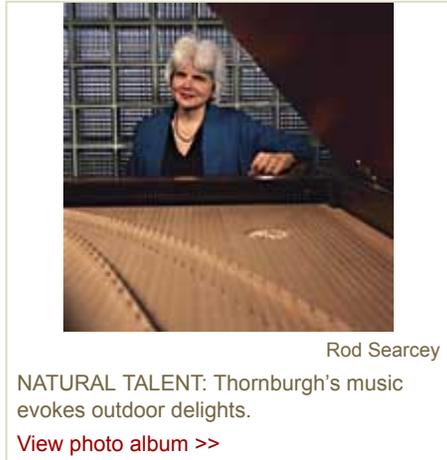


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NOTEWORTHY

Perfect for the Parlor

A new harpsichord gives chamber music a boost.



Rod Searcey

NATURAL TALENT: Thornburgh's music evokes outdoor delights.

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By Eva Ciabattoni

Drivers passing the plain silver van traveling from Berkeley to Stanford last July 17 would never have guessed its cargo. Later that hot summer evening, in the cool intimacy of the Cantor Arts Center auditorium, it was unveiled: Stanford's newest musical instrument, looking like a grand piano's slimmer cousin. Over the previous year, John Phillips had drawn on more than three decades of experience to build the 8 1/2-foot-long harpsichord, and he delivered it personally from his workshop to its debut performance.

Stanford early music lecturer and harpsichordist Elaine Thornburgh was at the keyboard with a program that complemented the season's art exhibition, "The Changing Garden." Selections from composers Rameau, Byrd, Couperin, Sweelinck and Peerson conveyed luxuriant sound portraits of poppies and primroses, woods and ocean waves, butterflies and nightingales.

Thornburgh sees nature not as an abstraction, but a vital element in daily life. Introducing Sweelinck's "Under the Linden Tree," she cited recent magazine articles about the demise of romance in marriages. Ardor might stand a chance, she mused, if people spent more time gamboling in the voluptuous outdoors instead of parked behind flickering computer screens. Similarly, Thornburgh said, radio, television and the habit of passive entertainment have diminished musical performance as a cornerstone of merrymaking and socializing.

As it happens, the harpsichord is ideally suited to the acoustics of a parlor, rather than a grand concert hall. The earliest instruments date back to 15th-century Flanders, and their precursors were handheld. Over the next 400 years, different designs evolved according to the needs of the composers they served. Italian design tends to be simple, focusing on purity and beauty of tone. Elaborately painted Flemish-style instruments featured a second manual (keyboard) used to transpose music. French designs couple the two manuals so that a single keystroke activates one-, two- or three-string registers, resulting in the familiar lush quality reminiscent of a lute or viola da gamba. German harpsichords, more evocative of an organ, are associated with the music of J.S. Bach and C.P.E. Bach, while the English school added features designed to compete with the up-and-coming piano in the late 18th century.

By 1800, the harpsichord was eclipsed by the piano. (The biggest difference between them is that harpsichord strings are plucked, piano strings struck.) The harpsichord stayed in the shadows more than a hundred years, until Wanda Landowska's performances in the early 20th century—and improved techniques in harpsichord building—sparked a revival.

At Stanford, a jury of keyboard instructors chooses four to six intermediate and advanced music students each year to study with Thornburgh, the department's sole harpsichordist. Until the recent acquisition, the University's inventory of early keyboard instruments included a French and an Italian harpsichord but hadn't been updated in nearly 30 years. Thornburgh and Mario Champagne, the music department's administrative director, thought the collection needed a new instrument for teaching and performing.

Choosing a harpsichord is not undertaken lightly. Apart from the \$30,000-plus price tag, different types of instruments suit different styles of music. After Champagne discovered an unused gift to fund the purchase, he and Thornburgh visited Phillips's Berkeley workshop and liked the sound of a Dresden-style harpsichord. Phillips explains that the 1739 Gräbner upon which he based his design for Stanford has a French disposition, making it ideal for Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. It can also accommodate a large repertoire of other composers, including all but 39 of Scarlatti's sonatas, those that require a key one note above the Gräbner's five-octave range.

The new instrument is constructed of Ponderosa pine with a soundboard of Norway spruce, and decorative and structural elements of claro walnut. Two manuals control two sets of 8-foot unison strings and one set of 4-foot strings pitched an octave higher, which can be sounded individually or together, allowing the colors of the individual registers to blend in organ-like textures. Although bird quill plectra are generally acknowledged to give the best touch for plucking the strings, they are easily ruined and require more maintenance, so Phillips used synthetic delrin set in pearwood jacks with holly tongues.

Phillips says the first time he played the newly built harpsichord, it sounded as though it was “stuffed with cotton and strung with rubber bands.” A month of playing allowed the soundboard to mature and brought out the resonances that give an instrument its soul.

After the new harpsichord’s Stanford debut, its maker assesses the sound as powerful and complex, yet clear enough that all the inner voices can be heard. The trebles are bright and singing, the basses sonorous. Adds Champagne, “It looks great, sounds good, the touch is very nice, the action is whisper-light. It’s fabulous.”

Music lovers have a chance to judge for themselves, when Thornburgh gives a solo performance on February 12 at 8 p.m. in Memorial Church. Tickets (general public \$10, students \$5) will be sold at the door.

The following is supplemental material that did not appear in the print edition of STANFORD.

A Tour of the Workshop

Walking into John Phillips’s Berkeley workshop is like taking a step back in time. Wood lines the studio, from raw boards of ponderosa pine and a sheet of burl walnut to the neatly organized pattern pieces that will constitute a whole instrument. Strips of wood (called gobars) under tension resemble a small forest of bare trees, curving under pressure adjusted daily to bend them into shape. A French and a Flemish harpsichord are under construction, awaiting bases that will be fitted onto the underside of their completed case rims. (For the Stanford instrument, Phillips fitted the sides around the base.)

Phillips specializes in restoration work as well as new construction. He tells of one 17th-century harpsichord he had to strip down to the case and soundboard, then splice slivers of wood to fill hundreds of minute cracks. Only then could his assistant apply paint to match the original Flemish floral pattern. He points to a nearly 400-year-old base that bears the maker’s original red pencil markings indicating the location of the 8-foot bridge.

Any modern craftsman plying an old trade must decide when modern tools and technology will serve the craft rather than detract from it. Wanting to stay true to original styles, Phillips studied their history and learned from assembling kits and copying old designs, apprentice-style, before venturing to innovate. He uses modern tools like a table saw and a band saw for cutting, and Microsoft Excel to calculate tension curves for stringing. But all his planing, fitting of joints and finish work is done by hand. He chooses glues for their historical authenticity, bonding quality and reversibility. (Gluing the soundboard into the case is one tricky maneuver, and reversibility is essential, Phillips says.)

After 30 years in the business, Phillips estimates that he has about 90 harpsichords in circulation, and that he can build about four per year.

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