

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW WITH JORY VINIKOUR

By Pamela Hickman

See cover photo.



Jory Vinikour

Photo by Lisa Mazzucco

On December 22nd 2017, I spoke to harpsichordist Jory Vinikour at his home in Chicago, USA.

Renowned as one of today's most outstanding harpsichordists, Maestro Vinikour's highly diversified career takes him to the world's major festivals, concert halls and opera houses as a recitalist, concert soloist, partner to instrumental- and vocal artists, coach, teacher, and conductor. Born in Chicago, Jory Vinikour went to Paris as a Fulbright scholar, remaining there for many years. Today, he once more makes his home in Chicago, still frequently travelling to Paris.

PH: Jory Vinikour, I see Francis Poulenc's Concert champêtre often mentioned in your concert programmes. It seems to be quite a central work of your performing life.

JV: It's interesting. Coming as I do from basically a Baroque/early music background... however did I get to performing that? I suppose I already had an interest in more contemporary repertoire. It was French conductor Marc Minkowski, always happy to branch out, who asked me to play the Concert champêtre with the Rotterdam Philharmonic back in 1993. In that programme, there was also a beautiful Telemann Concerto Grosso, a Haydn Symphony and then the Poulenc, which takes its own inspiration from some rather amusing Baroque clichés, including nods to Scarlatti, as well as Handel's "Harmonious Blacksmith". It is such a loving gesture from Poulenc to Wanda Landowska, whom he so greatly admired. Despite all of its tongue-in-cheek Baroque references, at the

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same time, it is so profoundly melancholic. There is a depth to the piece that has always spoken to me, always taken my heart. I feel that, despite the lightness of the music, you can sense that World War II and the horrors of the time are all somehow hinted at, a kind of fin d'époque work. Even as I speak to you, I am gripped by what I feel from it. So, one could interpret it as just "champagne music", which I never did. Back in '93, I felt there was something very different going on in that music. So, I love it. I have played it quite a number of times and am performing it in March with the Cleveland Orchestra, one of the world's great, great orchestras, and under the directorship of Stéphane Denève, who is one of the finest conductors around today. I am just over the moon about this and looking forward to it.

PH: Do you come from a musical family?

JV: I think I come from a family of music-lovers, the typical American Jewish immigrant family (on my father's side, Kiev, on my mother's, Austria), but there are no other professional musicians in the older generation. But I do have one niece who is a professional jazz trumpeter...quite different, and that thrills me to bits.

PH: What are your very earliest musical experiences?

JV: I don't think they differ from those of most other musicians - discovering classical music

on recordings in the household; immediately at home with all of that, starting some piano studies at age six. Music, however, did become all-consuming even when I was in elementary school. I did not go to a music-oriented school; there were few in America when I was a child; there are probably more today. I studied with a piano teacher in the home until I was in high school, when I had somewhat more formal training with an extremely fine professor, Emilio del Rosario, in a more organised young person's conservatory setting, the Music Institute of Chicago, but even that only brought me piano lessons as opposed to a fully-rounded musical education which, in America, most of us, as children, have to create for ourselves.

PH: And on finishing high school...

JV: I knew certainly that I would want to go into classical music. I first attended Peabody Conservatory, which is, if I am not mistaken, the oldest of the American conservatories in continuous operation. There I majored in piano. But, literally within the first hour of arriving at the school, I sought out the harpsichord professor, Shirley Mathews (she very recently passed away.) The early music "bug" was already biting by all means, but I did not realise I could pursue that as a career path. I just knew that I was passionate about the sound of the harpsichord and was introduced to it very quickly while at conservatory. I spent two years at Peabody as a piano major, for one year under the very fine Ann Schein (the great protégée of Arthur Rubinstein), studying harpsichord with Shirley on the side. So, I had a very rich and passionate piano background, then transferring to Mannes College, where I continued with a tremendous piano teacher - Nina Svetlanova - and was a little more

serious about the harpsichord studies. I finished my bachelor's degree as a pianist, but still wondered what I could do with the harpsichord. At that point, the president of Mannes College, the inimitable Charles Kaufman, offered me a full scholarship if I would enroll in the master's degree programme as a harpsichord major and that was all the encouragement I needed! That made the career path very logical and very appealing.

PH: When did you begin performing on the harpsichord?

JV: As a student, I had already been participating in various performances at the school and although I was rather serious about my piano studies, I always had a great preference for the harpsichord and not only the early repertoire intended for the harpsichord - that of the very early seventeenth century all the way to the end of the French Revolution. I was also very interested in contemporary music at the harpsichord, as I had been as a pianist. I was performing as a student, but by the time I began my master's degree, I participated in the International Harpsichord Competition of Paris, winning the prize for contemporary music (works by Gyorgy Ligeti and Tôn Thât Tiet).

PH: I see you continue to perform a lot of modern music.

JV: Less so than previously, and yet, that said, this repertoire has continued to play an important role in my career. I was even fortunate enough to be able to record a disc of American compositions some three years ago. It did rather well and received a Grammy nomination, unusual for a harpsichord recording and doubly so for such a "peculiar"

choice of repertoire. As we speak, I am in the midst of preparing a recording of contemporary harpsichord concertos with the Chicago Philharmonic. This is rather fascinating. One of the key pieces on the CD is the Concerto for Harpsichord and Strings by Viktor Kalabis, a marvellous, very serious Czech composer, whose international career suffered tremendously because of the vagaries of history and how the Czech Republic was crushed during Soviet occupation. Kalabis was the husband of the famed Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžičková, who passed away several months ago. I am doing my part to bring his music to a wider audience by recording his extraordinary and beautiful Harpsichord Concerto. Exquisitely written for the instrument, it does not sound like a pianist doing who-knows-what with the harpsichord. It is so sensitive and idiomatically conceived for the harpsichord. Another key work of this recording is the concerto by American composer Ned Rorem, composed in 1946. Dedicated to Wanda Landowska, it has never been performed professionally. Still with us at 92, a very great composer of song, he has written some very beautiful chamber music, as well as a short harpsichord piece, *Spiders*, which features on my recording of modern American works. So, despite the fact that contemporary music is only a relatively small part of my musical existence, there are, at this moment, some very challenging, intriguing and exciting things concerning that aspect of my musical life.

PH: You have also had works written for you.

JV: Yes. I occasionally think that for musicians today and 20 years ago, those going to conservatory and studying only harpsichord or only baroque violin, for example, sometimes one misses the opportunity to participate, if only peripherally, in the currents of

contemporary composition. I do feel fortunate that, by the time I went to New York in 1983, still a piano major, the student composers wrote works for me to perform. When I changed my focus to harpsichord, that simply continued. The early music movement was frankly not very strong at all in New York 35 years ago - there was nobody playing baroque violin or baroque flute in New York at that point, so it was very natural for me to play baroque chamber music with my colleagues performing on modern instruments, which could be rather frustrating, to be honest. I say this with some reservation, but the modern flute cannot transmit in Bach or especially in French music what the baroque flute can. So, on some level, I compensated for that by remaining very attached to this extremely lively, vivacious contemporary music scene.

Then, when I went off to Paris in 1990, I simply continued, remaining highly active and prominent on the early music scene for most of my first decade here. Gradually, this tapered off a little bit. The time required to learn certain avant-garde works seemed to be all-consuming. That said, I have had some wonderful experiences in the last few years. Perhaps my favourite work on *Toccatas*, my contemporary CD, is by one of America's most talented composers: Harold Meltzer. He wrote a set of toccatas for me which is published, and has been played by a few other artists. Those pieces are just gorgeous and challenging in the best way. I remember when they were written, I sought occasion after occasion to play them! I think I have played them 20 times and intend to play them again in May 2018. I do still remain attached to pieces written for me, but I cannot say at this point that this remains an essential part of what is going on in my daily musical life.

PH: So, let's get back to the early recital material written for the harpsichord?



Photo by Lisa Mazzucco

JV: Yes, yes, yes...always. although this year seems to be more of a conducting year for me. But, as of recent times, I played in Carnegie Hall's Early Music Series just two years ago; I performed at the Library of Congress about three years ago. For the early repertoire, I must say I really love everything. However, I find myself most easily able to programme works of Johann Sebastian Bach and the French composers, especially Rameau. I would love to have the opportunity to offer more varied programmes. Here in America, the presenters frequently ask us to stay somewhat within a fairly narrowly-carved path and we can sneak in either earlier repertoire: I select Elizabethan works...John Bull, William Byrd.

PH: Would you like to talk about your duo and accompanying activity?

JV: In terms of duo playing, this year has been quite wonderful. There is a fabulous American violinist named Rachel Barton Pine. One of America's prominent violinists, she is very unusual in that she seems to flow effortlessly from modern violin (and everything this encompasses...Paganini and so forth) to the Baroque violin. As a Chicago-born music lover, I have known of Rachel since she was very young, as she was a well-known prodigy. We finally met perhaps 15 years ago, and have enjoyed several "read-throughs" since then. Finally, we have given several performances together (always Bach!) over the last two years. Only three-or-so months ago, we recorded Bach's Six Sonatas for Violin and Obbligato Harpsichord and this recording will be released in May of this year. I am very excited. She is a thrilling artist to work with and an extraordinary human being as well. I will also perform two harpsichord recitals with French harpsichordist Philippe LeRoy, including at the Berkeley Early Music Festival this June. I will also play a chamber programme featuring Telemann's Paris Quartets with flutist Stephen Schultz for the festival. Stephen and I have recorded Bach's sonatas for flute and obbligato harpsichord (well, two of these are by CPE Bach). Speaking of some past chamber experiences, I toured quite extensively with great Swedish mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter and we have recorded together. This collaboration will always remain a highlight of my career.

PH: Would you like to talk about your Steffani project?

JV: Yes. An important chamber project I will be continuing is the recording of Duo Cantatas of Agostino Steffani. He wrote some 70 chamber cantatas for various combinations of two voices, principally for soprano and alto or

countertenor, but there are cantatas for almost every imaginable voice combination. We have recorded a first set of these: 10 cantatas last year with a wonderful assortment of singers I selected from around the USA and Canada for this. The CD should be released later this year. We intend to have a second volume in the offing very soon. The music of this composer is truly glorious. The chamber cantatas are so cleverly written and contrapuntally rich: they range from ironic and amusing to the most deep and tortured expressions of emotion and betrayal and sorrow. I find them extraordinarily rich and powerful and I hope this can be conveyed to our listeners. Cecilia Bartoli made her case for Steffani's music very spectacularly and I even participated in some of her Steffani concerts three or four years ago.

PH: And more unusual collaborations?

JV: One of the more unusual chamber music "adventures" coming my way is a collaboration with the American baroque dance specialist Caroline Copeland. We will be performing together in Washington, D.C. this coming March. As a conductor, I had an interesting concert experience last August in Argentina where I conducted their finest chamber orchestra, the Camerata Bariloche, with the beautiful Argentinian soprano Verónica Cangemi, an artist who has been heard all over Europe. She wanted a concert of half Handel, half Mozart. So, obviously, for Handel I was in my element, seated at my harpsichord. I stand when I wish (every conductor has his or her own style for this) but the keyboard is my guide and I can frequently convey to the musicians what I want to tell them through the keyboard and not through gestures of the hand. For the Mozart selections, that put me to a new challenge because for arias from Marriage of Figaro and Zaide and so forth, the harpsichord was no longer of any

help and I played exactly one chord in the entire second half of the program, that chord being the end of the cadenza from the famous aria, *L'Amerò*, from *Il re pastore!* But I would really prefer doing baroque opera, sitting at the harpsichord in the midst of the orchestra. I have studied conducting with Vladimir Kyn in New York, many years ago, and with the excellent Denise Ham in Bournemouth and London, I think I continue to grow in this way, but have no secretly harboured ambitions to conduct Beethoven and beyond.

PH: Would you like to talk about your involvement with conducting opera performance?

JV: I frequently feel rather fortunate and surprised to perceive an evolution in my career, speaking as someone who is not "young and up-and-coming". Many musicians, even good ones, get into a groove — sometimes that groove can become a rut — of things that we do or know how to do. What has greatly changed for me over the last several years is conducting. So, in my opera activity, I now increasingly find myself on the other side of the podium, if you will, although my podium invariably remains the harpsichord. At this moment, I only wish to be the type of baroque opera conductor who presides over my group from the vantage point of my keyboard. I am starting a production for Milwaukee's Florentine Opera Company, the main opera company of the big city just north of Chicago. There, I will be conducting a double bill of John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* alongside (very predictably) Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, with performances at the end of January.

PH: Who has influenced your way into the field of opera?

JV: Going back earlier in my career, I worked very extensively with French conductor Marc Minkowski and his Musiciens du Louvre, although I have worked much with him outside of that framework, as well. I was his assistant and head coach for numerous performances of the Paris Opera, the Zurich Opera, the Salzburg Festival, etc. This allowed me not only to learn repertoire but also to see how this world operated. From such a strong vantage point, it brought me in contact with extraordinary singers, some of whom became my friends and contacts. Today, with not a lot of time at my disposal, I pick and choose.

PH: With whom are you currently collaborating?

JV: The conductor with whom I collaborate approximately once a year is Canadian conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, presently music director of the Metropolitan Opera (New York) and the Philadelphia Orchestra. He is not an “early music person”, as such, but one of these great, great young musicians whose antennas are open to everything. I have been a part of his Mozart recording project for Deutsche Grammophon. I am always excited for the next adventure with him; he is one of a kind. In July 2018, I will perform with him in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, playing the glockenspiel solos and doing my usual work. I spent a month at Buenos Aires’ legendary Teatro Colón this past May, as the assistant to the Austrian organist/conductor Martin Haselböck, on Handel’s *Giulio Cesare*. This was a wonderful and rare experience. I also assisted Nicholas McGegan on an extraordinary project, Rameau’s 1745 version of *Le Temple de la Gloire*, with Voltaire’s unique (and rather bizarre!) opera libretto.

PH: How much of your professional life is spent in recording?

JV: With all of the talk about the dying – or at least slowing – recording industry, I consider myself lucky to participate in a handful of recordings each year. I think the recording experience is wonderful. This year, I spent four days recording with Rachel Barton (with all the preparation necessary for that). My Steffani recording was longer than that, I think, five days or so back in February. My contemporary harpsichord recording began just about one year ago, when we recorded the concerto of Michael Nyman – one day of extraordinarily gruelling and intense work. It is an extremely difficult piece, intense and relentless. I will perform the beautiful little concertino by Walter Leigh in Chicago on March 4, and record it, and the concerto by Viktor Kalabis, the following day. Then, I perform Rorem’s concert – really a chamber work – in early May, recording the following day. And then, of course, there was the Deutsche Grammophon Mozart recording with Yannick Nézet-Séguin; we recorded *La clemenza di Tito* in Baden-Baden (Germany) back in July and I join them for *Zauberflöte* this coming July. These are the four non-solo projects. I recorded a solo Bach recording which encompasses the second book of the *Clavier-Übung*, so, the Italian Concerto, the French Overture, to which I have added the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue and the big A-minor Prelude and Fugue, BWV 894; that was only a year or so ago and I am not sure when it will be released. These studio experiences are wonderful and rich. There has been a lot of recording in rather diverse groupings: solo recording, duo recording, a somewhat larger chamber formation, modern concertos with orchestra, opera. I never dread the recording process. If you have wonderful

people to work with, it forces you to listen to yourself differently and, of course, if you have accomplished producers, it can be a very enriching musical experience. I know that is not always the case, but if I think of the Steffani — these beautiful cantatas — of course you do not perform them just once and then it is “in the can”, as they say. You have to repeat them, in which case you might feel frustrated or you revisit passages, trying to understand the pieces differently.

PH: Do you write about music?

JV: I do, to a limited extent. There have been musicians throughout the 20th century, such as the American pianist Charles Rosen, who were wonderful writers, and there are a number of devoted bloggers today. I am not one of these, but, under the gun, I do write liner notes for my own CDs... with rare exceptions. So, I do enjoy writing about music, but I don't make any part of my career of this. For the Steffani recording, I felt very fortunate to benefit from the expertise of Professor Colin Timms, who teaches in Birmingham, England. His book on Steffani, “Polymath of the Baroque,” is definitive. He is “Mr. Steffani”. If he doesn't know it, nobody knows it. He is the person who assisted in the research and he has provided us with extraordinary liner notes and translations for this recording. I would never claim to be able to write as profoundly about the subject as he does. However, I do enjoy trying to think about things, trying to write about them and sharing my thoughts and discoveries.

PH: Do you edit?

JV: I'm going to say “no”. I occasionally retype a number of things for my own use, principally all of the Steffani, for instance,

which I took from manuscripts provided by Professor Timms. I have certainly spent many hours transcribing 17th-century Italian song into a more readily accessible modern notation, and certainly take the “editing” process seriously. However, I have no desire to publish, and I happily share my work with other musicians.

PH: Of course, you do play the fortepiano.

JV: Yes, I do, and I even have a Walter copy in my apartment right now. I have found myself at the fortepiano more and more in my opera work in the Mozart, where the trend —I think this started with René Jacobs—is of using fortepiano instead of harpsichord in the Mozart operas.

PH: Let's talk about your teaching.

JV: In my comparative youth, I taught for six years at a national school in the Burgundy region of France. I thought this was quite interesting. In the United States, it is — or was — terribly rare to be able to encounter the harpsichord prior to university. Very few kids are even going to see a harpsichord, but perhaps more today than when I was a kid; it is still something that is not so frequent. In France, the national conservatory system makes it possible for any child to decide that that is the instrument he wants to learn. When I was teaching back in the mid-'90s to '99, I had children as young as seven and then adults preparing their big conservatory exams and a couple of adult amateurs here and there. I loved teaching.

As a typical musician, I didn't exactly adore the administration and the French bureaucratic red tape that comes with that.). Although I have not been teaching regularly since 1999, I have given many masterclasses throughout Europe, and at

various universities in the USA. However, here in Chicago, I have one regular young adult student; he thrilled and surprised me by winning the 2nd Prize at the Prague Competition this year. So, if I have one student in my studio, I might as well have a phenomenal one. I will be teaching a master class centred on French Baroque music in Prague this coming March. This is sponsored by the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles. I will be working with the wonderful French soprano Chantal Santon, who will be teaching French cantata.

PH: Tell me about the series you created in Milwaukee, Great Lakes Baroque.

JV: Although modest in scale, Great Lakes Baroque presents chamber music concerts featuring wonderful musicians from around the country. Our most recent concert was a fascinating programme of music from the court of Marie-Antoinette, which was researched and performed by Philippe LeRoy. This was a real discovery for everybody, myself included, and made a strong impression on our audience. This June, we expand a bit. We are presenting a Bach concert in the Skylight Theatre, an Art-Deco jewel box of a theatre. Through Great Lakes Baroque, we have been able to assemble a period ensemble for Florentine Opera's Baroque double-bill – a first for Florentine.

PH: Where do you stand vis-à-vis the "authentic" music movement?

JV: Although I don't wish to feel confined in my artistic choices for any reason, and I don't believe myself to be a didactic musician, the movement towards historically informed performances has been a revolution in the classical music world over the last half

century or so...whether we are speaking about the very nature of the instruments we are playing (i.e. I am sitting in front of a beautiful, singing copy of a French 18th-century harpsichord).. The initial revival of the harpsichord in the early part of the twentieth century favoured practicality and power over any historical accuracy. The same can be said, obviously, of forte pianos. Without scholarly interest, we will only hear Steinways, instead of the rich variety of pianos which inspired composers from Mozart onwards.

As for interpretation, we are all free, finally, to choose our own path. Yet again, if we reject out of hand the Historically Informed Practice movement, we are rejecting very clear knowledge about ornaments, about so many salient aspects of style (for instance, the French *inégal*). I listen with great respect, and read what I can, from those who have spent a lot of time and effort with the original source material.

PH: When it is not music, what interests you?

JV: Oh, my goodness. I'm quite music-obsessive and it is so all-consuming. However, I do love cinema. I don't often go out anymore to the cinema and, luckily, my partner is a great, great cinephile. On the internet, we find all the old French and U.S. movies. I'm not a great reader, alas. My winding-down activity is doing the New York Times crossword puzzle!

PH: Maestro Jory Vinikour, many thanks for sharing so many of your experiences and thoughts. It has been most enriching talking to you.

JV: Thank you, Pamela. I have truly enjoyed meeting you!