Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 24, No. 2 Spring, 2020

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

Interview with Christoph Hammer

On 11 January this year Pamela Hickman spoke to German keyboard artist, instrumentalist, conductor and educator Christoph Hammer at his home in southern Germany. Born in 1966, Christoph Hammer has established himself among the most important and versatile specialists in historical performance. He enjoys an international reputation as a soloist, song accompanist and chamber musician on the fortepiano and harpsichord, and conductor. He cultivates a special interest in reviving works of lesser-known and forgotten composers, also undertaking research that results in performance of their works. He has given masterclasses at Juilliard, Yale, the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow and many other universities, in addition to performing at major international early music festivals. From 2009 to 2013 he was professor of historical keyboard instruments at the University of Texas, and since then he has been professor of historical keyboard instruments and chamber music at the University of Augsburg's Leopold Mozart Centre.

Pamela Hickman: Professor Hammer, you are an organist, you play the fortepiano (and the modern piano), you improvise, you are a musicologist and a conductor. How do you engage in all these disciplines?

Christoph Hammer: Well, I try to combine all of them. Basically, the whole idea and the main impulse is being interested in the history of music. When I started off by playing the organ, I was getting introduced to what I call the 'grammar' of music, which means learning to understand the principles of basso continuo, of cadences, of counterpoint, of ornamentation and so on. And, if one is a little bit more curious about finding out how all this music you play is connected, from where it has come, in which cultural background it was produced and what the context of it all is, one may start digging into the archives. I came from a small village with an old Benedictine monastery in its centre, so I must say have been surrounded and influenced by history. So, after a while, I started doing research and trying to find out more about the music history of my region and that has interested me so much that, over the years, I have, more or less, really concentrated on rediscovering the music from the southern German/Austrian archives. All of that has drawn me into conducting. I mean, if you want to perform the music, you have to get ensembles running, set up programmes and so on; in addition to conducting music, I had to edit it and make it available for modern performance and record it. This whole enterprise necessarily included the task of understanding all the context of the generally well-known famous composers in order to come to a possible re-evaluation of their work and to gain a broader view and a new perspective of music history, its regional colours and variety. It is very obvious that music history consists of more than just three, four or five famous composers who have become the canon of our perception of music history. There are so many more wonderful composers and there is so much more wonderful music around.

Where do the period instruments come into this?

If you look at this music, you understand that you need specific instruments - period instruments, of course - to make it sound right. A lot of the literature just doesn't work on the modern piano and, for that reason, it has been lost and forgotten because it just does not fit on a more modern instrument that might have been built only fifty years after the work was composed. So, with all the knowledge we have gained from the historical performance movement, which has deeply changed our understanding and reading of early music, you have the tools to discover music again and to perform it in a manner where the music becomes very vivid, alive and inspired; in simple words, it makes sense again. Of course, not every composition is as complex, deep and structured as, for example, the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. But, with the right attitude and the right stylistic approach, and if understood in the right context, even a completely unknown composer can enlighten one's view and the music can be fascinating, fresh and absolutely worth discovering. So, if you start digging into the history of music, you need to be everything - a musicologist, editor, conductor, ensemble director, a performer yourself, a continuo player. That's how it also was in the past, how all the Baroque composers functioned: you have to understand music not only from the view of a solo performer. The problem nowadays is that we tend to specify a musician by putting him into a drawer - 'Oh, you are the piano soloist' and 'You are the

conductor' - it just doesn't work that way in the history of music.

Are you from a musical family?

Not at all. I mean, my father sang in the local church choir. Nevertheless, I highly value that rural, provincial background where I grew up: just a small village with an old tradition (I think many composers in history came from such places) and you get inspired by a Baroque church and by performing music on a regular basis in church services.

What was your early keyboard experience?

Our local school teacher played the organ. When he discovered I could play a bit of piano, he invited me to play the organ for the early Mass. With this practice, you soon become very familiar with playing music, the necessities of music for an audience and the circumstances of live performance, which can also mean that you have to improvise if needed, to fill the gaps. That is the natural way of how it has been throughout history. You get into an 'environment' and, if you are intelligent enough, you probably want to get into it more. When you start playing the organ, you traditionally receive a thorough introduction in the basics of basso continuo and four-voice settings, material which pianists unfortunately miss in their traditional education.

And your higher education?

On finishing school, I studied organ, but was never happy in the academy atmosphere of this 'higher, faster' competitive style of study; it became quite clear to me that this was not my world. At the same time, I was also studying musicology, literature and philosophy at the University of Munich. After three semesters, I had the chance of studying abroad for a year. It happened to be at a place that was not the most cultural hotspot in terms of music history. I was offered a scholarship to UCLA in Los Angeles and there I did study music, of course, but I also had to reinvent myself a bit. When I came back, I decided to drop my music studies. So, up to now, I have never received a music degree ... which is uncommon nowadays.

How did your interest in historic instruments begin? And conducting?

Through instrument-maker friends of mine. I happened to come across a couple of early instruments, in particular, an original Walter fortepiano. The friends invited me to play with their professional ensemble. Naturally, by spending more and more time on that beautiful instrument, I discovered that playing this instrument I could do things that (having tried so hard to do them on the modern Steinway) were natural and easily possible, the simple reason being that it was the right instrument for the Classical period. I was enjoying this new feeling of music-making more and more and was considering going to study early keyboard performance somewhere, but could not find my personal style of approach. So, in the end, I decided to do it on my own. I am probably what you would call an autodidact in this field. The same happened with conducting. It all started with an idealistic project: we set up a performance of an early Baroque opera from the Munich court. We all rehearsed from Xerox copies of the original score. I wrote out the parts for the orchestra and a friend of mine created a fantastic stage setting. It was such a huge success that I was asked to conduct more and more and – to cut the story short - ended up conducting in big opera houses, at the same time continuing to build up my own Baroque orchestra in Munich.

So, you did all of this without taking a music degree.

Yes. I strongly believe that, of course, you need to have a good and well-founded basis in music, but that does not necessarily have to be the result of an official academic education. If you are surrounded by good musicians, if you get the chance to play in fantastic projects and learn by discovering music over and over again, listening to colleagues and playing chamber music, you can learn so much of what can never be taught in official lessons or classes. It's more about your own personal curiosity and also probably about one's approach to music in general. It is also about not putting yourself first but, rather, to have respect for the music, acknowledging that you are not the centre of the world, but that the music itself should always be the centre of your approach.

What work is occupying you at the moment?

At the moment I am concentrating more on the pianoforte and chamber music, following fifteen years of intense opera and orchestral conducting. I am now interested in playing in smaller ensembles again.

You are known as a musician interested in rediscovering works.

Yes, and let me use an example: if you don't know who was around Mozart at the time, whom he met, who inspired him, to whose music he was listening, you don't know from where he took off and what influences made him develop in a certain way. If you read Mozart's letters, for

instance, you see many names of composers from his early travels to The Hague, to London, to Paris. It is quite astonishing that we rarely hear a piece of these composers' music and, for a great part, we don't even have any modern editions of their works. They are completely neglected, today being considered 'minor' composers, with a kind of disparaging connotation. But, at that time, they were highly-respected composers in those cities and, often, all over Europe. Even if they do not have resonating names like Johann Christian Bach, composers such as Ignaz von Beecke (whom nobody knows today), Schobert, Eckard, Lang and Sterkel are very important for the development of the keyboard sonata. You really need to understand music history in its context and also in its side aspects in order to have the full picture. Another example: not every painting can be a Mona Lisa. You need to see many paintings around it to understand its cultural context and to evaluate the meaning of a masterpiece. If your understanding of art is based exclusively on the works of the big names, you might probably have a distorted view and narrow perspective. Personally, I am very interested to see what small courts and regional centres like Regensburg and Oettingen-Wallerstein can tell us about their music. So much music has been lying there for 200 or 300 years and hasn't been performed since then. It is absolutely worth it to look into them.

Do you prepare editions of these works?

I try to, but haven't published them in an official way, because I am still looking for a functional way of doing it. But, of course, if you have an opera manuscript or just the parts of a piano concerto, you have to put them into a score, which today can be done on the computer by anyone. You do have to learn how to design it and make it readable and make the layout work. Ten years ago, I was still paying a lot of money for microfilm from archives. Nowadays, the new generation is very lucky, because everything is digitally available. The problem students have nowadays is that they have no 'map' in their brains to understand what belongs where. There is so much available and they don't know how to look at it, how to approach it. I am concerned that we have to address much more attention to how broad and rich this heritage we have is.

Do you write music, and write about music?

I do not compose, and there is a reason for that. My way of playing or expressing myself is mostly formed by patterns which are typical of the historic musical Classical or Romantic periods. Recomposing a piece of that period would probably be easy, but I don't see the necessity of doing that to express myself. I like to improvise a lot. I could make up a complete piece you would think was of the 19th century. It is important to know that concerts of the past usually included big sections of improvisation. To learn a style and improvise in it is very important but that is where I leave it. I don't want to write it down. I am not very keen on writing scientific articles about music, but I like to talk about music with colleagues, thus understanding material and connecting and exchanging information. My ultimate goal is to show this in my performance.

With your interest in fortepiano, what instruments do you have at your disposal?

The fortepiano is not one specific instrument. There were lots of different instruments built over the years and, if you start with Cristofori in the beginning and go to Silbermann, Vienna, southern Germany, England and the French school, you need a couple of instruments available to understand the music well. I am lucky in having two collections available to me, and those collections include some fantastic original instruments, from five-octave instruments to Romantic pianos by Conrad Graf, Streicher, Bösendorfer etc. Great responsibility must be taken to use these instruments very carefully and to try to understand each one of them and the manner in which it wants to be played. The idea is that you should not play the instrument by hammering your pre-made conception into it, but rather evoke its possibilities and allow it to resonate at its best or, in other words, let it play. Original instruments are some of the best teachers you can have. I sometimes joked saying that my real teachers were Anton Walter and Conrad Graf!

Would you like to talk about your teaching?

Well, I freelanced for 25 years and then I was invited to apply for a position far away at the University of North Texas. Interested in a bit of a change in my life, I went to the Dallas area and worked there for four years. It was very interesting because the approach to music there or, should I say, the concert life there, was very different. If you grow up in a country where there is so much history in everyday life, where you have so many historic buildings, palaces and a beautiful Baroque church in every small village and you then go to a country where, within 2000 miles, there is nothing of that, you understand our responsibility in Europe much better to carefully preserve this treasure of culture, to make it available and to share it. After four years there, I returned home because my private soul needed to be back in these surroundings. I was really suffering from not having the Baroque churches and all the natural surroundings I had grown up with close by. But I am now working on the concept and idea of making all the

instrument collections we have here available to foreign students, and I strongly believe that it should be a part of any education in classical music to see and live, at least for a while, in the surroundings and atmosphere where all this music was created. This has to do with buildings, with architecture, with halls, instruments etc. I really hope we can go forward and enhance this kind of exchange. At the moment, I have a professorship at the Leopold Mozart Centre of the University of Augsburg. Augsburg is a wonderful city with a rich history. The instrument maker Andreas Stein worked in Augsburg and, in the second half of the 18th century, the town was really a stronghold of the early fortepiano, both in production and performance.

With what repertoire are you involved at the moment?

I am more focused on the Viennese fortepiano than on the French or English instruments. I make this distinction because, for many pianists, it is very fashionable or desirable to play Chopin on original instruments of Pleyel and Erard. I am more interested in the Viennese tradition, in music written at the beginning of the fortepiano period in southern Germany - from the 1770s up to, let's say, 1850. This is where I feel most strongly at home. There is also a lot still to discover, especially after 1800. At the moment, I am doing much research on fortepiano solo, chamber music and piano concertos of the southern German area, including the Augsburg tradition.

You have a deep connection with Schubert's music.

Yes, he is the composer I love most. His music is a world in itself and he always gives us an entire world of harmony. No other composer of his time had used the fortepianos of that period with the potential offered by their different stops, many colours and their specific sound, as a source of inspiration for music like he had. And you cannot substitute that with any other instrument. It is all about overtones, about harmonies, almost like music of the spheres. His music is like a personal secret and I am happy if I can understand a tiny bit of it and share it.

I understand you have several chamber music connections.

Yes, I have some wonderful musicians with whom I love to play. I am still connected with my dear colleagues from America - Cynthia Roberts, El Whear and Paul Leenhouts of the University of North Texas. I play with a couple of musicians here in Munich. Well, the problem is not in finding good musicians with whom to play; the problem sometimes lies in finding the time and how to organize it - to set up concerts and get it all running. (Unfortunately, a big part of being a musician is administration and organization.) And I very much love song accompaniment. When I work with tenor Daniel Johanssen, we connect on an immediate and natural level of expression from the soul.

For me, chamber music is for the soul and for 'mental' health. It is very important for me not only to only be a soloist, but to enjoy and play together with friends and colleagues, to engage in intelligent, sophisticated and witty conversation on our instruments. That is the best thing you can have in life, and it forces you not to break out, not to be a narcissistic character: you have to agree with other people on the manner of performing. It is a very good school and I encourage my students to play a lot of chamber music. It teaches them to learn from each other, to know where you have to come in, where you have to back off etc.

When it's music or not music, what interests you?

I like human intelligence. I like to talk to people who have ideals. I like to meet and share thoughts and discuss things, also outside of convention. My life has not been a typical straightforward development and I think you have to always look carefully at different perspectives - in whatever you do.

And your own musical conviction?

I think music itself always teaches you that there is no perfect interpretation, that there is no absolute security in performance. It depends again and again on situations, on the environment, on the colleagues, even on the audience, and you have to really be able to adapt to different characters, to different situations, to different surroundings. You must not fight those, rather, you have to find a way to connect. This flexibility is very important - and that is what music is all about. Each performance will be different, just as every day of our lives will be new, bringing excitement and challenge. As musicians, all we can do is to provide moments - little moments of joy or inspiration, and that's a great thing to do.