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EDITA KEGLEROVÁ

THE HARPSICHORD OPENED THE DOOR TO A NEW MUSICAL UNIVERSE

Edita Keglerová is an artist whose high degree of intuition has always fascinated me. She seems to be able to get to the very core of the score, beyond the limits of the staves and compositional instructions, and in an extremely natural manner to boot. More than two decades ago, she first bound her great musical talent to the harpsichord, thus joining the generation who in the Czech Republic have to a large extent paved the way to historically informed performance. Nowadays, Edita Keglerová is an esteemed musician and sought-after teacher, with her fortes including rigorousness, sensible distance and a sense of humour.

It would seem that over the past few years the number of harpsichordists and copies of historical instruments in the Czech Republic has considerably increased. Do you think that the Czech harpsichord school is enjoying a renaissance?

I would not term it an outright renaissance, which I would rather use in connection with the 1990s. In my opinion, through slow development over the past two decades we have attained certain changes, primarily as regards the institutional area. But you are right in saying that the number of trained harpsichordists has increased, as has the interest in high-quality copies of historical instruments. When it comes to concerts, harpsichord recitals in our country continue to be a matter for more informed audiences, as they are mainly included in the concert series focused on early music, and there aren't that many of them. On the other hand, there are plenty of renowned Czech early-music ensembles in which harpsichordists are employed.

Could the frequency of harpsichord recitals grow in the course of time?

That's difficult to foretell. Perhaps one day a musician so bold and distinguished will appear as to make an impact on the concert programmes. But I can't really forecast in this respect...

You have mentioned institutional changes. Could you specify them?

I have in mind, for instance, primary art schools, where music is taught at the amateur level and whose pupils and teachers of other subjects, particularly recorder, have begun ever more often to require harpsichord accompaniment for a certain type of repertoire. It motivates pianists, raising their interest in the harpsichord, and this in turn has over the past few years compelled music schools to order high-quality instruments. And that has given rise to scope for independent harpsichord training. If we shift to the professional domain, many conservatories today provide harpsichord studies not only as a secondary, but also the main discipline. At the Prague Conservatory, for instance, there has been an increased interest in Baroque music. Amazingly, the school's management supports this trend, so during recent years the recorder and the harpsichord have been taught as one of the major subjects. Another subject is performing in the Baroque orchestra, and students can also attend Baroque cello classes. That is a significant advance. This year, we at the eight-year music grammar school in Prague had two first-year students applying for harpsichord studies. That was the very first time in the school's more than 20-year history!

It is said that the harpsichord is mainly studied by organists and pianists who cannot cope with the technical requirements of their instrument. Is that really the case?

Not quite. Well, it does happen that some students face physical problems when playing the piano or organ, and the harpsichord serves as a certain solution for them. But it is not really possible without a certain inner resonance and without being keen on early music. Admittedly, the harpsichord has often above all been chosen by older students from the ranks of pianists and organists, who have taken an interest in Baroque music and intend to devote to it, but, as I have said, it has started to change and younger applicants have been appearing too.

What are contemporary students like when compared to your day?

They are very prompt, smart and sharp, versatile. This is particularly visible at the aforementioned music grammar school, whose students have to master the demanding grammar-school tuition and playing the instrument, both at a high level. Although they have fewer lessons earmarked for playing instruments than conservatory students, who on top of that have to attend chamber music, orchestra and figured bass lessons, they have other subjects, such as mathematics, physics and chemistry. In comparison with my generation, now in their 40s, contemporary students are more skilful in languages. Today, it is far easier to study abroad, attend classes given by foreign tutors, which in the 1980s and 90s, owing to the political situation, was only possible to a limited extent. At the present time, music academies may be enrolled at by performers who have studied the harpsichord

at a conservatory or have even dedicated to it since primary art school. My generation mostly began studying the instrument at the academy, following piano or organ training, possessing only a limited knowledge of the harpsichord.

And in what respect do today's students have it more difficult?

In seeking jobs. Nowadays, earning one's living by music is not easy. Those who have studied abroad logically establish a network of contacts and friends there, thanks to which they can find better job opportunities than here, in the Czech Republic.

Professor Žuzana Růžičková (b. 1927) built up harpsichord studies in the Czech Republic from scratch and has succeeded in bringing the instrument into the wider awareness of audiences. As for the copies of historical instruments, a major role was played by Professor Giedrė Lukšaitė-Mrázková (b. 1944), whose first students included you. What can you say about your encounter with her?

My encounter with Professor Mrázková was perhaps fateful... I still perceive it as an intervention of some force majeure phenomenon. We are on the same wavelength, not only in terms of music but also in comprehending the philosophy of life. But I cannot say anything else, as it is very difficult to find the appropriate words.

When disregarding this aspect, what benefits have your studies at the Academy of Music in Prague brought you in artistic and technical terms?

The harpsichord opened to me the door to a new musical universe. All of a sudden, I had to learn how to perceive everything in a totally different manner and mull over individual details far more than I was used to with the piano. Owing to this, I think, I have got deeper into music. What is more, harpsichordists are expected to be adept in playing other keyboard instruments too, such as, for instance, the organ and the hammerklavier, which I had to study as well. Historically informed performance also entails research work in archives, questing for unknown compositions, seeking connections. All of these activities afford me great inner satisfaction.

When it comes to education, all of us actually started with historically informed performance on the harpsichord. Professor Mrázková received her training from harpsichordists of such stellar status as Bob van Asperen, Jacques Ogg and Gustav Leonhardt, and subsequently initiated master classes with foreign tutors in Prague. She always attended to us with immense fervour and energy. We had lessons twice a week as absolute beginners. In point of fact, in a way she studied alongside us, meticulously writing down everything, gauging her knowledge, her intuition. At the time, it was more difficult than today to get to the sources and literature in which we could read everything. The treasure-house was above all the Dutch teachers, who had everything digested and verified.

Later on, you had the great fortune to study with Jacques Ogg. How did it enrich you?

The Netherlands has a long tradition of performing early music, and I went there so as to reassure myself in that which I was doing. I had met Jacques Ogg at master



classes in Prague in the 1990s. I admired him at first glance. He is a person whose nature is very close to my heart, he is generous, good-humoured and, above all, a true master in his discipline. Studying with him has enriched me both as an artist and a human. Owing to Jacques, I have become more self-confident in playing and gained inner certainty. Into the bargain, the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague is a huge school, so I met there plenty of young musicians from all over the world, some of whom have become my friends. I still meet many of them at joint music projects.

You have yourself become an acclaimed pedagogue. All the students you have prepared for entrance exams have been accepted. Have you been lucky in having extraordinarily gifted students or have you refined a special method?

In my opinion, being a successful teacher first and foremost rests in technically mastering the instrument, in understanding, in the ability to explain everything and pass on your knowledge. At the same time, a good pedagogue must also be a little bit of a psychologist, know the students and comprehend them. A teacher should estimate the students' potential and qualities, and also be able to plan properly. I work with students in the form of a rather friendly relationship, yet they should never forget who's the boss. We laugh a lot in our lessons, but there always has to appear the unpleasant phase, whereby the entire process must lead to some outcome. At that juncture I can be really harsh, yet the students largely respect it and, perhaps, will eventually understand and appreciate. I am a champion of open communication, so when the atmosphere thickens, I strive, if possible, to somewhat lighten the situation and clear things up composedly and without emotions. For the most part, it helps and the teacher-pupil relationship deepens. I don't like to yell at and stress out my students, as that wouldn't do anyone any good. I have remained in contact with the majority of my students; they keep coming back, asking me for advice, which makes me happy.

What instrument do you play?

I possess a copy of a 1756 harpsichord from the workshop of the French builder Pascal Taskin. It is the largest type of concert instrument possible, with five octaves, furnished with two manuals, and its corpus is made from basswood. It has



*Edita Keglerová's harpsichord
made by František Vyhnalek*



splendidly colourful basses and a great sound-carrying capacity. Another of its splendid features is that only one register has plastic plectra, the others have bird quills, which greatly affects the quality of tone and stroke, as plastic is emotionally blunt. Unlike plastic, quills do not break, only wear down and thin, which, naturally, impacts the sound. Consequently, the quills are far more practical than delrin, even though they do not seem to be at first glance. When it comes to the sound, French harpsichords, compared to, for instance, the Flemish instruments, which, owing to their rich overtones, come across as more “hairy”, are very cultivated, precisely in the spirit of the pieces composed for them.

Your copy was made by the renowned Czech builder František Vyhnalek, whose instruments, as far as I know, are among the best in the world.

Yes, that's right. The Academy of Music in Prague, for instance, has in its possession an instrument by Bruce Kennedy, ranking among the world's top builders, and I think that Vyhnalek's harpsichords are just as good. I believe that this is due to his approach, as he loves his work immensely, lives for it. Vyhnalek's instruments are elaborated to the tiniest details, which are further refined by other specialists, such as smiths and painters. Such harpsichords are gorgeous not only to listen but also to behold. I would also like to add that Vyhnalek's instruments are voiced by the harpsichordist Filip Dvořák, an absolute master in his job. This tandem is unique indeed.

Given the meticulous work involved, I'd expect one has to wait a long time for a harpsichord from this workshop...

Yes, it can take four or five years to build an instrument, but it's definitely worth the wait. As regards my harpsichord, I often lend it to someone for a concert, and I receive enthusiastic responses from musicians, some of whom even ask whether I would consider selling it...

To date, you have recorded on your copy of Taskin's instrument three CDs featuring pieces by the Czech composer Jiří Antonín Benda (1722-1795). Why? Do you strive to revive lesser-known Czech music?

Yes, to a certain extent. I still feel grateful to Professor Mrázková and her astonishing intuition, for her having inspired me to focus on this composer. Jiří Antonín Benda worked in northern Germany, where he arrived owing to his elder brother František, an acclaimed violin virtuoso. Jiří first went to the Prussian court in Berlin, where he joined his brother and where he met and befriended the harpsichordist Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Subsequently, he served for 30 years as the court Kapellmeister in Gotha. In his time, Jiří was a highly recognised composer, best known today for his melodramas. Yet he also created instrumental music, including 10 preserved harpsichord concertos. He published an anthology of keyboard and vocal pieces "for trained and untrained players" (für geübte und ungeübte Spieler), which enjoyed great popularity in the 18th century. The first of its six volumes was subscribed to by more than 2,000 persons, clearly outstripping the number of those who ordered C. P. E. Bach's collection of sonatas, intended "for connoisseurs and lovers" (für Kenner und Liebhaber)! By the way, Benda's anthology was also subscribed to by Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart, great admirers of his. That is why I am pleased that of late Benda's music has been performed more frequently in the Czech Republic.

How would you characterise Benda's pieces?

His music for keyboards has always been deemed early Classicist, and has been played accordingly. But then it sounds neither imaginative nor intriguing. Yet when we classify it properly, that is within the context of the sensitive style (Empfindsamkeit), it presently comes into blossom. Jiří Antonín Benda's pieces must be approached with the awareness that they should express the "true and natural" emotions, abrupt changes of moods and that, together with the Sturm und Drang period music, they represent pre-Romanticism. We cannot play them like, for instance, early Haydn sonatas; we should rather abide by the directions of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, who claimed that when a musician aims to move the listeners, he must first experience the emotions himself.

In your thesis, you have given a thorough account of Benda's harpsichord concertos. You are the first to have drawn up an urtext edition for four of them and the first in the world to have recorded two of them. What precisely is it about Benda and his music that so enthral you?

He was a man with a great sense of humour, sensitive and having a profound relation to nature. We have documents bearing witness to his being moved to tears during some of his home concerts. I think that these very aspects are reflected in his music, which fully resonates with me.

To what extent do you let yourself be governed by emotions when selecting particular compositions?

Why does one select two out of 30 sonatas? Because they touch the heart. The initial impression plays the key role in my selection. First of all, I play a piece as I feel it, only then do I start to dissect the details, which, however, just underline that which I had perceived at the very beginning.

This year, you and the flautist Julie Braná held summer classes for the first time. How did you arrive at the decision to do so?

I have known Julie Braná since my conservatory studies. She is a close friend of mine and a musician with whom I have an affinity. We'd dallied with the idea of giving independent master classes for ages, yet the time never seemed right. Until the moment, that is, when the master classes at which we had served as tutors for several years were scrapped owing to financial reasons. Coincidentally, at the time, Radek Hanuš, an organist and the director of the primary art school in the beautiful mountain town of Vrchlabí, became one of my students at the conservatory. And he offered to assume the auspices of our master classes. Radek is a great enthusiast, an incredibly efficient and self-sacrificing person, and he didn't say "no" to any of our requirements. He saw to all the organisational matters, provided us with his school's premises, arranged the opportunity to give numerous concerts at the local church. It was actually the "zero" edition", which, I think, turned out very well. And we're already looking forward to its continuation next year...



*After graduating from the Plzeň Conservatory, where she studied the piano with Věra Müllerová and the harpsichord with Jitka Navrátilová, **Edita Keglerová** went on to hone her harpsichord skills at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, under the tutelage of Giedrė-Lukšaitė Mrázková. She subsequently attended master classes given by Jacques Ogg at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague and at the Royal Academy of Music in London. In 2007 she received a doctorate from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. She has won several international music competitions, and as a soloist and member of chamber ensembles has appeared on numerous renowned stages in Europe and beyond (Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, USA). Edita Keglerová has worked with the Prague Baroque Ensemble, Capella Regia, Hipocondria, Barocco sempre giovane and other ensembles. In 2004 she and the flautist Julie Braná established the Accento ensemble. Edita Keglerová has collaborated with the Supraphon and ARTA labels, for the latter of which she and Hipocondria recorded a unique CD featuring the complete harpsichord concertos of J. A. Benda. From 2003 to 2005 she taught at the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno, between 2006 and 2013 she served as a tutor at the Summer School of Early Music in Prachaticice. Since 1996 she has taught the harpsichord at the Prague Grammar and Music School and since September 2011 at the Prague Conservatory.*