

IN MEMORIAM: KENNETH GILBERT (DECEMBER 16, 1931 – APRIL 15, 2020)

Hank Knox

All of us who are active in the field of Historically Informed Performance, especially those of us who play keyboards, have been touched in some way or another by Kenneth Gilbert's passage through our world. His contributions to the twentieth-century reevaluation and revival of early keyboard repertoire have had a significant and lasting impact on the way we play, hear, edit, teach, and think about music of the past.

Kenneth Gilbert was born in Montreal, Quebec and studied organ with Conrad Letendre and piano with Yvonne Hubert. He was awarded the 1953 Prix d'Europe for organ and studied for two years in Europe with Nadia Boulanger (composition), Gaston Litaize and Maurice Duruflé (organ), and Sylvie Spicket and Ruggero Gerlin (harpsichord). He worked primarily as an organist for the early part of his career, and served at Queen Mary Road United Church in Montreal from 1952 to 1967. There he was responsible for the installation in 1959 of the first major modern tracker organ in Canada, built by Rudolph von Beckerath of Hamburg. This was the first of three major Beckerath organs to be installed in Canada, and among the earliest to be installed in North America. He was also involved in the nascent early music scene in Montreal, performing with the Montreal Consort of Ancient Instruments directed by Otto Joachim, the Montreal Bach Choir under George Little, and with gambist Gian Lyman. He went on to establish the Early Music Programme at McGill University in the 1960s.

He returned to Europe for further study in the early 1960s with support from the Quebec government and from the Canada Council for the Arts. His interests then turned more and more to the harpsichord, and he became convinced that the best way to approach music of the past was to learn from the sounds of historic instruments and to study the prints, manuscripts, and treatises left by contemporary musicians. His interest in early French repertoire in particular led to a project to record the complete harpsichord works of François Couperin for Radio Canada International. And the preparation for this recording led him to produce a new edition for Heugel from the original eighteenth-century engravings. For the recording, he chose his newly commissioned instrument built by Frank Hubbard after an original instrument by Jean-Henry Hemsch in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. This groundbreaking set of recordings, which was released by Harmonia Mundi in Europe, firmly established him as one of the leading lights

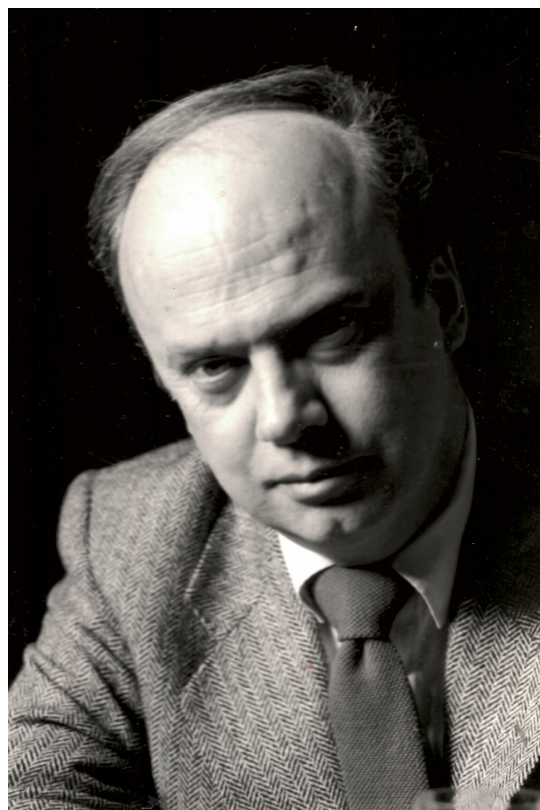


Photo: Maurice Decker

of the burgeoning Early Music movement.

Over the course of an international career as performer and musicologist that spanned some four decades, he played solo harpsichord recitals in all of the major centres in Europe, North and South America, Australia, and Asia, and was heard in numerous recordings for radio and television around the world. As Stephen Plaistow, writing in *Gramophone* (May 1973), said, "Kenneth Gilbert's achievement... is to rescue the music from a small circle of connoisseurs and to make it... universally enjoyable. He does so by harnessing the discipline of scholarship to his flair for performing the music... Not since Thurston Dart... has there been such a fruitful coincidence of the scholar's mind and the performer's fingers in this field." He produced a steady stream of influential recordings, many on original instruments. A complete online discography (compiled by Antonio Lechasseur, http://hypatia.music.mcgill.ca/1/gilbert/gilbert_discography.html) lists 57 original recordings and well over 250 reprints and reissues. Other than a very early

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album recorded on a Wittmayer, all of his harpsichord recordings were made on restored antiques or instruments inspired by original instruments.

Beginning in the 1960s, he assembled a varied collection of instruments, including an anonymous Italian instrument signed “F.A. 1677,” whose plan is shown in Plate I of Frank Hubbard’s *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making* (Harvard University Press, 1965), a single-manual instrument by Albert Delin (1768) on which he recorded works by Jean-Henri D’Anglebert, and a marvellous two-manual instrument built probably by François-Étienne Blanchet II in 1757 around a soundboard and rose signed I.C. (Joseph Johannes Couchet) in 1671 and modified by Pascal Taskin in 1778 heard on many of his own recordings, as well as a large collection of modern instruments based on historical models by such builders as Hubert Bédard, Frank Hubbard, William Dowd, Rainer Schütze, Willard Martin, and William Post Ross. Original harpsichords heard on his recordings include instruments by Joseph Collesse and Jean Franky, Carl August Gräbner, Andreas Ruckers (rebuilt by Hemsch), Jean-Claude Goujon, Nicolas Dumont (rebuilt by Taskin), Jean-Antoine Vaudry, Pierre Donzelague, Sébastien Garnier, and Pierre Bellot. While he is often associated with French repertoire, particularly Couperin, Jean-Philippe Rameau, D’Anglebert, Jacquet de la Guerre, and Jacques Champion de Chambonnières, his recordings include much of the harpsichord repertoire of J.S. Bach, along with collections of George Frideric Handel, Johann Jakob Froberger, and Henry Purcell. While he never recorded himself on the F.A., it can be heard in recordings by Bob van Asperen (Froberger), Paola Erdas (Luis Venegas de Henestrosa) and the present writer (Girolamo Frescobaldi).

Following the international success of the Couperin edition (completed in 1972), Gilbert began the monumental task of preparing a new edition of the 555 sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. Eleven volumes were published by Heugel (1971–84). Gilbert also prepared a facsimile edition of the complete harpsichord works of François Couperin (Broude Brothers, 1973) and edited the complete harpsichord works of D’Anglebert (Heugel, 1975). He prepared new editions of Bach’s Goldberg Variations (Salabert, 1979), Frescobaldi’s first and second books of toccatas (Zanibon, 1978 and 1979), and Rameau’s complete harpsichord works (Heugel, 1979). He became Président délégué of the Oiseau-Lyre publishing firm where he produced a reissue of suites by Charles Dieupart and oversaw the reissue of the thirteen-volume Paul Brunold edition of the complete works of François Couperin. Other editions include Bach’s Pièce d’orgue BWV 572a (Oiseau-Lyre, 1993) and an enjoyable two-harpsichord arrangement of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 (Ut Orpheus, 2001). He collabo-

rated with Christopher Stembridge on the first volumes of the new Bärenreiter edition of Frescobaldi’s keyboard works. Among his last projects were keyboard “transliterations” of lute and chitarrone pieces by Giovanni Girolamo Kapsberger for Ut Orpheus (1997, 1998, and 2001). His method of transcription involved reproducing the note picture of the original lute tablature by printing the rhythms above the pitches rendered as stemless half-notes; these wonderful pieces, reflective of the works of Frescobaldi, deserve to be much better known to keyboard players.

In parallel with his performing and editorial careers, Gilbert enjoyed a long teaching career at conservatories in Montreal, Quebec City, Paris, Antwerp, Stuttgart, and the Mozarteum in Salzburg, in guest positions at the Royal Academy and Royal College of Music in London, and at countless summer academies, of which the seminar of the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, where he taught for twenty years, is particularly noteworthy. His singular achievement as a teacher was to foster the particular artistic voice of each of his students, providing them with interpretive autonomy through his example as keyboard artist, researcher, and organologist. His students received a solid grounding in the technical aspects of harpsichord playing (fingering and articulation), familiarity with the various styles of keyboard composition (counterpoint, stylus phantasticus, and dance genres) and national styles, a critical understanding of source materials based on close examination of original material, especially contemporary pedagogical writings, and knowledge of the appropriate instrument for a given work.

A conference dedicated to his many interests, “*Autour du clavier d’autrefois: The Legacy of Kenneth Gilbert*,” held at McGill University in 2012, highlighted the breadth and depth of his interests. The collection of essays from the conference, published in *Perspectives on Early Keyboard Music and Revival in the Twentieth Century* (edited by Rachelle Taylor and Hank Knox, Ashgate Historical Keyboard Series, Routledge, 2018), pays homage to all facets of his activities and offers a comprehensive overview of his many and varied contributions to the early music revival. (A paperback edition has just been released.)

He received numerous awards for his work, including Honorary Doctorates from McGill University and the University of Melbourne, the Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art, and was made an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music, and an Officier de l’Ordre des arts et lettres de France. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and named an officer of the Order of Canada, the highest Canadian civilian award.

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I am one of many who have been marked by his influence. Some four and a half decades ago, when I was just beginning to study harpsichord at McGill University in Montreal, my teacher, John Grew, invited his teacher, colleague and friend, Kenneth Gilbert, to give a series of masterclasses and a concert at McGill. That visit marked me profoundly. My most treasured memory of that encounter was the concert. The programme was devoted to Bach's French Suites, played, as I recall, on a large Italian instrument he had purchased from William Post Ross. For a young student, it was a revelation to hear someone in full control of their craft render that music so precisely and lucidly and at the same time so expressively. I remember being very aware that while all the details were carefully thought-out and controlled, there was still room for spontaneous delights of the moment; there were as many pleasures for the mind as for the ear and the heart. But it was the encore that made an indelible impression on me. After hearing the rational delights of Bach for over an hour, we were offered the Grand Chaconne of Louis Couperin, and I recall finding myself so moved by the rich sound, luscious ornamentation and intense rhythmic sensibility that tears were running down my cheeks. It was the first time (and one of the very few since) that I found myself so moved by a performance, and I remember thinking that I wanted to learn how to make that kind of music myself and hoped I would be able to study with such an artist.

Following my studies at McGill, I had the privilege to spend a year studying with him privately while he was living on the grounds of the chateau at Maintenon. I would take the train from Paris and spend the day there, playing

alone on the Delin or the Blanchet/Taskin, then having a long lesson. Years later, during a sabbatical from my own teaching position at McGill, he allowed me to record a CD of Frescobaldi's keyboard works on the 1677 Italian harpsichord which was housed in the museum adjacent to the great Cathedral of Chartres. We had to do the recording sessions after business hours, which meant recording from 11 p.m. until we couldn't keep our eyes open any longer. One evening, Kenneth came in to listen and ended up assisting with one of the tracks. At first it was somewhat intimidating to have the editor of the edition I was using and the owner of the harpsichord we recorded on listening intently in the recording booth. But Kenneth was a gracious and meticulous listener, and all of his suggestions were constructive and helpful and the final recording was better for his participation.

During the many years when he would visit Montreal, he would come by the McGill campus to work in the library, to visit his instruments, or, as an Adjunct Professor at the Schulich School of Music, to advise graduate students. I could always count on a coffee or a meal together. I miss the freewheeling conversations that roamed all over the cultural landscape. Kenneth had a great interest in current thinking in science, politics, literature, and the arts and would offer readings or websites that were new to me. I feel his loss profoundly. But like so many others whose lives he touched, my professional and personal lives are the richer for his passage.

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