

The Boston Clavichord Society

Newsletter

Number 9, Winter, 2000

Clavichord Weekend at Brandeis

The Boston Clavichord Society organized a weekend of clavichord activities May 12-13, generously hosted by Brandeis University in Waltham.

The first event was an evening recital in the Harlan Chapel by Richard Troeger, stepping in to substitute for scheduled artist Steven Barrell, who was unable to perform for health reasons. (Mr. Barrell's concert took place October 8th.) Dr. Troeger offered a program of music from early and late in the eighteenth century. A brief Praeludium in G Major by Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer together with J.S. Bach's Adagio in G ushered in Bach's Toccata in G Major, a work rarely performed on the clavichord. Also heard was Fischer's Passacaglia in D Minor. A bridge to compositions written later in the century was provided by a light little menuet by Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach, followed by Joseph Haydn's Sonata in D Major (Hob. XVI:24). After an intermission, three dramatic works were heard: the free Fantasia in F-sharp Minor by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach; a Fantasia in D Minor by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach; and the Sonata in F-sharp Minor by Friedrich Wilhelm Rust. Troeger discussed the music with the audience before each composition was heard. He remarked that the Rust sonata is equally at home on fortepiano and clavichord, and that it includes many elements suggestive of Beethoven's music. The clavichord was by Dolmetsch-Chickering, built in 1908, based on a clavichord by Hoffmann from 1784.

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Keyboard Lessons with Arnold Dolmetsch

The impulses that drew me towards 'early music' manifested themselves already at an early age, when I was learning the piano as was customary in the early '20s. I was fortunate in my piano teacher, Marguerite Stilwell-Ross — an American, formerly a pupil of Pachman.

Of course I was taught music by Bach, Schumann and Brahms, Beethoven, etc., but I was always asking her for 'something older, please'. At that time she would have had some difficulty in getting what I wanted, but she did find Rameau's 'La Poule' (bereft of many ornaments) which I greatly enjoyed as I am fond of hens! At that time however, I had hardly heard of the harpsichord, and of the viols not at all; it was by a providential accident that I discovered my destined medium for music-making. My elder brother was a noted rock-climber, and among those whom he initiated in this somewhat perilous art was Marco Pallis who, as it happened, had already taken up the cause of early music as expounded by Arnold

Dolmetsch. Under Marco's sympathetic influence my own leanings in that direction received fresh impetus; soon I was learning the viol and taking part in my first consorts. Contact with Mr Dolmetsch soon followed, with the result that some time later, with the forming of the 'Dolmetsch Foundation'



Arnold Dolmetsch at Chickering's, Boston, circa 1908

for the purpose of promoting the cause, I was offered a scholarship which took me to Haslemere as a full-time student at the age of 18.

My first lessons with the Master were a revelation to me and music took on a new dimension in the light of his remarkable insight. He was about 72 years old when I became his pupil and for many years I was in close touch with him and his family and was able to study keyboard and viol with them.

The first pieces I learnt were Giles Farnaby's 'Dream' and 'Rest' from the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. I was astonished that seemingly 'easy' pieces were in reality profound, and contained in their tiny compass all the essentials required for

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Notice for Builders

The first edition of the list of North American Clavichord Builders needs updating. If you are already on the list and want your listing changed, please notify the BCS and specify the changes we should make. If you want to be added to the list, please provide your name, address, telephone number, type or types of clavichord you build, e-mail address (optional) and web site (optional). This information should be sent to the BCS at PO Box 515, Waltham, MA 02454 to arrive no later than January 25, 2001.

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A Conversation with Steven Barrell

What first drew you to the clavichord, and what was your first exposure to the instrument?

In 1981, while studying organ in Stockholm, I encountered at auction a huge gray table-like box with a keyboard on one side. The keyboard seemed to function, but the tone was so astoundingly soft that I concluded this poor old box of strings, labeled "klavikord," was defective. Before the auction, however, I learned that the clavichord is indeed very soft, but that it was also Bach's preferred instrument and the instrument on which organ technique in earlier times was based. I had to have it! I thereafter played a little CPE Bach and lots of Byrd and Gibbons on this old Lindholm clavichord. In 1983, while I was studying organ in Amsterdam, Hans van Nieuwkoop urged me to take the clavichord more seriously, adding that mine was probably the only privately-owned period clavichord in The Netherlands. Since I thought my little bit of luck might generate increased interest, I sought and found performances in churches, homes and museums, which is how I met Koen Vermeij. We discussed starting a group for a handful of clavichord enthusiasts, which became the Dutch Clavichord Society.

Who have been your teachers? Your major influences?

My first lesson was with Inger Grudin-Brandt, perhaps a year after I bought the Lindholm. She began my lesson by telling me that "playing the clavichord is like standing naked on the town square," a statement I will never dispute. I wanted to play CPE Bach, but she apparently felt I had much to learn. She set me up on a fretted clavichord, not her Lindholm, and had me play just the right hand of a single measure from the Anna Magdalena Bach Klavierbuch for half an hour, while she ironed and received telephone calls. Despite the apparent lack of attention, I understood what she was getting at. But the amount of control needed for the cantabile expression of two independent voices in one hand was a totally new concept and very difficult technique. I fiddled while she burned. When living in Amsterdam, I set

out to recover the authentic clavichord technique from primary sources, and spent a good deal of time and a great deal of money traveling to collections to assemble an archive of source material. These have proven very useful for gaining an overall picture of the clavichord's importance in 18th century Europe.

In the course of amassing this clavichord-based knowledge during the 1980s, I made eight or nine visits to Lisbon to work with Macario Santiago Kastner. Our first meeting was scheduled only for me to gain permission to view the Iberian clavichords housed at the National Museum



Steven Barrell. Photo courtesy Globe Recordings

over which he had dominion. Upon entering his home, I found myself face-to-face with two clavichord celebrities, for Bernard Brauchli was there as well. We hit it off, and our friendship flourished, a very easy thing with such a kind and generous person as Macario was. My lessons with him lasted hours, we discussed everything under the sun, and I learned a great deal about erudition. On one trip, I schlepped my fretted "Weiss" (Carl Fudge kit) clavichord all the way from Amsterdam, only to discover that Macario "loathed" old fingerings, frettedness and meantone tuning! Not to rile him, I concentrated on 18th century Iberian, *Empfindsame* and Classic period repertory, which I played on his triple-strung Verwolf clavichord. He was a marvelous coach, and I have many fond memories of him. I hope that those who knew him will one day gather to compile reminiscences of him, as well as tales told of other equally eminent musicians, if only for posterity.

My greatest teachers, however, have

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Submissions: This Newsletter is a forum for its members. We welcome articles, letters, questions and other contributions. Copy can be submitted by mail, e-mail or diskette to the Editor. Please contact him about preferred format before making a submission. The copy deadlines are February 15 and September 1.

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News

Lyrichord Discs has just issued Volume 3 of **Richard Troeger's** series, *BACH ON CLAVICHORD*. This CD (LEMS 8047) presents the Inventions, Sinfonias and Little Preludes. (Vol. 1 offers the 6 Partitas, Vol. 2 the Toccatas.) The Inventions and 12 Little Preludes are played on a fretted clavichord by **Ron Haas**, modeled on German originals of ca. 1700; the Sinfonias and 6 Little Preludes are performed on an unfretted clavichord, also by Ron Haas, based on an instrument by J.H. Silbermann. This recording, like the others in the series, is available in record stores or directly from Lyrichord Discs, 141 Perry St., New York, NY 10014; www.lyrichord.com.

•Copies of the pamphlets published by the BCS earlier this year are available without charge. The titles are: 1. *What is a Clavichord?* 2. *Selecting a Clavichord* 3. *What Repertory is Suited to the Clavichord?* 4. *Types of Historical Clavichords* 5. *Directory of North American Clavichord Builders*.

•The papers presented at the **Fourth International Clavichord Symposium**, held in Magnano, Italy in 1999, have now been published. *De Clavicordio IV* can be ordered from the Harpsichord Clearing House, 9 Chestnut St., Rehoboth, MA 02769 for \$55 plus \$10 per order for postage and handling. Topics include C.P.E. Bach, the clavichord on the Iberian peninsula, and the clavichord together with other instruments. The volume is illustrated with drawings and photographs.

•The BCS invited local supporters and their guests to a lecture, recital and reception on November 12, 2000. The event was held at a beautiful home owned by friends of **Peter Sykes**. Professor **Owen Jander** gave a talk, illustrated with slides, on "The Clavichord as Metaphor in 18th Century Portraiture." Peter then played pieces by J.S. Bach and C.P.E. Bach on two clavichords, a fretted instrument built by **Clifford Boehmer** and an unfretted Dolmetsch-Chickering. The afternoon was concluded with a reception and refreshments.

•**Carol lei Breckenridge** presented a recital of music by C.P.E. Bach on October 30, 2000, in Ames, Iowa.

•**Margaret Irwin-Brandon** played a clavichord house concert on December 1, 2000, in South Hadley, MA to benefit the Arcadia Players baroque orchestra.

The Eye of the Historical Needle

Surely one point of consensus among aficionados of early keyboard instruments can be that there is no difference in acoustical response between keyboard instruments, otherwise the same, whose tuning pins include or exclude holes to retain the wire.

For years now, the ownership of a clavichord or harpsichord with holes in the tuning pins has been something one almost had to live down.

"Apart from the pins, it's an exact copy of...." Ease of string replacement was an embarrassment. If you allowed tuning pin holes, the trend suggested, you might next be refinishing that seventeenth-century cabinet in polyurethane.

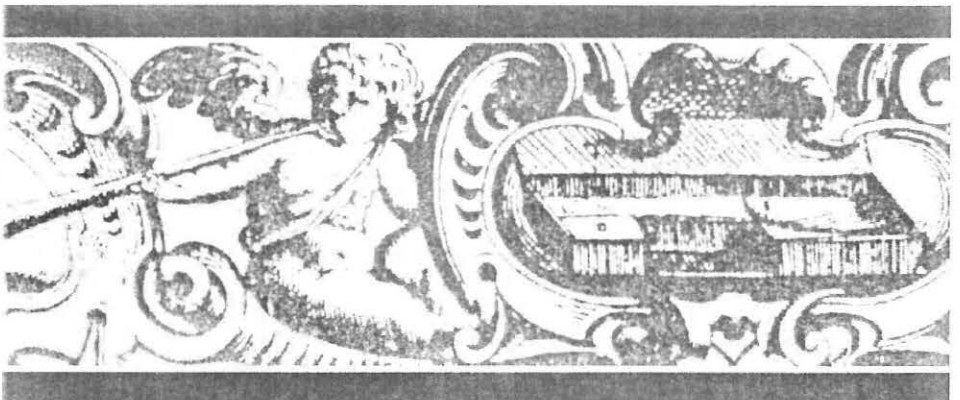
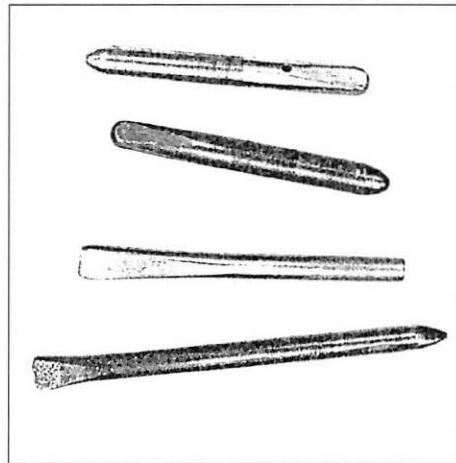
Some of us, of course, have been unregenerate all along. Why it should be necessary to go through a complicated series of maneuvers, just to change a string, was more than I could ever understand, although I finally developed some proficiency. I will remember trying the bare-hands approach when I coiled the wire around the pin and over itself, tightening it if it would tighten and watching it slide into nothingness if I was out of practice. On two or three occasions, if bare hands failed, I got out my wooden spool and tried inserting the pin and wire together. This operation I always performed with a sense of doom best suited to Greek tragedy—where, similarly, the outcome is already known to the spectator.

I usually returned to the unhampered approach: at least, with hands unaided, I could fail several times in the time required by a single failure with the spool. Of the wire, the pin, and myself, the pin always emerged from these sessions as the calmest of the three, imperturbable in its shiny, uncaring, smooth-sided perfection. (Whereas both the wire and I looked like nothing much.) The story of the unattainable princess on the glass hill often came back to me on such occasions.

In my youth, I once saw a harpsichord pin (zither pin) whose hole had been accidentally omitted. I never thought, at the time, that I should have to deal with so misbegotten an object on principle (someone else's principle). Finally, when two dozen strings (from a bad batch of wire) broke on a new instrument (from a very fine builder), I decided I'd had enough. Pausing merely to set up a jig in a drillpress, I added to every one of those tuning pins a small hole. And if anyone can hear the difference between "before" and "after," it would only be my dog. And I don't have a dog.

Flat-headed pins? Why not? Tapered pins? Certainly. They are easier on the wristplank and for tension adjustment. But don't tell me that a hole in the pin will adversely affect either tone or mechanics. It won't.

Richard Troeger



A Conversation, continued from P.2

been and continue to be instruments. Once a player acquires an ear for a clear and beautiful sound, the touch on any instrument will follow, always subconsciously guided by the ear. With the basic clavichord touch well established (NB: I think that different players' basic touch can differ, and that this becomes part of a musical personality), it's time for experimentation, for finding other expressive techniques and colors. Instruments are the most candid teachers, telling you immediately when you are playing them well. And you don't even have to stop playing to listen to them.

What kinds of clavichords do you particularly like?

Apart from having all its strings, and tangents that strike only the correct strings, I have no preferences. Every clavichord I've played has had qualities that I can use to express some sort of music satisfactorily. Repertories don't develop out of thin air, and the key to finding satisfaction in any instrument is to match repertory and instrument. I've played triple and quadruple strung clavichords, whose simplicity and directness I found charming. Granted, I have encountered clavichords, albeit rarely, that were suitable candidates for firewood for cooking fish, and I once played a concert on the worst clavichord I have ever encountered. But even this instrument had something to teach me.

What kind of repertory do you like to play, and what do you find audiences most receptive to?

Music is about communication. Music scores are a form of encoding that contains or implies some emotion. The musician's task is to recognize what particular emotion(s) the composer encoded into the score, and to recreate it during performance. In this respect, a musician is much like an actor, chameleon or octopus, capable of changing colors instantly. In order to do this, the player must be able to feel every emotion. Then, to transmit this to the awaiting listener, the player must be entirely free to use the music as the vehicle for expressing the emotion of that moment, without distraction from things technical. Think how unconvincing an actor can be when only concerned with remembering his next line.

I find it possible to express emotion in

just about every piece, including pure counterpoint. Once I am moved every time I play the piece, I find it easier to play it communicatively.

I'm convinced that listeners are subconsciously prepared to be moved, though they often settle for being amused by a jolly or familiar tune. Once I feel I have created a connection to the audience, I expand upon the expression according to the context. Admittedly, this is much easier to do when one doesn't feel like one is "naked in the town square." And under the best of circumstances, this is rare, which is undoubtedly the reason that few who

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play for their own amusement, including professional musicians, will do so publicly. I only play pieces that I feel. I once told Menno van Delft, a few weeks before his Hamburg CPE Bach competition victory, not to practice methodically every day at the same time, but to play only when jubilant, depressed, annoyed, despondent, or grateful. Pieces in which you feel emotion will be the pieces you'll play best of all.

How do you find the clavichord to relate to your playing of other keyboard instruments?

It begins with having access to the best clavichord you can find. Developing an ear for a good sound — one with clarity and beauty — is essential. This absolutely necessary skill is more easily developed on the clavichord than on any other keyboard instrument. Next comes the ability to draw instantaneously from one's palette of color. This results in more expressive playing on any instrument, regardless of how inferior the instrument or imperceptible the effect

may actually be. Having a chance to test the instrument beforehand is always good, because producing every desired effect from any instrument placed before you is quite a difficult matter, particularly if the instrument has the personality of a brick. For this reason, I prefer to play on my own or other familiar instruments.

Tell us about your recording experiences.

Shortly after my CPE Bach performance at the 1988 Holland Festival, Klaas Posthuma offered me five recordings on his Globe label. Only two were realized, since I left for graduate studies in the US in 1990. Because of the clavichord's small tone, recording can seem problematic. Older recordings made with a microphone practically inside the instrument are in my opinion musically unsatisfying, even when played at low volume. Klaas wanted to use the latest technology to make an acoustic recording, including the ambiance of the room. To suppress my own extramusical noises, I placed masking tape across my nostrils, which forced me to breathe more quietly through my mouth. This made me fairly self-conscious; although my lower lip did fall, no effervescence distilled from my countenance. I had also removed my shoes (a noise preventive measure, once employed for a prominent performer, whose tendency to stamp his feet at dramatic moments led to placing pillows under them during a clavichord recording session). Klaas' incomparable job of capturing the Lindholm clavichord was justifiably recognized within his industry. I regret never having completed the three remaining recordings, for which I still have some very interesting plans.

What could you envision as the clavichord's role in America?

This is a really challenging question, as it tests my ever wanting gift for prophecy. Were my predictive track record better, I'd be there (at the racetrack) instead of playing the clavichord.

During the Q&A portion of a presentation at the Aaron Copland School of Music in New York, the department chair pointed out that the clavichord's small volume renders the instrument unsuitable for concertizing and, consequently, eliminates it as a realistic music career choice. I wish I could have mustered a modicum of vehemence at the time. With

adequate preparation, I could at least have done a better job of responding. Although I have performed for as many as 250 persons, I still wonder if they were simply charmed by the novelty of the clavichord's timbre, and how much of the music went lost to them. The clavichord is best enjoyed in an intimate environment, and after dark, for reasons I cannot easily determine. But this may change.

The pace of our modern life is tragic. Through lust for bigger and better, we have lost the ability to notice, much less delight in, subtleties. Each spring, I happen upon the most charming little patch of wild flowers, none more than an eighth of an inch across. Some are faint yellow and orchid-like, some resemble pansies, and others remind me of wild forget-me-nots I encountered in Sweden. I am powerless to resist kneeling on soil to get a closer look. I think the clavichord experience is nearly identical; it's there for those who are open to take the time and do the work, and this miniature world is really an entire universe.

I find it highly unlikely that our stodgy traditional music conservatories, with their staunchly ingrained 8-hour practice regimens on modern instruments, will ever produce clavichord players. But the trend for players of one or two early keyboard instruments to become 'complete clavierists' is encouraging. With mounting acceptance of the clavichord's historical position in the standard repertoire, I think the clavichord will become as familiar as the harpsichord is today, and this in our lifetime.

The enormous freedom offered by this ultra-expressive solo instrument suggests other possibilities.

I can envision the clavichord in a potentially limitless role, amplified for popular and contemporary music. Oscar Peterson's "Porgy and Bess" recording with guitarist Joe Pass, and Keith Jarrett's "Book of Ways" demonstrate this in its earliest phase. I maintain that Lurch did much for the harpsichord's revival and current popularity, and I think the standard clavichord repertoire could be discovered and performed, hopefully unamplified, as a consequence of the instrument's popularity in other genres, should this occur.

I regret that stylistically correct and convincing improvisation in Early Music has not yet been realized. Recordings, static by nature, dominate the focus of our

industry, and accurate readings of scores are much preferred over highly personal renditions. Marketable recordings that include improvisation are usually limited to historic live performances by well-established artists. As with US postage stamps, death seems to improve one's candidacy. For the quick, the hope for professional acknowledgement through recordings does not encourage the pursuit of hard-won improvisation skills. Where spontaneous invention is viewed as a liability, repertoires such as ours, that once thrived on improvisation, will wallow in the doldrums. Should clavierists put forth the

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tremendous effort that improvisation entails, I can envision an escalation of attendance at live clavichord performances, even if only supported by devotees yearning to experience different performers' flair for improvisation. The repertoire demands no less than this.

I'm a jazz fan, and it's this element of improvisation and ownership that makes this music come alive. The same holds true for the historic clavichord repertoire. Limitations to the size of clavichord audiences as dictated by each clavichord's volume and other prevailing conditions, should continue. This needn't be considered a liability; as with jazz clubs and other similarly intimate venues, multiple performances at the same locale can take place. Quit yer bellyachin'. It's up to clavichordists to accept the terms and take the risks. And clavichord players already know lots about taking risks.

Concert by Steve Barrell

On Sunday, October 8th, the BCS hosted clavichordist Steve Barrell in a recital held in the Rapaport Treasure Room of the Goldfarb Library at Brandeis University. Mr. Barrell is well known in the clavichord world for his appearances in Europe and America, for several articles on keyboard performance practices, and for his recordings on the Globe label of the complete polonaises of W.F. Bach and a recital of Haydn sonatas.

The first half of the program presented a fantasia by C.P.E. Bach (No. 2 from the fifth "Kenner und Liebhaber" collection), three polonaises by W.F. Bach, and a sonata by J.G. Muethel, the last-named work sending the player's hands flying extravagantly all across the keyboard, a challenge met with élan by Mr. Barrell. (This sort of writing is of course more "dangerous" on the clavichord's unforgiving action than on any other kind of keyboard.) After an interval, works by J. Wikmanson (1753-1800) were heard. The first of these consisted of four "Fragmenter" for the composer's daughter, delicate miniatures that develop their themes with grace and humor. Mr. Barrell played these with warmth and evident affection. He concluded with Wikmanson's "Hoenshuset" of 1784, a work in the great tradition of music evoking the barnyard, replete with imitations of clucking hens, roosters, cheeping baby chicks, and so forth.

Mr. Barrell introduced the various compositions in an engaging manner, and spoke also about the instrument, his own Lindholm clavichord which was built in 1785. As he remarked, the Wikmanson would have been heard on precisely this kind of instrument. To my knowledge, the Lindholm is the first antique clavichord to be used in a BCS recital. Its clear, elegantly plain tone projected well in the Treasure Room and reminded me of Ralph Kirkpatrick's phrase concerning "the rich simplicity" of the original instruments.

Richard Troeger

Upcoming events

The BCS will present **Pekka Vapaavuori** of Finland in a recital at Brandeis University on Sunday, March 11, 2001 at 2:30PM. The BCS is also offering a full day's program of lectures and performances as part of the next Boston Early Music Festival. (Details will appear in our next newsletter.) This program will take place on Thursday, June 14, 2001, 10:30AM-4:30PM, in Remis Auditorium at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.

The Fifth International Clavichord Symposium will take place in Magnano, Italy, September 5-8, 2001. Proposals for papers are now being accepted with a preference for subjects related to (1) Scandinavia: historical clavichords and musical repertoire, matching instruments to repertoire (2) the clavichord as an educational tool. The forum for builders will be on the theme: Complex systems of structures and acoustics and the musical consequences, taking into account structure, sound bridge acoustics, string scaling and striking point. Proposals should be

addressed to the ICCS planning committee no later than January 15, 2001. Proposals for performances should include a program of twenty minutes of music.



Proposals for exhibition of instruments should include all pertinent information on the copy or original to be displayed. Contact the International Centre for Clavichord Studies (Bernard Brauchli and Christopher Hogwood, directors), Via Roma 43, I-13887 Magnano (BI), Italy. Tel/fax: 39 15 67 92 60; e-mail: bbrauchli@worldcom.ch.

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