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INTERVIEW WITH TERENCE CHARLSTON

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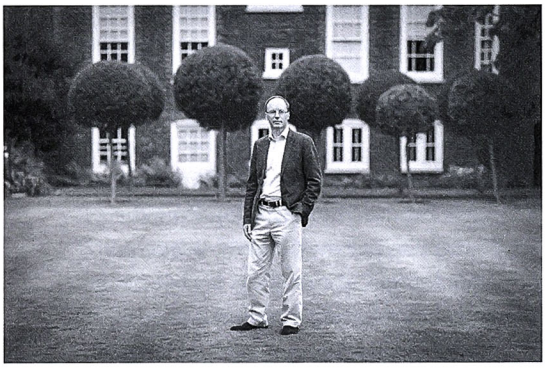

Terence Charlston at Fenton House.
Photo by Ben McKee.

Born in Blackpool, Lancashire, Terence Charlston, one of Britain's leading early keyboard specialists, frequently performs at collections of early keyboard instruments all over the world. As a harpsichordist and organ soloist, he has toured extensively in Europe, Japan, the USA and South America and has held master classes in Germany, Greece, Italy, Mexico and the USA. An advocate of 17th- and 18th century English- and European keyboard music, Terence Charlston has initiated a number of pioneering concerts and recording projects, one of them being editions and recordings of all Matthew Locke's organ- and harpsichord music. Influential in the training of younger players and in the development of practice-led research at several British conservatories and universities, he today serves as Professor of Harpsichord and Chair of Historical Keyboard Instruments at the Royal College of Music, London. On 1 September 2016, I spoke to Professor Charlton at his home in Hertfordshire.

H & F: Prof. Charlston, I am most interested in your research and edition of the keyboard music of British composer Albertus Bryne.
TC: That came about from owning Christopher Hogwood's edition of Locke's keyboard music from my very early student days. I hadn't really played the pieces attentively. Then, one afternoon, I thought I would play through this collection and really try and get the measure of these Restoration pieces. By the end of the afternoon I was in love with the music. As to Albertus Bryne, with this curious name, some works of his had been published, but only in combination with works of other composers. I decided to edit and record them afresh, which proved complicated because many of the pieces survive in conflicting sources. I was assisted by a colleague – Heather Windram – and together we produced a pioneering edition, which was not just on paper but is also published as an interactive edition. See www.charlston.co.uk. I don't see it as being exclusive to performing the works but as a tool to enable one to understand the music.

H & F: And you have made the world premiere recording of the keyboard music of Antoine Selosse.
TC: Yes. That was most interesting: a very obscure composer, writing in a largely English keyboard style with a northern European influence. Selosse is thought to have been a Jesuit priest at an English Jesuit college in northern France. This fascinating late 17th-century manuscript was discovered

by chance by Peter Leech in 2004, and he approached me to make the recording of his edition. Altogether, my performing work is driven by such projects or, indeed, through particular interests of my own.

H & F: Are you from a musical family?
TC: Not a family of professional musicians but a very musical family. My mother sang in the local church choir and my father was interested in playing the piano. But I think I was a "one off" in the family, showing musicality from a very young age. I have an older cousin who was interested in, and introduced me to, the harpsichord. My sister is a singer/songwriter and my nephew, a fine artist, has decorated my German harpsichord with a wonderful historically-inspired lid painting.

H & F:: Would you like to talk about your formal music education?
TC: Yes. As a child I was very fortunate in having excellent local piano and organ teachers who set me up with a very good technique, as well as a very inspiring senior school music teacher. The local authorities were also most generous and funded my lessons (sadly, no longer the case, I believe). So I acquired fine standards of technical control at a relatively young age. (In my work, teaching on the tertiary level, I realize that technique not acquired in a musician's young years is much harder to achieve at a later age.) Because I was playing the organ a lot, I would go to Cambridge in my summer holidays to see what was happening in the chapel choirs there. I thought I should be an organ scholar after finishing my school studies and went to Oxford to Keble College, where I read music, played the organ and trained the chapel choir. Most of my tuition at Oxford was on the organ and I had some absolutely amazing teachers : Peter Hurford, the renowned Bach exponent; and the great virtuosi Nicolas Kynaston and David Sanger. It was after finishing university that I went to the Royal Academy of Music, where I became interested in historical performance and first formally studied the harpsichord. There I was taught solo and continuo playing, forming the basis of my early career. And music college was then, as I hope it is still, the place to make contacts and friendships which still exist for me now.

H & F: What about conducting?
TC: Well, I started out directing from the keyboard with my own ensemble but now much prefer conducting. Earlier on, I enjoyed choir training and was responsible for a number of amateur choral societies and professional church choirs, but I now see myself primarily as a player who also guest directs. Over the last five years I have had the privilege of directing all Bach's major sacred works. What could be better than that?

H & F: Are you mainly a soloist?
TC: Yes and no. I am half soloist, half chamber musician. I have spent 30 years in the profession and in a lot of different roles, but I would say that my predominant activity (and my role of choice) has been chamber music. I was very fortunate to spend twelve years touring the world with the internationally famous group "London Baroque". At the moment I am playing with a number of distinguished duo partners and I am a core member of the innovative and renowned ensemble "Florilegium", which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year with many performances, including the complete Brandenburg Concertos. In addition to that, I also perform solo recitals on the organ and harpsichord. I began life as an organist; in fact, I started to play the organ

in the local church long before my feet could reach the pedals! I loved playing by heart, improvising and accompanying voices.

H & F: So you began your career as a church musician.
TC: I did. Yes. When I left university I was an organ scholar at Westminster Cathedral in London and spent two years there working with a very fine choir and two first-class choral directors: David Hill and James O'Donnell; this really set my musical standards for the rest of my working life. It also introduced me to the wonderful Willis organ – very big, very powerful but absolutely musical. The cathedral has a fine tradition of polyphony and, most importantly, their repertoire is rooted in Gregorian Chant, the plainsong tradition of the mediaeval church, which I accompanied daily and which taught me how to phrase and shape melody. I was now earning money as a freelancer and was able to buy my own harpsichord, making it possible to start my solo harpsichord career.

H & F: Would you like to mention some of the harpsichords you have owned?
TC: Yes. My first harpsichord was made by Colin Booth. (Interestingly, I have just gone back to Colin Booth to buy a German double-manual instrument). All my harpsichords have been made by British makers (I made one myself in 1997): David Evans, Andrew Garlick, Alan Gotto and David Rubio. I have been very fortunate in having collaborative relationships with several makers, particularly with David Evans, who has made four instruments for m... very close copies of French, Italian and Flemish instruments. Each has a most beautiful but individual sound and they work incredibly well. But it has also been a privilege to be part of the process of the creation of these instruments, to learn about their remarkable technology and ...they are, indeed, works of art.

Terence Charlston at Fenton House.
Photo by Ben McKee.

H & F: And your harpsichord studies?
TC: While at the university I attended master classes with Colin Tilney. Then, in London I studied with Virginia Black and John Toll, attending master classes with Kenneth Gilbert and Gustav Leonhardt. That was my formal training, but I was also learning, as it were, by giving concerts and listening to others play. At that time, the 1980s, London was very rich in harpsichord and Baroque activity. For example, Christopher Hogwood and the Academy of Ancient Music were producing a number of choral events and, although I was not directly involved in them, I helped in the preparation of choristers; this introduced me to Christopher Hogwood himself. The experience and his inspiration and generous guidance helped me in all sorts of different ways, especially on issues of historical performance. My close relationship with playing collections of historical keyboards, particularly the Royal College of Music, Fenton House, Hatchlands (UK) and Yale University (US) have been immensely formative and rewarding.

H & F: How do you relate to the piano and fortepiano?
TC: What I remember from my childhood is piano. As I said earlier, my father played the piano – mostly Schumann and Bach's Aria Variata (which I went on to record in the 1990s). And there was a local school teacher who had a spinet. I was also inspired by keyboard performances I heard – Thurston Dart, for example, on Radio 3. As to the fortepiano itself, everything depends on the quality of the instrument. The repertoire is magnificent and I have enjoyed playing very early pianos and late 19th-century pianos. The mid-Romantics – Chopin and Liszt and so forth – are a specialism all of their own, but I very much enjoy listening to others playing them. As a child, Chopin didn't really work for me, but I now find his music exquisite and (perhaps surprisingly) very close to that of François Couperin: they both have the same kind of subtleties and sensibilities. And I love Schumann...I really love Schumann.

H & F: Do you perform on the piano?
TC: No. Not really. Occasionally I'm asked to play some Mozart chamber music. I don't have the right technique or the strength for the modern, big black piano. But I love playing piano duets at home with my children.

H & F: What about the clavichord?
TC: I have been playing the clavichord a lot over the last 30 years. It is very important to me and has come to define my musical understanding of all keyboard instruments. The influence of Peter Bavington and his excellent instruments has been crucially important in this continuation of my musical education.

H & F: Have you had any connections with music in Lancashire where you grew up?
TC: Actually, yes. Over the last five or six years, I have had the pleasure of directing the Lancashire Sinfonietta, a professional chamber orchestra, now sadly defunct due to cuts in funding. I am a visiting teacher at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester.

H & F: And other recent projects?
TC: A recent departure and a very pleasantly enjoyable and musically rewarding one has been to coordinate a number of projects – concerts and recordings – with a young ensemble called Amici Voices, a group of young singers who are setting out on their professional careers. In the area where I live, we thought it would be a good idea to have an annual Bach Passion in Lent, giving people here the opportunity to enjoy these great works within their community and derive spiritual inspiration and comfort. However, rather than perform with a really big chorus, as is so often the case, we thought it would be nice to emulate the reduced forces used by Andrew Parrott and John Butt and perform the works with one singer to a part. This project has brought together young singers with players of my generation. Fortunately, several people have come forward to support it financially and in other ways. It has been very satisfying. As a teacher, I think the most important thing is to encourage students, but one must also try to provide opportunities for them. We have given over 20 concerts, including touring abroad and one recording, with another one on the way. So, for me, this has been very exciting and worthwhile.
www.amicivoices.com

H & F: What is on your programme at the moment?
TC: Work in three areas, really. One is a focus on the music of Froberger, with this year being the 400th anniversary of his birth (1616). I have spent a lot of time both playing his music and considering it from a more scholarly point of view. Froberger's music is still played very selectively and should be better known than it is. My modest contribution to the anniversary celebrations is a series of articles to shed more light on his contrapuntal music. Then I have been working on French music, inspired by a new edition of Chambonnières by Bruce Gustafson. Chambonnières is a fascinating figure: he is so important and so central to French clavecin tradition, but his music is in some ways a bit obscured by rather severe presentation in the score. It requires great insight and interpretive imagination to bring it to life in performance, a challenge I relish... and I have a beautiful French harpsichord that plays it very well; am also trying it on the French clavichord – a very unusual instrument after Marsenne's illustration of 1636 – to see what suits the music, its touch and style. Thirdly, I am working on the second book of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. And now, with my splendid German harpsichord, I am really looking forward to revisiting J.S.Bach's music.

H & F: Do you compose?
TC: I do, actually. Mainly, what you might call "functional pieces" — one or two pieces of church music which are being performed. An Advent anthem, "When all is dark", a piece of music that I wrote for my college choir in Oxford, is being sung quite a bit in the United States. I have written a few other pieces, mainly vocal pieces, but have not written for harpsichord yet. I do lots of arranging, when required. Perhaps composing is something I should look to for the future, as I am definitely interested in how great music works, "looking under the bonnet" of music, as it were, and that can motivate one to try to compose, oneself.

H & F: Do you perform contemporary music?
TC: A little bit. Yes. I played some at the York Early Music Festival and I encourage my students to play contemporary works and write their own music. As it is so specialized, it is essential for composers writing harpsichord music to work with harpsichordists. There is plenty of music being written, but very little of it works well on the instrument; a new work needs to be performed by several different players to win audiences and to establish it in the repertoire. An Italian colleague recently introduced me to "Soul Bird" by the Finnish composer Olli Mustonen: a lovely work, perfectly suited to the historical harpsichord.

H & F: Let's talk about authentic performance. What is your approach to this?
TC: I suppose in a way I have been a prime mover in questions of early music performance in that I set up the Department of Historical Performance at the Royal Academy of Music in the 1990s. Historically informed performance is about recognizing and embodying style, and not just in early repertoire. It is about veracity of text and meaning in music; this concept can be applied generally to all types of music. I am very much in support of investing in historical performance enquiry to encourage modern singers and instrumentalists, in modern orchestras for example, to reconsider how they perform core repertoire of the nineteenth century and even that of the beginning of the twentieth century —

the sounds of instruments, the way they articulate, how they phrase, the way they use vibrato, etc. That will enrich and revivify the performance of all styles and traditions. It is now quite common, for example, to see a modern orchestra performing with early wind instruments or to hear Elgar played with portamenti. But now, at least 40 years after the Authentic Early Music Movement, I think we lack some of the visionary zeal that was so much a part of the movement in the '70s, when people were probably more focused on the realization of the new ideas they had found in the sources. I think there is a much more homogenized general approach to the repertoire today, to make an appropriate sound for the text. I would say we should not just refer to the theoretical books, the treatises and so forth; we need to be conversant with our audience and the music itself and to be aware of very radical ideas, which may not be commercially credible or to the taste of current performers. We need to re-establish our pioneering credentials and show a little more respect for what we know as being historically true.

H & F: How do you find audience taste of early music today?
TC: Let's take Britain. In Britain we are very fortunate in having a pretty eclectic and well educated audience, but there is always the danger of conservatism – being artistically cautious – and this is also driven by a fear of the unknown or the untried, understandably so amongst promoters and venues who must keep their eye on the bottom line. So a lot of Baroque concerts are typically chamber music events or larger groups combining instruments and voice. That line-up seems to attract audiences. Where it is much harder to encourage people to listen to and enjoy is, for example, French Baroque music, which is neglected, and, definitely, harpsichord repertoire, which is generally poorly represented in programmes. The most obvious popular pieces are there (sometimes played on the piano, which is another debate) but I feel we still have a lot of work to do encourage people to listen to the harpsichord, the fortepiano, the clavichord and other early keyboard instruments. So, in that sense, there is still a lot of pioneering work to be done.

H & F: How does this tie in with your aims as an educator?
TC: As an educator, I think we have a huge responsibility to get this music performed in schools and not just in its very popularized form. I am very keen to see that develop. Part of our work at the Royal College of Music is to broaden our educational impact, especially with the young. Music and music education exit, after all, in a global market place. So what I would like to do is make more teaching exchanges further afield and, in that way, we will get a better impression of what we still need to do in Britain.

H & F: When it is not music, what interests you?
TC: I love to read and enjoy reading more and more, particularly novels. I am very fond of such writers as Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann and also poetry. I appreciate the natural world and being outdoors, always happy to walk. (If there is a hill involved, I seem to always have a need to get to the top of it.) I like food and cooking. I am very interested in art and architecture, partly through my musical work; both are very important to music. One of my favourite buildings is Gilbert Scott's St Pancras Station, which is very fortunate, since I can enjoy it most days when I travel into London.
H & F: Professor Charlston, many thanks for your time. Talking to you has been most interesting and enriching.