BCS TANGENTS
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Meerbach Clavichord

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The Geelvinck Fortepiano Festival was held August 9-22, 2018 at the Geelvinck Music Museum in Zutphen, The Netherlands. Concerts, masterclasses, workshops, lectures, and a symposium were presented during that fruitful time. I was invited by Michael Tsalka to give a concert, a lecture, and a masterclass, mostly on the fine fortepianos in the Museum's collection.

Of special interest was the presence of

Johann Christian Meerbach, c.1800

an antique clavichord, a recent addition to the Museum's collection. This large unfretted instrument of five octaves and two notes with a 4' course of seventeen notes in the bass, had recently been bought through an auction house from the private collection of a recently deceased collector in Great Britain. While in that collection, the clavichord had been restored to playing condition, but also redecorated in non-historic ways; the case was covered in embossed shiny red leather, and the lid interior painted in a modernist seascape depicting a Minoan volcanic eruption. It

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Fretting About Fingering: The Symbiotic Relationship Between Clavichords and Historical Keyboard Technique

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The important role that the clavichord historically played as a learner's instrument has long been acknowledged. Nowhere was this more true than amongst the keyboardists of the German-speaking lands during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his *Syntagma Musicum* of 1618, Michael Praetorius singled out the clavichord as the "foundation of all keyboard instruments," while emphasizing its practicality for students. In a similar vein, Martin Heinrich Fuhrmann described the clavichord in his music primer entitled *Musicalischer Trichter* (1706) as "the first grammar of all keyboardists," and noted that those who become proficient on it can easily go on to master the various other keyboard instruments. Fuhrmann's turn of phrase was echoed in Johann Gottfried Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732), while none other than C. P. E. Bach asserts in his famous and influential *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (1753) that "A good clavichordist makes an accomplished harpsichordist, but not the reverse."

The technical factors behind these claims will be familiar to anyone who has spent time at the clavichord given that, compared to other keyboard instruments, a far higher degree of physical control and nuance is requisite for producing a good, even tone, let alone for achieving even the most basic semblance of technique. The notion that the hypersensitive and demanding nature of clavichord touch creates a kind of autodidactic feedback loop is implicit in the thinking of the various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators mentioned above. In other words, the material design of the clavichord—the raw mechanics of its keyboard action—can, through kinesthetic synergy, foster a sound fundamental technique in and of itself.

The larger implication of this didactic relationship between instrument and player is that any substantive changes in the design of the clavichord's action would have necessarily impacted the nature of the playing technique it engendered. By the same token, extraneous developments in playing technique could (and did) occasion material changes in the clavichord's design. With all this in mind, I find it revealing to observe the subtle ways in which historical pedagogical treatises and surviving instruments—particularly those of the German Baroque—can attest to developments in playing technique that seem to have come about in conjunction with changes in instrument technology.

The most dramatic and significant organological development in the clavichord's history is arguably the gradual abandonment of fretting in favor of the unfretted designs that came to the fore over the course of the eighteenth century. Although Daniel Tobias Faber of Crailsheim has long been credited with this development around 1725, there is ample evidence (both material and textual) of unfretted clavichords from before the turn of the eighteenth century. The earliest incontrovertible reference is found in the preface to Johannes Speth's *Ars Magna Consoni et Dissoni* (Augsburg, 1693), where he states that "...a well-made and well-tuned instrument or clavichord is required, and indeed this latter must be so constructed that every key has its own string, and not such that, for example, two, three, or up to four keys strike one [string]." Clearly, Speth himself owned (or otherwise had access to) an unfretted clavichord, but the mere fact that he calls on purchasers of his collection to avail themselves of such an instrument strongly suggests that they were not mere novelties or unduly scarce by the final

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British Clavichord Society Newsletter

Benjamin Feldman

Benjamin Feldman is a retired Baltimore city official and Peabody Institute student.

In these parlous times in which we are living, the small but international world of clavichord enthusiasts has been an oasis of civility and beauty. That issue no. 73 of the *British Clavichord Society Newsletter* may be its last is sad and unwelcome news. The *Newsletter* has been a triannual treat which has kept readers *au courant* with the consequential doings for all things clavichord.

The
British
Clavichord
Society
Newsletter

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The society itself grew out of an informal meeting after a Derek Adlam recital in the Lewes workshop of Malcolm Rose and Karin Richter. In the February 1995 debut issue, Paul Simmonds wrote the first editorial and Derek the first foreword. By the third issue of that same calendar year, Peter Bavington began his essential series on clavichord tuning and maintenance. In 2001, Peter took over the editor's chair and shouldered the work until passing the responsibility with issue no. 64 to Judith Wardman in 2016. Now, almost a quarter century after the newsletter's debut, Judith Wardman will put down the blue pencil.

Over the span of these 70+ issues, we have enjoyed reviews of books, music editions, recitals, and recordings. We have visited collections, followed auctions, studied curious instruments, interviewed players and builders, kept an eye on small ads, savored occasional controversies, and read obituaries for those who have gone where there is no Pythagorean Comma. Those of us stateside were regularly made envious of the richness of the UK clavichord scene.

The roster of names who contributed articles is a Who's Who of clavichord luminaries, and many of these contributors did heavy lifting to keep the rest of us informed. Everyone who has followed the *Newsletter* appreciates the magnitude of the task to pull together so much quality thinking and writing and to share it at such nominal cost. Let us not say farewell to this good friend but hope that in some near future a perennial interest will coax a new generation of talent to continue the conversation. For now the readers of *Tangents* doff their hats in thanks for a splendid job to all who made the *Newsletter* possible. Ω

(Meerbach Clavichord, cont. from p.1)

also suffered severe water damage, becoming once again unplayable. Upon its sale to the Geelvinck Museum the instrument was researched by Peter Bavington, who gave a talk at the festival detailing the fascinating trail of evidence that led him to conclude it was one of four surviving clavichords built by Johann Christian Meerbach of Gotha around 1800. Similarities in the details of the keyboard, bridge and soundboard construction and decoration of the keyboard and interior case with the other three signed instruments (presently in Gotha, Zittau, and Bethlehem, PA) led him to this conclusion.

His entire paper on the subject, including a biography of Meerbach and the history of this instrument's ownership is available for view on the Geelvinck Music Museum's website **http://www.geelvinck.nl** along with photographs of this instrument and the other three Meerbach clavichords. The instrument was musically restored in 2018 by Dutch clavichord builder Sander Ruys, retaining its decoration from the previous owner. It once again speaks forth with a rounded, forthright sound, well balanced from bass to treble. I was privileged to perform part of my concert program on it, playing four polonaises of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach and a number of the Beethoven op. 33 Bagatelles, which sounded superbly on the instrument. For many attendees at the concert, this was their first experience hearing the clavichord in recital, and it made many friends at that event. It, along with the many other wonderful instruments in the Music Museum collection, is well worth the detour from Amsterdam for anyone interested in fine antique keyboard instruments. Ω

T A N G E N T S

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New Music for Clavichord

Rudi Seitz, a Boston-area composer has just released some music for clavichord: a collection of nine canons performed by his collaborator Matthew McConnell.

The album is available online at: **https://rudiseitz.bandcamp.com/album/canons-on-clavichord**

To download the files at no charge, please visit: **https://rudiseitz.bandcamp.com/yum**

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The Jupiter Symphony: A Personal Experience

Christa Rakich

Christa Rakich is vice president of the Boston Clavichord Society. She and Erica Johnson performed in a BCS concert in Cambridge, MA, on October 19, 2018. The Jupiter Symphony was the final work on their program. Ms.Rakich will teach at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in the spring semester 2019.

My father died on February 19, 2014, at age 86. His parents had been immigrants from Serbia and Montenegro, and Pa was raised rather harshly but with an appreciation for education and classical music. We had a piano in our home, and lessons were a matter of course.

When I reached adulthood, he took pleasure in ordering up piano recitals from me: "I'm inviting some friends over and we'd like to hear K. 545 (he loved referring to Mozart pieces by their Köchel numbers; I always had to look them up) and the Moonlight Sonata. Can you do it next Tuesday? And we'll end with some Scott Joplin." And so a date would be agreed upon, he would have the piano tuned, and I would drive the hour to his house where an audience of 7 or 8 people awaited me.

Pa took particular joy in the post-concert voicemail. "That last movement should have been faster." There was a surly pride in these remarks, and I understood the humor in his intent. How many parents can make such demands on their offspring? Overt appreciation was not part of his emotional vocabulary. But in his later years, after a command performance, he would slip me $300 "for gas." This impressed me, as I knew how reluctantly he parted with cash. And I grew to appreciate his unexpressed pleasure as well as the gift of his audience, which had been a consistent presence since I was five years old.

His requests were not limited to piano music. K. 525 was a favorite (*Eine kleine Nachtmusik*), and Sousa marches made frequent appearances. One email directed me to a YouTube video of Horowitz playing *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. I explained that if I practiced 4 hours a day for a solid month I still wouldn't sound like that. "Are you trying to give me tendonitis?"

Three years after his death, I found myself thinking obsessively of the Jupiter Symphony. It had been part of the background music of my childhood: Mozart, Beethoven, and the very occasional Elvis. It was as if Pa were ordering up another concert. "Play the Jupiter" was my earworm. A concert date for the BCS was on my calendar. I played through some Mozart sonatas. "Play the Jupiter," I kept hearing. I looked at the score. Could I make a transcription of this? Maybe just the first movement. Well, maybe just the Minuet. The last movement is the big thrill, though, with all that counterpoint.

Detail, Jupiter and Ganymede, Ferrara, Archaeological Museum

Poking around online late one night, I came across Otto Singer's transcription for two pianos. The puzzle pieces clicked into place. This was playable, and I knew just the person. I had heard Erica Johnson play a Bach partita on her Dietrich Hein unfretted clavichord after Friederici and been impressed. She was an Oberlin grad, class of '99, as am I, class of '74. Though we knew each other only professionally, I felt free to impose with a mildly crazy scheme. I called and asked, "Would you play the Jupiter Symphony with me? I'm emailing you a pdf. I'll come up next week and we can see if it's feasible." Erica lives in Walpole, MA, and I in Bloomfield, CT, so I packed up my 1972 Tom Wolf Schiedmayer, drove up, and we sight-read through the piece. It was not horrible, Erica was game, and we had the whole summer before us.

In addition to being an outstanding clavichordist, organist, and church musician, Erica is also mom to two girls, ages four and six. A thunderstorm passed through as we were practicing, and her younger daughter, frightened by the noise, interrupted us. "When there is thunder you have to be someplace safe," she explained, "like Walpole."

We were most fortunate to have an occasion to preview the concert at the lovely, quiet home of Ed Clark, a Boston Clavichord Society member, and his wife Joan Pritchard. It was also a good opportunity to rehearse the logistics of moving and tuning two instruments. Some days before the BCS concert, however, Erica's husband Dan Davis slipped while jogging and fractured a rib. This necessitated a little extra outside help with moving. As their 4-year-old explained, pointing to her own rib, "Daddy fell and broke a string."

The concert began with Mozart's Variations on *Ah! Vous dirais-je, Maman*, K. 265, then the Sonata in B-flat, K. 333. The Jupiter (or K. 551, as Pa would have it) was the grand finale. It was a smash hit. Of course; who doesn't love it? But to the keyboardist, all the hearing and analysis in the world cannot yield an equivalent insight to holding it in one's hands. Add to that the excitement of interaction with another musician in bringing it off the page. On two clavichords, the piece becomes delightfully clear. The dynamics and shading of the orchestral version are retained. And with 2 players, there is plenty of give and take, of dialog. And without the presence of 20+ players, the counterpoint is much more transparent. To the listener in a small hall, action passing from one clavichord to the other can be much more engaging than the wall of sound that emanates from an orchestra in a standard concert hall.

Thanks, Pa. K. 551 was a good idea. Hope you thought so, too. Ω

(*Fingering, cont. from p.1*)

decade of the seventeenth century, even if double and triple fretted clavichords remained the more common varieties.

The question begs to be asked: if this was, indeed, the case, why are there so few surviving unfretted instruments from the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and none at all from the seventeenth? Although it is pure speculation on my part, I see two possible explanations. In the first place, it could simply be a numbers game: if unfretted clavichords represented only a fraction of all clavichords built during the turn-of-the-eighteenth-century period, and only a fraction of instruments from this period survive, perhaps the odds of unfretted instruments making it down to us were prohibitively slim. Alternatively (or additionally), perhaps the first generation of unfretted instruments did not survive because they were simply not as structurally sound as their fretted brethren. If late seventeenth-century clavichord makers' first attempts at unfretted instruments consisted of simply adding more strings to a case designed only to withstand the lesser tension of a fretted instrument, it is possible that many of these clavichords slowly warped over time, becoming increasingly undesirable (if not unplayable), and were therefore discarded rather than preserved.

Whatever the case may be, beyond the issue of fretting there are other indications that clavichord design and construction had entered a period of flux around the turn of the eighteenth century, not the least of which concerned keyboard layout. Short octave keyboard layouts had long been the norm, but by the last decade of the seventeenth century larger keyboard compasses featuring a chromatic bass octave became increasingly prevalent. That this was an aspect of instrument design actively in flux during the 1690s is clearly intimated by several keyboard compendia from the time. An anonymous keyboard instruction book entitled the *Wegweiser* (Augsburg, 1689) describes both fully chromatic and short octave layouts, but notes "that because this latter variety is the most common on organs, as well as on harpsichords and clavichords, the whole of the following instruction will be oriented accordingly." In the second edition of his *Grundrichtiger Unterricht* (Ulm, 1697), Daniel Speer takes the opposite approach, stating that "we will not deal with the likes of [the short octave] here, but rather with a fully complete keyboard." Writing just a few years later, Johann Samber confirms in his *Manuductio ad Organum* (Salzburg, 1704) that keyboard layouts were, indeed, very much in flux. He advises a flexible approach, transposing up or down an octave as necessary in order to adapt to the keyboard layout at hand.

Turning now from instrument design to playing technique, this kind of flexible, adaptive approach to the keyboard very much seems to have been a hallmark of German keyboardists during the transitional turn-of-the-century period. The most significant development taking root in common keyboard technique at this time—and one of the (if not "the") most consequential technical developments in the entire history of keyboard playing—concerned the expanded role of the thumb in general and the adoption of thumb-under technique in particular. A substantial body of documentary evidence makes it clear that paired fingering served as the ubiquitous basis of playing technique from the early days of keyboard history right up until the dawn of the eighteenth century.

While paired fingering may at first seem unergonomic or outright cumbersome from our modern perspective, there is much to commend it when it comes to negotiating the intricacies of clavichord touch. This is especially true in the case of fretted clavichords, which respond well to the kind of articulate touch paired fingering begets. The frequent transference of weight from one finger to another not only leads to a more grounded, controlled tone, but also creates natural articulations between notes that can help keyboardists negotiate fretting hazards. It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the practice of paired fingering was gradually superseded by more linear, so-called 'whole-hand' techniques that make extensive use of the thumb—essentially 'modern' keyboard technique (writ large) as it is still known today.

Like any fundamental change in a field of human practice such as musical performance, where a technical skill set becomes embodied knowledge during a person's youth and generally remains deeply ingrained for life, technical innovations in keyboard playing did not supplant long-established practices overnight. Older, established keyboardists who grew up with paired fingering are unlikely to have rebuilt such a fundamental aspect of their playing technique and to have assimilated the progressive fingerings of their pupils' generation, so it was only through a slow process of attrition that paired fingering died off along with those who embodied the practice. Similarly, many instrument makers would have been content to simply continue producing the same established and familiar designs of fretted clavichord they had been building for years, rather than having to disrupt and reinvent their routine to produce unfretted instruments.

Thus, the early eighteenth century could be characterized as a transitional period in both keyboard technique and in clavichord construction that saw the concurrent use of both old and new practices. This notion is encapsulated in the following passage from Johann Mattheson's *Grosse General-Baß-Schule* (Hamburg, 1731), wherein the author seems to endorse both the older system of paired fingering alongside newer whole-hand approaches that make extensive use of the thumb: "One will find nearly as many ways of so-called application [i.e. fingering] as there are players. One person plays runs with four fingers, another with five, some just as quickly with only two."

While it is clear that early eighteenth-century developments in keyboard technique and clavichord design amounted to nothing short of a paradigm shift in both cases and while there can be little doubt that a causal connection existed between these two phenomena, it is difficult to say which of the two—the instrumental hardware or the human software—served as the catalyst for innovation in the case of other. But this is surely a moot point; the close symbiosis between clavichords and the technique of historical keyboardists, as repeatedly noted by period commentators, makes this a question of 'chicken or egg.' Ω

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