

SCOTTISH GROUP MEETING

29 April 2017

‘Not Landowska’. In a far from negative presentation and without a word of criticism of the eponymous lady, Peter Adamson in iconoclastic mode set out to dispel popular misconceptions about the harpsichord in the 17th period; namely that Landowska was almost single-handedly responsible for the harpsichord revival and was almost its only exponent to perform on record before 1940. We heard nineteen others, mostly women. Other misconceptions are that interest in early music arose only later in the 20th Century and that early recordings always substituted piano for harpsichord continuo.

In section 1, acoustic period, we heard only three discs, not surprising as this system wouldn’t capture the high notes or the harmonics of the low. First was Violet Gordon Woodhouse (HMV D490 from 1920) on a Dolmetsch copy of an early instrument. This was disappointingly faint. Then came a very rare, anonymous yellow label Favorite from 1913, the earliest known disc recording of a harpsichord. (Yes, there were cylinders!) This was an excellent recording and may have been played on a modern instrument by Landowska pupil Alice Ehlers. Lastly came a continuo example from ‘The Beggar’s Opera’ (HMV D524 from 1920) which was barely audible.

Section 2 gave us eight examples of how electric recording improved the representation of the instrument, the emphasis being on early music on early instruments or copies. Parlophone were first to produce a single disc by Anna Linde in time for Christmas 1926 and marketed as ‘Electricity revives ancient beauties’. (Was the publicist a Frankenstein fan?) Encouraged by the sales they introduced ‘2000 Years of Music’ in 1931. Columbia produced its ‘History of Music’ and specialist labels sprang up – Anthologie Sonore, Musiche Italiane Antiche, Musicraft etc.

Section 3 dealt with more modern music in three subsections. First, Looking Back, with modern composers (Graener and Ibert) recreating an ‘antique’ flavour. Second, Looking Forward: by 1974 over 700 modern composers had written more than 5,600 pieces for iron-framed instruments with pedals and stops. We heard pieces by de Falla and Oboussier. Lastly, Popular Music included ragtime (Mayerl in 1935), jazz (Guarnieri with Artie Shaw in 1940), boogie (Meade Lux Lewis in 1941) and swing (Bernard Peiffer on a 1948 Swing record SW 292).

Lest all this seem very dry, I can assure you that we had many amusing and informative asides, eg on the idiosyncrasies and performance of the Dolmetsch players and the ironic looming dearth of 20th Century instruments. So much energy has gone into producing copies of early instruments that there will be a shortage of modern ones for purists seeking the authentic 20th Century sound. Unable to produce a Berliner example, Peter did manage to link Billy Mayerl to the first London recording session (8 August 1898) – his maternal grandfather, A A Umbach, made clarinet recordings.

After this feast, I am moved to attend the harpsichord recitals celebrating the re-opening of St Cecilia’s Hall at the Edinburgh Festival in August.

Billy Gray