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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

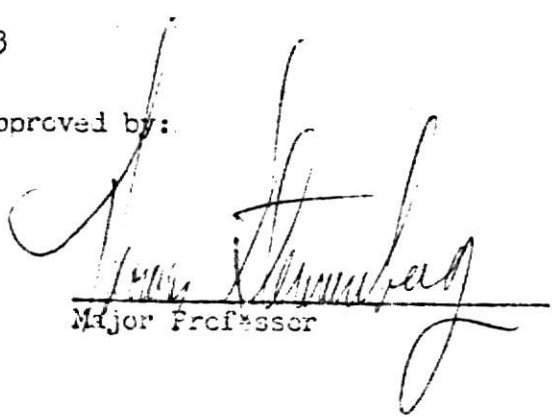
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KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

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.

CHAPTER I

THE HARPSICHORD REVIVAL

One of the first mentions of the reinstatement of the harpsichord was an article entitled "The Harpsichord is Coming Back," which appeared in Zeitschrift fur Instrumentenbau on March 1, 1888. It is a review of a harpsichord concert which took place in Paris in February, and it indicates that musical performances of this nature "seem to have become fashionable in Paris." This review also recognized the harpsichord's ability to blend well with woodwinds and strings. A performer by the name of Diemer had appeared on this concert, and according to Eta Harich-Schneider, Diemer has the honor of having been the first to reintroduce the harpsichord.⁸

A change in compositional style was an important factor which contributed in reviving baroque music and its instruments. Since 1900, composers such as Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schonberg have broken away from verticality. They have returned instead to horizontal, linear, polymelodic and polyrhythmic composition. This style characterized most European music at the time of Bach.⁹

Many twentieth century composers are attracted to the harpsichord not only for its suitability for contrapuntal polyphonic music, but also for its sound. A search for new sound materials is an important aspect of

⁸Eta Harich-Schnieder, The Harpsichord: an Introduction to Technique, Style, and the Historical Sources (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 6.

⁹Zuckermann, op. cit., p. 20.

twentieth century music. Although the harpsichord is old, its sound is fresh to our time because of its long neglect. Contemporary composers from neoclassic to atonal schools have been attracted by the "new" sound of the harpsichord and are writing works for it.¹⁰

The possibilities for varied tone colors afforded by different registrations and keyboards, facilitated by instantaneous pedal couplers, the broad spatial concept achieved by the doubling of voices in two or three octaves, and the incisive, clean edge of the harpsichord tone so conducive to clarity in many-voiced textures--all are characteristics that intrigue contemporary composers sufficiently for exploitation.¹¹

Educational opportunities provided by the study of the harpsichord are unlimited. A school music department can obtain a harpsichord of fine quality for under \$1,000.00. Aside from the widely shared opinion that Bach's Well Tempered Clavier and Scarlatti's sonatas sound better on a harpsichord than on a piano, concepts such as the pythagorian comma and mean-tone tuning can be demonstrated. Principles of voicing, the overtone series, and the attack, decay, and envelope of sound can be presented with greater ease on a harpsichord than on a piano.¹²

The do-it-yourself kit for constructing a harpsichord has popularized the instrument a great deal. In high schools this could provide an excellent inter-departmental project. On the college level, music students with a tendency toward craftsmanship will find this a most stimulating project

¹⁰Sylvia Marlowe, "A Dead Instrument," The Music Journal, XX (January, 1962), p. 70.

¹¹R. Bedford Watkins, "New Life for the Harpsichord," Clavier, IX (February, 1970), p. 39.

¹²H. Erik Shaar, "The Harpsichord in Modern Education," Clavier, IV (October, 1965), pp. 49-50.

both historically and musically.¹³

Many young people are enthusiastically taking up the study of the harpsichord because of the opportunity for musical discovery.¹⁴ There is a large amount of solo harpsichord literature available, and recordings have made music-minded people aware that this rich literature exists.¹⁵ Also, as Sylvia Marlowe states, "early harpsichord composers often merely indicated the musical pattern and left it to the performer to improvise."¹⁶ As a result, many people today, especially the young, "are drawn to its study through an intellectual as well as a musical approach, one that is creative as well as interpretive."¹⁷

The aforementioned reasons--a renewed interest in the past, the novelty of the harpsichord sound, the harpsichord's adaptability to the modern idiom, increasing numbers of recordings, educational values--have impelled people toward the harpsichord. Even so, the harpsichord revival might not have taken place had it not been for early twentieth century pioneers. These include performers such as Wanda Landowska, and builders such as Arnold Dolmetsch of England, and the Parisian piano firm of Pleyel. Sylvia Marlowe is important in the realm of composition for commissioning

¹³Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁴"The Goldbergs," Newsweek, LIX (April 2, 1962), p. 50.

¹⁵Harold L. Haney, "Interview with Sylvia Marlowe," The Harpsichord, IV (August, September, October, 1971), p. 71.

¹⁶Marlowe, loc. cit.

¹⁷Ibid.

many new works for the harpsichord.

A harpsichord in playing condition was a rarity at the beginning of this century. In the 1890's, Arnold Dolmetsch of England began to rebuild old harpsichords and to construct new ones. He later came to the United States as head of a department of harpsichords and clavichords at Chickering and Sons of Boston, Massachusetts. Back in England in 1913, he established his workshop at Haslemere in Surrey. The firm that bears his name still produces harpsichords as well as a wide variety of other older types of musical instruments.¹⁸

In 1912, a Parisian piano manufacturing firm, Pleyel, produced a large harpsichord with a sixteen-foot register. This was the type of instrument created for, and made famous by, Wanda Landowska. She continued to perform and record on it until her death in 1959.¹⁹

Landowska was instrumental in developing an interest in the harpsichord in Paris. She occasionally played pieces on it during her piano recitals. At first, according to Philip Treggor, audiences were hard to please because "previous poor playing of poorer instruments had in no way endeared the harpsichord to Parisian music lovers."²⁰ Gradually, however, the music itself and Landowska's high quality of performance helped to bring about a greater acceptance of the harpsichord in Paris and throughout

¹⁸Howard Schott, Playing the Harpsichord (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), pp. 27-28.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Philip Treggor, "Harpsichord News," The Diapason (March, 1968), p. 15.

²¹Ibid.

Europe.²¹

Sylvia Marlowe has also contributed greatly to the revival of the harpsichord. She played weekly concerts on NBC radio for many years. She has made many recordings, and she has given world-wide concerts. Not only has she commissioned more contemporary works for the harpsichord than any other harpsichordist, she founded the Harpsichord Music Society in 1957. This small group commissions works and sponsors concerts and scholarships. It also holds forums where experts discuss special subjects, including certain periods of music and specific composers.²²

The future of the harpsichord remains uncertain. Wallace Zuckermann, America's largest harpsichord kit manufacturer, writes:

musically unsophisticated people walk into harpsichord shops asking for instruments they know nothing more of than that they must possess one. How long this fad (if that is what it is) will last no one can say, but it still seems to be gathering force. Whether it will all collapse one day as suddenly as it did 150 years ago is anybody's guess, but modern life, which shows every sign of becoming increasingly frantic, will continue to produce an equally strong reaction, driving people back to the safe haven of an earlier time, its music, and its instruments.²³

²¹Ibid.

²²Haney, op. cit., pp. 6-11, 18-20.

²³Zuckermann, op. cit., p. 24.

CHAPTER II

SOME MODERN BUILDERS AND CONFLICTING BUILDING TRENDS

After Dolmetsch's first historical reconstructions of harpsichords, instruments for the general market initially were produced mainly by piano firms in France and Germany. The original harpsichord was a descendant of such early instruments as the lyre, the harp, and the lute, and so was based on the concept of plucked strings vibrating over a resonating chamber. Many of the first modern harpsichords, however, were based on some aspects of piano construction, especially those in which the resonating chamber and the weight of the case were major considerations. In the continuing development of the piano, the case had to be made increasingly heavier and stronger as heavier strings, higher tensions, and double and triple stringing evolved. Finally, when the case could no longer participate in resonance, the resonance was exclusively relegated to the soundboard.²⁴

Most of the similarities to the problems of piano construction have proven to be false and useless for the harpsichord. Massive cases and steel frames are unnecessary to carry the lesser tensions of the harpsichord strings. Also, these heavy parts cannot participate in the resonance. The soundboard does not need to be deadened by excessive thickness and heavy cross-ribbing. The heavy keys, weights, and bushings which are

²⁴Wallace Zuckermann, The Modern Harpsichord (New York: October House, Inc., 1969), p. 12.

required by the comparatively complex action mechanism of the piano only defeat the light crisp touch needed for playing on the harpsichord.²⁵ Many of these features of piano construction can be found in the harpsichords of the Neupert firm.

J. C. Neupert of Bamberg, West Germany, is one of the most important European harpsichord firms today. Originally a piano shop, the firm began building harpsichords in 1906. Dr. Hanns Neupert, the present head of the firm, reported that a total of 24,000 Neupert instruments have been produced. About half of this number, which includes pianos, are harpsichords and clavichords. Neupert currently produces about 400 harpsichords and clavichords per year. Typical features of a Neupert harpsichord include an open bottom, thick cases, thick soundboards, ribbing under the bridge, thick strings, and sixteen-foot strings which rest on the eight-foot bridge. These characteristics, according to Zuckermann, result in an instrument which "suffers from laryngitis, possessing a coarse, whispering tone."²⁶ (See Plates I and II.)

Two basic, and conflicting, trends have developed in the modern building of harpsichords. One trend is to closely imitate the old instruments, and the other, to use modern materials in a search for new technical innovations. Frank Hubbard and William Dowd were among the first modern builders to model their instruments after existing old ones, and were thus instrumental in the development of these two factions of the harpsichord

²⁵Ibid., p. 13.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 152-154.

PLATE I

Comparison of underside of massive Neupert "Couperin" model (above) with underside of soundboard of more classical Hubbard instrument (below). Note the Neupert's placement of ribs at right angles to the bent-side, crossing under the bridges, as opposed to the absence of ribbing under the bridges of the Hubbard instrument.

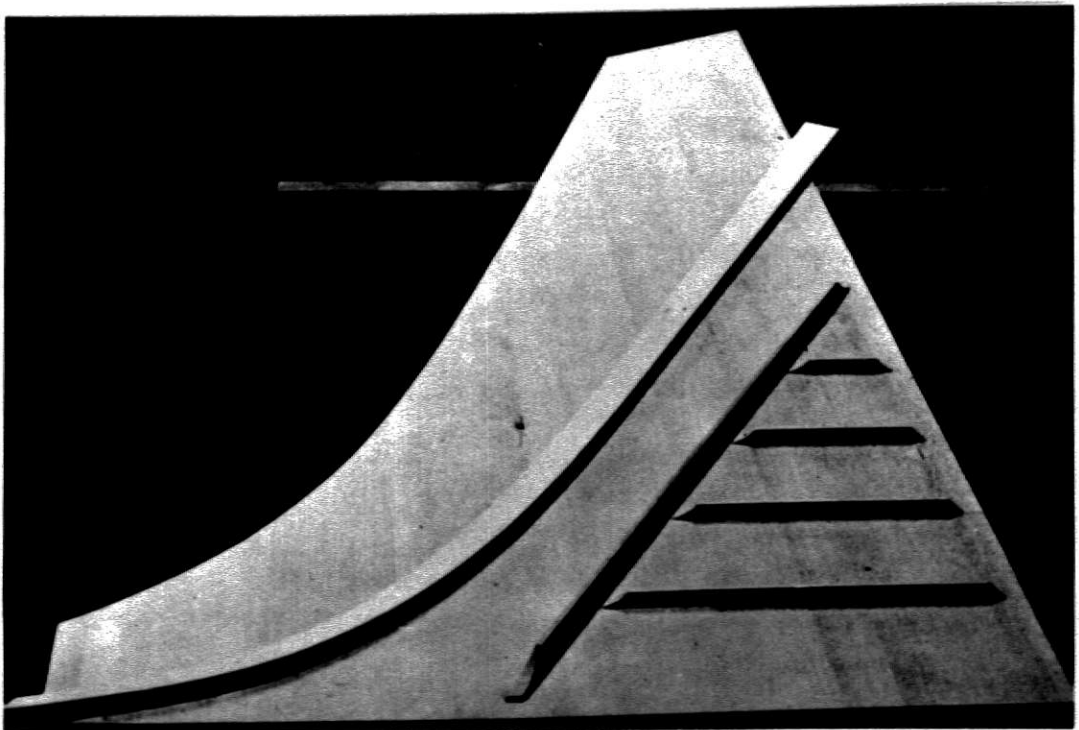
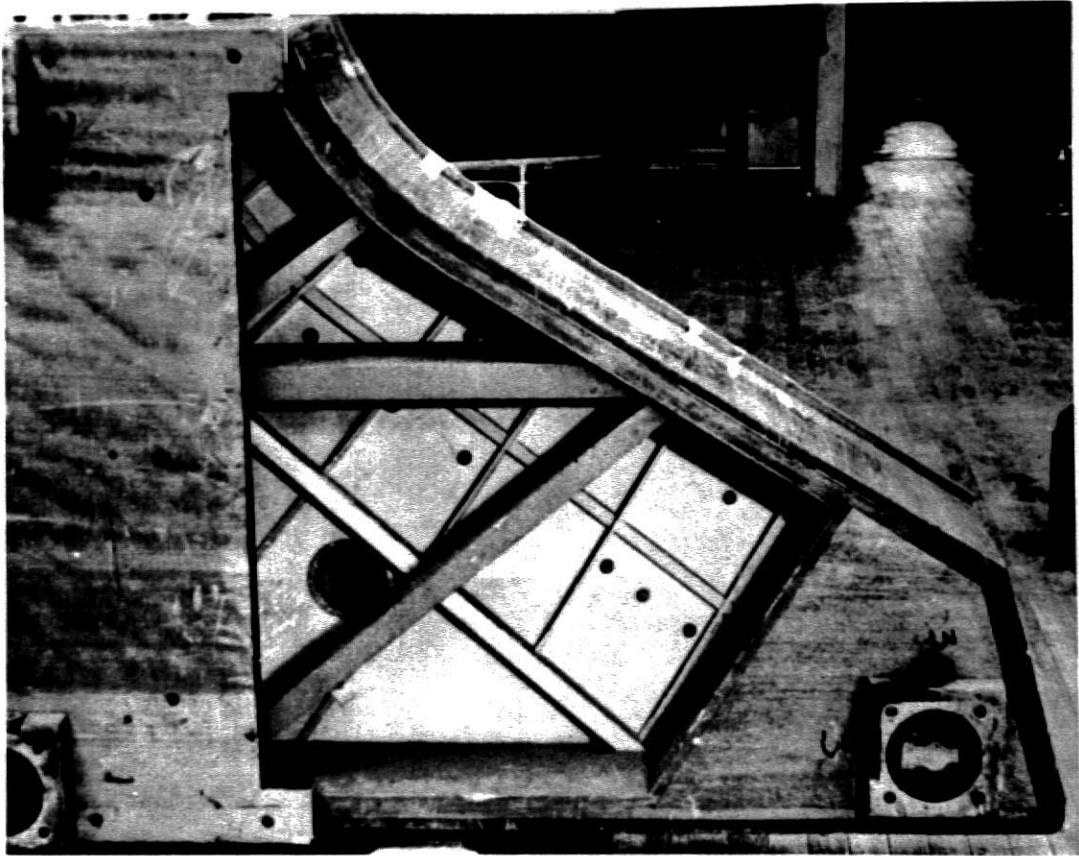
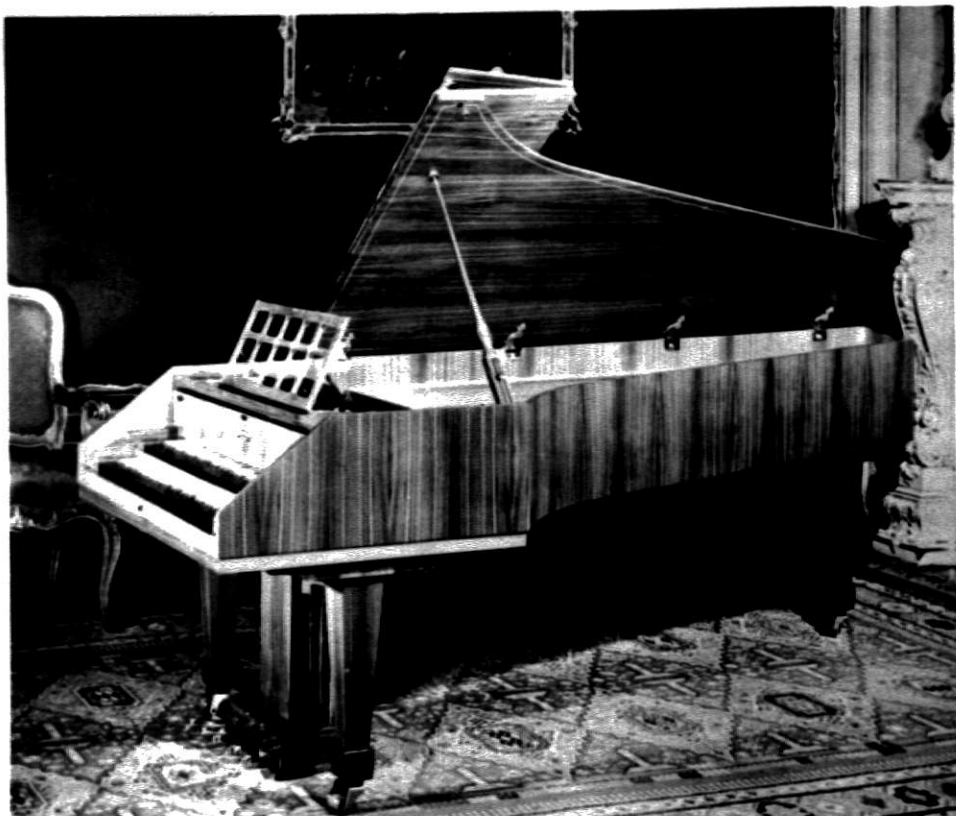


PLATE II

Typical harpsichord made in the "grander-than-grand-piano" tradition (Sperrhake, above) contrasted with the more simple lines of the Dowd (below).



movement--the modernist and the antiquarianist.²⁷

Hubbard and Dowd have been friends since boyhood, and it was while they were both attending Harvard University that they decided to establish a shop for building antique instruments. In preparation for this, Hubbard went to England for several years to work with Dolmetsch and, later, Hugh Gough. Dowd studied in Detroit, Michigan, with John Challis. Hubbard and Dowd returned to Boston, Massachusetts, in 1949, and together built harpsichords until 1958. Hubbard then purchased Dowd's share of the business and Dowd established his own shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts.²⁸

Much of the machinery in William Dowd's shop was designed and built by Dowd himself for specific phases of harpsichord construction. Included are a steam machine for the bent side and a humidity chamber where soundboards are treated until the exact time of installation. The "Go-Bar Deck" (Plates III and IV) is a clamping device used when gluing the soundboard to the instrument.²⁹

Hubbard and Dowd have studied and heard old instruments and have considered their tone to be beautiful. They have since tried to bring back the authentic instrument upon which early harpsichord music was based. As Dowd stated in an interview with Haney:

We are trying to play that music, in their way, and train ourselves to get their esthetic kicks from it. Otherwise, we

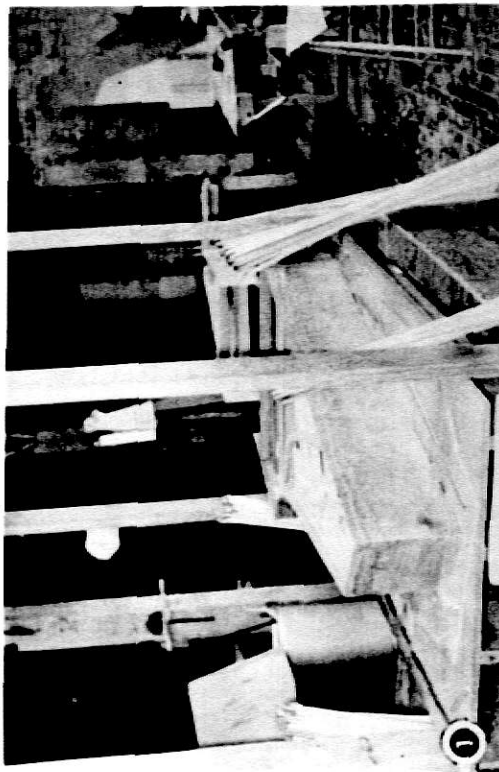
²⁷Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, V (February, March, April, 1972), p. 7.

²⁸Ibid.

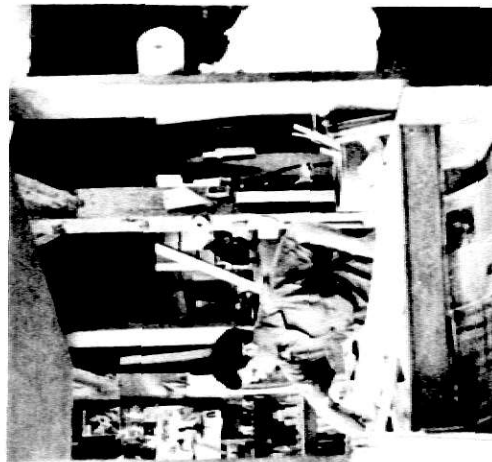
²⁹Ibid., p. 9.

PLATE III

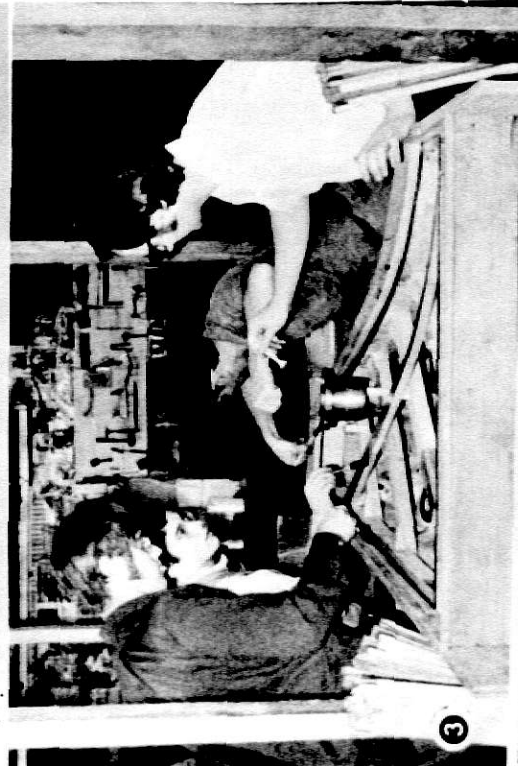
The "Go-Bar Deck."



A Dowd harpsichord, ready for soundboard, has just been placed on the "Go-Bar" deck. The go-bars, (flexible wooden slats with felt covered tips) are placed at each corner of the deck ready for use.



The four corners of the Go-Bar Deck become stations with a man assigned to each corner. The interior of the instrument is brushed clean of any wood dust which may have accumulated during assembly.



While the soundboard is being treated in a humidity controlled atmosphere, the glue is applied rapidly and efficiently. Each man has a brush and covers his part of the instrument.

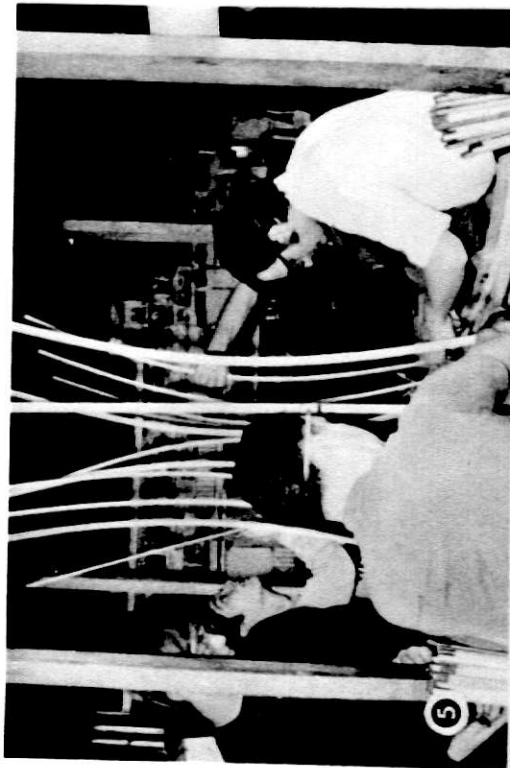


Within seconds the soundboard is removed from the treatment cabinet and put in place. The glue is not given a chance to cool before the soundboard is installed. This assures a secure bond. Strips of wood are placed over the pressure points to equalize pressure and eliminate marring of the soundboard.

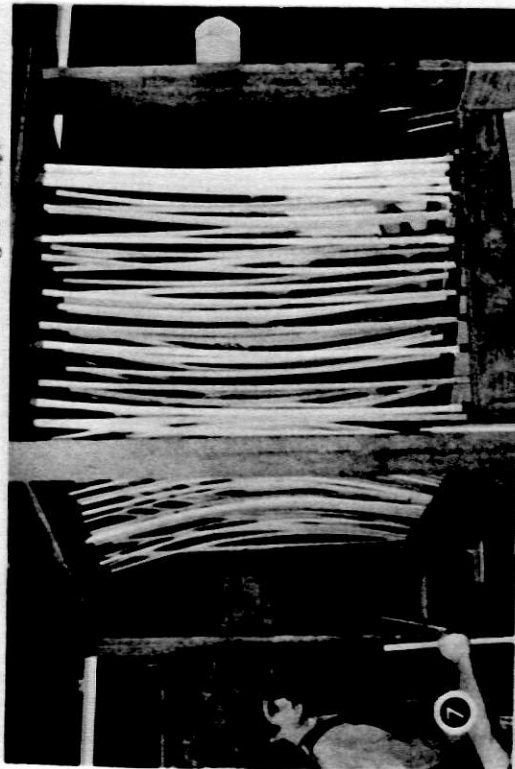
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PLATE IV

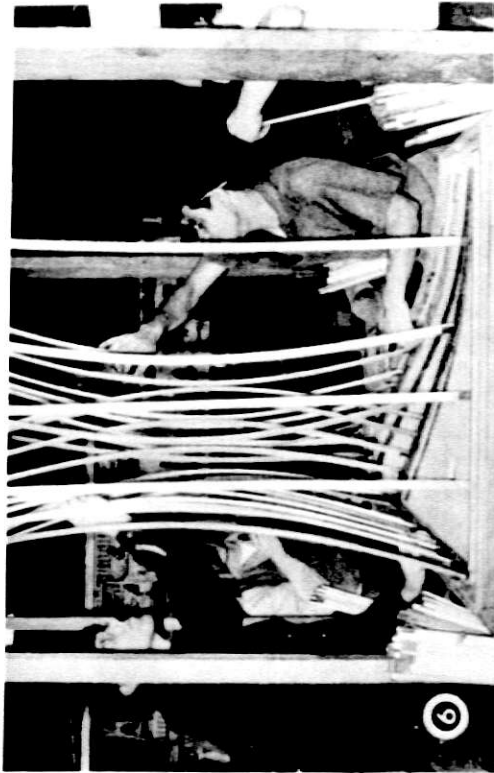
The "Go-Bar Deck" (continued).



Each man, working from his corner starts forcing the Go-Bars between the soundboard and the ceiling of the Go-Bar Deck. They start from the center and rapidly work out, which distributes the glue evenly.



Within about 40 seconds nearly all Go-Bars are in place. They now stand so thick that workers on the far side of the Deck are just barely visible.



Within seconds the area is covered. Then without delay, the spaces between the major Go Bar's are filled. Notice how the Go Bars are staggered so that they don't interfere with each other.



The job is now finished and the men go back to other duties, leaving the soundboard to bond to the instrument. The care and efficiency with which the soundboard is installed, is one of the reasons Dowd harpsichords have such clarity of tone and carrying power.

might as well play it in our style, in our way, and forget it.... We are trying to find out what that music was like in its time because it obviously was so important to them.³⁰

On the other hand, John Challis, an American builder who makes use of new technical resources, states, "I have never found an Eighteenth Century instrument that I have played that had a tone that I would consider beautiful."³¹ John Challis is one of the most important harpsichord builders in America today. When he built his first instrument in 1925, and for several years after that, he was the only harpsichord builder in America. Since then he has spent his full time designing, building, and playing harpsichords and clavichords.³²

Rather than copying the work of old builders, Challis is a creator and innovator, which makes him a controversial figure with those who imitate the old instruments.³³ He does not copy old instruments because he does not want to reproduce what he considers to be errors in them. He believes that in many old instruments and their replicas, the treble, middle, and bass ranges are often not well balanced in tone quality and volume.³⁴

Challis went to England at the age of nineteen to study with Dolmetsch. After four years he returned to Ypsilanti, Michigan, and started building

³⁰Ibid., p. 14.

³¹Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, II (August, September, October, 1969), p. 21.

³²Ibid., p. 14.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p. 22.

harpsichords. There were very few orders for harpsichords at first, however, since "nobody over here in America knew what they were."³⁵ During the Depression, he experimented with and completed his first frame using welded steel instead of wood. He maintained that instruments with metal frames would be easier to tune, and would stay in tune longer than instruments with all wooden frames. Later, he switched to cast aluminum because it is light and can be machined to close tolerances. He used another metal substance, Bakelite, for the pinblock, to overcome the problems of shrinking and swelling in the wooden pinblocks.³⁶

The idea of using hard rubber for the jacks occurred to him one day when he slammed down the telephone receiver after an annoying wrong number. He then realized that hard rubber telephone receivers hardly ever break, in spite of the rough treatment which they often receive.³⁷

Challis made soundboards out of Douglas fir for many years. He found that the Douglas fir gave his instruments a richer tone and greater stability of tuning than spruce soundboards. By 1946, though, he discovered to his horror that in some of his older instruments the soundboards were beginning to rot and pull away from the glue joint. He switched to using soundboards made from laminated wood, which he maintained were also better than spruce, but they tended to shrink and swell, becoming wider in the summer and narrower in the winter. This led him to explore and experiment with

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., p. 15.

³⁷Ibid.

metal soundboards. His first attempts at using metal soundboards produced, in his words, "the most dismal, ghastly, hopeless tone you could imagine." Finally, after several years of study and experimentation, he discovered the right alloy to produce a soundboard that he thought sounded as good as his wooden soundboards.³⁸

Just as he had feared, Challis' customers started cancelling their orders as soon as they found out he was building instruments with metal soundboards. Gradually, however, a few people began to try his instruments and discovered that they liked their tone. The stability of the tuning, of course, was also an attractive feature.³⁹

Challis also experimented with various substances to use for the plectra. Included were rubber, steel, various plastics, and Teflon.⁴⁰ He was also instrumental in the development of the pedal harpsichord (Plate V) which is two instruments in one. Above is a large scale harpsichord with two manuals and a full compliment of registers; below is the lower instrument with several sets of bass strings played by a complete pedal keyboard exactly as on the organ. Although many eighteenth century descriptions of this kind of an instrument exist, no such instrument has survived.⁴¹

Another device used by Challis and other modern craftsmen is a pedal with a "half-hitch." This device allows the rack of jacks to be moved only

³⁸Ibid., pp. 15-16.

³⁹Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹E. Power Biggs, "The Pedal Harpsichord; Two in One," The Music Journal, XXVI (February, 1968), p. 28.

PLATE V

E. Power Biggs beside a Challis pedal harpsichord.



half the full distance. This allows the plectra points to give the string a feebler pluck, producing a decreased volume of tone.⁴²

Claude Jean Chiasson, with John Challis, is among the earliest builders in twentieth century America. He built his first instrument in 1938, modeling it after a Kirckman that he had restored at the Fine Arts Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His work as a builder, performer, and teacher has had a great influence on other builders and performers, including builders Frank Hubbard and William Dowd, and performer Daniel Pinkham. Although Chiasson considers harpsichord building as an avocation rather than a vocation, he has a desire for quality and hopes that each new instrument will be better than the one just completed.⁴³

Wallace Zuckermann was born in Berlin in 1922 and came to the United States in 1938. He established himself through the buying, repairing, and selling of old pianos. After discovering the rarity and costliness of harpsichords, he built one himself in 1955. He decided to sell his instrument and build another, and soon he established a flourishing business. Zuckermann believes that he was successful not so much because he was the best builder in New York at that time, but the only one. He discovered after a few years that most of his customers were "modern people who expected to turn on a switch and have a machine that works." He often travelled twenty miles to adjust one plectra. Zuckermann's development of the

⁴²Philip James, Early Keyboard Instruments (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, June, 1930), p. 46.

⁴³Harold L. Haney, "Conversation with Builder-Harpsichordist Claude Jean Chiasson," The Harpsichord, IV (August, September, October, 1972), pp. 4, 8.

commercial harpsichord kit was an effort to educate at least a small portion of the public to "the beauty of a machine--something in which all parts move in just the right relationship to produce the desired results."⁴⁴ (See Plate VI.)

John Shortridge is a harpsichord builder who is fanatic for authenticity. He uses a poplar frame, maple pinblock, a cherry or walnut outer case, pear for jack slides, and basswood, boxwood, and rosewood for the keyboard. He uses spruce for the soundboard because cypress is not available in the United States.⁴⁵

William De Blaise, of London, has made a three-manual instrument, illustrated in Plate VII, to combine the advantages of the so-called "Bach" specifications (four-foot choir in the upper manual) with those of the "Pleyel" specifications (four-foot choir in the lower manual). This could have been done by adding a second four-foot choir of strings, but De Blaise did not want to load the soundboard with still another set, or to further complicate the tuning.⁴⁶

Rutkowski and Robinette have been building large two-manual harpsichords in New York since 1957. They personally construct custom-built instruments on order. Production is limited to three instruments per year. The instruments are commissioned long in advance, mainly by schools and

⁴⁴Wallace Zuckermann, "How to Go Into Business Without Really Trying," The Harpsichord, I (February, March, April, 1966), pp. 2, 10, 15.

⁴⁵"Man With a Mission," Newsweek, LXI (February 18, 1963), p. 60.

⁴⁶Philip Treggor, "Harpsichord News," The Diapason (October, 1967), p. 11.

PLATE VI

Basic Zuckermann harpsichord kit. This kit costs about one hundred fifty dollars. The instrument can be assembled in about one hundred hours of work.

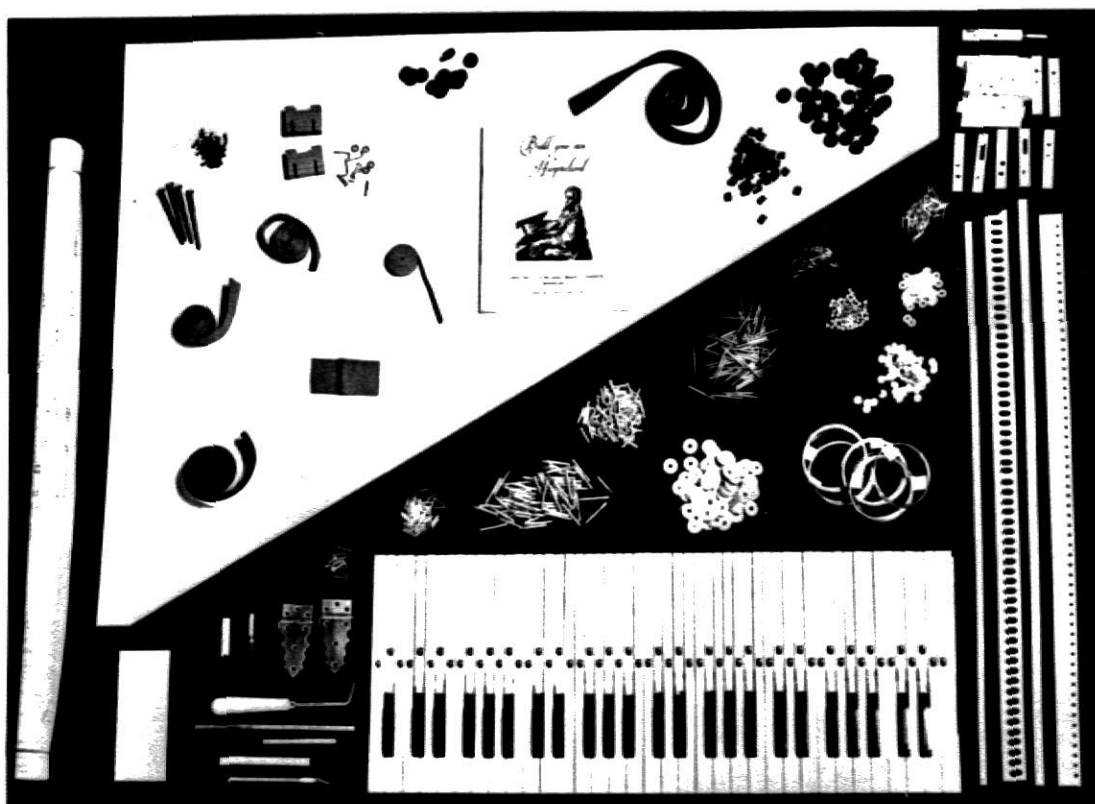


PLATE VII

Three-manual harpsichord by William De Blaise, with the following disposition: upper manual 2 X 8'; middle manual 2 X 8' and 1 X 4'; and lower manual 1 X 8', 1 X 4', and 1 X 16'. The middle and lower manuals are permanently coupled.



professional musicians. Rutkowski received his training from John Challis. His instruments retain some of the features of the Challis harpsichords, the most important feature being the aluminum frame. Unlike many builders, Rutkowski and Robinette do not welcome publicity, shop visitors, or curiosity seekers.⁴⁷

Many modern harpsichords have piano type keyboards which are heavily bushed and weighted, but keyboards of old instruments were unbushed, light, shallow, and minimally weighted. Most early twentieth century harpsichordists wanted an action similar to that of the piano, but it is argued that old harpsichord actions repeat faster, are lighter, and are more sensitive than modern ones made by new methods with new materials. Dowd believes that he has gradually been able to persuade artists, especially young ones, to prefer instruments with a light touch.⁴⁸

The addition of a sixteen-foot set of strings is an innovation which has caused much controversy. Most modern builders use this new register, but since it is rarely found on old harpsichords, some conservative builders do not include it.⁴⁹ According to Hubbard, the few surviving harpsichords with the sixteen-foot register were built by German organ builders, so it probably was merely an organ concept imposed on the harpsichord. He maintains that this register only "muddies up the texture."

⁴⁷Wallace Zuckermann, The Modern Harpsichord (New York: October House, Inc., 1969), p. 170.

⁴⁸Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, IV (February, March, April, 1971), p. 17.

⁴⁹Zuckermann, op. cit., p. 46.

Also, the crowding of the eight- and sixteen-foot bridges together in the treble spoils the tone of the eight-foot choir; the instrument itself becomes more complicated, bigger, and more expensive.⁵⁰

Arnold Dolmetsch developed a type of action which he called the Patent action. This system permitted the plectra to pluck the string, and then to move in a way not to brush against it on the return stroke. It was an escapement mechanism somewhat like the action used in the piano. This system proved to be difficult to maintain, and it was necessary to take the keyboard out merely to make a jack adjustment. According to Dowd, "You couldn't play 'Three Blind Mice' on it without having to take the instrument apart....It was absurd."⁵¹

One of the areas of greatest controversy concerns the use of pedals for changing registers and stoos, rather than hand-operated levers located above the keyboard. Pedals on old instruments were extremely rare.⁵² Around 1790, when the harpsichord had almost ceased to be used, some builders tried several devices, including pedals, to try to compete with the ever increasing popularity of the piano. Otherwise, most early harpsichords did not have pedals.⁵³ On modern instruments, however, pedals are almost invariably present. Ralph Kirkpatrick, a performer who prefers

⁵⁰Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, V (February, March, April, 1972), p. 16.

⁵¹Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, IV (February, March, April, 1971), p. 18.

⁵²Zuckermann, op. cit., p. 46.

⁵³Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, IV (February, March, April, 1971), p. 17.

authenticity, refuses to use pedals.⁵⁴ According to Dowd, a performer such as Kirkpatrick, by using only two eight-foot choirs and without changing any stops, can make the listeners think that they are hearing dynamic changes by the way he exposes or covers the notes. Dowd maintains that Kirkpatrick's approach is the essence of harpsichord playing, and that pedals are unnecessary.⁵⁵ Many contemporary composers, however, are writing music which involves changes that are so abrupt pedals must be used.⁵⁶

The construction of versatile modern harpsichords using new materials and new technical innovations continues to be a controversial issue. Builders of these instruments maintain that modern technical devices in harpsichord construction represent a continuing evolution in the harpsichord rather than a return to its past. Those who strive for authenticity, however, argue that "baroque composers did not write for these great out-sized modern harpsichords any more than they did for the piano, or the Moog synthesizer, or the tenor banjo."⁵⁷

⁵⁴Philip Treggor, "Harpsichord News," The Dianason (July, 1968), p. 8.

⁵⁵Harold L. Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," The Harpsichord, IV (February, March, April, 1971), p. 17.

⁵⁶Treggor, loc. cit.

⁵⁷Robert Evett, "The Harpsichord Boom," The Atlantic, CCXXV (May, 1970), pp. 122-123.

CHAPTER III

SOME CONTEMPORARY PERFORMERS AND THEIR IDEAS

As interest in the harpsichord spread, standards of performance on the instrument rose. Thirty years ago, anyone who bought a harpsichord became a harpsichordist. According to Robert Evett, the novelty of the instrument was such that even a mediocre performer could gain easy success and publicity as a harpsichordist. Consequently, much playing was of a low order. In thirty years time, standards have risen greatly. Today most professional performances are of high quality.⁵⁸

Just as there are controversies regarding methods of construction of the harpsichord, there are also controversies on methods of performance on the instrument. Some of the younger virtuosos such as George Malcolm and Rafael Puyana prefer a highly colorful style that makes full use of all the technical resources of modern instruments. Robert Evett maintains that the result should be desirable and pleasing, even though it may not be an authentic reproduction of the music as it sounded in the baroque period.⁵⁹

Mme. Alice Ehlers, born in 1887 in Vienna, was a great influence in the modern revival of the harpsichord because of her fine taste as a solo and continuo performer, as well as her influence as a teacher. She directed her European and American concert tours toward promoting authentic

⁵⁸Robert Evett, "The Harpsichord Boom," The Atlantic, CCXXV (May, 1970), p. 125.

⁵⁹Ibid., v. 123.

performances of seventeenth and eighteenth century music. Ehler studied harpsichord under Wanda Landowska in 1909. She came to the United States around 1920 and gave concerts throughout the West. Concurrently, Landowska was concertising in the United States, primarily in the New York area.⁶⁰

Mme. Ehlers, who had a close friendship with Dr. Albert Schweitzer, was greatly influenced by him. Schweitzer introduced Mme. Ehlers to a new concept of articulation and phrasing in the performance of the music of Bach. Mme. Ehlers has also worked with such musicians as Paul Hindemith, Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, and Eugene Ormandy. Around 1938, when she settled in America, she appeared on the Bing Crosby radio show, and shortly after that she was asked to appear in the film "Wuthering Heights" with Sir Lawrence Olivier. Other motion pictures followed. Later, she became a teacher in the University of Southern California, a position which she held until her retirement a few years ago at the age of about eighty.⁶¹

Ehlers greatly admired and respected Landowska's ability as a performer, but believed that Landowska did not know how to teach. As Ehlers stated:

She was a wonderful player and could play anything, but she could not teach. She never explained anything and one could not question her....She did not try to develop her students. We could not come out and she did not help us to come out. I had the feeling she was not proud of me, as I am always proud when my students play. I don't let my students play unless I can be proud of them. Also, I believe Landowska felt a great competition with her students and did not encourage them to progress as far as they might have

⁶⁰Harold L. Haney, "Conversation with Harpsichordist Mme. Ehlers," The Harpsichord, VI (February, March, April, 1973), p. 6.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 9, 17.

otherwise. I always thought it was the job of the teacher to help the student progress as rapidly and as far as possible.⁶²

According to Ehlers, students must first learn to "stand on their own feet." Second, "they must learn to discriminate as to what is good and what is not good." She starts students by making them "dig and think and discover."⁶³

Sylvia Marlowe has perhaps done more to popularize the harpsichord than any other artist. Just one of her NBC radio "Coffee Concerts" reached more listeners than an average artist could perform for in live personal appearances in his entire career. Marlowe has made many recordings, and she has given concerts all over the world.⁶⁴

Marlowe commenced her musical study as a pianist, but soon developed a preference for the music and instruments of the renaissance and baroque periods. She studied organ, piano, theory, and counterpoint in Paris under Nadia Boulanger. There she heard the harpsichord for the first time in a concert played by Wanda Landowska on her Pleyel harpsichord. Marlowe's first instrument was also a Pleyel which, after much searching, she purchased in New York; there were as yet no modern builders in this country.⁶⁵

Marlowe's first salaried employment as a harpsichordist was in a night

⁶²Ibid., p. 7.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁶⁴Harold L. Haney, "Interview with Sylvia Marlowe," The Harpsichord, V (August, September, October, 1971), p. 6.

⁶⁵Ibid.

club where she played both classical and popular pieces. Performing under a revolving stage under spotlights, she received publicity which led to guest appearances on many live, coast-to-coast radio programs. Later she performed regularly on NBC radio on her own weekly program which lasted for about fifteen years. She also played jazz works on another program called "New Portraits of Old Masters." She got an unusually large mail response because, as she expressed:

No one really knew what a harpsichord was and they liked the sounds I was creating. I was playing in millions of homes all over America. I think this fantastic exposure of the instrument on network radio greatly influenced the growth of interest in the instrument in this country.⁶⁶

Marlowe, after leaving NBC in the 1950's, concertized, recorded, toured, commissioned new works for harpsichord, and taught at the Mannes College of Music. By commissioning new works she believes she has significantly extended the literature of the harpsichord. As she states:

This is especially important because the harpsichord was at one time considered an instrument of the past and I have been able to help change that image. The harpsichord has a very contemporary sound and is now used...for jazz, for rock, for movies, for commercials, for everything.⁶⁷

Marlowe has also experimented with playing piano music on the harpsichord. Her performances of some early Stravinsky piano compositions in 1971 were well received. Other piano works which she has found suitable for harpsichord include Webern's Variations for Piano, opus 27, and selections from Bartok's Microkosmos.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

Whereas many performers believe that electronic amplification of a harpsichord is objectionable under all circumstances, Marlowe believes that there are some occasions when amplification may be necessary. She used an amplified harpsichord when playing with a symphony orchestra in a large hall in Berlin as well as in outdoor concerts in Indonesia.⁶⁹

When Marlowe began studying the harpsichord, for the most part, she had to teach herself, for harpsichords and teachers in this country were rare. She believes that students today, however, are very fortunate because of the availability of fine recordings, instruments, and teachers. She maintains that the tuning and maintenance of an instrument should be taught concurrently with learning to play.⁷⁰

Ralph Kirkpatrick was born in Leominster, Massachusetts, in 1911. He received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1931 from Harvard University where he commenced playing the harpsichord in 1930. He studied under Landowska in Paris and worked as a craftsman under Arnold Dolmetsch in England. He also undertook extensive research into the source material concerning the performance practices of seventeenth and eighteenth century chamber music in Western Europe. This research included a particularly detailed study of ornamentation. Later, he investigated material concerning Domenico Scarlatti, including unpublished material from Spain, Portugal, and Italy. His book on Domenico Scarlatti is one of the most important books on that

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

composer so far written.⁷¹

Kirkpatrick's career as a public performer began at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1930. He has toured extensively in the United States and in Europe, and his repertoire on both the harpsichord and the clavichord is extensive.⁷²

Gustav Leonhardt was born in Holland in 1928. His family was musical, and at the age of fifteen, he decided to study harpsichord and organ. In 1950 he was awarded the performer's diploma in harpsichord and organ, cum laude, at the Schola Cantorum in Basle. He is currently a professor at the Amsterdam Conservatory, a post which he has held since 1954. In addition to this, Leonhardt is known for his work in organ building and restoration and for his collection of keyboard and stringed instruments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷³

Leonhardt has founded two ensembles, the Leonhardt Consort and the Quadro Amsterdam, and both have achieved international fame. In addition to his many concert tours in Europe and the United States, Leonhardt has performed on television and radio in Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and the United States.⁷⁴

⁷¹E. Borrel, "Ralph Kirkpatrick," in Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians (5th ed., 1954), IV, p. 766.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ludwig Finscher, jacket notes for Morley, and others, English Music for the Virginal (Telefunken SAWT 9491-A).

⁷⁴Ibid.

Lady Susi Jeans, born in Vienna in 1931, established her popularity as a concert harpsichordist and organist with a tour of Europe during the early days of her career. In addition to playing in most European countries, she tours Canada, the United States, and Mexico. She has written many articles on the history of keyboard instruments. She makes frequent appearances over BBC, London, and her recordings have become quite popular.⁷⁵

Lady Jeans' instrument is a Maendler-Schramm pedal harpsichord. The pedal-operated instrument, on the floor, contains sixteen- eight- and four-foot strings. The regular harpsichord on top has sixteen- eight- and four-foot strings on the lower manual and eight- and four-foot choirs on the upper manual.⁷⁶

In an interview for The Harpsichord magazine, she expressed some of her views on performance practices, harpsichord construction, and teaching. She does not believe that the harpsichord should be electronically amplified. The audience can be any size, she maintains, so long as the acoustics of the hall are such that the unamplified sound of the harpsichord fills the hall. Lady Jeans prefers quill plectra over leather or plastic, although she admits she has had little experience with plastic. She also prefers multi-manual instruments. She believes that young students should begin their study on the harpsichord rather than on the piano. This, she maintains, facilitates learning the proper harpsichord touch, nor will the

⁷⁵Harold L. Haney, "Interview with Lady Susi Jeans," The Harpsichord, I (February, March, April, 1968), p. 4.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 5.

student have to overcome pianistic habits.⁷⁷

Harpsichordist Malcolm Hamilton, however, demands that his students have a piano background before he will accept them. He believes that in starting out on the piano, one learns the tactile sensitivity in the fingertips which is needed on the harpsichord. This sensitivity, according to Hamilton, comes much faster on the piano because the sound produced depends on direct contact with the key.⁷⁸

Malcolm Hamilton, a native of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, has concertized extensively in Canada and the western United States. He has appeared with major chamber orchestras all over the United States. He has studied with Mme. Alice Ehlers. His instrument is a Wittmayer, but in order to achieve the sound he is seeking, he has made numerous alterations in the instrument so that its sound is almost unrecognizable from that of the original.⁷⁹

Igor Kipnis has recorded for eight recording companies, working with such artists as Leopold Stokowski, Neville Marriner, and Seiji Ozawa. He has appeared with many leading symphony orchestras, working with such distinguished conductors as Erich Leinsdorf, Charles Munch, and

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁷⁸Harold L. Haney, "Conversation with Harpsichordist Malcolm Hamilton," The Harpsichord, V (May, June, July, 1972), p. 4.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 6, 15.

Alfred Wallenstein.⁸⁰

Kipnis prefers to provide great contrast in presenting a program of harpsichord music. As he states:

Audiences are not specialists. Specialists can take a whole evening, for example, of Elizabethan music. I would love it. But most audiences will get much more out of both the instrument and the music if you jump around a little.⁸¹

Kipnis plays a wide range of music, including contemporary music. He also plays works of Mozart, including the Concerto in E Flat, K271. He believes that this work was originally intended for the harpsichord for the work was commissioned for a French woman who was herself a travelling virtuoso harpsichordist. Also, at the time when the piano was gaining in popularity, France was the last country in which the harpsichord finally ceased to be used.⁸²

Kipnis maintains that a small one manual instrument with a single choir of strings is sufficient for a performer who wishes to play only music written for the harpsichord before 1750. However, he also believes that a professional harpsichordist should not restrict himself exclusively to early music. In a larger instrument, Kipnis prefers three choirs of strings and hand-operated stops, although he recognizes that there is often a need for pedal-operated stops in many contemporary works. He does not favor the use of elaborate registration changes in early music because such changes were

⁸⁰Harold L. Haney, "Conversation with Igor Kipnis, Harpsichordist," The Harpsichord, II (May, June, July, 1969), p. 4.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 8.

⁸²Ibid.

impossible to achieve on early instruments existing at that time.⁸³

Fernando Valenti, who made his debut at the age of nine as a pianist, studied harpsichord under Ralph Kirkpatrick. When he was in his twenties, he was selected to play at the Bach Festival in Prades, France. Later he received an appointment as the first harpsichord instructor in the history of the Juilliard School of Music.⁸⁴

In performing on the harpsichord, Valenti believes that one must develop a musical idea, and then strive to get this idea across to the audience. As he states:

Don't pamper either its advantages or disadvantages and of course, each instrument has a lot of both. It can be right or wrong, but make the instrument play for you. Not the other way around....We must all adapt to the conditions the instrument dictates, but in the end, it is important to make the instrument play for you.⁸⁵

⁸³Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁸⁴Harold L. Haney, "Interview with Fernando Valenti, Harpsichordist," The Harpsichord, II (February, March, April, 1969), p. 5.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 6.

CHAPTER IV

COMPOSERS AND CONSIDERATIONS PERTAINING TO THE MEDIUM

Ferruccio Busoni was one of the first composers of our time to write for harpsichord. He used it in his opera, Die Brautwahl, composed around 1912. In 1919, Delius attached the words "for harpsichord" to his Dance, but according to Schott, this piece is actually unsuited for harpsichord since the music calls for the effects of a damper pedal.⁸⁶

During the age of Francois Couperin and Domenico Scarlatti, opportunities to create, perform, and teach works of music were provided by royal or noble patrons. Most contemporary music for harpsichord, however, has been created at the behest of performers. In 1926, Wanda Landowska performed a concerto which was written for her by Manuel de Falla. In a real sense, twentieth century music for harpsichord can be said to begin with Falla. His Concerto for Harpsichord still stands as a landmark.⁸⁷ This piece is based on religious and popular Spanish music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it has been described as "an effort of rhythmic-tonal modernity."⁸⁸

In many pioneering efforts at composing for the harpsichord in the twentieth century, it has been particularly difficult for composers to free themselves from the instrumental technique and aesthetics of the

⁸⁶Schott, op. cit., p. 77.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 78.

⁸⁸Marion Bauer, Twentieth Century Music (New York: G. B. Putnam's Sons, 1933), p. 240.

piano. Although the piano and the harpsichord are both keyboard instruments, there are several major differences which particularly affect the methods of composing for one or the other. The harpsichord has no sustaining pedal, nor has it much sustaining power. To deal with these limitations, composers have referred to techniques of baroque composers, especially in reference to the trill. When Bach transcribed his Violin Concerto in A Minor for the harpsichord, and in other similarly transcribed compositions, he made frequent use of the trill in dealing with notes that were originally intended to be long and sustained.⁸⁹

A pianist is able to control the force with which the hammer strikes the strings, thereby controlling the dynamic level. The harpsichord, of course, is not capable of such gradual dynamic change through keyboard touch. Instead, dynamics are terraced. "The feeling of graded 'loudness' is replaced in the harpsichord by a delicately maneuverable feeling of 'fullness'."⁹⁰

Because of the weight and vibrating length of the string, and pairs of strings in the lower octaves of the piano, triads or other close-position groupings in chords in that range are extremely indistinct. On a harpsichord, however, similar chords remain clear and crisp, each note being clearly distinguishable from its neighbors. Low range, left-hand chords on the harpsichord, then, are extremely effective.⁹¹

⁸⁹Robert W. Jones, "Composing for the Harpsichord," The Harpsichord, II (November, December, 1969, January, 1970), pp. 12-15.

⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 12.

With the wide range of complexity among currently existing harpsichords, a question arises concerning the type of instrument for which the composer should write. Robert Jones believes that when one is definitely designing a work for a two-manual instrument, he should make the fullest use of its capabilities, both in registration and in independence of the manuals. For the purpose of enriching the general repertoire of harpsichord literature, he maintains that it is better to concentrate on pieces that are suitable for one manual, since this type of instrument by far outnumbers the more complicated two manual instruments.⁹²

Since there is no "standard harpsichord," technical indications concerning registration to be used for a given piece must be general. On some instruments, registrations can be changed by foot pedals or knee levers, while on others they must be changed by hand-operated levers. In Jones' opinion, a composer should not write for foot or knee operated devices, but should instead accommodate the performer who must be able to get a hand free in order to change registration. He also maintains that only the simple dynamic markings of "piano" and "forte" should be used. The composer should feel free, however, to use pitch-level indications of desired registers because this will give the performer an idea of the kind of tone quality desired, even though his particular instrument may not be equipped with all of the registers and stops that are called for in the music.⁹³

⁹²Ibid., p. 14.

⁹³Ibid., p. 15.

Some contemporary composers specify a particular type of harpsichord and also precise registrations for their works. Elliot Carter, in his Double Concerto, calls for a large Challis harpsichord and gives detailed instruction for registration. Milton Babbitt, in Composition for Ten Instruments, indicates degrees of volume from fff to ppp, but he advises the performer that "harpsichord registration is to be chosen in order to achieve the designated dynamics and durations as accurately as possible by means of the particular instrument employed."⁹⁴

Halsey Stevens, in his Partita for Harpsichord or Piano, states:

Since registration differs so greatly from instrument to instrument, no indications have been given; the problem is left to the discretion of the harpsichordist. Similarly, few dynamic signs have been used; this, too, is a matter for each player to determine in relation to his instrument, the hall, and his individual preferences.⁹⁵

Michael Civiello is a composer, harpsichordist, and assistant professor of music at Northern State College, Aberdeen, South Dakota. The harpsichord, as Civiello points out, "has expanded from the oneness of harpsichord-baroque-Bach to refreshing new idioms."

Witness its use in jazz by Garner and Shifrin; in pop music by the Beatles and Welk; in TV, radio, and movies. Even miscreant Kuzak uses the harpsichord beneficially.⁹⁶

In spite of this, Civiello found that he was unable to purchase contemporary harpsichord pieces from music dealers. He believes that composers today are offering works that need and ought to be part of one's

⁹⁴Watkins, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 40.

⁹⁶Michael Civiello, "A Case for Contemporary Music," The Harpsichord, II (February, March, April, 1969), p. 8.

repertoire. In an attempt to make this music more easily available to students and teachers, Civielli has compiled lists of solo and chamber harpsichord works and their publishers from such sources as Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, the Schwann Long Playing Record Catalogue, New York Times, record jackets, and catalogues. His list appeared in The Harpsichord magazine in February, 1969, and since then the list has been supplemented by other harpsichordists and composers in subsequent issues.⁹⁷

The importance of Sylvia Marlowe in the growth of contemporary harpsichord literature has already been mentioned. Some of the works which she has commissioned include Tocatt, by John Lessard; Sonata all'Antica, by Vittorio Rieti; Cantabile: A Portrait of Nicolas de Chatelain and Sonata No. Four, by Virgil Thomson; and Serenade for Flute, Oboe, Violoncello, and Harpsichord, by Ben Weber.

The harpsichord has become well ensconced in the instrumental vocabulary of many contemporary composers, including Elliot Carter (Double Concerto for Harpsichord, Piano, and Two Chamber Orchestras), Manuel de Falla, Alan Hovhaness, Bohuslav Martinu (Sonata for Harpsichord), Walter Piston, Francis Poulenc, Luciano Berio (Rounds for Harpsichord), and Igor Stravinski. R. Bedford Watkins has stated his belief that with the ever-increasing number of instruments available and the never-ending search for new methods of sound production, the harpsichord will continue to be used in new and imaginative ways, including electronic manipulations.

⁹⁷Ibid.

He hopes that performers will expand their repertoire to include contemporary works. In this way, they will "help to insure the position of their noble instrument in the musical life of our time, and they will further enrich our cultural heritage by making known an impressive body of contemporary keyboard literature."⁹⁸

⁹⁸Watkins, op. cit., p. 40.

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THE HARPSICHORD IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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B. S., Kansas State University, 1969

AN ABSTRACT OF 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

ABSTRACT

The harpsichord was one of the most important keyboard instruments of the baroque period. After 1750, the piano increased in popularity and by 1790, it had replaced the harpsichord. The piano remained supreme throughout the nineteenth century. It was better suited than the harpsichord for the dynamic range and homophonic textures which were sought in the Romantic period.

The twentieth century witnessed a revival of interest in the harpsichord. This revival was brought about by the return of contrapuntal writing and a search for new sound materials. Some of the early leaders in the modern renaissance of the harpsichord include performers, such as Wanda Landowska, and builders, such as Arnold Dolmetsch of England and the Pleyel firm in Paris.

Two basic and conflicting trends which have developed in the construction of harpsichords are those of the "antiquarianists" and the "modernists." Frank Hubbard and William Dowd of the antiquarianist group base their work on the close imitation of early harpsichords. John Challis, a leading modernist, makes use of modern materials, such as plastic, rubber, and various metals. Controversial new technical innovations of the modernists include the sixteen-foot register and foot-operated pedals for changing registers.

During the past thirty years standards of performance on the harpsichord have risen to a high level. Outstanding professional performers such as Sylvia Marlowe, Ralph Kirkpatrick, and Gustav Leonhardt have contributed greatly to the popularity of the harpsichord through radio performances,

public concerts, and recordings.

Twentieth century composers who have written for the harpsichord include Manuel de Falla, Igor Stravinsky, Walter Piston, Ervin Henning, Milton Babbitt, Halsey Stevens, and Virgil Thomson. There are several differences between the harpsichord and the piano which have affected methods of composition for the harpsichord as opposed to the piano. The main differences lie in the area of sustaining power, dynamic control, and tone quality. A lack of standardization among harpsichords is another aspect which contemporary composers must consider. The harpsichord has become well established in the instrumental vocabulary of composers today, and it is hoped that more performers will widen their range of literature to include this contemporary music.