

## Discovering Vancouver's Hidden Music Makers

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### Craig Tomlinson

Up in the hills of West Vancouver, there is a house entirely furnished with harpsichords and other exotic early keyboard instruments. They are the work of Craig Tomlinson, one of Canada's two makers of early keyboard instruments.

#### Background

When Craig starting building musical instruments at 16, he began with a simple dulcimer. It now hangs on the living room wall, a reminder of his modest beginnings amidst the collection of harpsichords, clavichords, virginals, and fortepianos, not to mention the family's Yamaha grand piano.

The revivalist movement in musical-instrument making began in the 1930s and, by the 1960s, classical music circles began to appreciate what original instruments could bring to performances of the great Baroque masters (Bach, Handel, Vivaldi and so forth).

In 1975, Craig was asked to work on a two-manual French harpsichord. The challenge of this task opened up a new world for him. He worked on kit instruments over the next few years, but could hear and see the limitations

#### What does Crab Park and the Orpheum have in common?

They are both venues where Vancouver's other music makers—the locally based makers of fine musical instruments—can be heard. Last week, I interviewed two of them. Both highly creative inspiring craftsmen, one lives in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and the other in upscale West Vancouver, and what I discovered is that what connects them far outweighs what separates them.

factory-produced kits. So in 1978, Craig headed down to Berkeley to learn the craft of building early keyboards. This led him to a rediscovery of the building methods of old-world craftsmen, after whom he modelled his instruments.

"The harpsichord I envisioned combined a perfect balance between the tonal intricacies of the sound and the beauty of the instrument and its decoration," he said.

#### The Instruments

My tour across Craig's living room was chronological and, although time seemed to fly, I know 350 years of keyboard



development had passed before I reached the other side.

Gazing at the collection, I asked Craig if people who buy his instruments are performers or simply collectors. He said that most buyers are in fact performers, although he cited one large glossy magazine in Palm Springs, California that posited the notion that you're not really on the 'A' list until you have your own French Double Harpsichord.

## Virginal

The grand old lady by the front door is an exquisitely ornate 1608 virginal. She was inspired by two 17th century Flemish instruments made by the Ruckers family of Antwerp. I



was so entranced with the sheer beauty of this instrument that I could hardly follow his description of its nifty short octave bass, which expands the lower octave downwards by replacing the chromatic black notes with diatonic white tone pitches (although, you wouldn't know to look at it). Sorry for the tech-speak, but I think this means that the

player can play down to a G below the expected low C, but as I said, I was drooling over the trompe l'œil, elaborate Latin mottos, and swirling arabesques. This instrument is a feast for the eyes.

As with all of his instruments, the virginal was painted by Craig's mother, Olga Kornavitch-Tomlinson. An artist in her own right, she decorates the instruments by combining historical authenticity and her own instincts as an artist.

Still drooling, I found my way to the next instrument—a harpsichord.

## Harpsichord

Perhaps to dispel the notion that early music people don't have a sense of humour, Craig told me a funny story about the 1769 harpsichord. To research the instrument (this one was based on a Pascal Taskin of Paris, now residing in a collection in Edinburgh), Craig received a Canada Council grant to travel to Scotland to photograph, measure, disassemble, and incredibly, even get inside it. So much so that one day, while he had his head in the instrument up to his shoulders, a wiseacre Scots curator snuck up and thundered the "biggest and loudest chord" Craig had ever heard played on a harpsichord.

Once again, there was a techie segment to the tour and Craig showed me the transposition block, a slab of wood used to shoehorn the instrument up and down in pitch.

In an age of globalization and standardization, it's hard to imagine some of the madness that goes on in musical circles with regard to pitch. For example, North American orchestra's tune to A=440 Hertz, while their European



counterparts tune to A=442 (or A=444 if you're in Vienna (or A=444.5 on Kärntner Strasse between the hours of 3 and 5 pm)). Okay, some of that's fabricated, but geography does play a part in pitch, as does time. In fact, pitch has crawled up steadily since the days of Johann Bach to the tune of a full semi-tone.

Curiously, this rise of an exact semi-tone makes the transposition block possible. Craig pulled the block out from the left side of the keyboard, shunted the keyboard to the left (into the vacant place), and then pushed the block into the right side and, voilà, the entire instrument now played a full (Baroque) semi-tone lower.

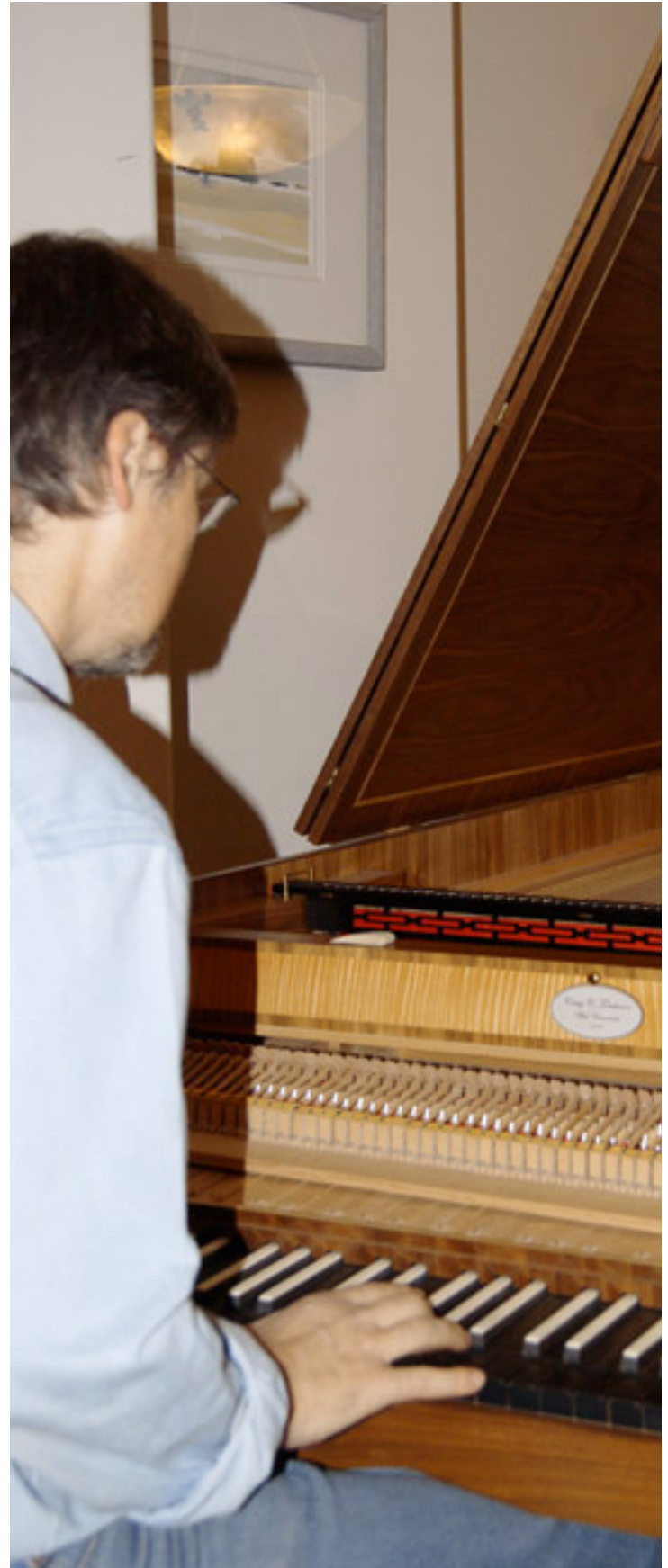
## Clavichord

The clavichord dates back to the 1400s, but the instrument in Craig's studio was a replica of one from 1784. Curiously, its visual simplicity seemed downright West Coast, reminiscent of the beautiful Arts and Crafts style furniture I've seen on Salt Spring Island and the Sunshine Coast. Craig attributed this to the cherry wood and, of course, its



admittedly unembellished appearance.

He doesn't play much any more, he said, but showed me how difficult an instrument a clavichord can be owing to its soft, but exacting touch. There's no margin for error. He played a few very neat and precise chords and the instrument whispered stoically. Take note all those who might



buy one of those tiny condos in False Creek—this is the instrument for you. It has a range of about three feet, guaranteed to disturb no one, and it's very soothing on frayed nerves.

## Fortepiano

There's a funny thing about the origin of the name of the modern instrument, the "piano". In 1713, when harpsichord maker Bartolomeo Cristofori invented an instrument that could play both soft and loud (unlike the harpsichord), he called it a "loudsoft" or *fortepiano*. This was the instrument Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven wrote for (well, before old Ludwig smashed his to bits that is), and it was the immediate precursor to today's pianoforte. You say *fortepiano*, I say *pianoforte*.

The name difference seems moot, but the two are quite different. While the *fortepiano* can and does have dynamics, it was no match for the thundering sonorities of the age of Romantic composers (Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninov) and so it fell out of favour when the robust *pianoforte* appeared on the scene.

In recent decades, an interest in authentic performances of earlier works necessitated the revival of the comparatively delicate *fortepiano*. In fact, the Vancouver Operawill be using Craig's *fortepiano* in their performance of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* in February 2011. It is a beautiful instrument based on one Anton Walter built in Vienna in 1795. The original now resides in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.

Techie bit: The *fortepiano* doesn't have pedals like modern pianofortes; it has knee levers. I'm sure it works better than it appears, but the *fortepianist* sustains notes by raising a damper rail—with his knees. The optics for this are frightening. Imagine the poor player, squirming away on the *fortepiano* bench. First knees, then legs and, finally buttocks join in. "The right lever raises only the treble dampers and the left lever raises the entire damper rail" Craig explained, but all I could think about was the *fortepianist*.

## Workshop

We headed out to the workshop and passed Craig's son, Brian. Craig remarked that Brian preferred the family Yamaha and the music of the French Impressionists (Ravel, Debussy), and then playfully snorted, "Kids these days..."

Given that the focus of this article is about local craftsmen, I asked Craig if any of the materials were local. Outside of the holly and the occasional raven feather found in nearby Chatwin Park he has used in the quills (the plucking mechanism in harpsichord jacks), he found that he had to use the same woods that builders used two and three centuries ago. He experimented by building a harpsichord using local Sitka spruce, but found the sound "entirely different".

For this reason, he makes regular pilgrimages to Mittenwald in southern Bavaria—a haven of fine European woods—to buy the Swiss pear, German spruce and boxwood his instruments need. He jokes about the time he beat the Steinway buyers there, leaving them only leftovers. Other woods, such as American poplar, come from



the US East Coast.

The workshop has one harpsichord in the works and Craig showed me various phases of its construction. He showed me blueprints made from measurements taken in Europe, which he laid over the instrument, like a dressmaker. In the corner, piles of pear wood, cherry, poplar, German spruce, and boxwood waited to be shaped into the exquisite instruments I'd just seen in his house and would one day grace the concert halls of Vancouver and the world.

## More about Craig Tomlinson

Craig's French double harpsichord is making the rounds of Vancouver's venues and ensembles during the festive season (and beyond):

- It just finished a stint at the Orpheum with the Bach Choir and the Vancouver Symphony for performances of Handel's Messiah.
- Pacific Baroque Orchestra will use it December 18, 19, 2010 for Winter: Cold Genius-England; March 26, 27, 2011 for Spring: O Primavera; and May 28, 29, 2011 for

Summer: The Sun King-France.

- The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra uses it May 20, 21, 2011 at the Chan for Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5.
- Vancouver Opera will be using the French harpsichord and/or the fortepiano for Mozart's La Clemenza di Tito on February 5, 8, 10 and 12, 2011.

You can visit Craig Tomlinson's website at:

[www.tomlinsonharpsichords.com](http://www.tomlinsonharpsichords.com)

## David Gowman



Out of the context of David Gowman's community, it's hard to know how to describe his horns and, indeed, his community. I'm confused whether to say trumpets (as his business card states) or trombones (many are distinctly trombone shaped), but everyone calls them horns (not horns in the pure sense of French horns, but more in the anything-you-can-blow-into horns sense). There are natural horns, that is, French horns without valves, but David's horns aren't made of brass (or horn), and most definitely not French (although, there's an Italian one in the works—more on that later). David Gowman's horns are little more than weeds—made of weeds and underbrush woods that

many people would deem little more than kindling. They could be called "weed horns" or "weedwinds", but I'll just call them horns too.

### Background

In 2002, David made his first elderberry horn while working as a camp caretaker in Roberts Creek. One day, he was passing the time hollowing out an elderberry branch with a heated coat hanger and, when he tried playing the branch, its first note transformed him from visual artist into musical instrument maker in a single "honk".

After the elderberry horn, others were to follow and his artist studio filled with many increasingly exotic horns made from empress wood, papier mâché, old felt hats, and giant hogweed (also called giant cow parsnip or *Heracleum mantegazzianum*), an invasive species currently subject to a city-wide program of expunging them from the region. One man's toxic weed is another man's work of art.

Although Gowman trained as a visual artist, his past music experience comes from choirs and piano lessons, he has no formal brass instrument training. So having just invented a new musical instrument, he wasted no time showing up at music events with his new horns. He quickly acquired the name Mr. Fire-Man, and soon formed his own band called, Legion of Flying Monkeys Horn Orchestra (LFMHO).

I got a tour of David's Gastown workshop located in one of the adjoining apartments he shares with his artist wife, Sharon Kallis. Given David's public persona as artist/madman, his workshop displays a concise timeline of instruments from fresh cut raw materials to finished product

hanging neatly from hooks or sorted in corners. The walls are adored with many of his fine paintings (he still paints avidly).

## Shapes

The shapes of his horns are exotic—sort of like didgeridoos after a lengthy meeting with Salvador Dalí. Some of his horns have names. The largest horn is called L'Andrew's horn, an eponymal nod to his friend Andrew, a member of David's band. L'Andrew's horn has a papier mâché bell, a hogweed body, and a cherry wood mouthpiece. Its curled tubing measures about nine feet and the instrument itself is an impressive five feet high. Another notable instrument, below, mixes elderberry, hogweed (cow parsnip) and an old straw hat.

## Sounds (and Smells)

I expected the instruments to sound kind of monotonous (like vuvuzelas with aspirations), but David has a way of coaching as many exotic and uncanny sounds out of his instruments as they have twists and turns. He picks up the early elderberry horn and plays a quick volley—a perfect fifth—and I'm suddenly transported back to rustic days of wooden hunting horns. Then, he plays a long deep note—the room fills with a sweet and somewhat mournful call and, amusingly, the smell of burnt wood still lingering in the horn eight years after it met the red-hot coat hanger.

## Impressions

David draws his inspiration from a rich combination of creative fearlessness and irreverent whimsy. So, while he mastered the overtone series on his instruments, he remains unapologetically informal in other technical respects (there was to be no wind player shop talk in this interview)—he doesn't "buzz" or "play" as you'd expect to hear from a brass player; instead, he "honks" to sound a note.

In another YouTube video (a must view), he describes the rigorous and exacting process of fabricating his instruments (well, at least the papier mâché part), "Choppy, chop, chop...grindy, grind, grind".



My favourite instruments include the hat horns, (they can be worn as well as played), and the horn with a built-in plunger mute (to recreate that sexy old-time jazz trumpeter effect).

## In the Works

Currently, he's working on a new elderberry horn called the "Italian", because the wood was obtained from an Umbrian farmer near Lago Trasimeno and smuggled into Canada (the wood, not the Umbrian farmer). According to David, "Italian elderberry is gigantic compared to ours". He goes on to describe how he had to cut it down and dry it in a microwave before packing it in his luggage.

## The Community



The thing about David's horns is that they are basically in-

describable outside of the context of the community that surrounds them. So, as part of my research (and because I know a good party when I hear one), I accepted David's kind invitation to join their Clown Parade the following Saturday night.

And so, armed only with a bottle of wine and a fascination with these colourful music makers, I made my way down to Crab Park in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to don clown costumes and make-up, sing fractured Christmas

carols, dance by the bonfire (kindling from cast offs of the horn-making process), and, of course, play one of his fantastic horns.

"Honking" is believing.

## **More about David Gowman**

To order a horn of your own or for more information about David Gowman, see his website:

[www.davidgowman.wordpress.com](http://www.davidgowman.wordpress.com)

## JASON HALL • BIOGRAPHY



As a frequent contributor to the Vancouver Observer, Jason likes to combine his technical writing skills and his years as a musician by interviewing musicians and researching music events. Prior to taking up the pen, he played clarinet with a number of orchestras in Canada, including the Vancouver Symphony. With over 15 years experience as a writer to clients including SAP, Webtech Wireless, WorkSafeBC and Health Canada, Jason Hall is in demand as a technical writer. As an instructor at BCIT, Jason mentors emerging writers to create clear and concise documentation suitable for its intended audience. He teaches technical and web writing courses, which are core to BCIT's Associate Certificate in Technical Writing.

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