

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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HEATHER SLADE-LIPKIN (1947-2017): HARPSICHORD PIONEER

By Pamela Nash



Heather Slade-Lipkin: Main publicity photo.
Photographer unknown.

The life of pianist, harpsichordist and teacher Heather Slade-Lipkin, who died last October aged 70, was one of such exceptional productivity, diversity and influence that it is a wonder for it to have passed unacknowledged by the national press. By way of small redress, and from the perspective of a former harpsichord student, I hope that the following profile will prove of interest, and in particular, show that besides Heather's impact on the world of the modern piano, her pioneering contribution to the harpsichord played an equally vital part in her profound musical legacy.

I would like to thank the Slade and Lipkin families - Jennifer, Barry, Alex, Andrej and Rob - for their kind assistance, and also Sophie Yates for her valuable comments on Heather's teaching.

Inevitably, Heather's work with the harpsichord was overshadowed by her high profile success in helping to launch the careers

of many concert pianists, with names such as Stephen Hough, Leon McCawley, Stephen Coombs, Anna Markland and Stephen Gosling to her credit. Another was Robert Markham, teacher of the current winner of BBC Young Musician of the Year, Lauren Zhang: a "grandpupil" so to speak, of which Heather would have been proud.

Yet there are many other "descendants" of her teaching around the globe: pianists, harpsichordists, organists and musicians of many kinds, pursuing musical activities of huge and cutting-edge diversity and all products of her enormous energy and musical curiosity. She was a veritable force of nature with unshakeable pedagogical instincts and a peculiarly "unfiltered" and uncompromising style which could shake you to your foundations. Some might venture to say that diplomacy was not her strong point. But in a myriad of ways, we have all come to see ourselves as beneficiaries of that hard-nosed advocacy and commitment: like all great teachers, she possessed the uncanny gift for seeing into one's musical soul: the future, the musician you could become, and she would stop at nothing to help you get there.



Slade-Lipkin,
in an early publicity shot.
Photographer unknown.

My own induction into Heather's teaching — and the harpsichord — was as a fledgling second

study student in 1975 at Chetham's School of Music: a time when the whole *clavecin* aesthetic was very new. My subsequent immersion in the scholarship and technique of the harpsichord under her tutelage led me to take it up as one of the first London conservatoire harpsichord majors, before pursuing it further in Paris and the US in the '80s. Though at this point, the harpsichord and its resurgence was more than just a twinkle in the eye of the musical mainstream, the instrument within music education was still something of a white elephant, despite the burgeoning of early instrument manufacture, and institutions were slow to replace their "old-style" pedal harpsichords - if they had them at all. Heather's success in advocating for the use of the reproduction harpsichord and fortepiano has perhaps fallen under the radar, but it is important to remember that she did much in her capacity at Chetham's, the Royal Northern College of Music and elsewhere as one of the first educators in the UK to champion the harpsichord as an instrument to be learned in its own right.

Perhaps equally significant was her unequivocal conviction that the art and study of playing the harpsichord and its repertoire was a rite of passage for all keyboardists. She encouraged this by incorporating the harpsichord as part of piano lessons, with discussion of Baroque sensibilities, interpretation, sources and editions, as well as by teaching continuo skills through her Baroque ensemble groups. The Chetham's harpsichord in the 1970s was a Feldberg Whale double manual with pedals, but lessons on the Clayson & Garrett Dulcken (1745) copy at the family home near Manchester provided an invaluable comparison - and to some of us, a revelation. Harpsichordist Sophie Yates, a piano pupil of Heather from the age of 10 at Chethams, remembers her own fascination with the Dulcken harpsichord. Though

Sophie's specialisation in the harpsichord was not directly steered by Heather, she is categorical about the significance of her teaching.

"What Heather was doing in her teaching was very rare in the 1970s. She gave me ideas about performance practice at a very early age, fostering my interest in playing baroque repertoire on the piano, and instilling a thorough approach to articulation right from the start. It was always clear that each period of music had its own style and needed to be approached differently: she opened up the world of French music to me through Chopin, Ravel, Debussy, Messiaen, etc. on the piano, and I have loved this repertoire ever since. I'm sure that understanding something of the French aesthetic helped greatly when first approaching the clavecinistes."



Clayson & Garrett Dulcken Copy 001

As a player, in spite of her rigorous piano pedigree, Heather eventually came to think of the harpsichord as occupying the higher place in her musical affections — though she regarded her two biggest influences, Gordon

Green and Huguette Dreyfus (piano and harpsichord respectively) as being equally significant in her development as a musician. Indeed, it was a highly effective and practical split musical allegiance which served her career extremely well. She could transfer from the modern piano to the harpsichord without compromising the integrity of either; whether she was playing orchestral parts on the piano for concertos or realising figured bass, and whether performing Romantic, Classical or 18th century repertoire.

It was a kind of artistic duality which seems to have been passed on to her pupils, with perhaps particular relevance and value in their own teaching. As Sophie again says: "She had a huge influence on me as a musician — though not directly as a harpsichordist — and I use the techniques I learnt from her in my own harpsichord teaching all the time." Despite possessing individual sensibilities for the piano and for the harpsichord, Heather's principles for teaching both instruments were directed in fundamentally similar ways. Phrasing, memorising, fingering, grasp of musical structure — all were paramount in informing your way of practising on either instrument. Her approach to the musical score was exhaustively analytical: no stone was left unturned, and no detail from the previous lesson forgotten. Looking now at my scores, whether Bach, d'Anglebert, Scarlatti or Louis Couperin, her directions are universal: "practise in unison", "group work here", "breathe", "shape", etc.

She did of course develop specific ideas about harpsichord teaching and performance, and not just in her capacity as "ambassador" for the principles of her own harpsichord teachers. Her excitement about nuances in *inégale* and articulation was infectious, and ornamentation was a favourite and animated subject explored well beyond the study and

exactitude of tables: the possibilities for varying the repeat of a Bach Sarabande, for instance, or the question of additional trills in Scarlatti could easily occupy an entire lesson. She was unilateral on certain points which she felt were lacking in the performance of baroque music and had very fixed ideas about tempo, often complaining about the lack of the dance feeling in piano interpretations of Bach because "the fast movements are too fast and slow movements too slow".

Yet it was never her wont to proselytise about the harpsichord, nor assume any grand stance on matters of authenticity: she believed — in contrast with influential figures of the Early Music Movement — that you could embrace the core tenets of Baroque expression without being a slave to performance practice ideologies. There was never any question, for instance, that the interpretation of Bach on the piano was of less intrinsic value to that on the harpsichord (and Scarlatti et al for that matter). Nor was there any issue of appropriation when it came to contemporary music on the harpsichord. In her debut at the Purcell Room in 1974, she gave the first performance of *Metamorphosis* for solo harpsichord by Malcolm Lipkin — one of Britain's finest composers, and a cousin of her husband Barry Lipkin — which she had commissioned with a grant from the Arts Council. Here again, she was ahead of the game, for it should be remembered that commissioning and premiering solo harpsichord works at that time was extremely rare. She also later became involved in the promotion of women composers through the work of her international Trio. For me, in the mid-1970s, hearing her play works like Jean Françaix's "*L'Insectarium*" and Ligeti's "*Continuum*" (a while before it came to general notice) undoubtedly sowed the first seeds for my future involvement in new music.



Heather Slade-Lipkin with her pupils at the Feldberg-Whale harpsichord at Chetham's School of Music in the early 1970s. *Photographer unknown.*

Heather would always go that extra mile, seizing any opportunity regardless of context. She would think nothing, for example, of giving each child a lesson in the process of festival adjudications, nor of giving up weekends and holidays for pupils to stay at her home to prepare for competitions and concerts —rousing the household with Beringer Studies at 8:30 on a Saturday morning. She was passionate about the whole ethos of teaching, in herself and others, and was also mindful of the importance of maternal solace for those studying far from home: as one student put it, “she was like a second mother away from home. She could look into somebody and know what they were feeling”. They were qualities which buoyed her along to pastures new throughout her teaching, in a career distinguished by posts at many leading institutions: Chetham's School of

Music, (latterly as Head of Early Music), Lancaster University as Visiting Professor of Piano and Harpsichord, Director of Juniors at Birmingham Conservatoire (a department which she re-established and ran from 1993 to 2001), Professorships at the Royal Northern College, the Royal Conservatoire in Glasgow, the prestigious St Mary's Music School in Edinburgh and she was also in high demand as a tutor to many Oxford/Cambridge and other university students. Abroad, she held directorships at international Schools in Moscow and in Hong Kong, where she was additionally responsible for Music on five other campuses across mainland China.

Unsurprisingly, Heather's own course of learning was fuelled by that same energy and focus which so defined her teaching. On a recent visit to her sister Jennifer, also a pianist, I asked about the formative years

in their intensively musical household where they were raised, with brother Rob, in Hoylake on the Wirral. Both daughters took lessons at home with their mother, Joan Slade —a renowned but stringent and matriarchal teacher whose father had also taught and played the piano professionally, and who instilled from earliest childhood the drive to achieve and compete. Heather's natural rivalry was fuelled by her elder sister's precedent, but interestingly, extended also to her mother. "Her desire to compete with us both made her quite a forceful character. She was fearless, and would take my mother on, whereas I wouldn't dare." The Slade sisters made a formidable team, regularly winning both solo and duo categories at festivals. Duets were a risky business and arguments got so heated they would rarely get to the end of the piece. "Our father would send us off to practise in different rooms. We'd have to go on stage, actually playing it through for the first time — and we'd still win the class!"

Forming a tough artistic mettle early in life must have armed Heather with the extraordinary degree of self-possession and "chutzpah" which coloured her professional life. Wherever she saw an artistic imperative or a need to challenge the status quo, she expressed herself instinctively — thinking nothing, for example, of marching into a school to tell them that their upright piano was awful and needed urgent replacement with a high quality grand. As Jennifer put it: "She was straight in there - but only because it was important. And people listened: it was just put in such a way that it was accepted without question!" Jennifer again recalls her grit and defiance growing up: as an avid reader, Heather was determined to secretly follow her latest book, propping it up on the piano stand, at the same time as playing random pieces. "It was a trick: Mother was

in the kitchen, thinking she was practising".

Defiance notwithstanding, it was an auspicious start under her mother's tutelage. Whilst still at school, she performed both the Bach D Minor and the Mozart A Major concertos with the Hoylake Symphony and at age 16 won first prize in the National Piano Competition. Studies continued at the Royal Manchester College of Music (now the Royal Northern) under renowned professors Gordon Green and Clifton Helliwell, and she gained her ARCM diploma in her first year, followed by ARCM diplomas in Teaching and Accompanying. But her strong early affinity for Bach and interest in French 18th-century repertoire soon led her to the harpsichord — and not merely as the adjunct instrument it was for most keyboard players at the time. She pursued post-graduate study at the College from 1969 to 1971, majoring in Harpsichord with Robert Elliot in her second year, followed by a BMus at Liverpool University with Harpsichord as the specialism. Then came her interest in the emerging European "schools" of harpsichord performance practice — an area largely unknown in the British musical mainstream — and she became one of the first wave of players to study the harpsichord abroad, travelling to Paris in 1973-4 for lessons with Huguette Dreyfus, and later with Kenneth Gilbert at the Academie Musicale in Provence. She won the 1974 National Harpsichord Competition (and incidentally was also a finalist in the Fortepiano Competition of the International Festival in Paris in 1978) and proceeded to balance her dedication to teaching and family with the life of a gigging harpsichordist, instrument in tow. She concertised around Britain, including at the South Bank, and toured internationally, including in Greece and Israel with her Trio formed with flautist Helen Metzelaar and

mezzo-soprano Marilena Zlatanou. For the tercentenary of Rameau's birth in 1983, she gave a series of concerts and recorded the second book of *Pièces de Clavecin* (alas, her sole commercial harpsichord recording), for which she was invited to contribute to a BBC Radio programme. Heather was still a rare breed then, and this contribution would have provided unusual enlightenment, even to the seasoned classical music listener. Certainly, her playing in this clip (the link is provided below) is a joyful reminder of the transparent clarity and spaciousness which always characterised her performances.

Heather's thirst for learning never abated, and later studies included a Master's Degree, attaining Distinction in one year, at Edinburgh University where her research reviewed the works of Armand-Louis Couperin, addressing the use of *notes inégales*. She also wrote a paper on the early history of grand pianos, starting from the time of Cristofori and with particular reference to the comparative organology of instruments by Americus Backers and Thomas Loud in the Russell Collection.

Heather's academic talent was matched by a gift for languages. She reached a remarkably high standard in German —both written and spoken — in the space of one year in readiness for early music summer courses in Germany, and learned to speak Russian in preparation for taking up her post in Moscow. She was conversant in French and also learned to read Hebrew.

Her achievements were celebrated many times and she was invited in 1990 to the Savoy "Women of the Year" in recognition of her work as one of eight principals of Junior Academies, where she was presented to its patron, Princess Diana. Her final recital performance, on instruments from the Russell Collection, was in 2013 at St Cecilia's Hall in Edinburgh. Her last

concerto appearance in 2010 with the Sidcup Symphony Orchestra says it all: not only did she play Poulenc's *Concert Champêtre* but also the orchestral piano part in Saint-Saens' Organ Symphony and the celeste part in Ravel's *Mother Goose*. The orchestra will be dedicating their concert in October this year to her memory.

Although the last eighteen months of her life were plagued by cancer, Heather defied her original prognosis by many months, and never lost the will to learn and to be strong and happy for her family as well as her wider musical family, to whom she will always mean so much.

Readers can follow this link to hear Heather playing and speaking on Rameau from the 1983 tercentenary radio programme, with the relevant segment running from 16:33 to 23:00.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03m0njz>