

## A perspective on historical keyboard playing in the UK

Terence Charlston

*Harpsichord & Fortepiano* magazine has reached its golden jubilee in fine fettle. It provides a fascinating record of the passing five decades and will, I hope, continue to inform and inspire as it charts 'all things early keyboard' in the ever attention-challenged world of Classical music over the next half century. This 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue provides an excellent opportunity to celebrate the past and consider where things may lead next. My contribution forays into historical keyboard playing in the UK. I have my concerns but remain quietly confident about its future, and in the younger players who are emerging.

How often must past commentators have said 'we are living through a period of unprecedented change'? For musical performance and listening the last decade has been something of an upheaval, if not a major overhaul. Natural and political events have impacted on how musicians move and interact globally, and the digital revolution continues to set the agenda for how we disseminate and consume music.

For historical keyboards this has brought new audiences and new ways of creative interaction through, for example, YouTube videos and Facebook groups. While information and visual stimulus flow freely online, musical reception there is essentially passive, solitary, and often fleeting. Live performances, however, are free from digital sound compression and reproduction limitations, and with audience numbers picking up post-pandemic, in person communication steadily resumes. These two parallel systems seem set to continue coexisting, often overlapping but mainly operating independently of each other.

The inestimable contribution of a fine historical keyboard in performance, whether an original or modern reproduction, can only be fully appreciated live, no matter how well reproduced digitally. The appearance of pipe-less, electronic continuo organs in prestigious venues exemplifies this rather well. Cheap and practical perhaps (no tuning needed) but patently inferior in every other respect, these imitations lack a true touch, feel and acoustical response. Aside from the question of honesty – authenticity in its true sense – quality certainly matters to the player. Great instruments inspire great playing. Mediocrity speaks for itself. Are we missing some of the integrity of the early music pioneers of fifty years ago?

Looking back over my working lifetime, almost five decades, the uptake of historical performance practice beyond the boundaries of 'early' repertory now seems an inevitable, unstoppable wave. Once embraced centre-stage by big-name virtuosi and orchestras, the modern performance approach changed for good, both in historical and contemporary repertoire, improving playing standards, questioning interpretation and enlivening sonority.

Things have also changed for keyboardists. Virtuoso pianists now pursue highly successful careers performing on both modern and old pianos, perhaps harpsichord and clavichord as well, with the option of directing from the keyboard. A positive throwback to the age of the *Kapellmeister* when multi-tasking between instruments and disciplines was the norm. In this model, the performance medium and musical interpretation remain fluid and in flux, the player constant.

For the aspiring student performer, such game-changing developments can appear rather daunting. From first-class proficiency on one type of keyboard, they must gain fluency and control on the others. At the Royal College of Music, our harpsichord, fortepiano and clavichord programmes for first-study pianists and organists have met with positive student engagement and given encouragement to players and makers beyond. Not everyone, of course, can achieve the highest concert-performance level across so many different keyboards but the experience opens new vistas of creative innovation and musical artistry.

Early-career schemes exist to encourage younger professional musicians including players of early keyboards, especially for ensemble players with excellent continuo skills. The opportunities are there but the competition is intense. At school-age, the organ playing initiative of the Diocese of Leeds Keyboard Studies Programme (<https://www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk/keyboard-studies-programme/>) is an exciting development already inspiring the next generation of players.

There will always be a place for high-quality musicians and makers, but they will not survive professionally without a culture which appreciates their skills, and which is prepared to invest in their talent. This is an important point related to the downgrading of not only the arts and music, but also manual skills in education. In addition to young entrants to instrument making, we urgently need more tuners and technicians. The young, however, are very unlikely to progress to a craft career if they have not first developed the necessary skills early on, particularly at school. Amateurs too need a sympathetic milieu. They remind us that it is primarily the love of music, and making music, which generates audiences, makers and performers alike.

[END]

[744 words]