

# Combination Keyboard Instruments in Practice: Some Recordings

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**M**OST OF THE CDS REVIEWED here were selected for illustrative purposes, as sounding examples of some of the instruments discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Keyboard Perspectives*. Combination keyboard instruments are not easy to find in the CD catalogue. Thus, rather than focusing on new recordings, I will present a selection that highlights a few of these instruments, as well as the various musical contexts in which they might appear. The earliest recording discussed here was issued in 2002 and only the most recent one is from 2015.

*Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, Mysterien Sonaten*, Alice Piérot, violin; Marianne Muller, viola da gamba; Pascal Monteilhet, theorbo; Elisabeth Geiger, claviorgan (ALPHA 038, 2 CD, 2003).

This recording shows the claviorgan in one of its arguably most typical historical roles: as an all-in-one continuo instrument.<sup>1</sup> Here it is part of a continuo group of three, joining the viola da gamba and theorbo in a recording of seventeenth-century core repertoire for the violin: Biber's fifteen 'Mystery' or 'Rosary' sonatas for violin and continuo, in an excellent rendition by Alice Piérot.

The claviorgan was built in 2000 by Quentin Blumenroeder. It has a specification of Principal 8', 4', 2' (in wood) and Regal 8', and is topped by a single-manual harpsichord with one 8' stop.<sup>2</sup> The harpsichord is based on an early-sixteenth-century instrument in the Castello Sforzesco museum (Milan) that has traces of connectors to a (lost) organ (booklet, p. 49).

On these two CDs, the claviorgan is defined not by its tutti sound, but by its potential for variation: the instrument is used to add more colors to an already colorful continuo group. As such, it is not so very different from, say, a chamber organ with a virginal perched on top (but no coupler mechanism). In the few cases

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<sup>1</sup> See Eleanor Smith's article in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Pictures of this instrument can be found on this page: <http://www.blumenroeder.fr/pages/claviorganum.html?idArt=16> (accessed October 25, 2015).

that the coupled tutti sound (one or more organ stops plus harpsichord) is used, the instrument provides a grand and regal quality to some of the statelier passages that would otherwise have been beyond the reach of a single keyboardist. The considerable challenge and effort involved in building an all-in-one instrument of this kind seem justified for this effect alone, especially when, as here, it results in a well-balanced and bright sounding organ and a particularly lovely, pliable, well-regulated—but not too prominent—harpsichord.

One interesting question for the keyboard player that is answered here in various ways is how to address the combined instrument stylistically: is it an organ with an added edge to the attack, or is it a harpsichord with added sustain? Keyboardist Elisabeth Geiger provides examples of both approaches, at times playing a lively ‘harpsichordy’ continuo realization in the right hand and letting the coupled organ partake in the trills, runs, and twiddles, and at other times letting the harpsichord join the organ-like chordal and static passages.

Most of the time, however, the components of the claviorgan are used separately, in various ways, sharing tasks with its equally versatile ensemble partners; the gamba can be heard not only in bowed bass lines but also in chords and *pizzicati*, and the theorbo covers the entire range from the casual plucking of single notes to figurations, arpeggios, and percussive effects.

Another practical question about claviorgans is how they should be recorded. This particular recording faithfully reproduces most timbres, but for the tutti claviorgan, placement becomes an issue. The recording reproduces the claviorgan as two distinct-sounding instruments, with the harpsichord mostly in the left channel and the organ centered; one wonders whether a different microphone placement would have led to a more unified sound picture.

The stylistic approach of the musicians would represent cutting-edge HIP playing even today, and certainly did so at the time the recording was made. Highlights of this approach are an unforced but precise adherence to meantone intonation (with the violin playing in *scordatura* most of the time, this is no mean feat); the aforementioned readiness of the continuo players to expand their canonical roles; and every player’s full cooperation in the shaping of expression and musical meaning—all on a very solid stylistic and technical basis. Alice Piérot’s playing is always versatile and at times energetic, but most frequently she lets the soft and introspective facets of the music and her instrument develop and shine, with great concentration. A possible point of criticism of the continuo players’ coordination is that their improvised passages sometimes tend to move in parallel octaves or unisons, and that chords sometimes are broken in the same direction in both harpsichord and theorbo, however not entirely in the same fashion. In

a free approach to group continuo, all this might be seen as a risk worth taking, but it is also something that can be analyzed in rehearsal and ultimately avoided.

All in all, however, this is an outstanding recording that rewards multiple listenings, and is a good demonstration of the possibilities of the claviorgan in its own habitat: continuo in an improvisatory manner. An extensive booklet in three languages accompanies the recording.

*Bach – Bull – Byrd – Gibbons – Hassler – Pachelbel – Ritter – Strogers*, Gustav Leonhardt, claviorgan and harpsichord (ALPHA 042, 2003).

In the same year as the recording reviewed above, the French label *Alpha* also issued a CD with the late Gustav Leonhardt, which, on some of the tracks, features a claviorgan as a solo instrument.

The claviorgan here is an Italian harpsichord after Aelpidio Gregori by Matthias Griewisch with two 8' stops, with a rather small chest organ (Gedackt 8' and Flute 4') by Friedrich Lieh stuck somewhat precariously under the harpsichord's key end. The harpsichord played in the later pieces on this disk is a sonorous copy of an eighteenth-century German model of the school of Gottfried Silbermann (8', 8', 4', lute stop) by Anthony Sidey and Frédéric Bal.

This CD belongs to the last handful of solo recordings Leonhardt made after 2000. The program, featuring a total of eight composers born between 1542 and 1750, could perhaps be said to reflect a typical Leonhardt recital from his later years (albeit with no music from eighteenth-century France); it contains repertoire that Leonhardt is known to have loved, played on two instruments that he cherished: harpsichord and organ.

Leonhardt, almost 75 years old at the time of the recording, and supported by an evidently excellent *Tonmeister*, can here be heard at the top of his game. His performance is a meticulously worked-out and exquisitely realized study in very subtle clarity. It does require an attentive listener to notice that, like Elisabeth Geiger in my first review, he also approaches the claviorgan in two ways. In the opening piece, a *Canzon* by Hans Leo Hassler, the instrument is treated basically like an organ, with vertical chords and few attempts at dynamic shading. A subtle introduction of harpsichord-like *arpeggi* can be heard in the second piece, a *Fantasia* by Nicholas Strogers. Here the harpsichord—a louder instrument on this recording than in the Biber reviewed above—is allowed to take the lead. More often, however, Leonhardt seems to prefer to treat the combined sound as he would treat the organ alone, as for example in William Byrd's *Queen's Alman*

as well as a short *Toccata* by Johann Pachelbel, which is the last piece on the disc that uses the tutti sound of the claviorgan.

The organ is played alone in Orlando Gibbons's *Fantasia II*. Somewhat disappointingly, varying degrees of wind noise are audible in its Gedackt 8', and the action is noisy as well. The same technical recording problem noted above is also present here: the harpsichord's overtones are much more prominent than the subdued sounds of the organ, and a true blend of the two is not achieved. A casual listener might even guess that the harpsichord plays ahead of the organ—headphones reveal, however, that in fact the reverse is true (at least in some of the tones).

The reverberation of the recording venue, the Chapelle de l'hôpital Notre-Dame de Bon Secours in Paris, is rather long, which can be heard faintly but clearly. This may in part explain why Leonhardt so rigorously favors short articulations in the selections that involve the organ. The clarity gained by this technique may have made some sense in the room itself, but through the microphones, the result seems somewhat too articulated and occasionally even slightly breathless.

Leonhardt's pointillist interpretation of some of the earlier pieces is compensated by his obviously greater ease with the sonorities of the eighteenth-century German harpsichord, used in an Allemande by Christian Ritter and J. S. Bach's *Fantasia* (BWV 1121), *Aria variata* (BWV 989), and *Partite sopra "O Gott, du frommer Gott"* (BWV 767). His overall approach can be likened to a somewhat educational variant of storytelling—relating tales of simple beauty with care and a special attention to details. Musical gestures, themes, counterpoint, and harmonies, even virtuosity—judiciously and intelligently shaped—are methodically presented to the listener for contemplation by a musician who consciously chooses not to put too much of a personal stamp on it all. The result is often beautiful, even endearing, but can occasionally verge on the pedantic. Still, this is a recording well worth listening to.

*Joseph Haydn, deLirium, Concerto, notturno per lire organizzate; Divertimenti per baryton*, Christophe Coin, Ensemble Baroque de Limoges, Quatuor Mosaïques (LABORIE records LC03, 2006).

The lira organizzata combines the principle of the hurdy gurdy with a small organ.<sup>3</sup> The crank operates the strings and works the bellows at the same time.

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<sup>3</sup> The instrument is mentioned in passing in Eleanor Smith's contribution in this volume, see footnote 49 on page 151.

On the commission of the Bourbon king of Naples Ferdinand IV, an *amateur* of the instrument, Joseph Haydn wrote several works for *lira organizzata*: a number of concerti in 1786, and some nocturni in 1788 and 1790. This CD presents a selection of these works, some in their original form and some in Haydn's later re-arrangements for other instruments.

The soloists Matthias Loibner and Thierry Nouat play on two new *lira organizzata* by Wolfgang Wecheselbaumer after a French model from around 1750, with a compass of two and a half octaves (as required in Haydn's works for this instrument). They can be heard in a Concerto in C together with string ensemble and horns (Hob. VIIh:1) and a Notturmo in C with strings, clarinets and horns (Hob. II:32). In the Divertimentos in A (Hob. X:3) and G (Hob. X:12), the solo instrument is a baryton. This is a fretted bass viol with six strings (tuned D-G-c-e-a-d<sup>1</sup>) and a set of sympathetic strings, here played by Cristophe Coin. Finally, the solo instruments of the Notturmo in G (Hob. II:27) are the flute and two oboes.

An exhaustive booklet explains how the organised hurdy-gurdy is constructed: the organ and hurdy-gurdy are separate instruments combined in a case. The keyboard controls both the organ—which has two sets of stopped pipes—and the hurdy-gurdy mechanism. The action allows the player to operate both instruments together or separately. A few photos of the instrument, artistically lit and somewhat enigmatic, are included. What we can see is a stand with cabriole legs supporting a tiny organ, with one rank of wooden pipes visible from the audience, and the hurdy-gurdy behind.

Musical instruments can be talked about in a variety of ways: in terms of technical difficulty (learning to master the *lira organizzata* appears to be difficult), in terms of affordance (Matthias Loibner writes in the booklet that the instrument “fulfills every hurdy-gurdy player's dream: that of being able to play polyphonically”), and in terms of listener response. For a CD, obviously, the latter matters most. Whoever has listened to Haydn's pieces for flute clocks on surviving instruments, with their erratic lack of regularity, toy-like sound, and—for the purist—maddening inconsistency of articulations and trills, this CD will be a pleasant surprise. The organised hurdy-gurdy (a treble instrument) reveals a thoroughly clean historical soundscape: an utterly plausible marriage of the thin but pleasant pastoral sound of the (bourdon-less) rosined-wheel-driven strings and the stopped wooden pipes of the well-regulated organ. It is an instrument that clearly allows for some virtuosity, but not at the expense of sweetness of tone, and without too much action noise. The overall effect is one of pastoral longing, as the recorder-like sound of the organ is lifted up by the string's overtones and their (very subtle) possibility of dynamic variation. The

sensation of a new-old instrument rediscovered is made perfect by the excellent efforts of the two soloists.

The *lira organizzata* was not a wholly exotic instrument in Haydn's time. Ferdinand IV also commissioned pieces from Franz Sterkel, Ignaz Pleyel, Adalbert Gyrowetz, and possibly Vincenzo Orgitano, and around twenty specimens of the instrument itself have survived. In spite of Haydn's familiarity with the instrument, his approach remains somewhat generic, as he invites it to join him in his *divertimento* style rather than adjusting his style to demonstrate the instrument's special possibilities. The resulting music is pleasant to listen to, but with a tendency to slip into the background of one's attention (notwithstanding a few dog barks at the end of the *cadenza* of the first concerto that made it out of the editing room).

The ensemble musicians find a very convincing tone for a medium-sized ensemble with shared soloist responsibilities, and they play very well in tune and together. In terms of expression, the few moments of musical drama in these basically carefree pieces are perhaps somewhat underemphasized: always competently shaped, but played with a slight understatement. This may have been necessary for reasons of balance, however, as the solo instruments are rather soft. Cristophe Coin as soloist on the baryton is excellent, weaving in and out of the musical fabric with utter ease and well-crafted expressivity.

*Mozart am Stein Vis-à-vis*, Andreas Staier, Christine Schornsheim, (piano/harpsichord) *Vis-à-vis* (harmonia mundi HMC 901941, 2007).

One of the organ and fortepiano maker Johann Andreas Stein's showpieces was a so-called *Vis-à-vis*: a harpsichord and a fortepiano combined in one large rectangular box. Two of these combination instruments—likely the only two Stein ever made—survive today. On this CD, the earlier *Vis-à-vis*, from 1777, can be heard in its freshly restored state of 2006.

The harpsichord part of this instrument is a rather large affair, with three keyboards and a disposition of 16', 8', 8' (one with a buff stop), and a third 8' that turns into a 4' in the bass. The piano part is Stein's earliest surviving fortepiano, with a singular action, today normally referred to as *Zugmechanik*, featuring bare hammers and a moderator. Unlike the German *Prellzungen* action, of which the earliest surviving example (also by Stein) is from 1781,<sup>4</sup> the *Zugmechanik* has

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<sup>4</sup> Claviorgan (piano/organ) by Stein, Stadsmuseet in Gothenburg, former Göteborgs Historiska Museums kulturhistoriska samling, inv. no. GM: 4478.



musicologist Andreas Freisenhagen, as well as a number of attractive photos of the instrument.

The initiative to have this particular instrument restored (very successfully) to playing condition by Christopher Clarke cannot be praised enough. Impressive too is the soloists' effort to come to terms with its features and its action characteristics. The recording itself distinctly documents the sound characters and combinations the *Vis-à-vis* can produce, and, satisfyingly, succeeds in presenting it as one single instrument.

Most important in Stein's concept of the harpsichord part of the *Vis-à-vis* seems to be the tutti sound and its contrast with the soft single 8'. The character of the harpsichord's sound as such reflects the somewhat neutral aesthetic of the latter part of the century, which here depends on the piano to add warmth and flexibility.

It comes as no surprise that, because of the bare wooden hammers, the piano's sound is closely related to the contemporaneous *Tangentenflügel* and its aesthetic. It seems, however, that Stein's action allows for better control in the dynamic middle range, and the mid-treble section displays a more clearly "hammered" sound than in a tangent piano. The overall characteristic of this part of the instrument is nevertheless, like a good *Tangentenflügel*, akin to a (hypothetical) very loud clavichord. Most of the time it blends very well with the harpsichord. In terms of mechanics, it is astonishing how little action noise the *Vis-à-vis* produces and how well everything seems to work, even in some fast passagework.

By its very nature, the *Vis-à-vis* asks to be explored and demonstrated by two players. The improvisatory preludes and the short improvisation by the soloists are used precisely for this goal<sup>6</sup>: they introduce the instrument to the listener, and function as cushioning between the more strictly composed pieces. They also work as resting points, and it is here that the variation of sounds of the instrument is most clearly translated into musical expression, *empfindsam* figurations, turns, and trills. The Paisiello variations, too, in which the players alternate, serve as a great demonstration of the *Vis-à-vis*'s various sounds and sound combinations. The overall impression is that of a gorgeous and full-sounding instrument, with, at its best moments, the potential to taper down the volume to two distinct soft timbres: one silvery and one muffled (the latter via the harpsichord's buff stop and the piano's moderator).

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<sup>6</sup> See again Eleanor Smith's article, where she makes the point that demonstration through improvisation was one of the typical uses of another combined instrument, the *claviorgan*.



Schornsheim's and Staier's playing—this comes as no surprise—is on a very high level, both in terms of finger technique and of being able to control the nuances of the instrument. They are obviously having a lot of fun with their new/historical “toy,” and, although they sound slightly competitive at times, are evidently a comfortable match for each other.

But the playfully competitive character of this exploration of the Vis-à-vis also has a flip side, most clearly evident in the fast movements of the two four-hand sonatas as well as towards the end of the variations, and whenever the pulse and tension accelerate in the improvisatory pieces. In these movements, the joint interpretation takes on strident tones, while the overall dynamic level settles rather on the forced side. Thus, for example, the opening Allegro of the B-flat major sonata (K. 358) is played at a fast and inflexible tempo, glossing over any change of mood in the second theme and other subtle musical gestures, and with little reference to the orchestral connotations of this movement. This rather mainstream classical approach, with its emphasis on large-scale phrasing and the strict unity of tempo, may be a reminder of how thin our layer of historically informed intuition really is, if we too readily give in to our (otherwise understandable) enthusiasm. In all other respects, a highly recommended CD.

*Jacques Duphly, Pièces de clavecin*, Aya Hamada, harpsichord (LIVENOTES LN 3814, 2015).

Pre-Revolution musical France cherished the harpsichord in a very special way, and composers and performers luxuriously celebrated its best sonorities. François Couperin, in his *L'Art de toucher le clavecin* (1716), instructed harpsichordists in developing great subtlety of touch, sound, and articulation, in order to overcome the instrument's built-in severity and to play it with the appropriate character. The best harpsichord builders, in turn, succeeded in producing instruments of individual character, gorgeous sonority, and great tonal beauty. For the listener of today, the best French harpsichord music of this period says that the harpsichord can, or should, do more than merely lay down a blanket of historically appropriate sound: a good harpsichord is a personality, to be taken seriously by players and listeners alike.

Jacques Duphly (1715–1789), organist, harpsichordist, and in his day a famous harpsichord teacher, lived in the midst of all this. Easily mistaken for “the best bad composer” of music “like a chocolate bonbon,” exquisite on the outside “but with a soft filling” (Gustav Leonhardt's tongue-in-cheek expressions of admira-

tion for Duphly<sup>7</sup>), Duphly is an unfailing negotiator of the borderland between traditional and new styles, and between taste and tastelessness. His pieces are a blend of virtuosic (but never back-breaking) showpieces, character pieces with changing moods, languid *rondeaux*, and carefully crafted miniatures. At times, like his colleagues Armand-Louis Couperin and Claude-Bénigne Balbastre, he weaves early classical elements into the Baroque fabric, but without embarrassing the player more than occasionally with newfangled *Alberti* basses or thoughtlessly thrown-in 6-4 chords. In fact, his harmonic progressions are often innovative and unexpected for the time. His command of form and voice-leading is impeccable. Most of his melodies have the stamp of canonic creations; one can imagine, at the height of his fame, his students whistling them on their way home.

Harpsichordist Aya Hamada presents a selection from Duphly's four books of harpsichord pieces. She plays on a French harpsichord (FF-e<sup>3</sup>, 2x8', 4', buff stop) made by Martin Skowronek in 1984,<sup>8</sup> apparently in an excellent state of regulation. The disc makes a superb case for the French harpsichord-lover's culture of the eighteenth century, and it is a joy to listen to from beginning to end.

Hamada's technique appears to be situated at the flexible-yet-energetic end of the spectrum, which allows her to produce passagework, note repetitions, and trills of astonishing speed and accuracy without ever compromising her tone and without producing much, if any, mechanical noise. Her tempo choices strike me as natural, never becoming either complacent or hectic. Her slow movements are meticulously worked-out, but delivered with spaciousness, subtly daring rhythmic flexibility, and convincing phrasing. Her take on note endings in the pieces marked "tendrement" is to not linger too long, compensating for the slightly airy results with a carefully planned touch. Some of the languorous pieces thus end up sounding unexpectedly light-footed, yet never stilted or coy—an efficient device to prevent them from becoming slow and sticky.

Throughout the CD, Hamada demonstrates a keen ear for the vocal treble of this particular instrument, but she takes nothing for granted, and actively enhances whatever the instrument has to offer through touch and timing: here is a harpsichordist who knows how to breathe and how to take time without losing her *cadence*. Each piece on this disc receives a thoughtful treatment with many well-shaped details and lovely registrations. This is especially gratifying in

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<sup>7</sup> These two quotations are authentic.

<sup>8</sup> Formerly in Gustav Leonhardt's collection. The instrument became initially known as a 1755 original by Nicholas Lefebvre, but it was in fact made on order. See Martin Skowronek, "The 'Harpsichord of Nicholas Lefebvre 1755': The story of a forgery without intent to defraud," *The Galpin Society Journal* 55 (2002): 4–14.

some of the faster pieces (*La Larare*, *Médée*, and parts of the *Chaconne*), whose passagework easily could lead to a mechanical approach; to be sure, there is plenty of drive here, but it is always balanced against a musical conception that goes beyond the surface appeal of technical fireworks.

Only very occasionally does Hamada show that she faces the same challenges in these pieces as other harpsichordists. For instance, at the beginning of the *Chaconne* in F (technically not really difficult) it is hard to achieve a really triumphant sound and a confident stride; trills and leaps and the task of fitting everything into the pulse get in the way. The result tends to become heavier than perhaps intended. Hamada meets the challenge of this beginning admirably, but a residue of its inherent problems remains faintly audible—the rest of the *Chaconne* with its many contrasts is brilliantly performed.

The recording, made in the same venue as Gustav Leonhardt's CD reviewed above, is direct but still spacious, and captures the character of the harpsichord well (especially when single stops are being played). The CD booklet, in Japanese and English, provides short, well-written "notes from the performer" on the instrument, composer, and recording.