The Clavichord

The clavichord, forerunner of the piano, was one of the most important instruments in Western keyboard history until the first decades of the nineteenth century. Bernard Brauchli’s comprehensive history fills a major gap in the literature on this instrument. Beginning with the earliest known references, he traces the clavichord’s evolution up to the mid-nineteenth century, ending with a study of performance technique. The clavichord’s structural developments (traced largely through an analysis of extant instruments), literary documentation (much of it presented here for the first time in English translation), treatises and iconographical sources are presented in chronological order. What emerges from this in-depth study of the various sources is an overview of the essential role this instrument played both socially and musically for more than four centuries, restoring the clavichord to the position it justly deserves in history.

Bernard Brauchli lives in Pully (Lausanne), Switzerland and is widely known in the field of early keyboard music through his many concerts, recordings and research, most notably on the clavichord. He has made numerous recordings for EMI and for Titanic Records (USA). He is artistic director of the Cambridge Society for Early Music (Boston, Mass.) and founder and president of the Festival Musica Antica a Magnano, the Corsi di Musica Antica a Magnano and, with Christopher Hogwood, founder of the International Centre for Clavichord Studies, all in Magnano, Piedmont, Italy.
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The Clavichord

Bernard Brauchli
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Foreword by Christopher Hogwood

With one of the most dismissive and wrong-headed sentences ever penned for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, John Robinson declared, in 1801, that ‘the clavi-
chord gives a fretful, waspish kind of sound, not at all suited to tender expres-
sion’. Nothing could be further from the truth, but his barb epitomises the
long-standing ignorance that has dogged this innocent instrument for two
centuries.

In ArtSpeak, the clavichord is a ‘sleeper’ – an overlooked masterpiece, its
true value for the most part unsuspected by the trade. As a work of art it would
probably also be a water-colour – delicate, private, subtle – allocated to a small
side-gallery, far from the grand sculptures, the vast canvases, and all the
assertiveness and public grandeur of *l’art pompier*.

In a world of high-decibel music, lacking the stentorian tones of the grand
piano, and the lung-power of the organ, it can never assist at the celebration of
High Mass, or clamour at the fall of nations in a symphony, or commemorate
the rise of Napoleon in a concerto. The world of the clavichord is private and
personal: as E. J. Dent put it, ‘it’s like the influenza, & searches out all one’s
weak places’.

But precisely because of its private, aquarelle nature, it was declared to be
fragile and faint, even timid; at the arrival of the piano, we were told, it faded
from the scene, was relegated to a dark corner, banished to the nursery for
practice, and soon forgotten. Marginalised in this way by later, piano-centric
historians, the clavichord was remembered as an instrument of last resort
rather than first choice.

But this was not true. From the evidence of surviving instruments, from
iconography, from documentation and treatises, and from its very repertoire,
it can now be proved to have been the most lasting of all domestic keyboards.
‘Mother of all musical instruments’ in 1618, ‘the first grammar of all keyboard
executants’ in 1732, and still ‘the true keyboard’ in 1805 – these titles argue
stamina and staying power. Nor was the repertoire considered light or incon-
sequential; when the poet von Gerstenberg in 1787 searched to add ‘explica-
tory’ words to the C minor *Probestücke* fantasy by C. P. E. Bach, he found only
two texts capable of underlining the seriousness of such a composition – the
final speech of Socrates and the soliloquy of Hamlet.

Not before time, this volume presents the evidence to contradict Mr
Robinson, and fervent partisans (amongst whom I would number myself) can, through documentary and iconographic evidence, have an overview of the history of this resilient instrument for more than 500 years. The picture stretches from the earliest instruments, and shared repertoire of the 1500s, through that amazing half-century after the appearance of C. P. E. Bach’s Versuch in 1753 when the instrument claimed an exclusive repertoire of several thousand pieces, and well into the nineteenth-century revival (or should it be survival?).

The focus, of course, is impressively domestic. As in the art world works on paper hold a more intimate message than oils on canvas, so, as Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart rhapsodised, ‘when you improvise by the light of the moon, or refresh your soul on summer nights, or celebrate the evenings of spring; ah, then pine not for the strident harpsichord. See, your clavichord breathes as gently as your heart.’