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## CLAVICHORD AS A TEACHING TOOL IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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*The clavichord is the extreme contrast to the modern piano. More than any other keyboard instrument, the clavichord represents a touch sensitive keyboard instrument without any mechanism that goes between a performer and the instrument. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries clavichord studies was regarded by many as the best foundation to the study of other keyboard instruments. Is the study of clavichord playing relevant to the 21st century keyboard world? Is it still a valuable teaching instrument? In this Lecture Recital, I will concentrate on the special attributes of the clavichord as an instrument, and how these qualities could be used to enhance our ability to listen and develop a sensitive touch on a keyboard. Although the clavichord is the softest of all keyboard instruments, it is arguably the most expressive.*

This presentation is aimed at highlighting elements of the Clavichord that might be of great advantage for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not just as keyboard teachers and performers, but also as general music teachers.

Some of these unique elements of the Clavichord include the *Bebung* (vibrato) and the simple mechanism of the instrument. Other elements that are relevant to us are that: the Clavichord is the simplest keyboard instrument to maintain as a result of its simple mechanism and the easiest to transport due to its small size.

Some perceived disadvantages of the Clavichord, in comparison to the modern piano, might be that one needs to tune the instrument much more frequently, and that the sound is very soft. I will argue that these two issues are actually of great advantage to the music learning process.

The first part of the talk will include a short introduction of the instrument. We will then look at some comments made in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries highlighting the advantages of the Clavichord as a teaching instrument. Finally - why and how should we implement this attributes to our 21<sup>st</sup> century environment?

## 1. About the Instrument

The Clavichord evolved from a very old instrument - the Monochord. It is probable that Pythagoras, the famous Greek philosopher invented the instrument to illustrate mathematically his theory of musical intervals and harmonies.

Originally the Monochord consisted of a rectangular plank, and later took on the rectangular box shape that allowed for a larger sound.

To quote -

It teaches all the tones by touch; by touch it examines all song. It teaches legitimate sound by the finger and ear. It places before the eyes the causes of all things that pertain to music. Without knowledge of this you can by no means become a skilled musician, and you will not understand many things in Aristotle's and the other philosophers. It is a semi-mute teacher, worthy of admiration, since it knows nothing yet teach everything. It is most patient, and teaches without blows and indignations. It does not get angry at the slowness of your intelligence. It is ready whenever you choose, the easiest and most artistic of all musical instruments.

Johann Turmair published in 1516 in the treatise *Musicae Ruimentas*.

As mentioned, the Clavichord is a rectangular music box, with a simple mechanism, which allows for the performer to have active on-going manipulation of the strings as long as one is depressing the keys.

Strictly speaking the Clavichord has a mechanism as follows:

Small metal blades, the tangents, which are inserted perpendicularly at the far end of the key levers, strike the strings. When a key is pressed by the player's fingers, the rear extremity of the key levers rises, and the tangents hit the strings. The clavichord is thus a percussion instrument, unlike the Harpsichord, in which the strings are plucked by small quills fixed on jacks, which rise when the keys are depressed.

Once the hammers of the Fortepiano, as well as the quills of the Harpsichord, have contacted a string, it immediately leaves it to vibrate freely on its own. The player does not have any

more influence on the sound. The entire length of the string, from the nut to the bridge, vibrates on both of these instruments.

In contrast, the tangents of the Clavichord fulfill two functions: they act as a percussion element, similar to the hammers of the fortepiano, but they do not leave the strings once they have struck them. Instead they remain in contact with them throughout the duration of the sound. In so doing, they divide the strings into two sections: the section from the hitching to the point of impact is damped by a strip of cloth, while the sounding part of the strings (their speaking length) is determined by the striking point of the tangent and the bridge.

Once the key is released, the tangent leaves the strings, the vibration section contacts the muted portion of the strings (damping cloth), and the sound is immediately silenced.

Now - the mechanism I just described is a very simple one. As is often the case there is much less chance of things going wrong with simple mechanisms.

A Clavichordist needs to rely on common sense and basic woodworking knowledge to solve most common trouble-shooting issues. One also needs to be knowledgeable in tuning and putting on a string. Aren't keyboard performers usually left far behind with these last two issues compared to string instrumentalists? There is basically very little that you can't do yourself in relation to dealing with a Clavichord.

The element of "Bebung" - vibrato - on the strings is perhaps the most unique feature of the Clavichord.

Türk in his 1789 *Klavier Schule* mentions that: "The true Clavier or Clavichord has, above most other keyboard instruments, the special advantage that one can execute the *Bebung* upon it, and produce rapidly one after the other all the degrees of loudness and softness available on the instrument, and that one can consequently play with much more expression than is possible for example on the harpsichord".

Clavichords vary in size between a traveling instrument that weighs around 7.5 kg and has a range of 4 octaves up to ones that have a range of 5 octaves and weigh up to 60kg.

## **2. The Clavichord as a teaching keyboard instrument in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.**

As modern piano performers it is often difficult for us to relate to written documentations in musical treatises dealing with keyboard instruments such as the Clavichord, Spinet, Virginal, Harpsichord or Fortepiano, simply for the reason that they often mention different techniques which are required for playing on any of these instruments as well as having often fundamental different views of sound production. The special techniques required for these instruments are often foreign to modern piano players. It is also challenging for us to translate the aesthetics of thought from 200 years ago into our current way of thinking. We should however look always for the fundamentals of expressive music-making which should make very good sense to us even after 200 - 300 years, as they will always remain valid.

Even when we encounter descriptions regarding organ in musical writing (those mentioning the Clavichord as a good starting instrument for future organ students) it is difficult for most of us to understand why this is the case. In our time we have become very dependent on the modern piano without having the diversity of previous centuries. Most keyboard players in the 16<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had basic knowledge if not the expertise in a wide range of keyboard instruments.

Although the two instruments (Organ and Clavichord) form the outer boundaries of the keyboard instruments family, they were often mentioned to have similar touch. Both are different from the plucked instruments in the way their keys should be manipulated.

Various treatises give us a very clear indication of the importance of the Clavichord as a teaching or a beginner's instrument for various reasons. Some of those arguments have no bearing on our current instrumental and musical environment. Some however are very relevant and could show us how valuable it is to have a Clavichord in our teaching studios.

In his paper presented at the Magnano Clavichord Conference in 2001, Bernard Brauchli gives us a detailed survey of the relevant treatises.

A few examples -

1511 - Sebastian Virdung in "Musica getutscht" (the first important treatise on musical instruments) includes an imaginary conversation with a student in which the student asks,

Please tell me how I can learn to play on the instruments? To which Virdung answers: first take the Clavichord, then the Lute and finally the flute, because what you will have learned on the Clavichord you will then be able to play easily and well on the Organ, harpsichord, virginals and all other keyboard instruments. What you will have learned on the Lute you will be able to play easily and well on the Harp and violin. What you will have learned on the flute you will be able to play easily and well on all other pipes with holes.

In 1593, Girolamo Diruta in his keyboard technique manual mentions that there is a clear distinction between hitting the keys and pushing them.

By pushing the keys one creates a united harmony, by hitting them one obtains detached harmony. Plucked keyboard instruments must be struck, while playing the organ (or the Clavichord) one should never hit with fingers.

In 1619, Michael Praetorius mentions that,

Beginner organ students are first taught the Clavichord, this is chiefly because the Clavichord has no Quills - and these usually cause much trouble and displeasure to the player, the strings remain more constant and the Clavichord remains in tune for much longer periods of time, a great advantage for beginner students.

In 1724 the Spanish musician Pablo Nassarre,

The organ is suitable to churches, but not to home practice. It is an instrument that requires much agility of the fingers, for which the Clavichord is suited. It is not irritating to those who hear it, but having enough sound so that those who study can understand what they are doing.

Georg Simon Löhlein wrote in his *Clavierschule* in 1765,

without doubt any Clavichord is better for a beginner than a harpsichord or pianoforte and experience confirms this for whoever learns on these instruments will never obtain the refinement in touch and expression of one who has started on the clavichord.

Georg Friedrich Wolf's "Unterricht im clavier spielen" from 1789 mentions that,

Anyone who would like to learn to play a keyboard instrument must start on a good clavichord not on a forte piano or harpsichord for these latter require more strength and speed in the fingers. In order to obtain refinement and expression in playing, to express on a keyboard sweetness and harmony one must start on a good clavichord... when one has studied a certain time on the clavichord the forte piano can profitably be used; one will thereby avoid that sticky manner of playing which is often that of beginners and will obtain more strength in playing because one will have learnt to lift one's fingers well.

Johann Samuel Petri wrote in 1782,

Anyone who does not loose rapidly the habit of always leaving the fingers on the keys should be brought to an organ where the notes shout as long as he leaves his fingers down.

Handel is supposed to have written: "... the clavichord must be made use of by a beginner instead of organ or harpsichord."

C.P.E. Bach in his "Art of Playing the Keyboard" writes -

Every keyboard instrument player must own a good harpsichord and a good clavichord which allows him to play all kinds of things interchangeably. He who plays well on the clavichord will also be an accomplished harpsichordist but not the reverse. One must use the clavichord to learn interpretation.

Daniel Gottlob Türk in his 1789 Clavierschule,

At least in the beginning the clavichord is unquestionably the best suited for learning, for on no other keyboard instrument is it possible to achieve finesse in playing as well as on this one.

As you can see from this small selection of quotes the Clavichord has been a vital part of the keyboard world up to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was perhaps the golden age of Clavichord.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the decline of popularity of the Clavichord as the piano took over as the instrument of choice. As the medium of concerts started, and the performance spaces became larger there was little place for the Clavichord.

Let us leave past times and ask ourselves -

### **3. Why should we use the Clavichord as a teaching instrument in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

As far as practical cost/space/transport issues go, the Clavichord is a very versatile instrument.

The price of a Clavichord ranges from under \$10,000 to slightly more than \$20,000. The \$15,000 - \$20,000 range allows us to purchase a high quality instrument.

In comparison to an upright piano this is very good value for quality, as all reasonable quality Clavichords are hand made. It was in fact a remarkable experience for me to witness in a Clavichord Conference the interchangeable element as far as a Clavichord performer and builder are concerned. Most Clavichord players have the basic knowledge of building an instrument. They are self sufficient in matters that relate to the instrument. Is this the case with the modern piano?

The space that a Clavichord occupies is minimal. Unless you are looking at the largest models the instruments are also reasonably easy to carry.

The sound volume could also be a very real issue in an apartment house in a city where rules of occupancy are getting stricter and stricter. Issues that do need to be considered are the same as with other high quality wood furniture: dryness and extreme temperatures.

The transport of the Clavichord by car is also fairly easy depending of the size of the instrument. In today's world of frequent moving and limited space the Clavichord serves a great alternative to the piano as far as logistics are concerned. It allows for flexibility.

These practical elements give us reasoning that relates only to the physical issues of owning a Clavichord or using it as a teaching tool.

The most important argument for looking at the Clavichord as a teaching and performing instrument should be however - what relevant attributes does the Clavichord possess in relation to the modern piano specifically, and to the music we play in general?

One of the fundamentals of music education is learning to listen. Perhaps more than ever our ways of listening have changed dramatically with the technological advances of recent times. The issues relating to volume of sound are very different from those in the 16 - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The most important element of the range of dynamic that develops this aspect is the soft dynamic range. Clavichord by its nature is the softest keyboard instrument. There is no doubt that the modern piano can create a remarkable palette of soft dynamic sounds and colors. This particular element of modern piano playing acts perhaps as the most creative process as far as instrumental practice, and is also one of the most challenging. It is so much harder to control the soft dynamic register than to allow our energy to go forth with uncontrolled bashing of the instrument.

With the Clavichord, which is in fact a very challenging instrument as far as instrumental control is concerned, once you learn the basic touch technique, and even before you come close to mastering and polishing the full potential of the instrument, you are already immersed in a very soft range of sounds. During further study of the instrument development of the subtle changes as part of the soft dynamic range are required, but throughout the process the sound environment that the player is experiencing has the intimate, delicate nature of subtle, refined soft dynamics.

As a modern piano player I found that the most striking element relating to the Clavichord is the touch control. It is a remarkably satisfactory sensation to have an on-going dialogue with the instrument. Not just striking keys and hoping for the best.

As noted the Clavichord was used through out the 16<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as a starting learning tool for other keyboard studies. Although the techniques of instruments such as the Organ, Harpsichord, Fortepiano etc, are different from the technique of Clavichord playing, it is important to note that musicians did see the benefits of the Clavichord's unique touch qualities as vital for further keyboard studies.

As far as the modern piano is concerned - our main question is whether we treat it as a mechanical instrument. If we approach this line of thought, than practicing on the Clavichord has no relation or would serve no purpose as far as leading up to the modern piano. Clavichord is anything but a mechanical instrument.

If on the other hand we are looking at the modern piano from the point of view of a touch sensitive instrument then the Clavichord has a direct bearing on learning ways to express our expressive ideas in a pro-active way during a performance.

The remarkable vibrato-like element the Clavichord can produce allows the keyboard player to venture into the realm of the strung instruments. This has significant virtues that allow the keyboard to be treated as an equal to a lute, for instance, in regard to expressive qualities.

One more element that we often forget as modern piano players is that our connection with the instrument is limited. I mentioned before that most Clavichord players are knowledgeable in building an instrument. This connection goes much further as the knowledge extends to tuning. Tuning is arguably one of the most important elements helping us in learning how to listen. As the tuning of the piano became equal we lost one of the essential building blocks of music. The individual character of different keys was a integral part of music in the 17th and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and was achieved by the different methods of tempered tuning. The modern piano player can't fully, as a result of the 19<sup>th</sup> century music (which lead to the equal temperament system), capture this element of music.

The Clavichord is an ideal instrument to get acquainted with tuning methods, and as a result of its small scale and simple construction serves as the easiest instrument to get familiar with basic tuning. Students will be able to identify with their instrument, learning basic physical tuning elements, and learn to be sensitive to the relations between pitches.

The attributes I mentioned until now (dynamic range, touch, vibrato and tuning) are often only associated with the music written for the Clavichord in early music.

I would argue that the Clavichord has some qualities which render it very contemporary as far as creative sounds are concerned. The specific attacks and sound qualities (almost digital qualities), render the instrument as an ideal instrument to explore a sound color that is not normally associated with keyboard instruments. It is a mixture between percussive, string and computerized sounds.

We would need to adjust our way of approaching the teaching of keyboard if we are to choose the Clavichord as an essential instrument. Instead of looking at methods written for the modern piano, we might want to look at studying the Clavichord as a musical learning method.

There are documents stating that J.S.Bach regarded the Clavichord as his favorite instrument as a result of its expressive qualities. Most of J.S.Bach's music for the keyboard was written with teaching in mind. His pieces were meant to be not just for instrumental teaching, but each piece was designed to teach the students music.

If we follow Bach's pedagogical approach, the Clavichord will take its place again as the ideal teaching instrument, for early music as well as for contemporary creative music elements.

To summarize - the Clavichord being a very old instrument survived the evolution of keyboard instruments over 2000 years. Being simple is sometimes the most important element in understanding the fundamentals. As an accessible musical instrument the Clavichord can be one of our biggest assets as a teaching tool in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**About the Author:**

The Israeli born pianist **Arnan Wiesel**, is a winner of national and international prizes. A graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music he studied with Seymour Lipkin, Gary Graffman, Pnina Salzman, Arthur Rubinstein, Alfred Brendel, Radu Lupu and Daniel Barenboim. A frequent guest at international festivals he has had regular invitations to the Schleswig-Holstein, Insel Hombroich and Munchner Klaviersommer Festivals in Germany and the Israel Festival. In Europe appearances include concertos with the Stuttgart Philharmonic, Hamburg Mozart Orchestra, Deutsche Kammerakademie Neuss, Wurttembergische Kammerphilharmonie, Danska Sinfonietta, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra as well as recitals at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Munchner Gasteig, Frankfurt Alte Oper, Bayreuth, Brussels, Copenhagen and Zurich. In the USA he appeared in Carnegie Hall in New York as well as with the Curtis Orchestra. Since taking up residence in Australia, where he is currently Head of Keyboard at the ANU School of Music, he has performed with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Australia Ensemble, the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, at the Adelaide Festival and in numerous ABC live concerts. Recent activities include the establishment and artistic direction of the Australian International Chopin Piano Competition in Canberra. In the last few years Arnan has been researching and performing works on the clavichord, the complete J.S.Bach Keyboard works.