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THE HARPSICHORD IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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B. S., Kansas State University, 1969

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF MUSIC

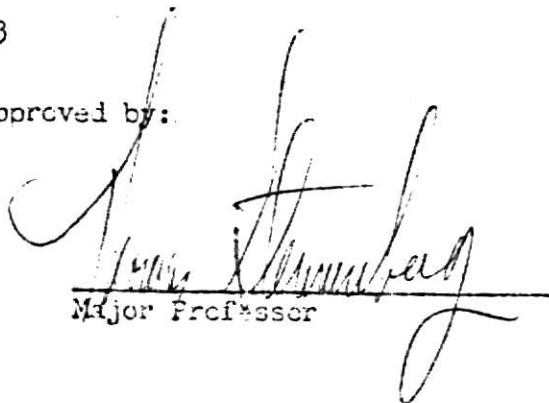
Department of Music

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1973

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INTRODUCTION

The harpsichord was in common use by the year 1500, and for almost three hundred years it reigned as one of the most important solo and ensemble instruments of European music. It had sufficient volume to blend with the voice and other instruments. Later developments which resulted in a greater range in available dynamics included more sets of strings to be played by the same keyboard. A second keyboard was added to facilitate the rapid change of tonal resources as demanded by the contrapuntal music of the time.¹ The classic harpsichord of Couperin was a two-manual instrument with two eight-foot sets of strings, one four-foot set, three sets of jacks, and a coupler.²

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the harpsichord was regarded as indispensable to all instrumental ensembles. The harpsichordist was also customarily the leader of the ensemble. His place was at the keyboard, and from there he signaled his directions in collaboration with the first violinist. The practice of conducting an orchestra from the keyboard rather than from a podium persisted well into the nineteenth century.³

¹Wallace Zuckermann, The Modern Harpsichord (New York: October House, Inc., 1969), p. 11.

²Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, IV (February, March, April, 1971), p. 16.

³Arthur Loesser, Men, Women, and Pianos (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), pp. 104-105.

During all this time, the harpsichord continued to gain in tonal resources, until in the end, the problem of gradual variation in dynamics was at last answered after a fashion by the application of the Venetian swell shutter late in the Eighteenth Century.⁴

The piano also underwent much development and improvement after 1709. By the 1760's, its use in public performances gradually began to influence customers into buying pianos. The harpsichord, clavichord, and piano co-existed on nearly equal terms by 1770. By the mid-eighties, the piano was the most prevalent keyboard instrument.⁵ Harpsichord construction declined and by 1800 it had almost ceased. Harpsichords from the Paris Conservatory were broken up and used for firewood during the cold winter of 1816.⁶

The piano was better suited than the harpsichord for the great volume and range of dynamic expression which was sought in the Romantic period.

From Haydn to Wagner, composers explored the possibilities of homophony...and modulations from key to key until with Wagner the manipulations of chords and tonality could go no further. This "romantic" music, with its vertical chords and thick textures, degenerates into mere noise when played on a harpsichord. The initial pluck of the string,...the rattle of the plectrum against the string before the damper can act, the rapid decay of the harpsichord tone, the fixed dynamics, the rigid brightness--all these "deficiencies" of the harpsichord in terms of the music that was being written and played in the nineteenth century were eliminated by the piano.⁷

The last years of the nineteenth century witnessed a gradual renewal of interest in the harpsichord. This report is a survey of the place of the

⁴Zuckermann, loc. cit.

⁵Loesseur, op. cit. pp. 107, 111.

⁶Zuckermann, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

⁷Ibid., pp. 20-21.

harpsichord in the present century. The first chapter is concerned with how and why this revival came into existence, and who started it, and where. Chapter II is a discussion of modern concepts of harpsichord construction. Two basic conflicting trends--those of the "modernist" and the "antiquarianist"--are described. The accomplishments of some outstanding twentieth century harpsichordists and some of their opinions concerning performing, teaching, and musical interpretation, are presented in Chapter III. Chapter IV is concerned with some aspects of composing for the harpsichord in the twentieth century.