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Interview with Carole Cerasi

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Harpsichord & Fortepiano *readers need no introduction to harpsichordist/fortepianist Carole Cerasi. On 16 December last year Carole and I talked at her home in London. Born in Sweden of Sephardi/Turkish origins, with French as her first language, she has been based in London since 1982. For the last 30 years Carole Cerasi has established herself as a soloist, recording artist and pedagogue of worldwide repute. Professor of harpsichord at the Yehudi Menuhin School and of fortepiano and harpsichord at the Royal Academy of Music and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, her recordings have won great critical acclaim and such prestigious awards as a Gramophone Award and three* Diapason d'Or de l'Année.

Pamela Hickman: *Carole, you recorded the complete works of Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre in 1998 and you have recently completed a recording of all of Couperin's harpsichord works... both huge undertakings. Would you like to talk about the latter?*

Carole Cerasi: Yes; it took rather longer than I had realised it would. I had in mind four or five CDs, maybe six, but it came to a good ten! Couperin's were among the first pieces I learned on harpsichord at the age of eleven, when I was living in Geneva. I played some of the Preludes from *L'art de toucher le clavecin*. My teacher made me try some of them on the clavichord and we then transferred them to the harpsichord, so I had an idea of their expressive qualities. I have played them all along. I have always loved that music; it has felt very comfortable. But when 2018 came closer - the 350th anniversary of Couperin's birth - I was hesitating about the idea of a complete recording. There are 243 pieces; I hadn't played all of them by any means and wondered if I had anything to say. However, we decided that if I didn't do it then, it would not come out in time for the anniversary. The upside was that it made me discover some pieces I had only sightread, but hadn't really got to know - and among them I have found some that I am particularly fond of now. I don't enjoy recording, usually doing one every three years, but, having left it so late, it was ten within a year, which felt very intense! And then we were left with the worse problem of editing all ten in one year to get them out in time. Our usual producer-engineer said: "Sorry... too subtle...I'm not doing a first edit with this'. My husband, harpsichordist/organist James Johnstone, who was producing, put together a first edit. We did get it out on time, which was a relief. It was a really intense time for me, stressful but fantastic in many ways.

I believe you recorded the Couperin works on four different harpsichords.

It was, in fact, five different harpsichords, plus a sixth for the pieces for two harpsichords. I have often used antiques, but, of course, the cost of this sort of project was an issue. There were a few instruments I was interested in overseas, but using those just proved to be too complicated. However, I did use one that hadn't been recorded on much - perhaps only once; it is by Antoine Vater, a Paris maker. Telemann stayed at his home when composing the Paris Quartets; so, in all probability, he would have known the instrument and even played it. It belongs to the widow of harpsichordist and restorer Michael Thomas who extremely kindly and generously let us use it to record the Fourth Book. It

was absolutely wonderful. It is not beautifully decorated; in fact, it's quite plain, with just a little row of flowers inside, so it looks a little bit like a Swiss chalet. It was probably a professional instrument and not one sold to the aristocracy. We also used a copy of that instrument made by a very fine French maker, Philippe Humeau. For the First Book, we used the instrument on which I had recorded de la Guerre, an original Ruckers-Hemsch which is in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands Park. For the Third Book I used a fine copy by the American maker Keith Hill. Then for the Preludes of *L'art de toucher*, we used an instrument by William F. Morton, which I have just seen again in Paris when I was there a month ago participating in a concerto project with several harpsichordists. Then, for the pieces with two harpsichords, we added my copy of a Goujon by Andrew Garlick, one of the best English makers – the original is in the Musée de la Musique collection in Paris.

Are you from a musical family?
A music-loving family. Well, my great-aunt in Canada (originally from Turkey), who died at 99, was a piano teacher. Her daughter is a pianist, and her grandson an excellent violinist - he is concertmaster of the Liceu in Barcelona. I have a cousin in Los Angeles who plays violin in Hollywood film orchestras. So, there are a few musicians in the family, but it doesn't go back very far. My father never played an instrument, but he is a passionate music lover, so my earliest memories in life are listening to Purcell, Wagner etc.

How did you come to play the harpsichord?
Very simply, I had a piano teacher when I was 11 in Geneva who was a harpsichordist teaching piano (as you often do to earn a living), and she thought it would suit me. My parents felt I should do one thing well rather than having a go at different instruments; so, we gave the harpsichord a try and it felt very natural. At that time, my father won a prize in medicine; some of that money from that went towards buying a small Flemish harpsichord, a Zuckermann copy made by a cellist of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande who built instruments for relaxation after concerts. It's a solid little beast, but a very good one. When I lived in Israel, we used to strap it to the roof of the car and drive through the desert to various concert venues. Funnily, when I was ten and my brother was six, he was passionate about organ and harpsichord. I had never been particularly keen on any one instrument - it was the repertoire that always drew me. By the time I was fourteen, my father had started a job in Jerusalem and we knew there really wasn't anybody there to teach me at the time. So, we talked to Kenneth Gilbert, for whom I had played in a master class in Stockholm. He told us I must see a friend of his in London, and that was the most wonderful thing, because Jill Severs happened to be the best teacher I could ever have dreamt of having. I started spending every summer in London, moved there when I was 19 and have been here ever since.

Once settled in London, somehow, I wasn't a pianist anymore, although I honestly can't remember actually making that decision. I loved playing Brahms, for example, but just don't have the physical strength for that now. I think I was very lucky that I developed the harpsichord and piano at the same time. I wasn't already a finished pianist when I started the harpsichord - they both evolved at the same time independently and in very different ways. In France now, it is quite common to start the harpsichord very early, often without piano studies. I am glad I have played the later repertoire. I had Russian piano teachers for part of my studies and the best harpsichord teaching possible in London from Jill Severs, as well as master classes with most of the great harpsichordists. I think I was very lucky in how my studies developed.

Who have been the big influences on your musical career?
Musically, Nikolaus Harnoncourt ... immensely. I spent a lot of my nerdier youth listening to Fischer-Dieskau and Gerald Moore. I would get up at six and listen to the complete *Winterreise* every weekend. As far as the harpsichord is concerned - very much Gustav Leonhardt and Kenneth Gilbert, but in different ways. I think my playing would probably now be more affiliated with Leonhardt's school. Kenneth was the first harpsichordist I met when I was 14 (I had heard Leonhardt in Switzerland when I was twelve). I went to Kenneth's courses in Antwerp, which were wonderful. They were on the Vleeshuis Museum's collection of antique harpsichords, and for ten days we were able to practise two hours a day on those instruments. From 14 to 18, I was there every summer. Kenneth was a great musician and pedagogue; my playing may have diverged from his, but I am very grateful I was exposed to his deep knowledge and inspiring teaching.

Let's talk about repertoire and taste. You have a very wide repertoire, from Byrd to Froberger, the French clavecinistes, *Bach and to Haydn and Beethoven. How late do you go with the Classicists? On fortepiano or on earlier keyboards?*
Sadly, only to early Beethoven, because I haven't been a pianist for 38 years. I came to London at 19, having finished my last piano exam playing Prokofiev's Sonata No.6 and Beethoven's Sonata No.31, Op.110. I don't feel comfortable playing works past 1800-1805 any more. I would love to say that my repertoire includes Schubert, some of the music that moves me the most,

but my hands no longer remember how to play it. I listen to the repertoire and, luckily, get to teach it. (One of my finest ex-students, now in his mid-30s, a wonderful Italian harpsichordist in Paris, has gone back to playing Schumann and Schubert, but for him, the gap wasn't as long.) I love playing Haydn on either clavichord or 18th-century fortepiano - even on a Stein rather than a Walter, as I prefer the earlier instruments. I think it is the German line - C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, more than J. C. Bach, Mozart, going on towards Schumann - that attracts me. I'm more comfortable in a style that depends on harmony for expression.

You have premiered modern works, for example, those of Matteo Fargion and Kevin Volans.

I'm not naturally inclined towards contemporary music, but I was asked by a very fine dance company, the Siobhan Davies Dance Company, if I would be interested to play a piece by Matteo Fargion to slot in with Scarlatti sonatas; for the Scarlatti Sonatas they were using a CD by Pierre Hantaï, a good friend of mine. Having never worked with dancers, I thought it would be interesting. Then we did *White Man Sleeps* by Kevin Volans for two harpsichords in an African tuning, viola da gamba and percussion, which was hard work to learn but fun to perform. To me it felt very much like acting in a foreign language ... a fascinating experience. An interesting realization on tour in St Petersburg with this dance company was that in the museums I was more moved by paintings from an even earlier period than the repertoire I play, paintings of the 15th century, whereas the dancers were much more interested in seeing contemporary art. But it was quite a nice exchange, as we went around both sides of the museums, realizing how the same art meant different things to each of us; we were interested in the other's focus, but not moved in the same way. So yes, I have premiered some modern pieces - also with the Rambert and Shobana Jeyasingh dance companies - and thoroughly enjoyed it.

What instruments do you have at home?

Between my husband and me, we have a Garlick French double manual after Goujon (1749), an Italian harpsichord by Willem Kroesbergen after Stephanini and a German copy after Österlein - the original was built in 1792, a year after Mozart's death! It is perfect for contrapuntal music and, surprisingly, sounds very effective for 17th-century music. We also have a single-strung Italian copy by Colin Booth, so light you can carry it under your arm. Then my fortepiano, which is a Zuckermann copy of a five-octave Stein, and actually a very nice one. Also, a positive organ by Winold van der Putten, an excellent Dutch maker; this splits into two flight cases, fitting into a car. And I have a small triple-fretted clavichord by Michael Thomas, which was given to me when I was 14 and has accompanied me on many trips. Finally, a muselar which is currently being re-strung.

Would you like to talk about your teaching?

Yes, that's something I enjoy very, very much. I teach at the Royal Academy of Music, usually on the Masters level. I love my work there; we have an excellent head of department at the moment. It feels very vibrant and it is a lovely building. Masters students receive lessons of an hour and a half, so we do get to know each other well. I also teach harpsichord and fortepiano at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, as well as at the Yehudi Menuhin School, which is essentially a boarding school for children aged 8 to 19. I generally teach teenagers there and that is often more a question of discovering the harpsichord and talking about a different way of looking at the repertoire. There they call it 'supporting studies', meaning that there will be piano lessons for the string players and harpsichord for pianists and for some string players. They get a full hour with me, which is quite relaxing - we have time to talk around music as well as play. And, once in a while, to my enormous joy, the students will say 'Could you just listen to my Brahms?', which is not what I'm supposed to do, but I love that opportunity. I have had some wonderful students: recently one has gone on to the Paris Conservatoire and another to the Schola Cantorum in Basel. Then there is the odd young professional who might be at Oxford or Cambridge university or has finished studying but wants to have a lesson from time to time. There are also people who come from abroad for the occasional lesson, which is always a pleasure.

There is a problem in England in that the government has set fees so high that it prevents students from coming. Certainly, over the years many young people have wanted to come to study with me but simply have not been able to afford it.

What are your next projects, and has Covid-19 thrown a spanner in the works for these and your pupils?

It is slightly tricky right at the moment, of course. One of the better sides of the pandemic is that it is a good time to record, because that is the one thing that is still doable if you play solo. I have a couple of projects - probably a CD of some Bach and I would like to record some Peter Philips works as well. But, as I really don't enjoy recording very much, I am quite slow to get going. Concerts in England are halting; we have just gone into Tier 3 (Covid-19 restrictions), meaning that, again, concerts are not live and that's going to take a little while

to change. I might see if I can shake myself into doing some streaming from home, which I never thought I would do, but I would like to play! The Menuhin School is managing some wonderful things. They have a summer festival every year. The pupils were not yet back at school because of lockdown, but the school managed to get them to perform chamber music together, where one pupil was in Taiwan, one was in Spain, three were in Surrey ... it's not ideal but far better than nothing. I have been teaching on Zoom, which makes it difficult to hear subtleties but quite a lot can still be achieved. Although they say things won't be the same again, I still feel optimistic - there is a tendency for human beings to bounce back to a life with which they are familiar ... and inevitable changes gradually become accepted as being the norm. I do know of musicians who are driving delivery vans at the moment, but at what point in history did musicians have an easy way of earning a living? Still, I can't imagine a better way to live than being a musician!

You mentioned being in France recently to perform.
Yes, in October of 2020, we played all the Bach concerti with some fantastic colleagues in Paris. There was an audience - spaced out in the hall, of course. I think the music scene works better and more easily in France, where there are more government subsidies. In England there is a slight feeling of missed opportunities: there is so much talent here and so little money put towards it. What they are doing very well in England in the conservatoires is a lot of practical projects, so that the students get to play a lot. What isn't always so good is the focus on learning in detail. At the moment, I would say that France has the best young players. I feel very much at home there. Both in my generation and at younger ages, there are some absolutely wonderful players; some of the younger players have come to study with me in London as Erasmus students for two semesters or for a year, but it seems that scheme may now be in jeopardy.

So, was it always to be music?
I don't think I knew consciously. I had a very strange first teacher who was an amazing musician, talking about harmony and touch when I was seven, but technique did not occur to him. He was wonderful for one year, but I had him for four, which was too long. He was a sort of tramp ... very eccentric. I was very lucky to have him, because I was so difficult to teach. I had very strong opinions of what music was: music was not books for beginners and it did not include learning to read notes, which I refused to do. You know, people often say children's feelings aren't developed from the start. Most musicians I know will agree that it is not true; you feel exactly the same at three or four years of age - you just don't have the words. But you are just as moved by music as you are later in life ... sometimes even more sharply as a child. I don't think I ever thought of doing anything else, although at one point, I imagined I might quite like to be a butcher! But it has been music for so long that I have never not been involved in it. I don't always feel the need to play. I can happily not touch a keyboard for a very long time and don't miss it at all. Then, when I get back to it, I think: 'Oh, that is what I do'. That is me'. But you still have music going on in your mind. It is still part of who you are. Sometimes I don't even listen to music, because you get so moved that it is quite difficult to bear. But it is always there. I discovered quite late, actually, from an amateur student I had who was a very high theoretical mathematician, that maths is a very, very beautiful subject. You couldn't have guessed from the way it was taught us in schools! I don't think I have the facility for it but maybe one day, when I no longer have children to look after, I would like to do algebra for complete beginners, because, in some ways, it is like music - it has a sort of truth to it, which means nothing unless you happen to be drawn to that subject.

What interests you when you are not busy with music?
Many things, but I have always quite liked just being... just existing. I love spending time with people. When in France or Holland, I always stay with close colleagues. We spend hours talking about music or what it's like to be a human being, or simply 'shooting the breeze'. Of course, that is not happening as much as usual at the moment. The other thing is that three years ago, my husband and I adopted a four-and-a half-year-old Chinese girl (our older daughter is 19). So, we now have this absolutely lovely little girl, which occupies quite a bit of time and we are back to picking up at primary school. And she chats non-stop, which is lovely! One of my favourite things is travelling. Fourteen years ago, I was in California, when my husband and then five-year-old daughter joined me. I did not get to see the Redwood Forests because of rehearsals, but we did drive along Highway 1, which was unbelievably beautiful. Sadly, travelling isn't possible at the moment. That's something we miss enormously. Normally, at Christmas, we would have been in Jerusalem, where my father and sister live. My brother is in Norway. So, like everybody else, we are a bit in limbo. It is a question of being patient.

Carole, many thanks for your time and for sharing your thoughts and so much interesting information.