

The Ruckers harpsichord of Neuchâtel

Caroline Junier and Pierre-Laurent Haesler

The collection of the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Neuchâtel, Switzerland includes a sumptuous Ruckers harpsichord of exceptional value, bearing the trade mark of Ioannes Ruckers and the dates 1632 and 1745. The roots of the famous Ruckers dynasty go back to Antwerp around 1579 and Hans Ruckers the Elder. The Neuchâtel harpsichord was built by his eldest son, Ioannes Ruckers. Harpsichords built by Hans Ruckers and his descendants were so well known that forgeries were still being built in Europe over a century after the family workshop closed.

The Ruckers harpsichord at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire originally had a single manual of 45 keys with a short octave C/E. It had two registers, a stop at eight-foot pitch (which sounds as notated), and the second stop at four-foot pitch (sounding one octave higher than written).

In 1745 the Neuchâtel instrument underwent grand ravalement—an elaborate rebuilding process of alteration and extension—to accommodate the prevailing tastes at the time. Many famous seventeenth-century harpsichords, particularly Ruckers instruments, were modified in the eighteenth-century ravalement. This process involved considerably extending the compass so that the Neuchâtel harpsichord now has two manuals, each with 58 keys, and a total of three registers (two stops at eight-foot pitch and one at four-foot pitch). Although their exact identity is not always known, highly skilled Parisian makers carried out the grand ravalement, and, significantly, did so in a manner that the desirable original features of the harpsichord



were left fully intact. A large portion of the original instrument's bentside, the soundboard, the lid, flap and bottom are extant. It can therefore be said that the original instrument was assimilated within the large eighteenth-century style French harpsichord.

Ornamentation

Almost all of the instrument's original decorations were lost during grand ravalement in 1745; only a few motifs are still visible. The interior lid and flap paintings were preserved,



and where necessary, were masterfully touched up and completed. Perhaps it was the high quality of the landscape depicted that led restorers to preserve it. After the rose had to be repositioned during grand ravalement, the soundboard—decorated with arabesques and richly adorned with flowers, fruit and scampi—was newly laid out and presumably repainted in the style of the original decoration. The original rose is unaltered, with the initials of Ioannes Ruckers on either side of a harp-playing angel.

The pedal and all exterior painting date from the eighteenth century. Fables by Jean de la Fontaine, set off and enlivened by arabesques, were painted onto a goldleaf ground using a lacquering method called Vernis Martin. Although the ornamentation imitates Japanese and Chinese lacquer paintings, the choice of de la Fontaine's fables for the motif and the lacquer technique used, which was developed in Paris in 1730, accommodates French taste.

The museum's harpsichord is a marvelous, preserved and, for the Neuchâtel canton, rare example of French instrument building craft dating from when chinoiseries were in vogue.

Restoration

For decades the instrument was on exhibit in one of the museum halls and was not played. In 1985 it was entrusted to a team of specialists most of whom are based in Paris. The

restoration effort was led by world-famous harpsichord builder and restorer Reinhard von Nagel, who collaborated with the cabinet-maker Germond, lacquer specialist Simmonneau, gilder Gohard, and Sheridan Germann of Boston, who restored the soundboard.

The restoration is a worthy example of the principle of reversibility, where less desirable restorations from the past are set right. The restorer concluded his report by writing: "The original condition from 1745 was not altered in any way. The restoration has been conducted with the highest degree of respect for the original intentions of the instrument maker."

This exemplary restoration—two-thirds of which was financed by the Rotary Club Neuchâtel—gave back to the harpsichord its original brilliance and extraordinarily warm timbre, a quality the Ruckers has been famous for since first being built. The instrument has thus been transformed from a large piece of furniture, one that could even be called bulky, to a genuine musical instrument.

Concerts

The Neuchâtel Ruckers harpsichord not only stands out due to its historical position, but is also remarkable in musical terms as well. For the first time in the history of music, there is a growing interest in period instruments and Early Music, and this interest is increasing all the time. Musicological research has uncovered quite a number of documents (scores,

essays, authentic accounts) which provides an entirely new empirical basis for period performance practice. In recent years, the interpretation of the important works in the classical repertoire (Mozart, Handel, Bach, etc.) has undergone fundamental changes. Free from excessive nineteenth-century Romantic expression, these works are now being played the way they may originally have been meant to sound.

This search for authenticity is also a search for instrumental and vocal techniques from the past as well as a rediscovery of the timbres and the expressive possibilities of period instruments.

It is for just this reason that music must be performed on the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire harpsichord. This wonderful instrument can contribute to the discovering forgotten repertoire and period techniques anew.

The truth or myth about how the de Montmollin family acquired their harpsichord

The instrument was acquired by the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Neuchâtel in 1844 when it was donated by the local de Montmollin family. By traditional account, the instrument once belonged to Marie Antoinette, Queen of France and wife of Louis XVI. Marie Antoinette is said to have then given the harpsichord to one of her ladies-in-waiting, a young woman from Trémauville who was engaged to Georges de Montmollin, a sous-lieutenant in the Swiss Guard and soldier in the service of the king. De Montmollin fell during the insurrection of the Tuileries palace on August 10, 1792. After his death, the widowed Trémauville woman is said to have given the harpsichord to the de Montmollin family.

Translation: Matthew Harris

