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Harpsichord and Baroque violin in Cairo

Ati Metwaly, Thursday 6 Oct 2011

Ahram Online talks to Estonian musician Saale Fischer about the chance discovery of a harpsichord in a Cairo church



The harpsichord was widely used during the Renaissance and Baroque music eras. In the late 18th century the harpsichord was supplanted by the fortepiano and almost disappeared from view after the arrival of the modern piano in the 19th century. Though interest in the instrument saw a resurgence in the 20th century, the harpsichord is not commonly heard in concert halls.

In Egypt, where only a small number of venues perform classical music, a concert incorporating harpsichord is a rare and valuable occasion for audiences. On 9 October, Estonian harpsichordist, with a violinist from Germany, will perform works by Castello, B. Storace, H.I.F. von Biber, L. Marchand and G.F. Handel.

Born in Tallinn, Estonia, Saale Fischer started playing harpsichord at the age of 14. Having completed her first degree in marketing from the Tallinn Technical University, Fischer entered the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and was granted a scholarship by an Estonian Cultural Endowment to continue her masters studies in historical keyboard instruments (harpsichord, clavichord, organ) at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik, an Institute for Early Music in Trossingen, Germany, where she graduated in 2010. Prior to that, in 2006 Fischer was the first Estonian harpsichordist invited to participate in the international Bach-Competition in Leipzig and in 2007 she won second prize at the Buxtehude-Competition in Tallinn.

Fischer came to Egypt shortly after her graduation. "I was still excited about my studies and music. Yet, as months were passing, I hoped to find any outlet where I could use my skills and education," Fischer explains to Ahram Online.

“The circle of foreigners living in Egypt is very small and during one of the social gatherings I met the German Protestant Church reverend and his wife. Not much later, I started playing organ during services at the church. Then the harpsichord discovery happened. The instrument was hidden under a pile of plastic chairs, stands and tonnes of dust.”

It is not known how long the instrument has been in the church. The only information available is an engraved sign on the instrument stating that an association supporting German schools in foreign countries gave it as a gift to one of the German schools in Cairo.

“Even though to many people harpsichord resembles piano, due to the wing-shape form and keys, there is a major difference in the mechanism of how sound is produced and therefore the sound itself is different,” Fischer explained. “Piano sound comes from the hammer hitting the string. In harpsichords, small plectrums (small flat tools) pluck the strings. This mechanism reminds us of the technique used in guitar playing.”

A harpsichord’s body is usually made completely out of wood. “Choice of wood is strictly related to the climate where the harpsichord is built. Being an instrument very sensitive to climate changes and humidity, it needs to be tuned very frequently, at least once a week.”

Fischer added that first harpsichords did not have pedals, yet the one found at the German Protestant Church has one pedal used only to change the register. Prior to the invention of pedal mechanism, harpsichords’ register were changed manually.

The concert will also include a baroque violin performed by Ingrid Richter, a musician from Berlin, currently living in Egypt. Richter holds degrees in both violin and baroque violin, and her resume highlights a project with Ton Koopman, playing Bach Cantatas in New York’s Carnegie Hall.

Fischer explains there is a significant difference between modern and baroque violins. “In order to create a well-balanced sound and interpretation for baroque music, the advantages of the baroque violin are enormous. Using the gut strings and a lighter and different-shaped bow, the sound is softer and the instrument gives more space for fine articulation and various acoustic colours.”

The concert has no admission fee but donations to the Church are encouraged, and funds collected will be used for the restoration of the organ. The church hopes for the organ to be fully functional in April 2012 when it is planned to celebrate its 100th anniversary with a concert.

The concert will take place on Sunday 9 October at 7pm, in the German Protestant Church in Galaa Street, Cairo.

Detailed programme:

Dario Castello (ca 1590 Venice – ca 1658)

Sonata seconda in D (Sonate concertate in stil moderno, Libro secondo, Venice, 1629)

Apart from the evidence of the compositions of Dario Castello there is only dubious confirmation of his existence. However, it is most improbable that Castello was personally unknown to his

contemporaries as the quality, popularity and difficulty of his instrumental works suggest that he was one of the leading composers of early seventeenth century.

Bernardo Storace (ca 1637 – ca 1707 Messina?)

Ciacona (Selva di varie composizioni d'intavolatura per cimbalo et organo, Venice, 1664)

The only details we have about Bernardo Storace are those contained in the 1664 edition of his works, the "Selva di varie composizioni d'intavolatura per cimbalo et organo," in which the composer is described as being "vice maestro di cappella del Senato della città di Messina." Messina was twice devastated by earthquakes, in 1783 and in 1908, therefore appearance of new archival material about Storace is highly unlikely.

Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber(1644 Bohemia – 1704 Salzburg)

Sonata III in F (Sonatas for solo violin, Salzburg 1681)

The major part of Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber's career was spent in Salzburg; it was in this city that Italian operatic music gained its first important foreign outpost. Biber's music can be heard as the culmination of the 17th-century Italian style.

Louis Marchand (1669 Lyon – 1732 Paris)

Suite in D minor (Prélude, Allemande, Courante I, Courante II, Sarabande, Gavote/Rondeau, Chaconne)

Pieces for harpsichord(Book 1, Paris, 1702)

Louis Marchand was one of the most famous French virtuosi of his day. Virtually all contemporary sources speak very highly of his organ and harpsichord skills. Marchand's skills as a performer were enough to fuel speculations in the press, but apparently he also possessed a volatile, flamboyant personality, and was a very difficult person to work with.

Georg Friedrich Händel(1685 Halle/Saale – 1759 London)

Sonate D-dur HWV 371 (ca 1750) Affetuoso, Allegro, Larghetto, Allegro

Georg Friedrich Händel was born in Halle, Germany, in 1685. One of the most remarkable composers in the whole of music history, Händel's father originally forbade music and intended his son to study law, young Handel practised secretly and finally received music lessons from F.W. Zachow, learning organ, harpsichord, violin, harmony, counterpoint and composition.

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