

AN INTERVIEW WITH BENJAMIN ALARD

Gregory Crowell

WHAT was your first experience with the clavichord?

My first experience with the clavichord was a concert by a French colleague and a wonderful organist, Etienne Baillot. He played a clavichord in 2001 or 2002 for a French organization, Claveçin en France. For me it was really a revelation, this kind of keyboard instrument and these colors.

You had never really even heard a clavichord before?

No, not really. Organ first and then harpsichord—these were really my means of performing. I was a little afraid of the clavichord, because it's very difficult.

What in particular about the clavichord attracted you?

The sensitive sound and the sensation that you can improvise whatever you want, whatever you like, so, particularly with improvisation. If you play from a score, it is difficult, but if you improvise and if you learn about different kinds of music through improvisation—I mean free preludes, fugues, chorales, dances—it is a very important instrument for discovering and for learning. And perhaps especially to discover one's own sensitivity; we really need to be alone with the clavichord. We can share as well, of course, but that is the way I like it.

Yes, I find the clavichord becomes even more of a companion than other instruments. I love the idea that it is an instrument that we need to be alone with. It allows for a kind of communication that no other instrument really does.

Yes, especially among keyboard instruments. And a very interesting aspect is to change your way of performing, whether you play alone, for a few people, for one person, or if you play the same kind of music on the harpsichord or the organ. It's a very different experience. That is why it is important to have many opportunities to perform. It is completely different worlds to perform a Bach Prelude and Fugue on a large organ, on the harpsichord, on the clavichord, on the pedal clavichord. I find it especially interesting to perform the organ works on a pedal clavichord. It gives us a great perspective on historical practices. For me, it is

a very effective way to experience what the composers experienced.

Yes, I understand what you mean. I think it's really an important aspect of speaking the language, and that, in order to really speak the language of Baroque music, we need to know the full vocabulary, and if you restrict yourself to one instrument, you are also restricting your vocabulary.

Yes, that is it exactly. And I can imagine that playing the clavichord can help very much with one's piano playing, especially early piano. I don't play much piano, even though I certainly like it. But for a lot of music—Beethoven, Mozart—the clavichord is wonderful. I very much enjoy playing Mozart on the clavichord. The clavichord is very sensitive—like the voice—although sometimes it is even a little bit dangerous. When we have found really good expression and shape at the clavichord, it can in fact be very difficult to play the same music on another keyboard. Sometimes it is a challenge to find a balance between all of the keyboard instruments.

Yes! I have found, however, that things that are possible on the clavichord that are not possible on the harpsichord, for example, to play a trill and make it diminuendo, if done well at the clavichord, can help one recreate a sense of that even on the harpsichord.

Yes, I agree completely. And it is the same at the organ. I think of C.P.E. Bach's statement that it is very good to practice on the clavichord to improve your harpsichord playing, and that practicing only on the harpsichord will not allow you to be a good clavichordist. The clavichord is really the best professor for me.

What clavichords do you practice on? Do you have your own clavichord?

Yes, I have a clavichord after Friederici by Emile Jobin, and last year I asked Jobin and the French organ-builder [Quentin] Blumenroeder to make a pedal-board to add to this clavichord. It is not a separate instrument, but a pull-down pedal, a *tirasse*. This instrument has been very helpful for me, and I recorded some organ pieces on it for the eighth volume



of the complete Bach keyboard works. It was a very interesting experience, because the two builders tried to make an instrument that had a very quiet mechanism. When we listen to a live clavichord performance, our ears choose to hear or ignore mechanical noises, but this is different for a recording. So Jobin and Blumenroeder made a number of experiences with certain kinds of wood and with a special paper to achieve a very quiet action. I play without shoes, just my socks.

I have to say, practicing organ music at this instrument changed my life. It was very natural for me to play these pieces softly, like Hausmusik, allowing for another dimension of nuance and of color, which you can also give to the music when you play it on the organ. I never expected to do this when I started this Bach project. I wouldn't have predicted that the clavichord would appear so early in the series. This was because of the lockdown as well, because I was alone with my clavichord.

You even made some recordings on clavichord and posted them during the lockdown, did you not?

Yes! Just with my iPhone, so the sound was not ideal, but it was for me important to do that, as well as to

practice the music I had in my head. I didn't have many scores with me, and I couldn't really print from the internet, so it became a challenge to check the music that I already had in my mind. For me it was a very nice experience.

Yes, I felt sorry for people during the lockdown who didn't have clavichords. Can you tell us about your experience playing the 1763 Johann Adolph Hass clavichord on which you recorded the Clavierbüchlein vor W.F. Bach?

Yes! It is a wonderful instrument. It's also a kind of double historical instrument because it was restored by Dolmetsch. The first time I played this instrument, maybe five years ago, I felt it was very special. It has a four foot in the bass and is very typical of the Hamburg instruments, and if you play polyphonic music on it you have a very different color in the bass. I didn't really expect to record on it. After lockdown, I paid a visit to the collection where it is held in order to play the big Hieronymus Albrecht Hass harpsichord [from 1740]. I realized that the Hass clavichord was built by the son of the builder of the harpsichord, and because the music was written for W.F. Bach, who was J.S. Bach's son, it was interesting to make this connection. For me the exercise was perhaps a bit anachronistic because

the music is maybe too early for this clavichord, but to make a connection with this tradition of builders was important. There is a good bit of mechanical noise on an instrument that is very old, but this allows us to feel that this is an old instrument. To me, this is a very great instrument.

Yes, it is a beautiful instrument and beautifully played, but I think it is also very well recorded.

Yes, well, [the recording engineer] Alban Moraud is a very sensitive. I recorded two concerts on this instrument for the Boston Early Music Festival, and I intend to release that program on YouTube, maybe at the end of this year. But I played a recital on it and Alban said, "It's a wonderful instrument, and we have to record it for the Bach project." It is very difficult to record clavichord. You have to feel like you are alone, but you have to also play for the listeners, and this is not very easy. If you play too much for yourself it doesn't work, but if you play too much for the public it can be too loud. It is especially important to be very concentrated and to be very quiet, and to take the time you need, and to wait for the night. The night is very important. I don't know if you feel the same way, but the silence of the night is, for me, the best. There is something magical that we can't even explain. Maybe it is the same for some other instruments, such as the lute, but for me it is something very special. We made those recordings very late.

I am wondering if you have any thoughts on why the clavichord has less of a foothold in France than it does in, say, Germany, the Netherlands, or Sweden today. France has a very special history in the arts in general. Louis XIII founded the Académie Royal de Musique with Richelieu, and this king already started to use the arts as an expression of power and to be the voice of the state. It was not always or even only this way, but I refer to official art. It's not the case with me, but perhaps, in France, we don't explore our deepest thoughts. I think the French like things big—the big dance, the spectacle. The school of harpsichord playing in France became very brilliant in the eighteenth century. When I discuss the clavichord with colleagues in France, they sometimes make a face and say, "Oh, it's too soft, it's too complicated..." There are exceptions, of course, such as Etienne and Jean-Luc Ho—wonderful musicians.

After the French Revolution, we kept a lot of the appreciation of the arts and the connection between the arts and the state. This was not the same in the Protestant parts of Europe, or even in Spain, where the clavichord was represented, but Spain also had a very long relationship with the North. Even in Rome, music

was, for Catholics, something for the service, and not really a means of self-exploration. It has something to do with Protestantism, for me. Even the writings of the fourteenth-century mystic Eckhardt provide a prelude to Protestantism, with the idea that one should stay in one's mind, and that God is in you. You have to find God everywhere, of course, but if you explore God in yourself, it is better. For me, this attitude is certainly one of the reasons.

Is there anything that you feel needs to be said about the clavichord that is not often discussed?

Just to stress again that the pedal clavichord is very important, especially for organists. It is good to practice the organ in this way, even for nineteenth- or twentieth-century music. I thought about these things during lockdown; I played a lot of Bach, and I came to realize that it is important to play pieces on the clavichord that are not so often heard on the clavichord. This really changed my feeling. I think it takes time. I understand people who are afraid of the clavichord because it is very difficult, and so it is easy, as a result, to dismiss it. It is fine to be like that and, later, to change your mind—it is possible! You just need a spark to get you started.

NOTES

- 1 Alard's recording on the J.A. Hass clavichord (volume 6 of his project to record the entire keyboard works of Bach) was reviewed in *Clavichord International* 26, no. 1 (May 2022), 20.

