

## Blandine Verlet (1942-2018)

*A French Harpsichordist Par Excellence*



One of that select but notable band of French harpsichordists who rose to international prominence during the second half of the last century, Blandine Verlet, who died recently, was a dynamic and diverse musician whose influence permeated all aspects of the subject. Quickly emerging as a noted scholar of Baroque repertoire and a virtuoso performer of the front rank who toured and recorded tirelessly, the remarkable breadth of her industry brought not only greater recognition for the instrument itself, but also proved pivotal in inspiring countless new generations of performers.

Born in Paris, the daughter of Pierre Verlet, the distinguished Curator of the Louvre, while a student at the National Conservatory, Blandine Verlet's first harpsichord tutors were Marcelle de Lacour and Huguette Dreyfus. While there, in 1963, she won the coveted first prize at the Munich International Competition. She then undertook further studies with both Gustav Leonhardt and then Ruggero Gerlin at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy, before spending twelve months in America, when she refined her technique in the company of Ralph Kirkpatrick at Yale University.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given such distinguished teachers, Verlet acquired not only a fine technique but also a deep understanding of many and varied styles. Couple this with an acute sense of colour alongside an unerring ability to animate even the most austere of offerings and one can easily understand why her playing was thought so revelatory at the time. Enjoying annual concert tours of America amid a non-stop global career that lasted almost half a century, save for rare recitals at the Wigmore Hall and the Queen Elizabeth Hall, sadly she appeared all too rarely in this country.

As a teacher herself Verlet was equally meticulous, exacting and demanding, never more so than during her time in Paris as Professor of Harpsichord at both the Conservatoire Claude Debussy and the Conservatoire Jean-Phillipe Rameau. Further afield she fulfilled a similar role at the Gabriel Faure Conservatoire of Angouleme, the Regional Conservatory at of Bordeaux and the Regional Conservatory of Ruel-Malmaison. In addition, her scholastic credentials also found a ready outlet as a key note speaker and performer at master classes, seminars and summer schools worldwide.

Happily many of her pioneering performances endure courtesy of a large and extensive discography that embraces virtually everything of significance ever composed for the instrument. She became the first individual player to record all the solo harpsichord music of the Couperin dynasty. For this she used a 1624 Ruckers instrument housed at Unterlinden Museum at Colmar in Alsace. The same instrument featured on the majority of her Bach recordings, most notably the *Partitas*, the *Two* and *Three Part inventions*, *The Goldberg Variations* and *Book 1 of The Well Tempered Clavier*.

For her extensive exploration of the music of Johann Jacob Froberger she used a more mellow sounding late 17<sup>th</sup> century instrument from the collection of Jannick Guillou. In contrast, her Rameau, Duphy, Scarlatti and Balbastre recordings featured a beautifully sounding instrument with a rich bass, originally built in 1754 by Jean-Henri Hemsch and restored by its owner, Jean-Henri Mercier-Ythier. Likewise, when dusting down the music of the Italian composer, Girolamo Frescobaldi, she became a most persuasive interpreter of this most allusive of composers.

Among her collaborative ventures, she worked with fellow countryman, the organist Jean Guillou, in bringing out an eight record set of J.S. Bach's *Clavierbung*. Her judicious accompaniments also gave added impetus to the flautist, Stephen Preston, in his quest to revive the flute music of Michel De La Barre. Later, she and Gérard Poulet combined on a boxed set of Mozart's early sonatas for keyboard and violin. In the interim, together with the English Chamber Orchestra, Verlet partnered Raymond Leppard, Andrew Davis and Philip Ledger in a recording of J.S. Bach's A minor *Quadruple Concerto*.

That she made this repertoire so much her own, makes one wonder what the seventeenth century did without her. Representing the very best in harpsichord playing, she was musically deeply engaged in all she did. Her great skill was knowing exactly how to make the slightest of hesitations, or an infinitesimal leaning on a note, so as to bring out the harmonic point without disturbing the rhythmic flow. Likewise, she was never afraid to add an occasional mordent for emphasis, her care over articulation and phrasing being such that her part playing remained one of the utmost lucidity.

Always an inveterate traveller, in May 1976, in the company of singers, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and Giuseppe Di Stefano, pianists Gina Bachauer and Philippe Entremont, violinist Ruggiero Ricci, together with the Amadeus Quartet, all took part in a two week sailing from Amsterdam to Leningrad and back, one of the first ever music cruises of its type, it subsequently served as a model for countless future events. Thirty one years later, in 2007, she compiled her masterly study, *L'Offrande Musicale*, now a most poignant and fitting memorial to her work and achievements.

She was married to the crime novelist and record executive, Igor Maslowski, who died in 1999.

***Kenneth Shenton***