

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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(MIRCat)

A commemoration of Elizabeth de la Porte (1941-2020)

Pamela Nash



‘...the sense of inner movement had a grandeur that only a great musician could achieve’ (*Daily Telegraph*)

With the death of Elizabeth de la Porte on 9 April 2020 – incidentally, just six days before that of her contemporary Kenneth Gilbert – the harpsichord lost an unsung champion. One of the first solo career harpsichordists of the 1970s, Elizabeth helped to re-establish the instrument into the mainstream, performing in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the UK as well as in her native South Africa. After several years of prominence as a recitalist, teaching became her primary focus and she devoted herself to the mentoring of generations of young players.

Born in Johannesburg in 1941 into an intensely musical household (her mother was the noted mezzo-soprano Betsy de la Porte), Elizabeth developed into a prodigious young pianist. Her particular affinity for Bach was evident at an early stage, and it was on the strength of her performance of the C minor Partita that she gained a scholarship for three years’ study at the Vienna Academy. Deeply influenced by the work of Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his new Concentus Musicus Wien, Elizabeth’s interest in Baroque repertoire blossomed, and after furthering her studies at the Royal College of Music, which included harpsichord lessons with Thornton Lofthouse, she at last resolved to focus on the harpsichord, going on to study with Rafael Puyana and Jane Clark.

The 1970s saw the timely emergence of Elizabeth as a fully-fledged concert artist, and though her rise to fame coincided with the early music revival and the burgeoning of reproduction harpsichords, there can be no doubt of the importance of her role in helping to put the harpsichord on the map as a solo recital instrument. Eschewing the use of modern hybrid-type harpsichords, she commissioned instruments from Michael Johnson (Goermans/Taskin, 1973) and David Rubio (French double, 1976). She also owned an Italian single (1970) by Michael Johnson.

In 1971, Elizabeth undertook the first full-scale harpsichord recital tour of South Africa since that of Ralph Kirkpatrick in 1958, and garnered high praise at her London debut the following year, later managing a rare coup for the time in playing an all-François Couperin recital to a sold-out Purcell Room. Several appearances on BBC Television followed, and she went on to make highly acclaimed recordings: ‘The Elizabeth de la Porte Collection’ (Böhm, Scarlatti, Byrd, etc) and a collection of Bach (the Italian Concerto, the French Overture and the Chromatic Fantasia & Fugue), both for Saga, and a set of the six Partitas for Hyperion. Happily, all of her Bach recordings, still cited by many as their interpretations of choice, have been recently re-released by London Independent Records.

Her playing was characterised by a gift for musical narrative which was compelling in its directness, and she possessed the capacity for being able to temper scholarship with insight and instinct. As noted by reviewer John Duarte: ‘she plays as a good orator speaks ... carries you in one sweep from beginning to end’, and the *Daily Telegraph* described her as having ‘a mind that contemplates and acts imaginatively on intimate stylistic knowledge’.

Elizabeth was a cherished teacher and colleague, remembered for her disciplined commitment and dedication to the welfare of her students, both personal and musical. She leaves behind a legacy distinguished by her many associations and by her work for schools, including Kent College and Junior King’s, Canterbury, as well as her posts at Morley College and the Royal College of Music Junior Department. She taught at the RCM for a remarkable 55 years, co-founding Baroque ensemble groups alongside her individual teaching and serving a vital role in educating and enlightening young pianists in

the ways of the harpsichord and the Baroque repertoire. She was awarded an FRCM in 2016 for her services to music and music education.

Elizabeth was an extremely devoted wife and mother to three children. In the words of her daughter Leonora, 'She wore her own intelligence and her phenomenal musical intellect lightly. But her love of music and the harpsichord was an integral part of who she was. And she could play with such joy, excitement and vivacity, and equally with lingering beauty'.

My thanks go to Elizabeth's husband Dr Paul Dawson-Bowling, and her daughter Leonora Dawson-Bowling, for their kind assistance. A further tribute article, featuring reminiscences from former colleagues and students, will appear in a forthcoming issue of Sounding Board magazine.

