

# Dear Harpsichordists: Why Don't We Play from Memory?

Paul Cienniwa



Figure One: no page turns, horizontal page layout



Figure Two: no page turns, vertical page layout

Over the years, I've asked myself why harpsichordists aren't expected to memorize, and, like many harpsichordists, I'd been asked by audiences why I didn't play from memory. I know of many reasons! Memorization keeps the player from free ornamentation. It isn't historical. Bach is too hard to memorize. We're too busy with all of the continuo playing. The world's greatest harpsichordists don't memorize. But the best excuse of all is that *we don't have to*. This is a great excuse, and I've used it so many times that I even recommend it!

Last spring, I made a personal moratorium on playing solo repertoire from score. At that time, I anticipated a two-year hiatus from solo recitals. After all, I hadn't played a memorized program since 1995.

When I mentioned to a violinist colleague that I hadn't memorized in over fifteen years, she remarked, "What, you don't have repertoire worth memorizing?" The truth is, I'd spent a lot of time looking at B-list composers. Maybe there was something to what she was saying. Her comment immediately reminded me of a Dutch harpsichord builder who once said, when I asked him what could

be done to advance the instrument, that the harpsichord would not survive if players did not begin to adhere to an industry standard of memorization. The violinist's comment also reminded me of a harpsichordist who said that he didn't own a metronome.

On one hand, we harpsichordists know that pianists and other instrumentalists have given us an industry standard. On the other hand, we want to be different from the conservatory mold and, hence, not own metronomes. We justify our counterculture with historical anecdotes and other excuses. But the fact remains that pianists—our closest relatives—would not have careers without memorized programs (and, I might add, metronomes).

Granted, harpsichordists come from different strains of the musical world. There are musicologists among us, and there are organists among us as well. There are also those who simply play for pleasure and others who really just enjoy continuo playing. But I am really writing to those who define themselves as concert harpsichordists and professors of harpsichord.

How did I arrive at my moratorium?

Part of it was a sense that I never truly learned my programs. I was essentially reading music on stage, worried that the lighting was good enough or that I'd make my page turns in time or afraid that I'd lose my place in the score. Part of it was the lingering suspicion that the emperor had no clothes. I once played a solo piece from score for a Bach festival in which I was a featured soloist. My performance was followed by a high-school violinist, who played his solo partita from memory. What was my excuse for not taking the time to learn and perform the music from memory? But above all of the reasons for my moratorium, it is that I wanted to communicate better with my audience. Performing is about communication, and having my eyes glued to the music is not a good way to communicate.

As an undergraduate pianist, I played from memory. But then I switched to harpsichord as a major, and I was told not to memorize. Once, when I wanted to play part of a program from memory, my teacher suggested that I was being a show-off and that it was not in the spirit of the repertoire. A few years later, concerned about entering graduate school,

I played my graduate auditions from memory. However, when I started my studies, my new teacher told me that I no longer had to play from memory. And I took the lazy, easy way out: I didn't.

Ultimately, I find it embarrassing that our colleges and conservatories are giving out degrees in harpsichord performance without a memorization component. How is it that pianists, for instance, are required to memorize programs—including works of Bach—but we don't have to? Of course: because *we don't have to*. Or could it be because professors of harpsichord themselves are not playing from memory?

Coming back to memory after many years began with some baby steps, including some serious, but recoverable, memory lapses. This season, I played a couple of memorized pieces on chamber music programs, and I've now graduated to a half-recital. I'll be at a full recital long before my two-year hiatus ends, especially now that I've realized that my ear, technique, and theory comprehension are much better than they were years ago. Playing from memory has done some remarkable things for me. First, it puts good repertoire into direct focus. In other words, if you have to commit something to memory, what do you want to spend your time on? My phrasing has changed, and I've developed more personal interpretations through the internalization of the music. I no longer have to put up with page turns, poor lighting, small music desks, and music falling from the instrument.

My subjective experience will not convince other harpsichordists to memorize. And, considering that harpsichordists may still view themselves with some counterculture cachet, the argument that pianists set an industry standard may not seem valid. But the harpsichord is no longer esoteric, and it is now—and has been for some time—a mainstream instrument. This is what we harpsichordists should all want: a larger audience and a public that embraces the instrument as a viable concert instrument. But there is a price to pay for this notoriety: our field has to grow up and do what is expected on the modern concert stage.

I am not writing this article to diminish the work of those who continue to play from score, and I submit this argument without any arrogance. Simply put, I am writing this as a plea for the future of our instrument. In order for the solo harpsichord to continue on the concert stage, it is imperative that the next generation of harpsichordists be expected to play from memory. Dear harpsichordists, I am not asking *you* to play from memory; I am asking you to require

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Figure Three: page turns, loose leaf layout

your students to play from memory. We need a sea change to meet the standard that is expected on the modern concert stage—because *we don't have to* is no longer an excuse. ■

Paul Cienniwa began his keyboard studies at age six. In his teen years, he played thrash guitar with the Evanston, Illinois punk band Malicious Intent, followed by seven years as keyboardist with the innovative Chicago-based Irish group Baal Tinne. Following his undergraduate studies at DePaul University with harpsichordist Roger Goodman and organist Jerome Butera, he received the Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Yale University, where he was a student of Richard Rephann. He has also studied harpsichord with Peter Watchorn, John Whitelaw, and David Schrader. As a scholar, he has been awarded Belgian American Educational Foundation and Fulbright grants, and his musicological articles have appeared in American and European journals, including *Early Music* and *Ad Parnassum*.

In 2009, he was music director for Boston Opera Collaborative's production of *Handel's Alcina*. As conductor, he leads *Sine Nomine*

choral ensemble and the choruses at Framingham State University and Mount Ida College. As organist and conductor, he is music director at First Church in Boston, where he can be heard weekly on WERS (88.9 FM) Boston.

From 2003–2010, he led Newport Baroque Orchestra (later Newport Baroque) in works from Arne to Zelenka, including performances of Bach cantatas and Purcell's *Dido* and *Aeneas* and collaborations with the Providence Singers, the Tufts Chamber Choir, and Providence College.

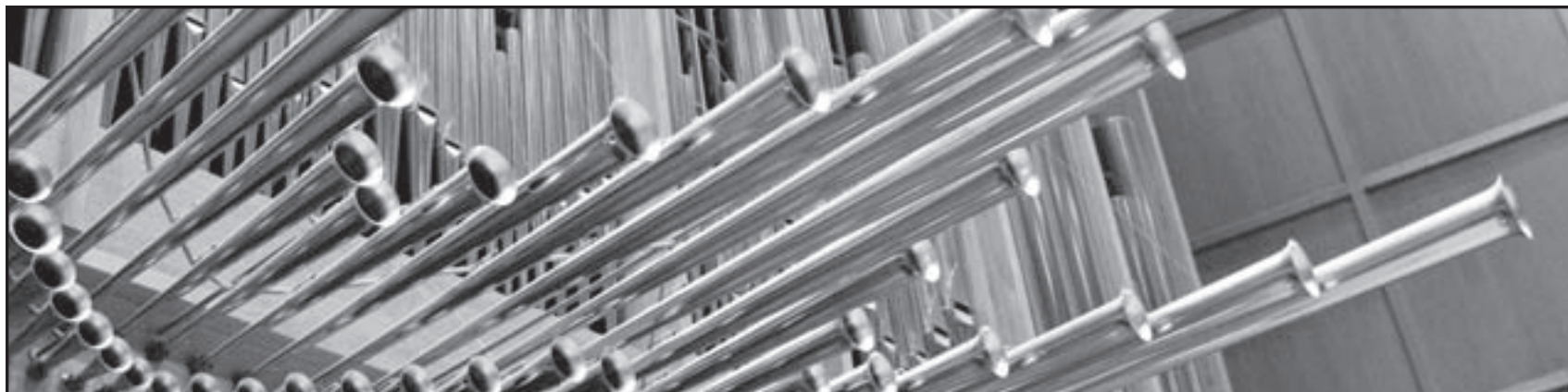
He is featured on a recording of the Bach *Viola da Gamba Sonatas* with cellist Audrey Sabattier-Cienniwa, and his recording with Grammy Award-winning uilleann piper Jerry O'Sullivan was named one of the top ten Irish traditional albums of 2010 by *The Irish Echo*. In November 2010, he performed the complete Bach *Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord* with renowned violinist Rachel Barton Pine on Chicago's WFMT radio. Upcoming events include Francis Poulenc's *Concert Champêtre* with the New Bedford Symphony (MA) and the release of a two-CD set of the music of Larry Thomas Bell on Albany Records. For more information, visit <[www.paulcienniwa.com](http://www.paulcienniwa.com)>.



Figure Four: no page turns, miniaturization layout



Figure Five: no page turns, no music, no glasses, no music desk, no lighting, no problem, Zen



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