

OUR GOLDBERG VARIATIONS HARPSICHORD

Posted on 17 Aug 2018 by Carey Beebe



Harpsichord maker Carey Beebe dedicates endless focus and effort hand crafting some of the most ornate instruments produced in modern times. In this piece, he shares his passion for the harpsichord, and provides detail on the Ruckers Double played by Erin Helyard in our Goldberg Variations tour.

Bach specified a double-manual harpsichord for three of his most significant solo keyboard works: The French Overture BWV831, the Italian Concerto BWV971, and the Goldberg Variations BWV988. The latter presents the greatest challenges for both instrument and performer.

Erin Helyard has chosen my 2003 Ruckers Double harpsichord to perform Labadie's string arrangement of the Goldberg Variations with the ACO, as well as two special recitals of the Goldbergs for **ACO Subscribers** in Sydney and Melbourne.

This instrument is one of my favourites, and made its debut at the opening of Esplanade Singapore in March 2003 with two concerts by Les Arts Florissants. It's been back to Singapore since, has made it as far afield as Dubai, and you may have already heard it live on stage around Australia, or on recordings.

The harpsichord as an instrument poses special problems for makers because it died out when musical taste changed in the early nineteenth century. Unlike other musical instruments, there was no continuity of tradition.

When the harpsichord was rediscovered in the early twentieth-century, they began to be built in piano factories, using piano technology and readily available materials. There was an overriding assumption that whatever came later must be better. The factory-made Revival or Twentieth-century harpsichord continued to be built through the 1990s, with Germany the centre of this stream of modern harpsichord development.

For music of the Baroque and earlier times, the Historic-type harpsichord—firmly based on historic principles and materials of construction—has now become the norm. This didn't happen overnight. The last twenty or thirty years has been a time of great but gradual change, and all makers—including myself—continue to attempt to more closely emulate the characteristics admired in harpsichords of the past, rather than try to improve on an instrument we feel had already reached its peak. I believe a fine historic harpsichord has an inviting touch and a richer, more resonant and powerful sound than its revival counterpart.

In the heyday of the harpsichord, instrument makers used materials which were readily available to them. Plastic, after all, is a relatively modern invention, and may well prove to be the bane of our existence. I've tried to come closer to an understanding of the music and instruments of earlier times by embracing the use of organic materials. The 171 tapered pearwood jacks in the 2003 Ruckers Double have holly tongues sprung by boar bristle, and its strings are plucked with plectra cut from Canada goose quill.

Can you hear the difference?

- Carey Beebe