

Book review by Carey Beebe

The Harpsichord and Clavichord: an encyclopedia

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It was September 1996, and an excited moment in the back of a Hong Kong taxi: The great American musician Igor Kipnis revealed his plans to me for the first encyclopedia of the harpsichord. We were en route for his fitting with an Indian tailor near the Star Ferry. Igor obtained his suit, but unfortunately died in early 2002 before he could see his book project completed. It has taken another five years for what he started to reach publication under an assembled team.

This long-awaited volume is the second in Routledge's series of *Encyclopedia of Keyboard Instruments*. Volume 1 (*The Piano*) has managed to reach a second edition, and Volume 3 (*The Organ*) was released last year.

There is much useful information to be gleaned from the 548 pages of this volume dealing with the early keyboards, but the quality of the content varies widely. Many of the contributors are leaders in their specialist fields. Others, though, to judge by their finished text, are clearly not, and so the expectation of an authoritative work overall by the use of the word *Encyclopedia* is likely to result in some disappointment.

The book is sprinkled with black and white photographs and diagrams throughout. Many of the photos are of museum instruments and most of these are of good studio quality with only a few missing feet or lacking in contrast. Other shots, though, are poor, like the photo of Hubbard's famous 1584 Moermans in a domestic setting, which appears to have had part of its keywell at the spine cropped for the benefit of the potplant at its tail. At least there are no reversed images resulting from flipped negatives. The "Antunes" photo does need judicious cropping to eliminate the height of the wall and the door. The photo accompanying the Todini article is not the famous Todini at all, but an anonymous instrument from the Metropolitan instead. Others are poorly captioned as well, like the Truchado Geigenwerk appearing with that article, but called a "Bowed harpsichord" and lacking any mention of its Brussels home. Several representative instruments are sketched instead of photographed, and not always to their benefit.

The diagrams fare little better. The cross section accompanying the definition of "Knee", for example, is captioned "Knee lever" in error, a mistake which may have crept in because of the tendency to want to keep illustrations in this volume either at the bottom or top of a column, and an editor has become confused with the subsequent article. The article incorrectly tells us that "Its purpose is to transfer the string tension from the hitchpin rail down to the rigid bottom...": In another part of the book, though, we are told that Italians usually have their strings hitched not into a hitchpin rail, but at soundboard level in front of a thin moulding. If

the only purpose of a knee was for string tension, why do they often occur supporting the liners on all sides and even the bellyrail on Italian instruments? The sketch itself only labels “Knee” and no other parts, and in fact the soundboard moulding is missing entirely.

Other diagrams are more lacking, and only clearly manage to show they were drawn by somebody who either didn’t ever see an instrument or understand how it works. Goodness knows what sort of harpsichord is pictured in the sketch accompanying “Mechanism”, or how it might be expected to work: The lower guide appears so close the rear of the rather piano-looking keys which lack key end cloth, and the jacks are obviously too tall to even fit under the jackrail.

Some diagrams—like the pretty floral arrangements used by Mark Lindley in his “Temperament” article to display key relationships—are reduced to illegibility, while another—that accompanying “Tongue”—needlessly occupies a valuable half column in height. One of the beats per second examples in the “Temperament” article is missing its all-important row of numbers. Other examples in that article are depicted in such an obscure numerical way without an adequate key, so they sadly defy any basic attempt by a layman to discover what the different temperaments are really about, or how to set them.

The tables throughout the volume are set sans serif, and while this might have been intentional to increase clarity, they really only manage to look out of place.

One of the larger articles is an excellent contribution by Sheridan Germann on “Decoration” that runs to thirty pages. While not verbatim, it is, though, virtually identical to her “Harpsichord Decoration — A Conspectus” which appeared in 2002 with an additional ninety-five pages of photos and commentary in Volume IV of *The Historical Harpsichord* series edited by Howard Schott.

Many countries have their own article. The excellent one on “Canada”, although gleaned entirely from online and fully attributed as such, could have served as an example for others to follow. It concisely details harpsichord playing there from the seventeenth century through to the present, along with making and pedagogy. While one of the earliest Australian harpsichords from the 1960s was mentioned in the “Australia” article contributed by Melbourne maker Mars McMillan, the actual maker of that instrument was not named. One of Mars’s own instruments is pictured, exhibiting the same distinctive soundboard painting style of her harpsichord shown in the middle of an Australian Rules football field in Wolfgang Zuckermann’s *The Modern Harpsichord*.

It’s natural for the interests and prejudices of each contributor to come out in their writing—along with this reviewer’s. Stronger editorship would help bring this into line for the *Encyclopedia*. Even if it is true that the late Motoko Nabeshima was the first Japanese harpsichordist to work with Gustav Leonhardt, it’s a shame for us to have to read about it in the article she herself authored on “Japan”.

The only living harpsichord maker that rates his own entry is “Dowd”. “Hubbard” and “Challis” have their own items, as do “Pleyel” and “Neupert”. Other modern makers and

protagonists in the harpsichord revival might be dealt with very briefly under their particular country, rate a mention, or none at all. (The index is helpful, but not as comprehensive as it could be.) The danger of attempting such an all-encompassing work is to leave something out, of course, and there are several glaring omissions in the large list of makers in the “Builders, twentieth century” article, in spite of the contributor’s disclaimer that the list is only representative.

For the interest of performers, there are many good articles. Richard Troeger’s writings on “Technique” are as clear and useful as his books, as is the late Peter Le Huray’s “Fingering”. Both contributors are renowned. Some important musical terms are included, and most of the great early keyboard composers have entries, although these are treated variably. There’s more than six columns on Saint-Lambert’s two theoretical writings, for example, but less than a paragraph on the far more important Couperin’s *L’art de toucher le clavecin*.

For a work with such a long gestation, some updating of initial contributions is probably to be expected. The “Blanchet” article lists the whereabouts of the 1765 instrument as “Formerly Scarsdale, NY Rosenbaum collection”, although for ten years this collection has been at the Hamamatsu Museum of Musical Instruments in Japan, and the city is mentioned in the article on “Collections”.

In all, there is much interesting information here, but in this disappointing effort to tie it all together, I can’t imagine Igor would have been satisfied with the published result. This volume is clearly only half-baked. Let’s put it back in the oven, appoint a new chef, and see what can be stirred into it for a second sitting.

AUTHOR NOTE

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