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Interview with Orhan Memed

Dr Orhan Memed (http://www.orhan-memed.org, illus 1*) studied at USC and Magdalen College, Oxford, and has pursued a varied career as a performer, teacher, scholar, editor and publisher. He was interviewed for* Harpsichord & Fortepiano *by Francis Knights in August 2019.*

Illus 1 Orhan Memed (photo: Gabriele Martinelli)

Francis Knights: How did you first get interested in music, and what was your early training?

Orhan Memed: As it is with many musicians, I can point to a defining moment when I knew music would most likely be an important part of my life: I was about five years old when my mother put on a well-worn LP of Tchaikovsky symphonies and asked me to close my eyes and formulate images to what I was listening to. It seemed at the time—and still is—the most natural thing for me to do. But the real impetus to play an instrument came from having a talented older sister studying piano and I wanted desperately to do whatever she was doing. After moving around quite a lot between the US and what was then Yugoslavia, my parents settled in Tucson, Arizona when I was six and I lived there for ten years. By nine, I had decided that piano was just the tip of the iceberg. Since I had been fascinated watching broadcasts on Public Television of symphonic concerts and always wondered what it would be like to be in the middle of the second violin section of an orchestra and be surrounded by such an immense sound, I asked my parents if I could study violin. Of course, I hope that anyone reading this realises the luck I had to have parents who, though they struggled, managed not only to finance lessons and purchase of instruments, but also to juggle all the back and forth to lessons, orchestra rehearsals, recitals etc.

At 16, I went on to study piano and violin at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. I was rather disenchanted by my experience there so when the opportunity came up in the middle of my studies to go to London to study for a term with John Barstow and Francis Mason at the Royal College, I jumped at the chance. My time living in London certainly had a profound impact on me, especially when it came time to decide what to do after conservatory. But something else did as well: in my last year of studies in LA, my piano teacher, already rather perplexed that I was always wanting to play Bach, suggested that I look at some keyboard repertoire written before Bach. I responded: 'But is there any music written before Bach??'. He threw the two-volume Dover reprint of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book at me and told me to go away and come back the following week with some pieces prepared. Of course I procrastinated and left it until the day before my next lesson at which point I sat down at the keyboard, opened the first volume and found myself staring at Bull's Walsingham variations. I then spent the next three hours glued to the piano bench playing every piece in the volume. So between my obsession with Bach and the discovery of 17th-century English keyboard music, it was only a matter of time that I would want to get my hands on a harpsichord. Malcolm Hamilton, a Canadian-American harpsichordist who was a student of Alice Ehlers, gave me my first lessons on a five-pedal Wittmayer 'Bach' harpsichord. I was smitten.

When I got to Oxford as a postgraduate, it was made perfectly clear to me by my supervisor that I had better concentrate my energies on musicology and spend less time at the keyboard. But the music scene in Oxford was just too tempting: I played violin in orchestras, I sang in choirs, and I signed up for every harpsichord masterclass there was. I cringe now thinking of how I must have played back then, but I was devouring scores and recordings, and trying to play any instrument that came available to me. In my third year, I jumped at the chance of playing for Huguette Dreyfus, whose recordings of French music I was particularly moved by. We were three young harpsichordists who had signed up for her class in Oxford. The first chap, already an established player, was being put through his paces by Huguette Dreyfus when suddenly she grabbed his ears, yanked them up and said: 'Use these... they're not just for decoration!'. An uproar of laughter came from the audience in the Holywell Music Room as I desperately tried to slither out the door, terrified of what she'd say about me. But once I played for her, I knew that she was the mentor that I had been seeking. As soon as I finished my DPhil, I went to Paris to study with her. She then became the most important musical influence in my life. Every time I prepared a new programme or recording, up until six months before her passing in 2016, I would go to her flat on the Quai d'Orsay and play for her. She was a remarkable musician, a wonderful teacher, but above all an extraordinary individual.

Tell us about your publications. What has driven your research interests over the years?

The discovery of 17th-century English music when I was 19 was certainly the impetus behind a desire to go beyond just interpreting this wonderful music. I went up to Oxford in 1987 and ended up writing my doctoral thesis on Benjamin Cosyn. It was really the perfect subject for me: I had to bury myself in libraries transcribing his works; I got to analyse and write about the music; and I would trudge through the archives in London looking for clues to his activities in London in the 1620s and 30s. Once I moved to Paris in 1992, I found it difficult to carry on research in that area and my interests had started expanding to French repertoire. While studying harpsichord, I was doing some part-time work for the music publishing house Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre. Kenneth Gilbert and Davitt Moroney were editing a volume of François Couperin's *petit motets* and asked me to check a few details. I had already come under the spell of French vocal music of the period through recordings by Les Arts Florissants and going to concerts at the chapel in Versailles and elsewhere. So once again, through my discovery of the music, I sought to know more and this invariably led me to spend hours in libraries. A happy discovery of the author of the texts of Couperin's motets made a small contribution to Couperin scholarship, and I ended up co-editing an edition with Gilbert and Moroney and writing up what I had found out.

Years later, a call from Stanley Sadie began by him shouting down the phone to me: 'You're the only Macedonian I know'. Five minutes later, I understood that he wanted me to write the *New Grove* article on Macedonian folk music. I thought about it for a further 5 minutes and said yes... as long as Stanley would give me 18 months to allow me time to research and write. There began a happy period of travels to Skopje working at the Folk Institute, meeting incredibly talented musicians, reconnecting with a tradition of music making that I probably listened to in utero, and happily discovering that music, especially in that region, can be seen and experienced without recourse to nationalism or hegemony.

A birthday present from a dear friend, the wonderful Christa Ludwig, of a page of a Cimarosa manuscript sent me off to Naples to track down a network of manuscript trafficking between Naples and Paris in the 1830s. So you see, there is often an initial spark of interest, mostly tied to music that I play or a repertoire that moves me very deeply, and then I'm off trying to work it all out and put it in a context to which I can relate. As I get older, all I want to do now is share all of these observations and discoveries.

Tell us about your involvement in music editing and with Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre.

The part-time job at l'Oiseau-Lyre while I was studying harpsichord in Paris evolved into a managerial role that got me stuck into all aspects of music publishing. Devising new marketing strategies to sell volumes of 13th and 14th century music was certainly a challenge, but I also came to love the detailed work required in putting together an edition. Engraving the edition of Louis Couperin's *Pièces d'orgue* and realising that keyboard players would be seeing and playing this music for the first time was but one of the highlights of my time there. My experience at l'Oiseau-Lyre stood me in good stead when I began working in mainstream publishing at Flammarion, shepherding French and English co-editions through to press. Lately, I've been asked to edit the *Musica Britannica* volume of the music of Benjamin Cosyn, so, you see, English music has never really fallen far from my sight and interest.

What about your performing and teaching careers, and your work with the Académie musicale de Villecroze?

I feel very lucky not to have been pushed into a performing career fresh out of my harpsichord studies, as I was still needing to work out a balance between performing, teaching and research. Being a new face in Paris in the 1990s (and non-French!) meant that I began to get concerts in France and Europe. Every player has anecdotes to tell of starting out - from arriving at the concert venue to discover that the festival organiser's idea of a harpsichord is very different from yours, to realising that the concert hall's acoustic gave new meaning to the word 'wet' - and we necessarily learn from these experiences. I tend to want to control as many details of my environment when I'm performing, so playing on my own instrument or choosing the venue are luxuries that I can often now afford.

As harpsichordists, we're lucky to have an unbelievably rich solo repertoire. But when I think of the most intense moments of music making in my life, they would all be in the context of chamber or orchestral music. Since I love the voice so much, my predilection is to perform with singers but I've had wonderful experiences with instrumentalists and yes, even sitting in the back section of the second violins.

Teaching in a classroom setting began when I was in my early 30s. I taught history of music courses and classes on the history of opera for ten years to Vassar College and Wesleyan University students in Paris. As performers, we like to imagine that we're reaching out through music to connect with someone in the audience and perhaps even brighten up a moment of their day. With teaching, the effect is palpable: when you see a student opening up his or her mind to an idea that you've just put forward, the satisfaction is overwhelming. I continue to teach, now in Rome at the FAO, and I'm seeing more and more how the lines between teaching and performing blur. Whereas in the past my idea of a concert was a performer stepping out into the hall, taking a bow, playing the pieces written in a programme that had been carefully studied by the all in the audience beforehand, standing up, taking another bow, and leaving the stage, I now can imagine, especially in a carefully chosen venue, a direct contact with the public so that a few words said before a concert might just help them understand that the piece that I'm about to play is indeed truly remarkable.

While I was working in mainstream publishing at Flammarion in Paris in the late 90s, I got a phone call that would change the course of the next ten years of my life. The Académie musicale de Villecroze, where I had been a student one summer in 1993, was seeking a new director, and the then-director, a wonderful man named Jean-Claude Comert, asked if I'd be prepared to drop everything to come run a summer academy. A month later I was down in the South of France near Saint Tropez managing 30 people and putting into place a season spanning six months of two-week long masterclasses, workshops and residencies for musicians. A generous endowment meant that I could reach out not only to busy performers in the throes of their careers but also to those great artists who, while perhaps no longer performing, had everything to pass on in the way of experience and expertise. It was an astonishing period in my life. I had already considered myself fortunate to have found a passion in my life—music—but I also discovered that it was actually the mere act of helping out a young person that gave me utter satisfaction. Along the way, I met and made friends with some remarkable individuals, amazed myself by learning how to balance budgets and cut costs when needed, and sat in on classes that changed how I thought about music. Of course, when I give masterclasses now, I find myself egregiously appropriating ideas and imagery I picked up from voice teachers, violinists and marimba players who taught at the Académie.

What types of keyboards have you used during your career? What about your recordings?

When I arrived in Oxford, I knocked on anyone's door who had a harpsichord and asked if I could play. Trips up to Edinburgh to play the instruments in the Russell Collection opened my sound-world to original instruments, so that by the time I moved to Paris to study with Huguette Dreyfus, I was ready to give in to the sound of her delicate Blanchet. With savings and help from my parents and sister, I put myself on a wait list and waited (im)patiently for John Philips to build a Ruckers-Blanchet-Taskin for me (the original being in the Musée de la Musique in Paris). It was love at first sight, and my harpsichord has not only served me well for three recordings (Bach's *Partitas*, his *Toccatas*, and music by Purcell) but I've also taken it on tour with me. I don't do this often, but I couldn't possibly turn down the opportunity to perform on my own instrument in Rome, for instance, at the magnificent Biblioteca Vallicelliana built by Borromini.

Illus 2 Goldberg Variations recording

I've been very lucky to have had the fortune of choosing when and what I want to record. I recorded the Goldberg Variations (illus 2) first as I had access to a 1763 Guillaume Hemsch harpsichord in excellent condition. It was the most 'polyphonic' instrument that I had ever played, and seemed quite perfect for the variety of styles found in the Variations. The Partitas and the Toccatas of Bach were to follow, recorded on my own instrument in a beautiful setting in Normandy. And then I took a leap: being the proud owner a rather wonderful Bösendorfer 225 from 1966, I suddenly felt the urge to return to the modern piano and to repertoire I had long neglected. The result was two very happy years performing Haydn and Mozart on modern piano and a recording that I did in Rome on a beautiful Yamaha CFX. Of course, I succumbed willingly to the temptation to play Bach on piano as well and brought out another recording of three of the Partitas in 2018. To mark my return to harpsichord, I chose to record an album of English music and was fortunate to be able to play three different instruments that I felt best suited the repertoire: *A Musicall Banquet* spans 150 years of English music and should be released in 2020.