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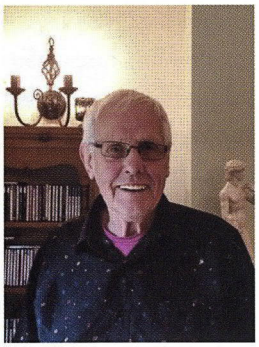
Interview with Richard Lester

Paula Woods



Richard Lester has enjoyed a 50-year career as keyboard performer, teacher, scholar, and highly acclaimed recording artist – a career that has seen him develop an enviable range of repertoire, from Frescobaldi to Bach, Scarlatti to Soler, and Vierne to Messiaen. He has played and recorded on almost every kind of early keyboard instrument, being equally at home on harpsichord, organ and fortepiano. It was a great pleasure to meet him in real life, at his home in Devon, and I began by asking him about his earliest musical memories.

Paula Woods: *I'd like to start by asking you about the music you experienced when you were very young. Were your parents musical people?*

Richard Lester: I came from a very musical household. Dad was an engineer by trade, and was also a very good amateur pianist. Mum sang, including doing some professional work. Dad was the one who spurred me on from the beginning, and arranged for me to have piano lessons when I was six. I had some excellent teachers - Elsa Jacobs, with whom I worked through the early grades, and then Bernard Roberts for the final exams. At the same time, I went into a very good choir, literally up the road at All Hallows Twickenham, and this was where I first really experienced music for myself. Regularly singing church music teaches you a lot – you're surrounded by real musicians. We were lucky: we had a priest, Rev. Charles, who was a former Precentor at Canterbury Cathedral. He really knew his stuff and trained us into a good choir – I learned so much there about appreciating music. And at home we had a lot of recordings, so there was always music to listen to. My parents' musical backgrounds meant that I was automatically brought up with it.

When did you decide that music might be a career for you?

I think I decided at quite an early age. When I was 13, Dad took me to see *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*, the Walt Disney film. James Mason, who played Captain Nemo, had an organ in the submarine, and that was it for me. I told Dad I must learn the organ, and he arranged for me to have lessons. I was still in the choir at All Hallows, although my voice was changing and I was dropping down into the alto line, and I was able to have lessons there. Until then, I'd never really noticed the organ, and it was a wonderful instrument. The church was built in 1940, to house the carvings of Grinling Gibbons that were moved from All Hallows, Lombard Street, after it was damaged during the war. The organ was by Renatus Harris and dated back to 1702. So I had a very fine instrument to practise on. When I was 14, I was looking through the local paper one day, and there was an advert for an organist in Teddington, which was up the road from us. And so I cycled over there, without telling my parents, and knocked on the door of the Vicarage. The Vicar came to the door, and I simply said that I'd come in answer to the advert. He invited me to play the organ, so I played, and he listened to me. Then he said, 'You've got the job'. So I found myself a professional organist at 14, and was pleased to discover that I got paid for doing it! Four years later, the post of organist became vacant at All Hallows, where I'd been a chorister, and I applied for that job, which included training the choir. I was successful in getting that position as well. By then I was studying organ with David Lang, who at that time was a professor at the RCM.

In 1995, I had a phone call from the vicar who had given me the organist's post when I was 14, and to my surprise he asked me if I'd like to give a recital at St Paul's Cathedral. There was to be a service to commemorate the 40th anniversary of VJ Day, and as he was now a Canon at St Paul's, he was looking for an organist to play after the service. It was a half-hour recital, and he asked me to play some English music, so I played the Elgar sonata. For me, that was one of the great events of my musical life. We practised the night before, and could hear the Spitfires overhead, rehearsing for a flypast the following day.

Did your relatively early start as a professional musician make a difference to your career?

Yes – when I left school, I really wanted to do music. It was the only career I had envisaged for myself. But I was born in 1945, at the end of World War 2, and when I left school the Cold War was still very much in evidence, and my parents wanted me to go into a 'reserved

occupation' – something that might be relatively safe if hostilities broke out again. My father was an engineer, and suggested this as a sound career path, so I went into that. I have to admit that I was never interested in engineering, and was quite hopeless at the practical skills. I'm still no good at anything to do with DIY or following instructions for making something. I did it for four years, and at one point was sent on a Technical Drawing course at Twickenham College of Technology. This was just down the road from the church, so I used to bunk off and do some organ practice instead. When I passed the Grade 8 exam, I applied for a post as a peripatetic piano teacher at schools in Twickenham and Richmond. This got me out of engineering, and started my teaching career in that way.

At what point did the harpsichord come into your life?

When I was about 19, my father brought home a 10" LP recording of George Malcolm playing Bach's *Italian Concerto* and the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*. I suppose that was the Damascene moment for me – my very first exposure to the harpsichord. And then I knew exactly what I wanted to do. Dad bought a kit harpsichord and built it for me – a perfect job for an engineer! And so I had a harpsichord at home to practise on. I got to a certain standard, and then somehow found out that George Malcolm's London Agents were Ibbs and Tillett in Wigmore Street. I phoned them and said that I'd like to speak to George Malcolm. Looking back, it seems quite funny, because in those days it was easy enough to contact people. They gave me his phone number, which sounds ridiculous now, when we have Data Protection rules and so forth. I phoned him up, and caught him at home, explaining that I had taken up the harpsichord and would like to have lessons from him. He explained that he travelled too much to be able to give lessons, but suggested I might like to attend his course at the Dartington Summer School, later that year. I could play for him, and he would see what he thought. So I booked up for a fortnight at Dartington. We met one morning over breakfast, and he gave me a lesson every day for the whole fortnight. I was a bit concerned about what the fees might be for this, and went to speak to the Administrator at Dartington, to enquire, but the next day he told me that there would be no question of any fees – my tuition was free of charge. I worked on the Goldberg Variations with him, and over the next few years I was able to study with him quite often, when he was not travelling. I turned pages for him too, and learned so much from just sitting beside him as he played. I made my debut at the Wigmore Hall in 1972 and became quite busy as a recitalist. In 1972 I also gave my first recital at the Purcell Room and played there again in 1974 and 1976. I then started travelling all over the country and abroad. I had the chance to play in concertos for 2, 3 and 4 harpsichords for the BBC in Birmingham, and in the early 1980s performed at the Bath International Festival.

How far did George Malcolm influence your own playing style?

Very much so initially. He played a Goble harpsichord with pedals, which could be used to produce a crescendo or decrescendo, and I did the same. The Gobles were sound instruments and could produce all the effects he wanted. Not exactly historically informed practice, but it worked for his repertoire, and he was certainly a great musician.

Like George Malcolm you have focused considerably on Scarlatti. Was it he who led you in that direction?

Not really – Scarlatti was a separate discovery for me and came from Fernando Valenti. Another delightful person, with a very dry sense of humour, not unlike Jack Benny. I met him first at Dartington: he was trying to light his pipe, and said to me: 'Richard, this tobacco has a distinct disadvantage. It will not ignite'. He had a wonderful way of presenting Scarlatti, playing completely from memory. One felt that he was composing the music, rather than just playing it. He gave the pieces an improvisatory flavour.

I always think that your Scarlatti recordings have that same freshness about them.

It's something that I don't think is easy to put across in a recording, as opposed to a live performance. Frescobaldi's music is very dear to my heart, and that really demands a feeling of improvisation. You can't play it just as it's written – that would be impossible. I made a recording in 1975 of Scarlatti Sonatas, and it was Valenti who really prompted me to do that. That recording received some very favourable reviews, and a few years later I was delighted when Janet Baker chose it as her favourite among her Desert Island Discs. That was a wonderful moment for me. I had first met her in 1971, when she was performing in *La Calisto* at Glyndebourne.

It was the year 2000 before I got involved in recording Scarlatti again. Someone suggested that I should record all the Scarlatti sonatas, but I had no idea how one went about organising something like that. But soon after that I met Raymond Fenton, who owned Dolphin

computers, and knew all about recording. He offered to do it for me, so I practised about six sonatas a week – as you know there are over 500 of them – and Raymond then came and recorded me, playing a wonderful harpsichord. It was a copy by Michael Cole of the Portuguese harpsichord in the Finchcocks collection. Like the original, the copy had pedals that enabled the player to play a crescendo or diminuendo. I made use of them, and the instrument was perfect for Scarlatti. By 2006 we had completed the recording, and Raymond wanted to market the discs, and suggested we look for a company to handle the distribution side. He contacted Nimbus Records, who asked us to go and discuss the project with them. The long and the short of it was that they proposed issuing the whole series. In 2007 the discs came out for the Scarlatti anniversary year, and I'm happy to say that the reviews were very good indeed. Dean Sutcliffe, who had published a book on Scarlatti, suggested that I include the group of recently rediscovered additional sonatas that were not in the Kirkpatrick catalogue. So we included them, and made it a really complete edition. This was also the beginning of a long relationship with Nimbus, who invited me to make further recordings.

I was interested to discover that not only have you focused on a vast range of repertoire across the Baroque era, but also a variety of instruments: organ, harpsichord, fortepiano. Do you have a favourite?

I think the number one instrument would have to be the Antunes harpsichord, on which I recorded the Scarlatti. But for Frescobaldi, the instruments we used were particularly interesting. I'd always looked on him as a difficult composer to understand. But once I got to know how he thinks, and writes – for instance, he talks about playing in an improvisatory way, in the style of a madrigal – I felt completely at home. I started recording on my own Italian harpsichord by Colin Booth, and then I had the good fortune to meet Alexander Mackenzie of Ord, who invited me to try – and then record on - his 1619 single-manual Boni harpsichord. Boni made instruments for Cardinal Barberini, who was Frescobaldi's patron, so it seemed particularly appropriate. It's an amazing harpsichord, with split keys to provide the extra accidentals – D# as well as E flat. In some cases, Frescobaldi calls for both parts of a split accidental to be used in the same piece. It was wonderful to be able to record on a harpsichord like that. And then we were lucky enough to be put in touch with an organ in Northern Italy, near Milan, which again has a Frescobaldi connection. It's dated 1588 and was built by Antegnati. We went there to record the Toccatas and Canzone, as well as some *Hinnos* or hymns – these were done with the choir of Bergamo Cathedral, singing the plainsong. That was an amazing experience. This in turn led to me recording with them in Bergamo – Cavazzoni organ masses and works by Merulo and Gabrieli. They have a lovely copy of an Antegnati organ. So that's the story so far of my Frescobaldi recordings – he's a fascinating composer, and still comparatively little known.

I think many people with an interest in Baroque keyboard music tend to start with Froberger, and perhaps don't give his teacher so much attention.

Yes – I think that's very much the case.

What came next?

Well, I knew Lucy Coad and her pianos, which made me want to record some Haydn, and it was at that time that the Schantz fortepiano at the Bath Holburne Museum was restored. I recorded some Haydn sonatas on it, and then gave a Mozart recital, which was broadcast live, and recorded. It happened to be one of those occasions when I didn't make many mistakes, so they put it out as a CD, and it was quite popular.

I was going to ask about Haydn, because to me the clavichord and fortepiano are especially suited to his sonatas, because of the clarity of sound and dynamic range.

Well, Haydn is a transitional composer, in both his style and the range of instruments available to him. The harpsichord was going out of fashion, and towards 1790, Schudi-Broadwood were destroying harpsichords for which they had no market. Haydn's music is well-suited to the parameters of the fortepiano. People were enjoying the dynamics of the new instruments.

You also have a deep interest in aspects of historical performance practice – you've written on historical fingering, for example. How did you get involved in that?

That was really because of the Frescobaldi – I had to research fingering patterns in sources such as Diruta's *Il Transilvano*, which led to an article on that. Ornamentation too of course – in Frescobaldi, for instance in the Canzone, there are so many opportunities for diminutions and so forth. As you consider the options, this in turn impacts your articulation and phrasing. There are certainly places in Frescobaldi where one finds a need to employ fingerings that go beyond those given in the historical sources.

Which of the composers you have focused on have you found the most challenging?

It would have to be both Scarlatti and Frescobaldi. Totally different keyboard composers. Scarlatti has such virtuosic intensity, while Frescobaldi makes quite different demands. But having worked on the organ – mainly tracker action organs - and learning music by Reger, Messiaen and Vierne, I think I was less daunted by Scarlatti!

You've played a considerable range of repertoire, haven't you?

Yes – the last thing I did was a recording of 'French Lollipops', made last year. I recorded half before the first lockdown, and the other half after it. It was made very quickly, and included a technically very demanding piece by Dupré: a Prelude and Fugue in G Minor. It involved paying four-note chords on the pedals – quite a challenge. The recording was released in November. I've enjoyed the diversity of repertoire – it's always seemed a necessary part of being a keyboard player.

And what about teaching? You've mentioned the teaching you undertook in the early part of your career. Did this continue?

Yes - mostly as a peripatetic teacher, or at independent schools. One of my main teaching posts was at the Mall School in Twickenham, where I became Head of Music in 1986. I qualified relatively late, both as a teacher and an FLCM, and they would not appoint me until I had some letters after my name. When the post came up, someone was appointed who was already well qualified, but the Headmaster did not get on with him. After two years he left, and I finally got the job. I was very happy teaching there. The second post was a few years later. We had moved to Cirencester, where I was the Director of the Early Music Festival, and I became Head of Music at Oakley Hall School, despite knowing nothing about cricket, which was the main topic discussed at my interview! It was a wonderful school – very traditional – but unfortunately pupil numbers were dwindling, and it closed. Then I moved to Rendomb College, and at the same time I was giving concerts around the country. It was a very enjoyable period of my life.

You've been able to combine performing with recording, teaching, and writing about music. Has it felt like a balanced career?

Yes, it has. I found writing difficult initially, but it's become easier, and I find it a fascinating process. I contributed a chapter to a Hungarian book on Scarlatti, and was surprised to be awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Budapest. As far as playing and recording are concerned, I think I have often been fortunate to be in the right place at the right time. I've been lucky to meet some extraordinary people – George Malcolm for example, for whom I once substituted at very short notice when he was unwell. I had to dash up to Northumberland on the train and stood in for him – an amazing opportunity.

Have your children inherited the musical gene?

Yes – my eldest son Marc writes music and works for the NHS. Christian is a Sports Therapist and Dominic is a taxi driver. I've been blessed with sons, a daughter and three very bright grandchildren, so the genes continue! And above all I'd like to mention my wife, Jackie, who has always given me the most incredible support and encouragement. She's always been behind me, and I could not have done all this without her.

Have you ever found it difficult to keep motivated?

Never – I've always got to be doing something! The only time I've had to sit and do nothing was after my heart surgery last year – I had a valve replaced and a triple bypass – and simply had to take some time out.

If this were 'Desert Island Discs', and you could only take one book of music with you, what would it be?

It would be Elgar. I'd like to have the First Symphony and the *Enigma Variations*. Probably some Vaughan Williams too – English music is very close to my heart. And while I'm tempted to say Bach, I think I would actually opt for Frescobaldi.

And of all the music you've played and recorded over the years, is there any single project that you look back on and think 'I'm glad I did that'?

I'm glad I did the Scarlatti. But I'm always looking forward, and at present I'm focused on a new project that will hopefully come to fruition in a year or two.

We'll look forward to hearing more about that in the future. Meanwhile, thank you very much for talking to us.

Readers can find out more at Richard's website: richardlester.org.uk.