

Details of all the early keyboard instruments used at the Festival
can be found at <http://www.hpschd.nu/prj/cbf/gallery.html>



Keyboard Musing or Tuning on the Fly

By Carey Beebe, Harpsichord Technician & Festival Tuner

Many Bach Festival patrons still talk about my friend and colleague Kevin Fryer's last year in Carmel. Kevin, my predecessor, took over the Scout House and turned it into a harpsichord workshop complete with roaring fireplace and late night recitals. He had been the resident tuner/technician at the Festival for the nine years prior to 1998, and it was truly *his* job. Although from Australia, Carmel wasn't entirely new to me, as I had already assisted Kevin in the computer layouts for his 1995 Bach Festival foyer display.

With his increasing order book for elaborate harpsichords, however, Kevin desperately needed to take a summer off and spend the solid five weeks of the 1999 Bach Festival season catching up in his own workshop. I remember the lengthy international phone calls as Kevin shared with me the many problems of his finding a suitable replacement for his year off. Not all harpsichord builders make good concert tuners, and the length of the Festival's season is a long time for anyone to be away from home. When it became obvious that no suitable person could be found in the States, Kevin was intent on persuading me to fill in for him, especially as I was already planning to be on the East Coast that summer for the Boston Early Music Festival.

I had two trepidations. I was aware of the extensive use of small continuo organs which would require me to learn their individual internal architecture and which would be rather hard on my ears for tuning. And I wasn't happy if I had to wear a suit. Both were allayed.

My first year with the Festival was delightful. It was a pleasure to actually be able to take root so long in one place, when so many of my projects entails flying into a city for a single concert, or performing harpsichord maintenance work for perhaps a few days or a week. Kevin enjoyed his summer off so much, and I was flattered to be asked to return again the following year. Kevin is still involved procuring the early keyboard instruments which have become the heart of the Festival program. We choose the keyboards according to the repertoire and collect and transport them to Carmel together.

Of course, it's been no California summer beach holiday for me! The Festival has grown in complexity each year over the past decade, and from the moment of my arrival I don't get a day off. The frenetic activity of the initial two week rehearsal period is only exceeded by the mayhem of opening week where recitals for the next day have their required dress rehearsal immediately after the current day's first performance. In 2008, there were four harpsichords, three fortepianos and two organs under my care. While I officially look after only the early keyboard instruments, I've sometimes been requested to make minor but urgent adjustments to the larger organs or fix the Steinway lid catch.

The keyboards are tuned according to their use and each particular program's repertoire. I rarely divide all the notes of the scale absolutely equally as is expected on the piano, because the bright harmonic structure of the harpsichords in particular makes them sound harsh when tuned in Equal Temperament. In that system, every key is actually out of tune, and there is far more interest and excitement to be found in earlier music by optimizing the fixed keyboard tuning to suit the music. You be the judge.

In the 2006 season, I tuned a record two hundred and twenty-two times! The most tunings I've had to do in a single Carmel day was thirteen — I know some of my colleagues who balk at having to tune more than twice a day. I'm on a completely different schedule, planning the keyboard instrument moves well in advance with Production Manager Doug Mueller, and preparing the instruments before the musicians arrive. Patrons are more likely to see me speeding on my bike from one venue to the next to tune, rather than seated at a concert or in the noise of a late-night party. I'm not sure I would enjoy travelling by car at all — the bike is what really makes the Festival possible for me. As well as being environmentally sound, it's far more fun for me to scoot around and be able to park right at the door.