



The virginals at Westwood House

BEST OF THE WESTWOOD

Sophie Yates passionately believes that whenever possible, antique instruments should be played and heard. Here she writes about her experiences of recording on a 16th-century Italian ottavino and an English spinet at Westwood Manor

This article is really a collection of thoughts on the experience of recording on antique instruments, stimulated by my latest recording – *Concord of Sweet Sounds* – in which I play a 16th-century Italian *ottavino* and an early 18th-century English spinet. These instruments are housed at the National Trust property, Westwood Manor, in Wiltshire and the disc was made on the instigation of the tenants, Emily and Jonathan Azis. They fervently believe, as I do, that if instruments are in a suitable condition, they ought to be played and heard. With this in mind, money for a recording was raised from a number of subscribers, who were keen to hear the instruments being played more extensively than is possible in a quick demonstration during a visit to the house.

Clearly there is always a fine balance to be struck between conservation and restoration, and in recent years that balance has often tipped in favour of the restrictions of conservation. Speaking as someone who was fortunate enough

to play original instruments regularly as a student, when there was a much more relaxed approach to this issue, I am keen to convey that experience to a wider audience now. Of course, recording is an ideal way to allow many people to enjoy the instruments whilst causing minimal wear.

Coming into contact with original instruments so much as a student has inspired me to continue to seek opportunities to get to know them throughout my career. Although we have wonderful instrument makers working today to recreate the sound-world of the 17th and 18th centuries, as craftsmen they cannot help but bring their own modern day experience to bear on the instruments they create. Of course this can contribute to smooth, reliable actions and strong sounds that can command modern concert halls; however I find that after a time spent playing an old instrument, coming back to a modern one, however fine, is something of a jolt!

Sometimes, old instruments can place considerable demands on a player. They demand a flexibility of technique – the ability to adapt to an idiosyncratic action, different key size and pitch, for example. There may be characteristics endemic to that particular instrument which cannot be changed owing to the exigencies of conservation, as well as the obvious problems of wear. However, my experience is that finding strategies to cope with these problems helps me towards a better understanding of the music I am interpreting and the world from which it sprang.

For players and listeners, putting music back in context is one of the main thrusts of the period performance movement, and original instruments can provide us with a very direct way of doing this. As a player I find the particularity of these instruments so stimulating to the imagination and feel that they bring me in touch, in a literal sense, with the period in which the music was composed. Whilst studying treatises and forming opinions based on academic research are vital to an increasing understanding of our musical world, the physicality of an instrument from the time in which the music was composed communicates with us on a different, more visceral level.

There are problems associated with recording on old instruments that differ from those encountered when playing a recital; however, my experience of recording various antiques in both public and private ownership over the years gave me some idea what to expect during the Westwood project. One of the things that sets the situation apart from that of a conventional recording on a modern copy is that you - the player - and the team you have alongside you, are not in charge. If the instrument is in a museum or a house which is

open to the public, there can be all sorts of restrictions in terms of access and often the freedom to research a programme and simply to get to know the instrument in peace and quiet is hard to come by.

Old instruments can place considerable demands on a player. They demand a flexibility of technique – the ability to adapt to an idiosyncratic action, different key size and pitch, for example

Sadly, although playing an antique instrument in a beautiful, period setting might be inspiring for the player, the acoustics which are favourable for recording are not always the same as those suitable for an intimate, domestic recital. Since the instrument's environment is almost always a given, the challenge is to make the best of whatever acoustic there is. Moving the instrument into another room in the building that has a better acoustic may present a solution but almost always throws up other problems at the same time: there is probably a reason why the instrument was situated where it was in the first place! Although not ideal, another option is to treat the recorded sound in some way, which is where your engineer's skill comes to the fore.

Additionally, re-positioning the instrument within the room may be necessary in order for microphones to be placed the right distance away; but, if there are other objects and artefacts that can't be moved (as is frequently the case in historic buildings), this can be tricky. Even such a simple thing as finding a way of supporting music on the instrument can be very problematic. It is rare for earlier instruments to have a music desk and yet it isn't always possible to place anything on delicate decoration that might be harmed by the pressure of a heavy book. The ingenuity of whoever is tuning and caring for the instrument during the recording may have to be employed to make some flimsy contingency that can survive for as long the sessions last. I was lucky to have Andrew Garlick in attendance and he rigged up a glorified retort stand that we placed alongside the instrument.

At Westwood, I was fortunate enough to have the understanding and support of the Azises in all these areas, which was vital in terms of making the recording a success. Having the help of a sympathetic curator who can tread the fine line between being practical and at the same time ensuring that the instrument and its environment are protected within the parameters of any over-seeing body (such as the National Trust) is essential.

Because I live round the corner from Westwood, I was able to devote time to finding repertoire that would bring out the individual characters of the instruments - one of the joys of working on such a project. The choice of repertoire for the *ottavino* was particularly interesting. It was a revelation that



The spinet at Westwood House

many of the dances with divisions in the right hand over a bass pattern were simply too high and brilliant for the pitch. I found that the pieces which worked best were ones with a *cantus firmus* or where the main interest was in the tenor register, rather than at either extreme of treble or bass. I was also pleasantly surprised to discover how well slower, more contemplative pieces could work at the higher pitch. Something I learnt from the recording was to take octave instruments a bit more seriously – their pitch can actually bring out different characteristics of a piece and I would also imagine that they could play a very useful part in an ensemble. I hope to explore these possibilities further in the future.

The fact that antique instruments have survived is stunning in itself, as many have endured changes of ownership and lodgings, differing aesthetics and varying restoration criteria over the years. Listening to them now does cause me to wonder what their original makers would have intended? After all, tastes change and, just as we don't always appreciate our Georgian ancestors' pea-green walls, how much should we question our modern aesthetic criteria? Another important question is whether or not these instruments' sound can actually improve with age. Clearly this is something we have never been able to measure or understand objectively, yet my feeling is that in fortunate circumstances - where a good instrument is kept in stable conditions, cared



Detail of soundboard

for and played - it is probably the case. It may be far-fetched but it could be that our descendants will be able listen to our recordings and judge for themselves... In the meantime, I value the sense that recording - which involves intense, repeated exposure to an old instrument's sound in a appropriate acoustic - can refresh my expectations and allow me to listen with 'new ears' to the next instrument I play.

To sum up, I have always found the experience of playing antique instruments to be inspiring, especially in the surroundings in which they would originally have been heard; I also hugely value opportunities to share that experience, through recording, with a wider audience. Original instruments have a vast amount to teach modern players about technique because they demand a correct and particular approach. While a robust modern instrument will respond to a variety of techniques, an old one cannot. In the same way, I think they can also educate listeners to appreciate a wider variety of timbres and textures. In this way, getting to know an original instrument's particular voice and disposition is immensely rewarding for player and listener alike. In a fascinating and rather touching way, we become part of that instrument's long history.

A Harpsichord Whodunit

??
*A Harpsichord with Attitude: technical Specifications,
and a personal Reaction to an Iberian Fake*
??



MUSICAL AUCTION CATALOGUES RARELY BOAST OF ANTIQUE HARPSICHORDS, AND IT IS EVEN RARER FOR AN IBERIAN EXAMPLE TO COME UP FOR SALE. THIS INSTRUMENT APPEARED AT SOTHEBY'S AND ENJOYED A BRIEF SPELL IN THE LIMELIGHT WHEN IT ENTERED A LARGE HISTORIC KEYBOARD COLLECTION, BEFORE DOUBTS BEGAN TO GROW OVER ITS AUTHENTICITY. PENELOPE CAVE PICKS UP THE INTRIGUING STORY



This harpsichord is one of a number of instruments, to emerge some years ago, purporting to be late 17th or early 18th century originals from the Iberian school. It is now recognised as being a 20th century representation of a region and period from which very few original instruments survive. After doubts began to grow about its authenticity, it went into storage, until Andrew and Robert Durand of the Music Room Workshop bought it. Whilst agreeing that it was a fake, the Durands were curious about the methods used, and prepared to spend some time on restoring its playing capacity, with minimum intervention. The Durands offer some pictures and details of their restoration, on their website, which they have kindly agreed to share.

When I first saw the harpsichord, my immediate impression was one of delight in this faded 'old' instrument that seemed to have migrated from a Spanish monastery or an Italian villa. It is in complete antithesis to the spotless coach-painted finishes of the early reproduction-harpsichords of the last century, and it oozes character and charm. When I played it, I was delighted that it sounded like an historic instrument. It has two eight foot registers, and a wonderfully nasal lute stop. When coupled together, it produces a robust dynamic. I had so wanted it to be the real thing, but the more we looked, the more pointers there were to the fact that it is not.

The marks of a machine-planer on the key-levers are perhaps the most obvious indication that the keyboard was intentionally aged. The base-board appears to be genuinely old pine, from a brief inspection of its underside, but if the next owner were to bore a small hole in it, and insert a

camera, more might yet be revealed. There are some apparent 'repairs' although the cheeks both have oblique top-corners, certainly a place that gets worn but these twin dents seem a little extreme; there is no corresponding damage to the lid corners, although it is liberally cracked. The lid extends across the whole instrument with what appear to be old and mended hinges. Whoever built it, appears to have been unwilling to make it appear too professional, so the mouldings and keyboard are rustic.

The naturals appear to be made of boxwood with the sort of dipped wear that can be the result of being frequently played with particularly acid fingers; they have been heavily stained and the walnut sharps have undergone similar treatment. The pins on the bridge are so uneven that they look to be deliberately naïve, and there has been an exaggerated old-varnish effect applied to the outside that I longed to rub back, but the Durands have wisely left 'as found'. Strangely, the rather handsome turned stand seems to have suffered from the hand of 'the distresser' even more keenly than the rest of the instrument. The overall multitude of scratches just does not quite ring true, and I think it would benefit from some re-touching.

There certainly are things one might want to do to it, not in order to make it look newer/smarter, but actually to make it look more original! That is, perhaps, the beauty of the thing - if it is not a historic original, one can make alterations without qualms. A small easing of the space between the sharps in the groups of three, the removal of the varnish-gone-wrong on the outside, a turned prop-stick, and some subtle gilding to the yellow mouldings to enliven it would be my inclination, as long as nothing is done to alter its personality, or that is brash and out of keeping with what does, from a distance, look like the real thing.

The general thinking is that it is not as old as the fakes of Franciolini, but was possibly the work of a 20th-century maker. So what is its fascination? Why would I actually like to own it?

It is a piece requiring detective-work that is bursting with potential. It is an object of delight to the eye, to match the music one might play on it. It is no more expensive than many new instruments. But most of all, it sounds wonderful. However, this was not written in order to do the Durand's advertising for them, but because I am fascinated by it. It is truly a curiosity that must appeal to most harpsichordists and makers, but it also begs a number of questions:

What sort of finish do most players want? How far might one go in distressing the finish of a harpsichord? Do you copy an original, as is, or copy what you *think* it might have looked like when it was new? What is an-inner lid painting for?

It also begs the important question of how much of the value of an instrument is as a decorative item? Roger Fry's painting for a Dolmetsch instrument of 1918 is an example of a decoration to fit an artistic style, and because it is that of the Bloomsbury set, adds value to the instrument.

Should an instrument match its surroundings? (An architect pupil of mine decorated his modern harpsichord kit in Corbusier colours to match his contemporary house and furnishings. In the late 18th century, the Kirckman harpsichord at Tatton Park handsomely complemented the collection of Gillow's original furniture). Might a time of austerity engender more modest decoration or, conversely, a more flamboyant demonstration of wealth?

Finally, if you have any further knowledge of the origins of this instrument, please send your information and/or ideas on these questions, and any others that this instrument might have inspired, to the British Harpsichord Society: editor@harpsichord.org.uk

To view the instrument, apply to the Music Room Workshop.
www.musicroomworkshop.co.uk



BRITISH HARPSICHORD SOCIETY

Contributions are always welcome
editor@harpsichord.org.uk

www.harpsichord.org.uk