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INTERVIEW JANE CLARK DODGSON IN HER 90TH YEAR

By Pamela Nash

The scholar and harpsichordist Jane Clark, 90 this year, is as youthful of spirit, sharply observant, and wittily erudite as ever, and by no means retired from musical life. Her commemorative birthday concert, hosted by the Barnes Music Festival in March, featured Scarlatti, Couperin and Dodgson, the composers who have distinguished and coloured her career and who continue to loom large at a time of both activity and reflection as she looks back on her life and on almost seven decades of the harpsichord.

I visited Jane at the south London home she shared for nearly half a century with her late husband, the composer Stephen Dodgson. It is a house which has seen the comings and goings of many great names of the music world as well as generations of aspiring students who felt drawn to the couple known for their discernment and encouragement of exceptional talent. Stephen's convivial presence is keenly missed by all who return but his musical legacy is very much alive in the whirl of activity surrounding the resurgence of interest in his music, a concern supported by the Stephen Dodgson Charitable Trust, and of which Jane finds herself at the centre as ambassador and advisor. Always his ardent champion, she is at her happiest when talking about the composer's work, but the harpsichord still persists at the heart of her thinking and she is keen to continue her other roles including as curator of the British Harpsichord Society's recital programme for Handel Hendrix House as well as supporting young players - and all this whilst preparing the third edition of her book on François Couperin, The Mirror of Human Life. As to Jane's own life, the following makes alas only a brief reference, but I hope it throws some light on the thoughts she has gathered along her unusual and fascinating musical journey.

Jane Clark at her birthday celebration.
Photo by Christine Thornton.

PN: You have observed the progress of the modern harpsichord from even before the advent of the Early Music Movement. Of all the figures of the harpsichord world you have known, George Malcolm was perhaps one of the most controversial and the subject of a recent BBC Music Matters programme to which you contributed. For all his "inauthenticity", he was in fact a vital part of the transition for the authentic instrument's return to prominence. Without pioneers like Malcolm, Thurston Dart, Ralph Kirkpatrick, Zuzana Růžičková et al, how do you think the harpsichord would have made its way back into the mainstream?

JC: I don't think it would have. Landowska was responsible of course for starting it, though she was actually more authentic than George Malcolm. He was a law unto himself. But the thing about people like Malcolm and Růžičková was that they were vital communicators; they could fill halls. In the case of many from the Authentic Movement, audiences often got bored, whereas they were never bored by Růžičková or Malcolm.

PN: It's true though, that unlike those others we've mentioned, Malcolm came to the harpsichord almost by default and was always trying to compensate for the harpsichord not being a piano or an organ, with all his registration wizardry, etc.

JC: Well, he always said he played the harpsichord by mistake. And he did use all the pedals - as did Landowska on her Pleyel. But she did it in chunks, i.e., in a more baroque way, like with soloist vs. orchestra, whereas Malcolm did it in order to make crescendos and diminuendos – so again, in that sense, Landowska was relatively authentic. However, I'll never forget him walking off the jury at Bruges in anger at the first round decisions. That night, in a terrible temper, he gave the festival recital on a Goble copy of a German harpsichord which only had stops. He played Bull and the Bach G Minor English Suite, and I've never heard, before or since, on any instrument, anything like it. It didn't matter a hoot if he didn't have pedals: it was fantastic.

PN: But you can't have been happy about things like trills before the beat or the over-use of registration?

JC: At first, I didn't like it one bit. I had grown up listening to Thurston Dart and Albert Fuller who were much more likely to observe rules. But I later came to realise how much more important communicating this music was to an audience than where the ornaments were, whatever Couperin might say about them.

PN: You studied with the Landowska pupil Aimée Van der Wiele who belonged to that international tradition of women proponents of the harpsichord revival. And even though in Britain, Dolmetsch was the real pioneer, it was Violet Gordon Woodhouse, Landowska's contemporary, who spawned, in turn, an ensuing generation of women harpsichordists in Britain such as Millicent Silver, Valda Aveling and Ruth Dyson. They, like George Malcolm, were fine, instinctive musicians who simply made the most of the revival instruments. And Goble, for example, made harpsichords that were seductive if you met them on their own terms. A fair number of us had to go through a Goble phase before

we could come out the other side – like a harpsichord rite of passage.

JC: Of course, and I studied on a Pleyel. There just wasn't anything else available generally, though I was exceptionally lucky in that I was allowed access to 18th-century instruments as well.

Jane Clark playing at home. Photo by Pamela Nash.

PN: In any case, we seem to have come round, in the main, to re-appraising and applauding the old artists. Is it because virtuosity and versatility are now important again on early instruments, and that's simply more exciting?

*JC:*I think so, yes, and of course now the pendulum has swung the other way, and everyone's playing fortepianos and conducting and choral training, etc, and it's all gone back to square one really. And I find that these days, harpsichordists are simply playing in their own way, irrespective of all the efforts of the past, with so many of them as "inauthentic" as George Malcolm: I am hearing Couperin played with ornaments before the beat all over again! So I'm not quite sure where we've got to or why. Partly it's because, like all instrumentalists, they want to carve their own path and be different, and this has led as far as I can see to a certain eccentricity, with a great many players distorting the music in rather distressing ways. And for all the George Malcolms, you couldn't call them eccentric. They were straightforward musicians.

PN: There has been a sea change then, since the times of those self-appointed gatekeepers of matters of Authenticity. You yourself have been quite clear in the past about your misgivings on the dictatorial stances surrounding Performance Practice – and of which the harpsichord was always the main object.

JC: The thing is, Kenneth Gilbert and Gustav Leonhardt each had their followings and that's fine, but it led to a certain narrow-mindedness and could be misleading. Some of their disciples were so bowed down, they felt if they didn't follow, like mock-ups, they'd lose out. I have great reservations about 20th-century "French style": I certainly can't find it in any treatise that I've ever read. And anyway, each composer is different. Having lived with a composer myself for 50 years I know that each has their own ideas of how their music should be played. It was the same in the eighteenth century… and you can't apply to Couperin what you apply to d'Anglebert or Rameau. Most of them were rather bad at expressing themselves in print anyway. So to develop a 20th-century French style seems to me an amazing mistake and it just means you've

invented rules which don't exist. You can't be rigorous: it's your responsibility as a performer to project the character of the music first and foremost. And going back to George Malcolm, it must be said that he minded terribly that the character of Couperin came across. It may not have been what Couperin wanted – and Landowska the same – but to play it with a blanket of 20th-century French style kills it stone dead.

PN: You have the distinction of having known the great scholar, writer and composer Wilfrid Mellers, whose study François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition must have been an inspiration for your own interest in Couperin and subsequent publication of your book The Mirror of Human Life, which I suppose you could call a guide or manual to the harpsichord ordres and their titles. How did the Mellers connection begin?

JC: I attended a lecture by Mellers on Couperin's vocal music and became completely hooked on that repertoire first – and was then drawn to the harpsichord music after reading his book. But it was Mellers himself and this wonderful lecture which inspired me the most. Such a compelling character - this was a man who could persuade you to sell your own grandmother! I loved Couperin's harpsichord music but there was always something there I couldn't get hold of, couldn't come to grips with, unlike with Bach and Scarlatti for example. Being a curious individual, I began to discover the background of the music and the significance of his titles, and when Mellers did the second edition of his book I spent a week with him at York University telling him all I knew of the titles. Then followed publication by Oxford University of my notes for their Bate Collection handbook. Eventually Lionel Salter implored me to write the book, with the backing of Mellers, and for which I was very fortunate to have the co-authorship of Derek Connon, the French scholar and theatre historian. It has been translated into Japanese and Polish and has sent me far and wide. It is now undergoing its third edition. I never stop learning about Couperin.

PN: Your other passion is Scarlatti and the Spanish connection, a subject on which you have lectured internationally. How were you first drawn to Scarlatti?

JC: I landed a job playing for a Spanish dance folk group when I was an impecunious student under the direction of the ethno-musicologist Lucile Armstrong. She was very particular about the provenance of the music. I had to learn about every type of Spanish dance as well as write down the guitar playing of genuine, pre-commercialised flamenco and to learn to play these chords on the guitar. When later I came to Scarlatti, it felt like: I've been here before. I was staggered at how precisely all the chords I'd strummed on the guitar were found in his music. It went from there, and I was invited to present a spot on Scarlatti for the BBC's Third Programme in which I challenged Ralph Kirkpatrick's chronology of the sonatas and which received a rave review in The Listener, sending me all over the USA and Europe.

PN: Despite knowing little about Scarlatti's personal life, or his reasons for working for the dysfunctional Spanish royal family, his adoption of Sp anish musical folk character must have been partly a response to his own quixotic and emotional temperament.

Was it also perhaps a kind of refuge from a feeling of dislocation he would have experienced at court?

JC: We do know he was quite a neurotic character and it is common thinking now amongst scholars that he was bi-polar. And when he landed in Seville, he must have been acutely lonely: as miserable and lonely perhaps as the poverty-stricken gypsies with their wonderful music. Andalucian music veers between deep depression and manic gaiety, and Scarlatti does just that in the sonatas, and bearing in mind that the really powerful ones do what a flamenco musician would do: K490 for example is exactly what goes on in the streets of Seville in Holy Week – even now. And because he led quite an isolated existence at court, I think he poured out the sonatas to keep sane. Those first four years, before the court moved to Madrid, galvanised Scarlatti into the character we know.

PN: Can you give an example of a sign that reveals Scarlatti as a manic depressive?

JC: K516, where he uses the basic chord pattern of the great flamenco fandango – the sung one, not the dance – is the very depth of gloom. I think it's the music of sonatas like this that make you realise how profound his gloom was, and based as they were on the musical outpouring of the despair of the gypsies. And then there are the manic sonatas as well. Also consider the famous portrait of Scarlatti: thin face, thin hands, but enormous body. I showed it to a doctor who thought he looked liverish - possibly alcoholic – and I think there's something in that, given what we know and suspect of his lifestyle.

PN: Do you have any reflections on Scarlatti performance?

JC: Nowadays there is this whole spate of people playing Scarlatti in what they think is Spanish style, but in fact Spanish style is extremely strict rhythmically with hardly any distortion. The picture postcard, technicolour, "Come to Seville" approach with lots of rubato is a far cry from what any Spaniard would do. But there are also many people who play Scarlatti very well with the real Spanish influence. I still think Rafael Puyana's Scarlatti recordings on a three-manual Hass – which incidentally are being re-released on CD - are unsurpassed. But I also adore Alicia de Larrocha's Scarlatti on the piano. They both have this Spanish thing of slightly displacing the rhythm which Anglo-Saxon players just can't do as well.

Jane Clark and her husband, the composer Stephen Dodgson, at their home in Barnes.

PN: As Stephen Dodgson's widow, your main mission since he passed away in 2013 has been in helping to support the new demand for his music. In life he was never without his devotees and players who connected passionately with his music, although it did fall under the radar of popularity for a time. There has been a posthumous surge of interest in young players, the most exciting outcome of which is a remarkable proliferation of recordings, and it's good news, especially for those of us interested in 20th-century harpsichord music, that Naxos has brought out the first four sets of Inventions (played by Ekaterina Likhina). Why do you think Stephen kept returning to the harpsichord, as he did the guitar – and to the invention format?

JC: The harpsichord was something he returned to because he loved it, and not because he was asked. With the guitar, he always had to be persuaded to write, and got to the point of running out of steam. Not so the harpsichord: he lived with it and was fascinated by its sound and by the contrast between the rhythm and the expression. He particularly loved the invention format which suited both the instrument and him, as he was forever striving to become more economical with his compositional language. You can see how the texture in the Inventions got gradually thinner from the early ones which he wrote for the Goff harpsichord. By the way, it's a myth that I had any input whatsoever in advising him on the harpsichord. I don't think I ever offered an opinion on anything he wrote.

PN: It strikes me that there has been considerable serendipity in your life, in the sequence of events and fortunes, in the associations you have formed and are still forming, and of course in your marriage.

JC: It's all been down to luck. I am always thinking about how lucky I've been in my life.