



FOR THE RECORD

Negotiating your first solo harpsichord recording session need not be a traumatic experience. In the first of a series, John Buckman, recording engineer at ToneGnome.com, presents reassuringly jargon-free tips on finding a recording style that suits you to a tee

There is no 'right' way to record a solo harpsichord CD - though there are plenty of bad ways to do it. Here I'd like to give you an overview of the issues to consider. As I've grappled with the challenges of recording early instruments, I've realised there are lots of thorny issues!

Your first step will be to decide how your harpsichord should sound. This is more complicated than it seems! I came to love the sound of the harpsichord when I met my wife-to-be, a pianist about to make the move to the harpsichord. My experiences of the instrument had not been positive. I had heard it played in a church, from some distance away, and I found it echoey, tinny and percussive. The CDs I had heard captured this sound, which was

very tiring to listen to, I also found it difficult to follow the melodic line, and thus found most harpsichord music 'sameish'.

That changed when I visited a music store and heard the instrument up close, in a medium-sized room. Suddenly, the harpsichord came alive, with clear

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basses, separate melody lines, a subtle chorus effect, clear pitch and minimal percussive and mechanical noise. I fell in love with that sound - and unfortunately for our budget, we bought a harpsichord *and* a bentside spinet.

Ever since that day, my ideal harpsichord sound is one played in a medium-sized room, with not too much echo, a clear separation of voices, a perceptible and pleasing stereo image, and very crisp, full bass notes. That's my personal ideal sound, but it doesn't have to be yours.

Another ideal sound, for example, is the one the performer hears at the keyboard. Here, the basses are on the left, and trebles on the right, so you have an extremely wide 'stereo image'. You will also get a very full bass response. With the lute stop engaged, the sound bounces about in joyous, plucky abandon. Equally pleasing is the sound in the first few pews of a church, where the echo creates a kind of drone, warming up the whole acoustic space.

Finally, another common sound is akin to listening from the back of a church. As I mentioned, this isn't to my taste, but evidently not everyone feels this way, as it is very common on recordings. For performers, it has the advantage of creating a wash of echo, drowning out any small mistakes! This also mimics the concert experience for many people, as only a few sit in the front pews.

How to decide on your perfect sound

As everyone has their own ideal sound, how do you find yours? Clearly different instruments from different periods sound... well, different, and the repertoire you are recording must affect your choice. Personally, I feel that earlier, simpler harpsichords benefit from a closer sound, while bigger, later instruments can take some distance. Both approaches should reflect the simplicity of tone of earlier instruments, and the traditional venues in which the music was performed.

An ideal sound is the one the performer hears at the keyboard. Here, the basses are on the left, trebles on the right, so you have a wide 'stereo image'

Your best first step is to listen to recordings of the same repertoire, and take notes. Ideally, focus on just one movement in one piece. Even better, find a piece with a very clear opening motif in the right hand, followed by the left hand, allowing you to hear each line separately and together. Is the melody clear and pleasing on its own? When the left hand enters, can you hear the two hands clearly, or are they blended together? Are the lower pitches clear, crisp and full? Or thin, sounding as though the left hand is playing mid-keyboard?

Next, try to find where there is a short pause in the playing (such as between movements) but the recording volume isn't faded down. This is useful for determining how large the 'echo' is. For this, I strongly recommend getting a pair of Sennheiser HD600 headphones, as these are accurate, fast, full-frequency and comfortable, and the ones most recording engineers use when recording classical music. With the harpsichord, there are lots of quick, transient sounds that other headphones miss, such as the plectrum gliding by a string. If you're making a CD, you need to be able to hear all of them. It's especially important that your headphones can reproduce these sounds, or you may end up with a recording that is pleasing on low-end equipment, but sounds quite the opposite on a quality hi-fi.

What to listen for

Get a sense of how 'large' the room is. This is the amount of time between a sound, and when it stops repeating. A very small room creates a 'short' echo, which can be pleasing – or it can sound like you're playing in your bathroom. In a complicated, real-world space, such as a small church, there might be a mix of short and long echoes, caused by nearby stone walls to the sides, mixed with the longer echo created by the length of the church. Generally, this sort of complicated echo is pleasing to the ear. However, a short echo from the side walls, can create a 'slap back' echo, where melody lines sound doubled, as though two musicians are playing them slightly out of time. Generally, this is remedied while recording by putting damping cloth on the side walls.

Work out how long the echo lasts. This is largely a function of how hard the walls are, and how much sound-absorbing material there is. Some echoes are loud, and can obscure the music. Others may last a long time, and at a lower volume, and create a pleasant atmosphere. A very large church or auditorium, with microphones placed near the instrument, will create this kind of sound.

Define the echo. Different materials absorb different frequencies. One reason the harpsichord sounds so 'trebly' from a distance in a church is

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that stone is good at reflecting high-pitched sounds, but tends to absorb the sounds from the bass. When you hear a harpsichord like this, you're mostly hearing reflected (echoed) sound. Now listen to the 'stereo image' of the recording (again, with headphones on) Are the right and left hand clearly separated, or mixed together? Does the recording sound flat and monophonic, or (at the other extreme) overly separated, bouncing from ear to ear and confusing? Bear in mind that the stereo image is significantly stronger with headphones on than it will be with speakers. Headphones are great for hearing details, but be sure to get a 'real world' feel for the sound by listening on speakers.

Your goal at this stage is simply to analyse what you like about a recording, so you can communicate it to your recording engineer. It will be their task to figure out how to get you the sound you like.

**To be continued...*

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If all this talk of different harpsichord sounds are confusing, don't panic! Magnatune.com, which I run, has a number of recordings that can be heard free of charge on the site (search for 'harpsichord'). For example, compare the *Harpsichord suites of Chambonnières* <http://magnatune.com/artists/albums/proosdij-chambon/> with *Les Baricades Misterieuses* <http://magnatune.com/artists/albums/proosdij-baricades/> both by Hanneke van Proosdij, to hear the difference between a warm church-recorded sound (Chambonnières) with a closer recorded-in-a-home sound (*Les Baricades*).



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Sweet Serendipity

While in Nice, Philip Thompson finds the 'Living Keyboard' exhibition at the grand Palace Lascaris, which boasts France's second-largest collection of historical musical instruments

The casual and uninformed visitor to 'Old' Nice can easily miss the Palais Lascaris. When I went some two years ago, the only thing that attracted my attention was a sign by a very modest entrance, saying 'Entrée Libre'. That, in itself, would not usually have been enough to incite me in, but I had nothing better to do... So, dodging the other tourists, and the homicidal scooter riders darting about like startled fish, I made my way in.

I passed through a small, dark, and utterly unpromising vestibule. From this point on, everything is a delight to the eye and to the soul; from the grand formal staircase with its trompe-l'oeil; to the gilded and painted panels and walls, the frescoed ceilings, the mirrors, the tapestries... In the Palais Lascaris, genuine faded grandeur, proud of its age, greets today's visitor with a benevolent and kindly smile. Here, history still sighs gently through its salons



The Debedan harpsichord (1770)



and corridors, and its heart throbs to the rhythms of the old city of Nice.

How fitting, then that the major exhibition that the Palais Lascaris is holding, until 29 October this year, is entitled 'The Living Keyboard'; most of the instruments on display are in playing condition and some, as part of the exhibition, have and will be, featured in several concerts and recitals.

The first hint I had of the importance of the Palais Lascaris, in organological terms, was a glass display cabinet containing two or three sack-butts - and of course, an enormous red harpsichord, holding pride of place in an upstairs room. In fact the Palais Lascaris holds the second-largest collection of historical musical instruments in France.

Its origin is the private collection, bequeathed to the city, of Antoine Gautier (1823-1904); it has continually been added to ever since. The Axa Group's Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel collection and archive were deposited here in 2009.

The three main contributing organisations to the exhibition are the Palais Lascaris itself, the Société Ad Libitum and Axa Group, but some exhibits have been loaned by private individuals, most notable of which is the Labrèche 1699 harpsichord, which has recently been awarded National Monument . The other institutional contributor is the 'Institut de France', contributing a



Photo: Muriel Assens

child's hurdy-gurdy of 1771, an anonymous clavitherium (made in the nineteenth or twentieth century, from eighteenth-century components), and a grand piano by Erard (1904).

As might be expected, Erard instruments are well represented here, and among the highlights must be considered the 1790 square piano (Palais Lascaris Collection), and the particularly significant and rare 1795 harpsichord-shaped piano (Société Ad Libitum), the earliest of its type in a playable condition. Only 263 of these instruments were built between 1790 and 1808, very few have survived, but they represent the first manifestation of grand piano building in France. By gifting two of these instruments to Haydn and Beethoven, the firm had a fundamental influence on Viennese piano building. Also from 1795 is an English M & W Stodart 'grand' piano, a term first appearing on a patent request by Robert Stodart as early as 1777. The 1795 Stodart 'grand' piano also

From the Palais Lascaris' own collection is the anonymous red double-manual harpsichord, whose contradictory and incongruous elements are still puzzling experts today: French sound board and decoration, English-style keyboard...



Pierre Sibieude's personal harpsichord, based on an anonymous 17th-century French instrument

has National Monument status, and is in playable condition. Of the three Viennese instruments on show, the earliest are the 1795 school of A. Walter grand piano, and an 1828 J. Schätzkel grand piano (again, both playable), and both from the Société Ad Libitum collection. The third is a beautiful square piano (circa 1830) by J. Simon, from the Palais Lascaris' own collection.

Of the other instruments in the Palais Lascaris' collection, one deserves a special mention (apart from the big red harpsichord, on which, more later). The 'Calderarpa', a keyed harp, by Luigi Caldera, is a gorgeous object in its own right. Three patents were registered for this instrument; in 1887 in Italy, and the United States in 1888 and 1889. Presented at the Paris World Exhibition in 1889, its mechanism sought to emulate the touch of the human finger on the harp-strings. With the keyboard on one side and the strings and sounding board facing the other, it was designed to be played with the performer facing the audience directly. This is one of only three such instruments by Caldera known to exist – and the only one on permanent public display, incidentally – the others being in private hands and in storage at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York.

While in construction and the decoration, Sibieude strictly follows historic tradition, the zebra-striped metal stand, and the post-modern lid painting, full of ironic double-meanings and allegorical quotation, attest to his work as a contemporary artist

Four harpsichords are on show. From the Palais Lascaris' own collection is an anonymous red double-manual, whose contradictory and incongruous elements are still puzzling experts today. French soundboard and decoration; English style keyboard, English disposition of bridges, tuning pegs, dogleg coupling mechanism and machine stop. Additionally, the instrument shows traces of having once been a claviorganum! Discovered in Nimes and acquired by the Fonds Kosla of Nice in 1978, it has been partially restored and features on two recordings. The case is in pine, and the soundboard painting, which is of high quality, shows similarities in style to that of the Dumont 1697 harpsichord. A short account of the anonymous harpsichord is available in Michael Thomas' article 'Harpsichords which have been found recently in France' in No 7 Volume 2 of *The English Harpsichord Magazine*.

The work of the famous harpsichord painter and restorer Pierre Sibieude (1945 - 2006) is represented by his personal instrument, which he built in collaboration with Alain Anselm and Jacques Lemaire. Based on a privately owned, anonymous French seventeenth-century instrument, the construction features lute-style bracing and a particularly thin soundboard, and is made of wood of an age which approximates to the historic harpsichords Sibieude made during his career. The soundboard painting, equally traditional, is particularly fine, and a testament to its maker's professionalism. While in construction and the decoration Sibieude strictly follows historic tradition, the zebra-striped metal stand, and the post-modern lid painting, full of ironic double-meanings and allegorical quotation, attest to his work as a contemporary artist. The harpsichord will feature in several concerts being held as part of this exhibition.

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The Claude Labrèche 1699 harpsichord, having been granted National Monument status in 2001, is currently undergoing restoration to playing order, and will feature in a concert by Frédéric Hass on 27 October. Its restoration will also be the subject of a seminar on 26 October. No documentation relating to Claude Labrèche's early life has survived, but we know that he was born in Aix-les-Bains (about 70 miles east of Lyon) circa 1641-2, and is to be found in 1665 exercising the profession of master carpenter, and later, master cabinet-maker in Riez. In 1688 he moved to Carpentras (about 16 miles from Avignon), where he died in 1711. This instrument spent its first 170 years in Vaison-la-Romaine, situated only some 30 miles north of Carpentras, before being moved to the Cote d'Azur in the 1960s, and has remained in the same family since it was built. It remains in a particularly good state of preservation, with the registers sliding perfectly and

retaining most of the original jacks with their quill plectra, the keyboards showing little misalignment, and the case bearing no evidence of movement. A second harpsichord, attributed to Claude Labrèche, is in the Wurtenbergsches Landesmuseum in Stuttgart. Accounts of both of these instruments are in 'Musique - Images - Instruments' No 7. The final harpsichord in the exhibition is the 1770 Debedan harpsichord (latterly of the Smithsonian Institute) and recently acquired by the Société Ad Libitum. The instrument will undergo a two-to-three year restoration programme to playing order after the exhibition. The only known harpsichord surviving with its original music stand, it was equipped with *genouillères* in the 1780s. A more complete description of this instrument - as well as the others in the exhibition - is in the exhibition catalogue. I chanced on this exhibition by accident, but I'd certainly recommend making a beeline for it -you could certainly do worse than spend some time in the Palais Lascaris. *

Palais Lascaris
15, rue Droite,
Vieux-Nice,
06364 Nice cedex 4
Palais-lascaris-nice.org

Events

Friday 26th October, 15h00

Seminar 'The Restoration of the Labrèche Harpsichord'; *F. Bal, R. Carli, M. Foussard, P. Frétigné, P. Hazael-Massiex, A. Sidey.*

In the Grand Salon

Saturday 27th October, 15h00

Harpsichord recital by Frédérick Haas on the harpsichord by Claude Labrèche

In the Grand Salon

Sunday 28th October, 15h00

Harpsichord recital by Frédérick Hass, *Goldberg Variations*, on the harpsichord by Anthony Sidey

In the Grand Salon



Learning the Harpsichord in France

Years ago, most harpsichordists began with piano lessons. Now, thanks to conservatoires and music schools, there are more than 160 harpsichord courses in France, and beginners are able to start with the harpsichord. H el ene Diot narrates the journey from beginner to professional musician

While some years ago most harpsichordists began with piano studies – whether because no infrastructure existed for lessons, or because the discovery of the instrument came late in life – today the younger generations in France are able to begin directly with the harpsichord, thanks to the conservatoires and music schools. Concerts and recordings of baroque music have led to the democratisation of the instrument, and attracted a larger public into these teaching institutions. At the time of writing, there are more than 160 harpsichord classes in France.

The harpsichord can be tackled by anybody, at any age, and whatever the individual musical journey, from the absolute beginner to the experienced pianist or organist interested in the baroque repertoire. This apprenticeship, which takes several years, is supremely systematic and punctuated by a number of important milestones. The apprenticeship begins with what we call

'l'éveil musical', or 'musical awakening', basically a 'hands-on' workshop where children can enjoy trying out and exploring different instruments before they finally choose one. It was at one of these that I was so drawn to the harpsichord that, in spite of my parents' misgivings, I embarked, at the age of six, on the long road which was to lead to my becoming a professional musician.

In some schools and conservatoires, children can trial two or three different instruments over the course of a year, before finally making their choice. Unfortunately, it can also happen that beginners on the harpsichord are not there of their own free will, but will have been transferred from over-subscribed piano classes! Beyond the absurd reasoning that suggests there is little difference between these two 'keyboard' instruments, this policy is an open door to a lack of motivation, despondency in the teacher, and finally the withdrawal of the pupil.

Once the instrument is chosen, the student embarks on a course of study, averaging ten years. Teaching in France is organised on the basis of academic cycles, allowing flexibility to cope with different rates of learning. Each cycle is defined by specific objectives, and constitutes a coherent structure of acquired skills and knowledge. The academic cycles also structure musical training into different stages, roughly corresponding to the stages of the school curriculum. Progression from one academic cycle to the next is by examination and continuous assessment.

Alas, sometimes beginners on the harpsichord are there simply because they have been transferred from over-subscribed piano classes! Beyond the absurd reasoning that suggests there is little difference between these two 'keyboard' instruments, this policy is an open door to a lack of motivation

Le Premier Cycle

Two to four hours weekly, with a minimum of 30 minutes individual tuition

Duration: 3-5 years

Content: Aural work and establishment of cultural reference points

Group vocal and instrumental work

Individual work on first study

Objectives:

To be able to play from a musical text or extemporise, in accordance with individual technical skill

To understand a musical text: structure, phrases, tonality, rhythm, vocabulary

To acquire practical technical and cultural fundamentals.

Assessment:

Continuous assessment, portfolio of written work and assessments

This academic cycle, sometimes preceded by a probationary period, corresponds to the beginning of an artistic apprenticeship; it allows for foundations to be laid, and for a methodology to evolve. Continuous assessment allows a holistic view of the student's progress.

The teaching of the harpsichord is recent; there are few modern methods and most are derived from piano teaching. Teachers therefore need to be creative: to create 'games' to encourage the discovery of the instrument, its colour, its touch; to invent short pieces and exercises to work the fingers, explore historic sources, to find adaptable and interesting piano pieces, and works by contemporary composers. It is essential to start with simple pieces so that the focus can be on the delicate and quite specific touch of the instrument.

Some parents hesitate to sign up their children for harpsichord lessons for fear of the cost of the instrument (up to 8000 euros for a study harpsichord). The music schools and conservatoires are able to allow students to practise on the school instruments, and sometimes are able to offer instruments for hire for a modest sum.

Le Deuxième Cycle

Four to seven hours weekly, with a minimum 45 minutes of individual tuition. Also possible is a personalised or non-certificated stream.

Duration: 3-5 years

Objectives:

Personal artistic and musical development with an emphasis on:

Greater cultural breadth

Development of autonomous working and study practices

Competence in group activities

Content:

Aural work

Acquisition of musical and cultural knowledge in line with technical requirements

Group vocal and instrumental work

Individual tuition

Organisation:

Option to evolve a personalised individual course, or to follow either a course leading to a certificate or not.

Assessment:

Continuous assessment, portfolio as above

Final exam giving access to third academic cycle (Troisième cycle) and entrance exam to the 'Cycle d'Orientation Professionnelle Initiale'.

This academic cycle reinforces and builds upon the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous one; it emphasises artistic development and stylistic awareness by the introduction to the standard repertoire. At this point, the student can choose to follow either an amateur stream (with or without a diploma or certificate) or a professional one.



Le Troisième Cycle amateur diplômant

The course is modular in structure and lasts between 2 and 4 years (300 hrs).

Objectives:

To develop a personalised artistic syllabus or project

To develop autonomous study practices

Structured and contextualised knowledge

Integration into the amateur music-making community

Content:

Aural work, music history, analysis and aesthetics

Content geared towards acquisition of skills necessary for amateur music-making

Practice and technical work related to interdisciplinary syllabus or project

Assessment:

Continuous assessment, portfolio as above, and final exam

Successful completion certified by the Certificat d'Etudes Musicales (CEM)

Possible equivalences for transfer to 'Cycle d'Orientation Professionnelle Initial'

Le Troisième Cycle amateur non diplômant

Duration: variable and dependant on contract agreed with the establishment

Objective: Greater depth of knowledge and skill

Content: Musical culture and/or relevant participation at the conservatoire

Assessment: Continuous assessment of 'personalised syllabus', references

Le Cycle d'Orientation Professionnelle Initiale

Duration : 2-4 years (750 hours) of which a minimum of 1 hour a week is individual tuition.

Objectives:

Increase in personal motivation with a view to professional orientation

Confirm aptitude for advanced study

Content:

Increased focus on first study

Cultural and group activity modules

Personal project

Organisation:

Entrance exam

Personalised learning

Possible change of first study and/or double first study

Assessment:

Continuous assessment, portfolio as above, final exam at regional level



Successful completion is certified by the 'Diplôme national d'orientation professionnelle' (DNOP).

The number of students obtaining the Troisième Cycle diploma are relatively few, many giving up through lack of time or motivation, which leads teachers to continually rethink and reassess the teaching or the syllabus to reverse this trend. One should also bear in mind that the main objective of these conservatoires and music schools is to favour the practice of amateur music-making and not to train professional musicians, an objective which they sometimes forget, in favour of a certain elitism which induces them to favour the best or youngest students, and to marginalise the less able during the

course of successive exams. I can offer as proof the case of adults wishing to begin the study of the harpsichord. Establishments willing to accept them are rare, and when they do, the courses offered are short (1-3 years) and are biased towards workshops. The adult learner is thus forced to rely on private lessons. These teachers are most often either Conservatoire teachers or advanced students, but there are unfortunately cases of non-qualified 'teachers' abusing this state of affairs.

The course of study outlined above applies to all instruments. For harpsichordists, the subjects offered by the conservatoires are generally as follows: Harpsichord; continuo playing; chamber music; ornamentation/diminution; tuning and temperament; extemporisation.

More and more teachers are beginning to believe it is possible to introduce these disciplines at the earliest age; however most establishments offer continuo playing or chamber music only from the second academic cycle, and the other three subjects only from the third academic cycle. Objectives would be: Acquisition of technical skills specifically related to period instruments; discovery and ever-greater knowledge of early music repertoire; group work (consort, chamber music, orchestra).

Currently, there prevails a mood of intense pedagogical contemplation as to the method of teaching, which has prompted several debates and seminars, organised in particular by Clavecin en France (the French harpsichord society, clavecin-en-france.org), the commissioning of new methods at all levels, and the publishing of catalogues or repertoire lists for each cycle, covering all styles and periods.

Apart from the study available at these academic institutions as outlined above, there is the possibility in France of attending summer-schools, holiday courses, master-classes as early as the first academic cycle, and these offer varied opportunities for studying solo repertoire, chamber music, orchestral work, tuning etc. For students on the road to professional musicianship, these are also a good opportunity to meet established musicians, to raise their profile and to consolidate their skills in specific areas, as some courses focus on specific themes. ✱

Hélène Diot continues her discussion on harpsichord teaching in France in a future issue of Sounding Board

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OBITUARY



Helena Brown

19 October 1948 – 4 April 2012

It is with great sadness that I find myself writing an obituary for Helena Brown, my keyboard duet partner and much loved friend since 1975. We met as participants in a harpsichord master class with Kenneth Gilbert. Helena had recently started the instrument with Jill Severs, whilst recovering from radiotherapy for Hodgkins disease. For the second time in her life she was not expected to have a life expectancy of more than a couple of years, but she was a fighter, and despite further onsets of other cancers, became the pride of the Royal Marsden hospital in later years.

Helena Waley was educated at Oxford High School and then won a scholarship to Dartington College of Arts in Devon, where she met her husband, the composer and university lecturer, George Mowat-Brown. She subsequently studied at the Royal College of Music with Hubert Dawkes. After leaving the college as an exceptionally able accompanist, she worked for the Royal Ballet. Helena was a consummate professional and could read and transpose any music at sight. Her sensitivity as an accompanist coupled with a profound knowledge of harmony, made her an excellent and much sought-after continuo player who preferred to play from a figured bass. She taught at the RCM and St Paul's Girls School, gave baroque chamber music courses at Roehampton University, Morley College, Hawkswood, and Benslow Music, amongst many others. She also performed with Musica Dolce, the Telemann Players and our four-hand duo, For Two to Play, which included performances for York Festival, Great Elm Festival, the Barbican, the National Theatre, Handel House, Hatchlands, the Jane Austen Festival, the Edinburgh Festival, Hull University, the Ashmolean Museum and many more.

Appearances on television included a film about Venetian opera, playing for Nigel Kennedy and French & Saunders, and she performed at Kew Palace for Her Majesty the Queen's 80th birthday.

Helena became a respected Examiner for the Associated Board, excelling at every stage to become a Senior Examiner, mentoring others, regularly sent abroad, and assisting with the harpsichord syllabus and training video. She wrote a short piece on harpsichord examinations for the third issue of the British Harpsichord Society's *Sounding Board* in November 2010, 'We live in such fortunate times...'

In addition to local teaching and willingness to be a deputy organist for a number of churches, perhaps her most important legacy is a number of community projects, the most prominent being Isleworth Baroque, which she founded in 2002. As Musical Director, she asked Catherine Bott to be their patron. This thriving group commemorated her with a memorial concert in July. Helena's humour, and generous and open-minded acceptance of those she met made her liked by all, and she will be sorely missed. They have set up a wonderful remembrance page on their website, with photos and comments. www.isleworthbaroque.co.uk/index.htm. *Penelope Cave*



'Celebrating Helena', a sing-and-play-along event held 8 July 2012, to commemorate Helena's life (Photos thanks to Isleworth Baroque)