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Interview with Andreas Kilström

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Illus.1 Andreas Kilström (photo: Maria Kilström)

Harpsichord makers Andreas and Ann-Christin Kilström need no introduction – they are known worldwide for the exquisite harpsichords they build. Years ago, I had the opportunity to gain some insight into their practice during a visit to Sweden when they were building my harpsichord. I was curious to learn more about their work, and recently spoke to Andreas Kilström (illus.1) about their process of building early keyboard instruments.

Hila Katz: *To what extent does the character, or spirit, of the builder affect the instrument they build, in your opinion?*

Andreas Kilström: I think it affects it to a great extent. Even though most of us set out to build copies after old makers' instruments, for example Ruckers, Taskin, Cristofori – and even though modern copies will play in the respective ball-parks of sounding Flemish, French or Italian, if you put instruments that are copies of the same original made by different makers, they will not sound the same. Each maker back in the day, and now, is an individual and to a great degree an artist. You can't create a work of art without putting something of your soul in it.

To which degree do you believe that present-day builders are able to replicate historical harpsichords, or truly know how they sounded?

We can't know what they sounded like when they were new, only how they sound after maturing for several hundred years. As I mentioned, each builder is unique and puts their personal imprint on the instruments they make. I still think we can get pretty close to the sounds of back then, by trying to work in the same tradition and using the same materials.

How do you view the balance between science (for example, physics) and intuition in building instruments?

Now that is an interesting question. Of course you've got to get all the physical parameters right, string lengths, thicknesses of wood, balancing of keys, geometry of jacks etc to make a well-sounding and functioning instrument. At the same time, you can't slavishly follow the thicknesses given on a drawing of an original instrument. It all depends on the density of your soundboard wood, which can be discerned by its growth rings, for example, and if they are 'on the quarter' (90 degrees to the surface), or off by some degrees – and this process is intuitive.

Where do you get your inspiration?

I would say from the makers of the classical harpsichord era, mainly the 17th and 18th centuries. The joy of seeing the craftsmanship, the excitement of unravelling the history of rebuilds and repairs. Many historical harpsichords aren't playing, but sometimes one comes across a sounding instrument and the sound can take your breath away. This was the case with an anonymous 17th-century French harpsichord outside Calais (the 'Diem 1679') which I had the fortune to see, hear and measure, and subsequently make a copy of.

What is your favourite phase of building an instrument, and why?

One of the most exciting moments is when the soundboard is glued in. I can never resist putting a few strings on it to get an idea of what the sound is going to

be like. Then it is a very long slog before you can actually make it play. We make all the bits that go into the action ourselves, but once you are there it is very satisfying work setting up the action, voicing and making it play.

What would you say is your philosophy as instrument maker?

I aim at making instruments that – hopefully – sound well and at the same time are a joy to play. I like to think that we create an aesthetically pleasing whole. Something for all the senses: seeing, hearing, touching and even smelling, though I can't quite see how taste enters into it!

Who is your favourite harpsichord maker from the past?

I have spent much time studying the instruments of the 'Ioanneses' – both the Ruckers and the Couchets. I have come to admire the instruments by Ruckers and Couchet for their elegance of design (illus.2, 3), and the straightforward approach they had in making instruments. They weren't fussing about things: you can find some raw surfaces in their instruments, where it doesn't matter. They were really meticulous about small details and consistency in string spacing, thickness of soundboards, shaping of bridges; the sound and function mattered to them a great deal; but they wouldn't bother about the exact shape or finish of a brace inside the instrument for example, so that the inside of the case was often left quite rough – it just has a function but it didn't matter if the finish was smooth or not. When it came to the look of the instrument, they wouldn't hesitate to have one of the more well-known Antwerp artists paint the lid, and at the same time the soundboards were always done by their in-residence artist, to quite another standard than that of the lid paintings.

Illus.2 A Mother and Child virginals showing the child virginal in the coupled position (photo: Maria Kilström)

This was the aesthetic, and people accepted it at the time. In France, many of the Ioannes Ruckers instruments got rebuilt and repainted, but still the spine was left as it was, with its original marble imitation painting which clashes with the often high-fashion design of the rest of the instrument. When rebuilding it, they wanted to leave some evidence that it was an original Ruckers instrument, and even if an instrument had a new spine rebuilt, they made it look as if it was old with the same kind of marble design – the 1612 Ioannes Ruckers being a prime example.

A lot of our work has been to try and understand their design principles and to make instruments in their tradition, both as they were first made and as rebuilds in the French tradition. I feel so indebted to these old makers, because they have shown me so much. So when I build instruments after their work, I don't really want to change anything that they did, because I'm sure they knew perfectly well what they were about. To me, that's the greatest tribute I think I could pay them – to follow in their footsteps.

One of the things I greatly appreciate about your harpsichords is your following past traditions by crafting materials by hand. Could you explain about this – for example, regarding pins?

We create handmade pins by buying iron rods, cutting them to length, and fashioning them into tuning pins, balance pins for the keyboards, and hitchpins. It takes some time, but it's worth it, because you get what you like and what is perfect for your purposes. Whereas if you purchase something ready-made, you might not – you still need to tweak it if you want to use it.
It is Ann-Christin who deserves the credit for doing much of this work, which can be very repetitious, alongside creating elaborate decorations such as chinoiserie and imitation tortoiseshell – she creates stunning decorations.

What is your process for making paint?

With paint, you buy pigments, dry pigments, and mix them – we most often use oil paints, so we mix them with linseed oil to make paint; linseed oil has been in use for artistic painting since the 15th century, and was a very common oil to use. However, we avoid lead-based pigments, such as flake white, which was the only white available in historical times.

Since every instrument is unique, and takes such effort to make, when you finish building an instrument, do you ever find it difficult to part with it?

When we were new to instrument making, we built an instrument and could have the feeling that we wanted to keep it. But this is not the case today. Now what makes me most happy is seeing the customer receive their instrument, and be really pleased with it.

Illus.3 Frédérick Haas playing a 'Ruckers à petit ravalement' at Nynäs castle (photo: Andreas Kilström)

Could you tell me what you are most proud of in the harpsichords you build?

That combination of a good sound with a well-functioning action, and seeing a good harpsichordist becoming one with the instrument.

How do you balance your artistic vision as an instrument maker with different clients' requests?

Most people who come to us nowadays, do so because they have encountered our instruments and something has clicked between instrument and prospective customer. We normally get free rein as to the construction. Decoration can be another matter, and people do have different wishes – quite understandably, as they are going to live with the instrument. We like to decorate our instruments in the same sort of styles as the antique instruments.

What are some challenges in building harpsichords?

Finding the right pieces of wood. Wood always has built-in tension, that is released when you saw it apart. It can twist and warp and generally misbehave. Making a keyboard is fraught. There is a lot of work that goes into the keyplank: marking out, drilling for balance and guide pins. Some makers glue down the key covering and then when you start sawing out the individual keys they twist, and it is not much joy. I always saw slices off the individual pieces of wood that make up the keyplank, to make sure we are dealing with calm pieces of wood.

Speaking of wood, there are harpsichord builders who choose to incorporate antique soundboards into their instruments, for example ones taken from antique pianos. What do you think of the idea of using these for constructing harpsichords?

Well, I'm not sure, because what I'm trying to achieve is the idea of what a thing would look like and sound like when it was new – and if you already use antique wood, you might get an antiquated sound; I think that certainly has appeal to a lot of people, but that's not for me to do it that way. Having said that, I always try to smuggle into each instrument some small piece of wood that is really ancient, just for the sake of it!

There seems to generally be a dilemma between using historical materials versus modern ones in harpsichord building. Modern materials may be perceived as more durable compared to historical materials, which may seem delicate. What do you think of this – for example, of quill plectra?

I think that in past times they knew their quills in a way that has been forgotten. Everybody used quills for writing and could cut feathers to suit. A well quilled setup could, and can now, last for years. Harpsichords I built that are quilled work very well, and in fact very little maintenance is needed. One of the differences is that, when a quill breaks, it doesn't just break straight off. You can still use it until it goes weaker, and you hear it needs replacing. Whereas a delrin plectrum breaks straight off, and will not play any longer because it won't reach the string. A good voicing in delrin will certainly keep for years and years. But I am certain that somebody who truly knows their quills will also make a very good job of it.

What advice would you give to young people who are thinking of choosing building harpsichords as a profession?

Study the originals, not just from drawings and photographs, but in real life. They will tell you so much that other people's documentation will not show.

How did you yourself come to choose this special occupation of building early keyboard instruments?

I have been in love with harpsichords since the age of 14, to me they just are unique. It was a long process. When I was 14 years old, I came across a recording of harpsichord music and I knew then and there that the harpsichord was going to be a major part of my life. In

order to be able to afford an instrument I bought a kit. The process of building an instrument was something I found to be very interesting and a task that I could accomplish. However, I didn't know then that I was going to become a professional maker. I trained to be a church musician, and completed BA studies at the University of Stockholm, majoring in musicology and receiving training in harpsichord and organ performance. After a couple more kits, and serving as curator at the Nydahl Collection, a music museum with a wealth of historical keyboards to look at and measure, I wanted to try my hand at building from scratch. Together with my then-colleague, Göran Grahn, I set out to copy a harpsichord in another Swedish collection – very likely a Berlin instrument that was brought to Sweden by its owner, a German immigrant (the label has been torn off, but it very much seems to be in the same tradition as the Mietke harpsichords).

Then in 1987 I formed the Kilströms Klafvessinmakeri together with my wife, Ann-Christin, who is a viol player – she had graduated from the Royal Swedish Academy of Music, and was playing in several early music ensembles at the time. The harpsichord workshop first served as a supplement to my post as church organist, yet the increasing demand for our instruments prompted us to focus solely on harpsichord building as a full-time occupation.

You mentioned that you studied historical keyboard instruments when you were working at the Nydahl Collection; can you talk about any famous Swedish harpsichords?

Well, there is one that's really famous because it was made the have iron strings all the way down. It's about three and a half metres long, built in 1756 by Johannes Broman. And it's still around, and still playing. Otherwise, there are no well-known Swedish harpsichords. There was another builder, Kinström; and there was a famous clavichord maker named Philip Jacob Specken, who was originally from Dresden. He probably studied with Silbermann. He made many clavichords, and there are a few harpsichords preserved that he built as well. Judging from the proportion of preserved clavichords as opposed to preserved harpsichords, it certainly seems that clavichords were the mainstay of the keyboard makers, but there is written evidence of quite a lot of making and advertising of harpsichords.

One interesting thing is that the very famous Italian harpsichord maker Zenti was part of an Italian troupe of musicians who came here to the court of Queen Christina around 1652. I'm quite sure he built instruments while in Sweden, because there was one in the inventory from the Medici in Florence, bearing an inscription that stated that it was built in Stockholm (*Girolamo Zenti fecit Holmiae*). He could also very well have taught somebody local his art, because there was another organ and harpsichord maker at the court at the same time, a Swedish fellow called Franz Boll, and they certainly must have met. It's all very interesting. Zenti is so pivotal because he was everywhere – he was in France as well, making French harpsichords (one of which is preserved in the Musée de la Musique, in Paris); he was in England in the 1660s just when the English makers started making spinets instead of virginals, and Zenti is also credited with the invention of the bentside spinet.

Lastly, having witnessed developments in the field over the years, do you have any concerns regarding the current state of harpsichord making, and/or the state of historical performance?

Many of us started building harpsichords already in the 1960s and 70s. Early music was newly emerging and there was a lot of curiosity and experimenting among builders and performers. The Festival in Bruges, where almost everybody gathered every three years for the harpsichord week, has been a sort of litmus paper. The instrument exhibition has had the same (now) old makers showing their instruments, and nobody is getting any younger. True, there are some new makers, but are there enough of them? As for musicians, there always seem to be new young ones eager to enter the scene. My only concern here is that whereas in the early days musicians studied the primary sources and tried to incorporate their findings in their performance, nowadays many of the new performers have learned from their teachers and just reproduce a practice that was established some 50 years ago. This, of course, is not true for everyone. There is still curiosity out there.