10 Practical Tips for Harpsichord Voicing

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'Voicing' in harpsichord refers to cutting the plectrum by which you change the 'voice' of the note; its loudness, its color, etc. As you can well imagine, voicing is probably the most basic maintenance skill far more frequently required than any others such as stringing and pinning.

Here are some practical yet not often revealed tips for those who have already experienced voicing only to achieve less satisfying result; Note that this is not an extensive voicing guide for beginners. Also, I suppose plastic Derlin or Celcon as plectra material in this guide even though I advocate the use of real quill (namely, bird feathers) over plastics.

1. The real secret for successful voicing is, above all, to keep the blade fresh all the time. This sounds too basic that it is too often neglected. Many instrument owners have difficulty cutting in shape, eliminating the materials to the desired degree blaming their lack of control, which is certainly a factor. However, it is, in fact and in most cases, because they do the job with blades that are not sharp enough. Even a professional will not be able to do a decent job with the dull blade you are using. Replace it as frequently as possible. For example, you may need at least 3 new blades to finish the voicing of a single register (15~20 notes per blade, minimum!). Working with new blades, I am sure you will find yourself a better craftsman than you might have believed. Similarly, the voicing block needs taking care of to have smooth surface without dents.

2. Choose the thickness of the plectrum carefully. Nowadays, it seems there are two thicknesses widely available; 0.4mm (or 0.0165 inch) and 0.5mm (or 0.02 inch) While 0.4mm seems to be an easy choice because it takes less cutting away and touch is obviously more pleasant thanks to its springy nature, I found that it has its limit; it often creates unpleasant clicking noise. Sound is often wimpy from mid to lower area. Since thickness of root plays significant role in deciding the volume, the carrying power, it is desirable even in the treble area that the root has enough thickness of 0.5mm. I use 0.4mm mostly for an emergency when I have very limited time to replace the quill on the concert stage. It can be useful for very high trebles and 4' as well.

3. There is no simple answer to the shape of plectrum. So far, there is no unanimous agreement even among renowned builders of our time regarding the best shape of well voiced plectrum. I have been collecting examples of various voicing styles from new instruments; extremely squared, tapered to varied degrees, almost pointed, straight cut, curved cut, leaving a ridge or not underside, and so on. In a word, it is open for many

possibilities. Only you can judge with your good taste. Do not stick to one single style. You need to be able to shape the plectrum in various ways to find the satisfying one according to the instrument and to compass areas as well.

4. Still, whatever shape you may choose, the bottom line is to make the plectrum bend parabolically so that the string is most likely to vibrate beautifully and efficiently with the smoothest touch – a touch without stiffness. Check the result of your voicing by pressing a key very slowly and see how the plectrum bends. It should be parabolical on the verge of its pluck. I witnessed, in many cases, they often end up with rather straight bend which is to be avoided by any means. Furthermore, it is also important for an entire plectrum to bend. In other words, it should bend 'from the root'. So, please cut from the very root starting your knife from right in front of the tongue. Thickness of root matters a lot!

5. It is a common mistake to assume the plastic plectrum to stay unchanged throughout. Without a doubt, Derlin is a stable material compared to real quill, but it does change. If fact, it changes more and faster than you may imagine. Fresh cut Derlin will get harder substantially in the span of days. The very next day you will find more to cut. This is the reason you get disappointed at the best skillful professional's voicing service in a few days more often than not. When voicing an entire register, no professionals can finish a voicing at once. It entails 2nd and 3rd voicing with intervals so that they can cope with the change in hardness. Given above, I recommend you initially voice the plectra somewhat softer than what you aim so that they will get hardened to the desired level sooner or later.

6. Voicing hard is doomed to fail eventually. Find the best level of clearness and transparency that your instrument is capable of producing. Many owners want their harpsichord to sound loud carrying well to the distance, and they tend to voice hard for loudness, even sacrificing the touch. However, it is only harsh noise, higher level of mechanical noise that they will get in return. Harsh and strained sound never carries well to the distance contrary to common belief. One indicator to hardness is the touch. It is nonsense that you get pleasant sound with unpleasant touch. Therefore, try to judge not only by ears but by fingers as well.

7. We usually hold and secure the plectrum on the voicing block with one hand and move the knife with the other. However, for those who find carving the Derlin difficult, those who are not confident at handling the sharp bladed knife, it sometime works that you move the plectrum instead of knife. Just hold and secure the knife, and move the plectrum to cut to the shape. Doing this way, as mentioned above, you will absolutely need the blade that is fresh sharpened.

8. You need to aim a good looking result. Symmetric and clean-cut plectrum leads to an efficient bend, while clumsy looking and irregular one will hinder the efficiency in any way. It should reduce the life of the plectrum, too. Of course, this is not easy. Even professionals are not always successful. The important thing is that you keep this in mind and pay attention.

9. Finishing the voicing of a note, it is necessary to check two things: hangers and staggering. A hanger takes place when a plectrum remains hanged on the string after releasing the key very slowly (You may all have experienced it, I am sure). If you see a hanger, it is most likely a sign of unsmooth surface though there are various reasons for a hanger to take place. Also, change in hardness inevitably affects staggering. Carefully examine the length of plectrum protruding the string since this directly affects the staggering. Adjust the height of the jack only if necessary; you first have to make sure voicing is properly done.

10. Last but not least, you have to accept that you cannot change the nature of the instrument by voicing alone just as you cannot turn yourself a competent painter by changing your brush. Upgrading the brush to the highest quality does not immediately bring you a masterpiece landscape. Overall volume and character of an instrument are largely inherent, an accumulation of many small choices. Voicing is only one of them.