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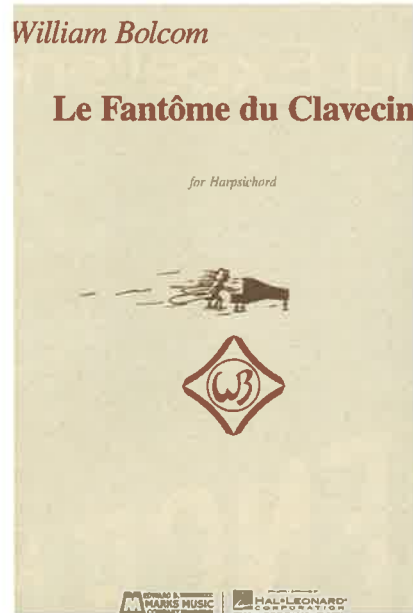
William Bolcom's Compositions for Solo Harpsichord

The path to knowledge is oft-times a roundabout one! Preparing to write an essay on harpsichord music of the modern revival period, I decided to solicit lists of favorite pieces from this repertoire from colleagues who actually interact with it, either as performers, historians, or musically astute listeners. This exercise has produced, thus far, a basic reaffirmation for the canon of well-known works, occasionally augmented by a complete surprise. Thus it was when Britain's Jane Clark included among her choices an American solo piece totally unknown to me: William Bolcom's *Le Fantôme du Clavecin*, composed in 2005, but unheard in concert performance until its May 11, 2010, inclusion in a recital by Greek-German harpsichordist Andreas Skouras at the Handel House Museum in London. That Jane would champion this particular work is not surprising; she is a leading authority on the music of François Couperin, and Bolcom's "Ordre," comprising nine movements, each titled in French, presents a creditable suggestion of what Couperin might sound like had he been born in the late 20th or early 21st century.

The 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning composer William Bolcom shares a birth year (1938) with ye olde harpsichord editor (as does a liberal sampling of prominent composers—among them John Corigliano, Calvin Hampton, John Harbison, Joan Tower, and Charles Wuorinen, to name a few). I had the honor and privilege of playing the first performance of Bill's *Just As I Am* from the very first set of *Gospel Preludes for Organ* (1979)—a Dallas AGO commission made during my term as chapter dean. Our paths have crossed occasionally since then, and I am totally addicted to the superlative recordings of cabaret and Broadway songs made by pianist Bolcom and his wife, the silver-voiced soprano Joan Morris—recordings that continue to set the standards for tasteful musical interpretations of these glorious works by Rodgers and Hart, the Gershwins, and their contemporaries.

So, confronted by the mention of a harpsichord piece of which I knew nothing, I consulted Bolcom's website, and there discovered not one, but two solo harpsichord works, the second of which dates from 2015. This was just too tantalizing to ignore, so I wrote the composer, and, within a few hours, received this cordial and welcome reply:

I'm delighted you are interested in the *Fantôme*. I wrote it to thank Davitt Moroney for the use of his house while [I was] at Berkeley in 2005 (which house, I'm sad to say, I didn't leave in as perfect order as I'd



Le Fantôme du Clavecin



William Bolcom and Joan Morris



The Vicarage Garden (Copyright © Edward B. Marks Music Company and Bolcom Music. Used by permission.)

like to have done . . .) I'll be sure to get you a published copy of it, and can ask my publisher to get you the little piece (*The Vicarage Garden*) I wrote in memory of Ruth Black. Her father was a vicar in England, in the Dorchester area, and I imagined his garden and little Ruth among the flowers. She was the widow of Arnold Black, who was, I thought, the mayor of the upper West Side musicians' ghetto—both [were] very close friends.

When the requested scores arrived the following week I rushed to my favorite harpsichord, Richard Kingston's 1994 Franco-Flemish masterpiece—the only instrument in my collection that has the requisite FF-g3 compass, as well as a resonant, singing treble range—and immediately played through Bolcom's newest harpsichord solo. Slightly exceeding two minutes, *The Vicarage Garden* bears the tempo indication *Allegretto à l'anglaise*, and offers a bucolic, lightly swinging tone picture, complete with some unexpected cross relations (as in the fourth measure with its simultaneous G-sharp and G-natural). Nostalgic, and not extremely difficult, this charmer belongs in the same company as Herbert Howells's second collection of clavichord

pieces (*Howells's Clavichord*) from the 1950s. Bolcom's work, completed on May 25 last year, suits the harpsichord impeccably and is a delight both to hear and to play. Imminent publication plans may be tracked via the publisher's website: www.ebmarks.com.

Its first performance was given by harpsichordist Gregory Hayes as the first of four pieces commissioned in memory of Ruth Black for a memorial event on August 30, 2015, at the Federated Church in Charlemont, Massachusetts. Black was a founding member of the Mohawk Trail concert series and, for 46 years, its executive director. Her impact on the regional art scene was quite evident in the beautifully organized program given to honor her memory; of the four composer friends who wrote new music for the concert, two were Pulitzer laureates (Bolcom and Lewis Spratlan [*Hornpipe for Ruth*]), and the others well known: John Clark [*Without E'er a Key*] and Alice Parker [*Three Emily Dickinson Songs*]. Preceding two harpsichord pieces, Debussy's *Syrinx* for solo flute was heard offstage. Hayes then programmed Louis Couperin's elegiac *Tombeau de Mr. Blancrocher* and followed it with Bolcom's lovely miniature. In addition to the premiere performances, folk song settings by Britten and Schubert's *An die Musik* and *Notturmo* completed the musical tributes.

The nine movements of Bolcom's *Phantom of the Harpsichord* begin with an unmeasured prelude: *Le Monstre Souterrain*. Very free, without strict time, the composer sets it primarily in the deep, rich bottom octaves of the harpsichord, beginning with the lowest note on the keyboard, F, and builds a full minor chord. There are *glissandi* on both natural and chromatic notes, some commanding bitonal chords, and a somber cadence in B minor—a threatening tritone away from the opening flourish. II, *L'Allemande Hargneuse*—pompously dotted and majestic; III, *La Pucelle-Cantatrice*—gracious, singing, and very intimate; IV, *Courante des Souris de*

l'Opera is a quick, light *pièce croisée* set in the highest ranges of both uncoupled keyboards. V, *L'Insouciant, Le Soucieux*, and *L'Enragé* form a complex rondeau, utilizing specified *notes inégales* and *égales*—charming and delightful with beginning and ending in B major and interior couplets in B minor. VI, *L'Air du Temps Perdu*—stately and lyrical, with a swinging beat, it is a movement I plan to pair with *The Vicarage Garden* for a forthcoming recital—since both eloquently suggest “times of old.” VII, *Danse des Critiques* presents quick alternating dissonant chords in various tonalities. VIII, *Sarabande des Profondeurs* is characteristically grave and very slow, rooted once again in the lowest octave of the instrument and the key F minor, the key of fear and doubt. IX, Very lively: *La Gigue-Bataille*, in which the battle is represented by vigorously athletic arpeggios that will require some diligent daily practice!

The titles are not given in English translation, which serves both to highlight the Frenchness of the work and, for many of us, will serve as a research assignment with a French dictionary. A splendid page of *Notes to the Performer* provides practical explanations of the ornaments, all of which follow 18th-century French practices. Accidentals, of which there are many, are used in the traditional way, with enough cautionary ones in place to give relative certainty as to the composer's intent. Registration and manual indications for a large two-keyboard instrument are indicated as well. The 24-page score is clearly printed, and careful attention has been given for ease of page turns. Published by Edward B. Marks Music Company (www.ebmarks.com), ISBN 978-1-4768-1858-1, it is priced at \$17.99 and distributed by the Hal Leonard Corporation (catalog #HL 103357).

Comments and news items are always welcome. Address them to Dr. Larry Palmer lpalmer@smu.edu or 10125 Cromwell Drive, Dallas, TX 75229.

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