

Harpichord News

by Larry Palmer



3 November 2002: players at the dedication of Richard Kingston's Millennium harpsichord, opus 300, in the Washington, D.C. music room of Charles and Susan Mize. Left to right: Dr. Mize, Larry Palmer, Virginia Pleasants, Don Angle, Brigitte Haudebourg, and composer Glenn Spring

Another member joins the harpsichordists' century club

Virginia Pleasants, harpsichordist, clavichordist, and fortepianist, celebrates her 100th birthday on May 9, 2011. Born in Ohio, she attended Wittenberg University and completed her baccalaureate degree (with a major in piano) at the College-Conservatory of the University of Cincinnati. After private piano study in New York City, she won a first prize in the MacDowell Competition for Chamber Music.

Joining her husband, music critic Henry Pleasants, in Europe at the end of World War II, the couple lived in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany until settling in London in 1967. There Henry wrote music criticism for the *International Herald-Tribune* and Virginia served for twenty years as an adjunct lecturer at Cambridge University. Her frequent recitals of early music and her gift for keeping in touch with a wide circle of interested friends kept Virginia in the forefront of the British early musical scene. In turn she kept many, including readers of *THE DIAPASON*, better informed about interesting happenings across the Atlantic. Pleasants' discography includes four discs of Haydn *Sonatas* for The Haydn Society, and Quincy Porter's *Harpichord Concerto*, issued by Composers Recordings Incorporated.

Four years after the death of her husband in 2000, Virginia came "home" to Philadelphia. In 2002 she joined several friends in dedicatory festivities for Richard Kingston's 300th harpsichord, playing music of Zipoli, Blow, Croft, Domenico Scarlatti, and Hungarian composer Tibor Serly. A longtime member of the South-



Virginia and Henry Pleasants, 1996 (photo: Charles Mize)

eastern Historical Keyboard Society, Virginia gave a memorable lecture-recital on the fortepiano works of Philadelphia composer Alexander Reinagle for the Society's 2007 conclave at the University of North Texas in Denton.

With her attainment of the century mark, Virginia Pleasants joins a select group of revival harpsichordists, including Marcelle de Lacour and Virginia Mackie. More research may be needed, but it seems that daily practicing, especially on a plucking instrument, might be considered beneficial for a long, as well as happy, life.

Comments and news items are always welcome. Address them to Dr. Larry Palmer, Division of Music, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275. E-mails to <lpalmer@smu.edu>.

In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



The temperamental organ

Winter was coming to an end, and at Fenway Park, fabled home of the Boston Red Sox, and the facilities manager was working down his checklist of pre-season chores. This would be the second year of the new ballpark organ, and he figured it would need tuning. He called up Fred Opporknockity, the guy who had delivered the organ, and asked if he could come to tune the organ before Opening Day. Fred replied that the organ didn't need to be tuned—he was sure it would be fine. Mr. Facilities suggested that the organ at his church was tuned for Christmas and Easter. "No," said Fred, "don't you know that Opporknockity tunes but once?"

This joins a long list of so-called jokes like the one that ends, "Is that an almond daiquiri, Dick?" "No, it's a hickory daiquiri, Doc." Or the one that goes . . . But I digress. (How can I digress when I'm only 160 words into it?)

In fact, the Fenway Park organ didn't need to be tuned. It's electronic and was tuned at the factory. But the tuning of pipe organs is a subject without end or beginning, without right or wrong, without rhyme or reason—it just needs to be in tune!

Mr. Facilities' recollection that the church organ needs to be tuned for Christmas and Easter (notice that I capitalized Opening Day as a High Holyday!) is only half right, in my opinion. For years I scheduled big tuning routes that occupied Advent and Lent, but where I live in New England, Christmas and Easter are almost always both winter holidays, and the August brides would walk down countless center aisles straining to the strains of sorry 8-foot trumpets that made her guests pucker as if they were biting into a lemon. It's my experience that summertime tuning problems always involve either "soprano" D, F#, or A, ruining virtually every Trumpet-Tune processional. In one wedding I played, the fourth E went dead—the trill on beat three of Jeremiah Clarke's ubiquitous tune made me laugh. I was only quick enough to go down a half-step, a safe enough transposition because you can keep playing the same printed notes with a different key signature. It was an awkward sounding transition, but at least it gave me back my "dee diddle-diddle-diddle da-da dum de dum dum" instead of "dee doh-doh-doh da-da dum de dum dum."

Gradually I changed my plan to define seasonal tunings as "heat-on" and "heat-off"—around here that works out to be roughly November and May—and maybe it means I found myself a little extra work because there often seem to be Easter touch-ups as well.

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Why do we schedule tunings according to seasons? Simply and authoritatively because the pitch produced by an organ pipe of a given length is subject to temperature. Say a pipe plays "440-A" and say it's 70 degrees in the church. Raise the temperature a degree and now the same pipe plays 442 (roughly). And the catch is that the reeds don't change with temperature and the wooden pipes (especially stopped pipes) are more affected by humidity than temperature. So when there's a temperature swing the organ's tuning flies into pieces. You cannot define organ pitch without reference to temperature. A contract for a new organ is likely to have a clause that defines the organ's pitch as A=440 at 68 degrees.

And here's the other catch. My little example said it was 70 degrees in the church. But it's never 70 degrees everywhere in the church. It may be 70 at the console, 66 in the Swell, 61 in the Choir, and 82 in the Great. If these are the conditions when it's cold outside and the thermostat is set to 68, you can bet that summertime conditions have it more like 75 or 80 degrees everywhere in the building except any high-up area where you find organ pipes—then it's super hot and the reeds won't tune that high.

Conditions outdoors can have a dramatic effect on organ tuning. Imagine an organ placed in two chambers on either side of a chancel, and imagine that the back wall of each organ chamber is an outside wall. The tuner comes on a rainy Friday and gets the organ nicely in tune. Sunday dawns bright and sunny, the south-facing wall gets heated up by the sun and that half of the organ goes sharp. During the sermon the organist "txts" the tuner to complain about how awful the organ sounds. (Wht wr u doing?) The following Thursday the organist shows up for choir rehearsal and finds the tuner's bill in his mailbox. What would you do? Was it the tuner's fault that it rained? Any good organ tuner pays attention to weather conditions and forecasts as if he were the mother of the bride planning an outdoor wedding.

I care for a large tracker-action organ in Boston, housed in a free-standing case with polished tin Principal pipes in the façades of Great, Pedal, and Rückpositiv cases. It's situated in a contemporary building designed by a famous architect, who gave the congregation the gift of light from the heavens coming through a long narrow window that runs along the ridge of the roof. In the winter as the sun moves across the sky, brilliant light moves across the front of the organ, heating the façade pipes as it goes. Instantly the Great 8-foot Principal goes 30 or 40 cents (hundreds of a semi-tone) sharp. Do the math—how many hundredths of a semitone are there in a quarter-tone? Guess what time of day this happens? Eleven AM. And guess what time the opening hymn is played on a Sunday morning? The first time I tuned that organ, I felt as though I were in a carnival fun-house with mirrors distorting the world around me as the organ's pitch followed the sun across the room.

Temperature's rising

In order to do a conscientious tuning, we ask the church office to be sure the heat is up for when we tune. When they ask what it should be set to, I reply that they should pretend that the tuning is a Sunday morning worship service. If the heat is turned up to 68 degrees five hours before the hour of worship, then set the heat at 68 five hours before the tuning. It's not very scientific but it seems to get the point across.

I've arrived many times to start a tuning to find that there is no heat in the church. Sorry, can't tune. I'll come back

A.E. Schlueter
Pipe Organ Company

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Conceptual drawing at right.



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