

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# AN INTERVIEW WITH MAGGIE COLE

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By Pamela Hickman



*On 31 October 2015 I spoke to Maggie Cole at her London home. Maggie Cole enjoys an international career playing and recording on harpsichord, fortepiano and modern piano. As well as teaching privately from her home, Ms Cole has been a faculty member at the Dartington Hall International Summer School for the past four summers and is professor of fortepiano at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (London).*

*H&F:* Maggie, do you come from a musical family?

*MC:* On my mother's side, with many relatives still in Chicago, there is a deeply musical vein running through our family, but only one person played in my immediate family. We had an inherited piano and my older brother played a bit of jazz on it. My parents weren't players; they were very keen listeners. I popped into the scene and inspired by my brother, I really wanted to play.

*H&F:* What are your earliest memories of music?

*MC:* The actual feel of the keys and finding that it was easy to figure out little melodies on it. I remember the sound and a sense of excitement in moving the melodies around the keyboard to different starting points.

*H&F:* What music did you listen to as a child?

*MC:* Right through my teens, I was most involved in listening to jazz and pop music..the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and black American musicians: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, and many more. I loved the music I was studying on the piano but I equally loved picking out songs that I heard on the radio. For me, there didn't seem to be any big separation between classical and popular music. A big musical listening experience was my piano teacher introducing me to Glenn Gould's playing; at that time, people were very excited by the fresh sense of discovery in his playing. My teacher thought he was the finest Bach player around (not everyone did!). I loved playing Bach and remember feeling a sense of some kind of recognition in those recordings — maybe because of his acute attention to articulation which of course is a large part of the harpsichordist's technique. But I didn't know any of this yet!

*H&F:* When did you start piano lessons?

*MC:* I started at four. There was a young couple living in my little town of Nyack, NY. Both were very fine pianists and teachers and he was a composer. We asked the wife if I could start having lessons and I'm told that I was furious when she said that I was too young and would have to wait a couple of years. Somehow, she finally gave in and our lessons went very well. Although I stayed with her too long (13 years), I'm grateful to both her and her husband for the very solid training they provided and that she took me so seriously right from the start.

*H&F:* Where did you continue your studies?

*MC:* At age 16, I went to live in Switzerland with my mother.. for reasons a little too complicated to go into here. In Geneva, I had the good fortune to study with Louis Hiltbrand at the Geneva Conservatory. He had been a student of Dinu Lipatti and had taken over Lipatti's teaching studio following his untimely death. Hiltbrand's work felt like an amazing, direct line to Lipatti. Hiltbrand was a magnificent teacher and I totally adored him. He introduced me to a very different approach to piano teaching and to music making and I badly needed this.

*H&F:* So, at age 18 you returned to the USA.

*MC:* Yes. I was meant to be going for auditions at Eastman, Curtis and other schools. However, in the throes of a kind of crisis, I couldn't see any possible reason to play music any more. I took myself off to England, but the first thing I did on my arrival was to rent a little upright piano, having no plans to take lessons. Playing it was for relaxation and enjoyment. For two years, I did lots of other things and did a huge amount of, taking a hard look at whether I wanted to do that professionally... modern dance. I decided it was not my calling. After a few years in England I returned to the United States.

*H&F:* With what objective?

*MC:* Of getting a good liberal arts education as young Americans do. I was 20 - a little older than the other students - but enjoyed being a more mature student. I was at a small university in the mid-west. In about my third month there, I walked into the music building, opened a door thinking I would find a piano in the room, and found a harpsichord (a Pleyel - it was a long time before I understood the significance of this instrument). I was very taken with it almost instantly and sat down to play every piece of Bach, Scarlatti and Rameau I had played on the piano. With that, I was back into music. There was an incredibly good teacher there. She was modest about her harpsichord-teaching, being the organ professor, but she knew a lot, was warm and straightforward and guided me very well. After a few years with her, I realised that I was very serious about the harpsichord and decided to return to England.

*H&F:* Did you return to England in order to study there?

*MC:* Yes. I first studied with a true grande dame of the harpsichord in Cambridge – Mary Potts. It was fascinating working with her. She had an original Ruckers (this was brand new to me - the idea that we could actually play on original instruments). She was very kind, but a little too complimentary. By luck, I met a man who was the keeper of the early keyboard instruments at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He arranged for me practise there and at Buckingham Palace as I didn't yet have an instrument of my own. He would listen to me play and one day suggested that I meet his wife. I went to their home for supper and played her a Two Part Invention by Bach. Sharing her thoughts, she immediately said three such illuminating things that, on the spot, I asked to study with her. That is how I met my great teacher, Jill Severs, with whom I studied privately for three years. Many fine harpsichordists have been through her hands. She is a very beautiful player to this day and her teaching was exactly what I needed: encouraging always but very pin-pointed and illuminating about sound, phrasing and style.

*H&F:* Did you continue studying?

*MC:* My learning continued largely through working with remarkable colleagues, and I keep learning from them. To work really intimately with people like Steven Isserlis, Michael Chance, Nigel North,

Nancy Argenta and many others has been every bit as much my training as any formal lessons have been. I feel very lucky to have worked with such exceptional musicians. Apart from my time in Geneva, I never took the conservatory track. Now, funnily enough, I teach at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. I see aspects of this form of education that I know I missed but I value the time I took off from music and all the other experiences I was able to have that enriched life and seemingly led me right back into the profession!

*H&F:* Do you still see yourself as a pianist?

MC: Yes and no. I now deeply understand why I was never going to be suited to the modern piano world. There was something that was never going to quite work for me about the number of hours a pianist must practise to do the kind of repertoire written so well for the modern piano. Life seemed too confined with this kind of regime. As well, I grew up with a Steinway piano that always felt too tough, too heavy and too thick. The piano was too much of a battle for me with my particular physical make-up and with what my ears wanted to hear. At a young age, I had absolutely no idea that my ears were seeking earlier keyboard instruments and the actual physical sensations of playing them.

*H&F:* How did you start playing the fortepiano?

MC: It crept in. It was starting to appear on the world concert scene, although later than the harpsichord. I had the chance to play on Christopher Hogwood's Viennese fortepiano replica of about 1795 and then a chance to play it in a concert — in a Mozart violin sonata, I remember. That particular piano completely caught my fancy. Then I started playing other fortepianos, both originals and copies, and I kept finding them to be not very satisfying. So I would go back to Hogwood's, borrowing it or hiring it. I ended up doing some recording on it. As I continued to explore the fortepiano, I would remember my feelings about Mozart and Haydn from childhood. The sensation and musical results of playing Classical repertoire on this instrument really felt like coming home. It was what I had always heard in my head as a child and was not getting on the modern piano. But I knew that if I was going to be serious about the fortepiano, I would have to purchase my own instrument.

*H&F:* How did you go about finding one?

MC: This is a magical story. My aunt and uncle from Chicago are ardent amateur cellists. They were in Prague for a quartet-playing week and I went to visit them there. Paul McNulty, the revered fortepiano builder, lives outside of Prague and I took a side trip to the village where he lives and works. I spent an afternoon playing the finished instrument that was in the workshop and, at the end of the afternoon, I said that I wanted badly to commission one. When he told me it would take three years to deliver, my heart sank but I asked him to put me down on the list. Driving back into Prague, I mentioned that I thought I had heard through the grapevine that Mitzuko Uchida owned one of his instruments. Yes, he said, adding that it was the same kind as I had just been playing at his workshop. I told him that she only lived a mile away from me in London and that rumour had it that she didn't like the instrument. He confirmed the rumour and said that she was the second person not to like it, after Trevor Pinnock had commissioned it. On my return to London I called Mitzuko and went to visit her. She took me to the mews where she kept her instruments, pronounced that I "would never like him" and left me to play on the fortepiano for an hour. There was something in this piano that grabbed me. It had not been played and needed to come alive again. I asked her whether, if I paid for the move, took it home for two weeks and liked it, she would sell it to me. She immediately agreed, still insisting I would not love "him"! So I

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took it. Two weeks later, after lots of playing, it was now really awake and the sound had fully developed again. A good friend, Melvyn Tan, an artist with deep knowledge of the fortepiano, agreed that it was beautiful and very well made and that if I loved it, I should buy it. A technician who looked at it said the same thing. So, instead of waiting three years to get a Paul McNulty fortepiano, it took only three months!

*H&F:* So the fortepiano became an important part of your performing life.

*MC:* Yes. I formed Trio Goya with violinist Kati Debretzeni and 'cellist Sebastian Comberti. I do much solo playing on it, duo work and song recitals with singers who are particularly interested in exploring specific repertoire with the delicate, responsive fortepiano sound.

*H&F:* Do you play in other groups?

*MC:* Yes. I play regularly with a group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts called the Sarasa Chamber Ensemble, a loose collective of many musicians. We choose players according to who is best suited to the repertoire of whatever programme we're planning. Our repertoire can range from very early Baroque to late Classical or even early Romantic music. We just recently toured, playing the Dvořák Piano Quintet on an original 1875 piano, with what we all agreed was a great result. I think we really found something new about that piece. For me it was a thrill: I had never played this work on the modern piano and so had no preconceptions — just a very immediate reaction to the text and the sounds available on the piano I had. I also have the very good fortune to work with the Nash Ensemble and the Britten Sinfonia.

*H&F:* And solo work?

*MC:* Yes, both on fortepiano and harpsichord.

*H&F:* Let's go back to the harpsichord. What about your harpsichord recitals?

*MC:* Well, it goes in phases for me. When I began performing, there was a huge flowering of the harpsichord recital in England, Europe and America. I was part of that and performed as a soloist all over the world. I now give fewer recitals in a typical year. This is partly because my range of interests has expanded, but also because there is perhaps less demand for the solo recital nowadays. Actually, at one stage I asked myself if I really like doing harpsichord recitals: it is so terrifying sitting on the stage all alone with a harpsichord; you cannot hide behind anything with an instrument that speaks in such a direct way, uncovered way. And yet, every time I give a recital, I remember how special the repertoire is, how intimate the connection can be between player and audience and how there is this wonderful freedom just to take the music whichever way you want to take it.

*H&F:* Perhaps we should now talk about contemporary harpsichord music and your performance of it.

*MC:* Sure. I think what is interesting is that the harpsichord has attracted so much new music for a long time. It's not just a recent thing. It goes right back to Wanda Landowska's commissioning of concertos from composers of her time: Poulenc's "Concert Champêtre" and the Manuel de Falla concerto. We have a really enormous repertoire of good new music to draw on — more than I can possibly give sufficient time to. So I choose those pieces that I feel I can bring something to and can play with sincerity. I really like the idea of the harpsichord as an instrument of our present time and not just associated with the past. There are many young composers who see the harpsichord as a fascinating instrument for which to write and they seem to be breaking free of recognisable, early gestures. I am full of admiration for several of my female colleagues who devote themselves almost entirely to playing contemporary harpsichord music... extraordinary, wonderful, exciting music that takes the instrument into very new realms.

It is always interesting to speak with living composers, to really be able to find out their intentions and to be able to contribute to the process of a piece being created. I have had that opportunity a few times: in a piece supposedly finished, I have been able to point out a design flaw and get it fixed! The French composer Henri Dutilleux wrote an extraordinarily beautiful and important piece for harpsichord, double bass, oboe and percussion called "Les Citations". I've had the opportunity to play this with the Nash Ensemble a few times and once, Dutilleux came to a rehearsal of it and listened to what we were doing. This was a little scary, but just to have him there and hear his comments (small adjustments to make, but adding strongly that we had absolutely captured his piece) was one of the most thrilling moments of my life. He also wrote a heart-warming note on my music. Of course, we really never know with our dead composers exactly how they heard their music or wanted it performed, so these moments with the living mean a great deal.

*H&F:* I would like to hear about your interest in teaching.

*MC:* I have loved teaching one-to-one since I was 12. Over the last 15 years, I have also discovered how interested I am in group teaching. It started when I got a job teaching at a Spanish summer school about 13 years ago. It was an historical performance-based course, with players of modern instruments made to feel completely welcome, I'm happy to say. I would often have a very big group and at first, this was new territory — figuring out how to balance all the different levels and needs in the room and steer them happily through two weeks of exploration. I have come to really love this way of working and I do quite a bit of group teaching now.

*H&F:* Have you anything you would like to say about today's audiences?

*MC:* A huge subject. I am not going to speak about trends. It seems that we as performers, are all forever trying to dream up ways to make classical music appealing to the young and to educate the next generation; I am involved in that but I'm also not uncomfortable with the fact that we're communicating with a small part of the population. Having said that, there are brilliant groups like Britten Sinfonia who I have the pleasure of working with, who are doing very creative programmes that often do reach a large audience. Regarding the general concert audience, it is always very touching to me that people still want to leave behind television and all their other distractions, and actually step out, pay money and come and give themselves to the experience of a concert. I understand better as the years go by, that this medium is a real conversation between player and audience. Our job is meaningless without the people who make the effort and commitment to be there. I am full of gratitude to all of those people who turn up.

A particular thing for me is that I enjoy playing in very small, out-of-the-way places and particularly love playing to audiences who don't have masses of music available to them. London is, of course, an exciting place to be as a performer, with its many venues and many opportunities to hear wonderful music, but I find that my really memorable moments of performing have been in remote places, like the very north of Norway where people, hungry for music, had to come by boat, making a huge effort to get to the church where we were playing. Thinking of this makes me remember many such moments: playing in remote primary schools in India and up in the very north of Saskatchewan in mining villages.

Then there is another audience that, for me, stands out. In the USA, with my group, Sarasa, I do outreach work with young offenders; they are an extraordinary audience. They haven't made the choice to hear us, but they very quickly become extremely present and are active and creative in their response as audience members. Our sessions together turn into collaborations in which we get to hear their rap,

poetry and other forms of expression. They bring a kind of listening that is altogether different from the concert hall.

*H&F:* When it is not music, what do you enjoy doing?

*MC:* As strong as my interest in music, and possibly stronger, is my interest in people and individual psychology and what makes people feel well on this earth - what makes them feel like they have a place and a contribution to make. Through exploring a little more freedom, expression, communication, or sense of wholeness – there are many ways of talking about this. You can put it into any language: it can be the language of the harpsichord, the fortepiano, dance, rap or whatever. For me it is always about enabling growth and health and, finally, community.

I also read a lot...mostly fiction, but some non-fiction. I love the outdoors – I am a big walker, and my vegetable plot is of great interest to me.

*H&F:* Maggie, talking to you has been fascinating. Many thanks for your time and for so much interesting and enriching information.

### **Piano in need of restoration free to a good home**

This description is given as a guide only – prospective owners will need to examine the instrument in person. Instrument by David Loeschmann of Newman Street, Oxford Street London. (C 1802-1829), made sometime after 1812. 5 ½ octaves. There are no pedals or levers; there is no trace of any under the keyboard or obvious modifications.

The piano measures 66" long, 23 ½" deep and 32" high, standing on 6 turned legs (removable). The key board is 36 ¼" long. It has a serial number 7032 stamped within, and appears to have numerous strings; though far from in tune it has almost an octave functioning. The surface and fretwork has some wear but would look wonderful with some care. It is heavy and the new owner would probably need to bring helpers when collecting the piano.

Please contact the owner directly on Faraway Gardner-Brown 01547 540477 [faraway@g-bh.eclipse.co.uk](mailto:faraway@g-bh.eclipse.co.uk). The item is currently based 23 miles north of Hereford.