

George Malcolm, C.B.E.

AN INTERVIEW

TO a very large number of concert goers the name of George Malcolm is the one which springs to mind most readily at the mention of 'harpsichord'. At 56 he is the doyen of British harpsichordists. He agreed at very short notice to be interviewed in the few days between the Darlington Summer School and an engagement at Harrogate, and welcomed your editor to his lovely home in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. The house was built as the central one of a group of three, designed by Ashbee; but one of its supporters has been destroyed to make way for 'development'. The interview took place in a lofty studio with a north light—cool on one of the hottest days of summer.

Editor: How did you first come to play the harpsichord?

George Malcolm: Well—I left the R.A.F. in 1946 when I was demobilised, and I wanted to spend my gratuity on something; and I decided that a harpsichord would be an amusing sort of toy to have. I did not know anything about the harpsichord in those days. My training had been that of a purely conventional concert pianist, and as a student I had never even moved among the kind of people who were interested in baroque music or old instruments. I scarcely knew the difference between a clavichord and a harpsichord; but I thought it would be fun to possess an old keyboard instrument. I had the great good fortune to find a very good instrument, a Shudi-Broad-wood of 1775, at an auction. There was not very much competition for them in those days and I got it very cheap. I had it done up and put it in my studio—literally as a toy—something to amuse myself with between bouts of piano practice, with no intention of ever using it professionally. In 1946 it was not anything like so usual to be in possession of a harpsichord as it is now, and when people found that I had got this very good one, I started to get asked to take it to concerts and play it, and then the whole thing very quickly escalated and before I knew where I was, I was getting quite a lot of harpsichord engagements and very few piano ones, and it just went on from there. Nothing could have been less *intentional* than my career as a harpsichordist. If you had asked me as a student if I would ever play the harpsichord I should have laughed. I still feel that the harpsichord was a bit of an accident, and I'm still not quite resigned to being a harpsichordist. In fact in this last couple of years I have done quite a lot more piano playing.

Editor: Do you still play your Shudi Broad-wood?

George Malcolm: I have not got it. I got rid of that some time ago, because, you know, an eighteenth-century instrument needs a great deal of keeping in order. You have to be like one of those young men with a motor-bike, who spends every Saturday afternoon taking it apart and putting it together again; and I haven't that kind of skill or patience or the time. And this Shudi was beginning to get into a condition of which I was rather ashamed. So I decided to dispose of it. It is now in Holland being very well looked after by somebody else.

Editor: That's nice—I wondered—can you tell me which is your favourite harpsichord now?

George Malcolm: Well my favourite for general purposes is by Robert Goble of Oxford, particularly if I can have it serviced by Malcolm Russell, who is probably the finest harpsichord-regulator in the world. Occasionally I want something different—perhaps a reproduction French or Italian instrument—but the Goble harpsichord gives me a number of facilities that I feel I can make use of, and, of course, they are beautifully made: you know exactly where you are with a Goble. The sound, to my ears, is entirely acceptable—it is not an *exciting* sound—it is a wonderful instrument for any kind of continue or accompanying work where a certain quick dynamic flexibility and unobtrusiveness are required. You know I'm not an authenticist at all, and I use the geared pedals that the Goble harpsichord (and for example the Goff harpsichords also) have for things like fading off an *appoggiatura*—fading off a feminine cadence—which is one of the great embarrassments when playing harpsichord continue in all these concerti grossi. The strings, on the last cadence do the inevitable *diminuendo* on a down bow, and the harpsichord is left clanking away or having to miss out the last chord altogether. I feel that this particular thing about the feminine cadence or the long *appoggiatura* was a *standing defect* of the classical harpsichord. Couperin practically refers to it in *L'Art de Toucher*; and I find that a modern instrument on which that can be dealt with, is a very good thing to use.

Editor: I rather agree. Now, one of my ideas is to combine this interview with one with Robert Goble: to pair off the player and the maker. How would you feel about that?

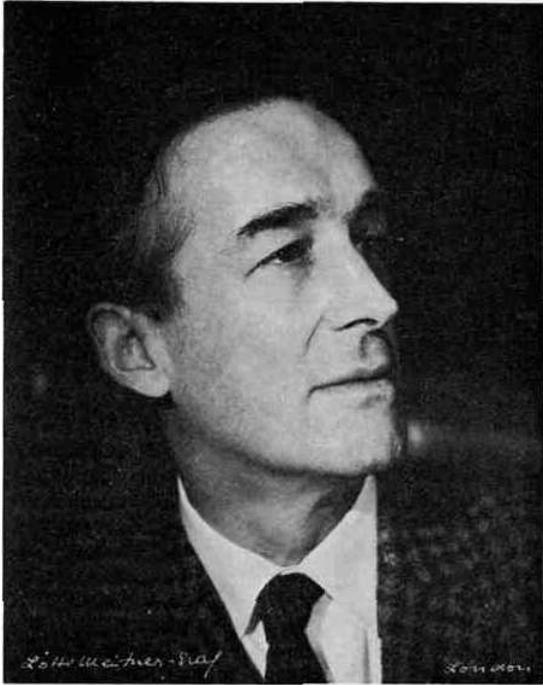


Photo: LOTTE MEITNER-GRAF,
London

George Malcolm: I should be very happy to be associated with Robert Goble. He has been very kind to me over the years, particularly when, at my last-minute request, he sent his best and newest harpsichord, uninsured to Moscow for my benefit. Thank God we got it back in one piece! He's been very kind to me.

Editor: I noticed one of Goble's harpsichords in Warsaw, in, I think, the Philharmonic Hall there.

George Malcolm: I didn't know they had one in Warsaw.

Editor: I was there about three or four years ago and went to a concert when they played Vivaldi's *Seasons*, and on the platform was a Goble harpsichord, in use for the continuo and for some solos.

George Malcolm: Well I suppose it was about two years ago when I was last in Warsaw, and I did not know that there might be a Goble there, otherwise I should have tried to get hold of it!

Of course, I know it is a very vexed question what kind of harpsichord one plays. Most of my colleagues won't have anything to do with what they consider to be a modernized version of the harpsichord. They don't like the sound; they need something more resonant, and they don't like the gadgets. They refuse to use the gadgets in fact because Bach did not have gadgets. And although

even people like Couperin acknowledged the expressive deficiencies of the classical harpsichord—they still won't. . . . But some of the modern harpsichords are just machines—there's no question about that—they are just gigantic things made for moving about in concert halls, with frames so thick that nothing will vibrate, and they have no sound in them at all. I find some of the German factory-made instruments are just absolutely useless—vast armed machines; but you can't hear them in the next room. I like to strike a balance between 'mod. cons.' and a good sound.

Editor: I agree that the Goble is a very good compromise between the two.

George Malcolm: A very interesting Goble instrument that I played at the Flanders Festival at Bruges last year was his Taskin reproduction, and of course that has no mod. cons., at all.

Editor: It is interesting to notice how many makers are going over to making reproductions of the old ones.

George Malcolm: Well—I think this is actually a dangerous thing. Yes, most of the best harpsichord makers are now engaged exclusively in making exact reproductions of old instruments, and they are learning a lot by doing so. But it can't go on indefinitely. I don't believe that at any period of history this was ever the way the great craftsmen worked.

Editor: They would always be looking for improvements?

George Malcolm: Exactly—now the interesting thing is that when harpsichords first started to be built again in modern times, the pioneer craftsmen, like Arnold Dolmetsch, took as their working models the late eighteenth-century harpsichords, as representing the highest development that harpsichord making had reached, and were proposing to go on from there. It was clearly in their minds that the harpsichord should continue to be developed. As you know, Arnold Dolmetsch even managed to get a sustaining pedal mechanism into his harpsichord! Now this is of course considered absolutely wrong, this is a mortal sin, you are not even allowed to have a pedal on your harpsichord as Bach did not have one!

Editor: Do you teach?

George Malcolm: I don't teach—I have one pupil at the moment (Roger Pugh)—I'm never in one place long enough. I started to teach at the Academy, but I had to be away for so much of the time that I gave it up after a year. What I do is to go down to the Summer School at Darlington—I came back yesterday, in fact. But that is a master class—I don't teach privately. I think lessons should be regular.

Editor: Which do you prefer, the classics of the harpsichord or the modern concert repertory?

George Malcolm: I very much prefer the classics

—I play them almost exclusively.

Editor: How about the Frank Martin Concerto for harp, harpsichord and piano, with double string orchestra?

George Malcolm: That is a very good piece and so is the Frank Martin Harpsichord Concerto—I am doing that on tour in Germany next January with the Northern Sinfonia, and we shall have to rehearse it like mad, as we are going to do it unconduted—in other words I am 'conducting it from the keyboard' which, in that piece, you can scarcely do because you are too busy. That is a fine piece, and so is Roberto Gerhard's Concerto, but I don't find much modern solo harpsichord music that I really like. I find most of it miscalculated for the instrument.

Editor: So many composers seem to regard it as a rather pretty sound.

George Malcolm: Yes—or as a heavy percussive sound—which it isn't; and you can't hear it as it is frequently mis-scored. The de Falla so-called Harpsichord Concerto is terribly difficult to bring off in performance unless you have the harpsichord amplified, because even with those few instruments the harpsichord can be totally obscured.

I've got a very good little modern harpsichord Concertino by David Lord, which is beautifully scored—just for strings and harpsichord. You can hear the harpsichord all the time—a marvellous little piece. It's really light music, but it's beautifully written. But most people, when they are writing for harpsichord—just—well—take the Poulenc—you simply can't *hear* the harpsichord a lot of the time unless you have some huge amplifier for it.

There is a lot of modern harpsichord music which I haven't explored, and I may well have missed some good things. But in general, I'm disappointed with new harpsichord music. I'm dying for Ben Britten to write a harpsichord suite or something. I'm always amazed that Strawinsky did not write anything for it—I would have thought it would have been right up his street. But, apart from the harpsichord part in the 'Rake's Progress', I don't think he wrote anything. I find that the first and last movements of Strawinsky's piano Sonata are marvelous on the harpsichord: you can't do the slow movement, because it needs a sustaining pedal and you can't do without it. But I wish there was more and better solo music for harpsichord.

Editor: You did some conducting—the Philo-musica of London—did you not?

George Malcolm: I do some conducting still!

Editor: Did you take over from Thurston Dart?

George Malcolm: Well almost. There was a period when Granville Jones took charge of the orchestra after Bob Dart left it, and then I had it for two or three years. Then there was a time when I was Associate Conductor of the B.B.C. Scottish Symphony Orchestra. Now I do sporadic bits of conducting: I conduct a number of the continental chamber orchestras as a visiting conductor on tour.

Editor: And do you like conducting from the harpsichord—in the way that Bob did?

George Malcolm: Not as much as some people do. I find that playing the harpsichord and conducting are both full-time jobs. And I don't do more of this conducting from the harpsichord than I have to. I would obviously do it in a harpsichord concerto; but I'm not so keen on playing continue while I'm conducting: I'd rather get someone else to do that.

Editor: Bob Dart had rather a flair for that.

George Malcolm: Oh, yes indeed—as he had for so many things. Have you seen my marvelous picture of Bob Dart?

Editor: No? (shown a photo of R. T. Dart playing a serpent).

George Malcolm: Actually he looks as if he was *drinking* out of it!

Editor: Was that taken in his rooms at Cambridge?

George Malcolm: Yes, I think so—as a matter of fact I found it among some papers at the office of the Philomusica.

Editor: Would you like to say something more about repertoire and perhaps about your recordings?

George Malcolm: As you probably know, I have become more and more interested in eighteenth-century French music over the last three or four years, and I think that I'm finding out how it goes. When I recorded the complete works of Rameau (on a very fine harpsichord by Thomas Goff), I was just beginning to get the feel of it.

But I don't like most of my recordings. I ought to do the Goldberg Variations again, but if I record anything for a second time, it always seems to go worse than it did the first time. I'm not happy in a recording studio at all. It's an artificial atmosphere, and I need people to play to. Playing is a form of *communication*, and I like an audience to be there. I don't so much mind a live broadcast as I know there's an audience there even though I can't see them. But playing in a gramophone studio with the electric ear of a microphone standing there waiting for me to make a mistake, just makes me more nervous than anything else. I'm terribly nervous in the studio—far more than on the concert platform.

Playing in ensemble is quite another matter—there is the communication between the artists. I

have recorded the Bach and Handel violin sonatas with Yehudi who is absolutely at

ease in the gramophone studio, and that communicates and makes for a lovely calm atmosphere. In fact, with the Handel sonatas we had great fun because in the slow movements we were both improvising. Yehudi was making decorations to the melody and I was doing all sorts of naughty things in the continue realization. And then there would come an incident when the producer would say that we would have to do the second half of that movement again, and 'will you please both try and play the same as what you played last time'—of course neither of us could remember what we played!

But in solo recording I often get very low-spirited, and feel that I am not in good form. I get tired and nervous and things go from bad to worse. Long recording sessions can be very taxing indeed.

I have just finished doing some of the Handel Organ Concertos with Neville Mariner and the Academy of St. Martin's. I don't know why they asked me to do it as I have not played the organ now since 1959 when I left Westminster Cathedral, but I think the results will be acceptable.

Editor: Are you playing on a chamber organ?

George Malcolm: Well more or less a chamber organ. We did Op. 3 last year using the organ at Merton College, Oxford. And we did Op. 7 at St. John's, Islington, which has quite a big organ, but which includes a very nice little positive, situated behind the player, and which makes some very suitable baroque noises even though it is a modern organ. We still have a few more to do in December, but have not quite decided where to do them—we are using different organs.

Editor: What did you think about the *concours* at Bruges? You were on the jury, weren't you?

George Malcolm: It was very interesting. No, I was not on the jury. I'm now refusing all calls to act on harpsichord juries. I was on a jury, I shall not say where, at one of the big international festivals a couple of years ago and it seemed to me that the decisions of the-jury as a whole were so grotesque that I don't want to be mixed up in them. At this particular competition there were a number of young competitors and I felt there were just two of them that had something to say to the audience, particularly one young girl who was quite outstanding. You know how there are always quite big audiences on these occasions—friends of the performers, students, and so on—and they are half asleep most of the time. But you could feel the audience waking up when this girl got going—she really *projected*, and she could play. Now in the course of her playing she committed a number of crimes against authenticity. She did some naughty things, getting her ornaments wrong and using

some grotesque registrations, and I would have been quite in agreement with her losing *some* marks, because she should know better in a competition like that. But when the marks of the jury were finally added up and announced it turned out that that girl was not even going to get into the second round, let alone into the finals. She had been a naughty girl: she had been unauthentic: she was out. And the fact that she was about the only one that the ordinary person would cross the street to listen to had nothing to do with it at all! From then onwards I have not been on these juries. That was bigotry carried to an extreme and I have no time for it.

Editor: You tour a lot and I wonder which are your most responsive audiences.

George Malcolm: My favourite audiences are some of those behind the Iron Curtain. I don't know what it is about them, but you get a marvellous performer-audience relationship. I think Budapest is my favourite place, and East Berlin is much better than West Berlin. In Moscow and Leningrad the audiences are simply marvellous. If they like it they really let you know about it, and it's most amusing. In Western Europe, if you give a successful recital you may get a lot of encores; but in fact they are only for a minority of the audience: the rest are on their way out, and only a hard core of enthusiasts come down to the front. But in Moscow, if the audience has enjoyed it they all stay put with no intention of going home, and you have to play five or six more pieces! Most of my foreign engagements are in West Germany—there is a tremendous market for harpsichord music there. It's no accident that I'm never asked to play in Holland. They are very 'authentic'-minded there, and they don't approve of me at all! Actually I'm sticking my neck out by going to Amsterdam with the Academy of St. Martin's this month.

What some people forget is not just that instruments may have developed over the years, but the European musical listening ear—the ear of audiences—has had a couple of centuries of absolutely *irreversible* musical experience since Bach and Scarlatti were writing. We have had Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, Puccini, Strawinsky, Stock-hausen, jazz and *everything*. And we can't be listening to music now with eighteenth-century ears. That's got to be taken into account, I think. And this business of going to great lengths to reproduce the exact *performing* conditions of the eighteenth century, for example, seems to me questionable, because you are never going to reproduce the *listening* conditions of the eighteenth century whatever you do—it's not going to have the same impact on a modern audience as it did in the eighteenth century.