

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Correspondence

I would like to comment on Colin Booth's excellent article on harpsichords Bach could have known (*Harpsichord & Fortepiano* xxii/2 (Autumn 2020), pp.4-10). Colin mentions the anonymous harpsichord in the Bachhaus in Eisenach. It has been convincingly dated at 1715, and as such is a conservative instrument for the time. The oldest surviving German harpsichord, made in Leipzig in 1537 by Hans Mayer has a double soundboard like the Eisenach instrument and has also a transposition possibility of a whole tone. The late Jürgen Ammer, himself a born Thuringian, undertook considerable research into the keyboard building tradition of his home area and concludes that the evidence points to an established building tradition in Thuringia. Jürgen built a number of these Eisenach harpsichords and I was bowled over by the model which was exhibited in Bruges in the 1990s. My financial situation at the time meant that I had to wait until 2016 before I could order a copy, and then I had to coax Jürgen out of retirement to make it. Conservative the model may be, but with its clear, rich sound it suits much of the Bach repertoire. (Pierre Hantai has recorded the first book of the 48 on one of these instruments.) I had a second manual added which extends its possibilities to the Goldberg Variations and *Clavierübung* works.

A similar harpsichord to the Eisenach instrument is in the Berlin Music Instrument museum, which at one time was falsely attributed to Johann Michael Bach. Originally built c.1700 with two 8' registers it underwent at least three rebuilds during the course of the century and now presents itself as a fortepiano.

Colin writes that 'clavichords are contentious'. If by this he is pointing out that we don't have many survivors from the first half of the 18th century which would do justice to Bach's music, I would agree. As with harpsichords, we should assume instruments of local manufacture and we have little evidence of clavichords made by for example, Hildebrandt or Gräbner. The beloved Silbermann clavichord, owned by C. P. E. Bach and sold by him in the 1780s has not survived. Its connection with the wider Bach family can be conjectured, as it would have been made well before 1750 (Gottfried died in 1753) and thus could have been previously in the paternal household. A strong candidate for a Gottfried Silbermann clavichord has survived, although its candidature is

indeed contentious. I refer to an unfretted clavichord in the museum in Markneukirchen. It was for some time attributed to Silbermann, but the wood has been dated at around 1740. A good maker would allow the wood to mature for 10 years or so, so the clavichord could have been made in 1750 at the earliest. Although Gottfried cannot be excluded – he was still alive – it is highly unlikely he had a hand in the making of this clavichord. The workmanship is also not up to his standards. The clavichord does have undeniable Silbermann features, and the sophisticated design points to the maker. My theory is, that the clavichord was made in the Silbermann workshop, to his design and even using his tools. When Gottfried died, his family inherited his bank balance, but the workshop, and everything in it, passed to his colleague Johann Georg Schöne. I speculate that the Markneukirchen clavichord could have been made by Schöne, possibly during the seven years' war when materials were scarce. Jürgen Ammer examined the original in the 1970s, and I am privileged to own the copy of it he made for his own use and to exhibit. For the music of J. S. Bach it is perfect. Although most Bach recordings are recorded on instruments from the second half of the 18th century, I rarely find them convincing – the instruments were conceived for a later generation of music, as Colin points out.

One final point: the early music revival got under way in the 1970s and, at this time, access to instruments in East Germany was limited, which meant that makers homed in on harpsichord models which were available in the West. Jürgen Ammer, growing up in the area where Bach was active, could dig out and document instruments and makers little known at the time in Western Europe. I would refer readers interested in his findings and theories, and with some German language knowledge, to an article by him which was published as part of the proceedings of the 35th Herne Symposium in 2010. The article is titled 'Der Cembalobau in Mitteldeutschland in der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts'.

Paul Simmonds