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Chicago Native adds Flourish to Harpsichord Renaissance

The harpsichord, says prize-winning performer Jory Vinikour, best displays its charms in a small room or a chapel with high, arching ceilings. With its ornate melodies, metallic tone, and muted voice, the Baroque instrument requires a more intimate audience than does its sonorous cousin, the piano.

“The piano has an immediate romantic impact. You are awash in the sound and beauty of the melodies and no concentration is necessary,” Mr. Vinikour says. “With the harpsichord, you need to be present, ready to listen with ears open. If the music is lost, you need to go find it, to move your ears toward the instrument.”

If listening to the harpsichord is almost an art in itself, Vinikour’s playing makes the effort richly rewarding. The acclaimed winner of two international harpsichord contests - at the Spring Festival of Prague in May 1994 and in Warsaw in April 1993 - Vinikour infuses his work with personality and confidence.

“(Vinikour) makes a concert an experience, in the very best sense of the word. His playing excites the ear,” says Igor Kipnis, a noted American harpsichordist and a member of the Prague jury.

Vinikour, a native of Chicago, who now lives and teaches in France, is eager to broaden appreciation for the harpsichord among Americans. He seeks to do this through exceptionally vivid performances in which he breaks the staid traditions of harpsichordists. He plays completely by memory.

In playing the harpsichord (which plucks the strings instead of hammering them as does the piano), Vinikour brings out the brilliance of the music with his sensitivity to the spacing between the notes.

“The general goal of the pianist is to make the instrument sing, to perfectly connect the notes,” he says. “In the harpsichord, the silence is as important

as the notes.” A child prodigy on the piano, Vinikour discovered the harpsichord as a teenager along with a fondness for the Baroque repertoire of the 17th and 18th centuries. He was drawn to the complexity of the polyphonic music, such as that of 18th century French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, which often incorporates four or five distinct yet harmonious voices in a single piece.

For more than 100 years after the piano emerged as the dominant keyboard instrument in the 1800’s much famous harpsichord music by Rameau and others was virtually forgotten. In the early 1900s, however, Baroque music enjoyed a renaissance. The historic harpsichord made a comeback in the 1950s, after the Boston team of William Dowd and Frank Hubbard began building replicas of the instruments kept in European museums.

Since then, harpsichord music has enjoyed a “widespread, but very thin revival” in the United States as people learn of the unique abilities of the plucked instrument, says Paul Irvin, a harpsichord builder and past president of the Midwestern Historical Keyboard Society.

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