

TEACHING WITH THE CLAVICHORD IN OUR ELECTRONIC WORLD

BY JOAN BENSON

For a preface to portraying the clavichord as a teacher in the twenty-first century, I would like to present two diverse ways of perceiving music. This is the first:

While on concert tour in 1980, I rented half of my house to a student. On returning home, relaxing on the sofa, I noticed plaintive sounds emanating from the wall. They resembled wistful *glissandi*, *melismas* in mini-tones and *crescendi* that reached peaks of mournful emotion. All this beauty touched me. What could it be? Then I realized it came from Calypso, my renter's hound. Longing for his master, he turned his sadness into sound. There was no time to record this instinctive 'music', and Calypso had no intention of performing. On his master's return, he burst into boisterous, joy-filled barks.

Surely humans first made music in this same manner, as a spontaneous expression of feelings. As late as the nineteenth century, it was customary for classical keyboardists to improvise as well as to compose. Today, a touch of Calypso's spontaneity is still needed to give meaning to each moment of music. This is especially true with the sensitive clavichord that invariably reflects the slightest variation of touch through tone.

A second way of perceiving music is exemplified by *Aibo*, the metal robot-dog. In the early twenty-first century, Sony created 150,000 increasingly complicated *Aibos*, each individualized by its owner. Different programs on a memory stick could activate various complex behaviours. Moving eyes, ears, mouth, the entire head and different parts of limbs, *Aibo* can awaken its master, dance to music and lift one leg to produce a tinkle. *Aibo* can also respond with various sounds, expressing up to sixty emotional states. 'It is like having a new baby,' says one owner. By caring for it daily, it becomes more like a person. 'I cannot live without *Aibo* now.'¹

The electronic world that *Aibo* represents offers clavichords new challenges and hopes. Yet as recently as my infancy in the 1920s electronic devices were relatively rare. I remember being bewildered by the tuba-horned *Victrola* and afraid of the telephone. Advances in technology occurred slowly, then ever more rapidly, until our earth is now united by a maze of electronic impulses. Finally, through electronics, we look for sounds of intelligence from distant outer space.

There are great advantages in extending our range of knowledge and communication. When time and distance are condensed, however, a sense of rhythm is less linked with the

¹ 'A Robotic Dog's Mortality', Jonathan Soble, *The New York Times*, 17 June 2015.

beating human heart. Particularly, youth is over-occupied with the latest of electronic devices, which serve as distractions from life itself.

In virtual reality, for example, one enters and moves about in three-dimensional fantasy worlds that are made more real each year. Wearing elaborate goggles and pushing a mouse, one skis over mountains, or faces the fangs of a dragon. The problem, for me, was after-shock. Free of goggles, I was afraid to move my legs within a space I could not automatically control.

Likewise, video games shocked me. The noise, the speed, the crashes made me turn to Dolmetsch's clavichord lid inscription, '*Plus fait douceur que violence.*' Yet for many, video games offer the illusion of fiery strength and power.

For those fascinated by electronic effects, however, daily life may appear to be in sluggish, slow motion. The slightest silence may seem a threat. There is the risk of becoming addicted to the electronic screen, unable to face the inevitable uncertainties and fragilities of life.

It occurred to me that the quiet clavichord could have a positive effect on young people today. I inquired about conducting sessions in public schools. Teachers warned me, however, that students were far too restless to focus on soft sounds. Large classes with set programmes required constant stimulation since a child's attention span lasted only about twelve minutes.

With this in mind, I decided to collect small groups of children who had never heard of the clavichord. I planned to play short pieces on a fretted instrument, and then let each child try it. There would never be a sense of rushing. Afterwards, I would collect their impressions.

The first groups of children were unacquainted with keyboard instruments. They actually had no knowledge of classical music. I asked them to lie down on the floor and close their eyes. After a pause, I silently went to the clavichord and played two short pieces by Haydn. They lay there listening and were very still. Having never heard of Haydn, they found his music refreshing. Then each child had a chance to try the clavichord and ask questions. They remained attentive as an hour and a half went by.

Here are some of their reactions:

I begin with Oliver, age eight. He watches a lot of TV with his father and they often play video games. The loud, violent, fast-paced 'Hotwheels' is a favourite for them both. They also like watching the manly sports of baseball, football, and auto racing. According to his young stepmother, 'He is a very busy boy'.

Oliver seemed shy. Lying on the floor, his first thoughts were of 'cars and helicopters.' As he listened to the clavichord, he began to find it soothing. Although he doesn't pay attention to music usually, he liked the little tiny sounds. 'The highs and lows are different,' he noted. 'It made me "fil gud".'

'Travelling in the car,' he added, 'We always have loud pop music to keep us going. When it is quiet, I would like the clavichord.' As Oliver gently touched a key, he was particularly sensitive to the point where the tangent touched the strings. He reacted to key pressure and was aware of producing a pure sound.

Anna, age ten, is a fan of rock star Katy Perry. The clavichord reminds her of 'an old kingdom with a little village by it.' She said, 'In the morning I like rock and roll. In the evening, I think I would prefer the soft, pretty sounds of the clavichord. This would help me to be attentive and to calm down.'

One boy, aged ten, drew a red, open-beaked bird standing on the barren limb of a tall tree. He wrote, 'I think the clavichord sounds like a bird singing very quietly so I drew a bird

singing. It would have to be very quiet in a home to be heard. I like that it is quiet because it makes me feel "relaxst".'

Stephanie wrote, 'As Joan played music on the clavichord, I felt transported to a time long, long ago. I enjoyed the emotion that can come from watching someone play such an instrument: both the movement of fingers and the movement of strings. The delicacy and control is fantastic. It is a lovely instrument to listen to and to watch.'

The next group consisted of South Korean children and their parents. Clearly, the desire to learn was very strong. One mother had looked up the word 'clavichord' so her children would be prepared for our meeting.

Yunbin Cho, a girl of the seventh grade, wrote:

'One of my feelings after Joan's performance is that clavichord is an instrument that has power. There are many loud instruments but not every loud musical instrument gives big impression. The calm and gentle reverberation of the clavichord is pretty quiet but it has a power to move the mind. If I can hear the serene voice of the clavichord when I feel so cross and tired, every note will reach my heart. Then the bunch of sorrow that piled up will explode in my heart and I will cry. So I tell the sounds "clean my mind empty". The calm voice and gentle echo of the clavichord ... is like a kind angel whispering to me in a language I can't understand. It heals my mind ...'

'When I pressed the clavichord's keys, I listened to its gentle resonance. The tone continued to vibrate, like water droplets on a calm pool. They spread out in concentric circles, gradually slowing down, then disappearing. Listening to Joan playing, my mind became peaceful and orderly.'

Eunsung said: 'The clavichord is like saying to a little girl, calm down, calm down, calm down.'

Yuhyeon, boy, age 7, observed:

'I can make deep breaths when I listen to the clavichord. I'm drawn into the music I can see the image of a quiet island where no one lives. There is a big tree that is blown softly by the wind. I also see the image of walking down the lawn alone, only me. I see myself flying, flowing with the sound of the clavichord like a bird.'

'Sick people can heal their disease when they listen to this music because such comforting music makes them safe and healthy. I thought I would be a person like Joan because I wanted to be fantastic like her. If I listen to the music while I'm angry ... its smooth sound makes me feel content.'

The next three groups involved children and adults who play the piano. Here the clavichord made a special impact. The first of these groups consisted of piano students aged nine to eleven. They all attended Edison Middle School in Eugene. The parents had money enough to add extras classes, such as ones involving mindfulness and yoga.

Ronnie, age 10, played a Bach *Invention* on the clavichord, using appropriately curved fingers. He said:

'I can see inside the instrument. It is much simpler than the piano. The keys are lighter so I can go very fast, but I must adjust my strength. There are no pedals, so you have to keep the pressure to produce extended tones.'

'I'm used to louder sounds but the clavichord would help me play the piano. It would help me pay attention to softer sounds and details. The quiet would really suit me and could change my touch and make it more delicate. In school, things are rougher. I like going into this quieter side of myself. It encourages tender inner feelings.'

One girl was adamantly against the clavichord. 'I think it is weird,' she said. 'I don't like the quiet. When it is quiet at home, I feel afraid. I need to have loud music going on constantly, and I prefer it to be rock and roll.'

Young Lena confided, 'I'm afraid I will hurt the instrument. It was hard not to hit another key because the keys are so tiny. But it was fun. It would help me with the piano. I would like to study both instruments.'

One piano teacher said, 'The fine lacy detail and the intimacy would be a dream. I intend to add the clavichord in lessons for my piano students.'

The second piano group involved pupils of Palo Alto's Professor Paul Fink. He keeps a clavichord in his piano studio. To help unwind students in wired Silicon Valley, he starts each piano lesson with the clavichord. Professor Fink said: 'My students adapt easily to the clavichord, especially in playing works by J. S. Bach and Mozart and selected pieces from *Thirty Pieces for Children* by Kabalevsky.' The students clearly saw how the clavichord helped their piano playing. They made the following comments.

Thomas, 6th grade, said:

'It makes you pay more attention and listen more carefully. A whole new world!'

Steve, of the 11th grade, commented:

'It requires a finer touch and more controlled movement in order to achieve a distinct sound. This translates into a better, more refined sound on the piano.'

Brian, of the 12th grade, played Bach's F Minor Prelude and Fugue from *The Well Tempered Clavier, Book Two*. 'Super-cool!' he said:

'Bach: this is how it was meant to be played. More exquisite than the piano: more delicate and genuine. Everything I like about stringed instruments is "there" — with a keyboard! I love the *Bebung*. When playing the clavichord you have the feeling of communicating with past masters.'

Other students reflected:

'You can continue to develop the sound and touch after the tangent strikes,' and 'The softness is good in a loud world.'

The third group consisted of musicians from the Berkeley Piano Club. On this occasion they were introduced to the clavichord by means of my CD. No longer was there the intimate interaction between listeners and player. Nor could these pianists touch the clavichord and experience directly its most delicate and ephemeral capabilities. Instead, the clavichord became a dramatic performance instrument with a wide dynamic compass. The Berkeley pianists listened to music by Froberger and C. P. E. Bach. They raised the sound level ever so slightly, to compensate for its not being live.

According to one professional pianist, 'I don't have any knowledge of the clavichord but was surprised at the wide dynamic range of the instrument. The Froberger evoked such emotional depths it almost takes one's breath away.'

Another pianist said:

'I was struck by the passionate playing of the instrument, the emotional power conveyed by the artist. The sound of the clavichord surprised me with the vast sonic range, in dynamics and colour. The dynamic range almost sounded unreal on the recording, so I would want to hear the

music played live. This has made me interested in the instrument and the music written for it. Also, I would be interested to learn about the techniques used to play the clavichord.'

The final group contained graduate students from Professor Chris Chafe's class at Stanford University's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics. The idea was to encourage softer electronic sounds by means of the clavichord. According to Professor Chafe,

'so far softer sounds have little place in contemporary electronic music practice ... The trend has been toward higher loudness levels ... There is no reason that electronic music might not live in the clavichord's quiet world ... This largely untapped potential is intriguing particularly because electronics can be adapted, easily creating sounds that blend well with the clavichord.'

This time, Chafe's students were introduced to both a five-octave and a smaller fretted clavichord. Here are some of their observations in the open discussion that followed:

'I felt a very intimate kind of atmosphere with the clavichord. It's a great instrument for performing very personal [musical thoughts]. It would be fine in the house to be able to play on your own and play for your family, for people you are closest to, versus using it as an instrument for "oration."

'It would be a different world [if the clavichord were widely used].'

'I just came from this Inner Hearing class, and we were talking about hearing loss nowadays. And hearing these instruments — I think my ear is probably okay. I actually am able to focus or at least use a different kind of mind set, so I can hear properly the rich subtleties of this instrument.'

[As an electronic composer] 'I'd be curious [relative to the piano] to see how loud the harmonics are compared to the fundamental and to see [across the range] the "cycle" of that feature.'

'Being near these instruments makes one aware that, like with Asian instruments, sound can be shaded by more manipulation.'

'I can actually manipulate this [tone] AFTER I have achieved the [initial sound].'

'I really felt that it was satisfying to see and feel that "push" [at the end of striking a note]. That was calming.'

'Hearing this instrument, I didn't feel calm, I felt that, wow [I can see] the strings going up, then down! And then when I play, I feel like, wow, this is empowering; I can do a VIBRATO on this thing!'

'The clavichord's personality can adapt to other forms of expression that are appropriate to current music, especially the vibrato as an interesting effect. The instrument's sense of presence is really revolutionary.'

'I'm a big fan of musical silences ... used in [the compositional process], of silent pauses, and also soft sounds. And hearing your playing and also being able to touch the instruments ... as I focus on the sound's clarity, I can also focus on all the crazy things that are happening in the music ... I can't anticipate what is coming ... I start thinking beyond the timbre and the actual loudness, to the sound's intimate nature.'

'With computer music, we have the ability to go so loud, that sometimes we forget we can explore the soft range that really enriches the [spectrum of] sounds. It's something that I personally have thought about. In our kind of classes, it's something that usually comes as an afterthought: that you can bring sound down into that soft range.'

Two Taiwanese graduate students in the group were inspired to write short pieces, combining electronic sounds with the clavichord. In Shu Yu Lin's *In Forgotten Voice*, one saunters through a soothing bamboo forest. Her piece suggests certain poetic, slow-paced Taiwanese dances, such as Lee-Chen Lin's *Anthem to the Fading Flowers*.

In closing, it is rewarding to see how young people responded to the intimate qualities of the clavichord. Their enthusiasm and insights show how ready they are for meaningful contrasts to our harsh electronic world: for a sense of silence that allows one to be aware of the softest of audible tones; for the focus on listening deeply and the value of sensitive touch; for the option of a haven for personal feelings that encourage a sense of self, independent of display.

Thus I encourage clavichordists to take the time to interact with our youth today. Rather than training them all to be performers, let us lead them to appreciate the clavichord for its own sake — and for theirs.

This brings us back to the plaintive Calypso, and to Aibo, the robot-dog. It is best they get along with each other. For it is the balance between these two — the expression of tender feelings and the electronic innovations — that are vital for music and life in the twenty-first century.



Abstract

This paper focuses on ways of expanding the role of clavichord as teacher in the twenty-first century. It contrasts the live and the electronic in our era, and shows how a clavichord experience can offer, particularly for the young, a quiet respite from our incessantly amplified world. In this study, small groups had the opportunity to hear and try the clavichord for the first time. Later they were asked to express their reactions.

The first groups consist of children who, in most cases, were unacquainted with classical music. Next, there is a group of children from South Korea. The following two groups contain piano students, ranging from age ten to sixteen. Then, for contrast, a group of professional pianists are introduced to the clavichord through a CD. The final group involved graduate students specializing in computer music at Stanford University's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics.

The amazingly insightful responses of these groups form the major thrust of this paper. Again and again, young people were captivated by a sense of calm and sensitivity that they missed in their daily lives. Children exposed mainly to loud TV and video games, for example, were captivated by the soft, graded sounds. 'I like going into this quieter side of myself,' reported one ten-year-old boy. 'It encourages tender inner feelings.' In the North Korean group, one young girl wrote, 'If I can hear the serene voice of the clavichord when I feel so cross and tired, every note will reach my heart.' One piano student noted, 'It makes you pay more attention and listen more carefully. A whole new world!' Professional pianists, in contrast, listened to a CD, which cannot capture all the subtleties of the clavichord. Turning up the volume slightly, they were struck by the wide dynamic range and dramatic effects possible on this soft instrument. Stanford University's electronic music students praised all the special qualities of the clavichord (including the *Bebung*) that can add a new range of soft, delicate tones to composing. Two advanced students were inspired to write short pieces for clavichord and electronics.

It becomes clear that the clavichord as teacher can open fresh ears and minds to a quiet inner world. Certainly, in the process, there will be some who will be inspired to become fine players of the clavichord, thus passing on this unique and valuable instrument to future generations.

Questo testo si concentra su i modi di espandere il ruolo del clavicordo come insegnante nel ventesimo secolo. Contrappone il vissuto e l'elettronico in era nostra, e mostra come un'esperienza del clavicordo può offrire, particolarmente per i giovani, una tregua quieta nel nostro mondo incessantemente amplificato. In questo studio, vari piccoli gruppi avevano l'opportunità di sentire e provare il clavicordo per la prima volta. Più tardi, loro si chiesero ad esprimere le loro reazioni.

I primi gruppi consistono di bambini che, in più casi, erano poco pratici con la musica classica. C'è, in seguito, un gruppo di bambini della Corea de Sud. I due gruppi seguenti contengono studenti di pianoforte, variando dall'età di dieci a sedici anni. Per contrasto, un gruppo di pianisti professionisti è introdotto poi al clavicordo attraverso un CD. Un ultimo gruppo comportava studenti laureati specializzandosi in musica elettronica nella Stanford University's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics.

Le risposte straordinariamente perspicaci di questi gruppi formano la giustificazione di quest'inchiesta. Di nuovo e di nuovo, i giovani furono incantati dal senso di calma e dalla sensibilità che loro aveva mancato nella loro vita quotidiana. Bambini esposti principalmente alla loro rumorosa TV e giochi di video, per esempio, furono incantati dai suoni dolci e misurati. 'Mi piace andare in questo lato più tranquillo di me', riportò un ragazzo di dieci anni. 'Incoraggia sentimenti interni.' Nel gruppo della Corea del Nord, una giovane ragazza scrisse, 'Se io posso sentire la voce serena del clavicordo quando io mi sento così stanca, ogni nota arriverà al mio cuore.' Un studente di pianoforte notò, 'Vi fa notare più attentamente e ascoltare meglio.'

Diviene chiaro che il clavicordo come insegnante può aprire orecchi freschi e menti ad un mondo interiore e quieto. Nel processo, saranno certamente alcuni che saranno ispirati per diventare suonatori eccellenti del clavicordo, trasmettendo così questo strumento unico e prezioso alle generazioni future.