

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *English Suite* for Harpsichord at 100

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Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (photo courtesy of Robin Escovado)

Fifteen years ago, on November 5, 1994 to be exact, I first encountered the work that, thus far, appears to win the sweepstakes as the first 20th-century solo harpsichord piece. It was featured in Igor Kipnis's Spivey Hall recital, the culminating event of the Southeastern Historical Keyboard Society's conclave at Clayton State College in Morrow, Georgia.

Igor and I shared an abiding curiosity about these earliest works for our instrument. My first encounter with the earliest known harpsichord composition by a post-baroque or post-classic-era composer, Francis Thomé's *Rigodon*, opus 97, came from Kipnis's recording of the piece; rather than asking him for a "copy," I instituted a search for it, and was rewarded with a yellowed original, from the stock of the venerable music store, Noten Fuchs, in Frankfurt. But Thomé's charming pastiche dates from the final decade of the 19th century! In my 1989 book *Harpsichord in America*, pride of place for the FIRST 20th-century composition was given to the *Sonatina ad usum infantis* by Ferruccio Busoni (1915/1916). So, hearing a work that predated Busoni's was an exciting discovery.

Musical history intrigues me; searching for unusual repertory delights me; thus it was a bit humbling, to say the

least, to realize that I had not noticed the 1909 date for the *English Suite*, right there in bold print in Frances Bedford's *Catalog of 20th-Century Harpsichord and Clavichord Music* (embarrassing, even, considering that I had written the Foreword to Fran's invaluable tome, and had failed to cite Castelnuovo's work).

Kipnis wrote an extensive (and deservedly complimentary) review of Bedford's volume for the *Early Keyboard Studies Newsletter* of the Westfield Center (Volume VIII/3, July 1994). He chose to cite this *English Suite* as a working model for some ways in which to utilize the catalog. His research concerning the early history of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's composition appears in endnote five. I am quite certain that not every reader of THE DIAPASON has perused this material, so here are Igor's discoveries:

"As an example of how valuable Frances Bedford's catalog can be, a personal experience: leafing through the volume for examples that I might not know . . . I came across the name of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, a composer born in Italy (1895–1968). I became curious about the 1909 composition date attached to his *English Suite* for harpsichord. Seemingly, it had been revised in 1940, shortly after his arrival in the United States. Be-



English Suite for Piano (or Harpsichord)

cause of Bedford's information—first, that the piece was to be found in the [Ralph] Kirkpatrick archives of the Yale University Music Library and, secondly, that it had been published by Mills [Music]—I was able to consult the manuscript (there is no evidence that Kirkpatrick ever played it), contact the composer's two sons, and obtain from the Castelnuovo-Tedesco archive other copies of the manuscript plus the out-of-print Mills publication of 1962, now reading 'for piano or harpsichord.'

"The reconstructed story, based on facts contained in the composer's unpublished biography, several pages of which were most helpfully translated for me by Dr. Pietro Castelnuovo-Tedesco, is that the fourteen-year-old composer, then in Florence, had been assigned to study and imitate various baroque suites by his teacher, Gino Modona. None of that output was

published at that time, but [C-T] continued to play one of his pieces in particular, a three-movement 'English suite' based on Thomas Arne that he had intended for harpsichord (or piano). After settling in the United States, Castelnuovo-Tedesco transcribed the seven-to-eight-minute piece onto music paper, and he may have sent it to Kirkpatrick. (Bedford writes 'revised,' but, in fact, the composer set the music down from memory in 1940. A few range modifications in his own hand may be found in the manuscript, possibly a result of his having talked with Kirkpatrick.) The neo-classic *English Suite*, therefore, stands as the earliest solo harpsichord piece of our century, as well as a remarkably mature work for a fourteen-year-old student. It . . . will figure on my 1994–95 recital programs."

My recollection of Igor's performance is that it did not immediately impel me to play the piece. But being the conscientious academic that I try to be, I resolved to obtain a copy for use in a 20th-century harpsichord course. Finding the work proved to be ridiculously easy, since, for once, I remembered to check our own local library holdings. And there it was, on the shelf of the Hamon Arts Library at Southern Methodist University in Dallas! Pristine pages, apparently never placed on a music desk! I made a copy for reference, and returned the original score to the library.¹

Occasionally I would pull down my copy of the *English Suite* from the shelf; gradually, with each re-reading of the score, I became somewhat more interested in playing the piece in public. There are, as Kipnis noted, several notes that exceed the range of the harpsichord. (A similar problem occurs in the Busoni *Sonatina*. That seems especially unwonted given that Busoni owned a Dolmetsch-Chickering double harpsichord, quite evident in photographs taken in his personal library in Berlin, and thus one might expect him to have been aware of the instrument's *ambitus*.) Nevertheless, with only minor adjustments, Castelnuovo-Tedesco's work proved to be playable on the harpsichord.

Now that I have performed the piece repeatedly in recitals, I have not shied away from revising those passages that seem too pianistic to be performed as

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Example 1. *Preludio, quasi un'improvvisazione*



Example 2. *Andante*



written (especially several spots in the lyrical second movement during which the young composer could have benefited from “tying his right leg to the bench” as another composer once promised he would do when I criticized his reliance on the damper pedal, although ostensibly he was writing for a harpsichord!).

Examining the ten-page score as published by Mills Music, movement one, *Preludio, quasi un'improvvisazione* [Example 1], shows a distinct similarity to the arpeggiated first movement of Arne's *Sonata III in G Major*. Probably it should be performed in a manner suggested by the 18th-century Englishman in prefatory words engraved above the first staff of his publication: “In this, and other Preludes, which are meant as Extempore Touches before the Lesson begins, neither the Composer nor the Performer are oblig'd to a Strictness of Time.” Castelnovo-Tedesco's broken chords and scales lead to a thrice-presented perky motive, presented the last time as a duet. Five measures, combining running passages and a hint of the lively motive lead to seven block chords that serve as a bridge to the second movement. When performed on the harpsichord, perhaps these chords are best played *arpeggiando* (an indication not found in the 20th-century work, but specified in Arne's, where the number of unadorned chords is the same).

Completely of its own time, the following *Andante* movement [Example 2], a passionate aria comprising 62 measures, is the most extended of the three. Indeed its purple chromatics [Example 3] presage the bluesy, Gershwin-esque harmonies of Frederick Delius's 1919 *Dance for Harpsichord* (another work needing judicious rescoring if one is to make musical sense of its left-hand octaves and oom-pah-pah accompanimental figurations).

Movement three, *Giga* [Example 4], is a compact, vigorous fugue, to be played “in a mechanical way.” Several further Italian adjectives indicate the composer's concepts for a proper performance: “burlesque, bassoon like,” or “drily, in the manner of a marionette.”

Biographies of those first associated with the new-old harpsichord often contain illuminating anecdotes. A description of Castelnovo's living conditions at the time he was creating his first published work *Cielo di Settembre* (*September Sky*) (composed in the same year as the *English Suite*) is found in this 1964 letter to his cataloger Nick Rossi:

... really, up to that time, I had written music which was, more or less, 'derivative'. I also remember, almost physically, how I felt ... all alone in that huge old Florentine palace where we lived, with the big rooms and the high ceilings. ... it was so cold! (there was no central heating) and my hands were frost-bitten: I had to wear wool half-gloves, to be able to play ... and sometimes my fingers ached so much that I cried ...²

September Sky, for piano, was praised several years later by the composer Alfredo Casella (who was, incidentally, for several years the harpsichordist with Henri Casadesus' early music ensemble, the *Société des Instruments Anciens*). Perhaps such site- and mood-evoking words written during Castelnovo-

Tedesco's latter years will help to rekindle some current interest in his earliest essay from those pioneering days of the harpsichord's revival. From such efforts the modern harpsichord repertory has blossomed exponentially. Each of the thousands of new compositions for our instrument doubtless has its unique story, but I suspect that few of these are as unusual as this tale of a student work transcribed from memory by a mature, politically displaced Italian neo-classic composer. ■

Example 3. *Andante*, ms. 37–39



Example 4. *Giga*



This latest installment of the very occasional series “Harpsichord Repertoire in the 20th Century” is dedicated to THE DIAPASON as a special tribute for its 100th birthday. Harpsichord editor since 1969, Larry Palmer has written for the magazine under every editor, except for founder S. E. Gruenstein.

Notes

1. The library's copy had on its front cover the rubber-stamped signature of English harpsichordist C. Thornton Lofthouse (1895–1974), who obviously kept up with 20th-century publications for the harpsichord. In my own personal collection, I have several other scores from his estate, purchased at a London

antiquarian music shop: Stephen Dodgson's *Suite Number One for Clavichord* and Kurt Hessenberg's *Zehn Kleine Präludien*, both with the same stamped signature and copiously annotated with fingerings, dates of performance, and critical comments. SMU's score was unmarked, thus almost certainly unperformed by Lofthouse. Apparently this addition to the library collection was quite a bargain—a pasted-on price sticker reads 6 shillings; the penciled, antiquarian price, only 80 pence.

2. Letter to Nick Rossi (3 November 1964), from the Mario Castelnovo-Tedesco Collection (Series III [Correspondence, A, 102], Columbia: University of South Carolina Music Library Special Collections).

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