AN INTERVIEW WITH JOAN BENSON

By Peter Brownlee

Upon entering Joan Benson's comfortable home nestled in the quiet hills overlooking the university town of Eugene, Oregon, one steps into a peaceful, almost monastery-like environment with no modern distractions. There are no televisions or radios in sight; everything is carefully organized and in its proper place. The chair in which she likes to sit when discussing music has shelves on either side stacked with primary source books, though she appears in complete command of their contents. At eighty-nine years old, Joan Benson shows no signs of slowing down. She remains as animated and enthusiastic for that intimate moment when the tangent properly engages the string as when I, as a teenager, met her when she taught at Stanford University.

Joan, you recently wrote a book on clavichord playing that already is being used by teachers in Europe, America and Japan. I think readers will be interested in knowing what led you to this instrument.

As a two-year-old in 1927, even before I ever heard a clavichord, I listened at a distance to Swedish angel chimes on Christmas Eve. By the flame of four candles, suspended angels circled, their tiny brass wands striking round metal bells. The high-pitched, ethereal tones seemed to nestle in my mind.

Some fifteen years later, in 1943, while attending the Longy School of Music, I chanced to hear Erwin Bodky play Bach on early keyboards. Afterwards the small audience eagerly gathered around the harpsichord, so I had the clavichord to myself. I touched the keys in wonder, realizing I was tapping into soft sounds that seemed a part of my past, not knowing they would become my musical world.

In time, I would discover how important the clavichord had been to the Sweden of my ancestors. By the late eighteenth century, Swedish makers were admired for their own special form of the clavichord. With triple stringing in the bass, a very large soundboard and a compass of up to six octaves, this instrument had great carrying power and was capable of wide dynamic contrasts. Such clavichords, substituting for the new fortepianos, continued to be built well into the nineteenth century. Some remained in country homes until modern times.

My first performance on a Swedish clavichord, by Pehr Lindholm, was in the 1960s. At last I could realize all the dynamic shading effects that I had imagined, but never heard. Decades later, after performing in Stockholm, I stayed with Count and Countess Mörner at Esplunda, their country estate. Here, in the nineteenth century, my great-great-grandfather served as chief horticulturist, introducing rare flowers and fruits to Sweden. At that time, the Mörners were music patrons. Surely my ancestors were acquainted with clavichord music. Above all, as I played my own 1780 Pehr Lindholm, I felt at home.

You were a noted pianist before you began focusing on the clavichord. What was it about this instrument that captured your imagination?

In my advanced studies in Europe with the famed pianist Edwin Fischer, he advised me to obtain more finger independence. In the process, I found myself particularly attuned to seeking control of miniature, shaded sounds. The

modern piano, however, could take this only so far. I began to wonder if I could create these sounds on the clavichord.

How did you find your first clavichord teacher? Did he come from a tradition of clavichord playing, or was it necessary for him to reconstruct the technique peculiar to these instruments?
Although I was sorry to leave Fischer, it seemed inevitable that I would switch to the clavichord completely. I turned to Fritz Neumeyer of Freiburg im Breisgau, whom I consider my first true teacher.

As one of the few clavichord experts and pedagogues, Neumeyer came from a long tradition. At Berlin's Stern Academy, he studied with James Kwast, a famous German piano teacher. Kwast had studied with Carl Reinecke, a pupil of Mendelssohn's and Liszt's. Likewise, he studied with E.F.E. Richter, who became cantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig.

With Richter, the line continues backward from C.T. Weinlig and his uncle, C.E. Weinlig, to Gottfried August Homilius, an organ student of Johann Sebastian Bach's. As a champion of the *Empfinsamkeit* style, Homilius taught the well-known clavichord specialist Daniel Gottlob Türk.

As far as I know, I was the only Neumeyer student who centered solely on the clavichord. Certainly there were no clavichord scholarships available in the 1950s. Fortunately, my cousin was a manager for Trans World Airlines in Frankfurt. Through him, I found a position as nursery supervisor at the United States military airport. Within six months, I had enough dollars to live in Freiburg im Breisgau for three years.

What was it like to study with Neumeyer?
Neumeyer's way of teaching clavichord seemed completely natural and uncontrived. Yet he was demanding. There were no shortcuts of any kind. On his late eighteenth-century clavichord, he taught me how to produce a singing tone and to be precise in timing and articulation. And he taught me in great detail not only a proper technique but also how to apply it to easy pieces. Sometimes, as an accomplished pianist, I felt impatient at being an arch beginner again. Once, in my frustration, I cracked my umbrella on the railing of my teacher's back steps.

However, Neumeyer was a caring man with a whimsical sense of humor, whom we affectionately called "Uncle Fritz." On the wall of his WC (toilet) there was a picture of a young maiden sniffing flowers. In a lesson break, he might spin his miniature train. I would bring him whiskey allotted me by the US Air Force, which he enjoyed sipping while I gradually learned to play.

Did being a pianist help you as a clavichordist?
Yes. Otherwise I would never have played the clavichord. For even as a pianist, I knew my slender fingers were particularly suited to producing a wide palette of soft, shaded tones. It was easy to listen to individual sounds and feel my fingertips pressing down the keys. Contours and breaks in dynamics were already a vital part of my playing. Through Edwin Fischer, I had learned about "singing tones" and how beautifully they could be conveyed. Above all, Fischer had taught me that, by refining my finger technique, I could play more clearly, expressively and spontaneously.

The clavichord, however, opened up a whole new way of approaching keyboard sound. It allowed me to walk into a miniature microscopic world where keen concentration on each motion became essential. In a sense, with its simple mechanism, this keyboard instrument resembled a violin. I could feel the strings, by way of a tangent, respond to my fingertips. I could affect the tone from beginning to end through the way the tangent touched, held, and released the strings. My fingers could even produce a portato or vibrato by wavering a key while holding it down. Playing in tune and in time and creating a beautiful, singing tone depended on the special way I caressed the keys. In addition, articulation and shading could be far more precise and subtle than on the modern piano.

I enjoyed being an adult student. In a sense, the clavichord itself became my final teacher. It pointed out my smallest inadequacies and showed me how to correct them. It helped me focus on the softest of tones until they vanished in thin air. Above all, I could delve into a whispering of sounds that would be inaudible, unless distorted, in a hall or on a recording.

You mention caressing the key. Is this manner of caressing the keys and producing a beautiful sound demonstrated in the DVD master class?
Yes it is, with several different students. These advanced players of the piano and harpsichord are touching the clavichord for the first time. Therefore the caressing of the keys is exaggerated. And how surprised each student is to produce some degree of singing sound! Eventually each one of them will be able to create a special beauty of tone that is unique.

What instruments were available to you in Europe and America when you started?
Clavichords were rare, and the ones that existed were tucked away in private homes or museums. Of the few modern instruments available, the sounds might sing, but they had no clear release. Both builders and players still had the modern piano in their ears. Both felt justified in exploring new ways.

In England, a clavichord revival among the elite was in full bloom in the early twentieth century. Of these modern clavichords, I had the chance to buy one of four octaves

and two notes, built by Thomas Goff in 1936. At that time, his clavichords were extremely popular and noted for their uniquely sweet and melancholic tones. I wish I had had the means to buy a five-octave instrument from the Chickering workshop of Arnold Dolmetsch. He was the first to build a clavichord approximately based on an historical model—his 1784 Christian Gotthelf Hoffmann. Later, my second teacher, Santiago Kastner of Portugal, advised me to buy a clavichord by Jacobus Verwolf of Holland. This instrument of over five octaves was capable of a wide range of dynamics and was sturdy enough to be transported for concerts. The touch was deep, however, and did not lend itself to articulation like an antique.

When I arrived on the [American] West Coast, no one was playing the clavichord. A small clavichord by Alec Hodsdon of England lay hidden at Stanford University, where the early music specialists were followers of Wanda Landowska. Her high-finger technique did not suit the clavichord, however, so she did not encourage playing it. Not until I began giving concerts did I become aware of all the beautiful antiques in the museums of Europe and the United States. In the 1970s, I bought from Jörg Demus my own 1780 clavichord by Pehr Lindholm, the eminent Swedish builder.

When did you begin teaching at Stanford University?
Around 1961, Putnam Aldrich, intrigued by my clavichord playing, introduced me to Stanford University. Here he had established the first graduate degree in early music in the country. Soon I began my international career as a clavichordist and became the first university teacher of clavichord in the United States. In succeeding years I taught chamber music, organ, and classical guitar, and took part in musicology courses. To combine musicology and performance was still very fresh and new. We all felt we were transforming the world.

When did you officially begin your concert career as a clavichordist? Did you travel with your own instruments? Did your audience find the clavichord "curious" because of its intimate voice?
The release of my first recording brought me almost instantaneous international recognition. Actually, I made no effort to start a concert career. It just happened by itself. Since clavichords were rare, I had to travel by air with my own instrument. For this, the Verwolf, with its broad spectrum of dynamics, was stable enough to survive. I found that the intimate voice of the clavichord captivated audiences, but, more importantly, they were amazed at the emotional expression possible on so soft an instrument. Rather than sounds exploding in their direction, they had to reach out, listen intently, and respond.

Later, I would add my 1795 Broadwood pianoforte for relief from such delicate tones. Because of my clavichord experience, I was able to bring out expressive details on this instrument as well, but with a louder range of sounds. The Broadwood traveled in a large, wooden case, with JOAN BENSON painted on it in bold letters. At that time, before the Internet took over, airline managers kindly called ahead for each stop, to make sure it was protected.

Your complete analogue discography is scheduled for release on compact disc format in the next eighteen months. Were there special challenges in recording the clavichord when you made the original LPs, and later the compact disc included with your book?
Half a century ago, when I made my first LP, early music recordings were rare and more difficult to make than today. To avoid tape hiss and other extraneous noise, the mike was placed very close to the clavichord. This might exaggerate the otherwise inaudible sound of key release. At the same time, LPs responded to a wider range of dynamics than early CDs. Thus, I chose to make no recordings on such CDs.

I preferred to play in person. This was also true for my great teacher, Edwin Fischer. The idea of one fixed interpretation inhibits the spontaneity and the interaction with an audience. I always played much better in live settings. I liked to feel as though I were simply a medium between the music and those listening.

Today one communicates easily and more often through recorded sound. One can mike closely (as the player would hear) or far away (as an audience might hear). Since current CDs are able to include more details of dynamic shading, it was time to convert my old LPs and tapes into CDs.

The transfer was made by Barry Phillips, a recent Grammy Award winner for his work in editing the analogue recordings of Ravi Shankar. We spent many hours trying to retain all the detailed qualities of the recordings. Barry made sure to maintain the dynamic shading for which I am known.

The performances selected for the CD comprise roughly four decades, from 1962 to 2000. They include four different clavichords, my Broadwood pianoforte, and a modern Hamburg Steinway grand. In addition, the settings were in nine different places. To merge all these different recordings onto one CD required careful attention.

Given the clavichord's tremendous response to the slightest impulse, do recordings capture this subtleness or is something lost in the translation to a CD?
CDs and live music have quite different advantages. CDs can propagate music easily and quickly, worldwide. Their availability make unamplified live performances seem antiquated. However, much is lost, and even forgotten, in the process.

No one expects subtle sounds today. We live in a web of raucous noise. There are remnants of nimble spontaneity in music from remote places. And to quietly hear the clavichord played can still surprise us.

Certainly the clavichord can produce countless sounds that are impossible to reproduce on CDs. But it takes time and attention to purify our ears so we can begin to hear them.

What special considerations are there in clavichord playing today?
In the twenty-first century, strength and amplified sounds are emphasized above sensitive artistry and soft tones. In this age of rush, it is difficult to devote the time and attention required in playing the clavichord well.

We must remember that, in earlier centuries, the clavichord was mainly an intimate instrument. For students, it was often the first keyboard instrument they played. Thus, they would progress from this softest of instruments to louder ones that demanded a little more strength.

Türk writes in his *Klavierschule* of 1789, "Even a child of eight can press down individual keys with one finger, unless the instrument is unusually stiff to play, or rather to strike. If this should be the case, then the teacher has to see about another clavichord." Later he adds, "A beginner should be able to produce beautiful singing tones before ever attempting to shade them."

Today, beginners on the clavichord are often experts on other, louder keyboard instruments. In each case, it is difficult to recede to a softer and softer sound. There are exercises in my book that show how this control can gradually be accomplished.

What are your thoughts on the clavichord as an instrument used in performance?
Of course the clavichord was not meant for performances in large halls. All the same, I found myself playing for as many as four hundred people. Amplification was necessary, and I used to work with the engineers for hours. But the sound quality depended on where you sat, and inevitably it was distorted. In contrast, I remember a clavichord in one stone cathedral. In its vast empty spaces, the sound carried amazingly well.

In performing on the clavichord, each situation is unique. Each sound is highly affected by the room's acoustics and size, the audience and player as well as the clavichord and its placement. Late eighteenth-century clavichords, with their large soundboards and reflective lids, can project well in small halls. In the wooden-floored museum of Leipzig, delicate sixteenth-century clavichords could be heard clearly a room away. On the other hand, the *Bebung* can vanish quickly, even in a small setting. Sometimes, to improve a hall's resonance, I would ask that draperies and rugs be removed. To me, the place in which the clavichord is played becomes a part of the instrument itself.

Certainly the clavichord is better suited to intimate gatherings, for then the fine details, such as the *Bebung*, can be heard. Better still is to play for one person seated near the soundboard. Then the listener can hear sounds almost as distinctly as the player.

When I first began the clavichord, there was no thought of performing. I wanted to learn what this beautiful instrument could produce. It still seems best to start this way, since it brings one closer to the clavichord's true nature. Playing for oneself can bring contentment, for the interaction with the clavichord is direct.

I especially encourage this solitary way of clavichord playing because it offers a place of repose. At the same time, I am deeply grateful for the fine performers who share their clavichord music today.

Is the clavichord being used often enough to accompany the voice?
Certainly, the combination of clavichord and voice can be exquisite. Already in the fifteenth century, there is artistic evidence of this occurring. Surely, with late eighteenth-century clavichords, it was common.

According to C.P.E. Bach's *Versuch*, the keyboardist should "listen to artistic singing" and "learn to think in terms of song." In fact, a study of voice can "aid and simplify the clavichordist's whole approach to performance." Certainly while learning a piece, one may go so far as to sing individual voices, one at a time. This helps give each voice a meaning and a shape.

Already in the 1970s, I was performing C.P.E. Bach's songs with a soprano. The clavichord seemed to combine with her voice rather than accompany it. For correct balance, the singer sat in a chair, looking down at a book of music. Eighteenth-century keyboardists thought of their sounds in vocal terms, so the blending of voice and clavichord could be naturally cohesive.

For singers today, the clavichord can elicit a whole new spectrum of vocal production. There is much eighteenth-century music that is suitable for voice and clavichord, particularly from Sweden and the Germanic countries. The emotional sacred songs by C.P.E. Bach and the songs for children by Johann Friedrich Reichardt immediately come to mind.

To what extent is arm weight involved in playing the clavichord?
Already in my piano lessons as a child, I included arm weight. Later I used my whole arms for loud, expressive tones. In time, I noticed how other pianists used their fingers for finesse in playing. Finally, in Vienna as a pianist, I learned how to make my fingers more flexible and independent.

In my own experience as a beginning clavichord student, I was taught to develop each finger while the arms remained loose. The arms, moving easily, could give contour to lines and help place fingers correctly on the keys. Reflecting the advice of C.P.E. Bach, there should be no stiffness in the hands and wrists. Arm weight, if any, should not detract from the fine details of finger playing. Today there are large clavichords being built or restored that may require arm weight. And there are clavichords made or restrung so they play as smoothly as silk. Some variables include string tension and gauge, cloth listing, and the balance of key levers.

Also, on a clavichord there are two steps to playing a note. One is the motion and pressure needed to raise a tangent from rest position to the point where it touches the strings. The second is the pressure needed for the tangent to lift the strings and hold them. The first step can be too quick and easy, particularly if the key lever offers no resistance. The second can require too much strength, particularly if the strings are heavy and taut. It is important that these two steps are coordinated so that their combination can be smooth.

Regarding antique clavichords, we cannot know how each one sounded when it was new or how it was originally played. A good clavichord, however, must have an even action and be capable of producing the subtlest of musical effects.

Certainly the exquisite sixteenth-century clavichords found in Leipzig need no arm weight. Instead, they respond to very delicate shading. With the subtle use of fingers, each voice can have its own shape, its own meaning. With large, late eighteenth-century clavichords, however, arm weight can have a place. By that time, wide shifts and shocks of dynamics were used to express human emotions. The desire for louder-shaded tones was leading to early forms of the piano.

In the 1770s, J.F. Reichardt describes C.P.E. Bach's powerful fortissimos that would break to pieces any clavichord but his amazing Silbermann. In a footnote added to the 1787 edition of his *Versuch*, Bach adds: "The pegs must be tightly fitted so that the strings will be capable of withstanding the full force of an attack and remain in tune."

According to Türk's *Klavierschule* of 1789, a clavichordist must be able to express the character of music through degrees of loudness and softness. But many players strike the keys with such force or press them down so violently that the tones are heightened in pitch. Yet really good clavichordists have a special way of striking or pressing down the key with great strength without distorting the tone.

Certainly, in Bach's later keyboard works and particularly in his fantasies, the weight of the lower arm occasionally may be required. But, for me, it always is supported by the finger's quick, forceful pull on the key.

Can you tell us why you wrote your book?
When Wendy Gillespie of Indiana University visited me some years ago, we talked about how I might share my clavichord expertise with others. Finally, she suggested we publish this book along with a teaching video and a CD of my playing.

This is the first modern manual to address in highly detailed lessons the simplest requirements of the clavichord beginner. It took me six years to complete it. Specialized exercises gradually take one down the path to becoming a clavichordist. It is even possible to learn to play the clavichord alone, using *Clavichord for Beginners* as a teacher. May I add that I myself took this journey when, as a pianist, I turned to the clavichord to enrich my own playing?

The included pieces are kept simple so the beginner can concentrate on creating proper tones. A careful study of this book will prepare one for the advanced and far more comprehensive books by C.P.E. Bach and Daniel Gottlob Türk.

What special advice do you have for using your book to learn to play the clavichord?
First, there are two kinds of beginners. One prefers a

"taste" of the clavichord. I encourage this group to go through the book in an easy, relaxed way. For even this experience can be vivid, particularly for players of other keyboard instruments.

Second, there are beginners who truly want to learn to play the clavichord well. Then the process is a slow one, involving patience. Above all, it is essential to digest each lesson before going on to the next.

Find a quiet place in order to concentrate. Also, drop habits applicable only to other keyboard instruments. If possible, take a vacation from them and focus solely on the clavichord. This will provide a fresh start.

In the beginning, think of the clavichord as an instrument for introspection rather than performance. Traditionally, it was used this way as well. This encourages space, a sense of stillness, and a relationship with one's inner being. If the clavichord is approached with thoughtfulness, there is much to learn.

What additional books would complement yours?
My book, with its limited number of pages, is not intended to cover all topics concerning the clavichord. Among the fine books available, I recommend acquiring the following. For an historical background, Bernard Brauchli's *The Clavichord* is excellent. For a brief view, particularly on distinctions of fretted and fret-free instruments, see *A Short History of the Clavichord* by Koen Vermeij. For attending to clavichords in general, turn to the second edition of Peter Bavington's *Clavichord Tuning and Maintenance*.

Of course, it is essential eventually to study Daniel Gottlob Türk's *Klavierschule* and, more important, C.P.E. Bach's Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen. It is interesting to compare Mitchell's problematic English translation of 1949 with the German edition edited by Tobias Plebuch from 2011.

You are particularly known as an interpreter and reviver of C.P.E. Bach's music, with emphasis on his emotional fantasias. What have you to say about this?
From the beginning, my sensitive nature was attuned to the *Empfindsamkeit* outlook. With my acute hearing, I could extend my dynamic shading to include the very softest of sounds. Above all, I naturally identified with my emotions, whether they were subtle or extreme. It was easy for me

to jump suddenly from one mood to another. I found that all moods, whether happy or sad, gave my life color and meaning. So it was natural for me to express the wealth of fluctuating moods found in C.P.E. Bach's music, particularly in his free fantasias.

You are one of the first to craft a career for yourself specializing almost exclusively in playing the clavichord. What parting comments do you have for beginners of the clavichord?
Learning to play the clavichord is closely akin to learning to play the violin. In each case, one first centers on producing beautiful tones and keeping them in tune. Then one starts learning how to manipulate those tones in various ways, such as through articulations and dynamics. However, this is just a beginning.

Clavichord for Beginners is meant to open the door for musical ideas and expression. One does not know where this will lead. May the clavichord take you, as it took me, to places never expected—on outward and inward journeys I never knew existed. And may you have the courage to go with the clavichord in ways you alone can explore, and share what you find with other beings.

Joan smiles as she closes her copy of Bach's *Versuch*, signaling the time to end the interview. Her hands, still beautiful, return the book to the table beside her chair. She can look back on seventy years of a successful career as performer, recording artist, teacher, and champion of the clavichord. Her work appears far from over as she continues to study, teach, write, walk in nature, meditate, and, most importantly, encourage others to find their own intimate relationship with the clavichord.