

Inscriptions on Harpsichords

by Edgar Hunt

Most harpsichords carry an inscription giving the maker's name, town and date of manufacture, such as *Andreas Ruckers me fecit Antverpiae 1651*.¹ Such an inscription is generally confined discretely to the name-board, and does not stray round to the cheek to confront the audience blatantly as on some concert grand pianofortes.

But there is an inherent beauty in lettering as a means of simple decoration, and the inside of the lid of a virginal or harpsichord invites the artist to fill its large area. The alternatives of a painting in an early or in a frankly modern style are equally self-conscious and unsatisfactory unless very well executed: there is a tradition and a timeless quality and elegance about good lettering.

Pieter Fischer, in his 'Music in Painting of the Low Countries in the 16th and 17th Centuries'² has drawn attention to the inscriptions to be found on some harpsichords made by members of the Ruckers family. His thesis is that, at the time they were made, Music was considered to be a form of Vanity, and the motto had to provide a moral remedy — as much as to say Music should be played to the glory of God, otherwise it was vain and evil. On the instrument quoted above we find on the lid: *Sic transit gloria mundi* (So passes away the Glory of the World) and *Musica donum Dei* (Music, gift of God), and on a former front-board, *Acta virum probant* (Deeds prove the man). On another harpsichord of Jan Ruckers, 1634, we find, on the lid, *Soli Deo Gloria* (Glory to

God alone) and *Acta virum probant* again. Even the flowers painted on the soundboards emphasize the idea of transience.

Sometimes the mottoes are rather overdone, as in the case of an anonymous Flemish virginal of 1568 in the V & A — inside the lid, round the base, on the drop-flap of the keyboard and on the jack-rail! These include, from Psalm 150, *Laudate Dominum in chordis et in organo* (Praise the Lord upon the strings and pipe) and *Omnis Spiritus laudet Dominum* (Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord). This last is also on a virginal by Andreas Ruckers in Brussels. Different sentiments are revealed in *Audi vide et face si vis vivere in pace* (Listen, look and keep quiet if you want to live in peace) on a double virginals by Jean Ruckers.

In selecting a motto today some of those pious sentiments may not be so acceptable, although the use of Latin may save the inscription from forcing its meaning on those who see it. In fact there is much to be said for the use of Latin. It has a monumental, decorative effect, yet the meaning is there for those who seek it. An English quotation — for example, 'If Music be the food of love, play on' -will have its own overtones and assert its meaning immediately, before it has a chance to be decorative.

On the name-board of an ottavina in the Russell Collection, Edinburgh, there is the pentameter line, *Du vixi tacui: mortua dulce cano* (While living I was silent; dead, I sing sweetly), appropriate for any musical instrument made of wood. This is in fact the second half of an elegiac couplet which was associated with, among others, the luthier, Gaspard Duiffenbruggar or Tieffenbrucker:

Vivafui in sylvis: sum dura occisa securi. Dum vixi tacui: mortua dulce cano. (I was alive in the woods: I was cut down by the hard axe, etc . . .) A study of this motto and others of similar meaning in Greek, Latin, French and Italian, is to be found in E. K. Borthwick's 'The Riddle of the Tortoise and the Lyre'³. Another elegiac couplet adorns the lid of one of the oldest

surviving harpsichords, that made by Jerome of Bologna, 1521, in the V & A:

Aspicite ut trahitur suavi modulamine vocis

Quicquid habent aer sidera terra, fretum.

We think that this must be a quotation, but have searched in vain for the context and are not attempting a translation here — we suspect that it may have to do with the voices of the Sirens.

Horace's 'Ode to his Lyre'⁴ suggests another appropriate quotation. *Laborum dulce lenimen* (sweet solace of labours), and this in turn reminds one of the inscription on a spinet by John Crang, London 1758, in the V & A: *Musica laborum dulce levamen*. A fuller version of this makes the hexameter line: *Musica magnorum est solamen dulce laborum* (Music is a solace of great labours) — is this a quotation also? If it is, we have so far been unable to trace its source.

On another, earlier, spinet in the V & A, by Giovanni Francesco Antegnato of Brescia, 1537, we read: *Amoris vulnus idem qui sanat fecit* (The same which causes the wound of Love, heals it) — more to the point might be the saying: *Incitamentum amoris Musica* (Music is an incitement to love).

On a Venetian spinet of 1540 in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, we read: *Non mi sona si tu non ha del buono* which we think must mean 'Don't play me unless you have the skill'. Is that correct Italian or possibly old Italian? The artist of today must always question the correctness of an inscription before copying it onto an instrument he has been asked to decorate — a mistake in the grammar or the syntax might be a sign that the instrument at some time passed through the hands of Franciolini of Florence the arch forger, who 'restored' many old instruments, giving some of them inscriptions, but who could not spell.

Musica Poesis avete sorores gemmae (Hail twin sisters, Music and Poetry) was inscribed by Arnold Dolmetsch on a clavichord made for Robert Bridges - another, suitable for clavichord, is: *Plus fait douceur que violence* (Gentleness is more effective than violence).

We have not yet seen a Greek inscription, though many might be suitable and look well in capitals, for example: XΑΛΕΠΙΑ ΤΑ ΚΑΛΑ (Good things are difficult), or the first of Hippocrates's aphorisms: 'Ο ΒΙΟΣ ΒΡΑΧΥΣ 'Η ΔΕ ΤΕΧΝΗ ΜΑΚΡΗ (Life is short, art is long - *Ars longis, vita brevis*), or one which we have taken as our motto for more than fifty years: ΤΗΣ ΑΑΝΘΑΝΟΥΣΗΣ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗΣ 'ΟΥΔΕΙΣ ΛΟΓΟΣ ('People don't think much of music that is not heard', or as Suetonius translated it: *Occultae musicae nullus est respectus*).

¹ On a harpsichord in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

² Swets & Zeitlinger, Amsterdam 1975.

³ *Music and Letters*, Vol. 51, No. 4, October 1970.

⁴ *Odes* I, 32.

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