Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 26, No. 1 Autumn, 2021

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

Keyboard instruments – some collective thoughts

Paul Simmonds

I've never really thought of myself as a collector, a youthful preoccupation with philately excepted. As a working musician I hesitate to term the tools of my trade as a collection, but in the strict sense of the word, that is indeed what they are, or have become. I never set out to collect instruments as one does with for example vintage cars or cow-creamers. With one or two exceptions, each instrument fulfils, or fulfilled, a musical need.

It started many years ago. As a child I was fascinated by sound and sound quality. The only music instrument in our house was an aged upright piano, bearing the inscription 'Blake, Acton', which was given to my parents as no-one else wanted it. It was my first experience of A415, as it could not be tuned any higher. This was my musical world for many years, as family finances would not run to anything else - I should mention that this was in Johannesburg, whence my family had moved when I was five. The cultural life in this city was then limited – I heard no live 'classical' concerts until my early twenties, so the sharp learning curve that was my musical education began with my university entrance. A decisive moment was a lunch-hour concert, presented by a faculty member, of virginal music which he played on a Neupert spinet. From this point there was no return, and within a month or so I had located and purchased a second-hand Sperrhake spinet (model Silbermann). Within a year or so this had been traded in in favour of a Sassmann harpsichord, model Pertici, the sound quality of which exceeded by far the other makes in the dealer's showroom. The shop was owned by two Germans, and they imported the factory makes Neupert, Sperrhake, Wittmayer and Sassmann.

On my move from South Africa in 1973 the harpsichord was crated and sent to England where, so I understand, it is still alive, working as a hire instrument somewhere in the West country. I remained quite happy with this instrument until taking part in the Bruges harpsichord competition in 1974. This occasion was my first experience of historically-informed instrument making, and sealed the fate of the Sassmann. The leather quills were cut off and replaced with delrin which improved the instrument, giving it a temporary respite, but wheels were in motion. A harpsichord by a real maker was beyond my financial means, but the fortuitous sale of the Sassmann realized enough for a Hubbard kit which, with limited tools and woodworking skills, I was able to make into an acceptable harpsichord. Based as it was on the 1769 Taskin in Edinburgh it was a good all-purpose instrument (sic), fulfilling my then needs as a performer and teacher. Within a few years this instrument made way, in turn, for an even later French double by Ferguson Hoey.

At this time I was taking lessons with Colin Tilney and a super recording by him came into my hands of Dowland transcriptions, played on an Italian harpsichord by a French amateur maker Jean-Pierre Batt.[1] By this time the reigning paradigm that a large two-manual harpsichord was the all-purpose ideal was, for my mind, wearing thin. The roof of Colin's Kent farmhouse was requiring urgent attention, and to the accompaniment of a justly tuned C major triad he suggested that this harpsichord and I belonged together. He was right, and this capricious instrument, with a soundboard made from a mast of a 19th century sailing ship, has been my musical companion for over 45 years.

In the 1990s research into the English Restoration repertoire and its close relationship with 17th century French music coincided with Malcolm Rose's painstaking restoration of the only known harpsichord by Thomas Barton, made in 1709 and now in the Edinburgh University collection. I had followed the restoration with interest and gave the inaugural recital on it in the Workshop Concert series in Lewes. That this harpsichord type was ideal for the period my wife and I were researching was immediately apparent, and its close similarities with the 17th century French building tradition were an added bonus. I ordered a copy, sold the Hoey to a student, and hoped that the instrument would be ready for a planned recording centred on a manuscript compiled by Charles Babell. All good things take time, however, and fate decided that we were obliged to use the Batt harpsichord for the recording.[2] The instrument proved to be a successful substitute, judging by press reaction to the CD. One, to us, amusing comment came from a wag, questioning why we had used 'such an old' harpsichord for the recording (its birth year is 1969), to which a reply came that many excellent harpsichords were a lot older.

The Barton copy fulfilled, even exceeded, all expectations, and with its split-key GG/BB short octave, inherited from the French tradition, has proved to be a sympathetic and reliable companion, solo and continuo, for much of the earlier repertoire. An inspired and not un-historic engineering feat by the maker meant that I can transpose the keyboard up and down, from A392 to A440, without upsetting the short octave.

The question of a suitable harpsichord for the music of J. S. Bach remained for me open for many years. Tonally a number of well-qualified candidates have been reproduced in recent years, but it was in the late 1990s that I encountered my ideal at the Bruges exhibition. This was a reproduction of the anonymous Bachhaus Eisenach harpsichord made by the Thuringian maker Jürgen Ammer. The original, dated around 1715, was conservative for its time, but for my ears had the clarity and sound quality suitable not only for Bach, but for his German predecessors. My financial situation at the time meant that the placing of a firm order was ill-advised, and it is relatively recently that I was able to realize this dream, just in time as it turned out. I had to coax Jürgen out of retirement, and the harpsichord proved to be his last before his untimely death in 2017.

The harpsichord, and to an extent the organ, has been my bread-and-butter over the past decades, but if readers associate my name with anything, it is most likely to be with the clavichord. At this point I need to return to Johannesburg, and to a record shop which was remarkably well stocked. I bought there Thurston Dart's recording of the Bach French Suites. This made a deep impression on me, but it was some time later that I encountered a clavichord in the flesh, and this was in Freiburg, Germany, where I was furthering my harpsichord studies. My teacher had a single-strung Wittmayer clavichord at his disposal, courtesy of the firm, and this was installed in my digs for that most authentic of keyboard occupations, namely practice. Practice time at the Conservatoire was limited, so I spent many hours with it, working through figured bass exercises, Vilém Kurz keyboard techniques and by way of relaxation, Bach's Chromatic Fantasy. We parted company at the end of the year, and a couple of years passed before I had another clavichord at my disposal. The contrast could not have been greater; lacking space in his music room Colin Tilney loaned me his Arnold Dolmetsch Hass copy, made in 1896. A whole new musical world opened its doors. My first public clavichord recitals were given on this instrument, in the Octagon of Orleans House, in part in duet with a lutenist. My first move to Switzerland in 1982 meant returning this gem to its owner (on which he has since recorded Bach's French Suites!), and the instrument as such passed again out of my life for some years. As Christopher Hogwood has pointed out, there is no such thing as a professional clavichordist, and most of the 1980s were spent doing what other musicians do to make a living – concerts, teaching and recording. The clavichord virus, once it has taken hold, does not let go that easily, however, and when I learned that Karin Richter was making clavichords I ordered an easily transportable model which I could carry to the music school where I taught, to while away the periods when students failed to turn up. At that time we lived within 200m of the music school. The clavichord, after Bodechtel, was only just transportable, but my enthusiasm was once again fired, and after an inspiring week in Magnano, Italy, with Bernard Brauchli, I began researching the instrument and its repertoire seriously. On moving to Brighton in 1990 I was able to buy another clavichord by Karin Richter, a close copy of the 1771 Hubert, an instrument which became, and still is, my workhorse in the best sense. Together we explored the keyboard works of Ernst Wilhelm Wolf, resulting in a prize-winning recording in 1997.[3] At this point history repeated itself; I possessed two very late instruments, well matched to the repertoire I was mainly exploring, but not suitable for the earlier repertoire - if indeed one can speak of a repertoire; prior to the late 18th century the clavichord had much the status of the upright piano, a genial house instrument, a *Mädchen für alles*. These generally smaller clavichords are certainly not without charm, and I was seduced by Peter Bavington's first copy of Leipzig No.10, an instrument from around 1700, and a delightful and expressive vehicle for the clavier fruits of the final years of the 17th century, and indeed some of the earlier works of J. S. Bach. A number of pieces exist requiring either enormous hands, or a split-key short octave which Leipzig 10 has.

The world of the triple-fretted clavichord has not passed me by: I owned for a time a copy of the little clavichord in Edinburgh, made by Darryl Martin. The sound of these little instruments is special, but playing them well is not easy, due to the somewhat random fretting system. As the two early clavichords were more or less contemporary, I used both for a number of concerts; memorable for me, and judging by audience feedback, was a concert I gave in the monastery church of Schönenwerd. I played standing, with the clavichords placed on two side altars. The triple-fretter would surely have felt at home, as many of these instrument types have been located in monasteries in the Catholic parts of Switzerland and Southern Germany. When an original of this type was offered me at a giveaway price, I could hardly say no,

Illus.1a Switzerland's oldest signed and dated clavichord, made in the east Swiss town of Wil by Johan Türig in 1680.
All photographs by Heinz Schaub, Switzerland

Illus.1b The rose of the Türig clavichord

but had to part with Darryl's clavichord to pay for it. It was made by Johan Türig in the East Swiss town of Wil in 1680, and as such is Switzerland's oldest signed and dated clavichord (illus.1a/b).[4] Despite its years, it is in good playing condition, and by way of an experiment I made for it a resonator, a second sounding board extending over the string-band, a feature typical to these clavichords. This has the effect of dampening key noise and homogenising the sound, even strengthening it.

An interest in the music of the Renaissance inspired me to order from Karin Richter a copy of the oldest surviving signed and dated clavichord, namely that by Domenicus Pisaurensis, made in 1543. This instrument, from which I learned a lot, is strung as a quint instrument (A is around 612Hz). Although proto-diatonically fretted (ie quadruple fretted) a surprising amount of music up to the early 17th century is playable on it.[5]

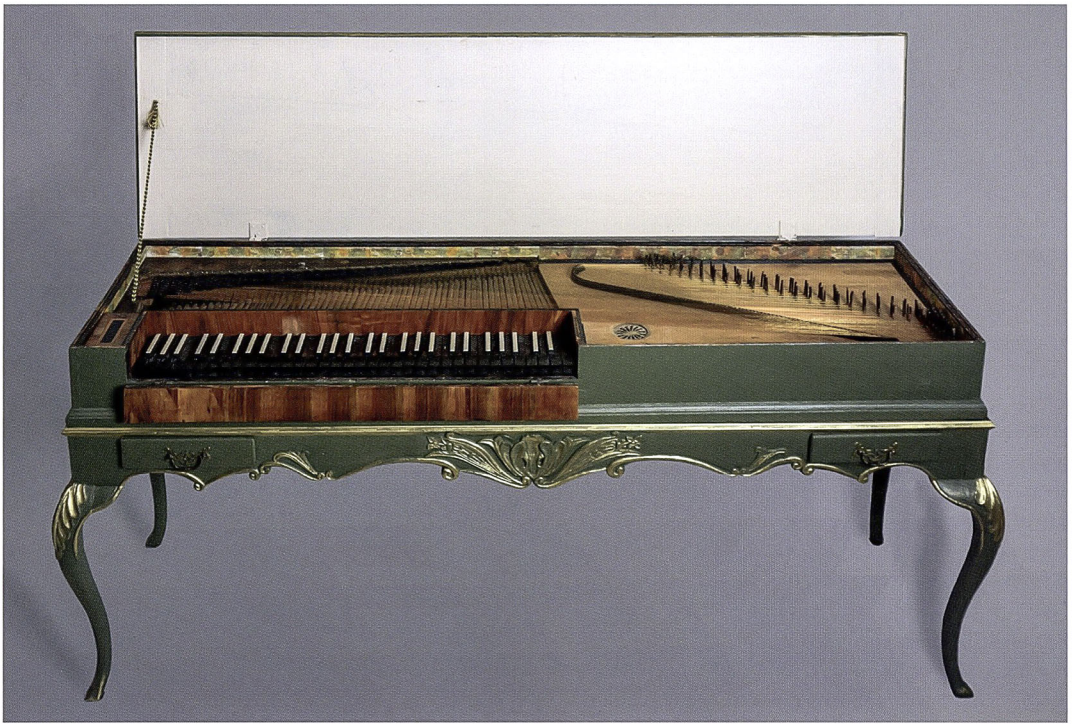
As with the harpsichord I could not reconcile myself to realizing the music of J. S. Bach on the late *Empfindsam* Clavichords. In 1994 I gave a clavichord recital as part of the Early Music Festival in Kassel and was the guest of the maker Jürgen Ammer. At his home I encountered a clavichord which he had made for himself in 1980 (illus.2).[6] This was based on the clavichord in the Markneukirchen Museum, at one time thought to have been made by the legendary Gottfried Silbermann. The dating of the wood has written off this attribution as wishful thinking, although evidence points to his design. I have a hunch that it was made by Georg Schöne, who inherited Silbermann's workshop and everything in it on his death. An association with the Bach family may never be firmly established, but certain is, is that this instrument works for J. S. Bach's music. Jürgen was not to be persuaded to part with this instrument, although he would no doubt have made me one. This solution would not have worked for me; an instrument has an aura, much like a loved human being, which is unique and allows for no substitution. On Jürgen's death I was able to purchase the clavichord from his estate.

Illus.2 Jürgen Ammer's personal copy of the 'Silbermann' clavichord in the Markneukirchen museum, made by him in Leipzig in 1980

An aside, but not an irrelevant one: when I first heard a cimbalom, it was in Kodaly's *Hary Janos Suite*, I was bowled over. When I later heard the playing of the Rumanian Toni Jordache I was electrified, and realized what an impression Pantalon Hebenstreit must have made with his dulcimer playing. I had heard about clavichords with pantalon registers so when one was advertised for sale in Stoizendorf, Austria, I had to see it. Its condition was lamentable, but some of the mechanism had survived, and one of its two pantalon registers had been reconstructed by the Austrian maker Thomas Glück. I took a chance and bought it (illus.3). The instrument had survived more or less intact for over two hundred years, only to incur considerable damage at the hands of an amateur woodworker. Although the latter had discarded everything which would have been important, he did at least photograph the soundboard area before destroying it, and this enabled us to reconstruct it fairly accurately. A lot of research and no small portion of luck enabled me to piece together most of its history.[7] This included a sojourn in the collection of Michael Thomas, whose catalogue from the 1970s, which included two photographs of the instrument, revealed the nature of the second pantalon register, a 'coelestine', which I hope one day to restore. An unedited recording I made on it of one of C. P. E. Bach's Fantasies can be heard via my website.

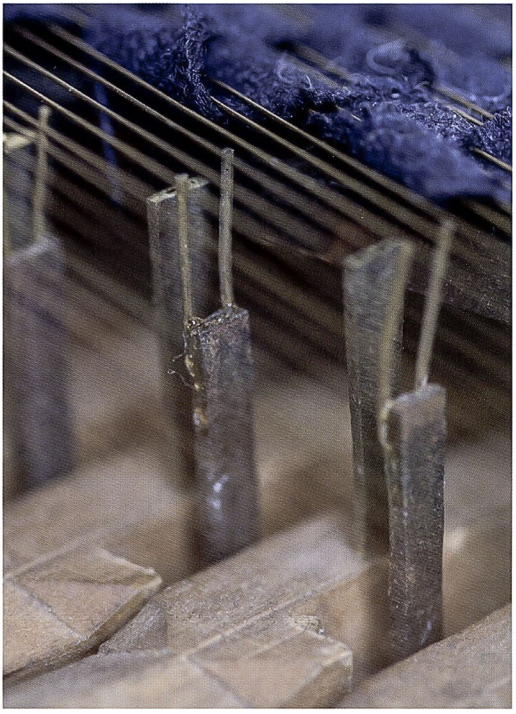
A couple of years later, another pantalon clavichord appeared on the market (illus.4). On this instrument, everything was intact – all that was missing were parts of the stand and the nameboard. The soundboard is not original, but had been replaced in 1877, to a high standard of workmanship, and the bridge is original. Its close resemblance to the surviving Friderici clavichords

Illus.3 Pantalon clavichord, found in the 1880s by Carl Engel in the Hanover area



Illus.4 Anonymous pantalon clavichord, probably made in the 1780s in the Gera area, Saxony

is noteworthy, but of more interest is the pantalon mechanism, which seems to be unique amongst surviving clavichords. On the lower octaves of the pantalon tangents 'U's of wire have been soldered. It is still unclear what function they had. I now think it was probably an attempt at a bassoon register (illus.5). The complete restoration of this device has not been undertaken, as any regulation attempt results in breakages at the solder point. The clavichord has been copied by the Swiss maker Ambrosius Pfaff with a successful reproduction of the pantalon mechanism, but further investigation of the bassoon stop remains for the future.[8]



Illus.5 Pantalon tangents and possible 'bassoon' mechanism of the Saxon clavichord

From the same source as the above clavichord came a large battered unfretted clavichord – it was almost as though the two instruments were inseparable, although they couldn't differ more from one another. The clavichord bears the inscription in red lettering on its soundboard 'H. Jansen, Holmestrand, 1767' (illus.6). Whereas the neo-Friderici pantalon oozes sophistication, this one is the county bumpkin. It has much in common with the Batt harpsichord described earlier. The makers of both instruments were amateurs – H. Jansen (probably Hans) was an apothecary in Moss, who later moved over the fjord to Holmestrand and is survived by four clavichords, of which mine is the only one playable. It has rustic

charm, with its (original) soundboard decorated naively with flowers. The keys are cut unevenly, some narrow, some wide, and the arcades on the key-fronts have been fitted upside down. A touch of the apothecary presents itself in the form of rows of hog's bristles glued in rows on the baseboards under the soundboard. This feature has yet to be explained, but maybe this inspired maker knew something we shall never know. The sound is strong, full and sweet, right up to top f^3. For composers with attitude, such as Müthel or Hässler, it is the perfect instrument, but like the Batt, it requires constant attention to keep it working!

A few years ago I was given a clavichord for the usual reasons – it is large, takes up a lot of space, was not working at the time and was thus unsaleable. Those familiar with Hubert Henkel's catalogue of the clavichords in Leipzig would recognize immediately, from its distinctive shape, a copy of the original made by Carl Lemme in 1787 (catalogue No.28). The handwritten label on the soundboard reveals that the clavichord was made 'for Prof. Alfredo Cairati .... hand-crafted in the piano workshops of Dr. Carl Pfeiffer in Stuttgart, 1926'. The clavichord is exquisitely made, condition as new, and follows the features and dimensions of the original, with one exception – the original had a laminated soundboard, dispensing, as Lemme proudly announced in his catalogue, with barring. It did not live up to expectations and collapsed. The maker of the copy understandably did not reproduce this feature but furnished the instrument with a traditionally barred soundboard. Given the information on the label I decided to undertake some research, the results of which are contained in two articles published in *Clavichord International*, and which introduced me to an unsung hero of the instrument-making world, namely Otto Marx.[9] He was born in 1871 and trained as a piano maker, his father's business. Early on in his career he began restoring early keyboard instruments and making close copies, mainly for museums, but also for private individuals. He never signed his instruments, many of which bore the names of firms for which he worked – Pfeiffer in Stuttgart or Rück in Nuremberg.[10] He retired twice, first in 1937 after restoring Mozart's fortepiano for the Grassi Museum and the second time in 1960, his last restoration, at the age of 89, being the 1640 Ruckers harpsichord now in Schloss Ahaus. Gustav Leonhardt recorded his first Froberger LP on this instrument a year or so later. Marx's Lemme copy works well, has a dark fundamental sound, and with a range of FF-a^3 (original) expands the playable repertoire (illus.7).

Illus.6 Clavichord by H(ans) Jansen, signed and dated 1767

Illus.7 Clavichord by Otto Marx, made in the workshops of the Pfeiffer piano company in 1926, after the original by Karl Lemme (1787) now in the Leipzig museum

A wish from my wife was responsible for a recent addition to the collection, namely a little square piano by Fredericus Beck. As luck would have it we encountered one looking for a home. As readers no doubt know, these little instruments, originally conceived by Zumpe, have a selection of registers including a damper-free, or pantalon stop. What fascinated my wife and me was the richness and character imparted to keyboard music of the second half of the 18th century, in particular J. C. Bach, who acted as an agent for Zumpe, and early Mozart and Haydn. Some music of this period can sound embarrassingly bland when rendered on a modern grand, but justifies itself to the full when sympathetically performed on such a piano.

When I survey our little collection of keyboard instruments I occasionally reflect on the purpose of such an assemblage of bulky instruments. I would like to think that the above thoughts are a justification. Many years ago, when I bought music when available, often second-hand, the complete edition of J. G. Müthel's keyboard works came into my hands. After some sight-reading at the harpsichord I consigned it to the top shelf and forgot about it. When I had an instrument to do it justice, a large five-octave clavichord, I realized I was dealing with one of the finest, most neglected, keyboard composers of the late 18th century. His fate is shared by many composers whose musical qualities can suffocate under the blanket of white sound produced by the modern piano.

A while back an interview was broadcast with the late Gustav Leonhardt. He related how during the war years he would play for hours on a factory-made harpsichord, typical for the time. The interviewer asked him if he had enjoyed playing such an instrument. To Leonhardt's affirmative the interviewer asked, why. Leonhardt's answer came promptly; 'Because it wasn't a piano'. Unkind? Maybe, but I can hear many composers of the past applauding.

Paul Simmonds was born in London and brought up in Johannesburg. He studied at the University of the Witwatersrand then at the Musikhochschule, Freiburg-im-Breisgau with Stanislav Heller. He is currently organist at the Roman Catholic church in Zofingen, Switzerland. Paul has made a number of solo clavichord CDs, including music by E.W. Wolf (Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritiken). https://paulsimmonds.com.

Notes

1 Decca, L'Oiseau-Lyre DSLO 552.

2 *Concerning Babell and Son*, Ars Musici AM 1167-2.

3 Ars Musici AM 1206-2. The CD was awarded the Deutsche Schallplatten Preis.

4 For the history of this little instrument and its siblings, refer to my article 'Three clavichords from the workshop of Johann Adam Türig', *Clavichord International* xxii/1 (2018), pp.16-24.

5 Encouraged by the recording company Ars Musici I made a CD using this instrument in 2004 (Ars Musici AM 1378-2).

6 The clavichord now bears the label '1987'. It was originally made by Jürgen and his first wife Renate Ammer in 1980, and was exhibited in the Grassi Museum in Leipzig from 7-29 November 1981 together with other handcrafts under the heading 'Galerie sozialistische Kunst'.

7 I've written about the known history of this clavichord in *Clavichord International* xi/1 (2012), pp.22-25 and in the article 'Carl Engel and the Clavichord', *Galpin Society Journal* lxi (2008), pp.105-113.

8 I've documented the fascinating history of this clavichord in *De Clavicordio*, ix (2010), pp.59-66.

9 *Clavichord International* xvii/2 (2013), pp.34-41 and xix/1 (2015), pp.20-27.

10 A recording by Gustav Leonhardt (Das Alte Werk SAWT 9422-B) was made using a Gräbner copy made by Otto Marx, but bearing the label 'W. Rück, Nuremberg', where he was employed at the time.