

The Clavichord

MARCIA HADJIMARKOS

"THE CLAVICHORD, THAT individual, melancholic, inexpressibly sweet instrument, has advantages over the harpsichord and the fortepiano when made by a master of his craft. It produces not only musical colouring but also middle tints, notes swelling and dying away, melting trills hardly breathing under the fingers, portato or vibrato; in a word expression for every shade of feeling. All this can be reproduced and conjured up by the pressure of the finger, the vibration and throb of the strings, and by a touch heavy or gentle. Those who do not care for bluster, frenzy or storm, and whose hearts find frequent and welcome relief in the overflow of sweet sentiment, will pass over the harpsichord and choose a clavichord.(...) When you improvise by the light of the moon, or refresh your soul on summer nights, or celebrate the evenings of spring ; ah, then pine not for the strident harpsichord. See, your clavichord breathes as gently as your heart."

Extravagant praise for the clavichord, like this passage by the German poet and musician C.F. Daniel Schubart, was common in the eighteenth-century. The clavichord reached its apogee in terms of repertoire and popularity in Germany in the mid- to late-18th century with composers such as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and the 'Bachists' who succeeded him, but was hardly a new instrument. It had already been in existence for several hundred years, and was the only touch-sensitive keyboard instrument until the invention of the Florentine piano in the late seventeenth-century. Like the pianos of Bartolomeo Cristofori, the clavichord allowed the musician to vary the loudness and softness of the sound through finger pressure alone. Its quiet, extraordinarily varied tone was thought to resemble the human voice, making the instrument the 'perfect mirror for the finer shades of feeling', 'the thrilling confidant of solitude'.

The clavichord is usually built in a rectangular case. Its strings stretch from left to right across the case and pass over a bridge or several bridges glued to the soundboard, which occupies the right side of the instrument. The simple action is generally found on the left and in the center of the instrument, and includes the keyboard and keylevers which extend from

the keys to the back of the case. A brass blade called a tangent is driven into the back of each keylever. When the player's finger depresses the key, the far end of the keylever rises, causing the tangent to strike a string or pair of strings which then vibrate. The clavichord, like the piano, is therefore a percussion instrument, and differs from the harpsichord, whose strings are plucked. The tangent performs two functions as it strikes the strings: it not only makes them vibrate but also determines their vibrating length "in much the same way a guitarist determines the pitch that a string will sound by pressing against one of the frets on the fingerboard of his instrument. Accordingly, by positioning a series of tangents so they will strike the same pair of strings at different points along their length, a series of different notes can be sounded." Earlier instruments in which one pair of strings produced several notes were known as fretted clavichords. Unfretted clavichords, in which each pair of strings produced a single note, were more common from the late seventeenth-century on. The fact that the tangent is in direct contact with the strings for the duration of the note means that the player can vary the pitch of that note by increasing and decreasing the pressure on the key.

This produces a "subtle pulsating prolongation" of the tone known as *Bebung*, which literally means "quaking". The ability to produce this vibrato is one of the "most celebrated characteristics" of the clavichord. Few indications for *Bebung* appear in musical scores, however, and it is a special effect that should be used sparingly.

The clavichord "is not an easy instrument to play well, and the better the instrument, the more difficult it is likely to be to play, as its sensitivity invariably means that the slightest unintended fluctuation in touch will be clearly audible as a difference in loudness and pitch. Moreover, as the pressure exerted on the keys affects the pitch of the notes, the performer must maintain an even pressure after striking, and must think about the notes all the time they are sounding, and not merely at their beginning and end." Mastery of the clavichord's difficulty is a rewarding experience for both musician and audience, though, and a sensitive, technically able player can achieve an enormous range of effects and variation in dynamic range, from an almost inaudible *pianissimo* to a bold and fiery *fortissimo*. Though the volume of the instrument is relatively small, this slight limitation – which means that the clavichord is more at home in an intimate concert set-



ting - is more than adequately overcome by its rich array of expressive qualities. It is truly "the most subtle and expressive of (those instruments) whose sound is produced by strings rather than by pipes".

A variety of pedagogical works dealing with clavichord technique appeared over the centuries. The first to address the important question of hand and finger position, a treatise *Libro llamado Arte*

de tañer fantasía, así para tecla como para vihuela, by Tomás de Santa María, appeared in Valladolid in 1565. The section of the work entitled "On the Manner of Properly Placing the Hands" states that "the hands have to be crooked, like the paws of a cat, with no hump between the hand and the fingers, so that the roots of the fingers are kept very low (...). One must strike the keys with the ball of the finger so that the nail never touch-

es the keys. This can be done by lowering the wrist and stretching the fingers forward, whereby the notes sound full, soft and sweet (...)". It has been suggested that the reference to low wrists was related to positive organ technique; remarks in subsequent works advocated a position in which the wrist is held in a straight line extending from the arm to the hand. Further treatises were published in Italy by Girolamo Diruta -*Il Tran-*

silvano- in 1593 and Lorenzo Penna -*I primi albori musicali per il principianti della musica figurata*- in 1684. Diruta is the first writer to "stress the importance of total relaxation in the hands and arms"; he also advocated playing with the hands cupped in a natural way. These recommendations are largely borne out in the iconographical documents showing clavichord players at their instruments: as time passed, the crooked finger

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position was supplanted by a higher hand position with slightly arched fingers.

Treatises on clavichord technique abounded in the eighteenth-century, especially in Germany; the most well-known of these was (and remains) C.P.E. Bach's *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen* (1753/1763). This work reiterates the familiar advice about naturally relaxed muscles and a curved finger position, and places particular importance on the thumb: "Those who only rarely use their thumb will usually play more stiffly than those using it cor-

rectly, for whom everything will be easy. This ease is recognisable in a performer at a glance. If he understands true fingering, he will play the most difficult pieces in such a way that the movements of his hands will be barely noticeable (...). Those who do not use the thumb leave it hanging lower so it does not get in the way. What can one play well in such a way? The use of the thumb not only gives one more finger to the hand, but is the key to any kind of fingering as well. That important finger is even more useful by the fact that it forces the other fingers to remain

supple (...). What is played with stiff and stretched muscles without the thumb can be played roundly, clearly, with wholly natural tension and therefore easily with the thumb." Although historic treatises are undeniably valuable and interesting, the clavichord itself is in fact just as good a teacher as any primer – and perhaps even a better one. It is unforgiving of any inappropriate use of the hand – it "spits" and "blocks" unmercifully if the finger does not strike the key in exactly the right spot and fashion (and this is particularly true of the black keys) – but wonderfully

generous when appropriate technique is used, producing infinite and subtly-graded variations of sound and mood.

The clavichord appeared in Europe in the late fourteenth-century, and was probably derived from the monochord, "a rectangular plank on which a single string was stretched" and which Quintilian, writing in the first century AD, claimed was invented by Pythagorus in the sixth century BC. It was known by a variety of names, and Grove's Dictionary begins its article on the instrument with a list that includes clavi-

corde, manicorde, manicordium, clavichord, Klavichord, manicordo, sordino, clavichordium, clavicordio and manicordio. The generic term *clavier* was also frequently used to designate the clavichord. The earliest images of clavichords appear in fifteenth-century stained glass windows, paintings, carvings and manuscripts from a variety of countries including Germany, England, Spain, The Netherlands and Sweden. According to Bernard Brauchli in his comprehensive book *The Clavichord*, the instrument is related to contemporary bowed and keyed monochords, the *tromba marine*, the *chekker*, the *psaltery* and the *tympanon*. The first technical description and plan of a clavichord appear in a manuscript written in the 1440s by Henri Arnaut de Zwolle, a Dutch astronomer and physician who served the Duke of Burgundy in Dijon and the French court in Paris. The clavichord Arnaut describes is very small, less than one meter long and with a three-octave compass. Another important reference is found in the exquisite and precisely executed intarsia in the Palazzo Ducale of Urbino (circa 1480). These *trompe l'oeil* include a representation of a beautiful clavichord so exact that modern builders have been able to reconstruct the instrument. English and Scottish fifteenth and early sixteenth-century literary documents refer to the clavichord's use as a teaching instrument, one of its main roles throughout its history, and late fifteenth-century Italian letters give a tantalizing glimpse of the work of Lorenzo da Pavia, a much-admired clavichord builder. Isabella d'Este, when ordering her first clavichord from Lorenzo, wrote, "We saw a beautiful and flawless clavichord that you had made for the illustrious Duchess of Milan. (...) We wish to

have an instrument of such perfection. We thought that in Italy there is no one who could better serve us than you." It is unfortunate that none of Lorenzo's instruments have come down to us.

By the 16th century the clavichord had evolved so that its keyboard was no longer placed in the center of the instrument but on the left; its soundboard had increased in size and shifted from underneath the keys to the right. The earliest extant clavichord, believed to have been built by a German maker, dates from around 1540. "The sound of the surviving sixteenth-century instruments is 'surprisingly loud and virginal-like; they are sensitive and exciting to play, ideally suited to pieces like the dances found in the Attaignant and Gardane collections (both of whose title-pages mention the clavichord) as well as the intabulations of vocal works.'" During the sixteenth-century the clavichord was thought to be an ideal teaching and practice instrument whose virtues included its cheapness, ease of tuning, and the fact that it developed "a proper touch" for organists. The clavichord was popular throughout Europe in the sixteenth-century, and a number of iconographical sources show the instrument being played, primarily by women, in an intimate, domestic setting. No music was specifically composed for the clavichord at this time, though it is mentioned as an alternative to the virginals or harpsichord on certain title pages. As time passed the clavichord fell out of favor in France, England and Holland, while retaining its popularity in Germany, Scandinavia, Spain and Portugal; this trend is confirmed by the large number of surviving German instruments. The most important advance in seventeenth-century clavichord design was the incorporation of

the keyboard into the case (from which it had previously protruded). Both fretted and unfretted instruments from this period have survived; their sound is "bright and assertive (...), while their improved touch tends to make the sound more flexible".

The eighteenth-century saw the true flowering of the clavichord. Its compass had now expanded to a full five octaves, and writers "began to single it out as 'beloved above all' other keyboard instruments, and declared it superior for performing 'overtures, sonatas, toccatas, suites, etc. because it permits one to produce 'a singing style' of performance.'" It was during this period that the great builders Hass, Hubert, Silbermann, and Hoffmann constructed refined and often beautifully decorated clavichords, many of which have survived and are now kept in private and public collections. Forkel, J.S. Bach's biographer, wrote that "(Bach) considered the clavichord the best instrument for study and for any music performed in an intimate setting. He found it the most able to express his most refined insights... (and) capable of so many subtleties within its small scale". The clavichord was ideally suited to the *Sturm und Drang* and *Empfindsamkeit* styles and inspired composers like C.P.E. Bach, Mützel, Mozart and Haydn, who conceived some of their greatest keyboard works for the instrument. Charles Burney's visit to C.P.E. Bach, who brought the clavichord to the 'artistic peak of its existence' resulted in his famous description in *The Present State of Music in Germany* (1773): "After dinner, which was elegantly served, and cheerfully eaten, I prevailed upon him to sit down again at a clavichord, which he played, with little intermission, till near eleven o'clock at night. During this

time he grew so animated and possessed, that he not only played, but looked like one inspired. His eyes were fixed, his under lip fell, and drops of effervescence distilled from his countenance. He said, if he were to be set to work frequently, in this manner, he should grow young again."

A short period in the nineteenth-century when clavichords were no longer built (though large instruments with a compass of up to six octaves continued to be made in Scandinavia well into the 1800s) was followed by the early music revival in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, which promptly brought the clavichord back to the fore. In the 1880s the instrument maker, musicologist and musician Arnold Dolmetsch was one of the first to champion old instruments such as the lute, recorder, harpsichord and clavichord. He made his first large unfretted clavichords in 1894, and later turned to making smaller instruments, perhaps under the influence of Violet Gordon-Woodhouse, an English virtuoso keyboard player who in the 1920s and 30s was a pioneer in the use of the clavichord for the music by J.S. Bach and Scarlatti. Dolmetsch's small instrument –Gordon-Woodhouse owned five of them– "became a fairly standard model for other twentieth-century builders. Many of these builders (were) English, and between the wars a substantial number of German makers began building clavichords, followed by even more since World War II." Today a large group of clavichord makers continues to build instruments to an ever-increasingly high standard; most of them are concentrated in Western Europe and North America.

A surge of intense interest in the clavichord was recently federated by Bernard Brauchli, who

founded the International Clavichord Symposium in 1993 – the event is held bianually – and the International Center for Clavichord Studies (co-directed by Christopher Hogwood) in 1996. Both are based in Magnano, Italy. Clavichord Societies have sprung up in Britain, Boston, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Japan and Finland, all of which are extremely lively. They organise concert series, master classes, lectures and workshops, and publish regular bulletins. *Clavichord International*, an English-language magazine, provides a wealth of articles by leading musicologists, organologists, instrument builders and performers, as well as record reviews and information on the activities of the various Societies. Interest in recording on the clavichord has grown rapidly over the past years, and nearly one hundred clavichord CDs are currently available. These cover a range of music extending from the sixteenth to the twentieth-centuries, with special emphasis on the eighteenth-century and on J.S. and C.P.E. Bach in particular. Contemporary composer/performers such as Keith Jarrett and Jean-Jacques Düнки have written new works for the clavichord, and the British Clavichord society is currently sponsoring the first-ever clavichord composition competition. Numerous master classes are offered by clavichord Societies around the world, and the instrument is taught in regular courses at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and the Oulu Conservatory in Finland. These examples provide ample proof that the clavichord will continue to inspire players, builders, researchers and composers well into the twenty-first-century, and that the deeply-felt words of Philippine Gatterer, an eighteenth-century German poetess, still ring true :

Unspoken grief within my breast,
I slip away to thee ;
Sweet clavier, solve my quest,
Bring harmony and joy to me !

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Anon. S. XVIII
Clavichord Player

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Emanuel de Witte (1617-1691)
Interior with woman at clavichord.