

Words and music

Ralph Kirkpatrick: *Letters of the American Harpsichordist and Scholar*, edited by Meredith Kirkpatrick. University of Rochester Press, November 2014, 186 pages, \$60.

Framed by illuminating and affectionate foreword and afterword essays from guitarist Eliot Fisk and harpsichordist Mark Kroll (both writers Yale University students who treasured Professor Ralph Kirkpatrick's musical mentoring), this slim volume goes a long way toward fleshing out our knowledge about one of the most prominent and respected figures in the 20th-century American harpsichord revival. Widely known for his pioneering study of the composer Domenico Scarlatti and as a prominent harpsichord performer and recording artist, Kirkpatrick (1911–1984) has not received a lot of posthumous attention. Carefully selected and annotated by his niece Meredith, a librarian and bibliographer at Boston University, this compilation of letters (largely “from” but also occasionally “to” the eponymous harpsichordist) reminds us of Ralph Kirkpatrick's contributions and wide-ranging influence during the middle years of the past century.

Beginning with a large group of 28 letters to family members (often retyped for distribution by Kirkpatrick's stepmother) detailing RK's student and European travel years, the epistolary history continues with communications to teachers Nadia Boulanger and Wanda Landowska (the latter, one of the parties to an uneasy teacher/student relationship as outlined in Kirkpatrick's memoir, *Early Years*). Colleagues and students represented include the pianist John Kirkpatrick (not a relative), violinist duo-partner Alexander (Sascha) Schneider, organist/harpichordist John Hamilton, and pianist Edward Steuermann (listed in the book as Steuermann); harpsichordists Albert Fuller, Colin Tilney, Kenneth Gilbert, and essayist Eliot Fisk; historians Oliver Strunk and Harold Spivacke (two successive heads of the music division at the Library of Congress), Donald Boalch, and Arthur Mendel; instrument makers John Challis (in a fascinating group of letters documenting an increasingly thorny love/hate relationship with the American maker's clavichords and

harpichords), William Dowd, Wolfgang Zuckermann, and Alec Hodson.

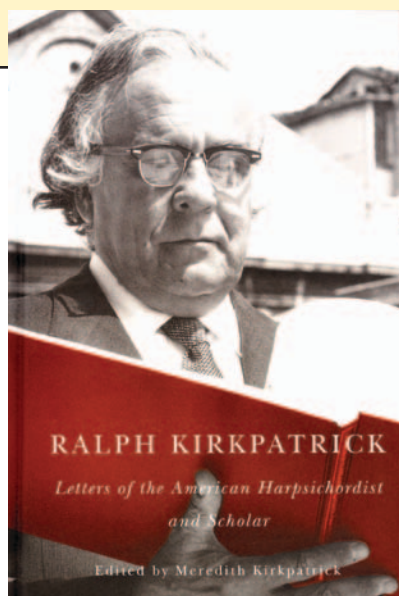
Kirkpatrick's considerable interest in contemporary compositions for harpsichord is documented by important correspondence with American composers Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter, Otto Luening, Quincy Porter, Vincent Persichetti, Henry Cowell, and Mel Powell, as well as Europeans Frank Martin and Bengt Hambraeus.

Literary connections include a letter to music critic Olin Downes and two (apparently unpublished) well-argued missives on musical topics addressed “to the editor” of the *New York Times*. Correspondence with author Thornton Wilder, arts administrator Oliver Daniel, patrons Alexander Mackay-Smith, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, Lincoln Kirstein, Paul Fromm, and Boston Symphony music director Serge Koussevitzky give some insights into the resourcefulness required to buttress Kirkpatrick's efforts at establishing the harpsichord more regularly as a component in America's concert life. An especially charming letter (dictated “tongue” in “jack” by RK's favorite Dowd harpsichord “Flora”) thanks neighbors Mr. and Mrs. George Young for taking care of his instrument during the player's absence. A 1977 missive to friend Wilton Dillon details the deteriorating state of Kirkpatrick's health, and a final selection, sent to editor Meredith Kirkpatrick in 1984, outlines plans for attending a Boston Symphony concert together, plans sadly unfulfilled due to RK's sudden death.

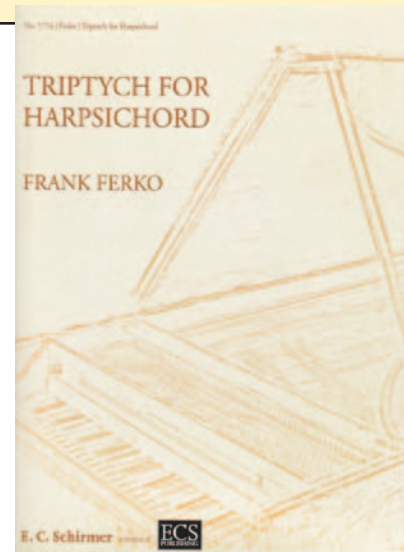
This fascinating book includes 18 pages of pictures, a generous index, comprehensive bibliography, and complete discography. To uphold “truth in advertising” I should mention that I was involved with this publication both as an early reader of the manuscript and later as a technical consultant.

Frank Ferko: *Triptych for Harpsichord*. E.C. Schirmer Music Company (a division of ECS Publishing), No. 5774, \$13.15.

Born in 1950, Frank Ferko has composed a number of significant works for organ (the 70-minute *Hildegard-Zyklus* from the early 1990s and his shorter evocation of bell sounds, *Les carillons de la destinée et de l'éternité*, completed



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Frank Ferko: *Triptych for Harpsichord*

in 1996, come to mind), as well as highly regarded choral works, including an a cappella setting of the Latin *Stabat Mater*, interspersed with aptly chosen sung commentaries in English (available in a superb recording by His Majesty's Clerkes on Cedille Records, CDR90000 051).

Ferko's first published harpsichord work is *Triptych*, composed in 2000, in which he displays an equally individual compositional voice while utilizing a mostly harpsichord-friendly texture. Dedicated to the Russian harpsichordist Tatiana Zenaishvili, a harpsichord professor at the Moscow Conservatory, this work was specifically crafted for her single-manual instrument's G to D range. The three movements are intended to last approximately eleven minutes.

In the opening *Toccata* Ferko alternates a motto of slow repeated notes and very light, fast single sixteenth-notes, which first expand to alternating fifths, then acquire a chordal, tenor-range melodic figure above these sounds and transition to slow arpeggiated chords. This pattern is repeated three times with gradually rising pitches.

The second panel, *Theme with [Five] Variations*, is based on an ancient Russian folksong. Variations one and two are *Bicinia*, with opportunity for many quick left-hand scales in the second. Variation three (“Elegantly, with spirit”) is a jovial single line to be played on the buff stop.

The slow, chordal fourth variation brings the first probable difficulty: widely spaced chords in both hands, requiring stretches that are not feasible for all players (tenths, occasionally in both hands simultaneously).

Since I have dealt with similar problems in quite a few works that I have commissioned, I contacted Dr. Ferko to ask the question, “Would you be offended by some judicious re-scoring—shrinking of chords—in these passages?”

His gracious response:

Regarding the wide hand spans in Var. IV, I can play those myself, so I write them with the understanding that anyone else who can manage them should do so in performing this piece. However, I also acknowledge the fact that many keyboard players cannot manage those wide spans, so I am perfectly happy with practical but musical alternate solutions.

[E-mail communication, January 10, 2015.]

Variation five consists of rapidly repeated sixteenth-note chords and octaves: again a difficult, but not impossible exercise in relaxation of the wrist. I have been experimenting with alternating the notes of the left hand part, especially the octaves, and find that, to my ears, the texture does not suffer, and wrists remain supple. I would offer this as a possible performance suggestion when this piece is played.

The final movement, a *Fugue à 4 voix*, is based on a theme from the opening *Toccata*. With gentle but sometimes surprising chromatic harmonies, here, as throughout the entire printed score, one needs to pay close attention to the composer's printed rubric: “All pitches are assumed to be natural unless specifically preceded by a flat or sharp.” To give more variety to the fugal texture, I have been experimenting with playing single bass notes rather than octaves in measures 22 through 31; and, to gain a more resonant sound I have transposed the right hand parts down an octave beginning with the middle of measure 24 through measure 32. As these experiments may indicate, I have fallen in love with Frank Ferko's beautiful score and find that his music grows on me with each successive practice session.

I urge our readers to consider buying this just-published work. We must realize that if we do not support publication of worthwhile new repertoire, publishers will not continue to offer it to us. Bravo to ECS Publishing for bringing this splendid new piece to our attention. ■

Comments and news items are always welcome. Address them to Dr. Larry Palmer, Division of Music, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas 75275. E-mail: lpalmer@smu.edu.