

GETTING STARTED

Clavichord

Revered clavichordist **Joan Benson** takes us through the fine history behind the instrument, and how pianists – and even violinists – might consider taking it on

While this century seems to revel in amplified sound, there is a growing need for quietness as a balance – a need that a clavichord can fill.

Beginning to play the clavichord is not unlike a musical rebirth. It reawakens delight in personal music-making that can enhance the playing of other keyboard instruments. It encourages a sensitivity to delicate, live sounds that otherwise might go unheard. It can transport one from restlessness to a place of quiet repose.

The clavichord's action is so immediate and intimate, that playing it one can watch and feel what actually happens. Simple wooden levers with pivots act like see-saws. On one end is a key, and on the other, a tiny metal tangent protrudes upward. By pushing down the key, the far end rises until the tangent meets a set of strings; this causes

the strings to vibrate at a certain pitch between the tangent point and a bridge placed on the soundboard to the right. On fretted clavichords, several tangents can strike at different points on the same set of strings. The closer the tangent to the bridge, the higher the pitch.

FROM PIANO TO CLAVICHORD

I came to the clavichord as a concert pianist, studying with the eminent Edwin Fischer in Europe. He suggested I perfect my finger technique with Paul Badura-Skoda's childhood teacher, whose ancestors were close to Liszt. In my first lesson, I placed my curved hand on a flat surface, fingertips touching it. Then I lifted my index finger up and down very slowly, keeping my other fingers completely relaxed. I did this with each finger, watching it tremble and then tremble less. I practiced this exercise everywhere I went until each finger

seemed to have its own mind. This search for finger independence led me to the clavichord, and this same exercise is one I give students today.

LIKE A VIOLIN

The clavichord is more like a muted violin and requires a special technique. One must control the whole tone like a violinist – not just its beginning and its end. Finger pressure must be held constant or the sound will change both in focus and in pitch; if a finger wobbles, the tangent will wobble the strings, and the sound will fluctuate. The way tangents press, hold and release the strings can affect the dynamics, articulations and other qualities of tones; as I gained sensitive fingers and ears, I discovered a wealth of expressive nuances.

For example, I could make a soft tone softer by lowering a key slightly before beginning to press it down. This brings the tangent closer to the strings. If I make the finger action consciously slower, I can achieve a near-silence that is golden. I can create a variable vibrato – called 'Bebung' – an ornament that is unique to every clavichord. An amazing range of effects are possible, some of which, like a whisper, are too subtle to be controlled.

CREATING SINGING TONES

The person who hears the clavichord best is the player. Even the lid slants in the player's direction rather than toward an audience. When I first heard my own singing tone, I was surprised how it bloomed, like a reflection of myself. On other keyboard instruments, one can lower a key and then relax while holding it down. With the clavichord, however, such a relaxation can make the sound flabby and out of tune. To keep a tone singing, one may pull-press the finger slightly forward on the key so that the



Joan Benson in Copenhagen

pressure remains level and lasting. A release of tone must be quick and precise enough to avoid extraneous noise coming from the action.

The thumb is a special case. Often a keyboardist's thumbs are inflexible and clavichords require subtle flexibility. Rather than treating the thumb like other fingers, I learned to pull it sideways toward my hand, with the first joint leading the way. Away from the keyboard, I also practiced moving this first joint easily, back and forth.

It is wise to play for short periods at first, perhaps 10 minutes at a time. Shoulders, arms and wrists should be relaxed. The focus is on controlling the fingers and keeping them limber while listening for singing tones. When I first played one note after another, I saw how uneven the sounds could be. I had to strengthen each finger in order to produce equal sounds.

At first, it's best to avoid pieces learned on other keyboards, as it is easy to slip into old habits. Instead, practice a series of notes in various patterns, then two notes together.

THE ROLE OF THE CLAVICHORD

Rarely are works labeled for the clavichord, yet it can breathe life into many keyboard pieces. Today this music is easily available in fine editions, and one may choose what seems appealing for a specific instrument. Copies of all kinds of antique clavichords exist, as well as modern examples.

Three-octave clavichords of the 15th century have sufficient range to play delicate music from manuscripts of the period. The sumptuous Spanish court of the 16th century produced Antonio de Cabezon, a great clavichord composer and player. In the 18th century, the clavichord was particularly popular in Germanic lands. Here, J.S. Bach's clavier music suits clavichords of slightly over four octaves. In contrast, his son Carl Phillip Emanuel expressed highly sensitive, personal emotions on his dynamic, rich, five-octave clavichord. As an exquisite swan song in the latter 18th century, Swedish builders made clavichords of up to six octaves. Their voluptuous tones and expansive

dynamic range overlap with the early piano – which would take the clavichord's place.

My first taste of a Viennese fortepiano came while preparing for a clavichord recital in a European museum. For glorious hours at a fine fortepiano, I played music by Mozart, Haydn and C.P.E. Bach – all excellent clavichordists. What surprised me most was how easily my clavichord approach could be applied to this new instrument. Later, I would take my own early piano on tours.

Modern pianists and other keyboardists can also profit from the clavichord's gentle palette. According to Andrés Schiff, 'The clavichord is my best teacher because it makes me listen very carefully. The sound is so delicate and the touch so sensitive, it shows all my shortcomings immediately.'

Joan Benson is considered one of the foremost clavichordists of modern times. Her book, Clavichord for Beginners, was published in 2014 by Indiana University Press. Her remastered recordings will be released in 2017.