

BCS TANGENTS

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Boston Clavichord Society
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Becoming an Early Keyboard Technician: Elizabeth Harris in Boston

The original version of this article was written by Peter Bavington and appeared in The British Clavichord Society Newsletter, No. 64, February 2016. Editor

Elizabeth (Beth) Harris lives in a suburb of Boston. She has degrees in both music (2006) and mathematics (2007) from the State University of New York, both awarded *summa cum laude*. With the aim of becoming



Beth Harris

a piano tuner technician, in 2007 she enrolled in a two-year piano technology course at the North Bennet Street School in Boston (www.nbss.edu). This remarkable institution is devoted to providing practical training in traditional handicrafts. Unfortunately, training specifically in early keyboard making and restoration is not (yet)

(Continued on p. 6)

What Makes It “Clavichord” (or not)?

Timothy Broege

Timothy Broege, a composer and performer, presented a recital of 20th- and 21st- century music suitable for the clavichord on April 3, 2016 at Gore Place in Waltham, Massachusetts. The concert was reviewed for The Boston Musical Intelligencer by David Patterson, former chair of the Performing Arts Department, University of Massachusetts at Boston. Patterson wrote that Broege brought to the concert “a mix of adventure, edification, and sheer auditory pleasure.” At my request, Broege compiled a guide to assist in identifying and creating music suitable for the clavichord. Editor

Here is a guide that may help clavichordists determine the suitability of contemporary keyboard compositions for their instrument and help composers achieve an idiomatic clavichord style.

Positives to look for

Resemblance to C.P.E. Bach, particularly the *Six New Sonatas*, Wq 63/7-12 and the sonatas, fantasies and rondos of the *Kenner und Liebhaber* collections: clarity of texture and gesture, abundant contrasts, effective use of silence and rhythmic displacement

Resemblance to J.S. Bach, particularly the 2-part inventions and French Suites: counterpoint always in service to melodic and harmonic rhetoric, with no excess of notes or over-decoration

Resemblance to the suites of J. J. Froberger, especially the slow movements: use of lute-style texture (*style brisé*), expressive dissonance, effective use of the mid-range of the clavichord

Negatives to avoid

Pianistic textures: too many notes, block chords, multi-octave arpeggiation, thumping, pounding, vulgarity, extreme dynamics, melodies with simplistic accompaniments

Organ textures: pedal points, extensive use of long tones in melodies or pitch sequences, much use of *cresc.* and *dim.* markings (swell pedal usage), extreme dynamics (*fff*, *ppp* etc.), heavy chords

Jazz or pop music rhythms: heavy accents, excessive repetition, thumping

To be prized

Rhetorical eloquence (Mozart), simplicity and sincerity of language (C.P.E. Bach), not too plain (overly tonal and/



or minimal), not too extreme (super-dissonant, super-abstract), but “just right” (as Goldilocks said).

Especially for composers

Here are some pieces composed for clavichord worth studying:

Herbert Howells: *Lambert's Clavichord*
Alan Hovhaness: *Dark River and Distant Bell*
Walter Haacke: *Whims & Fancies*
Chris DeBlasio: *Dances for Clavichord*
Keith Jarrett: *Book of Ways* (CD recording on the ECM label)

And here are some pieces (originally for piano) that are well-suited to the clavichord

Igor Stravinsky: *The Five Fingers*
Bela Bartok: *For Children*
Anton Webern: *Kinderstück (1924)*
Vincent Persichetti: *Sonatas for Piano (especially Opus 63 and Opus 64)*

Summary for composers

Spend time with an experienced clavichordist. Listen to an array of instruments, including both fretted and unfretted clavichords. Learn to play the clavichord. Try to channel the musical spirits of C.P.E. Bach and Mozart. Cherish *legato* over *staccato*. Ω

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Nordic Keyboard Festival . . . p.2
Building a Zuckermann VI . . . p.3
Sykes Fretted Clavichords . . . p.4
J.H. Silbermann Research . . . p.5

The Nordic Historical Keyboard Festival

May 29-June 10, 2016

The Nordic Historical Keyboard Festival was founded in 2012 by keyboardist Michael Tsalka and clavichordist Anna Maria McElwain¹. The past four festivals have offered a fine selection of historical keyboards (clavichord, harpsichord, fortepiano, baroque organ, virginal and spinet) in solo settings as well as with other instruments (baroque violin, gamba, recorders, mandolin, baroque trumpet, etc). Past performers include Peter Sykes, Joyce Lindorff, Dóra Pétery, Aapo Häkkinen, Alon Sariel, Rubin Abdullin, Wendy Rolfe, Walter Reiter, János Bali, and Dmitry Eremin.



Menno van Delft, one of the performers at this year's Nordic Historical

Finalists came to Kuopio from eight different countries.

The fifth NHKF will take place from May 29 to June 10, 2016. The main

part of the festival is in Kuopio, Finland. For the first time the festival will expand to other cities, offering concerts in Hämeenlinna and Helsinki. In 2016, the festival focuses on clavichords and brings several internationally-known clavichordists to the stage. This year there is a multi-disciplinary twist to the festival. The clavichord is offered with a dancer (Riikka Puumalainen) and a visual artist (Johanna Rossi), as well as a poet (Thomas McElwain),

and a player of traverso (Amanda Markwick). Elina Mustonen will give a recital celebrating William Shakespeare with music from the time of the poet played on a virginal, along with texts. Further complementing the clavichord offerings is the concert of a harpsichord duo from Estonia, Imbi Tarum and Julia Agayeva Hess.

The Nordic Historical Keyboard Festival offers a clavichord course in Kuopio, Finland, June 6-10, 2016. Ω

¹ <http://www.nordicclavichord.org/en>

The festival has aimed at building a bridge between the past and the present, offering music from the 1500s up to world premieres of works especially commissioned for the festival from composers such as Leonardo Coral (Mexico), Herbert Lindholm, Jouni Kuronen and Adam Al-Sawad (Finland), Mari-Anne Hof (Netherlands), James Hewitt (UK), and Liu Qing (China).

In 2014 the NHKF made history with the First International Clavichord Competition, the first known competition in the 700-year history of the instrument.

TANGENTS

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New and Old Music for Clavichord

Timothy Broege has recorded a CD entitled *New and Old Music for Clavichord*. It contains works by Howells, Harrison, Persichetti, C.P.E. Bach, Hovhaness, Woodman, Kosinski, and Broege. The CD can be ordered from Allaire Music Publications, 212 2nd Ave., Bradley Beach, N.J. 07720. The cost is \$15.00 with shipping included.



Susan Alexander Max: In Memoriam

The Boston Clavichord Society regrets to report the death of Susan Alexander Max. Susan performed for the BCS in October 2006. Her program included a piece by Domenico Zipoli, a composer whose works she recorded. She was best known as a fortepianist and recorded CDs with works of Clementi, Hummel, and Johann Christian Bach.

(Continued on p.6)

Building a Zuckermann Clavichord VI

Timothy Thomas

Building my first clavichord in 1974 was one of the most enriching experiences of my younger years. Made from Zuckermann parts, this was the so-called Clavichord IV, designed by David Way soon after he acquired the business from Wally Zuckermann. Although there were perhaps more things wrong than right with the design, over the years (and with considerable help from David) I made many upgrades to improve the instrument's tone, action and appearance. It became a treasured companion through graduate school, marriage and over 30 years of parish ministry in the Episcopal Church and is still responsive and satisfying to play.

After retiring in 2011, and having learned more about the clavichord, I was eager to return to building. The instrument referred to in this article was also made from a Zuckermann kit, their Clavichord VI. It is a five-octave (FF-f3) unfretted instrument in the Central German tradition, with overwound strings in the bass (FF-F). Design and materials are of course light years away from what was offered in 1974 (albeit for only \$350 at that time). The result is a much finer instrument with greater tone and flexibility. But this time around, the process of turning a handsome piece of furniture into something really musical was more challenging. The finishing touches (the voicing) took lots longer than the building, and this is the part of the process from which I learned the most.

After getting the instrument built and chipped to pitch ($a_2=440$, Kirnberger III) it was invaluable to stand across the room and listen to someone else play it. My friend Mark Jones, a fine organist and composer, played it several times during the voicing process. Each time I could hear notes that seemed weaker or sounded different from their neighbors. Many could be corrected by making tiny adjustments to a string's down bearing (by lowering the coil on the tuning pin) or side bearing (by tapping a bridge pin

for a bit more pressure on the string). I learned quickly that minute adjustments often do the trick.

In balancing the notes for consistent



Zuckermann Clavichord VI, five-octave (FF-f3) unfretted, built by Timothy Thomas

volume and tone quality, I found one note that sounded, for lack of a better word, a little “buzzer” than any of the others. It took me a while to realize that this note (f1) was not an intractable problem, but rather the best-sounding note on the



Tim Thomas in his shop

keyboard! Then it was a matter of going back to the other 60 notes to give them the extra intensity of tone I had inadvertently given f1.

It was also necessary to relocate a few tangents on their key tails. On this instrument (maybe this is a universal) the rear edge of the tangent needs to be precisely perpendicular to the key. If it's not, the

tangent must be tapped out, the hole plugged and re-drilled, and the tangent replaced. The slight angle on the top of the tangent should cause the back string of a pair to sound first, to mimic the “stagger” effect of a harpsichord. If the tangent is correctly placed on the key but the note still seems not quite right, the tangent can be twisted slightly with pliers (usually clockwise, looking down on the top of the tangent).

Getting the listing right is another project. This was my first experience with proper wool listing cloth, so I ended up installing it many times to get what I wanted: neither too much nor too little cloth; and tight enough for a sense of “bottom” to the key dip, but loose enough for an open tone.

Adding to the fun was the fact that changing one thing on a clavichord often means changing something else. For instance, I found that an adjustment to the listing might require adjusting a nearby tangent as well. Taken together, all these little things can make a world of difference.

In June 2015, my wife and I invited friends to hear Mark Jones perform an inaugural recital on the instrument. We recorded the event and made CDs. Ed Kottick, author of *The Harpsichord Owner's Guide* commented on the recording: “It appears to be an attractive, full-bodied instrument. The registers seem balanced, and it has good dynamic variety.”

Repeated hearings of the recording led me to even more adjustments. I still find a note now and then that I want to improve. But as Ed has observed, a clavichord is finished only when its rightful owner tears it from your grasp.

Steve Salvatore, General Manager at Zuckermann, has spent untold hours on the phone with me over the past six or seven years, and I am grateful for his generosity and counsel. Mark Jones put many hours into programming, performing and recording our recital. And although Peter Bavington's *Clavichord Tuning and Maintenance* is aimed at clavichord owners rather than builders, it contains a wealth of indispensable technical information. Ω

Exploring the Sykes Clavichord Collection, Part Two

Christopher Grills

In the first part of this report (*Tangents*, Number 39, winter 2015), I wrote mainly about Peter Sykes' unfretted clavichords, new additions to his clavichord collection, and instruments no longer in his collection.

This article discusses the clavichords not previously described, mostly fretted instruments.

There is arguably more diversity among fretted clavichords than unfretted with respect to design, action, size and other factors. Since Peter generously lends out many of his smaller clavichords to students, getting

access to some of them in order to get an impression was sometimes difficult. This has impeded evaluation and comparison, but I hope to provide information that the reader will find useful.

One of Peter's most admired fretted clavichords is an instrument by Clifford Boehmer. It sits atop a Charles Wolff pedal clavichord in Peter's studio. The Boehmer has a firm sound that projects well. Some clavichordists, including David Schulenberg, choose this as their practice instrument of choice in Peter's studio. The firmness of the listing and the consistency of the action make control of intonation easier than on instruments like the Dolmetsch-Chickering clavichord; that is, accidental deflection of the pitch occurs less frequently. By that same token, *Bebung* and *Tragen der Töne* must be performed more deliberately in order to be audible. The compass of the instrument is C-g^{'''} which I find somewhat limiting, since the bold, large sound of the clavichord makes me wish that I could play later repertoire on it. That said, the placement of the Boehmer on the pedal clavichord makes it ideal for organ practice, and C-g^{'''} is, of course, the standard compass for organ manuals.

The Charles Wolff pedal clavichord is almost too perfectly paired with the Boehmer. Indeed, given how similar the instruments appear in design and color scheme, it is difficult to believe that Charles Wolff did not have the Boehmer in mind when building the pedal instrument. Nevertheless, Peter assures me that the similarities are purely coincidental and that he decided to pair the two instruments after the fact.

Since pedal clavichords are extremely rare, objective comparison is difficult. However, I would encourage any organist to try

a pedal clavichord, if given the opportunity. It completely changes the way one approaches organ pedals. As with manual clavichords, it is impossible to produce a good tone on Peter's pedal clavichord if the key is approached from above. Before depressing the pedal one must have one's foot in contact with it. Since I wish to improve my pedal technique, I plan to spend a great deal more concerted time at the pedal clavichord this summer.

The very first clavichord I played from Peter's collection was a Renée Geoffrion fretted instrument loosely based on Hubert. (I tried it shortly before my audition at Boston University in January 2014.) This instrument has been on loan since the summer of 2014, so I must report impressions from nearly two years ago. Moreover, it should be noted that Geoffrion herself says that she is constantly innovating and making changes to her clavichord designs. Partly

because of this, each of her clavichords provides a somewhat idiosyncratic experience. The action of the Sykes Geoffrion clavichord is both firm and spongy, with keys that are almost rounded rather than angular and very shallow.

A number of individuals interested in purchasing their first clavichord have asked me to recommend a decent travel-sized instrument. Peter owns three travel-sized clavichords, two constructed from Zuckermann "King of Sweden" kits and another made by Gary Blaise. I will compare these three, along with a travel clavichord I purchased recently from Renée Geoffrion.

Peter owns both a double-fretted and a triple-fretted King of Sweden clavichord. He built the double-fretted instrument himself, whereas the triple-fretted instrument was built by workers in the Zuckermann shop. I am somewhat biased against triple-fretted clavichords, as they further limit the scope of repertoire it is possible to play, but for someone interested strictly in medieval, renaissance, and early baroque keyboard music, such an instrument would be a suitable choice.

Bernard Brauchli told me that for years he preferred these small fretted instruments, which he feels often surpass unfretted clavichords in their volume and ability to project. The double-fretted Zuckermann that Peter built is impressive structurally for the time it was built, and shows

more sensitivity and attention to detail than most kit clavichords. Nevertheless, I must offer a word of caution. King of Sweden kits were quite popular in previous decades. One can find perhaps hundreds of them owned and built by amateurs across the country. One will not usually find the level of craftsmanship and attention to detail in a kit instrument built by an ama-

(Continued on p.6)



Pedal clavichord by Charles Wolff with keyboard after Hubert by Clifford Boehmer



Travel clavichord after 1776 Hubert by Gary Blaise

Research on a clavichord in Paris attributed to Johann Heinrich Silbermann

Dietrich Hein

In early October of last year, I met with Jean-Claude Battault, curator at the Musée de la Musique in Paris, to examine a clavichord there that has been attributed to Johann Heinrich Silbermann. The Musée is part of the Cité de la Musique on the



The parchment rose of Berlin 598

northeastern edge of inner Paris. This was a continuation of a research project on the five existing clavichords that have been attributed to J. H. Silbermann of Strasbourg (1727-1799). None of these five instruments bears a signature, and given the similarities with other instruments made by members of the Silbermann family (organs, fortepianos and harpsichords), it had become clear that it was important to find distinguishing



The rose in the Paris clavichord with the exact same design and diameter, also out of three layers of parchment

features, so that the instruments in question could be assigned to their makers. The Musée de la Musique hosts a number of most interesting clavichords, among them the youngest of three remaining instruments by Christian Gottfried Friederici of Gera, but also a clavichord that looks very



The bass end of the bridge of Berlin 598

much like the three instruments situated in Berlin and Nürnberg, which I had already examined and described briefly in *Tangents*, No. 37. (There I concluded that the three instruments “are undoubtedly from the same workshop” and that they have a number of common features “that lead to the conclu-



The bass end of the clavichord in Paris, -obviously with a very similar cross section that all of these instruments are the work of Johann Heinrich Silbermann.”)

The organization of this sort of visit can sometimes take quite a bit of time, as the museums have their own schedules and rules. When I visited Berlin and Nürnberg, it was no problem to do the examining work on the instruments in the exhibition during

the museums’ open hours. In Paris, I had to appear on a Monday, when the exhibition is closed, but the clavichord had been taken to the restoration workshop, where I felt very welcome: excellent light, a set of latex gloves and plastic measuring equipment and even a decent endoscope were waiting there for my use. The object of inspection came to the museum from a private owner in France a couple of decades ago and had been put in playing order by the harpsichord builder Anthony Sidey (Paris). Since I had closely examined the other three instruments of the group, this clavichord looked very familiar



The tangents in the Bass section of Berlin 914, also showing the scribelines and the typical carving pattern found on all existing JHS clavichords with the exception of the instrument in Vienna

from the beginning. Every measurement I took was as I had expected and all the little details I had already found were here again. No doubt whatsoever that this clavichord



The Tangents of the clavichord in Paris

(Continued on p.6)

(Beth Harris, cont. from p.1)

included in the curriculum. Beth received some financial assistance with her studies because she is “legally blind.” She also supported herself doing various jobs and, from the second year at NBSS, by piano tuning.

Beth’s interest in early music and the early keyboard instruments began with her family; her parents joke that they met playing crumhorn. At university she was a member of the early-music ensemble and, she says, “made every excuse (mostly unsuccessful) to get access to the harpsichord room.” Boston is one of the best places in the United States to pursue an interest in early music. The Boston Early Music Festival draws participants from all across the United States. There are a number of keyboard instrument makers and restorers in and near the city

In 2010, Beth met one of these, the harpsichord and clavichord maker Allan Winkler, and eagerly seized the opportunity to work with him part-time, making and restoring harpsichords and clavichords. The following year she began restoring antique fortepianos with Tim Hamilton. Beth says “Both Allan and Tim have been truly amazing mentors to me; I can’t even estimate the cumulative hours they’ve spent answering my questions.” She supplemented this work with an intensive three-month furniture-making course, also at NBSS, in 2014.

She now shares with Tim Hamilton the work of tuning harpsichords and fortepianos for performances and rehearsals in the Boston area—and doing on-the-spot repairs. She also has piano-tuning clients, but her whole focus now is on work with harpsichords, fortepianos and clavichords. She was elected last year to the Board of Directors of the Boston Clavichord Society. Ω



(In Memoriam, cont. from p.2)

A CD with additional works by Clementi will be released by Naxos in June. Susan was born in New York City and graduated with distinction from the Juilliard School. She also had a degree in modern languages. An interview with her appeared in *Clavichord International*, vol. 16, no. 1, May 2012. Ω

(Research, cont. from p.5)

was made in the same shop as the ones I had already seen. Jean-Claude Battault was a very helpful partner for discussing these matters, because he had already taken closer looks at Johann Heinrich Silbermann’s work as well as other unsigned instruments obviously connected to the Silbermann family.



Paris instrument attributed to J.H. Silbermann, Musée de la Musique (980.2.666) Photo: Jean-Marc Anglès.

We looked inside the instrument together. Here everything looked familiar, as we found three wide and thin strips of parchment under the soundboard, crossing the bridge, just as in Berlin’s number 598 (whereas the clavichord in Nürnberg has strips of the same dimensions but out of quartered spruce, like the soundboard

(Sykes Collection, cont. from p.4)

teur as one would find in an instrument built by a professional.

Peter’s Gary Blaise clavichord is interesting in that it is at a higher pitch (concert A sounds like a C#, a major third higher at A440). This of course eliminates most opportunities for collaboration without transposing. On the other hand, the instrument was not designed with collaboration in mind. The action is very flexible and spongy and it is fairly easy to execute *Bebung* and *Tragen der Töne*. The extended upper range to f” is also useful for later repertoire.

I will conclude by describing a travel clavichord by Renée Geoffrion that I purchased recently, since I consider it especially outstanding in design. The clavichord has an electroacoustic feature. There is a port in the back for a 1/4-inch amplifier cable. The sound is surprisingly wonderful even when amplified. I filled an entire sanctuary with the sound of this clavichord at a wedding this summer. The A440 pitch combined with the amplification feature

wood). A little hint at its “French” origin was then discovered on the underside of the parchment rose, which by the way is again exactly like the one in Berlin 598: written in blue ink is a (cut off) word “épin...”, unlikely to mean something other than “épinette”, the French word for “spinet”.

Whether this was just to mark the material ahead of being cut, or not, we know that Johann Heinrich Silbermann installed parchment roses of exactly the same size, style and craftsmanship

in his spinets and square pianos. The roses have been a matter of discussion in the past, as it would not be impossible that various members of the Silbermann clan could have had a common supplier of parchment roses. Here at least we have a clear indication that this supplier is from French-speaking territory. Ω

makes collaboration entirely possible. The instrument is single-strung, which creates some challenges in playing. Strings are difficult to replace and as with any travel clavichord, the bass goes out of tune easily because of how foreshortened the scaling of the bass strings is.

This instrument is very versatile. The composer and organist Balint Karosi purchased one of these instruments not long ago from Beverly Woodward. He has played it in concerts and plans to compose a double concerto for amplified bass recorder and e-clavichord next year. Ω



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