

60 SECONDS WITH "SOUNDBOARD"

Directed by David McGuinness, *Concerto Caledonia* is Scotland's leading baroque ensemble, specialising in music of 18th Century Scotland played on period instruments. David has appeared as a harpsichord soloist with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. He has also broadcast on BBC radio, been a producer and presenter on Radio 3 and has recorded extensively with *Concerto Caledonia*. "Soundboard" invited David to talk about his diverse musical interests as well as current and future projects.



You were the youngest ever graduate from York University? How old were you and what were the circumstances surrounding your being an undergraduate at such an early age?

I wasn't that young really, I went when I was 16, so I graduated for the first time at 19. I'd started school fairly young and then skipped a year before going to high school. I went to York to do maths but only lasted 4 weeks as I was rubbish at it! Music seemed like more fun, and I thought, I'll have 3 years doing something I enjoy and then I'll still only be 19 so what's the problem?

You play a wide range of instruments. Can you list them and do you have a particular favourite?

Well, officially I play harpsichord, fortepiano, piano, organ (but I'm out of practice on that one), harmonium and melodica. But other things creep in from time to time: inept blues harmonica, various electronic devices (I've loved samplers ever since they appeared), I'm a passable fretless bass player and a terrible electric guitarist. I have a flute but I've never practised enough to be any good, and I'm hoping to learn violin along with my daughter when she starts. If I have a favourite it's either the melodica, or the 1755 Kirkman harpsichord in the Russell Collection, which I always want to take home.

Is my observation that you're principally involved with baroque music correct? Within this there appears a disparate range of other tastes. Are there any particular influences that have caused this?

Well I'm crawling out of the baroque ghetto now into more areas. I first really got excited about music listening to the John Peel show in the bath when I was about 10, which was in the age of punk, so the Buzzcocks and their ilk still have a special place in my musical heart. Classical and early music came later, when I started exploring the LP and score collection in Glasgow's Mitchell Library, in the days when you could borrow from it. But it was that same process of discovering music that your friends wouldn't know, whether it was some obscure punk band, Orlando Gibbons or Stockhausen. Now I do it with 18th century collections of Scottish music in libraries!

You maintain an interesting web diary. I've read that you play melodica on "Spring Any Day Now". What made you opt to use it?

In my capacity as a BBC producer I brought Finland's Ensemble Ambrosius over to Edinburgh in 2002 for a concert. They play on old instruments, but they only play contemporary music, and their first album was of Frank Zappa tunes! One of their multi-instrumentalists, Jonte Knif, was playing melodica, and it blended so well with baroque oboe I was amazed. It also looked very odd which appealed to me, and it's very cheap. As a keyboard player, you're normally stuck sitting in one place, and you can't take your instrument around with you easily: the melodica solves both those problems and lets you use your breath expressively too - it's a wonderful invention.

I've also read in your diary that you've never mastered the fortepiano. Some of our readers won't have had the opportunity to play one. Can you tell us about some of the difficulties it presents?

Well, the word fortepiano covers such a wide range of instruments, each with its own quirks, delights and difficulties. It's a particularly hard instrument to really master, because the depth of touch tends to be shallow, so your fingers are working to very small tolerances of distance and pressure. And there are so many things that can go wrong! On the soundtrack of the new movie of 'Vanity Fair' I played a 1801 Broadwood which is like taming a wild beast, and just the other day I was lucky enough to play the oldest piano in existence, the 1720 Cristofori in the Met Museum in New York, which is quite the opposite: you coax it and it sings back to you - amazing.

Concerto Caledonia's recent album with Linn "Mungrel Stuff" has been well received by reviewers. Does its quirky title make reference to a mongrel-like mélange of influences? Tell us a bit about it.

Well, "Mungrel Stuff" is a contemporary description of Geminiani's Scots song arrangements, and it's not meant to be flattering. But I like it: I'm always suspicious of the notion that exists in some traditional music circles that, for example, a song learnt from your mother is



'I'm lucky to be a keyboard player...'

necessarily more meaningful than one learnt from a record. I think that's nonsense: you end up in search of some musico-racial purity which is really offensive. On the CD is Domenico Corri's 'Duncan Gray' (played on the Russell Collection's 1793 Broadwood with Venetian swell) which includes a Tambourin: a French dance on a Scots tune by an Italian composer.

You collaborate regularly with Cape Breton musicians. How do you find the performance style there differs from that which has evolved in Scotland when the two cultures have essentially derived from the same Celtic tradition?

Well, only recently I was playing some tunes with David Greenberg, and in a strathspey I decided to follow Robert Mackintosh's 1790s bassline exactly. David said 'hey, you're playing like a Cape Bretoner'. So there are clearly things which have survived from the 18th century there which haven't done so here.

As well as boasting ability on an array of instruments, you also work as a producer, arranger, lecturer and teacher. Have you some secret energy source?

I wish I had! The only thing that keeps me going is fear of boredom I think. I try to balance not repeating myself with the necessity of earning a living and feeding my family! I'm lucky to be a keyboard player, because I can keep my technique at an acceptable level without having to practise very much.

If there were a fire in your house and you could only save one recording, which would it be?

Oh, that's hard. For preservation purposes I'd probably grab the little pile of CDs which are the recordings I made with friends as a teenager, and the theatre and TV music I wrote in my 20s - lots of memories there. But if it were for something of musical value, I'd take David Bowie's LP Scary Monsters, just to hear the exquisitely precise violence of Robert Fripp's guitar on the first track, I never tire of it. Or possibly the first album by John Zorn's Naked City, for its combination of astonishing virtuosity and glorious stupidity - no matter how despondent I am, it always cheers me up and reminds me how great music can be.

Musically, which individual has influenced you more than any other?

Ooh, another difficult one. I think it would be the clarinettist Alan Hacker, who was one of my lecturers at York. His Decca recording of the Weber clarinet quintet, played on an old clarinet found in an Edinburgh dustbin (honestly!) is like punk chamber music, totally extreme. I think I identify with his stubborn refusal to be pigeon-holed as anything, and his determination to make music that excites him in the face of any difficulties that come along.



Left: Working on another project.

Below: Lion - Concerto Caledonia's quartet (L to R: Katherine McGillivray, David McGuinness, Alison McGillivray, David Greenberg).



Any exciting forthcoming projects you're allowed to tell us about?

Well, lots of recordings actually. Concerto Caledonia have a CD of 18th century Scots material coming out in July on Delphian, and I'm hoping to make a solo recording of French repertoire on the glorious 1769 Taskin for them too. For release early next year, we've recorded a disc of the Earl of Kellie's music for Linn: we played some of the chamber stuff in Kellie Castle itself, and the orchestral pieces in St Jude's on the Hill in London. It's very exciting music, and it's scandalous that no-one's given him a whole CD to himself before. Which other countries ignore their own musical history like this? As the Lion Quartet, we're piecing together the eclectic follow-up album to "Spring Any Day Now", which will have on it everything from Robert Mackintosh and Thomas Morley to spoke word collages! Then this summer I'm working on a CD of early Arcadian music in Montreal with Suzie Le Blanc, Chris Norman and David Greenberg. Better brush up on my French...

[Read more about David McGuinness and Concerto Caledonia at www.concal.org/]