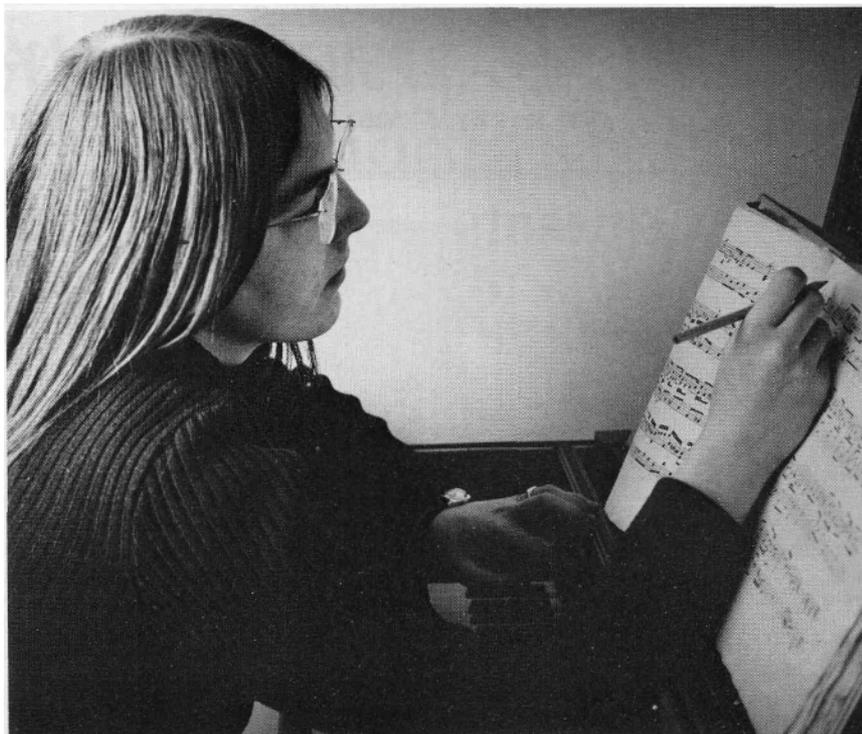


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**Maria  
Boxall**  
interviewed  
by  
**David  
Lasocki**



(Maria Boxall's *Harpsichord Method*, published in March by Schott & Co., was reviewed in our April issue).

**DL** I imagine you must have started out by playing the piano?

**MB** Yes, about the age of seven.

**DL** How did you start playing the harpsichord?

**MB** My school put on a performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* about the same time as -if not a few weeks before — the Raymond Leppard production, and they bought a spinet for the occasion. I played the basso continuo on the spinet, and beforehand, at the suggestion of my music teacher at school, I had three harpsichord lessons with Christopher Wood. So *Orfeo* got me hooked on both early music and the harpsichord. Instead of doing my A Levels I applied for Trinity College of Music, which is where Mr Wood was teaching at that time, and was accepted. At Trinity I took piano, harpsichord, and later recorder.

**DL** How did you become interested in 'authentic' performance?

**MB** Christopher Wood actually plunged me in at the deep end. My first lesson was on a Rameau suite — and I'd never even seen a trill before! He taught me right from the start about ornamentation and rhythmic inequality. Then I started doing my own research at the British Library. I had been playing an edition of a

Mozart sonata which had been heavily edited in a romantic way; there were octaves all over the place, and it had even been cut. I discovered an original print of this sonata in the British Library and the scales fell from my eyes. It showed me what editors tended to do to early music.

**DL** Since you were in London at that time you must have gone to performances of early music?

**MB** Yes, although it's only more recently that there has been much 'authentic' performance going on. I didn't hear players like Leonhardt until after I'd finished college. I remember that his recital in the Queen Elizabeth Hall was only about a third full.

**DL** At what point after you'd discovered the original print of the Mozart sonata did you realize that you have to know a great deal to be able to play this comparatively 'bare' version?

**MB** I think I went through a 'bare bones', almost a 'sewing machine' period at first. I was so keen to strip the music of all the hairpins etc. that my performances were probably very dull. But I've always wanted to know how things are made. For example, in painting I've always been interested to know what tools they used, how they ground the colours, etc. I knew that if you went to somewhere like Sotheby's someone would be able to tell you exactly how to mix the paints to prepare a certain historical effect. In music this just didn't exist in England

- at that time. Yet I wanted to learn how the early harpsichordists performed. How did they sit? How did they hold their hands? What would they have sounded like? And through a study of the old fingerings I discovered what could be done with articulation, which was a real eye opener and has been my hobby horse ever since. I realized straight away that how you play the instrument makes a great difference to the sound. In a way I was lucky in being completely on my own; I had no one to help me, and I had no harpsichord lessons apart from that year with Mr Wood. So I was looking it up and doing it for myself, not just doing what someone told me to do.' I started collecting a file on articulation, which has now become very thick.
- DL* Did you have an intuitive feeling that the way the music had sounded in the earlier times was the way you wanted it to sound?
- MB* It was more that the music was being destroyed by having other people's values superimposed upon it, and I rebelled against that. To make another analogy with painting, everyone is horrified that Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* once had large areas cut off it. And yet people quite often leave out the repeat of the second section of a movement because it is longer than the first section, although this destroys the balance and is really as dreadful a thing to do to the piece of music as to cut off part of *The Night Watch*.
- DL* There is a limit to how much we can learn about how music was performed in earlier times; it is inevitable that there is some personal taste as well as the evidence of what was done then.
- MB* I am trying to purge the music of all that I know would have been impossible or unlikely at that time. I don't think you can say that they did do something, but you can usually say that if you study the old techniques this could not have been done.
- DL* So you are setting up a range of historical possibilities and saying that 'authenticity' lies somewhere within this range. When was the first time you played a harpsichord that was anything like a historical instrument?
- MB* I had my harpsichord lessons at Fenton House, and they had some early instruments, although at that time they did not work too well. It did, however, give me a feeling for what they were like. Philip Lancashire, whom I met one day at Fenton House, made me a copy of their Marcus Siculus, dating from around 1540. Then through Philip I met Michael Thomas, who generously allowed me to play on his collection of instruments.
- DL* So you began to apply your knowledge of the early fingerings on these old harpsichords?
- MB* I had been playing 'plucked pianos' and now a lot of things I had been trying to do fell into place straight away. The articulation was the most important revelation. The damping system and powers of resonance are so different on an old harpsichord. You could play in a much drier way without it sounding dry. On a modern harpsichord you are rather forced to play as legato as possible to wring every ounce of sustaining power and resonance from it; the damper damps the string completely. On early instruments the dampers leave free the strings which are not being used. Even if you have silenced the string you have just used, the other strings, the soundboard and casework all go on vibrating sympathetically. So you can play in a much more detached style. In fact you have a much larger 'length' of note to play with — that is, the proportion of note that sounds to the proportion of silence. You can obtain much more variety.
- DL* You discovered in your research into the fingerings that the 'strong' notes were played longer than the 'weak' notes?
- MB* In most of the fingering systems that were in use, the third finger was regarded as the strongest, and it went on the strong beat. And as the finger is longer it helps the note to be longer. What strikes me about this early technique is that the hand is used in a more natural way; there is no striving to make all fingers equal. This system is not consistently followed; in sixteenth-century Germany the second and fourth fingers seem to have been used on the stronger notes. Also some sources say that you must be able to trill with all the fingers. But the German system couldn't cope well with counterpoint and died out in the early seventeenth century. The principal system is a basic feeling which underlies most of the early harpsichord technique I have come across.
- DL* What insights other than the lengthening of strong beats did you gain from these fingerings?
- MB* Mainly, as I have said, that everything was slightly detached - apart, of course, from what was written or played as slurred. And here my study of the recorder was useful, because on woodwind instruments they did tongue every note unless they decided they were going to slur. I learned that on the harpsichord you can vary the lengths of the notes in a subtle way.
- DL* There must be differences in the way the national schools of harpsichords respond to the early fingerings.
- MB* With every resonant instrument such as the early eighteenth century French harpsichords like Michael Thomas's Gamier, you almost have sound to throw away; there is so much resonance you can play in a relatively dry

manner. And of course you can make the notes overlap as well; you have an enormous range of possibilities for articulation. Whereas on, say, Italian harpsichords that sustain less, one would tend to hold the notes a bit longer to compensate. Then also the acoustics of the place in which you are playing make a difference.

*DL* They tended to have rather bright acoustics.

*MB* Yes. Most harpsichords would, I imagine, have stood on a wooden floor, whereas we tend to put ours in places with carpets. I find that you can play Italian music on a French or Flemish harpsichord and compensate by playing more cleanly. What I think you can not do is play French music on most Italian harpsichords. It might well be the different combinations of harmonics. Yet there has been a fashion recently for having Italian instruments — because they are cheap and easy to transport — almost as a standard, which I think is a great mistake. You cannot play Bach or Couperin on them to any artistic effect; nor would these composers have envisaged writing for such instruments.

*DL* Recent makers seem to have made great progress in providing a good resonant sound, but they often pay little or no attention to the proportions of the keys.

*MB* Yes, this is a pity because you cannot study early fingerings on a keyboard which has keys the dimensions of piano keys. You must have the short key fronts; otherwise the accidentals are too far back to reach. With the exception of some early sixteenth-century Italian instruments, the lengthening of the natural keys happened with the introduction of the thumb turning and the beginning of piano technique. You can not say what we should make the length of the natural key fronts, but you can say what it must not be. As for the width of the keys, one of the hazards of being a harpsichordist is that on early instruments you have to cope with keys of all widths.

*DL* Do you think that we are coming to a time when harpsichordists will have different kinds of instruments to play different styles of music (assuming they can afford to)?

*MB* I think the day has already come when a performer can play a recital of, for instance, early eighteenth-century French music. We have become so used from the piano repertoire to having a concert which takes you on a tour of the major composers, on the grounds that audiences cannot stand too much of the same style. Whereas they did in the olden days, and they should still be able to. They can sit through a recital of Bach, so why shouldn't they sit through a recital of, say, English virginal music? Then the performer can choose

one instrument which will be comfortable for the whole concert.

*DL* Most players nowadays started out on the piano, and they bring with them the accumulation of their piano technique. In your Method you cut across that by writing for people who will not have that experience or who will put it aside and start again from scratch. Do you believe this is the only way we will be able to develop first-rate harpsichordists?

*MB* I have now taught a lot of people who have played the piano, and generally speaking the better pianists they are the less progress they make on the harpsichord — unless they give up the piano. Maybe some genius will come along who can split his personality enough to be able to play both instruments, but it is beyond most mortals. I think you come to the point where you have to make a choice. There is a point in playing the harpsichord beyond which you just cannot go if you are still playing the piano.

*DL* Have you ever missed playing the piano yourself?

*MB* Occasionally. But then occasionally I wish I could still play the violin, which I played at school. Life is too short. But the harpsichord is a complete instrument in its own right; it's not limiting. After all, there is harpsichord music from 1500 to 1800, which is longer than the piano repertoire and over a comparable range of styles.

*DL* What are you working on now?

*MB* I am preparing a book of harpsichord studies. Actually they are fingered preludes and voluntaries which I have found in various manuscripts. There are no technical studies for harpsichordists; I don't think the piano studies are revelant. Also, practising scales is silly, because their purpose is to practise the technique of turning the thumb, which did not exist in the modern sense in harpsichord technique, and to practise fingering patterns — which did not apply then; scale fingerings depended on the context in which the scale appeared. Quite apart from the fact that on most harpsichords you do not get very far on a scale in two hands; you run out of notes. So I am trying to provide technical material expressly suited to the harpsichord.

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**David Lasocki** is an English musicologist and writer who is now back in this country after a number of years in U.S.A. where he went first to study at the University of Iowa and then established himself as an editor, writer, teacher and performer. In addition to many editions of baroque music, his published works include an English translation of Hotteterre's *Wwczpes de la Flute Traversiere...* (Barrie & Rockcliffe, 1968).

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