

Gathering Peascods for the Old Gray Mare

Some Unusual Harpsichord Music Before Aliénor

By Larry Palmer

The 2012 inaugural meeting of the new Historical Keyboard Society of North America (HKSNA), formed by the merger of the Southeastern Historical Keyboard Society (SEHKS, founded 1980) and its slightly younger sibling, the Midwestern Historical Keyboard Society (MHKS, organized 1984), was an historic event in itself. The late March gathering in Cincinnati included both the seventh iteration of the Jurow Harpsichord Playing Competition and the eighth occurrence of the International Aliénor Composition Competition, plus scores of scholarly presentations and short recitals, loosely organized into ten sessions, each with a general connecting theme.

For my contribution to Session Seven (The Old Made New) I attempted to craft a title enigmatic enough that it might pique the curiosity of a few potential auditors, but with the higher goal of providing information about some of the earliest and relatively obscure “new” compositions for harpsichord from the early 20th-century. I hoped, as well, to underscore, at least by implication, the major stimulus for a continuing creation of new repertoire that has been provided by the Aliénor’s prizes, performances, and publications since its inception in 1980.

Woodhouse plays Cecil Sharp

As early as July 1920, Violet Gordon Woodhouse, the most prominent and gifted of early 20th-century British harpsichordists, recorded three of folksong collector Cecil Sharp’s *Country Dance Tunes*. Thus Sharp’s 1911 piano versions of the tunes *Newcastle*, *Heddon of Fawsley*, and *Step Back* serve as the earliest “contemporary” music for harpsichord committed to disc.¹

These were followed, in 1922, by recorded performances of two more Cecil Sharp transcriptions, *Bryhton Camp* and the evocatively titled *Gathering Peascods*.² While the 1920 recordings were already available in digital format, courtesy of Pearl Records’ Violet Gordon Woodhouse compact disc,³ I had never heard the 1922 offerings. Peter Adamson, an avid collector of these earliest discs, assured me that he could provide the eponymous work listed in the title of this article. Both of us were surprised to find that *Gathering Peascods* was never issued in the United Kingdom, but Peter was able to send me some superior dubs from the original 1920 discs, as well as a few seconds of authentic 78-rpm needle scratching. Combining this acoustic noise with Sharp’s keyboard arrangement, quickly located online via Google search, made possible the restoration of *Peascods* to the roster of earliest recorded “contemporary” harpsichord literature. It is

equally charming, though perhaps less historically informed, when performed without the ambient sound track.

Thomé

New harpsichord music composed for the earliest Revival harpsichords⁴ actually predates any recording of the instrument: Francis Thomé’s *Rigodon*, opus 97, a *pièce de clavecin*, was written for the fleet-fingered French pianist Louis Diémer, and published in Paris by Henry Lemoine and Company in 1892.⁵

The first 20th-century harpsichord piece?

There are currently two contenders for “first place” in the 20th-century modern harpsichord composition sweepstakes. The first may be Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s *English Suite*, originally committed to paper in 1909 during his student years in Florence, then recreated in 1939 shortly after the Italian composer’s immigration to the United States. That version, sent to prominent harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick in 1940, seems to have been ignored by the artist, but it was ultimately published by Mills Music in New York in 1962.⁶

A second contender (dare we call it a “co-first”?), which is, thus far, the earliest published 20th-century harpsichord work, is Henri Mulet’s tender and charming miniature *Petit Lied*. Mulet is most often remembered, if at all, for his ten *Byzantine Sketches for Organ*, a set that ends with the sometimes-popular toccata *Tu es Petrus* (Thou art the rock). Comprising a brief seventeen measures, Mulet’s “*Little Song*” is dedicated to fellow organist Albert Périllhou, who was characterized by his more famous contemporary Louis Vierne, as “a composer of the 18th century.” So perhaps this delicate, nostalgic work, published in 1910 “pour clavecin [ou piano]” was intended to pay homage to Périllhou’s antiquarian tendencies.⁷

Busoni

1916 saw the publication of Ferruccio Busoni’s 1915 *Sonatina ad usum infantis Madeline M.° Americanae pro Clavicimbalo composita*⁸—a strange, but ultimately satisfying keyboard work that, with some imaginative editing, is playable on a two-manual harpsichord, which one assumes the composer did, since he was also the proud owner of such a 1911 Dolmetsch-Chickering instrument.⁹

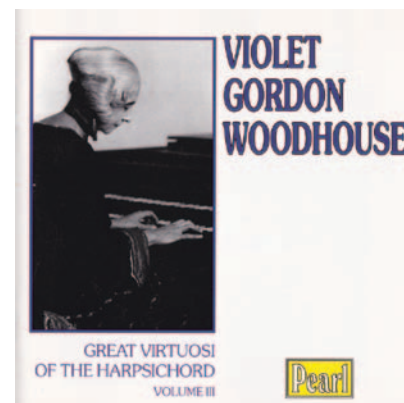
Delius

Often described as “unplayable,” the very original *Dance for Harpsichord* (for piano) by Frederick Delius came into being in 1919, inspired by the artistry of Violet Gordon Woodhouse. Kirkpatrick included it in a unique program of 20th-century harpsichord music presented at

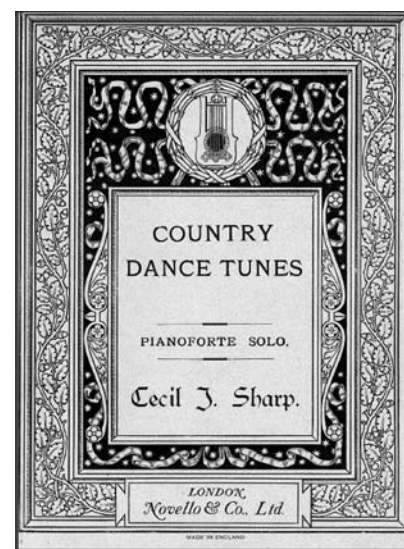
the University of California, Berkeley in 1961¹⁰ and Igor Kipnis recorded it in 1976.¹¹ I have occasionally enjoyed playing Delius’s purple-plush harmonies in a shortened version arranged by Baltimore harpsichordist Joseph Stephens. Each time I play the work I find fewer notes to be necessary, and decide to omit more and more of them, often an approach that best serves these piano-centric harpsichord refugees from the early Revival years. Since Delius surely ranks among the better-known composers who attempted to write anything at all for the harpsichord, it seems worth the effort to forge an individual version that serves to bring this quite lovely piece to the public.

Grainger

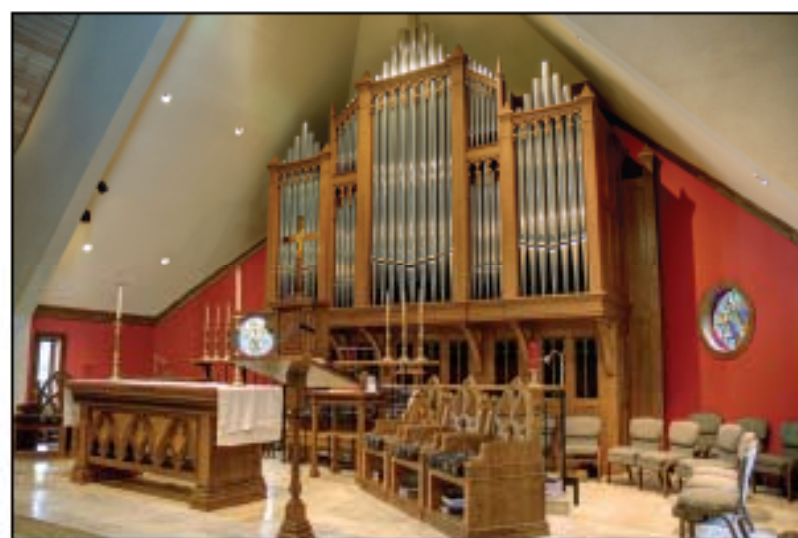
Inspired by the recent anniversary year (2011) of the beloved eccentric Percy Grainger (he died in 1961), it



Violet Gordon Woodhouse Pearl CD cover



Cover of Sharp’s *Country Dance Tunes*, arranged for piano



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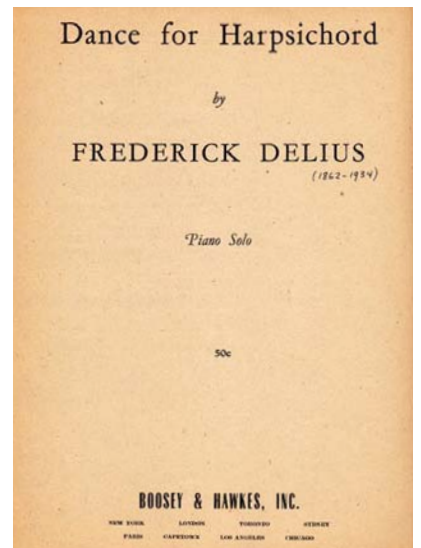
Francis Thomé, *Oeuvres pour Piano*



Castelnuovo-Tedesco, *English Suite*



Ferruccio Busoni at his Dolmetsch-Chickering harpsichord



Delius, *Dance for Harpsichord*

seemed fitting to rework another of my own arrangements, that of his “Room-Music Tit-Bits,” the clog dance *Handel in the Strand*, particularly after coming across Grainger’s own mention of the harpsichord’s influence on his compositional career. In a letter to the pianist Harold Bauer, Grainger wrote:

... the music [of my] *Kipling Settings* ... [is] an outcome of the influence emanating from the vocal-solo numbers-with-accompaniment-of-solo-instruments in Bach’s *Matthew-Passion*, as I heard it when a boy of 12, 13, or 14 in Frankfurt. These sounds (two flutes and *harpsichord* ...) sounded so exquisite to my ears ... that I became convinced that larger chamber music (from 8-25 performers) was, for me, an ideal background for single voices ...¹²

So why not present Grainger’s Handelian romp edited for one player, ten fingers, and two manuals? Grainger’s own arrangement (“dished-up for piano solo, March 25, 1930, [in] Denton, Texas” according to the composer’s annotation in the printed score) provides a good starting place.¹³

Persichetti and Powell

Two major solo works from the 1950s composed for the harpsichordist Fernando Valenti deserve more performances than they currently receive: Vincent Persichetti’s *Sonata for Harpsichord* (now known as that prolific composer’s *Sonata No. One*), still, to my ears, his most pleasing work for our instrument, and Mel Powell’s *Recitative and Toccata Percossa*—another wonderful work

included on Kirkpatrick’s contemporary music disc.¹⁴

Duke Ellington

For aficionados of jazz, the 44 measures of Duke Ellington’s *A Single Petal of a Rose* comprise three manuscript pages now housed in the Paul Sacher Foundation (Basel, Switzerland), available only as a facsimile in Ule Troxler’s invaluable volume documenting the many commissions bestowed on contemporary composers by the wealthy Swiss harpsichordist Antoinette Vischer.¹⁵ About Ellington’s unique work, Mme. Vischer wrote to the composer late in 1965:

Just on Christmas Eve I received your marvelous piece ... I am very happy about your composition and I want to assure you of my greatest thanks. ... could I ask you the favour to give me the manuscript with the dedication to my name as all other composers are doing for me, with a photo from you who always belong to my collection ...¹⁶

When Igor Kipnis asked whether I had any idea as to where he might find this score, I shared the citation information with him. Some years later he reciprocated by sending an arrangement made in collaboration with jazz great Dave Brubeck. A damper pedal would certainly make playing even this somewhat more idiomatic keyboard arrangement easier, but the gentle beauties of Ellington’s only “harpsichord” work deserve to find their place in our repertoire. In the spirit of jazz improvisation, I suggest adapting the written notes to fit one’s individual finger span, as well as assuming a free approach both to some of the notated rhythms and repeats, and not being afraid to toy with the tessitura by changing the octave of some notes in order to achieve a more lyrical legato line on our pedal-less instrument.

Prokofiev (for two)

In 1936 Sergey Prokofiev surprised the western musical world by forsaking Paris and returning to live out the rest of his days in his native Russia. One of his first Soviet musical projects was the composition of incidental music for a centenary production of Pushkin’s play *Eugene Onegin*. In this dramatic and colorful orchestral score a dream scene is integrated with the house party of the heroine, Tatyana.

In his recent book, *The People’s Artist*, music historian Simon Morrison writes,

The party scene opens with the strains of a ... polka emanating from a distant hall. Aberrant dance music represents aberrant events: much like Onegin himself,

the dance music offends sensibility. It sounds wrong; it is a breach. Prokofiev scores the dance (No. 25) for two provincial, out-of-tune harpsichords, the invisible performers carelessly barreling through the five-measure phrases at an insane tempo—a comical comment on the hullabaloo that greets the arrival ... of a pompous regimental commander. There ensues an enigmatic waltz (No. 26), which Prokofiev scores first for string quintet and then, in a jarring contrast, for the two harpsichords ...¹⁷

One wonders just how many provincial harpsichords there were in mid-1930s Russia, but this *Polka* from *Eugene Onegin*, played at a slightly more moderate pace, has served as a delightful encore for performances of Francis Poulenc’s *Concert Champêtre* when that enchanting work is performed as a duo with piano standing in for the orchestral parts, just as it was presented by Wanda Landowska and Poulenc in the very first, pre-premiere hearing of Poulenc’s outstanding score.¹⁸

The Old Gray Mare, at last

Having fêted a pompous general with Prokofiev’s *Polka*, it is time to explain the reference to *The Old Gray Mare*. American composer and academic Douglas Moore composed a short variation set based on the popular folk tune to demonstrate the culminating amicable musical collaboration between the previously antagonistic harpsichord and piano, a duet that concludes the mid-20th-century recording *Said the Piano to the Harpsichord*. This educational production has had a somewhat unique cultural significance as the medium through which quite a number of persons first encountered our plucked instrument. While Moore’s variation-finale remains unpublished, it is possible to transcribe the notes from the record, and thus regale live concert audiences with this charming entertainment for listeners “from three to ninety-plus.”

Other musical examples utilized in this clever skit include a preludial movement, the mournful *Le Gemisante* from Jean-François Dandrieu’s *1^{er} Livre de Clavecin* [1724]; the violently contrasting *Military Polonaise in A Major*, opus 40/1 by Frédéric Chopin, in which the piano demonstrates its preferred athletic and happy music and then goads the harpsichord into a ridiculous attempt at playing the same excerpt, *sans* pedal. That confrontation is followed by Jean-Philippe Rameau’s ever-popular *Tambourin*, which manages to sound nearly as ridiculous when the piano tries to show that it “can play your music better than you can play mine!”—an attempt

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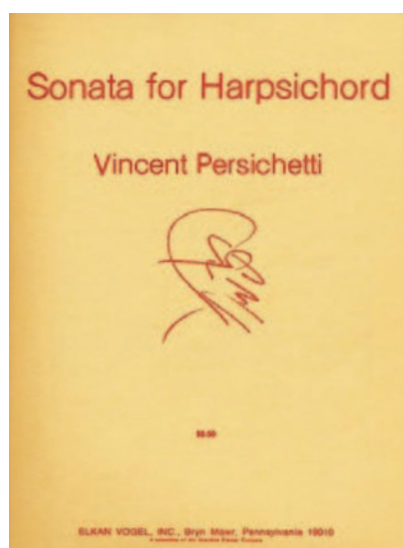
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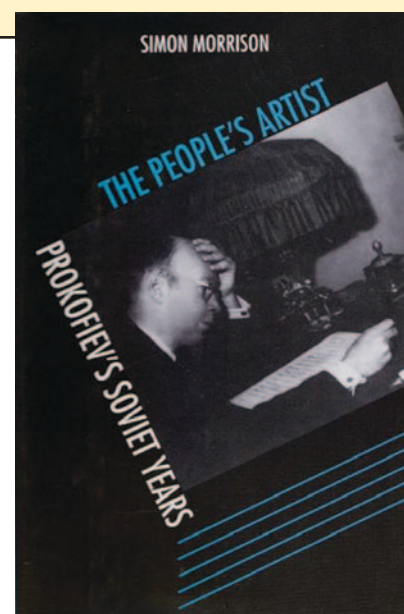
Grainger, *Handel in the Strand*



Persichetti, *Sonata for Harpsichord*



Cover of Troxler's book on Vischer



Cover, Simon Morrison book on Prokofiev

heard to be futile when the harpsichord puts that notion to rest by playing it “the way it ought to sound.”

The 2012 *Aliénor* winners chosen by judges Tracy Richardson, David Schrader, and Alex Shapiro from some 70 submitted scores: Solo harpsichord (works required to emulate in some way the Mikrokosmos pieces by Béla Bartók): composers Ivan Božičević (Microgrooves), Janine Johnson (Night Vision), Kent Holliday (Mikrokosmicals), Thomas Donahue (Four Iota Pieces), Mark Janello (Six Harpsichord Miniatures), and Glenn Spring (Bela Bagatelles). Vocal chamber music with one obbligato instrument and harpsichord: Jeremy Beck (Songs of Love & Remembrance), Ivan Božičević (*Aliénor* Courante), and Asako Hirabayashi (Al que ingrate me deja).¹⁹ ■

Notes

- Jessica Douglas-Home, *The Life and Loves of Violet Gordon Woodhouse* (London: The Harvill Press, 1996). Discography (by Alan Vicat), p. 329.
- Ibid. Matrices issued in France with the catalogue number P484.
- Great Virtuosi of the Harpsichord*, volume 3. Pearl GEMM CD 9242 (1996).
- Three newly constructed two-manual harpsichords built by the piano firms Érard and Pleyel, and by the instrument restorer Louis Tomasini, were shown at the Paris Exposition of 1889, and heard in performances at the event. The modern harpsichord revival is often dated from that year.
- See Larry Palmer, “Revival Relics” in *Early Keyboard Journal* V (1986–87), pp. 45–52, and Palmer, *Harpsichord in America: A 20th-Century Revival* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989; paperback second edition, 1993), pp. 4–6; page six is a facsimile of the first page of *Rigodon*.
- See Larry Palmer, “Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s *English Suite for Harpsichord* at 100,” *THE DIAPASON*, December 2009, pp. 36–37.
- See these articles in *THE DIAPASON*: Donna M. Walters, “Henri Mulet: French organist-composer,” December 2008, pp. 26–29; *Harpsichord News*, August 2010, p. 11; and, for a complete facsimile of the original publication, the issue of January 2011, p. 12.
- Edition Breitkopf Nr. 4836 “for Piano Solo.”
- See Larry Palmer, “The Busoni Sonatina,” in *THE DIAPASON*, September 1973, pp. 10–11; Palmer, *Harpsichord in America: “Busoni and the Harpsichord,”* pp. 25–26; the first harpsichord recording of this work is played by Larry Palmer on Musical Heritage Society disc LP 3222 (1975). A fine 2002 digital recording, *Revolution for Cembalo* (Hänssler Classic CD 98.503) features Japanese harpsichordist Sumina Arihashi playing the Busoni *Sonatina*, as well as Delius’s *Dance*, Thomé’s *Rigodon*, and other early revival works by Ravel, Massenet, Richard Strauss, and Alexandre Tansman.



Said the Piano to the Harpsichord album cover

- The list of included composers is given in Palmer, *Harpsichord in America*, p. 146. Kirkpatrick also recorded this program in 1961.
- “Bach Goes to Town,” Angel/EMI S-36095.
- <http://www.percygrainger.org/prog not5.htm> (accessed 20 October 2011).
- Published by G. Schirmer.
- Persichetti’s ten sonatas for harpsichord are published by Elkan-Vogel, Inc., a subsidiary of the Theodore Presser Company, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010; the *First Sonata*, opus 52 (1951), was published in 1973. The Powell work remains unpublished.
- Ule Troxler, *Antoinette Vischer: Dokumente zu einem Leben für das Cembalo* (Basel: Birkhäuser-Verlag, 1976). Published by Schott & Co. Ltd., London; U.S. reprint by G. Schirmer.
- Ibid., pp. 99–100.
- Simon Morrison, *The People’s Artist—Prokofiev’s Soviet Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). The quotation is found on page 130. I assembled the two harpsichord parts by cutting and pasting them from the orchestral score of *Eugene Onegin* (his opus 71). I am unaware of any other published edition.
- Personally I find the balances for the Poulenc much better in duo performances than in live harpsichord and orchestra ones. Another interesting possibility, at least as demonstrated by a recording, may be heard on Oehms Classics compact disc OC 637, where harpsichordist Peter Kofler is partnered by organist Hansjörg Albrecht and percussionist Babette Haag in a compelling performance, recorded in 2009 in Munich.
- For more information about *Aliénor* and its history, consult www.harpsichord-now.org.

2012 marks the 50th anniversary of harpsichord editor Larry Palmer’s first published writing in *THE DIAPASON*: a brief article about Hugo Distler in the issue for November 1962. Since those graduate student days he has taught at St. Paul’s College and Norfolk State and Southern Methodist Universities, served as President of SEHKS from 2004–2008, and is a continuing member of the advisory board for *Aliénor*. At the Cincinnati gathering in addition to “Gathering Peascods” he played Glenn Spring’s *Bela Bagatelles* at the Awards recital and chaired the Sunday session devoted to “Swingtime—The Mitch Miller Showdown.”

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