

Ruth Dyson

AN INTERVIEW

We visited Ruth Dyson at her home in Dorking, Surrey, a spacious old house in a pleasantly overgrown garden. In the hall stood a muselar by Adlam-Bumett, while in the music room, besides the Bechstein grand, we noticed a Goble harpsichord and spinet, a clavichord and, in a place of honour by the window, and for daily use, a harpsichord by Michael Johnson.

Editor: My first question must be, how did you come to the harpsichord?

Ruth Dyson: Well, it was just a flick of Fortune's wheel, almost a mistake! I had trained, of course, as a pianist. The only harpsichords at the Royal College of Music at that time were the valuable ones which are now in the Museum of Instruments. Some of these were just lying about the passages, most of them were packed into the Donaldson Room, they were not in playing order and we dared not touch them! I really had no contact with the harpsichord as a student or for several years after.

I had a career as a professional pianist for twelve years, then, owing to the illness of a colleague, I had to take on a series of lectures on Tudor music to a group of Swedish students who were over here on a course, and it was obviously useless to illustrate this with a grand piano which was all that was available, so I borrowed a small harpsichord from a friend, and travelled with it by train — a very hazardous journey it was too. The train was very crowded and I had to sit on the harpsichord and persuade British Rail officials that it was not the coffin of my pet dog, which they all seemed to think it was! (I vowed I would never take a harpsichord by train again, and I never have — I nearly always drive my harpsichord to the concert, to the B.B.C. or wherever). The course turned out to be a success and I was invited to repeat it in Sweden, and it was at this point I thought I should start really studying the instrument in earnest. Then my troubles began: there were very few teachers about and the established players of the time were really too busy to take me on. I heard many conflicting reports as to how one should learn the harpsichord. One player said it was a matter of trial and error and you could pick it up in a few months, another equally distinguished player said it would take fifteen years to learn the touch and it would be a positive disadvantage to have had any acquaintance with the piano! So somewhere between those rather wild opposites I found the truth, and I shall never cease to be grateful to Susi Jeans and Thomas Goff, both of whom very generously allowed me to practise on their instruments in their houses when they were absent. I think that is what every young player needs — to sit down and play the

harpsichord, not just for a short time but for many hours, to get the feel of it. They have to get the piano or organ out of their systems, and they need to be alone and concentrate and listen. *Editor:* Have you anything to say to people who are trying to combine the piano and the harpsichord? *Ruth Dyson:* Words of caution, of course, but I don't see any fundamental reason why one should not do both. Obviously they are two totally different skills — maybe as different as dancing and skating, but there is no need to confuse the techniques. (Pianists often have a good technique to start with, which is an immense help). The repertoires of the two instruments must be kept quite separate, and perhaps the only serious objection is that life may not be long enough for this!

One of my former pupils, Carol Cooper, won the Raymond Russell Harpsichord Prize and the following year the Chappell Gold Medal for Piano, and she is determined to keep a foot in both camps, which I heartily encourage, and I am delighted to say that Kenneth Gilbert, who heard her play recently, did the same.

Editor: You have the harpsichord well established now at the Royal College of Music; but what can the students do - can they take it as a principal study?

Ruth Dyson: They can, but very few do. They mostly take it as a second to organ or piano, and I think they first come to get an idea of baroque style and to see what impact a knowledge of the harpsichord has on their piano playing and piano teaching. But it then often happens that they fall in love with the harpsichord and want to make it their principal study. It is then that their difficulties begin — the expense of buying a harpsichord is generally beyond a student's pocket. This is the tragedy — so many students utterly devoted to the harpsichord and unable to buy one. There is some splendid craftsmanship in this country today, but I do slightly regret the tendency to concentrate on excessive decoration — painted soundboards, painted lids, etc., all of which add to the cost. I should like to see a very simple basic harpsichord with a good tone being produced, which would be a little more within the range of a student's budget.

Editor: In my experience, quite a number of students make their own harpsichords from kits. *Ruth Dyson:* Yes, I have one pupil now who is doing a lot of work with a kit-harpsichord which she constructed (with the help of her current boyfriend) and it has been a great success; but not all musicians, unfortunately, are gifted in this way. I'm certainly not myself — I'm a born saboteur! *Editor:* Would you like to tell us something now



Ruth Dyson playing on her muselar

about your own playing?

Ruth Dyson: Yes, I found, for the first twelve years after I took up the harpsichord, I had a fairly evenly balanced career between the two instruments, but now I get very little work for the piano unless it be for the early piano. That is how I like to have it.

Editor: You have recorded a number of the early pianos from the Colt Collection, haven't you?

Ruth Dyson: That was a very fascinating experience for the sheer variety of different sounds that come under the heading of 'piano tone'. *Editor:* And you have also recorded for the BBC sound archives?

Ruth Dyson: Yes, I did even once record the miniature Taskin at the V & A — the delightful little 1786 instrument. It has a terrifyingly tiny keyboard and is presumed to have been made for a royal child. The octave span is four-and-a-half inches and playing it was more like a nightmare than anything I have ever done. But the instrument has a wonderful tone. One might imagine that because it looks so delicate and fragile, that the tone would also be delicate and fragile, but it was tremendous — a real Taskin 'boom'.

Editor: I believe you are also very interested in modern music for the harpsichord. *Ruth Dyson:* I think this is terribly important. I think we are going to become a very narrow group if we don't look outside the past and if we don't keep in touch with the music which is being written today. Also I think that when you work with a live composer you begin to realize that the printed notes are the

merest skeleton of the real meaning he wants to convey, so much has to be read between the lines. I admit that I don't think there has been any really great twentieth-century music written for the harpsichord yet — but we must wait. There is, however, a lot of very good music — particularly the concertos, I think.

Editor: You are thinking of Frank Martin? *Ruth Dyson:* Yes, both the Frank Martin pieces, and on a smaller scale the Walter Leigh. The Roberto Gerhard is a good work. Amongst the solo pieces I have great admiration for the works of Alan Ridout, he has caught the harpsichord idiom exactly right: the work is original without a trace of pastiche. Among the *avant garde* works I think Ligeti's *Continuum* is the most striking — he has the incredible magic whereby he manages to make you imagine that the harpsichord is producing a continuous thread of sound — the one thing it cannot do! *Editor:* Do you find that you need modern harpsichords for this modern music, or can you play it on a traditional instrument?

Ruth Dyson: I don't find it so satisfactory. I must say that even the despised sixteen-foot stop has its place in the twentieth-century repertoire. In the Ligeti piece I have just mentioned, if you don't get that sudden roar from the sixteen foot you are losing half the dramatic impact from the piece. On the whole I think it means playing the right music on the right instrument, providing it does not mean having six instruments at one recital! The Elizabethan music is so right on a virginal - the robustness of it, the richness and roundness of the tone so suit the music. *Editor:* I notice that you have a muselar for that music.

Ruth Dyson: I do, and this is extremely valuable to me for lectures on Elizabethan music, for Sweelinck — anything in fact up to Tomkins. *Editor:* Which instruments do you really like best? *Ruth Dyson:* I think really, for sheer beauty of sound, I'm very happy with my new Michael Johnson instrument, which was made three years ago. It seems to me to have a real Taskin quality. It's not a pure Taskin reproduction — I asked Michael to do all sorts of terrible things, including putting two pedals on it. But that was really to make myself a more adaptable continuo player rather than for use in solo work.

Editor: You feel there is a real difference between being a continuo player and a harpsichord soloist?

Ruth Dyson: Yes, there is a great difference, really. Because if you play solo music, very little depends on dynamics. The expressiveness of the harpsichord comes from subtleties of rhythm, articulation, ornaments, things like that. Dynamics are only to a very small extent important. But when you are working with other players, you are guided by their dynamics, and there comes a moment when the conductor demands a Thomas Beecham pianissimo, and the

harpsichord (which up to that moment has been hardly heard at all) suddenly becomes louder than anything else. This is the moment when you need to cut down your tone very quickly. *Editor:* Finally, would you like to tell our readers about some of the concerts you have in view? *Ruth Dyson:* I look forward very much to playing Brandenburg V with the Academy of St. Martin's, and I am doing a recital at the Purcell Room in the spring, of works for two harpsichords, classical and modern, with my former pupil and colleague, Margaret Phillips. There is also a four-harpsichord Bach

jamboree planned for the summer with George Malcolm, Roger Pugh, Alexander Skeaping and myself. I have one or two broadcasts in the pipeline, including one of a very unusual programme of pieces taken from the private collection of music of Jane Austen at Chawton. This is a programme of music we did with an early piano, a very nice Kirkman of 1806. Most of the items will, I imagine, be new to listeners today because the early nineteenth-century repertoire of songs and piano music, including that of Cramer whom Beethoven greatly admired, is not often played today.

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