Throwing Simultaneity to the Wind: Arpeggiation and Passive Release

The other night I performed in a concert at the Episcopal Cathedral in Louisville. They had acquired a 'new' harpsichord (a 1977 by David Sutherland) which was surprisingly fun to play. The program was built around the theme of light, including various choral and solo vocal works, and my harpsichord rendering of Buxtehude's fantasy on *WieSchšn Leuchtet Der Morgenstern* ('How Brightly Shines the Morning Star') sat in the middle. What happens to me when I'm playing with and for people who haven't heard the harpsichord much is that I feel lifted and invigorated by my role as ambassador, as though I've been sent to communicate that there is life on Planet Harpsichord. I took great pleasure that night in bringing the widest range of color, affect, and inflection to my playing, especially in the Buxtehude. I've been doing this for long enough to know that the primary component recognizable to the listener is my use of arpeggiation, or 'spreading' of anything made up of two voices or more. Following the concert, one of the choir section leader's remarked on the flexibility and variousness of my playing, and asked whether it was 'the norm' to 'break' chords so much, hardly ever playing any two notes truly simultaneously – it had struck him that this seemed, at my hands, to be an essential and natural texture. It's been a long time coming for me to find the confidence to say that I *do* think that arpeggiation is absolutely essential, that it's always there unless one actively chooses to play blockishly, for special effect. It's through my teaching that I've arrived at clarity about this, and ultimately, it's the students who most fully buy into this principle who I feel thoroughly plumb the depths of the instrument's sound world and expressive capacity.

I don't listen to a lot of harpsichord recordings, in part because I find the lack of arpeggiation difficult to get past -- and the more I respect the basic musicianship of the player, the more painful this deficit is. Once, when I was having dinner with some of my favorite colleagues during a Historical Keyboard conference, there was a little bit of wine relaxing the conversation, and I found the nerve to openly ask them why they didn't use more spreading to create greater elasticity in their playing. One of them, surprisingly, said she had never really

thought about it. I don't know that she then went back to her practicing with a new sense of purpose, but I was glad to know that she and I weren't completely at odds, that it hadn't been an act of rejection on her part to not employ what feels to me to be such a basic mechanism. It's become personal for me, it's become a part of my language to the point that, when it's not there, there's a barrenness that I can't imagine being able to ignore.

So why does this matter so much to me, this avoidance of simultaneity among notes? I've found a number of ways to explain it – it's the equivalent of a dancer bending the knees upon landing from a jump; it is cushioning at the bottom of the key dip, padding for the weight of the arm as it's released into the keys; it allows for the heart of each pitch to be heard rather than being canceled out by the concurrent jangle of other sounds; it brings malleability, especially in the melody and internal lines that seek not to be enslaved to vertical alignment with other voices; its physicality lends itself to swing; there's infinite variety in the degree to which one spreads, the speed, the rhythm or lack thereof. Perhaps most importantly, it captures the essence of an intuitive world of *non-notated* practices, it is a starting point for leaving the limited and limiting signifiers on the page and massaging, palpating the sounds until they breathe. This is no act of defiance – how can it be a violation of some code of conduct when anyone who's really delved into the aesthetic of the harpsichord and its repertoire admits to the whole proposition being dependent upon taking liberties? And yet, of all the myriad ways in which harpsichordists step away from literally interpreting notation, arpeggiation, when used in its fullest and most wide-ranging expression, seems to often solicit the response 'You just can't do that.' Well, evidently, I can and I do, to great effect, and it seems to be the key to drawing student keyboardists out of a restrictive relationship to 'attack', and to getting them to listen in a different way.

Space and Release

One important point to make is that playing with an overarching use of arpeggiation is not the same as playing smoothly all the time. It's generally understood (in my tiny sliver of the musical universe) that the most substantial use of rolled chords is for downbeats and other events requiring emphasis. However, this cushioned release of weight into the keys, this bending of the knees, can't occur naturally without being preceded by an upward movement, a lift, a lightness. Space and suspendedness *before* downward motion is created by setting free into

thin air the notes that make an upward motion. It's very easy to talk about such feathery releases, it's another thing to achieve them on the harpsichord.

We're meant to accept, even to honor, the audible ending of sound that occurs when a key is released, the quill falls past the string, and the felt abruptly dampens any remaining vibration. So how do we pretend that all of that can happen in a way that imitates evaporation? It requires time. Enough relaxation at the end of gesture to allow sound to taper, then a peeling of the hand off the key in the most inactive of ways, as though it's floating. Physical rotation plays a part in creating this tender motion, but the greater factor is arpeggiated release of notes that would appear, on the page, to all end at the same time. So, again, avoidance of simultaneity, but this time avoiding it in the cessation of sound rather than its initiation. One can actually play an upbeat chord made up of a number of voices, and arpeggiate it in such a way that it's truly the opposite of those richly sustained arpeggiated downbeat chords. A single airy motion of the arm and hand plays the subtly spread notes of a chord on the upswing and then lets them go just as airily – a brushing of the keys, the dancer's feet gently sweeping the floor on the way toward effortlessly jumping into the air.