

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
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Interview with Richard Taylor



Illus.1 Richard Taylor

Today I'm delighted to be talking to Richard Taylor (illus.1), the East Anglian instrument maker who coincidentally made my own clavichord. He has spent most of his life in Suffolk, and because of the current situation I'm not able to visit him in person, so we're speaking to each other via FaceTime.

Paula Woods: Richard, where did your interest in music come from – was it something in your family, or did you discover it for yourself?

Richard Taylor: Well, my Mum had an extremely tuneful singing voice. She didn't play an instrument, but she was always singing something, and my Dad played piano. Both my sisters learned the piano, so there was always music in the house. I took up the violin when peripatetic teaching first arrived at school. (Lessons were free, and a subscription of five shillings a week until the violin was paid for.) We got taken to local concerts – we lived in the small town of Beccles in Suffolk – so we hadn't got access to big concerts. But Norwich was not far away, and there were concerts there, so we were taken to musical events.

So East Anglia is your family home?

My Dad traced the history of the family back to about 1540, and discovered they never lived more than about 30 miles from here. So we haven't come far in 450 years! And of course we have Snape Maltings down the road.

I've done quite a bit of tuning there – a really joyful experience, and I've met some amazing people – Pierre Boulez once came across the stage and said to me '442 please!' But that was as far as the conversation went! My friend Alan Gotto makes instruments for players all over the world, and lives in Norwich. He's not always free to travel, and I'm only a few minutes away, so I sometimes stand in for him and do a good deal of tuning. I've also made quite a few keyboards for Alan, and you can imagine how exciting it is to contribute the keyboard to one of his exquisite instruments. For example, he copied an incredible instrument from about 1690 – an Italian harpsichord by Boni – which has umpteen split sharps and a fistful of funny notes in the bass, and it was a really enjoyable experience, making that keyboard.

You clearly came from a family with an interest in music. How far did they influence you directly?

They influenced me in more ways than just in music. My mother was a professional tailoress. Before she met my father, she made evening suits and morning dress for the gentry – all of the highest quality. Even my school blazers benefitted from her skill! And my Dad, while he had a relatively mundane job, was something of a polymath, and would spend his free time at home working on complex geometrical problems, and doing old RAF examination papers for fun. He made radios, he drew and painted, so there was a strong creative streak and a lot of intellectual curiosity in my family.

What other musical influences did you have as you grew up?

I had some very good music teachers at school: Frilly and Frolly Firth – he played the violin, and she played piano and cello. We had a rattling good school choir too. I also had musical friends at school – one was a very good guitarist, who played Bach – and so I heard a lot of music as I grew up. I came to Bach quite early, and as far as instruments go, I remember hearing a broadcast of Sheridan's *The Rivals* on the radio, when I was about 14, and that's when I heard the harpsichord for the first time. The sound made a huge impression on me, and the following year, when we were working on *Twelfth Night* for the O-Level exam, we were taken to the Madder

Market theatre in Norwich, where they had a little bentside spinet for the music. It was an original one by John Relph. It's listed in Boalch, and this was the first time I was able to get close to one.

I also had a friend – John Sargent – who made a number of very good harpsichords until an accident ended his instrument making. He had the Relph spinet in for repair about 35 years ago, and by an odd coincidence I found myself helping him with that. Another influence came when I was about 16, and my Dad took me to Fenton House, where the very first 'live' harpsichord music I heard was Couperin's *Les Barricades Misterieuses*. That piece really set me off on my path with early keyboard instruments.

Other craftsmen have also taught me a lot – one was the father of one of my school friends. He was an excellent signwriter, and I learned a terrific amount from him, as I did from another friend, who is a notable carver, and has repaired work by Grinling Gibbons at Petworth. I have often watched him at work, and I've picked up a tremendous amount from him. There is also a book – *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, by David Pye – it's an essential book for all crafts people.

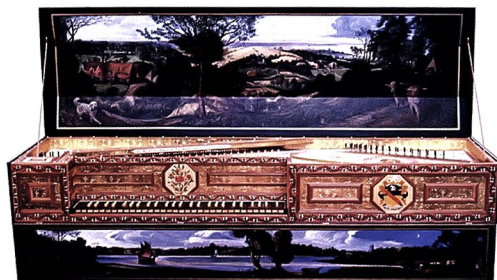
How early did you think about having a career that involved music?

Well, when I was at school, I wanted to be an architect, or a draughtsman. That was the kind of fiddly, detailed work that I enjoyed – I made model aeroplanes and so forth. Then I gradually became more interested in music, and I went to Colchester Tech, which had a really strong music department. For my first job, I spent a couple of years as a peripatetic violin teacher, working in Newham. I loved that, and then I came back to Suffolk, with my newly acquired wife. She is a terrific musician – a keyboard player, who also plays the violin – and as we speak I'm sitting at the Ruckers-style harpsichord I made for her. We moved to Suffolk in 1971 and have lived here ever since, and until I retired I was a design and technology teacher, which I enjoyed greatly. I had pupils making flutes and guitars, and it was a pretty varied career in that respect. So I never really planned a musical career, other than in instrument making. I retired early – about 19 years ago now – and I've made quite a lot of instruments since then. I believe I've made about 48 instruments in all.

How do you decide which instruments to build?

Quite often someone has said 'Could you make me one like this?' So that determines what I make. If they are not sure what they want, I'll suggest something, and

recommend what I think will suit their needs. There are some instruments that just inspire you – for example, the lovely Stephen Keene virginals in the Edinburgh collection. I went up there to see it, and they were so helpful. They allowed me to inspect it closely, and I was able to spend several hours measuring and making notes. I made one for a client, and he was thrilled with it.



Illus.2 painting in the style of Brueghel

I also have a friend, Richard Morgan, who is a fabulous painter, and who had just undergone surgery when I made the virginal. He was frustrated at not being able to do his usual work, and so I said to him 'just sit in front of this lid please, and paint it'. And he did – a painting in the style of Brueghel, depicting the client's house. An amazing image – I took my daughter to see it, and Richard said that he knew he'd got it right when she looked and gasped. The customer was absolutely delighted with it, and so it was a particularly rewarding commission (illus.2).

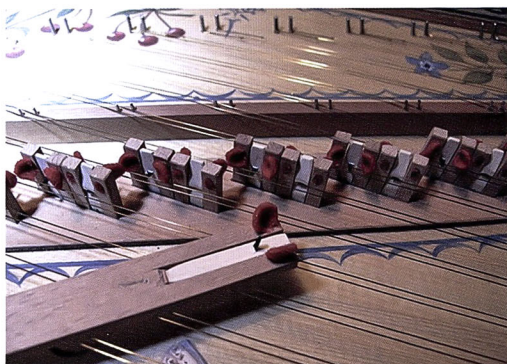
So, deciding what to make is partly a matter of what the client would like, and also partly dependent on what you feel would be an interesting instrument to build?

Yes – I love the decorative aspect, but also the technical side – making my own jacks for instance (illus.3). And I have an aversion to spindly legs – I really enjoy making the proper, knobbly Ruckers stands. More decorative, and more accurate too.

When you begin an instrument, do you think in terms of following a design process, or visualising a specific finish?

I'm always keen to follow the traditional methods of construction. I don't think there's any future in departing from the kind of original specification, when it works beautifully. The instrument I've made for Geraldine is absolutely based on the original Ruckers, in measurements and materials. I'm always trying to

do that, and I'll make sure the materials are of the best quality I can get. When it comes to soundboards, I'm particularly fussy. I'm always drawn to Ruckers of course – I've just finished a 4 1/2 voet virginal, after one built in 1629 (illus.4). And some instruments just shout at you – 'look at me'.



Illus.3 Ruckers virginals jacks

There's something special about Ruckers instruments, isn't there? The character of them, and the wonderful 'ring' in the sound of a good, close copy.

The one I have here is now fourteen years old, and the sound has developed over that time, which is super. But when it comes to construction, I also like the fact that when I examine a Ruckers I can see what has been done in the workshop. You look inside and you can see where the glue dripped down, and where they didn't bother to plane the wood. But the working parts – the jacks, soundboard, keys and so forth – are fabulously well made. I love making jacks – it can be incredibly tedious, because it's so repetitive – and I sometimes curse! But they're such a wonderful piece of design, perfected so long ago, and it was great to be able to make them, after that glut of plastic, screw-laden, twiddly jacks that we had to contend with in the 1970s. I remember a few years ago having to work on an enormous harpsichord by someone whose name I won't mention. It was just monstrous, trying to regulate those awful things. The jacks I made for this harpsichord here were voiced fourteen years ago, and apart from one broken quill – delrin of course – I haven't really had to touch them. It's a thrill to work with the original design, from so long ago. In a way it seems very modern: if you were faced with using only hand tools, and knew nothing of the piano, or electricity, and someone asked you to make a keyboard, you would still do it the same way.

Have you ever made an instrument that posed a particular challenge?

The Keene virginal entailed making dies to emboss gold-leafed paper, and a fierce amount of soundboard painting. There are certainly times when you think 'Hmm. I haven't got this right', and have to re-do something.

When it comes to repertoire, do you think about specific pieces in relation to an instrument?

I think I'm more technically driven, and tend to think first of the instrument that I'd like to make, rather than the repertoire. Then if I'm lucky enough to find someone to play the right music, that's a bonus. I've made a number of bentside spinets – based on English models from about 1700 – for people who like to play Handel and Bach and earlier stuff too. They're very versatile, all-round instruments.

It sounds as though you're more into the earlier instruments?

Well, I've made several Italian style, pentagonal spinets, with the outer cases. Sir Charles Mackerras had one of mine for early opera, and had a travelling case made for it, in order to take it to Australia for performing there. He wrote me a letter afterwards to say how pleased he had been with it. The instrument is with his sister now, not far from here, so I see it now and then. I fell in love with those little spinets when I visited Fenton House, and saw the one by Marcus Siculus. Another fascinating example is the 1540 clavichord – the one in Leipzig. Back in 2000, we went to the festival held to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the death of Bach, and I saw it in the museum. I've been longing to make that ever since. I think it's the earliest extant one of its type. I'm just about to string it – I'm just dying to know what it's going to sound like. Did you know Rodger Mirrey?

Yes indeed.

Twenty-five years ago I went to their place with a pal and met Rodger and his wife. Such welcoming people – they cooked lunch for us, and in the corner of the room was sitting that lovely little 1620 fretted clavichord. And that was one of the instruments that said 'Come here – come here with your tape measure please'. And I've made five of those – Claire Hammett has one, Steven Devine has one – and I'm tempted to make another one, because the sound is astonishing. And then Peter Bavington suggested I try twisted strings in the bass, so I made some of those, and they worked very well.



Illus.4 Ruckers virginals

Can you think of specially satisfying moments you've had as an instrument maker?

Oh yes! My wife has a Baroque trio, with a fabulous recorder player and Baroque bassoon player. They give quite a few concerts locally. And of course it's very nice to sit at the back and listen to the sounds that you've had a part in creating. That's a very enjoyable thing. And there have been a couple of occasions when instruments of mine have been used in the Aldeburgh Festival. That was very nice too. When an instrument is sitting in a room in your house, or in the workshop, it's very difficult to know what it's going to sound like in a performing space.

Are you a player yourself?

Not a keyboard player – I play violin, and I'm just getting to grips with a Baroque flute, which is driving me nuts, because the fingering is slightly different from the recorder, and many notes have up to six alternative fingerings! I play the violin and viola in a little local orchestra, though not at the moment of course.

Let's hope it won't be long before we can get back to normal musical life. What do you think really keeps you motivated?

I'm very lucky to have a workshop at the end of my garden, so it's easy to stroll down there and do an hour's work – or a whole day. That makes it easier, and also Geraldine plays all the time, so I'm constantly able to hear Bach, and Schubert, or Granados. It's there all day long, and so I don't have to come to music: it's with me all the time. I also re-hair violin bows. I did a calculation, and over the years I think I've re-haired well over three thousand bows. That started when we were at school: I said to a pal of mine that it must be possible to find out how it's done. Our music teacher gave us a few not-very-special bows, and we just taught ourselves to re-hair them. Over the years I've worked on bows for some pretty eminent players – it's a fascinating job.

Is there anything you'd like to make, but simply haven't got round to yet?

Well, at 74, I sometimes wonder if I'll make many more instruments, but I've questioned that several times, and I just seem to carry on. And there are so many options. I've made a lute, and I've made cornetti for someone who played with Musica Reservata. I have some beautiful boxwood, which I've had for years, and I'm thinking of copying my Baroque flute.

Somehow I doubt you'll be giving up work just yet! Thank you so much for talking to us.