

Welcome to the eighth e-newsletter of the British Harpsichord Society.

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Editorial

Thank you very much to our correspondents. The newsletter needs: more letters; suggestions for featured harpsichord builders; articles; reviews – instruments, recitals, courses, recorded music, what is going on in your area; favourite instruments; favourite recordings; and anything else that may be of interest to readers. Please do write! (Email the Editor.)

I am grateful to Jane Clark for suggesting Michael Johnson as the featured builder for this issue, and to Michael Johnson for agreeing and sending text and pictures.

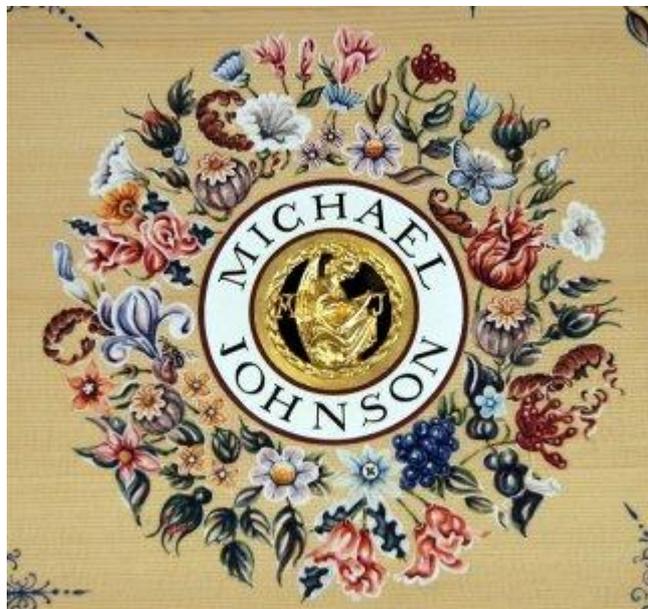
Please note that details of how to obtain a CD of David Wright's recording of the Goldbergs is buried amongst my 'Musical Jottings'. I am amazed that I have been to so much since the appearance of the January newsletter. I would have said I rarely go anywhere, or hear anything, apart from myself! Attending recitals in places like the British Library conference centre and St Martin-in-the-Fields, I am again made aware of how fortunate we are to have the lovely and intimate rehearsal room at the Handel House Museum for our monthly recitals. It is gratifying that they have been so well attended recently.

Michael Ackerman

Michael Johnson

Michael Johnson was apprenticed to John Broadwood & Sons, London, as a piano tuner and restorer in 1950. He opened his own piano restoration workshop in 1959, firstly in London and then in Devon, restoring and working for many of the then leading performers. After restoring a Blüthner grand for Julian Bream in 1967, he was offered a studio-workshop Julian Bream had previously built for his then guitar maker, David Rubio.

The Johnson Rose...



The first Johnson Harpsichord was made in 1969, and was used by George Malcolm for three recitals, before being sold. That instrument was much influenced by piano techniques, and Johnson was advised by Jane Clark to find an original instrument to copy. An Italian by Nicolas Gregori was chosen and subsequently bought by Michael Thomas. Johnson then made several instruments of his own design, one of which was bought by Ruth Dyson, which she later named Lady Blue. In 1971, Johnson was introduced, by the late Tom Goff, to Mrs. Russell, mother of the late Raymond Russell, then owner of a collection of instruments which were to form the basis of The Russell Collection of Early Instruments, now in Edinburgh. Mrs. Russell had retained from that collection a Hass

Clavichord and a French double-manual harpsichord, then thought to have been made by Couchet, even though the name-board was inscribed 'Pascal Taskin 1783'. Both of those instruments are now with the main collection in Edinburgh, and a great deal of work and research has been done on the harpsichord. It has now been established that the instrument was made by Jan Goermans in 1764, not Couchet, and was enlarged by Taskin in 1783. Elizabeth de la Porte commissioned a copy of the Goermans-Taskin in 1971, which has formed the basis of all work coming from the Johnson workshop up to the present day.

Franco-Flemish Harpsichord...



Examples of the Johnson Goermans-Taskin can be found all over the world, with many of the leading academies using that model as their principal concert instrument: the Koninklijk Conservatorium, Gravenhage; the Sweelinck Conservatory, Amsterdam; the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford, Manchester, and Birmingham; the Royal College of Music, London; Trinity College, London; the Birmingham Conservatory, the Barber Institute, Birmingham; and the University of Western Australia, Perth - to name a few. The York Early Music Foundation and Glyndebourne Opera, England, also own Johnson instruments. Johnson double manuals based on the Goermans-Taskin are used for hire in London, Tokyo, and on the continent: so they are known and asked for by most of the leading performers. Many examples can be heard on record: Bob van Asperen used his Johnson Goermans-Taskin for most of the CDs recording the complete works of Soler.

Glueing in the Soundboard...



Michael Johnson kindly responded to some questions of mine:

A: How did you come to harpsichord building?

J: I got fed up with restoring pianos and wanted to make something from scratch, so to speak. I thought first of a virginal but changed my mind at the drawing-board, feeling that such a lot of work should be directed at a harpsichord, which was musically more interesting. Perhaps a mistake.

A: What were your first successes?

J: I think making the single manual for Ruth Dyson, who so generously supported me through those early years.

A: Any notable disasters that you would be willing to share?

J: I think I very much regretted number one, with all its pedals and piano influence. George Malcolm quite liked it but made caustic remarks about the instrument being quilled and not leathered; he did, however, give a public concert on it.

A: What are your favourite instruments?

J: Without doubt the Flemish school and Ruckers, both of which have dominated my thoughts over the last thirty-five years. I have concentrated all my thoughts and energy on that period and design, and allowed myself to develop in a narrow field. Some would say a mistake and feel they would be unable to restrict their direction, but my total interest in the harpsichord has been to learn from the bench and develop with each instrument, so a single-minded approach was for me the only way. After so many years and well over a hundred instruments, they still improve in my mind, and the fascinating learning-curve goes on. In later years, I have concentrated very much on technique, thinking always of a way to improve on detail and the quality of the instrument at hand. The interesting result of such thought usually not only improves detail, it makes the operation quicker,

which is why we now make some five instruments a year, compared with only two twenty years back.

A: Do you play?

J: Very badly but enough to know what is required for the player.

A: Have you any project yet to be realised?

J: I need to make an instrument that pleases me, and I doubt I will achieve that. Perhaps that is a good thing - for what would there be left to work for should that happen?

A: Any comments on the way 'early' music has developed and the present state of affairs in Britain?

J: I think that we are so lucky to live and work in a country so rich in the Early Music movement and blessed with so many talented players and performers. I also feel there is great support for that movement, with some very fine makers in this country, many of whom I truly admire. The early years for me were not easy and, as with university students, the overdraft grew. I would think that is also the case with many of the new talented makers that are appearing. But they should stick to the mill and not be deterred: money is not the most important item in life, and only time will make them realise that.

Soundboard
Decoration...



Buying or selling an instrument?

William Vine writes:

Our Instruments for Sale and Wanted page attracts twenty-five to thirty visitors each day (about eight hundred per month), making it a good starting point for buying and selling. I recently saw an advert on ebay where the seller had posted video clips of the instrument being played to give potential buyers a better idea (including showing that all notes work). We can host mp3 sound files with adverts for a small extra charge, so potential buyers can hear your instrument, as well as see it.

British Harpsichord Society Events

John Erskine writes:

We have been most fortunate in the quality of performances and the warmth of audience-reception that we have been enjoying: I am sure both will continue through the coming months, when we shall be presenting a varied and very interesting series of recitals. If any one composer can be said to occupy the focal point for the remainder of the year, it is Johann Sebastian Bach - and surely no one will quarrel with that. But we are also giving appropriate prominence, in this year of anniversaries, to Buxtehude, Froberger, and Scarlatti.

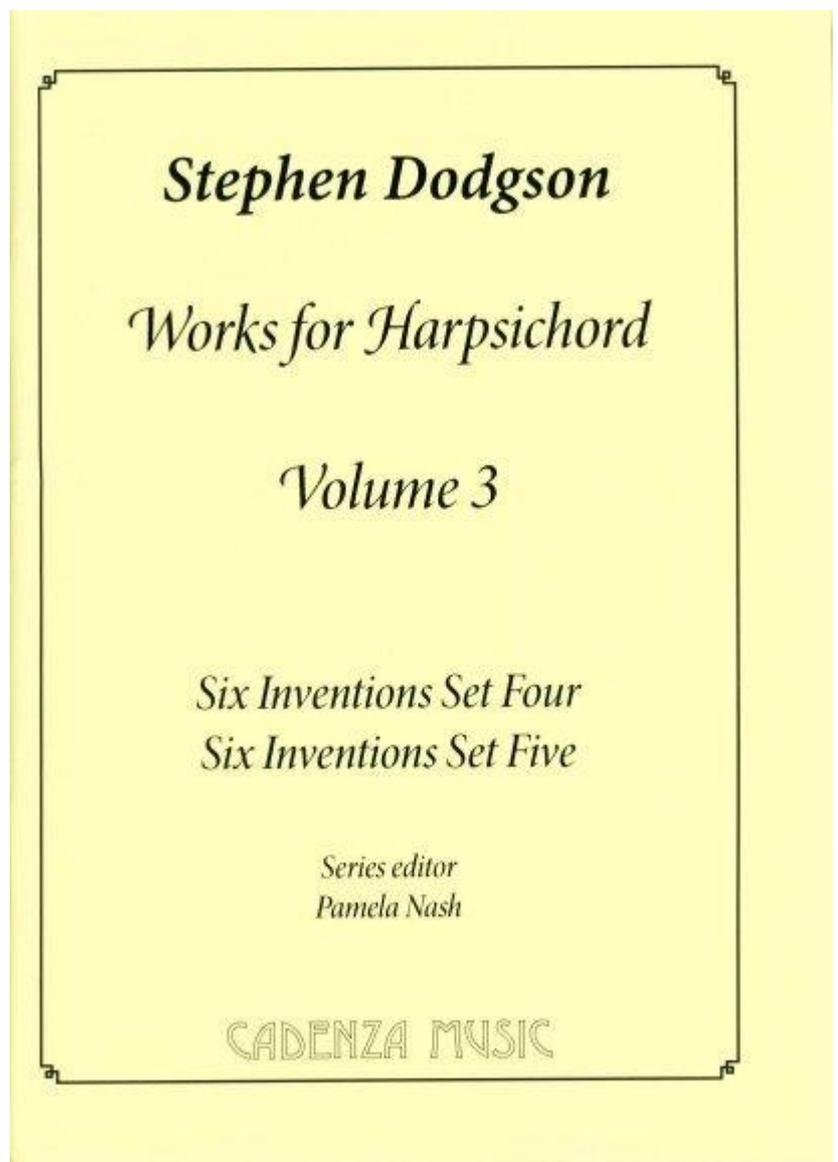
a new edition from Cadenza) forms a climax to Stephen's fifty years of special association with our instrument. No less than eight harpsichordists will assemble at the Handel House Museum on the afternoon of June 2nd to celebrate this achievement, performing an excellent selection of the works. There seem to be two outstanding characteristics to Stephen Dodgson's music: his sympathetic writing for the harpsichord fully recognises in modern music the historic status of the instrument; and secondly, his combination of rhythmic vitality with warmth and lyricism makes this true contemporary music but with wide appeal. As always, a page on our website will provide further details.

Just a few days after that, on June 12th, Simon Perry will help us to re-focus on the baroque repertoire: his programme concentrates on three substantial works - all of them indisputably masterpieces. In July, there will be a fascinating mixture of tradition and innovation, when Larry Palmer visits from America (Tuesday July 10th). I am sure we shall find his programme not only hugely enjoyable, but educative in the process. There is no one we would rather have to close the current season for us than Jane Clark (August 14th): Jane is well known as the very generous moving spirit behind many of our events that give opportunities to other performers, but we have also managed to persuade her to give us an individual recital, consisting of music from one of the two areas for which she is particularly renowned - the French baroque.

Fortunately, our events will continue after the current season without interruption, as a new season will begin in September, with a recital (September 18th) by Luke Green - an extremely interesting programme concluding with Bach's Chromatic Fantasia & Fugue... by which time, no doubt, another Newsletter will be due for publication, and there will be a chance to say a little about the remaining months of the year, when we shall be hearing Colin Booth, Tom Foster, and Sharon Gould.

It is a pleasant duty again to thank, on behalf of the BHS, the harpsichordists who have played for us in the past, and those who will be playing for us in the coming months.

Stephen Dodgson's complete Works for Harpsichord are now available in three volumes from Cadenza Music, edited by Pamela Nash, who will be performing - in company with seven other harpsichordists - at our celebratory event...



Winchester Early Music Series

William Vine writes:

The Series began in September 2006 and has featured a number of BHS members, under the dedicated organisation of Micaela Schmitz. Keyboard performers have included David Wright, Micaela Schmitz, Bridget Cunningham, Penelope Cave, Helena Brown and Julian Perkins, sometimes joined by singers and other instrumentalists. Performers have used clavichords, harpsichords and an early square piano.

The Series has used a delightful eighteenth-century venue, the Milner Hall in Winchester, which was originally the first public Catholic church consecrated in this country since 1558. It was deconsecrated around a hundred years ago, when a larger church was built alongside. The Milner Hall is in a quiet setting and has a marvellous acoustic that makes even a clavichord recital quite audible. The cost of the venue is quite low, which helps with the economics of the venture.

The Series was conceived as an experiment to enable artists to self-promote events within an existing framework. Essentially, the performer(s) pay the cost of the venue and a contribution to promotional costs; then they receive the takings from ticket sales. It is not without risk, but there is a growing list of attendees who are notified by email of future events. It is intended to be lower risk than performers self-promoting an event from scratch, but the Series has no financial backing to underwrite or pay fixed fees to performers.

Anybody interested in participating in future is invited to contact Micaela Schmitz.)

Letters to the Editor

Dear Michael,

Thanks for publishing my letter in the BHS Newsletter. I have read Mr. Green's letter and your comment asking if there are more Landowska fans out there. I say YES, and my comment is obvious: if the harpsichord had evolved just like the fortepiano did, the final result would have been Landowska's harpsichords, which are nowadays so unjustly underrated by 'orthodox' historicists. This opinion does not diminish the real pleasure of listening to a historical reproduction of an eighteenth-century harpsichord. I think that both lines of thought may and should coexist.

Yours,

Pedro A. Tesone
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Dear Michael Ackerman:

It is nice to read the opinions of knowledgeable people such as Miki Lindser and Prof. Pedro Tesone. As regards the latter, I am in a situation very similar to his own, since I live in Chile and cannot take part in the interesting activities advertised in this newsletter. Concerning Miki Lindser, I wholly agree with him about the often unfortunate replacement of the harpsichord by the piano. Exceptions to this rule are Rosalyn Tureck's versions of the Bach partitas. The sound of the harpsichord is irreplaceable, for aesthetic as well as historical reasons. The most incredible show of sonority in this instrument is the 'Fandango' of Antonio Soler - the best work of his that I know, his Sonatas being a little overrated.

By the way, I am glad that Spanish music is being studied and appreciated again - and in England, of all places - after so many centuries of oblivion. I think the best of it was created during the renaissance; but, nevertheless, it seems that the Spanish baroque holds some good surprises for everyone.

I apologize for these rather disparate considerations, but it is so good to find people with the same interests that you have. Go ahead!

Raúl Simón

Dear Editor,

Thank you for the newsletter and all your hard work. Regarding harpsichord music played on the piano: I guess there are many pianists who love their instrument and like it played that way. I have no objection to such broadcasts. I can tell when this is going to happen, as the piece will be introduced as 'for keyboard'. Of course most of the time the keyboard could only have been anything but piano. I think the phrase 'transcription for piano' would be more appropriate. For me, there is so much lost playing harpsichord pieces on the piano, and the justification and techniques of accomplishing it get very convoluted.

I am still very attached to Radio 3, except when they broadcast world music, which I feel should be on another channel. However, if we lost Radio 3, it would be a sad day.

Regards

Jim Paton

Richard Siegel's New Method

Les Editions Alphonse Leduc has just published my new method for beginning harpsichordists. It is, from all the feedback I've had, a most welcome addition to the repertory, and a welcome relief to the aging Amsterdam Harpsichord Book. The method is published in four languages, including English of course, and I would be very pleased if you could post this information somewhere. Volume 2 is scheduled to come out this summer, taking students to the end of about four years of work.

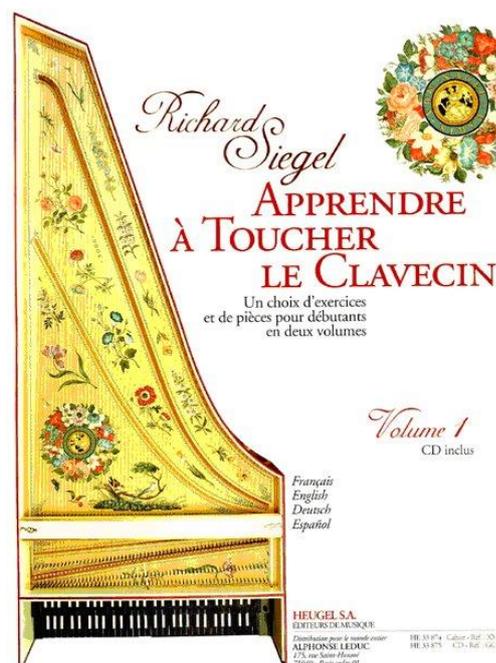
Thank you.

Very sincerely,

Richard Siegel

Harpsichord Professor at the St. Maur National Conservatory (near Paris)

A New Method for Learning to Play the Harpsichord...



The Ackerman Virginals

At the beginning of March, I decided that I had to get some sort of harpsichord, whether or not I had the room. (I have been wanting one since I was about 11!) At the now defunct Chiltern Street Harpsichord Centre, a couple of years ago, they had a couple of Alex Hodsdon virginals, which I liked very much, in tone, in look, and in size. I looked at the Early Music Shop website, and saw they were still for sale, a couple of thousand pounds each! So I Googled 'Alex Hodsdon virginals', and apart from the EMS ones, there was one other, which was at a piano shop in the wilds of Bedfordshire. The website photo of the case looked lovely, and they wanted £880

Virginals by Alec Hodsdon...



A dear friend of mine died a few years ago, a fellow imbibor of wine and early music, leaving me £1,000. This money has languished in Premium Bonds up to now, and having decided to buy an instrument I thought what an excellent idea to use the bequest to buy one. Off I went to the piano shop, direct line from King's Cross. I was very disappointed to find a very sad and dusty instrument, unplayable, and with the original leather plectra. They had bought it years ago, an impulse purchase at an auction.

Well, they gave me to understand that they were open to offers. I returned home rather subdued. However, the well-known interpreter of the Goldberg Variations, David Wright, has quite a bit of experience of these instruments, and I 'phoned him. He gave me very useful advice, which resulted in its ending up in my study. The evening of its arrival I gave it an 'antiquax' polish, and as a piece of furniture it immediately sprang to life. David replaced the leather with Delrin plectra and Andrew Wooderson repaired a couple of jacks. I found the maintenance information on this website invaluable, by the way. Having lived with it a little while, I decided that a thorough restoration was

needed, and Andrew W and his colleague Edmund Handy agreed to undertake the work. So during May it is at their workshop, and I eagerly await its reappearance.

The Virginals - with lid open...

