

'The true art of not giving up the Clavichord', *British Clavichord Society newsletter* 74, Summer 2019, pp. 44–45

The true art of not giving up the clavichord

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Sad though the demise of the British Clavichord Society undoubtedly is, there is much to celebrate from its twenty-five years as the primary force in the recent revival of the playing, making and appreciation of the clavichord in the UK.

I have benefited enormously from the support and encouragement of the BCS and am pleased to have been a member from its beginning. Inspiration (usually quiet and gentle, but in buckets full) from the greats, Gustav Leonhardt in Oxford in 1999 and 2005, from the amateur enthusiast, and from the young.

The clavichord is very difficult to play well. It is perhaps not an [tautology?] exaggeration to say that it is any self-respecting keyboardist's ultimate challenge. It does not suffer fools gladly, delights in exposing technical inadequacy, is positively off-putting to the beginner and uninitiated, and is particularly demanding of those of us who play it in public (positively terrifying at times). But it offers many rich and frequent rewards of sonority, interpretation and communication which absolutely compensate for the effort of playing it – and more frequently and consistently in this respect than any other instrument I know and play. Only the very best old harpsichords and organs can get anywhere near it. I am grateful that as a younger player I was sufficiently inspired to take the clavichord seriously and to develop its special technique in order to play it (I hope, then and now) well and musically. Several BCS events were important catalysts in this process.

Paul Simmonds' BCS recital at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, on 27 October 1995 [date in BCSN4, p. 14, is wrong] (perhaps the first BCS event I attended, and a memorial concert for Christopher Kite) is the first that sticks in my mind. I found Paul's playing both captivating and mysterious, and I was overwhelmed by the gorgeous unfretted instrument by Karin Richter and the amazing German seventeenth-century repertoire. I went straight home and played through all the Kuhnau biblical sonatas. My journey of clavichord discovery had already begun elsewhere but this recital confirmed my convictions and aspirations. It also set me the challenge of very high standards to reach for. Thank you, Paul, thank you, BCS. You must both bear the responsibility that I am now enjoying playing the clavichord more than ever and finally building up the collection of clavichords I have long thirsted for.

I see from my back copies of the excellent BCS newsletters that my first clavichord concert for the society was at the fourth AGM at Blackheath in May 1999 and the last in Oxford in July 2016. Between those pillars I have enjoyed leading study days and education events, and penning a few modest articles and reviews for the newsletter. I have been sponsored financially by the society and, most importantly, I have been given the use of really excellent clavichords for my many other projects and recordings: I am most happy to acknowledge here the practical help of Judith Wardman and Peter Bavington for the use of their splendid instruments. That support has been constant right to the close of the BCS era. One of the very last actions of the society in June 2019 was to provide a grant enabling a commission for [provisional rephrasing to avoid the inaccuracy of saying that the BCS did the commissioning] Iain Farrington to compose a piece for two clavichords which Julian Perkins and I will première and record in 2020.

The recital at the society's final AGM in June 2019 demonstrated the excellent health of current professional clavichord playing in the UK, if any demonstration were needed. The

beautifully crafted programme of music from the seventeenth to the twentieth century by Julian Perkins, his refreshing and committed playing, and the exquisite response of the excellent clavichords would not have come together into such a satisfying whole without the vital lead and momentum the BCS has provided and maintained since its inception in 1994. The BCS can be proud of this and I thank and congratulate everyone involved for these lasting achievements. They are inspiring the next generations of players who will develop them in new and fruitful directions. Many are pianists, organists, harpsichordists, singers, conductors rather than clavichord specialists. This is a good thing and we should welcome it. Without watering down the things that we value, we the former members of the society must continue to enthuse for our beloved and wonderful clavichord beyond our small circle. This is certainly happening in the Royal College of Music, London where I have the honour to teach. I therefore remain confident and positive for the future of the clavichord in our musical culture.