

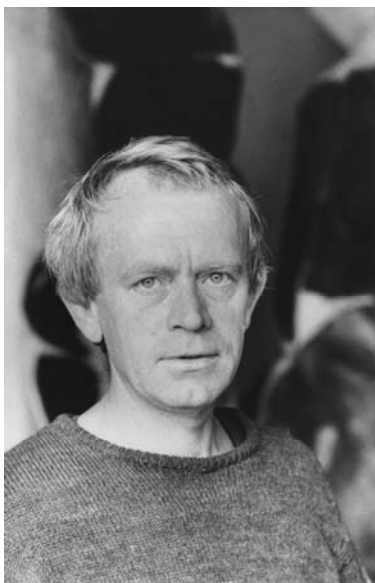
The Creative Harpsichordist

By BENJAMIN IVRY

Pierre Hantaï's father is the French painter, Simon Hantaï, one of the rare cases in history of a great painter siring a great musician

Gramophone Award-winning harpsichordist Pierre Hantaï, who finished a U.S. tour last month with Bach recitals in Berkeley, Calif., and Tucson, Ariz., transfuses the sometimes anemic early music movement with red-blooded excitement. A lean, somber Frenchman born in 1964, Mr. Hantaï has just released a CD from Mirare of François Couperin's *Pièces de Violes*, which conveys a genuine excitement in baroque dances and mythology, instead of the often vacuously pretty approach of other performers. Although expressivity is almost never inherited across artistic domains, a case can be made linking Pierre Hantaï's achievement with that of his father, the still under-celebrated Hungarian-born French painter Simon Hantaï (1922-2008).

Pierre Hantaï's thrilling Mirare CDs of Bach's "Goldberg Variations," saucy Scarlatti sonatas, and graceful pavanés by British composer John Bull establish him as one of today's most exciting and individual harpsichordists, as creative in his own

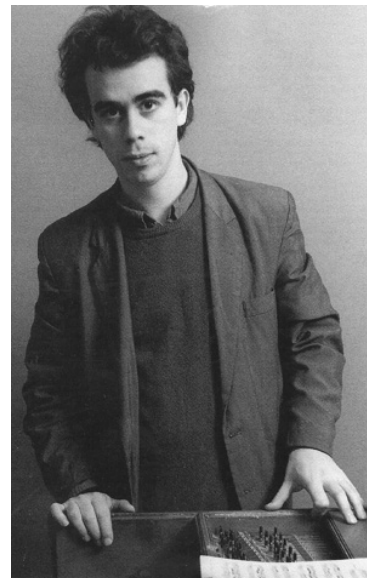


realm as his father was in art. This is one of the exceedingly rare cases in cultural history of a great painter fathering a great musician.

Simon Hantaï's origins were deceptively modest. He was born in Bia, a small village on the outskirts of Budapest, to a family of Roman Catholic Swabian origin that left Germany in the 17th century. To protest Germany's World War II

invasion of Hungary, Simon's father discarded the original family name of "Handel," adopting a

Hungarian-language equivalent. Perhaps not coincidentally, Pierre Hantaï continues the family tradition of rejecting Handel, viewing that composer's keyboard works, despite their evident popularity, as unacceptably florid and turgid.



At age 8, Simon Hantaï was temporarily blinded by a bout of diphtheria, an experience that in 1960 would influence his innovative "folding method," in which he clumped together pieces of unstretched canvas and then applied paint. Simon explained the technique as "putting oneself in the position of someone who has not yet seen anything," and despite its tricky-sounding randomness, it resulted in works of exultant energy. One such painting is "Study (1969)," now in Paris's Musée d'Art Moderne. In it, a flurry of white shapes flaps energetically upward, like a flock of wild birds. Simon's folded works rely on blank, pristine areas to punctuate colors, much as a musician depends on silence to make effects in phrasing.

His youngest son, Pierre, born in Paris -- to which his parents had fled from postwar Communist Hungary in 1948 -- at first wanted to become a painter like his father. Only at age 12, after Pierre heard a recording of Bach's "English Suites" played by the Dutch harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt, did he decide to become a musician. Pierre's first teacher in Paris, Arthur Haas, who now teaches at Stony Brook University, asserts that Pierre's originality and amazing mastery were present from the beginning. Part of this early assurance was doubtless due to Pierre's visual acuity and willingness to approach music and art in a unified way.

In his notes for a CD of Scarlatti sonatas for Mirare, Pierre writes: "Scarlatti alternates visions, landscapes, over and over again within the same work . . . then moves on to another scene -- another color -- without any form of transition." He describes Scarlatti's use of repetition as "redolent of Debussy, intended rather to render a color with sufficient substance. From there to regarding Scarlatti as the

first of the Impressionists is but a short step . . . which I am quite ready to take!"

Another quality shared by Hantaï père and fils is complete open-mindedness in terms of sources of inspiration. Simon, initially fascinated by the Surrealism of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, also found compelling precedent in Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock. Obsessed by the late work of Cézanne and Matisse as colorists, Simon Hantaï created an entirely individual oeuvre that inhabits a contiguous emotional world to these mighty names. To reconcile such apparently contradictory sources, Simon in 1958 created a highly original canvas, now in Paris's Pompidou Center, titled "Ecriture rose" (Pink Writing). Onto the 10-foot-8 by 13-foot-9 work, the artist scrawled in pen and ink a year's worth of reading in theology, philosophy, aesthetics and poetry. Pierre Hantaï, when asked to cite his musical inspirations, will describe a Mulligatawny stew of influences, ranging from the monumental Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter to Mie Miki, a Japanese musician who plays works by Bach and Grieg on the accordion. From these disparate predecessors, Pierre also derived a uniquely emotional playing style.

Like the violence inherent in Simon's folding method, wild artistic emotion and expressivity occur when Pierre plays a trill, the musical ornament that is usually decorative, elegant and dance-like. In Pierre's hands, trills become passionate, explosive and dramatic. No other current harpsichordist holds the secret to such expressive trills, which derive not so much from his relaxed hands and supreme

keyboard technique as the inner spirit of the musician, something at least partly inherited.

In 1982, Simon Hantaï withdrew from the art world, ceasing to exhibit his new work. He was disgusted with the growing commercialism of the booming art market, as well as with France's peculiar way of offering state commissions to artists as a form of political favoritism. (On June 25 at Paris's Salle Drouot, his 1962 oil on canvas "Mariale, MD 4" sold for €347,514 (\$493,112), including costs, well above an estimate of €250,000 to €300,000, apparently justifying his angst about vertiginous prices.) Hantaï soon became notorious for what Art in America called his "streak of ethical obstinacy virtually unparalleled in contemporary art."

Pierre Hantaï's career has been marked by his own brand of ethical obstinacy, including his intense critical concern for a concert venue's acoustics or the quality of instruments on which he performs. By performing with colleagues with whom he is familiar, especially his brothers Marc, a flutist, and Jérôme, a gamba player, who make up the Trio Hantaï, Pierre assures further artistic control of performances. Lately he has even embraced conducting, a time-honored way for solo instrumentalists to shift into the driver's seat. Part of the lasting pleasure of his Mirare recordings is the painstaking care with which every aspect of the CD, from engineering to graphics, is produced. The tired old expression "like father, like son" describes, in the case of Simon and Pierre Hantaï, a rare legacy of admirably original artistic achievement.

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