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HARPSICHORDIST HITS KEYS TO SUCCESS

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Musicians don't always set out on the instrument they wind up playing for the rest of their lives. Violinists become violists. Trumpeters become French horn players. Some instrumentalists even take the audacious (or foolhardy) step of becoming conductors.

Jory Vinikour was a pianist who transformed himself into a harpsichordist. His choice turned out to be wise. In the 15 years since Vinikour began immersing himself in the elegant ancient instrument, he has received two grants to study in Europe, won two major international harpsichord competitions and recorded with major artists in the early music field.

Vinikour's adventures in harpsichord have kept him busy mostly in Europe where he performs and teaches. The Chicago-born musician returns stateside to give a recital of old and new harpsichord music tomorrow at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium.

An American in Paris, the 33-year-old Vinikour still occasionally plays piano his first instrument, as vocal accompanist or coach. But he says he devotes 99.5 percent of his time to the harpsichord. Vinikour only realized how wondrous the instrument could be in 1981.

"I sometimes think that if I had had access to the harpsichord from the earliest stage, I would have chosen it," he says on the phone from Paris. "That didn't seem to be a possibility." But once Vinikour was drawn to the harpsichord, the piano got into deep trouble. The pianist didn't need much persuasion when Charles Kaufman, then president of the Mannes College of Music in New York, suggested that he pursue a master's degree in harpsichord.

Smitten initially by the sound of the harpsichord, Vinikour became entranced with the repertoire and the multitude of instruments built for specific styles. "I was never whatsoever attracted to the romantic repertoire for piano, only as a listener," says Vinikour. "To put your hands on [the harpsichord] is a totally different thing. When I hear Bach or any other music of the period, I want to reinterpret it myself. There are so many different elements that attracted me to the instrument.

Vinikour didn't make the switch cold turkey. Even as he was becoming a harpsichordist he continued to play piano. The challenge of playing both instruments eventually prompted Vinikour to decide that the harpsichord would win.

The differences in technique on harpsichord and piano are striking, says Vinikour. "A number of years were necessary before I was feeling I was responding to the harpsichord itself and not just playing with a very good piano technique and lightening it up," he says. "That's not all there is, by any means. I certainly feel by this time I respond as a harpsichordist as a separate entity and don't drag years of piano training into it. Maybe I drag a sense of discipline or solutions to certain problems. But the inspiration is still somehow there."

Much of Vinikour's inspiration has come from prominent harpsichord teachers. After studies with Lionel Party and Nina Svetlanova at Mannes and Charlotte Mattax at Rutgers University, Vinikour headed to Europe on Fulbright and Beebe grants to work with Huguette Dreyfus at the National Conservatory of Rueil-Malmaison and Kenneth Gilbert at the Paris Conservatory. He also had lessons from Glenn Wilson, a student of Gustav Leonhardt, in Holland.

Settling in Paris in 1990, Vinikour became the first non-French harpsichordist to obtain a teachers certificate – he holds classes today in Burgundy – and the only harpsichordist to win first prizes at two international competitions. He won in Warsaw in 1993 and in Prague in 1994.

Vinikour remains pragmatic about his competition triumphs. "Anybody who thinks the career is going to be made after an enormous competition is fooling himself," Vinikour says. "Harpsichord competitions never have as big a stake as piano competitions. But they opened some doors around Europe and the world and upped my prestige here in France."

In a rather big way. Vinikour has performed at major European opera houses and made recordings with two eminent French early-music ensembles – Les Musiciens du Louvre, led by Marc Minkowski, and Les Arts Florissants, led by William Christie. He recently participated in recordings of Gluck's "Armide" and Handel's "Ariodante" for Deutsche Grammophon.

"I'm very rarely unoccupied," Vinikour says. "I do maybe 30 to 35 concerts a year. Maybe 10 are significantly important."

He considers his recital tomorrow at the Cleveland Museum of Art – his first in the United States on a major series – to be one of those significant events.

Harpsichordist Jory Vinikour performs works by Bull, Farnaby, Frescobaldi, Storace, Kerll, D. Scarlatti Royer, Stephen Blumberg and Handel at 7:45 p.m. tomorrow at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium, 11150 East Cleveland Tickets: \$5, students (at the door); \$8-\$14, others, by calling 421-7340, Ext. 282.