

# AN INTERVIEW WITH AAPO HÄKKINEN

*Koen Vermeij, Clavichord International (2003/1)*

Aapo, to start with a few 'standard' questions: how was your musical training, and when & how did you first meet the clavichord?

*I used to sing in a boys' choir, and played a lot of piano as a child. Then, at 13 or so, I discovered a harpsichord in the local music school and had some lessons on it. It was around the same time that I first met the clavichord. The Sibelius Academy was organizing an early keyboard happening with recitals and an exhibition. I was very interested, but didn't really have a chance to get to know the instrument until a few years later, when I was able to borrow a colleague's clavichord for several years. So I've had a clavichord at home for ten years now, at least in its case...*

What did you do at the Sibelius Academy as a 13-year old boy?

*Well, in fact the sight of a 13-year old at our venerable institution isn't as strange as it may seem. We have the junior department where talented children travel for lessons from all parts of Finland. Myself, I entered the Academy at 16 but already much before that, I was spending lots of time in the library, which has a fantastic collection of recordings, among other things.*

When studying in Amsterdam you were still very young...

*After my studies in Finland, I spent five rather long years in Amsterdam, graduating with diplomas in both the harpsichord and the clavichord. At the same time, I also studied privately in Paris and in addition took some further courses at the Sibelius Academy - organ and conducting amongst others.*

In Paris you studied with Pierre Hantaï; what did you specially learn from him?

*I think what I specially learnt from Pierre Hantaï was... to play the harpsichord. He showed me that it can be musically as rich and expressive as any instrument - that its infamous limitations only exist in the minds of players accustomed to certain technical attributes of both the music and the instrument, while remaining insensitive to others. This is not to say that I always agree with or even appreciate his interpretations... but in a way, that is true of any great musician.*

So, all in all you are a real 'clavierist'. Harpsichord, organ, clavichord. Do you feel attracted to the piano(forte) as well?

*Sure, but I haven't performed on any kind of piano for a long time... just as I haven't performed on so many other keyboard instruments. It's mostly harpsichord and clavichord, which of course happen to compliment each other well.*

That's interesting. Most people think harpsichord and clavichord to be about absolute opposites. Changing between clavichord and pianoforte or organ is generally considered to be much easier. What makes you say what you say?

*It's the music first of all; on the piano, the emphasis is quite naturally on composers for whom the harpsichord wasn't a seriously valuable instrument anymore. The musical difficulties will always be bigger than the purely technical, instrumental ones. Even technically, one doesn't really need to*

*change anything when going from, let's say harpsichord to clavichord - that is, if you have a proper, flexible technique such as I find essential at any keyboard.*

You just mentioned that you've trained in conducting. Do you intend to conduct as well? Is this part of a 'strategy' to achieve musical goals, such as leading ensembles?

*Well, you could perhaps say I did have a strategy to become a clavierist, but with conducting that only came about after I started to be approached to do just that. In fact, I'm doing a lot of conducting this year, relatively speaking, because I've just started to direct the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra. Anyway, keyboard music was never the only stuff I was interested in...*

So, actually, you feel to be a musician at the first place, and a keyboardist as one of the means to express yourself as such, just as conducting is also one? It could have been singing or violin playing as well?

*Oh yes, if I only had a good voice... or if I only had started to play the violin a good few years ago! In fact, I'm somehow very attracted to string instruments - it often feels so difficult to achieve the same diversity of expression on keyboard instruments. Anyway, I came to the early keyboards through their music, that's what interested me in the first place.*

Meanwhile you're teaching at 'your' institution, the Sibelius Academy. What do you teach there?

*Harpsichord and clavichord. I'm not a regular professor, I only teach students who specially ask to study with me. They're very flexible at the Academy about that, which I find great.*

Focussing on the keyboard side: does the clavichord take a special place in your heart, and if so, does this have consequences for the repertoire you play on the clavichord?

*I only perform music that touches my heart, music that I can play touchingly. And for much of it, the clavichord is perhaps the best instrument available - when you need the eloquence of tiny gestures, the intimacy... for example, the music of the *Empfindsamkeit*, which relies so much on its wealth of details; they all need to be expressive and intelligible... much more than J.S. Bach's music, or other earlier styles.*

Here we seem to meet a question very often considered amongst keyboard players: what do we play on which type of instrument. Do you have special ideas about that?

*Well, I try to be as flexible as possible. Talking about the clavichord's heyday, keyboard music was rarely conceived in terms of a single instrument type. Composers and other performers always had their preferences just as we do, for instruments as well as music, but it's our business to make our own choices. And they need to remain subjective; that's part of the art. For example, it is often maintained that J.S. Bach's music is better suited to the clavichord than to the harpsichord. Why? Because of the cantabile, the expressivity, the feminine endings... and nothing could seem more obvious to us. But where in Bach's oeuvre do you most need those qualities if not in pieces such as the Goldberg Variations, the Italian Concerto, etc. Clearly, it would be absurd to regard those as clavichord compositions - but only just as absurd as other generalisations of this kind! Even when we know a composer preferred some of his works on a certain type of instrument, I tend to see that more as an act of interpreting those works than as something defining them.*

Does this apply to all works on all instruments? If we consider Bach's large organ pieces, the Preludes & Fugues, could these in your opinion fully develop by being played on a (pedal)clavichord?

*Maybe... depending of course who is playing, where, and why!*

You did hilariously (see Michael Zapf's report in CI 2002/2) perform the Goldberg Variations on 'a pair of clavichords', and you'll have played them on harpsichord as well. I now understand that in your opinion the tool is less important than the music. To set extremities: could you imagine to perform this marvellous set of Variations on 'a pair of high-class digital keyboards' which perfectly react to all your wishes in the fields of dynamics and instrumentation?

*Well... anything that actually works to a perfection is probably better than the usual things one gets to play on! But I think high-class instruments for this music have been invented long before our digital times. The burden of perfection lies elsewhere...*

Why 'burden' of perfection? And where does that lie, in your opinion?

*It's quite a burden really if that's what we're looking for, no...? And of course we are, trying to do our best. I only mean it's better to start from improving ourselves, not the instruments. That way, we can even learn from them.*

Last January I heard you play a piece by the Swedish composer Johnsen. I was surprised by its originality, it was a sort of improvisation, and you played it as such. My question is: do you improvise yourself at the harpsichord or clavichord?

*I try to improvise all the music I'm playing - to 'make it new' every time. So I'm glad if that's come through in a concert! To perform a piece of music isn't like preserving, or even restoring a piece of art, it's more like watching one attentively... reflecting on it, interpreting it, developing the thoughts it raises in you. Of course, a command of stylistic idioms and standard expressive vocabulary is necessary to articulate that spirit of improvisation, whatever the music you're playing. Perhaps I'm being a bit provocative now... but to me, art really is a serious matter, it's supposed to... to change your mind. The consequence is its essence.*

It is a nice statement saying that you try to improvise all the music you play. Do you, however, improvise in the 'other' sense: just playing what Inspiration offers you?

*Sometimes, yes. Far too little.*

By the way, what could be provocative by saying that Art is supposed to change your mind?

*Well, perhaps it only seems provocative because it isn't commonly realized, at least not in its full implications. After all, change is a terrible, fearful thing, because it smashes and destroys you - as you at present know yourself to be. So works of art are tacitly taken only as instruments of selfish pleasure, things of no consequence, not as something profoundly meaningful. But when taken seriously, art can really stretch the mind way beyond the limits of the understanding. Moreover, besides expressing the artist's emotions it communicates his sense of values, as Herbert Read put it. I've been fascinated by many of his writings, such as 'The Meaning of Art' where he talks about exactly this. Anyway, great artists have always regarded their art as the organ of their whole*

*unified sensibility - not merely of their feelings, or thoughts. All I really want to say with this is that such reflections are essential for one's development as artist.*

Can one go so far to say that if art is not meant to change peoples minds, but only to serve as entertainment, the word 'art' is misplaced?

*'Art' is certainly a tricky word to define... but I do see such art, however creative and skilful, as only superficially art.*

I ask this taking into consideration that many of our beloved composers wrote serious music as well as entertainment music (which in many cases they were ordered to compose). In both sorts of music the composer's 'soul' is involved; do I understand correctly that, in your opinion, both sorts can be considered as Art, although of different 'depths'?

*Well... art usually isn't as simple as that. So-called entertainment music can be very profound - for many of us, after all, a good joke can be the most serious thing in the world! Laughter either begins or ends in tears. As for 'serious' music itself... what's that actually supposed to mean? Sad music? Post-Haydn symphonies? Opera? As I see it, the depth of a given piece of music can only be found in that piece itself, not in its compositional or performance history.*

Do you agree with Shelley that art is an instrument to moral good? How should we see this from a practical standpoint?

*Oh yes, I'm sure art can make us better as human beings. The point is, art is all about identifying with things other than our own. So it helps put ourselves in the place of an other. Beautiful experiences can make a lasting impression that has something spiritual in it, an impression that can change the whole course of one's life. For us performing musicians especially, perhaps, there is a danger of forgetting that attractiveness is one of the most important qualities of our art. I cannot see anything selfish in attempting to please the listeners - quite on the contrary, attracting their attention is a way to inspire selflessness in them.*

If art can make us better human beings - I agree with that - shouldn't this be apparent in artists themselves, as they are continuously 'exposed' to it?

*Sure, but art isn't necessarily the most powerful instrument of moral good. Some are more inclined towards religion, for instance.*

To return to clavichords: do you have preferences for certain types?

*Well, it mostly depends on the music I'm playing. In general, I like to change instruments often. It's usually more inspiring to play a concert on an instrument you still didn't know a few hours previously - it kind of helps you to listen to the music creatively, with fresh ears. Unfortunately, it isn't possible always to have new instruments at home... especially if you don't really have a home! I very often use my travelling clavichord, which is so small that it fits easily in aeroplane lockers.*

After the success of your harpsichord CD, are you planning a recording on clavichord in the near future?

*I'm probably going to use the clavichord for recordings of a few C.P.E. Bach violin sonatas later this year. But otherwise I prefer live recordings, which are a bit complicated on the clavichord - the*

*instrument needs such an intimate atmosphere, which in turn is so easily lost when you have the microphones around... but it certainly isn't technically impossible. Once, when I happen to have a good opportunity, I'd be very glad to do that.*

Aapo, we are all waiting for it...

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