

# Conversation

## *Fortepianist Andrew Willis Talks To Instrument Maker David Sutherland*

*Piano after Giovanni Ferrini, ca. 1735, built by David Sutherland, 2005. Image omitted from digitized version of the text.*

**A**FTER COMPLETING A FIFTY-SIX-NOTE Florentine piano in 2005, David Sutherland took it to the joint meeting of the Midwestern and Southeastern Historical Keyboard Societies at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida, where Andrew Willis played a short recital on it. Willis followed this with recitals at the Bloomington Early Music Festival and at Oberlin College in the summer of 2006. His affinity for this piano led to considerations of further performance projects, and the idea emerged of working up the cycle of J. S. Bach's solo keyboard concertos to demonstrate this instrument's relevance to the music of the high Baroque period, a project to which Sutherland and Willis will devote intensive work in the spring of 2009. They recently discussed these and related topics in a wide-ranging conversation.

### **Discovering the Florentine fortepiano**

**Andrew Willis** Was there a watershed event that initially got you excited about Florentine-tradition pianos?

**David Sutherland** Yes, there was. After my apprenticeship in Frank Hubbard's shop I came back from Boston in 1974 to set up shop in Ann Arbor. There is a notable collection of musical instruments at the University of Michigan School of Music, the Stearns Collection, and I turned to this source to look for historical models to follow. Their only harpsichords were three by Italian makers—unluckily, as I thought in those days—including a very big one: practically eight feet long, fifty-six notes, GG to d<sup>3</sup>, single case. It was the filthiest mess you can imagine, covered with literally decades of soot. The then director of the Stearns Collection—this was 1977 or 78—asked me if I wanted to restore it, thus betraying his naiveté about me, and I said “Oh sure!” thus betraying my naiveté about restoring something like that. One of the fellows in the shop had looked closely at the Cristofori piano at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and he said, “You know, there are a lot of things about this remind me of that Cristofori piano.” There was the shape of the decorative brackets in the keywell, and there was one remaining keyboard arcade (only), which he thought matched those on the Cristofori piano. So we all got very excited about this and we thought, “My God, could it possibly be a Cristofori instrument here in Hicksville?”

I remember the shock when I realized that two rather large holes drilled in the wrestplank at either end of the nut went all the way through the wrestplank and through the wrestplank support block and out the bottom. One day when I was sticking a small rattail file down there to see if I could clear out whatever was in that hole, I lost my grip and the file rattled out on the floor. So it was instantly obvious that these two holes were there for some sort of mechanism. We looked more closely at the bottom and could see evidence that there had been strapwork on the bottom and that there were screw-holes for holding the straps down. The rusty outlines of that strapwork were still visible on the bottom but not obvious: we could easily have missed them if we hadn't been tipped off. I presumed that this mechanism could only have been designed to turn one or both of the registers on and off. It was clear that it had always been a harpsichord, it didn't seem as if it had ever had any other sort of action in it, but I figured it was maybe a sort of missing link between harpsichord and piano, that is, a dynamically inflecting *cembalo*. I wrote it up for the American Musical Instrument Society newsletter and publicized it a little. That was that, except that I was so impressed by the quality of the instrument, which sounded magnificent, that I copied it. That got me interested in Italian harpsichords, and particularly in working with the scaling, the plucking point, etc., which I started applying to my own instruments.

**AW** It sounds like it was a great source of information to guide your work.

**DS** Absolutely, and I immediately began thinking about the Italian pianos. I always assumed that someone with more qualifications than I had would come along and start making copies of the pianos, because I figured they just had to be great instruments. The harpsichord clearly was a great instrument, and you could tell from the surviving Cristofori instruments, the oval spinets and the big *spinettone*, that he was an extremely inventive maker, and you could tell by looking at the designs of the piano action in reference works that it was a beautiful design. My main claim to fame is that way back then I believed his pianos had to have been great instruments.

**AW** Was that harpsichord you've described authenticated as a Cristofori?

**DS** No. A few years ago I got to working with Denzil Wraight (an English scholar of keyboard instruments and an exceptional maker who lives in Germany). Among other things he has an extensive collection of moldings and impressions of moldings from a large number of Italian instruments, and he's compiled a catalog that aims to list and describe all surviving Italian keyboard instruments up to 1800—an extension of his doctoral dissertation.<sup>1</sup>

**AW** He seems to have a knack for thorough documentation, because, as you surely know, his website includes an archive of all the recordings of Italian fortepianos he has been able to find.

**DS** Yes, he's a real scholar as well as a very fine builder. I showed him impressions of the various moldings on this anonymous Italian instrument, particularly of the single arcade, and he was able to identify them as being identical with those on an instrument by Giovanni Ferrini dated 1746, a two-manual *cembalo doppio* with harpsichord action on the lower manual and piano action on the upper. So I consider it proven that this harpsichord is by Ferrini and dates from around 1746, which also makes sense with its range. This doesn't prove the date; undoubtedly Ferrini would have had a stock of moldings and it's impossible to know exactly when he used them on individual instruments. But it's still a pretty good indication that the fingerprints of the instrument are right around mid-century.

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<sup>1</sup> Denzil Wraight, “The Stringing of Italian Keyboard Instruments, c. 1500–c. 1650; Part One: Discussion and Bibliography; Part Two: Catalogue of Instruments.” (Ph.D. dissertation, Queen's University of Belfast, 1996 [University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, MI, 1997; UMI # 9735109]).

**AW** Not coincidentally, the piano of yours we are using in our Bach project is also after Ferrini and of exactly that compass.

**DS** Yes. Ferrini had started off as Cristofori's apprentice, worked for him until the end of Cristofori's life, and inherited the shop, since Cristofori had never married and had no children, at least no legitimate ones. Ferrini almost blew it at the last minute. He apparently started signing his name to instruments from the shop while Cristofori was still alive; Cristofori heard about it and promptly wrote a second will, disinheriting him, and leaving him some absurdly small amount like ten scudi. But in the end, Ferrini did continue working there with the stock of materials, patterns, etc., and a contemporary record says that Ferrini continued to make instruments after the norms and patterns of his master. The few surviving instruments we have by Ferrini bear this out. On the other hand, it's also clear that Ferrini struck out on his own with some new designs that departed from those of Cristofori.

**AW** Which is exactly what one would expect of somebody who is really good.

**DS** Exactly. Ferrini is hardly known today. He wasn't a pioneer; he didn't invent all the amazing, wonderful forms that Cristofori did, but he was a very great maker in his own right. I reckon he continued making pianos right up to the middle of the century, maybe later. He died in 1758; Cristofori had died in 1731, so he's almost exactly one generation younger, and he probably made pianos right up to 1750 or even 1755 depending on his health.

**AW** Having experienced your first taste of the Italian school of Cristofori, how did you realize it would be *your* task to make a piano in the Cristofori line?

**DS** For a long time I used to dream about making a Cristofori piano. But I felt I wasn't qualified to do it—I didn't know anything about pianos, and don't know anything about modern pianos to this day, and secondly, I couldn't see how I could get over to Europe to look at the pianos, and thirdly, even if I could figure out how to do that, I couldn't possibly take a year or so out of my life. It just seemed as if someone else would have to do it. But I wanted to very much.

**AW** What finally convinced you to try it?

**DS** I had discussed the need for some sort of acknowledgement of the then upcoming tercentenary of the invention of the piano by Bartolomeo Cristofori in the year 1700 with Lynn Edwards, former director of the Westfield Center. Those discussions took place around 1995. In 1997 the late Bruce Carlson,

director of the Schubert Club in St. Paul, Minnesota, began thinking about the tercentenary year and decided to see if he could locate someone who could make a copy of one of the three Cristofori pianos for his collection. He called Lynn, and she, knowing of my intense desire to do exactly that, passed on my name. So then he called me and it was done almost as simply as that. With this commission in hand, I wangled some money and managed to get over to Leipzig, where the balance of the Cristofori instruments are found now in its magnificent musical instrument collection, and I later managed to go to Italy to get a supply of Italian cypress, which is needed for the soundboards and fittings of these instruments. So, I started in. I was very, very fortunate that Bruce Carlson had the nerve to give me this commission. I will say that I have found the making of pianos to be a tremendous technical challenge, by far the greatest I've ever faced, and also by far the most interesting work I've ever done. I'm now making a fifth Florentine-tradition piano (though one of them was a slightly different matter, a copy of a Silbermann piano that is also at the Schubert Club).

## Restoration and Reconstruction

**DS** In certain important measures that first piano was a collaboration between myself and Keith Hill. I asked him for some advice about the soundboard, and he responded by inviting me to come to his shop so that we could make the soundboard together and put it in the instrument. I agreed on the condition that we work within the measurements and specifications as well as we could know them. I benefited from the work of a young woman in Germany, Kerstin Schwarz, who had studied all the Cristofori instruments and had herself started to make a copy of the 1726 Leipzig piano. Keith and I made the soundboard based upon her detailed list of the length of the strings and the soundboard thickness at various points. A very important part of why that first instrument sounded well is that Keith is absolutely brilliant—he's superb on the acoustical properties of wood and has all kinds of techniques for getting the best out of a given acoustical situation.

**AW** How did you acquire the information based on Schwarz's research?

**DS** We'd met when I was in Leipzig, and she kept in touch and was very helpful. She was trained in museum curatorship and came to her interest in Cristofori through that discipline. Of course, museum curators are very cautious, very

reluctant to stress frames of instruments, and are very careful about not over-stringing, because for so long, museum curators made the opposite mistake of trying to get all instruments to be restored to playability.

**AW** That has been a sea-change, probably for the better, in our time.

**DS** I think for the better, although you have to say, if we hadn't sort of forced sounds out of instruments long ago, one wouldn't have discovered anything.

**AW** That certainly provided lots of inspiration, but as we all know, a great deal of information was destroyed in the process.

**DS** The 1720 Cristofori is a good example. Kurt Sachs, who was one of the first modern experts on musical instruments, served for a number of years as the director of the Metropolitan Museum Collection of Musical Instruments, and under his tenure the 1720 piano was restored. He brought in highly qualified technicians, German craftsmen, from a local piano company, and they took the bottom off and threw it away. You can't imagine what that means, because all the structure is fixed, is founded on the bottom—it's like taking the foundation out from under a house. Then they took out the soundboard and discarded that. It was a slaughter—there's very little left of that piano that is from Cristofori's hand. The irony is, it's been very much recorded and played in recitals. It has a certain charm, I guess, but to my mind it's very weak sounding, thin and frail. That instrument was forced to sound, but it's clearly a wild distortion of its original sound.

**AW** That gives great weight to the imperative for making good replicas.

**DS** I think the best solution is for lots of people to make replicas. If seven or eight people in the next ten or fifteen years make replicas of Cristofori pianos, and if there is any commonality among them, then we'll gain a clearer idea of what the originals might have sounded like.

## Instruments and Repertoire

**AW** You've studied the rise of a new style of playing based on the hammered action and the ways this manifests itself in the Italian solo keyboard literature of the early eighteenth century. What are some of the elements you've found in this repertoire that suggest the influence and presence of a piano?

**DS** The repertoire of the Italian multi-movement sonata is coterminous with

the piano itself—the piano coming into prominence around 1715-1720 and the early Italian sonata repertoire of the time representing the headwaters of the whole line of development that runs through J. C. Bach into the work of Mozart. In these sonatas by Marcello, Domenico Alberti, and others, you find things that just don't work very well, and sometimes not at all, on a harpsichord. To take the most obvious case, you begin to see situations that require that one part of a keyboard texture be subordinated to another; an accompaniment subordinated to a melody, for instance. It's theoretically possible to do this on a two-manual harpsichord, if you play the accompaniment on one manual and the melody on another, but, first of all, two-manual harpsichords were almost unknown in Italy, and secondly, the kind of thing I'm talking about also suggests and seems to require a kind of dynamic molding or modulating. These sorts of dynamic requirements, it seems to me, pretty much rule out the use of harpsichord.

**AW** The finest artists on the harpsichord deploy nuances so subtly that they can contrive to make these pieces sound quite well on a harpsichord. But I must agree that it's not inherent in the nature of, say, an Alberti bass or a repeated-thirds accompaniment to be flexible or subordinate to the melody. Melody is almost invariably presented in a single-note line that has difficulty holding its own in a high register against more active material in the most resonant area of the scale, which is the tenor and bass range.

**DS** One has to wonder why these Italian composers would begin writing in a way that's so inimical to the nature of the harpsichord. A lot of this music when played on the harpsichord sounds clattery, empty, silly, and really sort of ugly.

**AW** This repertoire doesn't come off that well on the modern piano for that matter, and it has not interested modern pianists very much. But the moment I had the opportunity to try a little Alberti, Marcello, and Platti on your Ferrini piano, I was amazed to hear how charming it was.

**DS** What constitutes piano music in the eighteenth century is a matter of taste, and there's very little else to go on. Composers did not make any mention of the piano for a long, long time, with the sole startling exception of Giustini's collection of solo sonatas. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the piano wasn't perceived to be a separate instrument; it was considered a harpsichord, or *cembalo*, with a different action. In modern terms, once electronic keyboards became inexpensive and widely used, you could pay a little more to get a touch-sensitive one that had a dynamic response to the weight of the touch on the

keyboard. That's exactly what the eighteenth-century piano was, a touch-sensitive keyboard, and that's all it was, and a lot of people did not see any more in it than that: it was just a fantastically expensive option. A lot of people in the first half of the eighteenth century wouldn't have bothered about it. Some did bother about it, and they discovered a new world. But everybody referred to these instruments as 'cembalo' in Italy, 'Klavier' in Germany, 'harpsichord' in England, and so forth, and very rarely would there be a need to specify, as the English might, a 'forte-piano harpsichord.' My rule of thumb is, any keyboard music in the eighteenth century that's not for organ can be legitimately considered as within the orbit of the piano.

**AW** What was the role of the clavichord at this time? Surely the idea of a touch-sensitive keyboard was nothing new.

**DS** The clavichord is one of the oldest of keyboard instruments, and probably still the most subtle. Many writers on keyboard pedagogy recommended the clavichord as the best way to learn any keyboard instrument because it taught you to play close to the keys, and with sensitivity. It had a great vogue in the work of C. P. E. Bach and his contemporaries, and north German and Scandinavian composers in the late eighteenth and even the nineteenth centuries. They made much bigger clavichords and much effort was put into making them louder as well. But until that time the clavichord was strictly a personal instrument, for practice and for the study of the player. To the extent that the sonatas and keyboard music in general were appropriate for and intended for personal use, the clavichord would be always an excellent choice for any repertoire. But until very late in the eighteenth century, the clavichord could never have been a public instrument. And that's what is so wonderful about the piano: it brings the touch sensitivity and the general sensitivity of the clavichord out onto the public stage.

## J. S. Bach and the Fortepiano

**DS** Now, the idea that J. S. Bach disliked the piano is an urban myth, sort of like the crocodile in the sewer. At least since 1945, when *The Bach Reader* was first published, we should have been able to see that. The nub of Bach's involvement with Silbermann's piano making is there to see: it's clear that when Bach first tried a Silbermann piano, he "praised, [and] indeed admired, its tone."<sup>2</sup> The

German is something like "*bewundert*," he "wondered at" the tone. But, he said, it's too difficult to play—"schwer," which probably means heavy—and it's weak in the treble. So Silbermann withdrew his instruments, did a lot of work, and later made a new series of instruments, which Bach gave his wholehearted approval to. Later there came to light a receipt in Bach's hand for a Polish nobleman's payment for a Silbermann piano, based on which Christoph Wolff has flatly stated that Bach was Silbermann's Leipzig representative for the sale of pianos. Leipzig was a big trade fair center and it was also a center of printing and publication. So Leipzig was a very good place to be the Silbermann representative, much as London later saw J. C. Bach, Bach's youngest son, become sales representative for the Zumpe piano. These Bachs clearly had an eye out for business relationships.

**AW** In the keyboard works of the 1730s there are indications that Bach's style was evolving in directions very analogous to those you've described with the Italian composers.

**DS** The whole case of the keyboard concerto is a special and really interesting one, and I think the history has not been properly written. We should first of all be aware that essentially there were no cembalo concertos before 1717, which is the probable date of composition of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto. Now, this piece is a *concerto grosso* with a solo group consisting of flute, violin, and keyboard, but notoriously the keyboard part predominates over the others, and in any case it is the first significant example of a *concertato cembalo* part in existence. This is very surprising considering all the hundreds of concertos by Italians in all the great musical centers, especially Vivaldi. They wrote concertos for every other instrument for which there was a solo literature; they didn't write concertos for double bass or for viola because those instruments never had a separate solo repertoire. But for all the other stringed instruments, and also plucked string instruments (lute, guitar, mandolin), all the wind instruments—there is even an Italian repertoire for hammered dulcimer—but never, ever, in Italy a *cembalo* concerto before about 1730. And likewise, in Germany or anywhere else there is never a *cembalo* concerto before the Fifth Brandenburg, and then Bach began writing concertos in the decade of the 1730s when he took over the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig and became responsible for weekly concerts throughout the year.

**AW** The treatment of the keyboard part in the Fifth Brandenburg is unique in that the harpsichord is given an extensive solo, something that does not recur

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<sup>2</sup> Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in*

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*Letters and Documents*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1966), 259.



in any of the later solo concertos. One could surmise that that was the best and possibly the only way for a harpsichord to be heard to great advantage in a concerto setting.

**DS** That was a big part of it. Pieter Dirksen hypothesizes that Bach composed the Fifth Brandenburg for his own debut at Dresden with the Dresden court musicians, which took place in 1717 at the same time as the competition that was to have taken place with the famous French organist Louis Marchand, who decamped by express coach out of town the night before they were to have met.<sup>3</sup> So it was a big event. Not only is there that huge cadenza (although it's grown longer in the version we know than it was on that first occasion), but the writing throughout is very carefully and ingeniously arranged to make the harpsichord show its best. For one thing, it plays absolutely non-stop sixteenth- and thirty-second-note motion in the fast movements.

**AW** That aspect is actually quite typical of the later solo concertos as well.

**DS** Yes, but the solo melody of the A-major concerto starts with a long note. Even dwelling for a full quarter-note is just not done in the Brandenburg nor in the D-minor *cembalo* concerto, the only other one that I think was originally conceived as a harpsichord concerto. The D-minor has extensive solo cadenzas that collectively amount to about as great a proportion as the single huge cadenza in the Fifth Brandenburg. You can see how Bach managed to make the harpsichord work as a solo instrument in those two concertos, but you can also see that it tied his hands, only allowing him a limited number of possibilities, whereas the later solo concertos are considerably more varied and contemplate many more possibilities of duetting and interaction with the accompanying string band. Aside from the Fifth Brandenburg and the D-minor, and perhaps a few concertos that have been written in later years, for instance a few in the twentieth century, I really think that keyboard concertos have always been piano concertos. It's as simple as that; I just don't think the harpsichord could work as a solo instrument in an ensemble, whereas the piano notably could.

**AW** It may be obvious, but what does the piano have that the harpsichord doesn't have?

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<sup>3</sup> Pieter Dirksen, "The Background to Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto," in Pieter Dirksen, ed., *The Harpsichord and Its Repertoire*, Proceedings of the International Harpsichord Symposium, Utrecht 1990 (STIMU: Foundation for Historical Performance Practice, Utrecht, 1992): 156-86.

**DS** Well, it has first of all the ability to mold a melody dynamically. It's an important part of making it sound like a solo instrument, but I think the more important part is that the piano's tone is plainer and duller, and this was noted already even by Maffei, who said that "some professors [professional musicians] have found it *troppo mollo e ottuso*"—soft and dull, essentially.

**AW** That doesn't at first blush sound like a virtue, does it?

**DS** No, but this apparent disadvantage turned out to be a very productive characteristic. For one thing, it led to an incredible aggrandizement of keyboard technique. Right away, even among the Italian sonata composers, you begin to see all sorts of new keyboard techniques emerge that start the piano off on the road toward virtuosity. This was inspired precisely by the dullness of piano sound.

**AW** When the tone itself is not a ravishing element, does that create a need to generate more textural activity in order to beguile the ear? Is that one reason why the bass parts in the solo concertos are invariably more elaborate than those in the putative or known models?

**DS** Yes, exactly. I also think that apparently duller tone carried better in an ensemble. The harpsichord has an incredibly elaborate superstructure of partials on top of every note, which bleeds off a lot of energy. Less of the energy of the piano tone goes into that structure of high partials, so it comes through more clearly. When a harpsichord is in an ensemble, it can be very hard to hear what it's doing. I remember when I was in Hubbard's shop, we went to a concert at Harvard that featured one of Hubbard's harpsichords and Louise Vosgerchian playing her Philip Belt piano in Emanuel Bach's *Concerto for Harpsichord & Fortepiano*, in which both instruments play the same material without any differentiation whatsoever. I assumed beforehand that the piano would give a sort of romantic, clouds-of-smoke version of the material and the harpsichord would give a rat-tat-tat up-front clearest possible version, because we had all been told so often that such music could be heard much more clearly on a harpsichord than on a piano. But it was actually the exact opposite: the piano would give an utterly clear exposition of the musical phrases, and the harpsichord would play the same phrase, which was gorgeous—sort of like shards of stained glass floating in space—but you couldn't hear what the hell was going on. The harpsichord is wildly confusing in an ensemble, I think, unless it's played in continuo style, rather low and chordal and with limited motion. So the consistency and dullness of piano sound is a huge advantage

in an ensemble. I just don't think the harpsichord can be made to sound like a solo concerto instrument unless by someone of the genius of J. S. Bach, and he had to work very hard to do it. He managed it brilliantly in both the Fifth Brandenburg and the D-minor, especially the latter, but I don't think his later concertos work as well.

**AW** Yet they've received a number of intriguing and illuminating performances on harpsichord across several generations.

**DS** It's not as simple as I'm making it sound. But have you actually heard a really good performance in person? There are some good recordings, but recording is a different matter entirely.

**AW** You've argued that Bach was thoroughly familiar with the piano. It's less clear when he had direct personal access to instruments that he was satisfied with. How do we make the bridge between Ferrini, whom we've discussed, and Silbermann, who was directly associated with J. S. Bach?

**DS** One might assume that in talking about Bach and the piano we would be referring to Silbermann's pianos. Certainly that was true at the court of Frederick the Great in 1747, when Bach improvised on the king's Silbermann pianos in their later, improved form. But in the period of the 1730s and early 40s the situation is more complicated. Bach had indeed criticized the earlier Silbermann piano, so scholars are rightly dubious as to whether these fantastic works of that period—such as the *Partitas* and the second volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*—would have been written with an instrument in mind that he had criticized in this manner, even if he did praise its tone. The second, mature series of Silbermann pianos can be dated rather precisely to 1744 and after—too late to have influenced most of Bach's keyboard music. That's one reason that scholars such as John Koster and others are dubious as to whether the piano played a large role in Bach's keyboard repertoire, because Silbermann did not build any pianos in the ten-year period prior to 1744. Where does that hole in Silbermann's keyboard production leave the Bach works? Now, I was far from the first to note that Silbermann's action was copied from a Florentine prototype. Many modern scholars looking at the three late pianos that survive from Silbermann have said that he must have actually had a Florentine action in front of him on the bench. It's too precise a copy to have been done from a drawing or a description. You can find differences of opinion on that as with anything else. But there's widespread agreement that Silbermann did copy Cristofori's design in his second piano action. What Denzil Wraight and I noticed

is that there's a little detail in Silbermann's action that corresponds not to the three Cristofori pianos but only to the single Ferrini piano action that's come down to us, which is in his *cembalo doppio*. From that I conclude that there had to have been a Ferrini piano in Dresden available for Silbermann to copy, and I suspect that it had been brought to Dresden by Johann Adolf Hasse and his wife, Faustina Bordoni, a famous *prima donna*, who were appointed to the Dresden court and arrived in June 1731. That September Bach came up from Leipzig to hear Hasse's first opera for Dresden, and in turn played an organ concert there. So he was in touch with the Hasses from the beginning. There's no evidence for it, but I suspect Hasse brought a Ferrini piano of fifty-six notes, and my guess is that if such an instrument had shown up in Dresden, Bach would not have missed the opportunity to try it out, and would have assessed its worth. I'm willing to guess—in the complete absence of evidence, why shouldn't I?—that he arranged to have a Ferrini piano present in Zimmermann's coffee house when he took over the Collegium concerts.

**AW** A tantalizing newspaper advertisement for one of those concerts announces that “a new type of harpsichord that has not been heard here before” is to be played. I suppose one can't clinch the argument that it was a piano, but what else could it have been?

**DS** Well, Saxony was rich in explorations of new keyboard technology in those years. They were inspired partly because the region had very intimate connections with Italian music centers. Ever since Schütz in the seventeenth century there had been a deep interest and a deep level of communication between Dresden and Italian centers, especially Venice, and Dresden musicians were always going down there to finish their education. There was a great deal of interest in new keyboard technology. Dresden, very close to Leipzig, was the big music center in that part of Germany.

**AW** Eva Badura-Skoda cites an announcement in Dresden in 1731 of an instrument invented by Ficker, which had a hammer action.

**DS** Probably down-striking. There had been a huge vogue in that part of the world for large hammered dulcimers—it was sort of a one-man show by Pantaleon Hebenstreit, who must have been a great performer. In a way it reminds me of Marcel Marceau. He took this very specialized medium and made an incandescent career of playing the huge concert dulcimer, which he played with beaters—no one else could do it as he did; others tried, but the art was *sui generis*. In Saxony there were attempts to keyboardize the hammered

dulcimer: Schröter apparently experimented with that, and Silbermann was involved in making some of Pantaleon's instruments.

**AW** The picture that you're painting is one of an absolute ferment of interest in just this part of the world at just this time in developing a hammered keyboard instrument.

**DS** Absolutely, and for the reason that it was touch-sensitive: they could see that hammers would be the path to getting touch-sensitivity in a keyboard instrument, which musicians had long wanted. Even Couperin, of all people, made an eloquent plea, in the preface of one of his collections of keyboard music, for some genius to invent an instrument that would have the beauty and precision of the *clavecin* but with the added ability to control dynamics. You would hardly think of a Frenchman as wanting something like that, but people really did want it, and the desire to do it was very much in the air. In Saxony in particular there was intensive interest, partly because of the connection with Italy, and partly because of the tremendous vogue of the hammered dulcimer.

## The Bach Concerto Research Project

**AW** Let's talk about our own plan to investigate the case for a practical match between the Italian fortepiano, as exemplified by Ferrini, and the solo concertos of Bach in the 1730s. It will be an attempt to create some empirical evidence through actual playing to see whether it works.

**DS** It's one thing to blather about all these things and blow clouds of rhetoric but it's another more interesting thing to see if it actually works.

**AW** That was your conception from the outset, and I have to thank you for drawing me into the project.

**DS** It was a crucially interesting body of music, because these seven solo concertos of Bach, except for the D-minor (which I think is harpsichord music but will also work gorgeously on piano) are not so much performed, and I don't think they've gained a secure place in the affections of the musical public at large. In fact, there have been many slighting references to them in the scholarly literature as being derivative, not working very well, et cetera. And in fact, they don't work very well on the harpsichord, I think. But it's wonderful, gorgeous music. In some ways the D-minor is the most titanic, but the others are anything but second-drawer works. I think the piano's going to put these

on the map: it's going to reveal how the music works. People have been all too ready to conclude that Bach didn't care much about the actual realization of his music, he just sat in a room and composed, and as long as the works met his standards for contrapuntal integrity, that's all he required. But I don't think that's true, there are so many instances in Bach's music where he has heard and calculated beforehand extraordinarily beautiful and original combinations of sound. There's lots of evidence that he was a practical musician deeply interested in the results of the actual music-making, and of course he was a tremendous virtuoso. It's amazing to think of the hive of activity that he presided over, not only composing these things but also performing them.

**AW** If anything happens along the lines of my experience when playing the Italian masters on your Ferrini for the first time, and discovering them as composers who had something to say and could say it in a way that truly delighted the ear, then we're in for an exciting discovery. If that door is opened, what of the solo literature such as the *Partitas*, and the second *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which was being compiled in the 1730s and offers many invitations to nuanced playing?

**DS** Tom and Barbara Wolf, the prominent harpsichord makers, made a copy of one of the Cristofori instruments and are deeply interested in this whole business. Tom says flatly, "the piano is going to transform our idea of high Baroque keyboard style." I think he's absolutely right. It's not that the music hasn't been perfectly gripping on harpsichord, but I think we're going to realize new possibilities into it, new dimensions in it when it's played on the piano, and I really think it's going to seem more and more like *the* instrument for Bach's keyboard music from roughly 1730 forwards. It doesn't mean that Bach absolutely had this in mind or that in mind, or that this is the best way the right way or the only way to do these things, but we should be open to the possibility of the piano as a legitimate medium for the performance of high Baroque keyboard music.

**AW** I'm immediately reminded of some preludes from the second book, such as the G#-minor with its Alberti bass and appoggiaturas in thirds and sixths, so many elements of the *galant* style that Bach had a use for from time to time in his later works. Ultimately, this repertoire has many good possibilities for realization, so perhaps it wasn't commercial considerations alone that led classic-era composers to refer to their pieces as being for the *cembalo* or the fortepiano. People who want to play good music will want to play it on whatever instrument they have.



**DS** That phrase that we find so often in the second half of the eighteenth century, sonatas for *cembalo* or fortepiano, or lessons for the harpsichord or the fortepiano, is a little problematic. I'm sure it partly means, literally, for the plucking instrument or for the hammered instrument. But I wonder about the grammar around the word "or," which is not always, in English at least, used to indicate two alternatives. It could mean "lessons for the harpsichord or, specifically, for the fortepiano."

**AW** An intriguing interpretation I hadn't considered before. Is there anything else you would like to put on the record?

**DS** Only that in my career there have been unexpected, wonderful moments that came as gifts, such as Bruce Carlson's offer to have me make the first Cristofori for the Schubert Club, which led to my making several other pianos, and generated interest among other people in using and exploring such instruments, for instance Elaine Funaro's beautiful recording of Platti made at the Schubert Club on that Cristofori. But then I made an instrument for myself and the real second break in my career came when you started playing it and got excited over it. It's one thing to make the instruments, and jump up and down and wave your arms and shout about how important the piano is, and how badly people have underestimated its importance and influence in the early eighteenth century, but it's an entirely different thing when an artist says, "Wow, I've got to work on this instrument, I want to play it." You've played it in recital several times, and the fact that you've gotten interested in this and taken on the formidable challenge of learning all the Bach solo concertos, that's another break as far as I'm concerned.

**AW** Well, it's kind of you to say so, but it's a break for me too—it's an endless joy to have access to that music in one's life, and the excitement is augmented greatly by finding such an incredible medium for its performance. This is a great example of the synergy between instrument makers and artists and how much we depend on each other to move forward.