

An interesting early ‘post-historical’ harpsichord – the Christmas gift

Whilst there was, of course, some awakening of curiosity in early music performance and period instruments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it wasn't really until the 1960s that interest became more widespread and led to many new ‘authentic’ early instruments starting to be made. But, in fact, immediately after the war there were already a few new pioneers who forged the way – such a one was John Cousen of Huddersfield. John's first musical interest was in the violin but in the late 1940s he became interested in early instruments and started out making some keyboard instruments before eventually moving on to his life's early instrument work: professionally making wide bore historically based recorders and other period wind instruments. For example these truly enormous, but historically accurate, proper pitched recorders shown in the picture below (copied with permission) being played by a quartet (c. 1960): including a young David Munrow with John Turner, Alan Lumsden and Andrew van der Beek.

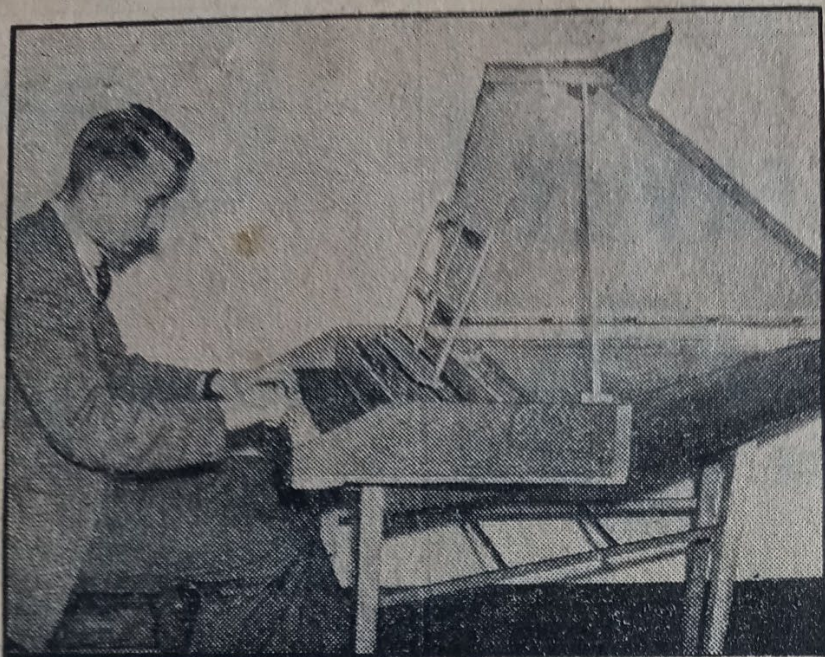


John Cousen died in 2014 (his obituary by Stephen Turner appeared in the June 2014 edition of FoMRHIQ) and more recently his widow, Mary, passed away. Their son Christopher (Kit) now has the sad and formidable task of assessing and, in some cases, disposing of the extensive collection of instruments (many original period examples) built up over almost 70 years:

ranging from violins, viols and, of course, early woodwind and many others too. A few items (including, suprisingly, an early serpent) are proving more problematical to pass on and one such is a harpsichord John made in 1950 (one of the very first post-war instruments) and thus is a very interesting example of those early days of modern 'antick' instrument making. It needs some attention and I've suggested to Kit that a FoMRHI member may be fascinated to 'restore' it to its 1950s hey-day and bring it back to life – as a true modern historical relic. He agrees and would be happy to give it to any such member who may have an interest in these early/modern instruments. The photographs below show the instrument together with a contemporary 1950 article in the local *Huddersfield Examiner* of him playing this instrument.



Made His Own Harpsichord



Mr. Cousen, of 2, Abingdon Street, Fartown, playing his home-made harpsichord. No heavy or light-handed touch of the key-board makes any difference to the tone.

A FARTOWN man, Mr. John D. Cousen, aged twenty-four, of 2, Abingdon Street, has constructed a harpsichord—the keyboard instrument of the 16th-18th centuries, a forerunner of the modern pianoforte.

Mr. Cousen, who is a qualified optician, told an "Examiner" reporter that he became interested in music as a schoolboy, and after learning to play the violin he turned his attentions to a study of the harpsichord.

"I found it practically impossible to buy a harpsichord," he said, "so I decided to construct one from old drawings. I had great difficulty in obtaining the necessary woods—cedar, birch and oak—and it took me nine months to complete the instrument. It has a range of four octaves."

Mr. Cousen, however, plays his harpsichord only occasionally. He prefers a recorder; but a friend of his, Mr. D. Addy, of Slathwalte, is a skilful exponent of the harpsichord.

Commenting on the scarcity of harpsichords, Mr. Cousen said, "I should be surprised if there are any harpsichord makers in Huddersfield, for I know of only two firms in the whole of England who make them."

The harpsichord reached the height of its popularity about 1750. Henry VIII. Elizabeth and Charles I. were accomplished players. With the introduction of the piano, harpsichord playing gradually declined, but Mr. Cousen is of the opinion that in recent years the instrument has become more popular, especially in specialised ensembles.

Mr. Cousen has also done a lot of transcription of folk-songs. "I have not come across any folk music from this locality," he remarked. "The probable reason is that this kind of music was evolved between 200 and 300 years ago when this district was sparsely populated."

Once a week Mr. Addy, Mr. Cousen and Mr. Ralph M. Sykes, 6, Hollin Terrace, Marsh, discuss and play folk-songs and medieval music, with the first-named performing on the harpsichord and the others on recorders.

When a leading exponent of folk-song, Mary Rowland, gave a recital at the Fitzwilliam Street Unitarian Church last week, Mr. Cousen and Mr. Sykes were interested members of the audience. Afterwards they went with her to the home of Mrs. M. Campbell Vickerman, the church secretary, and played their recorders to a harp accompaniment by Mary Rowland.

H.Ex., Wed, 18/10/50

Any members who are interested in having this instrument, Kit who is very happy for you to contact him direct by email: sccousen@gmail.com

Epilogue – the spirit of Christmas

Not only was John a highly talented maker of instruments but Mary and he were much loved by all who knew them. As an epilogue I'd like to share with members the following eulogy (previously included in a North East Early Music Forum magazine and here reproduced by permission) by their old friend Vincent Walsh which well encapsulates their world and the high regard in which they were held.

'I met John and Mary Cousen in 1973. They were presenting some early music items at Baildon Festival. I had bought my first viol, a treble by Ubel, and I needed someone to play consorts with. John was also looking for souls to add to his Sunday night singers, and we began to travel from Bradford to Huddersfield to join them. That's about forty-eight years ago, and we've been making that journey ever since; Sunday nights to sing, and one day a week to play viols. John had written out vast amounts of music into part books for players; recorders, viol consorts a3, a4, a5, a6. It seemed like acres of the stuff! In fact, if you were to tell me that it matched that favourite BBC benchmark: 'About the size of Wales', I'd be quite prepared to believe you. And then there were the published scores for singers from *Mapa Mundi*, Oxford editions of Tudor Church Music, *Musica Britannica*, and so on, introducing Palestrina, Lassus, Byrd, Tallis, White ... The Cousens' door was always open with a kindly welcome for music makers to come and share this treasure trove.

The Christmas parties at the Cousens' house were the stuff of legend (sorry about the cliché, but I can call witnesses if you challenge me). Held as close as possible to the first Saturday after Christmas Day, but in any case, within the twelve days of Christmas, the party invitation was in the Christmas card. Let me digress a moment to describe the Christmas card. Nothing fancy here; a real card card. On it were the four, sometimes five staves of an old carol (*written by John in his fine distinctive 'period' music hand - MH*) often from the German repertoire, a bit of Praetorius, say, set out such that singers might gather round it at a table and sing their parts each upon his own side. Oh! To have kept more carefully a full set! In time, I hope someone might gather them as a set and publish them. Surely they'll become as well known in the early music world as Giles Cartoon annuals on the shelves at W.H.Smiths.

The party would begin at 2:00 p.m. People would arrive, from all over the country, some bearing instruments ("Cases in the hall, please!") and with bags, and the occasional bottle or two, Tupperware boxes and tins and plates hidden under cling-film, all whisked away into the kitchen for Mary to select where and when best to set them out on the table later. Meanwhile, in the music room, we would find a rather ordinary looking grey box, packed full of Christmas music. The challenge was to sing and play our way through everything while we had the mix of forces to do it. As soon as there were enough souls to sing all the parts, we'd start, possibly with Praetorius: *En Natus Est Emmanuel*, from large copies written out by John. Then Remember, O, Thou Man, by Ravenscroft. We might sing a few more - Sweelinck: *Hodie Christus Natus Est* was ever a favourite of mine, - until there were enough players for a consort

or two. Then voices and recorders, voices and viols, recorders. There was a session for small pipes, or a mini-set for rebecs a2. And always a lute or theorbo adding to the richness. We'd play and listen and pause for a little cuppa or something more. In twos or threes, folks might slip away to another room to have a private practice before presenting a party piece, always to a worthy standard. There'd be Church band, with Chalumeau, Flute, Serpent and voices, too. And the greetings! That simple joy of renewing friendships from last year; showing new instruments; telling of minor adjustments made to transform a reluctant note in a flute; discussing foibles of this recorder or that reed; a 'wrinkle' to solve some little snag. Now and then, Mary would go kitchen-wards to prepare the feast, and come back to join in. There was a general pause when Mary invited us to the stout table so laden with festive fare as to be beyond immediate comprehension! All that food. Baked potatoes, sausage rolls, cold meats, cakes, mince pies, apple strudel... All that preparation. All that enjoyment.

There were not sufficient chairs in that big house, but there was room to stand and talk quietly or eat earnestly; and there was always extra room to sit on the wide staircase. The sheer pleasure of meeting souls, some of whom we'd not seen since last year. Catching up on news; filling the details that we had skipped over earlier on so that the music might embrace us all. We'd resume with... what? A session of 'nasties'- crumhorns and other reed caps. And on one occasion, one brave soul brought a regal he had built. What a gallant sound that made! And we'd play and sing some more. I forget how we chose the 'best' time to do Praetorius' Quem Pastores Laudavere a2, etc up to a11, with soloists, chorus, viols and recorders, but it was always a highlight of the party. And we'd never fail to play and sing Buxtehude In Dulci Jubilo, with some fine recorder playing and fiddling in the band and where we tenors found that we could manage to sing down to bottom F and be determined to make as rich a sound as the basses while we were there! The party would officially end late at night with the Bell Anthem; Purcell's Rejoice In The Lord Alway. Followed by an invitation to stay for a drop of soup! Dickens' Spirit of Christmas Past would have been delighted with the Cousens and their spirit of Christmas!