

*On  
Copying  
Historical  
Instruments*



THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A STANDARD HARPSICHORD, AND WHAT EXACTLY DO WE MEAN BY THE TERMS 'ITALIAN'; 'FRENCH' AND 'FLEMISH', ANYWAY? IN A BID TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANINGS (AND AT THE RISK OF BEING BLINDED BY TERMINOLOGY), **ANDREW WOODERSON**, HARPSICHORD BUILDER AND THIS ISSUE'S GUEST EDITOR, ASKS, WHEN IS A COPY A COMPROMISE?



**D**uring the 25 or so years I have been a professional harpsichord builder, I have often found myself wondering about some of the terms so freely used in our field: Instruments are described as 'copy of' or 'after' a certain historical maker. Sometimes even 'school of....' Terms such as 'Flemish', 'Italian' or even 'continuo' are used to describe harpsichords, often with a sense that the term refers to almost standardised designs and sounds.

Of course, the use of such terms in this context serves as useful shorthand, but it can also be very misleading. This article aims to gently meander through some of the considerations and choices that may be made when 'copying' an old instrument, and the way in which some of these common terms

are applied - with varying degrees of accuracy!

How is the choice of instrument made and what informs the choice? Of course, in a concert situation with mixed repertoire, it is usually necessary to select a single instrument with a compass and specification suitable for the entire programme, and this necessarily suggests a relatively large, late instrument. And very often there is a simple matter of availability.

But it seems to me that makers and players are often trying to head in slightly different directions. Players seem commonly to look for instruments that are 'safe' and comfortable, with tone and quality of construction being secondary considerations, while the relation of the modern 'copy' to its

historical predecessor comes a poor third! Many instrument builders, on the other hand, appear keen to strive for greater fidelity to a given historical instrument. And in recent times, although access to some original instruments is a little more restricted than the slightly more relaxed attitude pertaining 30 or more years ago, they have access to large volumes of excellent information, technical drawings and research.

But this situation produces an interesting paradox: Players often seek safe and comfortable instruments before historically accurate, but often rather challenging and even superficially 'limiting' instruments. The player, seeking usually to give something broadly along the lines of 'historically informed performance' tends to seek trusted 'safe' instruments on which to perform, rather than be drawn towards the very best, least compromised historic copies. These instruments by their very nature may influence the way a player can perform. And for the player this is a real issue. Should you allow a well researched, carefully built instrument to change the way you play? For example, should a particularly wide octave span and shallow touch (as may be found on many original Italian instruments) be seen as *guidance* or *hindrance* to performance?

And the builder, usually out of sheer commercial necessity, tends to be nudged towards making 'comfortable', 'safe' instruments, often knowingly disregarding clear and unambiguous historic evidence in order to build harpsichords that

appeal to a wide range of players. Such historical 'inconveniences' range from ranks of strings that remain undamped when not engaged; solo 4' registers on the upper manual with no means of coupling; early Flemish harpsichords with unfavourable key leverage (i.e. the balance points a long way forward); dog-leg couplers, or lower manuals that slide to couple, short bass octaves and countless other features. There appears to be a fairly general trend to change rather than explore.

Should the builder be lead by players (who after all are the customers!) tastes to build harpsichords with a wide appeal? Or should they strive to make the very best, historically informed and carefully researched instruments with the aim of providing the very best tools for players? Of course the reality is that the demands of the customers have to be paramount, as the customers provide the means of earning a living.



To illustrate this issue I should mention the post-graduate student who perhaps rents a rather rough kit built 'Flemish' harpsichord for practice at home. And at college usually has lessons and gives recitals on one of several quite nice

but rather worn copies of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French harpsichords. These instruments were perhaps built in the early 1980s, and have been very heavily used. Eventually the time comes when this student and aspiring professional player decides to buy their first new instrument. This is a big step and a major financial commitment. After much thought and discussion with one or more makers, usually centred on cost, size, compass and portability, the young player orders a small 'Italian' harpsichord of one kind or another. The thinking is that this would be useful for continuo playing and relatively easy to transport. But the player asks for a wide, chromatic compass and transposition.

So what does the builder do? Build a 'real' small Italian harpsichord? This might one can imagine be based on a particularly fine example from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, well known to the builder, with good plans already available and easy access for further research. But the same instrument probably has a C/E-c compass with the short bass octave, it certainly doesn't transpose and was probably intended for a different pitch than that now required. Then it probably originally has no lid, being intended to be housed within an outer case. There are no stoplevers and one of the 8' registers is set permanently in the 'on' position. The octave span of the original instrument is about 2mm greater than a modern piano span and therefore much wider than a typical 18<sup>th</sup> century French harpsichord. The sharps are very wide and low and the spacing unfamiliar - there

being wide gaps between them. The keydip is very shallow and there is relatively little cloth on the insubstantial jackrail. Finally there is no original music desk.

This is where what I think of a 'driving school syndrome' appears. When one learns to drive it is very common (and not surprising) that when the young driver starts to

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look for a first car to own, their view is very strongly shaped by the car on which they received lessons. They want their new car to feel just like the nice, familiar car in which they learnt to drive.

So if the harpsichord builder builds a beautiful copy of his favourite little 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian harpsichord, the young customer may well be a little disappointed. Of course the builder will make adjustments for pitch etc, but what of the other issues?

The new copy is a delightful instrument but the player finds the keyboard unfamiliar and

uncomfortable. It seems to dictate a particular approach and playing style and limits certain techniques. The tone doesn't work at all well for some of the repertoire, the registration is very limited and the second 8' rank, operated by a lovingly copied, small wooded 'tag' under the jackrail is awkward to engage. And all this is assuming that the maker hasn't even attempted to build the instrument with a correct short bass octave. And then there is the fragile, light case (or the extra expense and considerable extra weight of the outer case) and the inconvenience caused by the lack of a music desk.

What the student really had in mind was a small version of the old, familiar college instrument - something that was 'comfortable' and familiar, but just a little smaller, cheaper and more practical.

*HOW MUCH SHOULD BUILDERS COMPROMISE, AND WHERE DOES IT LEAD? OFTEN THE COMPROMISES ARE DICTATED BY PRACTICALITY AND COMMERCIAL VIABILITY... AND THE FIRST CASUALTY IS USUALLY IN DECORATION!*

Harpsichord builders generally understand these points but **how much** should they compromise and where does the compromise lead? And often the compromises will be for the purposes of coming closer to the expectations of players. These players own views and tastes were formed by years playing on older instruments in colleges, built by makers who in turn were influenced by the need to appeal to the prevailing taste of the time. And these compromises by builders are encouraged most commonly by the

simple need to sell instruments to make a living.

And then of course there is a second area in which compromise by builders almost always occurs; that of practicality and commercial viability. The first casualty is usually in decoration. Carving, gilding and decorative paintwork are all very costly. In fact I strongly suspect that the relative cost in these modern times might well be higher than in the historical period, when carvers, gilders, and painters were likely to be found in most major towns.

But the sheer cost of building harpsichords - workshops and overheads, materials, labour etc. produces pressure to cut costs where possible. Depending on a particular builder's outlook this may mean compromises in the quality of material, the degree of elaboration in decoration - not just

painted decoration but in the simplification of mouldings, omission of features such as decorative roses, embossed or carved keyfronts etc. And none of this comes from sloth or laziness. From all I hear from colleagues, most of us work long hours for only modest rewards.

So typically, thinking again of the example of the Italian harpsichord for the student player, the builder is quite likely to do most of the following: Firstly omit the short

bass octave and build the harpsichord with a chromatic compass. A few extra notes might well be added to increase the possible repertoire (for example a C/E-c3 compass might well become BB-d3). This might reduce the size of the endblocks or even widen the case. The reduced width endblocks will be likely to cause the extreme treble and bass strings to be much closer to the case sides, very likely spoiling, or at the very least changing the quality of tone at these points. Then further compression or case widening will be necessary to allow space for transposition by at least one semitone, though these days transpositions by two semitones is usually desirable. Then the keyboard octave span and layout is likely to be revised - reducing the octave span will slightly reduce the compression caused by trying to

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squeeze in extra notes. It will also have the useful (in the context of our example) effect of making the keyboard feel slightly more familiar. The builder will almost certainly fit conventional stoplevers, allowing the useful (but completely unhistorical) possibility

of using either 8' stop on its own.

This assumes of course that this is an instrument that actually had two stops at 8' pitch to start with.

Then very commonly the builder might suggest building the harpsichord with a 'false inner/outer' case rather than a separate outer case, thus allowing the fitting of a proper lid - a process that was increasingly used by historical builders during the 17<sup>th</sup> century so in many ways one of the more valid changes. And for various reasons of cost, supply or even just ease of working, various materials may be substituted. For example Cedar of Lebanon may be used instead of the more commonly occurring Italian Cypress in some applications. The timber for the case may be changed and the stand simplified and made easier to transport. None of these changes suggest the result will be an inferior instrument, simply one that stretches terms like 'copy' and 'after'.

What I have illustrated at some length is a very typical scenario and comes from personal experience. All the changes and compromises in themselves seem reasonable and practical.

But all this does seem to be at odds with the approach commonly taken to musical sources. I can't imagine musicians in our enlightened times changing notes and altering ornaments in reliable original manuscripts just because they didn't 'fit' or were 'difficult'! None of these comments are meant in a judgemental way and in my own work I find myself very much in the

midst of such considerations. But at best I hope my observations may be very gently provocative...

And those general terms mentioned in the first paragraph... What is actually meant by an 'Italian' harpsichord? I think it was Raymond Russell in 'The Harpsichord and Clavichord' that first really grouped surviving harpsichords together in national 'school' of building. This remains a useful shorthand, but implies a degree of uniformity that can be highly misleading. Consider the 'Italian' title for a moment:

Firstly the term encompasses instruments built over a period of more than three centuries - that is a longer time than the span from the first Cristofori fortepianos, to the present-day concert grand. How pianos have changed in that time! Then it covers a wide geographical area of separate states, with differing local materials. All these states would have had varying amounts of trade with other nations, making available a variety of other materials. And tastes changed enormously over three centuries. What might be termed the 'social status', or possibly the relative cost of a harpsichord is another pertinent factor. In Italy there seems to have been a fairly steady change from the elaborate, beautifully decorated, generally quite small instruments of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century to larger, simpler and more utilitarian instruments of the later 18<sup>th</sup> century.

But of course what people generally mean by 'Italian harpsichord' is just a single manual instrument with

two 8' registers, and a compass of at least four or more octaves chromatic.

The same is true of the term 'Flemish'. The Flemish harpsichord of 1557, the year Hans Ruckers the Elder petitioned to join the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp, is a very different instrument indeed to the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century instrument of Bull or Dulcken. But generally players tend to think of a Flemish harpsichord as medium-sized instrument of one or two manuals, suitable for 'most of the repertoire'. The use of these generalised national groupings becomes even more misleading when referring to German or Iberian instruments.

These views are of course perfectly reasonable, but maybe it is time to encourage players to explore their instruments in slightly greater depth and sometimes to seek more appropriate choices for performance? Of course this already happens, to some extent, and a number of players care very greatly about the subject. But the general level of knowledge or concern displayed by many players regarding the instruments they use appears to lag a long way behind their comparable understanding and knowledge of music and performance.

To change this is maybe asking a lot. It is rarely possible for most players to afford to own more than one harpsichord. And to follow the 'historically appropriate' route more thoroughly would suggest a number of contrasting instruments are required in order to do justice to a reasonably wide repertoire.

Nevertheless I believe there is some scope for change. Colleges perhaps have a role to play by placing increasing emphasis on acquiring a varied range of high-quality and relatively uncompromised copies of specific types of harpsichord. And by providing more opportunities to study the history, development and construction of instruments, as an integral part of the study of music and performance. Well-informed and articulate instrument makers should surely be involved with the teaching in music colleges and universities? This already happens to some extent but should surely become standard practice.

And perhaps we builders should become a little braver and more rigorous in our approach to the old instruments we purport to 'copy'? Of course producing a clumsy and awkward instrument can never be justified by claiming to simply have

suggesting this - a brand new design, starting from a clean sheet of paper may well produce a very fine and wonderful instrument. But this needs to be fully understood in the context of 'historically informed performance' (or whatever the current favoured term may be). There seems to me to be a danger that players and builders may lead each other further and further away from the way we understand (and to a growing extent know) things were.

And I suggest players might be encouraged more strongly to be ready to use, explore and experiment with these more rigorously copied instruments. And of course the practical experience of player actually using these instruments serves in turn to inform builders. Rather than assume that certain accurately reproduced historical features represent limitations or difficulties, perhaps

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'copied the original' - it is not just a useful excuse to cover mediocre workmanship. But perhaps 'Copy' can come to mean 'close copy based on a thorough study of the original'; 'After' might come to mean 'very clearly and recognisably related to the work of a particular historical builder'; and 'School of..' might mean 'an instrument clearly built in the style and with all the principle features of a specific historical maker's work'. I don't mean to sound too dogmatic when

these same features should be looked as offering guidance to historical performance?

So, having held forth at some length, I feel some obligation to describe my own approach. The example cited above of the student and the Italian harpsichord, is completely true and representative of a number of similar situations I have experienced in recent years. I build harpsichords for a living and I need to sell them in order to continue. So I readily admit that my

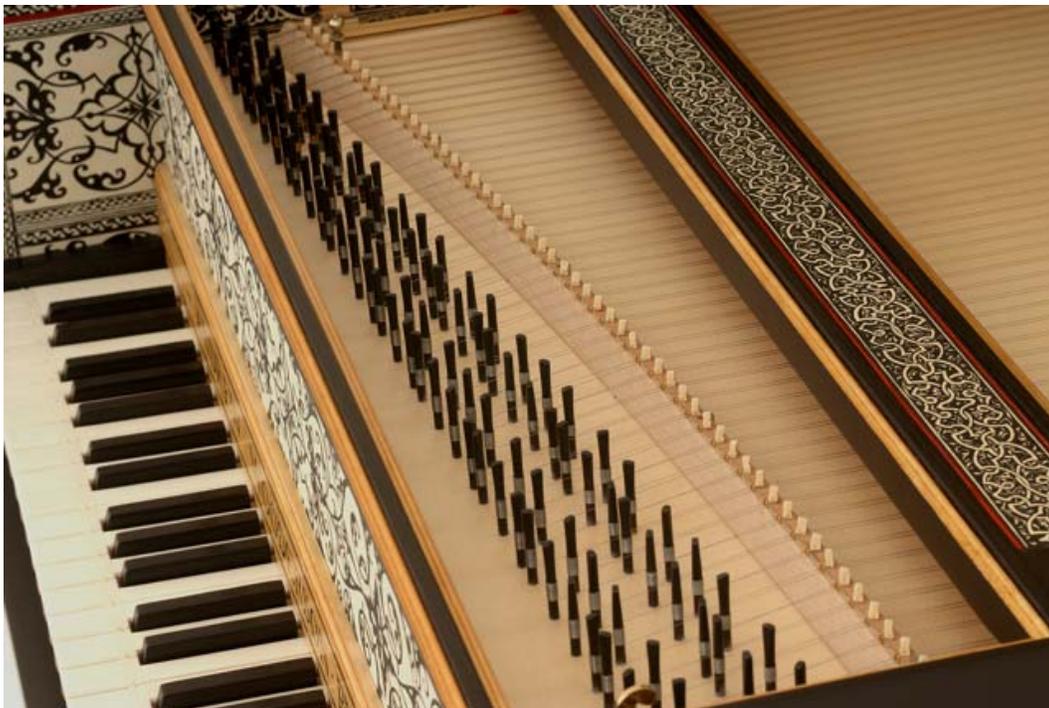
building is to an extent influenced by what people tell me they want.

I've chosen to illustrate this article with pictures of two of my own instruments; the first is an Italian harpsichord, which I tend to describe as 'after Grimaldi'; it is based on the Nurnberg instrument by this maker. In building it, I have made almost all of the practical compromises I described in the example above, save that I have used historically appropriate materials, of the highest quality I was able to source.

The other instrument is based on a surviving original by Ioannes Couchet. In its present, largely unaltered state, the harpsichord does not have the musical specification the customer was

seeking. So I subjected the design to a hypothetical 'petit ravelment', drawing guidance from the many Ruckers and Couchet family instruments thus treated. It might be stretching it to call the result a true 'copy'; it is rather (I hope) a convincing 'might-have-been' instrument. This approach allowed me to keep the case shape and proportions intact and most of the other details have quite close historical inspiration.

My guiding principle, such as it is, can probably be summarised by 'the old builders probably knew best'. In building harpsichords for the modern world, some changes and compromises are almost inevitable, but I find it helpful to imagine what the old folk would have thought of my choices. ✱



... *A Final Note* (♪)

# RAIDER OF THE LOST ARCHIVES

*The Early Music Pioneers Archive is a filmed research project, about the revival of interest in the authentic performance of early music, writes founder, researcher and blogger Paul Thwaites. Can you help enrich the archive?*

This project is an extension of my research into the life of one my teachers, Mary Potts (1905–1982), the Cambridge-based harpsichordist, who was a student of Arnold Dolmetsch, the foremost pioneer of the early music revival, in the late 1920s. Mary bought an eighteenth-century harpsichord made by Burkat Shudi from Arnold (as she couldn't afford one of Arnold's own 'better' instruments) and used it throughout her life for teaching, concert performances and radio broadcasts.

Although Mary is cited in a newspaper article as being someone who, in the 1950s and 60s, was 'keeping the harpsichord alive', she was apparently 'not famous enough' to be commemorated, despite having taught Christopher Hogwood, Colin Tilney, and the organ and Bach expert Professor Peter Williams, to name but a few. And as my research continued and I contacted pre-eminent performers, conductors and scholars whom Mary had known personally, had performed with, or had taught during a professional

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life which spanned more than 50 years, two things became clear: 1.) Mary knew practically everyone involved in the harpsichord and authentic performance until the 1980s; 2.) She was only one of the many people involved in early music whose contribution has not been acknowledged.

Even people such as Arnold Goldsbrough (founder of the English Chamber Orchestra), Sir Anthony Lewis, E. H. Fellowes and Thurston Dart, all well known in their lifetimes, are now largely forgotten outside the world of historically informed performance and academic musicology. They can hardly even be found in reference works or online, except, perhaps, for a listing of CD transfers and a brief and often inaccurate obituary.

Goldsbrough, for example, only gets a single mention in Haskell's *The Early Music Revival* – for influencing Dart, who was his student – but there's nothing about his 1938 Bach Cantatas, with recorders, or his ground-breaking work for the brand-new Third Programme, which included a very light-footed, small-forces version of *Acis & Galatea*, and dozens of historical programmes and live broadcasts. Fellowes, who was

quite the celebrity (having been invited to lecture in the US by President Coolidge's wife in 1927), has but half-a-dozen lines devoted to him in the Oxford History of Music. We know almost nothing about people like Desmond Dupré, who worked with Alfred Deller, taught himself the lute and gamba, and regularly popped up in all sorts of ensembles. And although the wiki about Anthony Bernard lists his 1929 recording of the Brandenburgs

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with the Dolmetsches, it focuses more on his Elgar and Delius, and neglects even to mention his work with unknown Baroque repertoire and his very authentic-sounding broadcast performance of Rameau's *Dardanus*; made at a time when the Kuijken brothers were still in short trousers!

Apart from acknowledging the pioneers, and collating the scant published information with personal reminiscences, my aim is to discover how this 'movement' gathered impetus and overcame resistance from the musical establishment, at a time when all music was played in exactly the same way. The cherished Messiah 'tradition' didn't make things any easier, and many innovations were simply not well received. In the early years, poor Arnold Dolmetsch was regularly slammed by the critics: in one particularly savage review in *The Times*, the performance of a piece for two viols was described as sounding like 'toothache calling unto toothache'.

Whereas there are many oral histories relating to communities, industries and crafts, my preliminary research suggests that practically no such work has been done on music and musicians, and that the material I plan to explore is a huge untapped resource. I have already discovered previously unknown documentation, photos, recordings and other ephemera which provide additional historically important raw material.

A major element of TEMPAR will consist of interviews, in which amateur and professional musicians, instrument makers, academics and others who were actually involved in the revival will share their personal experience and anecdotes, on camera, along with those who witnessed the developments close at hand. Apart from describing their own professional lives, they will share their memories of those unacknowledged early-music pioneers, as well as giving new insights into literary and musical figures more familiar to us

today, such as Kathleen Ferrier, Toscanini, David Munrow, Pablo Casals, W. H. Auden and Professor Edward Dent – memories and insights which would otherwise be hidden from history. They will fill in gaps in our knowledge of the revival's back-story, create 'living' biographies of musicians who deserve to be remembered, give us a more vivid picture of our common past and help to clarify trends, influences and previously unseen connections.

As the first generation of pioneers, responsible for the rediscovery of old instruments and playing styles, is gone, I'll be focusing on musicians active just after the war, when some very significant breakthroughs began to take place. But time is short: if the recollections of this second generation are not recorded urgently, this fascinating part of our social history and cultural heritage will disappear. Several important pioneers, whose lives have largely gone unrecorded, have recently died, and their memories are now sadly lost to us forever. As most of those concerned are now over 70, it is vital that field work continues apace.

The initial output will consist of digital storytelling in the form of a blog – [www.semibrevity.com](http://www.semibrevity.com) – in which the narrative is interspersed with photos and documentation, extracts of video interviews, embedded video from other sources, plus digitised sound files from private recordings, LPs and 78 rpm discs. I hope that there will also be some crowd sourcing; and that readers will supplement my research with their personal experiences (of concerts and meetings with the people concerned) and contribute memorabilia and recordings of 'lost' performances.

I've already started to promote the blog on social networks: see [http://twitter.com/](http://twitter.com/@semibrevity) (@semibrevity) and <http://www.facebook.com/> (Bert Shudi). If you think it's a good idea, please 'follow' me (and thereby stay up to date with new posts) and 'share', 'vote' or 'like' the blog, on sites like the ones shown on the Enjoy & Share bar on each blog page. Perhaps you could also forward information to like-minded friends and colleagues who might be interested in the back-story of the early music revival.

This project could very easily become a very full-time job – in fact, it's already become difficult to continue as a hobby, so I'm trying to find funding for it. I am also looking for help both with technical matters and with the whole business of promoting the blog – otherwise it will be seen by about as many people as a billboard in the desert! In the meantime, offers of help in any of these areas would be very welcome indeed. ✱

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