

Westfield

NEWSLETTER OF THE WESTFIELD CENTER FOR HISTORICAL KEYBOARD STUDIES
VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 4

*A National Resource for the Advancement of Keyboard Music,
Serving Professionals and the Public Since 1979*

Fall 2014

Tilman Skowroneck, Editor



A very warm welcome to the Fall edition of the Westfield Newsletter 2014! Much is afoot at Westfield, and this issue is filled with exciting announcements, and a fresh report from the conference *Sensation and Sensibility at the Keyboard in the Late Eighteenth Century: Celebrating the Tercentenary of C. P. E. Bach*. Annette Richards also reports on the meeting of Westfield's board of trustees, which took place in early October, and reminds the Westfield members to [renew their membership](#).

In this issue you will find an introduction to next summer's large-scale event, *Forte/Piano: A Festival Celebrating*

Pianos in History. In more detail, pianist *Ryan MacEvoy McCullough* writes about our other festival of the coming year, *Environs Messiaen: Nature Rendered at the Keyboard*, which will take place at Cornell in March 2015.

My own report from the C. P. E. Bach conference follows, together with a selection of pictures from my trusty iPad. This issue's interview features the Paris-based conductor and harpsichordist *Skip Sempé*, a passionate musician and one of the foremost figures on the French Early Music scene.

—*Tilman Skowroneck*



CONTENTS

From the Executive Director	2
Looking Ahead to <i>Forte/Piano</i>	2
<i>Environs Messiaen: Nature Rendered at the Keyboard</i>	3
Conference Report: <i>Sensation and Sensibility at the Keyboard</i>	5
An Interview with Harpsichordist and Conductor Skip Sempé.	12

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Here we are at the end of another busy year for the Westfield Center, one that has seen a major conference and concert festival on C. P. E. Bach, and intensive planning for the coming year (more on that below). As ever, we are very much indebted to our many friends, supporters and helpers, and especially to our loyal board members who work hard on Westfield's behalf. At the annual board meeting this past October we elected Peter Sykes as our new President and Karen Flint as our Treasurer for one-year renewable terms starting in 2015; deeply grateful to both of them for agreeing to take on these roles, I also want to thank outgoing President Matthew Dirst, and Treasurer Andrew Willis for their sterling service over the past year. Warm thanks also to Roger Moseley, who has agreed to continue as the board Clerk.

The energy, imagination and expertise of the board is vital to Westfield's programming and operations, but so too is the support of every one of our members. You should have received a membership renewal reminder

this week, and I very much hope that we can count on you for the coming year. Membership renewals and donations can be made at <http://westfield.org/join> (or, of course, by regular mail). This past Fall we have made our online payment process easier—and it remains as secure as it has always been.

In the coming year we can look forward to two festivals cosponsored by Cornell—*Environs Messiaen*, March 5–9, 2015, and *FortelPiano: Celebrating Pianos in History*, August 5–9, 2015; further ahead, we are working on plans for a harpsichord festival in Berkeley (2016), a major organ festival at the University of Notre Dame, IN (2017), as well as numerous smaller events in various locations around the country. As ever, Westfield members, friends, students and anyone interested in keyboard instruments and their music are warmly invited to participate.

With warmest wishes to all for the holiday season,

—Annette Richards

LOOKING AHEAD TO FORTE/PIANO: THE WESTFIELD SUMMER FESTIVAL, 2015



Mark your calendars and join us in Ithaca this coming summer for *FortelPiano: A Festival Celebrating Pianos in History*. This ambitious festival will take place from Wednesday, August 5 to Sunday, August 9, 2015. The event takes as its main theme the rich variety inherent in the piano's four-century history. It celebrates pianos from virtually every epoch of the instrument's four-hundred-year history, from a Florentine piano of the 1730s, through the late 18th-century Steins, Walters, and Broadwoods, to the Grafs and Streichers and mid-19th-century French Pleyels and Erards to the Steinway model of the 1870s and onwards.

At the heart of this festival is this musical conviction, expressed by Anton Rubinstein in 1892:

I think that instruments from every period have effects and colors that cannot be reproduced on today's pianos—that compositions were always conceived with the instruments of their time in mind, and only on those can they achieve their full effect...

With repertoires ranging from the 18th century to the 21st, the festival will showcase the diverse opportunities for artistic expression, technical creativity, and musical learning that the multiplicity of instruments old and new offers pianists today.

Concerts will include performances by Tom Beghin, Kristian Bezuidenhout, Malcolm Bilson, Xak Bjerken, David Breitman, Penelope Crawford, Ursula Dütschler, Tuija Hakkila, Alexei Lubimov, Liv Glaser, Zvi Meniker,

Hardy Rittner, Anthony Romaniuk, Bart van Oort, Jiayan Sun, Andrew Willis, Miri Yampolski, and many more.

The program will include, in addition to evening performances, five days of lecture-recitals, talks, demonstrations and master classes with performers, scholars and instrument-builders. As part of our commitment to education, we are planning to make the master classes available to students at no cost.

We would very much welcome donations to help support the festival. Your gifts to *FortelPiano* will serve to meet

costs directly incurred to make the event possible, from moving pianos to spreading the word about the festival. We'll pull up our sleeves and carry 5-octave pianos, but we'll have to let professionals carry the 7-octave Erard and the grand Blüthner! If you would like specific information about what difference your contribution will make or if you wish to sponsor a specific event or participant, please feel free to contact us at info@westfield.org or 607-255-3065. More information about the festival is available at: <http://westfield.org/festival>

ENVIRONS MESSIAEN: NATURE RENDERED AT THE KEYBOARD
WESTFIELD'S UPCOMING SPRING CONFERENCE AND FESTIVAL
MARCH 5–9, 2015, CORNELL UNIVERSITY
BY RYAN MACÉVOY MCCULLOUGH

French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) was and remains one of the most mythologized and mysticized musicians of the 20th century. His generous, resplendent music was carefully crafted to transform a concert hall setting into a place of worship—not just of religion or “spiritually elevated art” (although as a devout Catholic this was one of the unmistakable hallmarks of his music), but also a fascination with sound itself, and through sound a deep, sublime admiration of nature.

It is impossible to overstate Messiaen's love for birds and birdsong, and for most of his compositional career his works made direct musical reference to birds, both objectively through their calls and figuratively as representations of innocence and the divine order (as in his seminal 1941 work *Quatuor pour le fin du temps*, or “Quartet for the End of Time”). Early in his career, Messiaen's musical depictions of birdsong were mostly stylized approximations of unidentified calls he had heard in nature. Beginning in 1949, Messiaen became acquainted with French author and ornithologist Jacques Delamain, and during visits to Delamain's home Messiaen learned to identify birds by their calls alone. This marked a turning point in the composer's output, and his attention to birdsong—particularly his fidelity to the rhythms and timbres of their voices—became an



essential feature of his music.

In the 1950s, Messiaen produced some of his first compositions based almost entirely on birdsong, including *Oiseaux Exotiques* (“Exotic Birds,” 1955–56) for solo piano and wind ensemble. Messiaen composed portions of this work—especially those parts based on Northern Cardinals, Wood Thrushes and Orioles—referring to a 78 vinyl record of North American birdsong given to him by Darius Milhaud. This recording was the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's *American Bird Songs*, released in 1942 and the first such collection of its kind made available to the public. Messiaen subsequently came to visit Cornell and the Lab of Ornithology in the early 1970s while beginning work on *Des Canyons aux étoiles* (“From the

Canyons to the Stars”), a work commissioned to celebrate the bicentennial of the United States and inspired by the geological and ecological landscape of Bryce Canyon, Utah. Upon his arrival in Ithaca, Messiaen (who was evidently quite anxious to get to the Lab and listen to its audio archives) visited what is now the Macaulay Sound Library, presently housed at the Imogene Powers Johnson Center for Birds and Biodiversity in Sapsucker Woods, just north of downtown Ithaca.

It is in celebration of this connection that the Westfield Center—in collaboration with the Cornell Department of Music, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Cornell Concert Series, and Cornell University’s 2014–15 Sesquicentennial celebrations—presents *Environs Messiaen*, a festival and symposium focusing on the music, influence, and naturalist artistry of Olivier Messiaen, his students, and composers who have either directly or indirectly followed in his footsteps. Reflecting the Westfield center’s mission to promote keyboard-related repertoire, *Environs Messiaen* is programmed to emphasize Messiaen’s very personal relationship to keyboard music, including works for piano, organ, and the distinctive ondes Martenot.

This festival features ten events from March 5th to 9th, 2015, including lectures, concerts, a sound installation, and a film screening, all culminating in a two-piano recital by *Pierre-Laurent Aimard* and *Tamara Stefanovitch* featuring works by Boulez and Messiaen. Aimard was a student of both Messiaen and his wife, pianist Yvonne Loriod, for whom Messiaen wrote almost all of his piano music, and he will offer a masterclass on Messiaen’s music the morning after the recital. The festival’s full program is available at <http://westfield.org/environsmessiaen>

Messiaen’s relationship to the Lab of Ornithology will be emphasized with a performance at the Lab’s Sapsucker Woods Observation Lounge of the complete *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (“Catalogue of the Birds,” from 1956–58). This extraordinary collection of 13 piano pieces is based on the songs and calls of over 70 birds from across France, and is significant not just for its accurate renderings of these birdsongs but also its remarkable use of the piano to recreate the timbre of each bird’s voice. This event will feature performances by Cornell piano faculty Xak Bjerken, candidates of the Cornell DMA in Keyboard Studies, and guest pianist Mari Kawamura.

As a North American counterpart to Messiaen’s naturalist musicality, the work of 2014 Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer John Luther Adams will be featured in several settings. Adams, originally from Mississippi, was drawn to Alaska in 1975 as part of his work in en-

vironmental conservation, and subsequently developed a unique compositional voice reflecting his love of the Alaskan landscape. One of his earliest works, *songbirdsongs*, composed between 1974–80 for percussion and piccolos, features sensitively rendered transcriptions of birdsong from across north America, and will be performed in the partial outdoors setting of the Cornell Plantations Guy Nearing Summer House. Another work of Adams, *The Immeasurable Space of Tones* for organ and small ensemble, will be featured earlier in the festival, in addition to his sound installation *Veils*, which will run continuously at Cornell’s Johnson Museum of Art.

Other concerts will include Messiaen’s *Messe de la Pentecôte* for organ, works by André Jolivet and Messiaen for ondes Martenot and piano, Gérard Grisey’s *Prologue* for viola and electronics, new works by English composer James Wood and Cornell graduate composer Corey Keating, Jonathan Harvey’s *Tombeau de Messiaen*, and idiosyncratic Canadian composer Claude Vivier’s *Lonely Child* for soprano and orchestra, featuring guest soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon and members of Ensemble X, Cornell Symphony, and Cornell Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Chris Younghoon Kim.

Lectures will include papers by renowned authors and Messiaen experts Robert Fallon of Carnegie Mellon University, Christopher Dingle of Birmingham Conservatoire, a lecture-recital by NYU professor Marilyn Nonken, and Ronald Raymond Hoy, Merksamer professor of biology at Cornell, who will speak about Messiaen’s synesthesia and use of birdsong as an introduction to the performance at the Lab of Ornithology.

“Environs” means much the same in English as it does in French (to encompass, surround, a vicinity, etc.), and Messiaen’s bird pieces are as much about natural settings as they are about the birds that live there. To close, Messiaen’s own description of *The Golden Oriole*, from the *Catalogue d’oiseaux*:

The Golden Oriole, that beautiful golden yellow bird with black wings, whistles in the oak trees. His song, aqueous, gilded, like the laugh of a foreign prince, evokes Africa and Asia, or some unknown planet, filled with light and rainbows, filled with smiles à la Léonardo da Vinci. In the gardens, in the woods, there are other birds: the rapid and determined strophe of the Wren, the trusting caress of the Robin, the vigor of the blackbird, the amphimacer of the Redstart with its white front and black throat, the incantatory repetitions of the Song Thrush. For a long time, without lessening, the Garden Warblers pour forth their sweet virtuosity. The Chiffchaff adds its jittery water drops. Leisurely reminiscence, memory of gold and rainbows: the sun seems to be the gilded emanation of the song of the Golden Oriole...

CONFERENCE REPORT: SENSATION AND SENSIBILITY AT THE KEYBOARD

BY TILMAN SKOWRONECK

The exceptionally well-organized and timely conference was opened by Annette Richards, who outlined its scope and thanked those who had made it possible.¹ In thoughtful words she also remembered Christopher Hogwood, who had been a driving force in the C. P. E. Bach publishing project, and whose presence at the conference was sorely missed.

Directly following this introduction, the Opening Concert started off with a grand gesture. Playing on the Schnitger-inspired Yokota/GOArt organ in Anabel Taylor Chapel, David Yearsley plunged right into the great drama of C. P. E. Bach's *Fantasia in C Minor*, a piece that exploits the possibilities of diminished seventh chords and 'wrong' turns of modulation. In the following Fugue, Yearsley brilliantly displayed the organ's subtle palette of responses to variations in touch. Even in C. P. E. Bach's setting from J. S. Bach's chorale prelude *Ich ruf zu dir* (BWV 639), a curiously eclectic combination of the older Bach's open intensity and his son's searching parallel sixths and suspensions, Yearsley produced a wealth of nuances by touch alone.

There are not as many surviving organ compositions from J. S. Bach's sons as one would wish. The program now turned to transcriptions and arrangements, inviting the listener into a fascinating musical world of historical would-be-ness (and of 18th-century keyboard practice). The naïve *Romanza* from Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach's 1792 *Concerto Grosso in E-flat Major*, came across stylistically surefooted, neither banal nor too serious. In his program notes, Yearsley explained that he feared that the excursion into

this "light, even decadent" late piece might be "a bit unfair" to the composer. For the necessary balance, the audience was now treated to Yearsley's own fugue on a theme by J. C. F. Bach. The piece wittily tested the listener's sense for chronology by masterfully exploiting the late composer's theme in a retrospective contrapuntal style.

J. C. Bach's *Andantino* originally from a string trio—served as an "aperitif" before the next, heftier selection—displayed the "London" Bach's public-friendly idiom and, at moments, a defiant love of parallel fifths. Any such levity was blown away with Yearsley's transposed arrangement of the *Allegro* from J. S. Bach's trio sonata from the *Musical Offering*. The program notes describe the process of playing this piece as a "limb-stretching, mind-bending exercise in multi-tasking," and its performance was in many ways the high point of the program. Even in its original version, the piece is difficult: I can remember the time when there were only very few traverso players who could play their part at all, let alone well, and even in terms of getting the ensemble together, the piece requires extra rehearsal time and is not easily conquered. Yearsley was in full command, choosing a tempo that was noticeably higher than any of the chamber music versions I've heard or participated in—somewhat breathless at times

perhaps, yet without having to give up on musical clarity or transparency.

The program concluded with J. S. Bach's arrangement of a Vivaldi concerto, which his son Wilhelm Friedemann later claimed as his own, played in a grand but not bombastic manner, and arrangements of two movements from Friedemann's own *Sinfonia in D Minor* with beautiful contrasting sonorities, and concluding with a magnificent Fugue.

In the first paper of the panel "Sensation, Sensibility,



Annette Richards's Opening Speech.
Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

¹ The program and abstracts for *Sensation and Sensibility at the Keyboard in the Late Eighteenth Century: Celebrating the Tercentenary of C. P. E. Bach* (Cornell University, October 2–4, 2014) are available online at: <http://westfield.org/cpebach>



Conference attendees having their pre-dinner drinks.
Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

and Making Sense,” Matthew Head briskly steered our attention away from the healthy, sometimes muscular approach to music that still lingered in our minds from Yearsley’s concert. Instead we were invited to contemplate links between the genius and the (sometimes frail) body, here exemplified by an indiscretion, published in the *Magazin der Musik*, in which Carl Friedrich Cramer informs us that C. P. E. Bach wrote his A Major Fantasia, H. 278 “*in tormentis*” because of his gout. Head took the listeners past various stages of Bach’s career, situating Cramer’s disclosure of Bach’s illness in an 18th-century “Gout Culture” and a discourse about “the possibility of knowing, representing, and making art out of somatic sensation and ... feelings.” The overarching concern of this thought-provoking paper was perhaps best summarized as trying to “recover something of the physical content” of the past.

Turning from sensation to sensibility, the next speaker Yonatan Bar-Yoshafat analyzed various layers of meaning in C. P. E. Bach’s famous C Minor trio, Wq 161/1 (“*Gespräch zwischen einem Sanguineus und Melancholicus*”). His paper combined musical analysis, a short review of the contemporary conversation about the piece, and a critical look into the inconsistencies between the program of the sonata and some of its traits of “counter-sentimentality.”

James Kennaway’s keynote address on “Medicine and Music in the age of Sensibility” was a breathtaking marathon through the borderland between music and pathology. Speaking with great speed and even greater clarity, Kennaway illuminated a time when the understanding of the nervous system was still in its infancy and highly contested by other ideas of how the human body

functioned. Many texts from the 18-century “cult of sensibility” make use of one or another concept of “the nerves,” and discuss their stimulation, and over-stimulation and their respective effects. Kennaway succeeded in his lecture, a brilliant example of a nuts and bolts teaching session, to provide a complex overview of opinions, influences and developments in what he described as a basically “chaotic scientific situation.”

Tom Beghin’s clavichord recital that concluded the first day of the conference was entirely devoted to music by C. P. E. Bach. The recital took place in the Hayloft of the Carriage House Café, a suitable venue for the clavichord. Parked under a wall-mounted, retired penny-farthing (another decorative item of the room is a huge sign from the long-gone Lehigh Valley railroad), Beghin was quickly able to open the listeners’ ears to the dynamics of his



The audience assembles for Tom Beghin’s clavichord recital.
Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

instrument, a clavichord built after Saxon models by the Belgian maker Joris Potvlieghe (he was greatly helped by Annette Richards’s charming and *very* quiet introduction).

Beghin’s serious dedication, backed up with a healthy dose of dry wit (a good match for C. P. E. Bach), was evident both in his multi-faceted and skillful playing and his announcements between some of the pieces. The repertoire selection was outstanding in its combination of more frequently-heard pieces, such as the Rondo in E Minor (“*Abschied von meinem Silbermannischen Claviere*”), and quite unknown gems, such as the seven character pieces with French titles from *Petite Pièces pour le Clavecin*, Wq 117. The clavichord Beghin had chosen for the evening belongs to the rather more sturdily-strung variety. It allows for a virtuosic approach (as in the final Allegro of the

Sonata in A Major, Wq 55/4) but also for subtle nuances and an utter pianissimo (as could be heard, for instance, in the character piece “La Stahl”). The clear and direct tone of the instrument perhaps invited Beghin to use clavichord specialties such as the *Bebung* in a relatively sparing and well-integrated manner. Thus, his version of the *Abschied* was blissfully sensitive, yet unsentimental. Beghin ended the program with the sixth sonata from the *Probestücke*, Wq 63/6, with its famously expressive concluding *Fantasia*.

Opening the panel of the second conference day “Cultivating feeling,” David Schulenberg addressed C. P. E. Bach’s vocal music, and vocal styles (or “metaphorical rhetoric”) in his instrumental pieces. With the help of many music examples, and beautiful short demonstrations on the harpsichord, Schulenberg explained some superficial and some deeper stylistic influences on Bach. There is a connection to the style of the *opera seria* in his large-scale vocal works, for instance, Graun and J. S. Bach can be sensed in various contexts, and a more structural “juxtaposition of styles” can be found in the “trios with two themes.” Some of the music from Tom Beghin’s clavichord recital retrospectively found a stylistic home in the minds of the listeners during this paper: the recitative style of the concluding *Fantasia*, for example, and the character pieces about which Bach in later years was “embarrassed.” Schulenberg concluded with a discussion of the late F-sharp minor *Fantasia* “C. P. E. Bach’s Empfindungen,” which, rather than directly depicting sentiment, expresses the sublime (*das Erhabene*) and thus in a way transcends the “rhetorical principle” that has been seen as so important for this music in the 20th century.

After a beautiful introduction by moderator Roger Moseley, Annette Richards now took us to a “sentimental collection” of texts and props: an excerpt from Goethe’s *Werther*, mentioning Klopstock; a picture of Klopstock’s



At the end of the first conference day.
Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

actual *hat*; a contrasting pair of copperplate prints from Chodowiecki’s *Natürliche und affectirte Handlungen des Lebens* depicting “Empfindung” and “Sentiment,” followed by a sharp turn into kitsch, exemplified by a cup and saucer with their cheesy dedications to eternal friendship and a reference to the “rondo craze” of the time; and finally a quote from the venerable Freiherr Adolph Franz Friedrich Ludwig von Knigge. Amusing and thought provoking was Richards’s return to Goethe’s specific brand of humor, who in his “Triumph der Empfindsamkeit” poked fun at the *Werther* cult, and her comparison of Goethe with C. P. E. Bach’s complex self-ironizing mode, demonstrated in the seriously playful late rondos

of the *Kenner und Liebhaber* collections.

Nicholas Mathew then contrasted the personal experience of C. P. E. Bach—a crucial feature in some famous descriptions of Bach’s contemporaries—with “the competing media forms and protocols that shaped Bach’s musical world”—the interplay of “manuscript circulation and expanding print commerce,” in a world in which “letters and parcels crisscrossed Europe.” Mathew’s main theme was presence and distance and the “mechanisms of its traversal”—toward the end of the talk we had arrived at Beethoven’s Sonata, op. 81a “Les Adieux,” in the light of “media proliferation and circulation” around the turn of the 19th century.

Mathew’s account was impressively full of unfamiliar lines of thought and I would have liked to spend some time reading it. But network-inspired lectures such as Richards’s and Mathew’s are always also fun for the listener: here, Bach’s remark that he prepared his printed works for the general public with “more sugar” prompted Mathews to branch out into a description of the Hamburg sugar refineries of the time. A sideline of thought, to be sure, but a vivid illustration of the musical and commercial world we were invited to contemplate.

Fortepianist Andrew Willis played an after-lunch recital with music by C. P. E. Bach and his contemporaries on an initially somewhat uncooperative fortepiano based on J. A. Stein's model. Perhaps, too, the venue was not entirely ideal: the cushioned atmosphere of the medium-large lecture room made the sound somewhat dry. Willis faced these challenges brilliantly. During the course of the first piece, the fourth of C. P. E.'s *Probestücke*-Sonatas, he briskly persuaded the instrument to cooperate, and throughout his recital he managed to maintain an extraordinary palette of nuances together with great tonal control. For the fellow fortepiano player, such an example is a source of inspiration.

In the idiosyncratic sonata in E-flat Major and two contrasting Polonaises by W. F. Bach, Willis did not cave in to the possible temptation to smoothen and beautify this idiosyncratic and sometimes fragmented music, which he performed with strong contrasts. A great sense for architecture shone through in his interpretation of an Adagio from a sonata in F Major by Johann Gottfried Mützel, in which he also gave a brilliant account of the composer's typical, twiddly ornamentation.



Richard Kramer's lecture.
Photo: Tilman Skowronek

With great concentration Willis now returned to C. P. E. Bach and three pieces from the *Kurze und leichte Stücke mit veränderten Reprisen*. This was followed by a somewhat more conventional sonata in D-minor by Ernst Wilhelm Wolf, which contained some interesting virtuosic writing in the outer movements.

Willis chose a judicious beginning tempo and careful worked-out articulations for C. P. E. Bach's B-flat Major Rondo, Wq 58/5, building up the piece in a grand manner: the fast passages were particularly dazzling, and the ending was very effective. A somewhat run-happy sonata by Johann Wilhelm Hässler followed, reminiscent of the Mannheim style. The program ended with C. P. E. Bach's Fantasia in C Major, Wq 61/6, in which Willis took great risks to chisel out the quirky character, which he contrasted with beautifully played slow sections. All in all a very successful recital, which the audience happily acknowledged.

A panel by graduate students in the Cornell music department took us to the Special Collections of Carl A. Kroch Library, where students presented books and manuscripts illustrating the larger context of 18th-century thought on the sentimental and the sublime. Treasures included first editions of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, signed by the author, and two contemporary manuscript copies of Graun's *Der Tod Jesu*, as well as numerous publications from the Hamburg press of Bach's friend J. J. Bode.

Richard Kramer presented the keynote talk of this second day, "The Klopstock Moment," a fascinating account of Klopstock, the ode, and C. P. E. Bach's vocal style. The tightly-woven interplay of historical texts and music examples (with some live demonstrations) provided a clear picture of how Bach's approach to the ode compared to composers such as Christian Gottlob Neefe, who also attempted to set Klopstock in music. This, in Annette Richards's words, "rich and thought-provoking paper" left the listeners with a new appreciation of the fact that Bach's writing for the voice was exquisitely well worked-out and utterly to the point.

For the evening concert in Barnes Hall, the period instrument ensemble *Ars Lyrica Houston* and musical director Matthew Dirst were joined by Annette Richards, organ, Sarah Mesko, mezzo-soprano, Lucy Fitz Gibbon, soprano and Dennis James, glass harmonica for a program entitled "America in Sentimental Europe." It began with C. P. E. Bach's organ concerto in G Major, Wq 34 (a piece without American connotations). Soloist Annette Richards, playing on Barnes Hall's Yokota/GOArt chamber organ, succeeded in placing the concerto in a festive



Ars Lyrica pre-concert tuning session.
Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

yet intimate context, with playful virtuosity in the outer movements and a hint of melancholy in the beautifully paced adagio. The first piece of the “American” core of the program represented Germany’s reception of a New World of fantasy: in his libretto to J. C. F. Bach’s solo cantata *Die Amerikanerin*, Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg adorns a passionate but generic “exotic” scene of longing, an imagined world populated by various outlandish creatures, tigers among them. Sarah Mesko re-lived the scene dramatically, tone-sure and with good German diction.

After the intermission, actual American artifacts took over from fantasy. Johann Adolf Hasse’s cantata *L’Armonica* is a duo, in which the soprano, in praise of Benjamin Franklin’s glass harmonica, promises to imitate the “amorous sounds” of the “ever-changing crystals (i.e. the harmonica’s glass bowls)” with her song. The glass harmonica then answers with

ethereal chords and melodies. A very beautiful interpretation by soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon was—as must be the original intention of the piece—gradually eclipsed by the exotic appeal of the new sensitive “American” instrument; the performance demonstrated what may have been an authentic moment of frustration for the singer as the listener’s attention shifted to Dennis James’s expressive hands and the otherworldly sounds he extracted from his instrument, which was placed right at the edge of the stage.

Ars Lyrica ended the much-appreciated program with an outstanding rendering of C. P. E. Bach’s Symphony in F Major, Wq 183/3.

The wakeup panel of the final day brought us back to Barnes Hall. In his opening talk, Pierpaolo Polzonetti elaborated on the concert of the previous evening. To map out various “Perceptions of America in 18th-century European Music Culture”—as the paper was titled—is a complicated task because we cannot generalize about the various actual “Americas” of the time, nor about how they were understood by the world, no matter whether people looked at them with “enlightened clarity” or the “uncertainty and subjectivity” that characterized Sturm und Drang. Polzonetti’s many examples were a kaleidoscope of would-be “American” 18th-century otherness and its reception, which in its most far-away form was perhaps best exemplified by the line “America is like the moon.”

During the first half of the following talk, Emily Dolan introduced the glass harmonica, discussing what led to its creation, what its popularity can tell us about 18th-century culture, and how the invention of this in-



The “ever-changing crystals” of the glass harmonica. Photo: Tilman Skowroneck



Keyboard still life at Barnes Hall. Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

strument ties in with the larger picture of technological development at the time. America's leading expert on "glass music" and soloist of the previous evening Dennis James now took the stage to tell the tale of his personal involvement with Franklin's invention. A musical demonstration followed, and finally, listeners were invited to try their own luck with making the instrument sound, which proved not to be very easy.

The morning session concluded with a lecture "The Clavichord in America" in which Peter Sykes talked about the Dolmetsch-Chickering clavichord of the early 20th century, followed by a short master class on the clavichord, also led by Peter Sykes.

An intense roundtable session about new technologies of the keyboard followed after lunch. Roger Moseley addressed various meanings of the keyboard, and explained how both playing approaches and inventors have long striven to "get between the keys," that is, to add nuance and possibilities of control to it that go beyond its most obvious black-and-whiteness. Emily Dolan addressed the convenience and inconvenience of the keyboard interface in the light of combination instruments and new inventions, also wondering about the limitations of

technological progress and the point when a keyboard offers too much control. Andrew McPherson introduced, explained and demonstrated his inventions, especially the magnetic resonator piano (MRP). For McPherson, these inventions are not so much about changing the keyboard per se, but rather to make use of the players' knowledge and to help expand it. Ryan MacEvoy McCullough concluded the session with an absolutely stunning performance of McPherson's extremely complex piece for magnetic resonator piano, *Secrets of Antikythera*. The piece only occasionally makes use of the magnetic resonators; for long stretches we listened to an "ordinary" piano sound, which made the contrast to the new sounds the MRP can offer all the clearer. A short discussion ended this thought-provoking session.

The conference ended with two concerts. The afternoon concert, again in Barnes Hall, had an all C. P. E. Bach program. It began with the Symphony in B Minor, Wq 182/5 played by the Cornell Chamber Orchestra. Before the start, conductor Chris Youghoon Kim explained why the ensemble would play, in good chamber orchestra



Dennis James explains how to play the glass harmonica. Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

style, without a conductor. This decision led to visible “lateral” attention among the players, and yielded the homogenous result of an ensemble playing safely together. On occasion the group could perhaps have taken some higher expressive risks.

The concert proceeded with chamber music: Bach’s wonderful quartet for Flute, Viola and Clavier in D Major, Wq 94, played by Yonatan Bar-Yoshafat, Paul Miller and Matthew Hall. Especially the soothing, and sometimes spooky, second movement made an impression on me. Accompanied by Matthew Hall, Zoe Weiss then played Bach’s sonata G Minor, Wq 88 for viola da gamba, with

persuasive rhetorical gestures and a truly magical ending. Paul Miller, Zoe Weiss and Matthew Hall were joined by flutist Mathieu Langlois in a Trio Sonata in E Minor. This may not be Bach’s most inspired composition, but it was played very well, with great moments in the viola and a subtle sense for intonation in the flute. In another of the quartets with Clavier, Langlois and Miller were accompanied by Ryan MacEvoy McCullough, who treated the fortepiano with delicacy and accuracy, and produced a well-projected tone. These performances as a whole were an impressive demonstration of the versatility of Cornell’s current crop of musicology graduate students and faculty. The last piece on the program was a beautiful performance of the wonderful collaboration between Bach and Klopstock, *Klopstocks Morgengesang am Schöpfungsfeste*, Wq 239, performed by the Cornell Chamber Orchestra under Chris

Younghoon Kim, together with the Cornell University Chorus and soloists Lucy Fitz Gibbon and Sarah Mesko.

Peter Sykes’s clavichord recital, again in Anabel Taylor Chapel, concluded the conference. Sykes performed on two clavichords from his collection, a double-fretted five-octave instrument by Koen Vermeij and an unfretted five-octave instrument by Arnold Dolmetsch, built in 1906 in the Chickering workshop. The program consisted of three sonatas by C. P. E. Bach and the A Minor Rondo, Wq 56/5, the numbers VI and I from Beethoven’s Bagatelles, op. 33 and Haydn’s F Minor variations, Hob. XVII:6. In a true end-of-conference mood I took a risk

and placed myself toward the back wall of the chapel, quite far away from the soloist. This proved to be not a problem: Sykes’s instinct for gesture and timing let me follow his playing note for note and gesture for gesture. The sound of either instrument was—obviously—not strong, but very clear throughout. Both clavichords have a somewhat more yielding touch than the one



Peter Sykes’s masterclass. Photo: Tilman Skowronek

Tom Beghin had performed on, and invite a different kind of flexibility, of which Sykes is a master. Especially memorable was the A Minor Rondo, which can sound lengthy, as the theme recurs rather often. Sykes was able to give the theme a new face every time it could be heard, and made great use of rhetorical pauses without losing control over the structure of the piece. All in all, Sykes combined his highly convincing interpretations with great tonal control and exquisite precision—a very suitable conclusion to three extremely stimulating days of learning and listening.



AN INTERVIEW WITH HARPSICHORDIST AND CONDUCTOR SKIP SEMPÉ

Skip, when I first met you more than thirty years ago—a young enthusiastic American in Paris visiting the private collection of Yannick Guillou—you were bursting with excitement about playing the harpsichord, about the instruments themselves, and very eager to talk about both. What is it that brought you to the harpsichord?

What brought me to the harpsichord were the recordings of Landowska and Leonhardt. That was during the years that I lived in New Orleans, and the only access to any harpsichord repertoire or ‘early music’ was recordings. I was completely fascinated by the music, the instrument, and the power of the performances. It is true that these three elements still inspire me, and indeed I have dedicated the greater part of my everyday life to this particular excitement.

And so, you are still in Paris, and still enthusiastic. Speaking strictly as a harpsichordist, what is it that makes Paris so special?

Many things, mostly ‘historical’ by now... There is a long tradition that actually goes back to the very end of the nineteenth century.

The early music movement began in Paris with Wanda Landowska. She was not only the first to establish a school for early music but she also created the first French early music festival. Rafael Puyana, her last student in the United States, ended up in Paris along with his famous three-manual Hass harpsichord from 1740.

The harpsichord maker Anthony Sidey, who studied at the Dolmetsch shop in England but went on to make traditional-style harpsichords, moved to Paris as well. In fact, Anthony Sidey was the first to make harpsichords of extraordinary quality in France.

An idea of the importance of cultural heritage from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was somehow valued by the French throughout the twentieth century, though this idea is now on the way out... At this point in time, the French are politically obsessed with an over-concern for ‘creation contemporaine’, which, in the art of music, means living composers and the funded performance of their works—in which there is no real interest.

The French (and they are by no means alone) refuse to come to terms with the fact that the preservation of tradition is in fact the greatest of all contemporary art forms. That is the reason why many great French classical organs were the victims of disastrous restorations in the twentieth century. In Germany and Holland, Baroque organs were restored with respect to the traditions

in which they were originally made.

It was our mutual interest in a fine historical harpsichord that brought us into the same salon back then. What is it that fascinates you in a good instrument?



Skip Sempé. Photo: Marco Borggreve

Playing an instrument that is an acoustic marvel is always the most fascinating experience. Of course, all the different traditions of harpsichord making are not at all alike, but they have to be real acoustic marvels to be interesting.

A good harpsichord at home can be something else than a safe or suitable choice for a performance. If you had to choose, what would you pick for a recital? A harpsichord that most of all sounds gorgeous, one that easily adjusts itself to your musical ideas, one that feels safe to play, or the most adequate type of instrument for the music you play?

It depends on whether you are willing to play more than one instrument in a concert. For a recording, it is easier. It is always rewarding to play sixteenth- and seventeenth-century repertoire on a harpsichord based on instruments built a bit earlier than a Taskin from 1769.

There is a general tendency to remark that it is important to play on these instruments because they feel different, because of varying balance points of the keyboard, the various heights of the accidentals, the various octave spans, the various ways of cutting the dampers... But, in fact these instruments represent a totally different repertoire and a totally different sound world, and it is this sound world that runs the show. And, then, given that the instrument is beautiful, it is only the animation in the playing that counts.

What reaction do you sense in your audiences? Is the act of playing good harpsichords well something that still “comes across” in our time?

I am convinced, surprisingly enough, that what comes across in playing is fine-tuned subtlety and detail. Even in an extremely loud or fast or aggressive passage, it is still this subtlety and the detail that matter. And, playing fine instruments—either antiques or new instruments that are based on the acoustical mastery of fine antiques—is a must.

Playing the harpsichord is often a rather intimate affair—even if one plays on stage and for a larger audience. What are your tricks to make people listen?

The single most important ‘trick’ is to project the strongest possible musical idea. This is achieved in a series of steps, all of them important, regarding the efficient use of constant surprise and variety. The use of surprise and variety is nothing new, nothing original—this is the purest

tradition of all great composers and all great performers. It is a mastery of age-old rules that invariably work in the performance of the last 1000 years of Western music.

Harpsichordists have a lot to take care of: we don’t want to lose that little bit of land, conquered during the last century, that we love—we have to relate to a legacy. Your record label has, for example, published some unknown Landowska documents; we talk a lot about Leonhardt and what he meant to the musical world ... and so on. How does a harpsichordist make sense of the recent past of harpsichord playing and teaching, while also being a musician in her or his own right, who wants to be heard by an audience of today?

A real love for the harpsichord as a musical instrument is the essential pre-requisite.

And a real admiration for the music concerned. It is also interesting to study harpsichord playing of the past, simply for the perspective that it allows. Especially the playing of Landowska and Leonhardt, as they were the most influential harpsichordists of the twentieth century.

It seems to me that one never has enough time to work on all the music one loves. What’s your secret project that you would like to do if someone gave you a free year?

Certainly sixteenth- and seventeenth-century repertoire for solo harpsichord and for ensemble. In fact, from time to time, it is important to concentrate on music that people ‘need to hear’, rather than music that people ‘want to hear’.

Imagine yourself as a mentor: what would be the most important thing you would like to say to a younger generation of performers on the harpsichord? What’s to avoid in harpsichord performance, what should be encouraged?

One thing I learned from both Landowska and Leonhardt is that if one is in a position of influence, you have to judge your own playing rather severely. I think that copying and rigidity are to be avoided, and that tradition and flexibility are to be encouraged.

The other thing to be encouraged is the use of period instruments, using the special expressive playing techniques that are singularly appropriate to all acoustic musical instruments. I never played a modern instrument, so I have been rather spoiled by never having had to ‘convert’ to period instruments. The Mozart and Beethoven performances of Nikolaus Harnoncourt or Frans Brüggen

are far more successful than those of ‘modern’ conductors and orchestras.

The same question could be asked about harpsichord makers. There are some truly great instruments out there, and some have been made very recently. What would you want a harpsichord maker to do, or listen for, and why is it important?

I think that the most important thing to achieve as a harpsichord maker is to learn how to listen critically to the acoustic properties of the finest antiques, and then to attempt to make an honest version of one.

Loving and owning good instruments is always also a little melancholic. We labor to maintain and preserve them while we have use of them, but we fear that a next generation won't understand what made them so special. How healthy is the harpsichord world in Paris? Will an appreciation for our instrument last?

The current harpsichord world in Paris is quite healthy. There are a number of really fine players, and there is acceptance and mutual admiration between them, rather than a competitive atmosphere.

This has perhaps been influenced by the fact that most of the harpsichordists of the younger generation have studied with either Pierre Hantaï or with me. They have also understood that Pierre Hantaï and I have never been in competition over anything—we even teach master classes together now—so that has set a rather inspiring professional example for the younger generation. Everyone performs and records on everyone else's instruments, including the three double manual instruments from Leonhardt that went to Pierre Hantaï, Olivier Fortin and me.

How long it will last is a question that can't be answered, even on speculation. Too much attention is currently paid to law and technology, and not enough attention is paid to liberty and tradition. This is a sad phenomenon of our contemporary world. Even if what lasts is the appreciation of relatively few people, I do not find that a problem or a catastrophe.

Think of the owner of a chateau, or the curator of an important collection of paintings or furniture: *you* don't own *it*, *it* owns *you*.

Many thanks, Skip, for this interview!





The Westfield Center relies on donations from its members. Please consider making a donation towards our program of conferences, festivals, publications and the support of young keyboard artists.

<http://westfield.org/donate/>

Submissions and questions may be directed to:

Tilman Skowroneck, Editor (tilman@skowroneck.de)

Westfield Center for Historical Keyboard Studies

Department of Music
Cornell University
101 Lincoln Hall
Ithaca NY 14853

info@westfield.org / www.westfield.org

WESTFIELD CENTER
FOR HISTORICAL
KEYBOARD
STUDIES



© Westfield Center for Historical Keyboard Studies, 2014

