

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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DAVID EVANS 1963–2018: AN APPRECIATION

By Terence Charlston

This tribute is based on the address I gave at David Evans's funeral in South Oxfordshire in December 2018 when I had the honour of representing the large community of musicians and instrument makers who knew David and his extraordinary work as a harpsichord maker. It contains recollections generously shared by family and friends, makers and players, and especially his widow Patricia Jordan Evans, Maurice Ratliff, Chris Rawlings and Richard Way, and material from the obituary I wrote for the Telegraph newspaper.¹ We all owe David an enormous debt of gratitude for helping us to better understand the harpsichord through his consummate and painstaking craftsmanship, for generously sharing his knowledge and experience, and for his friendship, wisdom and humanity.

David was first captivated by the sound of the harpsichord as a nine-year-old listening to a BBC radio broadcast of an 18th-century French original. The impact of this experience was so great that he devoted the rest of his life to the music, sound and, most importantly, the making of harpsichords based on the methods of great makers of the past.

He was born on the 28th of July 1936 at Wooler in Northumberland into a musical family. His paternal grandfather was a professional musician, his father a competent cellist and his great uncles singers at Durham Cathedral. David often accompanied his father on his visits to local farms in his capacity as a Goods Agent at Wooler station. He was responsible for the transport of livestock to and from market by train. These early years living among rural craftsmen in Northumberland gave David his first insights into the traditional, pre-industrial craft skills he used in his harpsichord making. When challenged by his mother about a lack of concentration in class at his junior school in Wooler David explained that he "was thinking how to make a wheelbarrow": a first sign of the future craftsman.

At 12 he won a scholarship to board at Lord Wandsworth College, Hampshire, where a performance on recorder and harpsichord by Carl Dolmetsch and Joseph Saxby in 1951 began his life-long passion for early music. He learned to fly Tiger Moths at school and subsequently joined the Hull University Air Squadron whilst studying Zoology (he found comparative anatomy and laboratory skills transfer remarkably well to studying and copying historic instruments). National service in the Royal Air Force followed including flying and teaching. He was a fighter pilot during a bleak period of the Cold War when he regularly intercepted Russian aircraft, shadowing them as they tested our defence systems.

It was during his time in the RAF when stationed in the Midlands during the late 1950s that David met the cabinet maker Denis Rawlings in Leamington Spa, began his apprenticeship working with wood, and made his first harpsichords in the cellar of a rented house. Rawlings was a remarkable craftsman able to restore any piece of historic furniture to mint condition, no matter how badly aged, damaged or broken. From him David learnt the

basic skills of cabinet making, decoration, finishing and the suitability and use of a wealth of materials. In return, as it were, David taught the Rawlings children the recorder and his love of nature. Later, when stationed in the Maldives, David thrilled the Rawlings boys with a present of a whole, shaved coconut, sent by forces post with their address painted on it. On another occasion he sent back treasures from the seabed found on his scuba diving explorations.

David recognised that his inspiration to make according to historical principles ran against the grain of contemporary British harpsichord making. In his own words:

What was missing was an in-depth knowledge about the making of a good instrument. This was 1960 and very few people had such knowledge. The need for new harpsichords to satisfy the early 20th-century resurgence of interest in baroque music had produced a generation of beautifully engineered modern harpsichords made by piano makers with modern instrument technology. The sound of these was often strident or nagging. They had not the voice or ease of response found in well preserved instruments of the great makers of the past.²

After the RAF, he worked in education and was a headteacher in primary schools at Monks Eleigh and Tudor Road, Sudbury in Suffolk. There in the late 1960s he met the harpsichord maker Frank Sykes (whose photograph David kept on the wall of his workshop): another important influence. Sykes worked in Sudbury assembling Alec Hodson's instruments and organising his workshop. When Hodson withdrew from the business in the 1960s, Sykes continued producing instruments, eventually under his own name.³ At about the same time, David had a number of conversations with another harpsichord maker, Peter Whale, when making his visits to maintain Maurice Ratliff's Feldberg Whale harpsichord. David's vision and fine instruments impressed Whale, and not long afterwards the Feldberg Whale workshop in Sevenoaks changed their making practices away from their Neupert-franchise beginnings to making "faithful reproductions" of the original instruments.⁴

Coincidences – synergies we might say – happen frequently in David's story: the fact, for instance, that David in his Suffolk years should end up living in the same street in Bildeston as the only harpsichordist in the county, Maurice Ratliff. Maurice first encountered David as a recorder player in a concert at Old Buckenham Hall School, Ipswich, the first time they met (Maurice on harpsichord, David and Andy Malcolm on recorders), and he was overwhelmed by the sensitivity of his playing. Maurice and David became great friends, David making harpsichords in the garage of no. 5 Manor Road, and Maurice playing them in no. 12! As David's only means of transport at this time was a bicycle, Maurice's smart company car came in useful for transporting timber back to David's garage. David destroyed three or four early instruments before he was sufficiently satisfied to have his name on one: a Flemish harpsichord with two keyboards for Maurice made in 1972 and his official "Op. 1". He completed a virginals for Maurice in 1974 and a cornett. He also made a few recorders at this time.

In addition to his other accomplishments, David was a very fine musician, and this of course informed every aspect of his harpsichord making. He was a sophisticated and discriminating connoisseur of harpsichord playing – sympathetic of the difficulties facing the

player but quietly alert to any lack of finesse or polish in their performance – and he never lost his childhood love of its sound and repertoire. He rejoiced in good playing and listened avidly to Radio 3 and recordings. He played the trombone and in later years enjoyed playing tuba in the Marlow Town Brass Band. His tuba playing inspired the ska band Madness to use one in their hit-single “Baggy Trousers”.

Alongside his distinguished career in education, David continued to make harpsichords in his free time. He was awarded the MBE in 1986 for his services to education and for his pioneering work at the Cambridge Institute of Education which included practical research on how to teach science and maths to young children through play. His arrival as a mature maker was signalled by the French double-manual harpsichord after Taskin, which he completed in 1985 for David Kinsela in Australia. It took seven years of research and part-time making to produce and was widely acclaimed. John Barnes, the then curator of the Russell Collection in Edinburgh, described it as “uncannily like the original” which he had recently restored, and David was particularly pleased with it. The maker Rémy Gug was an important influence at this time and David maintained a wide correspondence and exchanged ideas with a number of other makers throughout his building career, most recently with Burkhard Zander in Germany. He also undertook several restorations of historic instruments.

In 1987 David set up a workshop behind the Bohun Gallery in Henley-on-Thames where he worked full-time as a maker until early 2018, when his advancing ill-health prevented him from so doing. In this small but meticulously organised space he built a range of instruments which dazzled players and audiences alike for their exquisite craftsmanship and sumptuous sound. Between 1959 and 2018 he made 44 plucked keyboard instruments, two harps, four zithers, six psalteries and five dulcimers. These include: three double-manual French harpsichords after Pascal Taskin, 1769 (Russell Collection, Edinburgh); a single manual François Etienne Blanchet, Paris, 1736 (Cité de la Musique, Paris); several English Virginals after the so-called “Queen Elizabeth Virginals” by Giovanni Baffo, Venice, 1594 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) and one after the Fleming Johannes Grouwels (Antwerp, c. 1580); and a copy of the earliest surviving harpsichord (the late 15th-century upright harpsichord now in the Royal College of Music Museum in London). His signature instrument was based on the small Neapolitan harpsichord also in the Royal College of Music, Museum (RCM 175) now attributed by Grant O’Brien to Onofrio Guarracino and dated *circa* 1660.⁵ His first copy, made in 1991, was a close reproduction of the original and proved popular. Eight further copies or hybrid models followed, four being sold in Switzerland. The hybrids changed the case proportions and/or the line of the bridge of the original to accommodate additional notes and transposing keyboards required by particular customers. David considered these modified instruments “interesting” experiments and more convenient to modern needs, but much preferred the sound of his uncompromised copies.⁶

He made several “one-off” commissions which aim to be very close copies of their originals and each required extensive research and considerable ingenuity in execution: a double-manual harpsichord after Jean-Antoine Vaudry, Paris, 1681 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) for Luke Green; two “Queen Elizabeth” virginals for Sophie Yates; a single-manual harpsichord after an Italian original dated 1693 and thought to be the work of Joannes Baptista Giusti (Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC), a single-manual

harpsichord after Ioannes Couchet, Antwerp, 1645 (Russell Collection, Edinburgh), and a single-manual version of an anonymous French harpsichord dated 1667 (Museum of Fine Art, Boston, USA)⁷, all for the author; and five instruments for David Kinsela: a Taskin double, the Grouwels Virginals, the RCM upright-harpsichord, a 'Queen Elizabeth' virginals, and a reconstruction of the anonymous Thuringian single-manual harpsichord (c. 1715) currently in the Bachhaus, Eisenach.

His instruments are used by leading performers, opera companies, festivals and enthusiasts in Britain, Switzerland, Germany, USA, Australia and France and can be heard on numerous recordings. A selective list of recordings featuring his instruments is given at the end of this article. Many professionals have used his instruments and, omitting those players already mentioned, these include: Rinaldo Alessandrini, David Bates, Harry Bicket, Chris Bucknall, Laurence Cummings, Christian Curnyn, Steven Devine, Stephen Farr, David Gordon, Rob Howarth, Andrea Marcon, Joseph McHardy, Kah-Ming Ng, Julian Perkins, Peter Skuce, Tim Roberts and Alastair Ross.

David was a natural mentor who shared his extensive knowledge and experience with open generosity. He enjoyed company and delighted in the pleasure that his instruments brought to others. He also derived great satisfaction from them himself. David was transported when reacquainted with his fine Taskin harpsichord in Australia, declaring "Oh, I remember that wonderful sound".

Not surprisingly, David's Henley workshop has been an international place of pilgrimage over the last 30 years. A vital role of instrument makers is to work in tandem with players and through his harpsichords David has inspired and encouraged at least two generations of harpsichordists. His work has significantly refined the art of historical instrument making and fundamentally changed the way we play and hear pre-Classical music today.

From my conversations with players and makers who knew David the same two themes have emerged: a deep admiration and respect for his consummate skill, wisdom and knowledge, and a warm affection for the man. He was at the forefront of the adoption of historical methods of building harpsichords in the last 60 or so years and his instruments are treasured by their owners.

His last completed harpsichord sits in my front room and I play it most days: a single-manual French harpsichord completed in 2014 in rich walnut. It is a truly wonderful instrument and, like David, a true and good friend. In the weeks before David's death I had all three of my Evans harpsichords in action – one in concert and the others being used by my college students in my studio at home. We enjoyed the instruments and marvelled at their fine construction, we were inspired by their appropriateness in the music for which they were designed, and we thought of David. That seems the best memorial I can offer.

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2018/12/28/david-evans-harpsichord-maker-paved-way-revival-instruments>.

² David Evans, "Passion is Instrumental", *The Sternian* (2009): 13, <http://lordwandsworth.daisy.websds.net/Filename.ashx?systemFileName=LWCTST2009.pdf&origFilename=LWCTST2009.pdf>.

³ Michael Ackerman, "Alec Hodsdon 1900-1986", *Sounding Board* 1 (Jan 2010), published by The British Harpsichord Society, <http://www.harpsichord.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BHSmagJAN2010a.pdf>.

⁴ <http://www.nicholas-martin.co.uk/keyboardshistory.htm>.

⁵ http://www.claviantica.com/Neap_sch.htm.

⁶ Programme note by David Evans, Royal College of Music Museum Concert, 21 Feb 2011.

⁷ David Evans, "Report on making a 17th-century French harpsichord", *Harpsichord & Fortepiano Magazine*, 19/1 (Nov 2014): 7.

A selective list of recordings featuring instruments made by David Evans

Double-manual French harpsichord (1985) after Pascal Taskin, 1769

- “Eloquence: Works by Louis-Nicolas Clérambault.2 David Kinsela. ORO 108 (2008).

Clavicytherium (1991) after German? original, c1480 (RCM 1)

- “Fundamentum: The Birth of Keyboard Repertoire. Anon., De Vitry, Ileborgh, Paumann”. David Kinsela. ORO 202 (2002).
- “Keyboard Banquet: A choice of music from the Buxheim Organ Book attributed chiefly to Conrad Paumann (c1410-1473)”. David Kinsela. ORO 206 (2006).
- “Harmony-Lore: The tablature of Amerbach of Basel, 1513-32.” David Kinsela. ORO 105 (2006).

Neapolitan harpsichord after anonymous original to Onofrio Guarracino c. 1660

- “Spanish and Portuguese Harpsichord”. Sophie Yates. Chandos CHAN560 (1994).
- “Johnny Cock thy Beaver”. Dufay Collective. Peter Skuce. Chandos CHAN 9446 (1995).
- “Cancionero”. Dufay Collective. Peter Skuce. AVIE AV 0005 (2007).

Double-manual French harpsichord (1995) after Jean-Antoine Vaudry, Paris, 1681

- “Purcell’s Fairy Queen”. Armonico Consort. Luke Green. Deux-Elles DXL 1120 (2006).
- “Cavalli: Ercole Amante (1662)”. Netherlands Opera. Luke Green. Opus Arte 1020 (2010).

Italian harpsichord (1999) after Giusti?, 1693.

- “Harmonia Caelestis”. Charivari Agréable. Kah-Ming Ng. Signum Classics SIGCD049 (2003).
- “Matthew Locke, Complete Keyboard Works”. Terence Charlston. Deux-Elles DXL1047 (2003).
- “Stravaganza Napolitane”. Dan Laurin, London Baroque, Terence Charlston. BIS-CD-1395 (2003).
- “Carlo Ignazio Monza: Keyboard Music”. Terence Charlston. Deux-Elles DXL1117 (2009).
- “An Italian Rant”. L’Avventura London, Zak Ozmo, David Gordon. Opella Nova (2011).
- “Alessandro Scarlatti: Con eco d’amore”. Elizabeth Watts, English Concert, Laurence Cummings. HM USA (2015).
- “Purcell: Come all ye songsters”. Carolyn Samson, Laurence Cummings. Wigmore Hall LIVE (2016).

Italian virginals (2000) after ‘Elizabeth I virginals’ by Giovanni Baffo, Venice, 1594. Assumed likely first compass and pitch.

- “Elizabethan Virginals Music”. Sophie Yates. Chandos CHAN0699 (2002).

Single-manual harpsichord (2005) after Ioannes Couchet, Antwerp, 1645

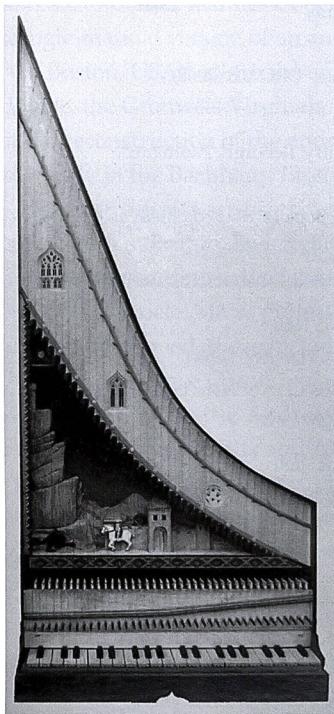
- “Albertus Bryne, Keyboard Music”. Terence Charlston. Deux-Elles DXL1124 (2007).
- “William Byrd: For My Ladye Nevell”. Terence Charlston. Deux-Elles DXL1136 (2008).

Virginals (2008) after Johannes Grouwels (Antwerp, c. 1580)

- “William Byrd: For My Ladye Nevell”. Terence Charlston. Deux-Elles DXL1136 (2008).

Reconstruction (2010) of the anonymous Thuringian single-manual harpsichord (c. 1715)

- “The Harmonious Thuringian”. Terence Charlston. Divine Art DDA 25122 (2014).



David Evans Clavicytherium (1991) after the earliest surviving harpsichord dated c1480 and now in the Royal College of Music Museum.



David Evans reconstruction (2010) of the anonymous Thuringian harpsichord (c. 1715).



David Evans single-manual harpsichord (2005) after Ioannes Couchet, Antwerp, 1645.



David Evans Italian harpsichord (1999) after Giusti?, 1693.

Please see cover for the photo of David Evans with his Grouwels virginals (2008).