

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE HARPSICHORD

RALPH KIRKPATRICK

THE harpsichord owes its current revival largely to the interest of the present generation in music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A more discriminating sense of style and an increased historical consciousness have created a desire to hear the music of the past in its original and purest form. But the harpsichord's increasing popularity is due also to certain changes in musical taste, which are as conspicuous in the composition of new music as in the performance of old. Sonorities long absent from the world of classical music have reappeared, and a preference for the bittersweet and pungent is evident in orchestration and performing styles, both of classical and popular music. A new hunger for the music of line rather than mass, for rhythmic precision and sinewy articulation, is a counteragent to the overblown dynamics and thick impasto of post-romantics. As the piano passed its apogee, composers began to treat it like something it was not. The guitar regained a certain popularity outside the few countries where it had always flourished, and the harpsichord too began to seem less archaic and more a genuine expressive medium for musical thought.

If the harpsichord has again become a classic instrument for the performance of seventeenth and eighteenth century music, for the general public it is still a novelty as a vehicle for modern music. And yet it is astonishing how many composers have written for it in the last twenty-five years. An impromptu list compiled by this writer includes about forty names, more than half of them well-known composers. Most of this music was written especially for certain performers and very little has been published. Some of it is piano music adapted for the harpsichord by means of a simple operation on the title page, and some of it is genuine harpsichord music. Among those works written directly for the harpsichord there are varying degrees of success, according to the composer's familiarity with the instrument, but mostly according to the nature of his musical style. Some can write well for harpsichord with only a limited knowledge of the instrument, while others will never be able to adjust their thought to its rhythmic and linear inflections.

Many modern composers use the specific color of the harpsichord in combination with other instruments. Among the best known and most successful ensemble pieces are Falla's *Harpsichord Concerto* and the Florent Schmitt *Trio*. Noteworthy are the Robert Oboussier *Odes of Klopstock* with coloratura soprano and oboe, the sonatas with violin by Milhaud and Piston, and other works by Rieti, Martinu, Luening, Kaminski, Hans Weisse, Arthur Cohn and Mary Howe. Harpsichord concertos have been written by Poulenc, Wolfgang Fortner, Emil Peeters, Wilhelm Maler, Dante Fiorillo, Charles Naginski and Hubert Lamb. Falla's masterpiece, *El Retablo*, contains a harpsichord part. There are solo pieces by Delius, Oboussier, Luening, McBride, Virgil Thomson, Lou Harrison, Castelnuovo-Tedesco and others. The largest and most successful is the *Fantaisie Symphonique* by Ernst Lévy.

These works show great stylistic variety. Some are entirely contemporary in feeling, some archaistic throwbacks to earlier styles, some experiments in particular problems of composition or instrumentation. Nearly all are straightforward and consistent expressions of their composers, but several of the best are not perfectly conceived for the instrument. A few are almost completely idiomatic, notably the pieces by Oboussier, Schmitt, Lévy, Piston and Fiorillo, and the harpsichordist has little difficulty in realizing their musical intentions.

Almost all linear music and genuine counterpoint is successful on the harpsichord. The best examples, ranging from the simple to the complex, are by Thomson, Piston and Lamb. Yet Lévy's *Fantaisie* and the slow movement of the Falla *Concerto* deal most effectively with blocklike harmonic masses of sound. The instrument lends itself extremely well to dissonant harmonies and pronounced rhythmic figures. Jazz sounds excellent on the harpsichord. Good counterpoint, clear rhythmic syntax, and the logical knitting of parts provide a musical structure which is less dependent on the instrument used, and such music, even if not conceived in terms of the harpsichord, can often still sound well on it. But the harpsichord generally tends to expose all superfluous notes or details not clearly designed for a melodic or rhythmic function. Many full sound effects which can be made effective on the piano fail completely on the harpsichord.

Chords, in much new harpsichord music, show miscalculation by being too widely spaced or poorly balanced. The enormous variety of registration possible on the modern harpsichord and effect of its colors on the texture have frequently escaped modern composers. The spacing of chords is greatly affected by the use, either singly or in doublings, of the sixteen- and four-foot registers of the harpsichord. Doublings that are necessary on the piano become superfluous, while those of another nature take their place. Often, with the piano in mind, composers ask for chords or sudden

jumps which are difficult, if not impossible, to execute smoothly without a sustaining pedal.

Harpsichord texture is determined by the manner in which the music is composed. Thickness can be achieved by many voices spaced closely, thinness by two or three widely spaced. Two notes sounding simultaneously are louder than one. A *forte* can be produced by a massing of notes, either simultaneously or in quick succession, as contrasted with the *piano* of a few separate notes. Close, exact spacing often sounds louder than wide spacing. The speed and direction of arpeggios may be used to control the inflection of relative harmonic intensity in a series of chords. The motion of parts on the harpsichord can produce great variety of sound, and the rhythmic inter-relationship between different parts is of enormous importance in the inflection of many-voiced music. Skilful composers and continuo players in the eighteenth century managed the progression of their parts to indicate the fluctuations of musical expressivity. By thickening and thinning textures, by tying and repeating notes, by adding and subtracting voices, by doublings and innuendos, they managed to express the preparation and resolution of dissonances and to reinforce the fundamental harmonies. By the same devices they were able to provide accents, rests, intensifications and relaxations of the rhythmic phrase. The inflection of a melody was controlled not only by its own inherent structure but greatly aided by the conduct of simultaneous or accompanying parts.

The vocabulary of broken chords known to the eighteenth century accompanist of recitatives was endless, and it is regrettable that Falla seems to have realized this only partially. Fast motion, either in broken chords or stepwise, produces the greatest volume and brilliancy of sound. Slow motion especially requires skilful syncopations and interlocking parts, incorporation in the actual texture of the natural accents and shadings, to achieve the psychological tension which is substituted for sustained sound. Often a slow movement in which the sustaining of sound is only illusory can be more intense on the harpsichord than on the organ, where the sustained quality is real and makes no demands on the imagination.

The possibilities of two keyboards for simultaneous contrast in color are best realized by the composer in terms of two equal voices or dominating voice and accompaniment. Many special effects are possible, but these vary greatly according to the particular instrument used, for harpsichords are no more standardized than organs. Like the composer for the organ, the harpsichord composer who shapes his music too closely to the special sonorities and registers of any one instrument faces difficulty in the conversion of his music to another. Thus it is often advisable to note the basic inflections and proportions of sound, and leave to the player the final adaptation to the instrument.

Writing for the harpsichord can be a first class discipline for the composer. Its very limitations – the relative lack of sustaining power, the lack of dynamic flexibility – force the composer's attention to the fundamental elements of musical expression, to flawless melodic declamation, sustained rhythmic pulse and eloquent gesture, to perfectly knit harmonic phrases. The harpsichord offers the same challenge to the musician as hard stone to the sculptor.

In new music for the harpsichord, only a small part of the instrument's resources have yet been employed. Composers have been attracted by its warmth, brilliant tone, its capacity for linear clarity and rhythmic definition, its variety of color and doublings, but few have fully profited by these advantages. There is a wealth of sound effects never yet exploited, even in the eighteenth century. As an ensemble instrument with strings, voice or winds, the peculiar virtues of the harpsichord are a matter of general knowledge. It is hardly to be expected that the harpsichord will ever regain its former position and certainly it will never displace the piano. But along with other rarer yet irreplaceable instruments it will have an honored role. It is to be hoped that future composers, increasingly familiar with the instrument, will contribute to it a rich new literature.