

Plain talk about funny harpsichords...

During the revival of early music, the harpsichord has had a peculiar history. While almost every other instrument employed in Western music was drastically modified during the nineteenth century, still these changes came as a somewhat gradual growth, or outgrowth of what had gone before. The harpsichord simply died out. When the harpsichord was revived, it was by a graft onto the piano, which had continuously developed—and the anomaly that resulted was the plucking piano, which has in turn died out save in some Latin American countries and in Eastern Europe.

When we at last turned back to the antique instruments as our models, we had to take a leap over a century of lost tradition, lost technology, and our surviving models had in most instances been sitting silent and uncared-for during that hundred years. Had these battered relics been lovingly restored according to the principles which are now embraced by all good museums and responsible collectors, we might have had a much better and truer sense of what the old instruments sounded like.

But alas, all anybody wanted to do with them was to get them playing somehow, and to get them playing anyhow meant ripping out much of the original fabric. Unlike most old instruments, the basic structure of the harpsichord, with a fragile wooden membrane held inside a rigid case, causes a certain amount of self-destruction as the wood ages. Damage to the action, and to the case rim and bottom, might be repaired without affecting the sound (although such repairs were seldom carefully made). But when the soundboards were repaired (and rare is the old instrument that survives without multiple repairs to the soundboard), the 'restorers' were dealing with the soul of the instrument, and they imposed upon the instrument their own ideas of what it 'must' have sounded like, or even what it 'ought' to have sounded like.

Such restoration, but in a much smaller degree, has of course happened to all old instruments still in use. Still, we can have much more faith in what we hear from an old flute, or even from an old violin, than we can in what we hear from old harpsichords.

Then there is the effect of age (aside from active damage) upon the sound of harpsichords. For days after it is first strung up, any harpsichord sounds ghastly. We say that the soundboard must be taught to sing, and the increase in warmth of sound is truly remarkable after the instrument has been played a while. This phenomenon (which the scientists, using machines infinitely cruder and less perceptive than the human ear, deny the existence of) is particularly noticeable in the first few months, is markedly perceptible during the first two years—and seems to continue throughout the life of the instrument to some degree. Old instruments sound better than new ones, and the poor harpsichord builder seldom can afford to keep an instrument long enough to realize its potential. And since few harpsichord owners have much skill in voicing and regulation, it is possible to wonder if very many new harpsichords ever do reach their potential.

(After years of dealing with professional players, I am still amazed at the rattletraps many of them do their practicing on. When I once protested to one of the most famous that we would gladly have sent someone to sort out his instrument—yes, and tune it too—he replied: 'You can do all that before the concert. Then the instrument will be so easy to play that it will be fun, and the concert will be better for it.' Or: I hit myself with a hammer because it feels so good when I stop.)

Harpsichord builders today have thus no very clear knowledge of the sound of the old instruments as they were—and often no clear idea of what their own instruments can sound like once they have matured.

Nor does the harpsichord builder get any help from the professional harpsichordists (with one notable exception). Professional players are quite understandably interested in the action of the harpsichord, and many of them won their spurs on older instruments which could not now be considered 'state of the art'. As one of them explained to me, 'No critic ever remarked on the sound of the instrument, but if I play wrong notes they are sure to write about it.'

(However, Leonhardt has often risked his reputation by encouraging lesser-known builders who promise or have achieved a better sound, and he has risked himself repeatedly to play on old instruments not exactly perfectly restored to playing condition.)

With no very good way to get back to the old sound, and no very great interest among professionals, harpsichord builders are to be commended for the efforts they expend in this direction. The gap of a hundred years (indeed, now almost two hundred years) must be bridged somehow. A number of approaches to the problem have been tried:

1. The Progressive Approach: Since the old builders did not enjoy our modern technology and our modern materials, and our modern understanding of the demands of music, going backwards into the past is silly. We should not envy Bach his harpsichords, but feel sorry for him. By using aluminum soundboards and plywood and all the other modern materials, we can build instruments with a longer sustain, a simpler development of partials, and much more tuning stability than was possible in the past. We should build completely modern instruments, suited to modern times.
2. The Antiquarian Approach: We cannot hear the old instruments as they once sounded, but if we meticulously copy everything the old builders did so far as our eyes can see, then the resulting sound must be like the old instruments in their youth.
3. The Romantic Mystical Great Artist Approach: Since the old builders were all great artists, what one must do to emulate them is to be a great artist. Since great artists are notoriously unappreciated in their own lifetimes, and are only discovered after they are dead, one must court the disapproval of at least the establishment, and if one can manage to flabbergast the bourgeoisie at the same time, so much the better; this latter can be accomplished by keyboards that don't work, and splinters in the case. (Genius, of course, transcends lack of knowledge and lack of skill—look at Moussorgsky.)
4. The Approach of the Principled Autodidact: Since the most important thing of all in the arts is originality, any knowledge, even, of how instruments have been made or are being made by others is to be eschewed, and everything must be thought out and invented *ab initio* by a single person (wives and children impressed into service do not count). This approach is best accomplished by complete isolation (a cabin in the midst of a forest or an abandoned farmhouse are ideal locales), but can be accomplished even in the midst of a city if one shuns all other harpsichord builders.
5. The Fake Antique Approach: While we cannot know what the old instruments sounded like in their youth, it is easy enough to imitate the way they sound today. If the soundboard has been deadened by bad restoration, put oil, or oily varnish, on new soundboards to deaden them. If the museum instrument speaks with a mere whisper of its former glory, flabby voicing will imitate it closely. If the instrument has been restrung by curators with twisted wire, so the wire is full of false beats, then string with twisted wire, and call the false beats a 'bloom' on the tone (this 'bloom' can also be accomplished with badly drawn wire, or wire that has rusted so it does not node cleanly). In the furniture trade this is called 'distressing', and there are hundreds of tricks (false wormholes, kicking, beating with chains, breaking off corners, etc., etc.) that can be used to make a new table look old. With harpsichords we have the added dimension that we can also distress the sound.

The actual builders who espouse any of these creeds, or any combination of them, are invariably delightful persons, serious, dedicated, kind, brave, clean, and reverent. I count them among my friends, and if we argue, we manage not to shout.

But I (and each of them) have trouble with the disciples, the religious converts to these divergent views. There is something about harpsichords that brings out the religious fanatic in many of us, and converts are notoriously holier than the pope.

At the risk of starting yet another Harpsichord Religion, I would propose an approach to the instrument and the building of it different from all of the above. Any polarized approach (and there are more possibilities than I have listed above) leads us to the situation of the blind men and the elephant, which was very like a tree, but also very like a rope.

Let me begin non-controversially, if that is possible in dealing with a subject which excites religious passions.

A harpsichord is a physical object, bigger than a breadbox so it cannot well be hidden. There is surely no harm in making it decent and pleasant to look upon, nor any great sin involved in making it as handsome as possible.

Nor is there any valid *musical* reason for making it ugly.

(But I will admit that I have seen a great number of harpsichords that were masterpieces of the cabinet-maker's art that were completely invalid as musical instruments. And conversely that I have seen some pretty scratchy looking harpsichords that sounded very well indeed.)

A harpsichord is in certain aspects a machine for plucking strings by means of a keyboard. I think we can all agree that the action gains nothing musical by being carelessly or sloppily made.

(I know all about the theory of the 'aesthetic threshold'—that playing on an instrument with which the player feels insecure makes him rise to greater heights of subtlety of feeling, but I think it is nonsense, and I think that the players at least will agree.)

I wonder if we can all agree that music is meant to be heard, and that therefore some degree of efficiency in amplifying the sound is necessary for a good harpsichord. Some of the museum instruments have the soundboard so loaded down with veneer, glue, cloth, added ribs, and have otherwise been so compromised in their tonal efficiency that they give a very muted sound, and this effect has been widely imitated in 'exact copies'—or, since making an efficient instrument is a matter of some skill and art, perhaps no special effort was required to 'imitate' this aspect of the sound.

If a violin can be made to speak only with great pressure on the bow and much sawing back and forth, the fiddler lays it aside and calls it a bad instrument. If a harpsichord cannot be heard across the room without massive oversize quills thumping the strings, must we not also put it aside as bad?

(I've had my say about the fad of spaghetti-fingered harpsichordists who insist that all instruments they play on be voiced exquisitely lightly, resulting in what Ralph Kirkpatrick once called 'whisperchord' sound. A certain amount of energy must pass from the finger to the string, otherwise a decent amount of energy cannot be made to move the air to our ears. But if we think in terms of efficient use of energy, we shall be able to play to even sizable audiences that can sit in their seats instead of straining forward in an agonized attempt to hear.)

Coupled with the principle of efficiency is that of focus—the instrument must very quickly settle into a recognizable, musical tone, a fundamental pitch and its accompanying partials, and without reinforcement by the partials, it has been demonstrated that it is difficult to hear the fundamental.

And also coupled with efficiency is the phenomenon of transparency. Harpsichords are designed to play contrapuntal music, and for contrapuntal music to be heard, each voice must find its way through the texture to our ears as a recognizable entity. We do not want to build up masses of opaque colors as does the modern piano. For us the treble must not overwhelm the inner voices, nor can we allow the treble to die under the tenor, and the bass must give solidity without covering everything above it. Such transparency is readily demonstrated by playing music, and requires no special faculties: you can hear the distinct voices through the texture or you cannot.

So far I have not had to refer to the ‘beauty’ of the sound at all. With the harpsichord, beauty is as beauty does, and an instrument that lets us hear the music clearly will convince us that the music is beautiful without calling attention to itself.

In fact, if a harpsichord calls attention to itself by *any* extraneous quality, making us aware of the instrument instead of allowing us to focus absolutely on the music, then we should call it bad. The harpsichord’s tone should be transparent—the instrument itself should be as clearly revealing of the music as a wine glass reveals the color of the wine.

We cannot hear the old instruments as they once sounded, but we have a vast legacy in the music they were made to play, and if we focus on the music, and the revelation of the music, then we shall be at one with the old builders, and have no more religious quarrels among ourselves. All harpsichords will be considered good if they reveal the music, and to the degree that they reveal the music, and all approaches to building harpsichords will blend into one common goal, and all things that do not contribute to that goal, or which detract from it, will be forgotten.

From the player’s point of view, the best description of a harpsichord I have heard: ‘I belly up to the instrument, hold my hands out, and it plays itself.’

From the listener’s point of view: ‘I was so enchanted by the music that I never listened to the instrument.’

Truly the making of musical instruments is a humble art. We best do our job when we least intrude, and our genius is most in evidence when no one notices it.

To achieve this humble end, we would be foolish if we did not learn everything we could from the antique instruments that have survived—we shall be antiquarians to that degree. But we are not the servants of the antique; rather, like the old builders, we are servants of the music.

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