

Profile:

JOAN BENSON

Clavichordist



by Melinda Bargreen

The annual Twelfth Night banquet at Seattle's Brasserie Pittsbourg Restaurant was well underway, and enormous quantities of hot mulled wine had helped drive the decibel level of the merry-making up to impressive heights. But when a tall, slender woman climbed onto an impromptu podium and began to play the clavichord, the noise subsided magically fast. As the tiny voice of the clavichord lifted the strains of C.P.E. Bach around the room glasses stopped clinking, conversations broke off, and a rapt, profound silence greeted the delicate music.

Joan Benson was the clavichordist, and that evening was just one more piece of evidence of the extraordinary effect of her music. Her concert tours — extending from Yale and Oxford to New Zealand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia — have brought similar results: though the clavichord has perhaps the softest dynamic range of any performing instrument, Benson's spellbound listeners have no trouble hearing it.

Like many specialists in early keyboard instruments, Joan Benson began her career as a pianist. Unlike most others, however, she does not play the harpsichord professionally, and she performs only occasionally on the organ. "I prefer the instruments that shade," she explained, "instruments that give dynamic and tonal changes through the touch of the finger on the key. That's why I specialize in the clavichord, the fortepiano and, to some extent, the modern



piano. I'm most interested in the subtleties of shading — what can be achieved with the quieter end of the dynamic range. Because the clavichord is the most subtle of instruments, I was drawn irresistibly to it."

As a child, Benson wanted to learn the violin. "I was given piano lessons instead," she remembers, "and I decided to go on with the piano. Edwin Fischer was my mentor; I studied with him in Switzerland and did quite a bit of concertizing in Europe and the United States on the modern piano. Even then, when I was in my teens, my reviewers wrote about my interest in *pianissimo* effects and the quieter range of the piano.

"Gradually I became more and more interested in early music. Everybody else went to the harpsichord; I went to the clavichord. The clavichord kept haunting me, even while I was performing on the modern piano. It was as if I heard a voice saying, 'Play the clavichord.' I felt sort of silly — I had piano scholarships at the time, and things were going very well with Fischer. There was no reason to turn to the clavichord, but I felt an irresistible attraction to it. I went to England to study the clavichord, and the piano gradually got left out."

Eventually, Benson extended her interest in



the clavichord to include the fortepiano, the forerunner of the modern piano, with a harpsichord-like wooden frame, small leather hammers and thin, unwound strings. "I had had enough of being soft all the time," she recalled, "and I wanted to play a little more aggressively. What was really attractive about the fortepiano was the chance to play music of the right period on the right instrument. While there is certainly no dearth of literature for the clavichord, I wanted to be able to do something more."

Benson's route from Europe, where she was concertizing on early instruments, to America's west coast was an unusual one. She was performing in Portugal, where she had studied with Santiago Kestner, and a travel agent suggested she could most easily transport herself and her instruments by ocean. Benson landed on the west coast and fell in love with the Stanford area.

"At that time I had no notion of teaching," she remembers. "I kept my clavichord in sort of a closet. One by one, members of Stanford's early music faculty kept coming over to my place and leaning into the closet to hear my clavichord. Eventually they asked me to teach at Stanford, where there's a very active early music scene."

That was approximately a decade ago. After several years at Stanford, Benson began to long for the atmosphere of the countryside. "I wanted to get out into the country, where it was quiet. Just about that time, the University of Oregon contacted me about starting an early keyboard program there. Eugene, Oregon was exactly what I had in mind, so I took the job. Now I teach clavichord and piano there, in addition to my concertizing, which takes a lot of time. At Oregon we now have a program leading to an M.A. in early keyboard, and I'm very happy with it."

Like many collectors today, Benson is reluctant to discuss the full extent of her early instrument collection. "Let's just say I have several instruments from several periods," she said. "Among them are a 1795 Broadwood piano that's almost a museum piece. There's one in the Smithsonian, but there are a few others around so I'm not too nervous about taking mine on concert tours. And I have a 1780 Pehr Lindholm clavichord which I play a lot, and a tiny 15th-century model.

"Sometimes it's hard to find the right setting for my clavichord concerts. I would never walk into a hall without knowing in advance what its properties are, and preferably doing a sound check first. You can't play the clavichord just anywhere. It's not the size of the hall so much that matters, but its acoustical properties. Occasionally I will consent to amplifying the clavichord, but it must be done properly."

"For that reason, your fingers must be very independent. A clavichordist literally can't get away with a thing! That's why the clavichord is such an excellent tool for pianists — it teaches them finger independence and sensitivity of touch. You have to be able to hold down the

keys with the same pressure while playing another voice with different fingers of the same hand, and that's not easy.

"The fortepiano technique is different. There's more hand and arm motion, though your emphasis is still on a rapid, light touch and a shallow key dip. The sustaining pedal also comes into play, and its use is quite different from that of the modern piano.

"Moving back and forth between clavichord, fortepiano and modern piano can be difficult. When a clavichordist or fortepianist plays the modern piano, it's hard to get used to the difference in key dip: you have to really push those keys, and the action is so much harder that at first you have to sacrifice some speed. Those passages which came so quickly on the early instruments require much more force on the piano. When I began to concertize on the modern piano after years on the earlier instruments, my back was literally killing me. All those muscles I didn't need to use on the clavichord and fortepiano! But the finger technique was certainly there, that's one thing you get from those early instruments.

"Going the other direction can be tricky, too. It's much harder to get the nuances when you move from the piano backward in time to the

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earlier, more subtle instruments. But I think that's one problem with pianists today — not enough subtlety, not enough attention to what can be done with the quieter end of the dynamics spectrum. For that reason I'd recommend the clavichord as an excellent training tool for pianists.

"I'm not opposed to modern instruments. There are some gorgeous modern pianos, and some tacky clavichords. Each era has its triumphs and its disasters. What mainly concerns me is the presentation of each era's music on the appropriate instrument. I'd like to hear Chopin's music on the kind of piano Chopin used, and the same with Beethoven, Haydn, Schumann and everybody else. I don't like to set strict date limits and say, *this* was the era of the fortepiano, and you can't play anything later than *that* on the clavichord, and so on. Instead, I think it's a sort of continuum in which every case, every piece, should be considered as an individual.

"But I do feel that more pianists should consider the virtues of the clavichord. For one thing, there's its practicality. We are now in a recession, and clavichords may be had relatively cheaply, for as little as \$600 or so (climbing to around \$3,000 for a really exceptional instrument). What an ideal instrument for a beginning child! It can be made for tiny fingers, and carried from room to room, and it's quiet so the sound of practicing needn't disturb the whole

household. And you wouldn't have to distort the child's hand position the way you do with a full-sized piano. You could teach him finger independence and all the niceties of keyboard technique on the clavichord, and it would be relatively simple for the child to adjust to a full-sized piano later if he decided to continue. The piano has been the gateway to all keyboard instruments, but it doesn't have to be. A child who begins on the clavichord avoids so many bad habits — including the use of the sustaining pedal to glue passages together and hide technique problems! And the clavichord is easy and light to tune, almost like a guitar. There's very little that can go wrong with it.

How are the clavichord, the fortepiano, and the modern piano different from the standpoint of the performer's technique? "With the clavichord, one of the most important things is sensitivity of touch. You must feel a great deal with the fingertips. There's a lot of pulling in of the fingers, and none of the percussive, striking action that you employ in playing the modern piano. The slightest motion makes a tremendous difference in loudness and control — even a variation in touch you can hardly feel. You never attack the keys; all the action originates at the key level. That's because the performer has direct control over the string: you can actually feel the tangent pushing against the string, and you can manipulate the vibrato and even the pitch with your fingers. The player can't get away with any unintentional movement; everything must be strictly controlled. It's not at all like the harpsichord, where once you depress the key the plectrum strikes and that's it. With the clavichord, your fingers exert control as long as they remain on the keys.

"One problem, of course, is finding a good teacher. It's not that clavichord technique is so difficult, but there are a few things you really must know, and it's much better to be shown the beginning principles than to try to get them out of a book. I'd like to set up a series of workshops across the country with the idea of instructing piano teachers in clavichord technique. I'm also thinking of compiling a list of reputable instrument builders where you can get good instruments.

"One of the joys of playing concerts is the ability of early instruments — especially the clavichord — to bring people to themselves in music of lovely serenity. The clavichord resolves the tensions of our chaotic world; it brings peace and simplicity in a complicated world. And there is nothing like it for communication with audiences. During concerts I feel I am sharing with the audience in a two-way communication. And that never ceases to be a thrill." ■

Melinda Bargreen is the music critic for the Seattle Times and plays piano and harpsichord in chamber concerts.