

## AN INTERVIEW WITH TERENCE CHARLSTON

Gregory Crowell

*Tell us something about your background.*

I began performing early keyboard repertoire at an early age, thanks to inspired piano and organ teachers, and the chance acquaintance of a local teacher with a spinet. My musical education was eclectic and ranged from standard classics to new music. I sang and played the organ in local churches and played piano in school ensembles and jazz groups. (The experience of harmonizing hymns and playing standards from a lead sheet provided an easy transition into continuo playing a decade later.) I recall being endlessly captivated by music: playing it, listening to it, and even just looking at it. It wasn't long before I began to compose, too.

*Did you have a favorite composer?*

Beethoven was one of my gods, and his music was unquestionably great to me, but how did he do it? How does any great composer create those amazing sounds? I spent much of my teens searching for the answer, usually "under the bonnet of the music," if I can put it that way, looking for evidence of the engine which kept it running and how it worked. I trawled through all the scores I could lay my hands on and, thanks to a local library of gramophone records, friends, and BBC Radio broadcasts, I quickly built up a broad knowledge of Western Classical art music and, more importantly, a deep need to hear it and be a part of it. I wanted to perform it as well.

*Do you remember your first encounter with a clavichord?*

Listening to recordings of Thurston Dart was my first experience of the clavichord (via the radio), and I must confess to being more impressed by his choice of music and taut delivery of it than by the instrument itself.

*At some point you must have had an encounter with an actual instrument, however.*

It was only at university that I played a clavichord built on historical lines. At school, I was more interested in the harpsichord: I was so desperate to own one (remember, this was just before the ubiquitous availability of electronic keyboards) that I would prepare my piano at home with adhesive tape and rubber bands to imitate its sounds.

My interest in historical keyboard instruments was honed whilst an undergraduate music student in Oxford. My perceptive tutor, the keyboard music expert John Caldwell, sent me to the Bate Collection to be taught organology by another very eminent scholar, Jeremy Montagu. I think it was this experience, and access to the other university collections, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Bodleian, that taught me to respect the harpsichord and clavichord in all their many and confusing types. I learned to search more deeply within the repertoire for the subtleties of sound and expression, which I thought might best illustrate their diverse and non-uniform characters.

After Oxford, I was enormously fortunate to "fall" into the UK early music scene in London in the late-1980s. This was a time of "bust," when period orchestras had just finished recording everything in sight and the work for many players was beginning to dry up. Although it was disheartening not to be instantly welcomed into the music profession with open arms and lucrative bookings, it nevertheless encouraged me to be independent in mind and career, and to fall back on my own resources in an ultimately positive way. I worked hard developing my technique and interpretative sense, and I like to think it gave me the critical instincts and artistic individuality to make a success of those opportunities which did come my way. It also gave me time to pursue speculative avenues, one of which included the clavichord.

*Opportunities do not just appear, though, do they?*

*There must have been other, external inspirations.*

It takes a great deal of help and encouragement to succeed as a young performing musician, and fortune plays its part, too. Even after completing one's studies, there remains so much to learn. Opportunity seldom runs in tandem with aspiration, and time-honored tradition dictates that the professional musician is always in a hurry. Experience, on the other hand, can only be gained at its own speed and, if it is to be effectively absorbed, it needs further time to be burnished and put to good use. Instrument makers and museums have been a primary vehicle in my clavichord education and, through their willing collaboration and



Terence Charlston at Fenton House. (photo by Ben McKee.)

generosity, I have gained in experience and confidence as a player.

*Are there particular instruments that provided special inspiration?*

The UK collections, especially the Benton Fletcher Collection at Fenton House and its anonymous triple-fretted, the Mirrey and Hogwood Collections, the 1784 Hoffmann at the Cobbe Collection, and the clavichords in the Russell Collection in Edinburgh were amongst the first originals I discovered. I visited many collections in the US and Europe whilst on concert tours and, more recently, have recorded the playing instruments in the Royal College of Music Museum of Musical Instruments, including the very fine 1894 Dolmetsch clavichord after Hass. My detailed work with clavichords, in addition to teaching, has focused on concert and recording projects with specific instruments, particularly the clavichords of UK makers, including Derek Adlam, Peter Bavington, and Karin Richter.

*Of the instruments you mention, however, none could have prepared you for your encounter with a rare type of clavichord—the French clavichord.*

My most recent recording project used Peter Bavington's Mersenne clavichord—a reconstruction made in 2010 after Marin Mersenne's description in *Harmonie Universelle* published in Paris in 1636/37.<sup>1</sup> The musical success of Peter's meticulous research and making inspired me to revisit the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French keyboard music I knew and reassess it from the perspective of this very unusual clavichord and to reconsider how the clavichord might have been used at the time.

*Tell us about your perception of the instrument's musical qualities.*

Apart from its size and rich walnut case with coffered lid, the most striking aspect of Peter's clavichord was the lute-like quality of its sound. It is quite unlike any other instrument I have played. Playing it, I am aware of two pronounced features. The first is the clarity of

speech produced on the iron scale strings by the long, light keys and very long tangents, which lend a harpsichord-like touch. This quality of attack reminds me of plucked strings: harps, lutes and guitars, of course, but also the virginals, which the deep case of the instrument resembles. The second remarkable characteristic is its astonishing resonance, which can sustain a note for many seconds longer than any other fretted clavichord I know. While this can only be best appreciated close up (or on a recording), such a resonant effect calls out for the music of the *clavecinistes*, a repertoire I hadn't particularly explored on the clavichord before. This wasn't the only surprise. The Mersenne conveys the bulk of the many possible repertoires (lute and string music, intabulations, vocal, string, organ and harpsichord music) very convincingly—indeed, I found a vast range and number of pieces (running to many hours of music) which I could have included in my recording, but which I had to exclude.

*Did these unique qualities have a strong influence on your performance choices?*

Although there are no surviving clavichords of incontrovertible French origin, we do have a considerable body of evidence of clavichord making and playing in France before the end of the eighteenth century. It therefore seems a shame if the clavichord is excluded from such an important area of the keyboard heritage, and I hope my recording reveals some new approaches. This year, the anniversary of François Couperin's birth, I have been using the Mersenne to prepare for my performances of his organ masses. Perhaps surprisingly, these pieces stand in their own right on the clavichord and belie the well-worn cliché of the clavichord as a mere practice facility. Put another way, the clavichord brings to organ music a more nuanced approach to ornamentation, rhythm, tempo and particularly dynamics and phrasing—likewise for harpsichord music. Most importantly, the Mersenne



*Terence Charlston at Fenton House. (Photo by Ben McKee).*

can bridge and inform approaches to note shaping. The experience of continuous finger contact on the sounding notes when playing the clavichord can help the organist to improve their tone production and sense of cantabile. Another interesting observation might be made about the periodicity of French music in general, and François Couperin's music in particular: the way phrases often repeat rather than develop. I think of this as a playful, even dangerous element. For those who like music with uniform phrasing (and to mark it in their scores with heavy pencil), all this can be very frustrating—an embarrassment of phrasing and dynamic possibilities! The *gigue* at the end of the “Offertoire” from the *Messe pour les Paroisses* is a good example. Here Couperin repeats the initial one-bar subject almost continuously. To my mind, the clavichord is the only keyboard which can fully reveal (and suggest) the enormous potential of this theme for dynamic shaping. I apply the unpredictable potential of the theme suggested by the Mersenne in my organ performance as well, responding and reacting as I go. To me, one way of phrasing simply suggests another (usually its opposite). This, of course, is a normal state of affairs in chamber music (Couperin's incomparable trio sonatas spring to mind) and if the clavichord—always a natural partner for imaginative musical conversation—can readily convey the clarity and flexibility of his subtle, composed discourses, then so can the organ (and harpsichord). It is proof, if any were needed, of Couperin's genius that one can never tire of playing such attractive and inventive music.

Finally, while still on Couperin, I would like to add that the Mersenne plays much of the later *clavecin* repertoire, too, and I wish that I had included more of it on the recording. The famous character piece *Le réveil-matin*, for example, becomes an entirely new sonic experience: recognizable, but completely transformed. To perform this “mainstream” harpsichord music on the clavichord is not only challenging and audacious, it is highly instructive and opens up the music and the player to a broader range of expressive possibilities. Both instruments remain dynamically and acoustically different, but the cross-over benefits the player's sense of timing and gesture on both. Informed by this experience, harpsichord performance gains a greater awareness of touch, and perhaps less reliance on the sheer sonority and power of its plucked sound, and clavichordists are encouraged to think “big” (or at least on a broader scale) about their real and imaginary acoustical space.

*Would you say that the encounter with the Mersenne clavichord was uniquely revelatory about the repertoire*

*and its performance, or have you had similar experiences with other instruments and music?*

My collaboration with the tenor Norbert Meyn performing later eighteenth-century German Lied with clavichord accompaniment was another fascinating project. This led to a recording of Emanuel Bach's devotional songs.<sup>2</sup> Though largely forgotten today, Emanuel Bach's settings were very popular in the eighteenth century and added considerably to his luster as an *Originalgenie*. The experience of working on these songs brought home to me the significance of text and spoken language in the communication of human emotion through music. This prompted me to “text” his purely instrumental music and that of his circle to better understand and convey its *affekt*. The process works both ways, of course, and clavichord accompaniment brings positive challenges for singers and instrumentalists. I hope to make more clavichord collaborations in the future.

*Expand on this idea, if you would. How does one “text” the instrumental music, and what direct effect does that have on performance choices?*

Nothing to do with mobile phones! Simply adding imaginary phrases or words to a passage of notes, often a section which has proved difficult to understand and play. Applying phrases (or even just nonsense syllables) from the language of the composer can suggest prosody, stress patterns, and rhythmic adjustments. Certain pieces suggest their own external references, too. The first section of the E Minor Prelude BWV 855 from Book One of the Well-Tempered Clavier, for example, reminds me of the effortful, relentless semiquavers [sixteenth notes] of the opening chorus of the *Johannes-Passion*. The fit doesn't have to be exact to help broaden our sense of affective location and appropriateness.

A good illustration of Emanuel Bach's approach to text and melody, and its practical potential for application in the instrumental music, can be seen in the *Clavierstücke verschiedener Art*.<sup>3</sup> Included in this keyboard collection are three songs. The location of text, especially consonants, within the melodies of these songs demonstrates how articulations might sound and be achieved, for example, to lighten the *prallender Doppelschlag* (trilled turn) or to emphasize compound appoggiaturas. Their underlay suggests smaller phrasing and highlights the importance of triplets and other decorative shaping. The meaning of the text, of course, is also highly suggestive. Each strophic melody is set to several verses with contrasting sentiments and therefore carries more than one meaning. Frequent, fast syllabic writing suggests clear, emphatic articulation, and question marks and other punctuation are denoted by

degrees of rests, pauses, and appoggiatura according to their importance.

Emanuel Bach the teacher recommended singing through a phrase before playing it to discover its correct manner of performance. He may have added words, too. Musical phrasing and articulation are, after all, simply equivalences of syntax and pronunciation. Like his father, he aimed to compose “as ‘songfully’ as possible” and embraced the *cantabile* style,<sup>4</sup> although their musical styles were very different. An inspirational performer, Emanuel Bach impressed his contemporaries not just with his undoubted command of musical grammar and syntax, but also with his unrivalled ability to convey emotion and release the profoundest feelings in his listeners.

Some of Emanuel Bach’s contemporaries sought to clarify the correct meaning and interpretation of his music by “extreme texting,” as it were, by supplying texts to instrumental music where none exists. The lack of text or program to the C minor Fantasy (H. 75), one of Emanuel Bach’s most expressive keyboard outpourings, encouraged the poet, critic, and musician Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg to supply his own verbal explanation of its emotional power. Gerstenberg’s analysis, derived from Aristotle and from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, can be both read and sung. Momigny, in the nineteenth century, was following a similar path when he interpolated a dramatic scene of *Dido and Aeneas* into Mozart’s D Minor String Quartet. Norbert Meyn and I included Gerstenberg’s “Hamlet” Fantasy on our recording of Emanuel Bach *Lieder*.

*Let’s turn to your teaching activities.*

I have already mentioned the changing professional climate in London in the 1980s. The knock-on effect of this wasn’t felt in the conservatoire sector until the 1990s and, likewise, the innovative melting-pot of “alternative” performance such as “early music” or “new music,” which were well represented in the UK universities (and beyond) by then, had yet to take root in our conservatoires. I found myself part of this “new wave” when I established the first historical performance department in the UK (at the Royal Academy of Music). In addition to revising the methodology and content of courses for specialist instrumentalist and singers in Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical disciplines, we also addressed the broader educational needs of all students and the historical performance culture across the institution. These innovations have been largely adopted throughout the UK conservatoire sector. I have been teaching harpsichord, basso continuo, and related studies in London since my student days, and I have taught the clavichord for over twenty

years. I am now based at the Royal College of Music in London, where I hold the Chair of Historical Keyboard Instruments. I teach my harpsichord students on both instruments, and I will begin a new clavichord course for post-graduate organists at the RCM later this year.

*Research also comprises an important part of your activities as teacher and as performer.*

I am a performer and my research is centered on performance. I research music to refresh my ideas about performance but I do not consider myself a musicologist. This “credo” stems back to my music student days, when music was still a single subject and taught in its totality from antiquity up to the present day. That was just before the emergence of the many “-isms” and “-ologies” which proliferate music courses today. For me, enquiry about music makes most sense when it comes out of the music and feeds directly back into performance. From a clavichord perspective, original instruments and good modern copies are our best teachers. Primary source documents lend historical context, inform the musical texts we choose to play, and develop personal opinions about taste and style. Performance, however, is quite a different matter. It is intuitive and ephemeral. It engages with the “now” of music. Performers must adapt to temporal circumstance, local situation (acoustics, for example) and, most important of all, engage one’s audience. In short, performance is the sum of its artistic decisions (well informed or not) and a lot of hard work in preparation.

*What is your current research focus?*

Froberger’s music and its very patchy reception have long intrigued me. The surviving music, some 130 keyboard works in all, is shrouded in certain mysteries, and its written text gives only partial clues as to how it might be performed. Indeed, Froberger himself seems to have encouraged this obscurity and to have deliberately restricted the dissemination of his works for fear of inadequate performance. Nevertheless, each of the genres he worked in constitutes a varied and comprehensive textbook, though in music rather than words. The fugues, for example, show the gamut of contrapuntal keyboard practice: an art which in Froberger’s time was more frequently heard extempore than written down. Behind the notes of his fifty surviving fugues (and the fugal sections of his toccatas) lie the concealed clues for their interpretation.

A good example is Froberger’s method of melodic construction as we find it revealed in the fugues. There he derives his material from scales based on the six-note hexachord and contrapuntal devices or *oblighe*, such as *inganni* (defined by Artusi in 1602 as



"whenever one voice part, beginning a subject, is succeeded by another that does not use the same melodic intervals, but nevertheless retains the same names of hexachord syllables..."). Froberger, like his teacher Frescobaldi, achieves a fluent melodic ease within his chosen contrapuntal constraints and is known to have displayed the same remarkable polyphonic invention in his improvisation as well. The melodic adjustments or *inganni*, such as we find in the fantasias, have their parallels in the compositional process of earlier and later composers.

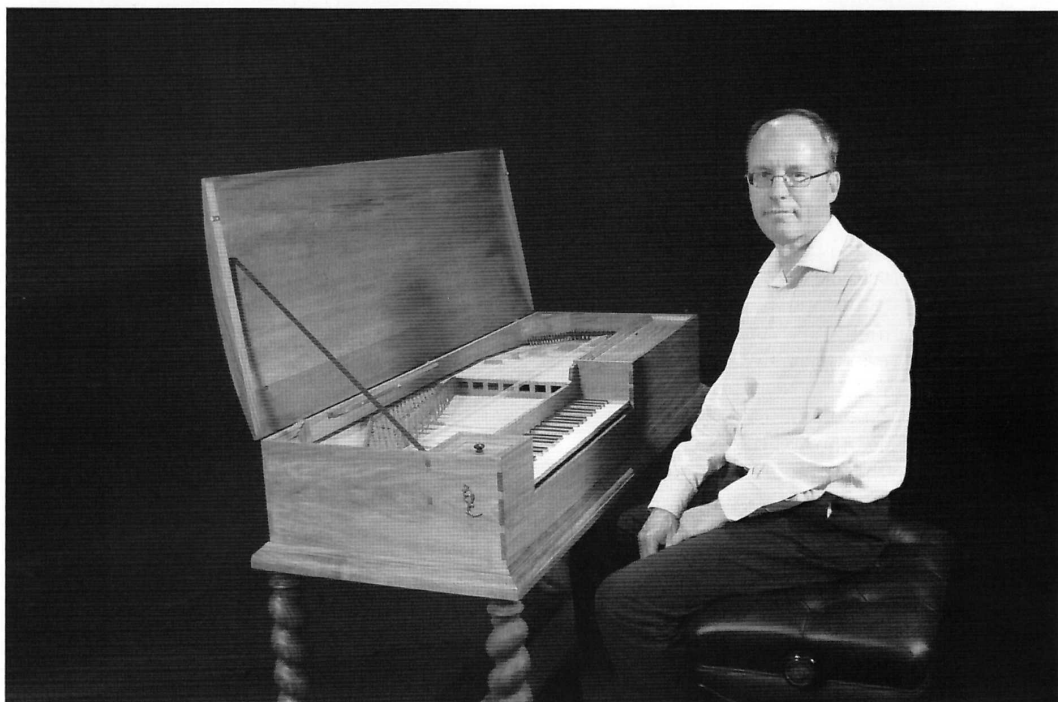
*Such as?*

Trabaci, J.S. Bach, and Mozart spring to mind. And also within Beethoven: pupil of Neefe and Albrechtsberger and, like Froberger, a Viennese resident. The closely related web of motives which form the melodic content of the Archduke Trio, Op. 97, and which stems from the opening theme of the first movement, can be explained in terms of the hexachordal adjustments found in Froberger. The presence of this device two centuries apart, whether applied consciously or unconsciously, demonstrates that the thorough contrapuntal training in the Baroque and Classical periods left its mark

on the aural facility and melodic awareness of the best player-composers. I call this quality the "lyrical imagination," and the clavichord can be one of the best instruments to release it. All this has a direct bearing on performance and how we hear music. Hans Keller was here before me, I think, with his functional analysis, a system first devised to help teach performance, though, in his case, chamber music.

*What are your thoughts on clavichord performance today?*

We have all benefitted from the resurgence of interest in the clavichord in the twentieth century. Happily, the standard of professional clavichord playing and making, it seems to me, has never been higher and is well represented by a refreshing diversity of approaches and temperaments. Our knowledge of historic instruments and repertoire continues to expand, and contemporary music is well represented, with composers writing for the clavichord. The various national clavichord societies must take credit for many of these initiatives. In the UK I can speak from personal experience of the enormous contribution made by the British Clavichord Society and its enthusiastic membership, and I was recently a guest of the Dutch Clavichord



Terence Charlston at Mersenne clavichord. (Photo by Ben McKee).

Society at the recent “Clavichord & Organ: Companions for Centuries” symposium—a wonderful synergy of enthusiasm, talent and inspiration—European cooperation at its best.

*What plans do you have for the future?*

There are some clavichord recordings I would like to make and we have a great team of engineers at the RCM Studios who can capture a true sound. Froberger, J.S. and C.P.E. Bach would seem likely given my current interests, W.F. Bach too, perhaps some more French music, something from the English virginalists, a collaboration with viola d’amore, then some contemporary music. The list could go on.

I am composing a set of pieces for two clavichords this year which I hope will make an appropriate companion piece to Peter Maxwell Davies’s “Four Lessons for Two Keyboards,” Op.81, written forty years ago, in 1978.

*How would you describe your compositional language?*

Maxwell Davies’s set is a very precise composition with finely balanced structures. In contrast, and perhaps to avoid direct comparison, my pieces will be disparate in style and more obviously contrasted. They will also use some of the special techniques suggested by Maxwell Davies plus a few of my own. At least, I think so: The set is not yet complete.

*Final thoughts?*

I have spoken about the relationship between the clavichord, harpsichord and organ—my three main instruments. The playing actions and sounds of these

instruments remain, of course, fundamentally different. Nevertheless, I have suggested that the techniques of each are not exclusive and can benefit from facility on all three. I believe that some concert pianists have found this to be the case with the piano and the clavichord, and I therefore hope we are on the cusp of exciting developments in the touch and sound of modern piano playing. The clavichord has a very important role to play in education and it would be exciting if the interest in historical instruments, including the clavichord, currently being shown by pianists were to influence critical taste more generally. I will be listening.

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NOTES

- 1 Mersenne’s *Clavichord* (Divine Art Recordings, DDA 25131). A review of this disc appeared in *Clavichord International* 20 (May 2016), 23–24.
- 2 C.P.E. Bach: *Spiritual Songs* (Toccata Classics, TOCCo248).
- 3 Peter Wollny, ed., *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Works*, I/8 (Los Altos, California: The Packard Humanities Institute, 2006), 26, 36, 48. A facsimile of Wq.112 (Berlin, 1765) is available via the Harvard University Library at [https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:6631819\\$1i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:6631819$1i). These are single examples from literally hundreds of songs.
- 4 Berta Joncus, “Private Music in Public Spheres: Chamber Cantata and Song,” in S. Keefe, ed., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 535.



Terence Charlston. (Photo by Ben McKee).