

# My virginal making in the English way

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I could easily recognize him in the evening crowd on the platform of Middlesbrough station, though I had never seen him nor seen a picture of him. He was not so young, prudent and very gentle, just the man that I had guessed from his letters during ten years.

He is Mr David Bolton who had taught me the virginal making, mostly by his instruction manual and through many letters. The virginal is a square instrument with the same action of the harpsichord. He supplied me with a lot of metal parts which were not sold in Japan and some wooden parts which I could not make. He had long worked for a chemical company. When he had quitted the work, he began to sell these parts and instruction manuals in a simple kit form. All the parts were made or prepared in his attic. He always quickly answered each letter which I wrote to solve the difficulty in my work. It took five days on single way, his answer letters should arrive in two weeks having no exception. His answers and suggestions helped me enough and finally I finished the first virginal in a year since I began the work. After that I made ten virginals in about ten years.

Looking from Japan, the coexistence of conservatism and creativity in English people is sometimes strange or astonishing. The English voluntary or amateurism may help us to understand this. I will write here my small experience through virginal making in the English way.

On the way to his car after we exchanged greetings, he asked "Do you know why we go the left in England?" "We can put a harpsichord into a car nicely so that its tail coming to the seat next to the driver. In France they have to put the harpsichord upside down!" The harpsichord has the shape a little similar to the piano, but the tail is far thinner and it can go on the seat if the driver sit in the right seat. The next question was "What is Japanese early music like?" This is a natural question for English people, who are interested in the art or culture of foreign countries. I have often heard that Japanese students studying music in London were asked "What is Japanese classical music like?" We are expected to tell about "our music", if we learn European

music. Japanese painting, if we learn European painting. Japanese flute or shakuhachi, if we learn European pipes. "Why do you study European ... instead of Japanese ..." These are natural questions, but often we are not willing to answer it. I tried to explain Japanese traditional early music, but it was limited and could not satisfy his curiosity.

His atelier was on the second (in Japan we will say the third) floor of his house. Many tools were there. He explained each one. Some were factory made electric tools, but many others were wooden tools he made, which were designed to help in each process of virginal making. For example, a large board edged with strips of wood to be used when gluing bottom mouldings, or a strangely shaped wood block to be used for gluing the corners of two panels at right angle or certain angles. All were rather simple but very important for the work. The most complicated one was the winding machine to make wound bass strings for clavichords. He also showed me his clavichord and advised me to make clavichords, but I was so devoted to the virginal making that I did not think of other instruments. The clavichord is also a keyboard instrument, with strings which are not plucked but pushed up by small pieces of brass placed in the far end of keys.

In the evenings we played the English consort music he prepared for us; he played the cello, his wife the viola and I the violin. These pieces for consorts are rather easy to play at sight reading, and there are many kinds of consort such as in three parts, four parts, five parts and so on, which would be chosen according to the number of the guests the host has. When I was leaving him after the three-day stay, he told me "You have bought many parts from me. You can reduce the amount little by little and finally you can make it zero. I will tell you all the suppliers from which I get the parts for the instruments in case you can not get them in Japan. Some parts are from West Germany. It is a waste of time and money to import from West Germany and export to Japan!"

A few years later I began to think of obtaining all the parts by myself and make instruments on my own design, though it took another decade to achieve this. I knew that all the kinds of wood I needed were imported in Japan. When I got A-class spruce (spruce is a kind of pine, nearly all the soundboards of European musical instruments are made in spruce) from an ordinary Japanese wood trader, I was astonished to find that the spruce was the best I have ever

seen. The trader told me that the A-class was used for window frames, door and door frame or other house parts you could see, while B-class was used for structure frame which you could not see. What a rich country Japan is to use soundboard-quality spruce to the materials of doors and windows!

Fortunately I could come across a craftsman who was willing to make complicated parts from hard wood. He had all the traditional wood work technique necessary to make all kinds of furniture. He had made over 200 planers to get special curves. He made them from ordinary flat planers which were sold at shops. I learned from him how high the level of Japanese craftsmanship level was. Unfortunately it is almost dying because the forestry is not going well and furniture is mostly imported. It is now hard to make even a fine chair in Japan.

The last parts which I kept buying from him were keyboard blanks. A keyboard blank is a wooden panel before cut apart into keys. When I asked him "What 'blank' means? My largest dictionary reads 1. not written, 2. not filled in, 3... 7. unfinished," he answered at once, "Your largest dictionary is correct. It means "unfinished" but is used as a noun. English nouns can be used as adjectives, but occasionally adjectives are used as nouns." Keyboard blanks are normally in basswood which is very similar to Japanese 'shina(しな)'. I bought often several pieces of shina but I did not find them in satisfying quality. Later when I got to know American alder, I determined to use it instead of basswood.

It was also pleasant to know some incredible parts makers in England. Mr DJ Law, historical brassware maker, produces all his hinges and other brass parts accurately copied after the brassware used on historical harpsichords and other instruments. Another certain man produces extraordinarily fine Italian historical jacks. A jack which is used in harpsichords and virginals, has a plectrum in order to pluck a string. These activities do not seem to be successful if we say in a commercial point of view. But they want their products to be used in many instruments and they are happy if their products are recognized and exported to other European countries or even to Japan. Similarly, some people help certain activities with money or labour. For example, as you may know, local steam locomotives run under these kinds of helps. Forests are kept by certain societies. The voluntary shall make various kinds of activities possible.

He visited my house twice with his wife. Both were only short stays. Their son is living in Australia and when they flew to Australia they stopped over in Japan. They studied Japanese little by little on a Japanese course on BBC TV. They could read Hiragana. They could read "よこはま" though it took 15 seconds, when we arrived at Yokohama station. They could write and read "八王子(Hachioji)", where I live, and "止まれ(stop)" sign which was often written on the roads. Once on our morning walk he exclaimed "Huge leaves!" seeing a tree in a garden of a house. He enjoyed the tropical gardens (so do English people find!) very much. He said smiling, "A tea is served automatically!" when we took lunch at a Japanese restaurant. It must be a surprise for English people to be served a tea "automatically", which should be carefully prepared and tasted.

When he came the first time, he advised little on my clavichord making, and on the second he only said "Congratulations!" This was the last word commenting on my instruments. Perhaps this is also one of the English ways, not complimenting further. After that we only write or talk on our daily lives. He wrote once that he had forgotten "how to control children!" when his grandchildren visited him. He has a field a little way apart from his house, on a hill. He often visits there with his wife. They have planted some trees. But it may not be easy for a young tree to grow there. For me as a Japanese, pastures of England look very attractive, but once the woods disappear, it may be hard to regenerate quickly. On the contrary, a large part of Japan is covered with woods even though we do not pay any attention to keep it. I now understand that Japan archipelago is much blessed and I should not import wood from Europe or other foreign countries any more.

Our names are listed in the revised edition of "International Clavichord Directory 2005" as clavichord maker by British clavichord society.

Clavichord maker

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