

Kenneth Gilbert

AN INTERVIEW

Editor: First I should like to ask what first brought you to the harpsichord. I know that you are also an organist; but how did it all happen?

Kenneth Gilbert: Well, like every one else, I first had instruction on the piano; but I was very much attracted to the Baroque and to Bach, and was the despair of my piano teacher at the Conservatoire in Montreal. I always insisted on doing more Bach than was the accepted norm then! I took very little interest in music of a later period and altogether had difficulty in balancing my diet. So gradually I became more interested in the organ and won a scholarship to study in Paris. While there, in my late teens, I first came in contact with the harpsichord, and it seemed a natural step from there, first to the repertoire which is common to the two instruments: then gradually interest in the harpsichord became greater and the whole thing shifted. The piano dropped out completely and the organ diminished, although I still play the organ and have made a few records in recent years. I still consider myself an organist, but with rather specialized tastes, activities and choice of instruments.

Editor: I had the impression that some of your harpsichord studies took you to Italy.

Kenneth Gilbert: Yes, I studied in Italy for a number of summers with the Accademia Chigiana, and there I was a pupil of Ruggiero Gerlin who, as you know, was a pupil of Landowska and was her assistant for a number of years before the war at St-Leu-la-Forêt. I worked with him for four years, and under his direction while I was in Paris. So my early contact with the harpsichord was in Paris, and as a pupil of Gerlin I reckon I was one of the venerable Landowska school at that point in my formation.

And then along with many other players of my generation, we became interested in early instruments, and began to realize that the harpsichords we had known were not quite what the early composers had experienced. One thing led to another: the restorations were then becoming an important element to museums, so that instruments were being made to play so that we could actually hear them. You must realize that on the continent the tradition of early harpsichords had never been kept alive as it had in England; so we did not have the experience of being able to play late eighteenth-century harpsichords. *You* have a continuity there. So it became something of a discovery to us that the real harpsichord was quite a different instrument from what we thought. Getting to know these early instruments and the increasing number of

copies that were being made changed one's approach to the style of playing. Many people, as in my case, having begun at a certain point in the harpsichord's revival, found themselves being carried along by changes in taste and an increasing knowledge of the early instruments, to where we have come today.

Editor: Did you start on some of the harpsichords in Paris, or was it to the Ruckers instruments in Antwerp that you went?

Kenneth Gilbert: My early training was, like many others, on the Pleyel.

Editor: No, I mean, when you became attracted to the earlier examples.

Kenneth Gilbert: Yes, I did know some of the instruments in Paris, but they had not yet been restored—they were visible even if they were not playing very well. It was here and there: chance visits to some of the museums, in Vienna, The Hague and Fenton House—they were always playing quite reasonably. My first visit to Fenton House was in 1963. It was quite a revelation to play on those instruments. Things happened gradually and there were distinguished players like Leonhardt pointing the way. They certainly had considerable influence.

Editor: Yes, I was very interested to see at Bruges that the majority of the instruments were built on traditional lines. In fact, there seemed to be only one 'modern' harpsichord.

Kenneth Gilbert: I have been to Bruges three times now, and it has been interesting to compare the gradual but very definite change. Already, six years ago, there were a number of traditional-type instruments. Then three years ago the shift seemed to have occurred quite decidedly, and, as you say, this year it was difficult to find anything else! Of course that does not mean that there is no room for variety. In fact, I think that the striking thing this year was the variety of instruments. At an earlier period there were only two basic types of concert instrument. There was the continental one, built in Germany and developed in the early years of the twentieth century, and the English which was, perhaps, closer to the traditional model. I don't think that in England harpsichord building strayed quite so far from the classical model, but nevertheless it had taken on some rather undesirable features, especially those derived from piano construction. Basically all harpsichords then conformed to one or other of those types, whereas now, with the revival of the classical models there is greater variety of shapes, forms, designs and sounds. This is a very good thing. It develops

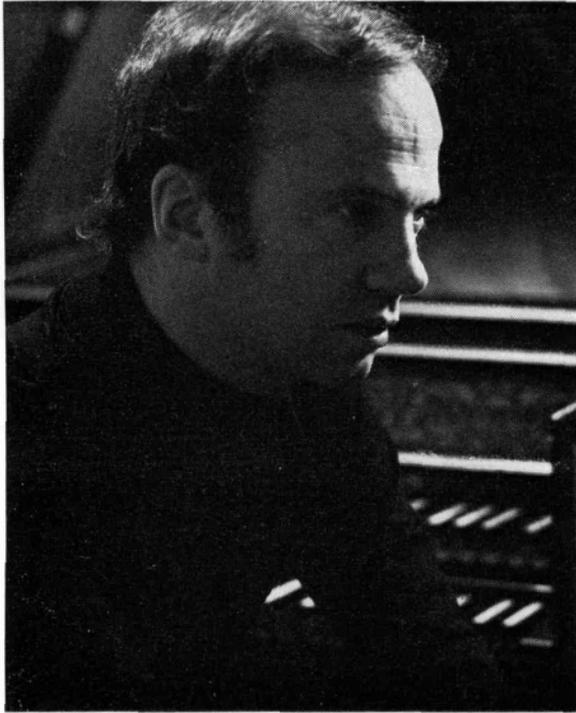


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critical listening in the player and critical judgement in the relationship of the instrument to the style of the music and the performance. All these questions become inseparable.

Editor: I was reading what you say in the Ruckers Society's report: The fact is there can be no real knowledge of, or feeling for early keyboard music without direct experience of the actual instruments for which the music was conceived. Of what possible use can it be to construct elaborate theories about early fingerings, for example, and then to perform the music on modern harpsichords with piano-derived keyboards having completely different dimensions and weights?"

Kenneth Gilbert: Yes, I think one can be very specific about that and take, for example, the question of early fingering. For years we have been exploring the idea of the possibilities of early fingering. It is not a new idea at all because in the '30s books were written on the subject with the idea that if these fingerings were studied sufficiently and players became sufficiently fluent in them, it would influence the articulation. So an attempt was made to establish a relationship between fingering and articulation, and thereby performance. But, my point is that this was all being done on keyboards which had nothing to do with early keyboards. Anything as precise as that needs the exact physical conditions in which it was done.

a series here in England for Argo. I have done recordings of D'Anglebert and some on early harpsichords, including one on the Colasse which is part of the Anglo-French Exhibition. Also one of D'Anglebert on my own Albert Delin (1768) which is a very fine Flemish instrument.

Editor: You must tell us something about your own harpsichords.

Kenneth Gilbert: I have a very fine harpsichord by Albert Delin. He is known principally for his upright in The Hague Museum. There are four such instruments. He also made ordinary 'flat' harpsichords, of which two survive, one in Berlin, <http://www.harpsichord.org.uk>

So it seems absurd to develop such theories when the right keyboards are not available. Now all this is changing. We do have the instruments, originals and copies, and then the whole question of fingering becomes vital.

Editor: But don't you think we also have the problem that it would be difficult for a person who is giving concerts to change his technique from piano fingerings to early fingerings in the midst of a concert career. That would mean a special dedication, wouldn't it?

Kenneth Gilbert: That problem still remains, and it is not a simple case of having to change. Musicians who are living today have to fulfil a variety of roles, and I am not convinced that a harpsichordist who has to play in many styles should cultivate one approach at the expense of others. I think one has to have a balanced view of these questions. One has to *know* the early fingerings and what they imply in the way of phrasing; but it does not necessarily follow that one has to recreate one's technique to adapt it to one period of music. In any case there is no harpsichordist today who is dealing with only one period of music. Leaving aside the question of modern music and piano music which one may still have to perform occasionally, he has to deal with music over a period of three hundred years and to adapt his technique to the needs of different periods. One cannot develop a virginalist's technique and ignore, say, what was going on in France a hundred years later, or in Italy at the same time. So, right away, it is impossible to recreate precisely a technique that will serve one: one has to have an adaptable approach to the instrument. I think it is a problem that is much exaggerated. The instruments themselves dictate their own solutions. When playing an early keyboard instrument with short keyfronts, if one has any sensitivity to the layout of the keys one is going to adapt one's technique. One finds, for example, when playing on a virginals or muselar, or an early Italian, one is using early fingerings practically without knowing it. It is easier. If, on the other hand, one is perhaps playing on a Kirckman or other later instrument, those fingerings will not work as well. One must keep them separate. Also I think one can go rather too far in deducing articulation from the fingering. I can imagine someone living in the twenty-second century who re-discovers nineteenth-century piano technique and decides how interesting it is that they used to pass the thumb under and scales were fingered 123 1234; and deduces that we articulated over the beat in the most strange way. The fact is early fingerings existed and had a certain bearing on articulation; but not as close as some would have us believe. Articulation is basically derived from vocal and instrumental practice. The key-

have the other in Paris. I have recently recorded on that. I also have an Italian which you will find in Boalch under the initials 'A.F.'—we don't know who it is. This harpsichord was used by Frank Hubbard for the first three plates in his book, as a typical Italian. Apart from that I have a number of modern instruments. A very fine one by Frank Hubbard himself on which I recorded the Couperin series. Then I have a Dowd which has played something of a role in the revival of the classical harpsichord in England, and one by Hubert Bedard in Paris based on the Ruckers-Taskin belonging to Madame de Chambure.

Editor: Then, when you were in Bruges recently, you played on the Adlam.

Kenneth Gilbert: That is a very recently-built instrument based on Blanchet. I also played on the Schiitze for my lecture and on the Adlam forte-piano, which I had great delight in doing. I enjoyed playing Scarlatti on that piano—interesting to confound some of the critics! But I believe, along with Kirkpatrick, that Scarlatti had access to the piano. The Queen owned some pianos and it is very likely that he played on such an instrument and might have been attracted to its expressive possibilities. By choosing carefully I managed to find sonatas that were suited to the instrument. Of course we still do not know what Scarlatti's harpsichord was. That is one of the next areas for research—that and the seventeenth-century French harpsichord. Finally, I would like to say something in connection with harpsichord making. I think it is extremely important for builders to do what they are doing today—learning as much as they can by copying the early makers. There is, however, some confusion setting in as to what the purpose of our exploration of early instruments really is. The reason so many young players deserted the earlier twentieth-century instrument was because it was not a good musical instrument. We found it wanting on musical grounds—it lacked resonance, carrying power, in quality of attack and so forth—also in the construction of the keyboard—the feel of it.

And these were perfectly valid reasons for wanting something better. However, I feel the direction some builders are going now, towards very elaborate decorated instruments, spending a great deal of time copying the design/furniture aspects of the instruments, is subject to some caution, because we are not looking for imitations—exact reproductions of the external features and decoration—so much as the musical qualities. I'm a little uneasy about the way decorative aspects are being stressed just now. I know many people, who would not dream of having imitation eighteenth-century furniture, think it quite normal to have an imitation eighteenth-century harpsichord. And I think those who would not have sham reproduction furniture are more tolerant of instruments. We must keep firmly in sight what we want—a better-sounding harpsichord, and whether it is veneered, decorated or painted is a very secondary question. We need a good workable, serviceable instrument, and I'm sorry to see prices go up because builders are spending too much time on unessentials, while the essentials are still in process of being discovered. What we need is a better-sounding harpsichord and one that suits the music.

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