

The Boston Clavichord Society Newsletter

Number 7, Fall, 1999

An Interview with Clavichordist Joan Benson

Richard Troeger: What originally brought you to the clavichord?

Joan Benson: I first heard a clavichord at the Longy School where I was a teenage piano student. Erwin Bodky had a small clavichord that was kept there; I believe it was a Dolmetsch. Bodky gave a concert of J.S. Bach's music on the relatively unknown harpsichord and clavichord. Afterwards, everyone gathered excitedly around the harpsichord and I went alone to the clavichord, to touch the keys and listen to its tones. My studies, however, centered on the piano. In time I left for Europe to become a protégé of Edwin Fischer. It was in Europe that I became obsessed with delicate sounds. In fact, when I played piano for the Lucerne Festival, it was my use of pianissimos that gained special praise. In time, I began to imagine soft, subtle music that no piano could produce. Then I remembered the clavichord and realized that this instrument was meant for my slender, sensitive fingers. Fischer was very kind to me and was pushing me towards a pianist's career; but something kept urging me to the clavichord. Fischer loved the clavichord and played it himself, but he became upset by the thought of my pursuing this for public performance; he said "Joan, it's not a performance instrument." He considered it to be a private instrument, and of course he's fundamentally right. He tried to discourage my longing to make it my main medium of expression.

Shortly after this encounter, I heard a concert in London on a clavichord by Thomas Goff and this reaffirmed my interest in a concrete way. I found that in England the

clavichord had a certain very private following. I got to know Goff, who arranged for me to practice on one of his clavichords in the home of a friend of Winston Churchill. He also took me to see Raymond Russell, where I was overwhelmed by the live sounds of his antique keyboard instruments.

It was in Freiburg im Breisgau that I began clavichord lessons with Fritz Neumeyer. My grants for piano study did not of course extend to the clavichord, so I had to work to survive. Through my cousin, a TWA official in Frankfurt, I became head



Joan Benson

of the American Air Force nursery. I was completely unqualified, however, to care for the progeny of American service personnel. Yet I managed to last three months and in that time saved money for later study. On weekends I'd travel from Frankfurt to Freiburg to study with Neumeyer. Sometimes I brought him gifts of wine and cigarettes, which he appreciated. Since I drank little myself, I gave him all the free alcohol the air force provided. This meant that by the time a lesson began, he was sometimes quite high. He was an excellent teacher, however, and I eventually moved to Freiburg to take lessons from him for nearly two years.

RT: What kind of instrument was used for these lessons?

JB: A clavichord built around 1805, attributed to Carl Christian Schmahl. Neumeyer

recorded an LP of Haydn Sonatas on it, and the instrument is now in the Neumeyer collection at Bad Krozingen.

RT: What was the teaching like?

JB: In England I'd had some brief instruction, the main point being to put *Bebung* on every note. The first thing Neumeyer did was to eliminate this continual vibrato! He taught finger withdrawal as described by Quantz. He used the metronome to ensure tempo regularity. He was into precision: note accuracy of course, and control of the instrument generally. But he was no martinet. He had a wonderful sense of humor; we had a lot of meals together, and took long, enjoyable walks in the countryside with his beloved dog Britte.

At first he did not let me play pieces at all. Instead, I had to become a beginner again, spending months on tone production alone. Having recently come from the piano, this was the time I made the biggest adjustment. There was no chance to misapply my pianistic expertise and at first the whole process seemed quite frustrating. By the time I felt at home with this instrument, I realized that each clavichord is unique and requires a new beginning. Only in this way can one bring out its special tonal traits, make a proper balance of sounds, and control all the details.

RT: What did you practice on between lessons?

JB: In England I'd acquired a Thomas Goff clavichord, a used one built in the 1930's that I bought through the builder.

RT: So that was a bit of culture shock, going between the loosely strung Goff, with its yielding touch, and the antique Schmahl.

JB: Yes indeed. But the two years with Neumeyer really encouraged my love for the

continued on page 2

In this issue:

Lord Berners –
the last eccentric page 3

Clavichord News page 5

Upcoming Events page 6

Benson Interview, continued from page 1

clavichord. After that, in the summer of 1960, I went to Lisbon to study with Santiago Kastner.

RT: What did Kastner give you?

JB: Kastner was an unbelievably warm and generous man, who gave me his time and full attention. He introduced me to a wider scope of literature than I'd studied before and encouraged me to read early treatises in his possession. With him, I became aware, for the first time, of Scandinavian and Iberian music. He also offered a "stronger" technique than I'd been taught. He put more pressure into the keys (I don't mean vibrato) and used long-lined, dramatic focus and color. None of this is to denigrate what I had from Neumeyer, for without him I could not have learned what I did from Kastner. Of course, I couldn't play the way Kastner did, since he had large, full fingers that approached the clavichord in a different way and it was natural to him to play in a way that is different from what is natural to me. In any case, as anyone must, I mingled different elements from different teachers.

I had also imagined studying with Alfred Kreutz and hearing him play. He was revered as a highly expressive clavichordist who had stopped performing with the Second World War. I did visit his widow, who kindly shared her memories with me. It was unfortunate that I missed the opportunity to study with him, but I wanted to learn what she could tell me of his approach. I'd imagined various kinds of shadings, for instance tapering down to a vanishing pianissimo, and I discussed these points with her. When she told me yes, he had done these things, I felt at ease about experimenting with such techniques myself.

Finally, I went back to America, with the small Goff and a much larger clavichord by Jacobus Verwolf that Kastner had urged me to buy. I had wanted to buy a third instrument that resembled more an antique. It was a big Dolmetsch/Chickering [#36, 1909] that had gone through the Dolmetsch firm after the death of Dorothy Swainson, but I could not locate the money to pay for it, which was most unfortunate.

By chance, I returned home by the P & O Lines to San Francisco. When my family met me and my instrument boxes at the ship, they thought I was out of my mind. How lucky I felt to discover Stanford University, with its early music program headed

by Putnam Aldrich, close by! It was Aldrich who "discovered" me first, and immediately took me under his wing.

RT: Did you study with Aldrich?

PB: No, although I did profit from many early-music classes at Stanford. Aldrich felt I was an instinctive artist, and that his personal teaching would only hurt me. Instead, I looked directly into the music I was playing and slowly, with study, came to my own conclusions. I'd put the musical context first, but I'd always check to make sure I had the letter right. I would check with him or

Earlier, at Indiana University, my piano teacher Anis Fuleihan had pushed me out on my own. "You're not telling me enough of what to do," I complained. His response was "You know what to do — just do it!"

others at Stanford to make sure I was in accord with early treatises.

Earlier, at Indiana University, my piano teacher Anis Fuleihan had pushed me out on my own. "You're not telling me enough of what to do," I complained. His response was "You know what to do—just do it!" I remember going outside, lying on the grass and pounding the lawn. At that moment came a major breakthrough. I realized "I have my own integrity and, finally, imitation doesn't lead anywhere."

RT: Like a breakthrough in meditation.

JB: Exactly. With Fischer you always looked at the whole musical structure, but never only as an intellectual matter; it had to have an emotional unity. I studied and restudied the music I played, looking at the whole structure of each until it became alive.

As early as 1961, for example, I was scheduled to play C.P.E. Bach's Fantasia in F# Minor on the radio, Berkeley's KQED. His music was rarely performed at that time and I'd come across the fantasia by chance. I hadn't heard anyone play C.P.E. Bach: how

could one hold such loose and lengthy music together in performance? I thought to abridge it, and of course I couldn't cut it anywhere, for one section led inevitably to the next. I realized from these attempts, and the analysis they involved, the integrity of the work—which also showed me what gave it such emotive powers. The secret, I discovered, was hidden in the bass line and in the emotional improvisational continuity of the work. I never attempted to play this piece the same way twice but gave it freedom, even as the composer had suggested. On my first record, that fantasia brought me world-wide recognition and it became a favorite warhorse of mine.

Anyway, beginning with my time in the Stanford environment I found myself performing in the Bay Area and eventually across the country—concerts, radio appearances, and performances on PBS television stations.

RT: I remember, early in my high-school days, seeing you on KQED-TV in 1967.

JB: I also played on Indonesian television. There I was given an hour on the equivalent of Dick Cavett's show. The interviewer was wonderful. The publicity of this TV performance led me to be a star anywhere I went in Bali! People stopped me on the street and when I ventured into remote areas on my own, limousines appeared to take me back to town. In Bali, I was aware of an acute rhythmic quality that infected my own playing. In fact, wherever I performed in the world, I felt an interaction with the environment. Thus, although Indonesia brought out an exciting rhythm in me, when I went to nearby New Zealand, I responded to the sweet gentleness of the people in my playing.

RT: What gave the first impetus to your concert career, after the start in the Stanford environment?

JB: In 1962, Repertoire Records invited me to record. The Repertoire people were gifted and really pampered me. We had to try three different locations until we found the right spot for clavichord sound. The first was in a commercial building in San Francisco, where we worked at night. We got one piece down and then the cleaning staff arrived and the noise was such that we had to give up. In the second place we picked up a night radio station crying "Work, work for the Lord!" Finally, we re-

continued on page 4

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Lord Berners

The drawing at right, by Max Beerbohm, shows Gerald Tyrwhitt, Lord Berners, at the clavichord. Berners (1883-1950) was a musician, painter, fiction writer, memoirist, aesthete, and eccentric. Many stories were told of him – that he dyed the pigeons on his estate various hues; that he had a grand piano in the back of his Rolls-Royce. The first was true. As for the second, in fact he had in the back seat a small 4 1/2-octave clavichord, adorned with flowers and butterflies, that had been made by Arnold Dolmetsch.

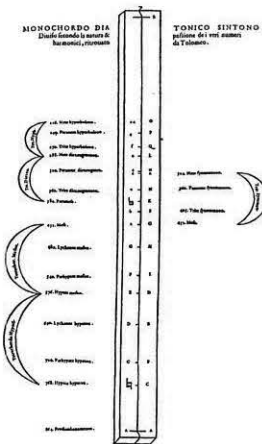
Berners was mostly self-taught as a composer, though he had advice and encouragement from Stravinsky. His first serious composition, in 1913, was a setting of “Du bist wie eine Blume,” (“You are like a flower”) which, according to Berners, was addressed not to a maiden, but to a small white pig. Later, he wrote ballet music for Diaghilev, as well as the “Fantasie Espagnole” of which a critic wrote: “It would be an exaggeration to say that the Spanish national style was invented by a Russian, Glinka, and destroyed by an Englishman, Lord Berners; for after the latter’s amazingly brilliant parody of Spanish mannerisms, it is impossible to hear most Spanish music without a certain satiric feeling breaking through.” Such compositions led to Berners being known as “the English Satie.”

There is a current revival of interest in Berners. His *Collected Tales and Fantasies* as well as two autobiographies covering his early years – *First Childhood* and *A Distant Prospect* – have just been reprinted, and Mark Amory has written a biography entitled *Lord Berners: the Last Eccentric*. A review of these by Noel Annan appears in the October 7, 1999 issue of *The New York Review of Books*.



“Lord Berners making more sweetness than violence”; drawing by Max Beerbohm, 1923

Paul Monsky



We thank the following people for their contributions and assistance during recent months:

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Benson Interview, continued from page 2

recorded in a private home in the wilds of Marin County. There was no attempt to rush me from one take to the next. Instead, I could go outside and stare at the stars or pet the dog to relax a moment. That record got distributed in Europe and received a citation in the *Saturday Review* as one of the finest records of the year; it sent my name throughout America and Europe. In the 'sixties, people of all ages flocked to hear this fragile subtle music. I was encouraged to play in large halls where it was necessary to amplify. I tried to keep this to a minimum, and I don't like it, but it often had to be done. Naturally, I looked for resonance in rooms, but I prefer playing in intimate environments.

RT: Tell me about your teaching career.

JB: I taught at Stanford from the late sixties through the seventies. I was fortunate in having some very gifted students, majoring not only in organ, harpsichord, and piano, but in guitar and voice as well. Many of these students have gone on to be noted professional musicians themselves. Finally, when the University of Oregon in Eugene began an early keyboard program, I was asked to be part of it. I taught there until the mid-eighties, and from then on I continued to give master classes throughout the world.

RT: What about your experiences with museums?

JB: I began noticing and playing museum keyboards far before it became the accustomed rage. In fact, both in Europe and the United States, many instruments had to be unpacked or dusted off so I could see them. I discovered that each clavichord, fortepiano or small organ that was truly playable taught me something. The best ones seemed alive like individuals and quite different from the current revival instruments. At any museum concert I liked to choose music especially appropriate to specific antique clavichords. There was more access to museum instruments then, because there wasn't enough interest that they had to limit people who wanted to play these instruments. The curators were pleased to have a player show such interest. In Sweden, I stayed with Count and Countess Morner on their lakeside estate, Esplunda. In the nineteenth century, my great-grandfather had been the estate manager. He had developed exquisite gardens

and filled them with rare flowers and exotic fruits. Since the Morners were patrons of music and the Swedish clavichord was common in the early nineteenth century, surely my ancestors heard it played. Thus the closeness I felt to the clavichord was almost a response to my own Scandinavian heritage. One can't prove or explain this response, but I seemed to be returning and responding to my roots.

In Paris, the Comtesse de Chambure arranged a number of engagements for me. She was very kind to me and at various places in Europe she opened venues for me



to play. I remember filled houses in other main cities of Europe, in Denmark for example, in historical buildings that are no longer used for such events. So much opened up for me with little effort on my part. I was allowed to remain shyly sensitive, responsive, and, in a sense, innocent and protected. This does not seem to happen much to an artist in today's aggressive world. The cultural climate now is far less nurturing to an artist than in former times, and I was lucky to catch the end of that era.

I have spent most of my life centered on music, often ignoring my own personal being. Several years ago I came to a point of feeling that the clavichord was pulling me too narrowly inward, that I was beginning to repeat effects that I no longer felt to get the same audience reactions. So I took a turn toward Tibetan Buddhism in order to grow as a whole person and widen my horizons of understanding. This is what I have explored in the last five years. What I have found is a wider, more open way of looking at things. I learned to get past "being the emotion" that I was portraying as a musician. This is not only a way to deal with getting older, but to embrace age instead of rejecting it. For by seeing every-

thing as a fresh learning experience, I could look at life with the freshness of youth. After my recital at Brandeis on Sunday, I'm going on a month's retreat to Gampo Abbey in northern Nova Scotia. I have already been on several month-long retreats in another monastery on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia. Both are located in beautiful settings where one can look down over water and walk in woods where wild animals wander. This outer spaciousness encourages one to breathe of life more deeply.

I have also turned to writing, because I've always been interested in it, and it's a new discipline.

RT: And what are you writing?

JB: A book about the family of Mendelssohn. This started with a grant to study Fanny Mendelssohn, but I found that that was already being done, so I began on the whole family and on Mendelssohn's life, too—and he did NOT have an altogether easy life. His music, whether you like it or dislike it, was not "facile" because he had an easy time of it. Certainly, the family's money and position cushioned some things, but there were difficulties of all sorts and he worked almost ceaselessly. He wore himself out.

RT: With all your experience of clavichords, what were and are you looking for in these instruments?

JB: This always depends on what different repertoires require. In general, I don't like neutral-sounding clavichords with no variety of color. I particularly like to play in museums where I can use several antique instruments for different styles of music. At the same time, I found that there is no substitute for growing to really know a good instrument, so one feels at ease with its idiosyncracies and can use them naturally to best advantage.

In my career, outside of museum instruments, I was limited to what was available and transportable, particularly in the case of larger "all-purpose" clavichords. I tried to do the best I could under the circumstances, while encouraging builders to study closely the clavichords of earlier centuries. By now, great strides have been made in twentieth-century clavichord building.

Each period of time has its own outlook on the clavichord. A tendency that bothers me today, in all life, is the tendency

toward boldness rather than tenderness. This is evidenced in the clavichord as well as in the modern piano. In both cases, there is a tendency toward a hard action and too much uniformity—a constant, rather inflexible tone—from bass to treble. By a hard action, I mean one which sacrifices subtle details for a louder sound involving greater string tension. This is not to say that a hard action is necessarily inflexible, but it's rare that it is flexible. The too-uniform timbre makes it difficult to individualize each sound and delicately shade or mold the lines. These I see as dangers in contemporary building—which has of course come a long way.

We have to keep in mind that the clavichord was essentially a personal instrument, meant for intimacy rather than display. So I'm a little worried if people place it along with the organ, harpsichord, and fortepiano, and think of it mainly in terms of the stage. As a player, although I often used large forums, I always tried to preserve the intimate aspect, and I don't want to see this lost. Therefore, I encourage players to think of it as their personal instrument even in public performance. Rather than throwing the sound out to the audience, one can gently lure the audience toward the sound. Thus I encourage clavichord players to remember this delicate aspect, even in public performance. You have to draw the audience in. You can't push the sound out.

RT: Thank you for sharing your views with us.

JB: I have enjoyed it.



NEWS

Igor Kipnis played a concert, sponsored by the BCS, on September 24. The concert, held at Brandeis University, featured music by Froberger, Pachelbel, Kuhnau, Mozart, Scarlatti, and C.P.E. and J.S. Bach. Earlier in the day, Mr. Kipnis talked and played on Richard Knisley's program on WGBH radio.

Adam Rahbee, clerk of our Board of Directors, is leaving the Board in order to devote as much time as possible to his graduate studies. Adam has been accepted in the Master of Science in Transportation program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he will be focusing on urban public transportation and doing research on rapid transit operations. (It is rumored he may help improve the Red Line in Boston!) Adam says he will not give up playing the clavichord. The BCS regrets his departure and hopes he will rejoin the Board at some future time. **Paulette Grunden** will take his place as clerk.

Carol lei Breckenridge writes that she played a clavichord program of J.S. Bach, W.F. Bach, and C.P.E. Bach at the Shrine of Music Museum in South Dakota on September 25. This was the premiere concert on a newly acquired Swedish fretted clavichord.

Judith Conrad writes that she built a keyed monochord this summer based on plans drawn up by **Nellie van Ree Bernard**, co-editor of *Clavichord International* in the Netherlands. She calls it "a hypothetical reconstruction of the most primitive clavichord." It has 11 diatonic keys, b to e", plus a b-flat near the top. There are two strings, one struck by the tangents and the other plucked to give a drone. Nelly performs medieval western and Sephardic music on it. The construction was simple. It is amazingly loud, an interesting fact given all those angels in early paintings and carvings playing little clavichords in large ensembles.

She also writes that she gave a concert on her large unfretted clavichord on July 18 entitled "Music of the Classical Era in Central Europe." It included Haydn dances and a Beethoven Sonata (opus 14 no.1), and a wonderful Fantasia by Antonin Reicha of Prague which was definitely written for a large clavichord. It also included four songs of Frederic Chopin, early works whose accompaniments fit nicely on the

clavichord, and two Mazurkas of Glinka, all of which were clearly written for informal at-home performance. Possibly the biggest hit of all was a set of simple keyboard arrangements of popular songs and dances from a region in northern Croatia, "Lieder von einem Mur-Insel," written by a Serbian named Marko Tajcevic, who was born in 1900. The concert was given in a rather small house, now a museum known as the Lafayette-Durfee House, built in 1750 near the Fall River waterfront. She used the kitchen as her performance venue, since it is the largest room in the house and the most comfortable. It has a huge fireplace and the large clavichord sits right in front of it, but could actually fit inside. An audience of about forty can be accommodated, with everybody a few feet from the instrument.

Gary Blaise writes that two travel clavichords are currently nearing completion in his workshop. Based on a clavichord by Hubert from 1776 (Boalch #2), the instrument is basically a miniature (presumably designed for travel) of his larger and often-copied double-fretted models, but with a keyboard of normal stichmass (octave width). Although it is only 37" long, it has a double-fretted range of 54 notes, C - f" pitched a major third high. It weighs only 15 pounds and can be easily checked as baggage when properly protected.

Another interesting and on-going project in his shop involves experiments to explore how the tonal qualities of wood might be improved without aging. (As of yet, he has not used artificially aged woods in his instruments.) In these experiments, wood samples are recorded for their pitch and rate of decay, then subjected to varied conditions of: leaching, to remove internal damping materials; oxidation, to harden internal damping materials; and fossilization, to exchange internal damping materials for fiber-stiffening materials.

Except for oxidation, he tries to limit processes and substances to those which would have been possible in the baroque era. The samples are re-recorded after treatment and analyzed for their potential. He loves this sort of alchemy, if for no other reason than the appreciation it imparts for the complexities of natural aging and the remarkable intuition of past builders.

In a more traditional vein, plans are under way for his next clavichord which

continued on page 6

News, continued from page 5

will be made almost entirely out of wood from an old piano of no particular value owned by the client. When the instrument is finished in March of next year, it will already be 140 years old! The instrument will be after one of the unfretted Huberts. If the iron-scaled model in Leipzig (Leipzig #24, Boalch #3) is chosen, he may even be able make use of the keyboard from the old piano as well, "like the American Indians using every part of the slain buffalo!"

Also, finishing touches have been put on a clavichord article by Blaise which should soon appear simultaneously in *Harpsichord & Fortepiano* and the newsletter of the American Organ Academy. "Pick Up Your Fingers, Prick Up Your Ears" explores the history of the clavichord as a practice instrument. According to Blaise, "the usual suspects are rounded up once again and their embers stirred one more time, but in a slightly unorthodox manner." This introductory-level article and other information can be found on his web site. (A link to it can be found in the BCS site.)

Early Keyboard Journal, the annual scholarly organ of the Southeastern Historical Keyboard Society and the Midwestern Historical Keyboard Society, is seeking an editor to assume responsibilities early in 2000, for publication of volume 19 of the Journal in the spring of 2001. The editor will be appointed for a three-year term by the boards of both Societies. Terms are renewable.

Qualifications:

1. Proven and superior ability to edit English prose in a manner commensurate with the goals of the Journal: publication of new information relating to early keyboard instruments and their literature up to ca. 1850, including articles and reviews on repertoires, performance practices, organology, sources, individual composers, and reception histories.
2. Broad knowledge of the literature in the field of early keyboard music as well as general music history.
3. Familiarity with the Chicago Manual of Style.
4. Familiarity with foreign languages, particularly German, Italian, French, and Latin.
5. Proven ability to work with authors in an effective and diplomatic manner.
6. Ability to maintain a schedule for self, contributing staff, and authors.

Description of the Position:

1. Take overall responsibility for the production of the Journal, including coordinating the contributions of authors, the reviews editor, the advertising manager, the production manager, and the Journal's printer.
2. Maintain an appropriate editorial board consisting of members of both Societies.
3. Solicit articles, evaluate submissions, route them to appropriate readers, make the final selection, and edit the articles for publication.
4. Prepare an annual financial statement for the SEHKS Executive Board.

Application procedure:

Interested candidates should submit a resume to Edward L. Kottick, chair, EKJ Editor Search Committee, 502 Larch Lane, Iowa City, IA. 52245. Phone, 319-337-3770; fax, 319-337-4595; e-mail, edward-kottick@uiowa.edu.

The Committee would like assurance that candidates are capable editors, and will accept recommendations and strong evidence of writing and editing skills.

The selection process will begin immediately and will continue until an editor is chosen.

Candidates need not currently be members of either society, but will be expected to join if selected for the position.

Upcoming events

The Clavichord and the Pianist

On January 24, 2000, Peter Sykes and Richard Troeger will give a presentation entitled "The clavichord and the pianist" at a meeting of the New England Piano Teachers' Association. The meeting will be held at The First Parish Church of Watertown, 35 Church St, Watertown, at 9:30 AM. The event is free for members of NEPTA; others are welcome to attend (admission \$5).

Spring Concert and Clavichord Day

In early May, the BCS will sponsor a clavichord concert by Steve Barrell. In conjunction with this event there are plans for a clavichord day with lectures and an exhibition of clavichords.

Peter Sykes and Richard Troeger will discuss the role of the clavichord in the history of keyboard instruments at New England Conservatory on Tuesday, December 7, at 8:00 PM. For further information call 617-661-0570.

For sale: Beautiful virginal after Celestini made by Colin Booth. For further information, contact Beverly Woodward at 781-891-0814.

The Boston Clavichord Society

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