LAST DECEMBER, the English publisher Ashgate released Isolde Ahlgrimm, Vienna and the Early Music Revival, a book that I began to write in 1989. Ahlgrimm (1914-1995), the great but now relatively little-known harpsichordist and fortepianist, played a uniquely pivotal role in the gradual recovery, by 20th-century musicians and audiences, of the keyboard instruments and playing techniques of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Ahlgrimm was absolutely the first to reintroduce genuine Viennese fortepianos in the music of Mozart, Haydn, and the early Romantic composers to the Viennese musical public, beginning with an inspired “Concert für Kenner und Liebhaber” performed in the Figaro-Saal in the Palais Palffy, on February 20, 1937. The critics were beside themselves, and this first concert turned into a series that would continue for nearly 20 years. Her work encouraged younger musicians to investigate the fortepiano for themselves, including two pianists who are often credited with initiating the revival, Paul Badura-Skoda and Jörg Demus. As Badura-Skoda acknowledged, Ahlgrimm was the source of their own ideas regarding historical pianos.

My own lifetime of fascination with her work began in 1968 in my hometown of Newcastle, New South Wales, when I discovered two spirax-bound LP volumes containing Isolde Ahlgrimm’s 1951 and 1953 recordings of Bach’s Das wohltemperierte Clavier, from the Philips Complete Works for Harpsichord (of J. S. Bach) in my piano teacher’s collection. (In the U.S., Columbia Masterworks released Book I along with the six French Suites.) I was so entranced by these early LPs that I spent years trying to find my own copies of these long-deleted releases, repeatedly sending letters to Philips to see if they would ever consider reissuing them. In 1974 (I like to think due to my own diligent efforts), I was finally able to hear nearly all of Isolde Ahlgrimm’s solo harpsichord recordings in sonically up-to-date versions, re-released in the form of two 10-LP boxes.

In 1977 I moved from Newcastle to Sydney to pursue my career as a harpsichordist and a few years later asked my friend David Rumsey, a fine Australian organist who had studied in Vienna with Anton Heiller, to deliver a letter to Professor Ahlgrimm, as I had discovered from him that she was still teaching at the Hochschule, the successor to the old Wiener Akademie, where she herself had studied as a youngster. Her modest reply arrived within a couple of weeks: “Thank you for the kind words you find for my records. They are so old (like me!). I am astonished if someone still likes them – performance style has so much changed!”

This was the beginning of a friendship – first by mail, later in person – which lasted from that time until Ille, as I came to know her, died at 81 in October 1995, worn out by struggles with illness, a decade of artistic neglect, a lifetime of hard work, and much tribulation, including two World Wars and a Depression. I met her for the first time in person in 1985, when I spent three months travelling twice a week from Amsterdam to Vienna for lessons. She was incredulous at my regularly traversing the distance involved, but, as I pointed out, the trip was like going from Sydney to Melbourne, not a big deal for an Australian – especially one who had flown from Sydney to Europe in the first place. After my first period of work with her, I flew to Boston and won the coveted Erwin Bodky Memorial Award for my performance of the A minor English suite, which I had studied with her in great detail. In her honor, too, I played the work as she would have done: from memory and with ornamented repeats. She was thrilled. Of course, I already knew of Ahlgrimm’s own far more prodigious feats as a performer: how in the 1940s and ’50s she had played the complete solo keyboard works of both Bach and Mozart in 25 concerts, note perfect and entirely from memory.

In 1985, when I first met Isolde Ahlgrimm (1940), painted by Josef Dobrowsky on the occasion of the first modern performance given (by Isolde Ahlgrimm) on Beethoven’s Erard piano. Courtesy: Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Vienna.

The fine sense of timing and tasteful rubato, the flexible ornamentation, the phrasing, the sober registration, the intelligence – and a host of other characteristics too numerous to mention – represented to me all that was best in harpsichord playing, or any other playing, for that matter. These things became my ideals, too.
The author of a new book about the pioneer performer on fortepiano and harpsichord writes about his deepening relationship to her over the years.

By Peter G. Watchorn
Ahlgri-m in person, Vienna appeared to be a far less prosperous city than it is now — it was, quite frankly, gray and depressing in many ways, not quite as it had appeared in Carol Reed’s great film *The Third Man*, but certainly with traces of its wartime scars still quite apparent. After arriving from Amsterdam via the Westbahnhof and sorting out the streetcar system, I turned up for my first lesson at her modest apartment on the Strudlhofgasse, a street near Vienna University and the foreign embassies. After I rang the house bell, there, on the stairs, appeared a tiny figure with the same grave smile and almost magical eyes that I had seen in various pictures. I think she remembered so much about her work. Her English was not perfect, though it was far better than my German, but there was no mistaking her incredible intelligence, humor, and musical wisdom. We were instant friends, and I was to return regularly throughout the next eight years for lessons, for which, after our first set, she refused to accept further payment. My writing her biography was, in some measure, a way of giving something back for all the time and attention I received.

Given my own all-consuming interest in the music of Bach, and my desire to follow in her footsteps by learning, performing, and recording all his music myself, towards the end of our time together, she (rather too kindly, perhaps, though she was not given to gratuitous compliments) designated me as her “only successor.” This conferred upon me a great honour and imposed an even greater responsibility. I was determined to finish the book in a way that did justice to her own extraordinarily high standards. Eighteen years after our first tentative discussions in 1989, it was finally completed. Over the last 10 years, I have also proceeded to fulfill her confidence in my ability by undertaking my own recordings of the complete works for harpsichord by J. S. Bach, perhaps in order to keep going from where she had left off.

It was after I moved to the U.S. in 1987 that I began to realize that, in addition to having become famous throughout Europe, Ahlgri-m had also enjoyed a successful performing and teaching career here and was greatly revered by those first American students who met her during the Oberlin-Salzburg Mozarteum exchange program of 1958. The result was that she played in the U.S. on several concert tours arranged for her by former students such as Larry Palmer (who has recently compiled an unforgettable account of his time in Salzburg and Vienna through letters written there as a student), Max Yount, David Harris, and Kim Kasling. Indeed, Emil Danenberg, the dean of the conservatory of music at Oberlin, invited her to teach its inaugural harpsichord class, to take place in September of 1973, an offer which, due to her age and the fact that she had finally achieved financial and artistic security in Vienna, she felt unable to accept.

Given the commanding position that the Oberlin program has occupied in the early music scene in the U.S. over the last 30 years, it is worth reproducing this letter in full (see sidebar).

**Technique**

It is interesting to speculate what might have transpired had she taken the leap. Ahlgri-m’s playing made an unforgettable impression on me from the very beginning. I heard many harpsichordists playing Bach during the 1960s and ’70s, both live and through recordings: Wanda Landowska, Ralph Kirkpatrick, Igor Kipnis, Helmut Walcha, Thurston Dart, George Malcolm, Zuzana Růžičková, and, of course, Gustav Leonhardt; Ahlgri-m’s playing always stood out. The fine sense of timing and tasteful rubato, the flexible ornamentation, the phrasing, the sober registration, the intelligence — and a host of other characteristics too numerous to mention — represented to me all that was best in harpsichord playing, or any other playing, for that matter. These things became my ideals, too. By the time I met her, Ahlgri-m had already given up the two Ammer harpsichords and pedal harpsi-

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**Invitation to Oberlin**

January 16th, 1973

Dear Frau Ahlgri-m,

You will be pleased to know that after lengthy discussion, the Conservatory Faculty Council has just established a new position on the Faculty in Harpsichord. As you are well aware, the demand for harpsichord instruction has increased immensely during the past decade; and we have been building our equipment so that by next September we shall have available for use here five two-manual instruments, one single and a spinet.

The Conservatory would be most pleased if we could open our new program in harpsichord by hiring an artist-teacher of stature. With this aim in mind, I am writing to ask whether you would be willing to consider either a one or two year appointment at Oberlin as Guest Professor of Harpsichord beginning in September, 1973. We would provide a private studio with a two-manual instrument available for teaching and practice. We would assume that the teaching load would consist of teaching harpsichord (major and secondary students), teaching class in continuo playing (or a course of your own design), possibly coaching a student baroque ensemble, and possibly playing with the Oberlin Baroque Ensemble. The scope of your work could remain flexible for the moment because the department will also include Professors [David] Boe and [Fenner] Douglass, and they will both be willing to assist.

I would very much appreciate having your preliminary reaction as soon as possible, since we must move with some haste in this matter, with warmest regards,

Sincerely yours,

Emil Danenberg, Dean

The author was granted access to this letter, which was among Isolde Ahlgri-m’s private papers.
chord that had become so familiar to me through the Bach recordings of 30 years before. In their place she now had a green David Rubio instrument, which she had bought from Miles Morgan in 1972. In her small living room, which also contained her tiny sofa bed and a microfilm reader to enable her to research her dictionary of ornamentation, we had lessons on everything from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Inventions and Sinfonias to the English Suites, Italian Concerto, and French Overture. Perhaps my final test was in 1992 when, with the fine American-Viennese violinist Peter Matzka, I played the six sonatas for harpsichord with violin, BWV1014-19, with Isolde Ahlgrimm sitting in the front row of the audience. Her enthusiasm indicated that we had both passed the test.

For several weeks on my journeys from east to west and back, I took as my travelling companions Ahlgrimm’s own heavily-used working scores of The Well-Tempered Clavier, the 1924 edition by Donald Francis Tovey. She used these same scores to make her recordings for Philips in 1951 and 1953. Although she always played from memory, the scores showed evidence of incredibly meticulous work, chiefly in the remarkably detailed multiple rows of fingerings that she had marked in the score like Landowska, one of them, the final choice, in red ink. I remember so well her amazing technique, where virtually no finger motion was evident, and her wrist and elbow joints absorbed nearly all movement while remaining relaxed. This, she felt, was the real secret: total flexibility. It was also, she was convinced, the true origin of the contemporary reports (by J. N. Forkel and others) that no one could see Johann Sebastian Bach’s fingers move when he played: all movement was absorbed by the larger joints at shoulder, elbow, and wrist. In this she was directly opposed to those harpsichordists who insisted on maintaining a rigid and tightly controlled finger technique, from which all activity of the wrists, elbows, and shoulders was excluded. In her view, this approach was contrary to common sense and could only lead to frustration and even injury. In preparing music for performance, several things mattered to her above all: slow practice for as long as possible, consistency of articulation, final tempos allowing one to comfortably negotiate the most intricate passages, and, above all, extreme care in working out the fingering. The extraordinary clarity of her part-playing, evident on all of her Bach recordings, was a direct result of these primary concerns. Despite her small hands, her technique was extraordinarily fluid and reliable.

Influence

By the time we completed eight summers of study together, made somewhat easier for me by my move from Sydney to Cambridge, MA, in 1987, we had become close friends. It was in 1989 that I first broached the subject of writing
The range and breadth of her work, her meticulous scholarship (which included obtaining a degree in Latin from Vienna University in 1967), the actual use of genuine “period” instruments at Baroque and Classical pitch, and the most authentic modern harpsichords to be had in pre-war Vienna, as well as original fortepianos: all indicated that she was clearly far ahead of her time.

her story, which I felt was far more important to the general history of the early music revival than had hitherto been claimed by anyone (including Ahlgrimm herself). In fact, her name was remarkably absent from all the standard reference works, including Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, until 1980, when Howard Schott rectified the situation with Grove. I recall that in 1974, when Philips released a new solo Bach recording of hers that included some of those works omitted from the earlier Complete Works series, Gramophone reviewed it as though it were her debut! Their (quite prominent and well-known) critic, who also approvingly reviewed new (and then still-revolutionary) recordings by Leonhardt and Harnoncourt, two of Ahlgrimm's more famous younger colleagues, didn’t have a clue who she was. Offended by this obviously unjust omission, I was determined to change this state of affairs and to find out her real importance to the harpsichord (and fortepiano) world, which, the quality of her playing seemed to indicate, must have been considerable.

What I discovered as I painstakingly pieced together the story astonished even me: the range and breadth of her work, her meticulous scholarship (which included obtaining a degree in Latin from Vienna University in 1967 in order to make certain treatises accessible), the actual use of genuine “period” instruments at Baroque and Classical pitch, and the most authentic modern harpsichords to be had in pre-war Vienna, as well as original fortepianos: all indicated that she was clearly far ahead of her time.

As a student I was caught up in the wave of excitement produced by the period instrument revival as presented in concerts and recordings during the 1960s and '70s by such artists as Gustav Leonhardt, Nikolaus and Alice Harnoncourt, and Frans Brüggen (all figures, incidentally, who are themselves rapidly becoming less known to today's younger generations of early music students). I began to wonder if any of them, especially the Harnoncourts, who also lived in Vienna, and Leonhardt, who had taught there as a young and recent graduate of the Schola Cantorum in Basel, had known Ahlgrimm's work, and, if so, what influence it had had on them. Long-deleted recordings I had not known about then gradually began to surface: the Philips 1955 Bach gamba sonatas and Musical Offering with Ahlgrimm and Harnoncourt, then the solo and double harpsichord concertos featuring Ahlgrimm and one of her students, Friederike Bretschneider, playing with an ensemble of original instruments at Baroque pitch: Erich Fiala's Amati Orchestra, in which both Harnoncourts played around the same time as they were founding their own distinguished and important ensemble, Concentus Musicus Wien. The principal violinist for Amati was Rudolf Baumgartner, later of Lucerne Festival fame. His early (and quite idiomatic for its time) playing of the Baroque violin came as a complete surprise to me, but my research made clear that Ahlgrimm and her instrument collector husband, Erich Fiala, had inspired many of Vienna’s musicians to take a serious look at playing Baroque instruments. In 1995, I interviewed Gustav Leonhardt in Amsterdam while researching the book, which had, with the discovery of more and more new information, begun to grow far beyond its original modest size.

While Leonhardt claimed not to have been directly influenced by Ahlgrimm's harpsichord playing (although he acknowledged that he had heard Ahlgrimm often and also visited the Fialas on many occasions), quite unprompted he lauded her fortepiano playing (“fantastic – far ahead of its
time”) and Erich Fiala’s “magnificent” collection of Italian string instruments and Viennese fortepianos. He acknowledged that it was Fiala’s example that had inspired him to begin his own collection, which he used in Vienna with the Leonhardt Baroque Ensemble (a group that included the Harnoncourts as well as Eduard Melkus and Leonhardt’s Swiss-born wife, Marie, who also knew Ahlgrimm quite well and stayed in touch with her) and later in Amsterdam with the more famous Leonhardt-Consort, which, with Harnoncourt’s Concentus, produced by the late 1980s the first complete recording of Bach’s 200 church cantatas. Leonhardt also bought his first fortepiano from the Ahlgrimm-Fialas: the very instrument from 1787 attributed to Anton Walter on which Ahlgrimm had presented her Mozart Cycle and on which Leonhardt later recorded Mozart’s sonatas in the 1970s and ’80s.

As a confirmed skeptic when it came to the idea of anyone writing her story (“who would want to read it?”), Isolde Ahlgrimm gradually relented and then patiently submitted herself to 20 hours of questioning about a range of subjects: her troubled yet artistically fruitful 20-year marriage to Erich Fiala, her years of study, her relationships with friends and colleagues, her technique, and, finally, to World War II. Above all, Erich Fiala, whom she met in 1934, and the war shaped her life and career and determined their outcome, for better or worse.

Making history

In March 1938, Fiala insisted that he and his wife drive into Vienna to hear Hitler’s notorious speech on the Heldenplatz (due to the crowds they actually got only as far as the Ringstrasse and had to leave the car there and walk): she was instantly horrified by Hitler – and the apparently mesmerized state of her fellow Viennese as they listened to his ranting. Later, in a rash moment, Fiala denounced the Nazis within earshot of an informer and was twice arrested by the Gestapo, the second time on the serious charge of seditious treason, for which he was sent to a labor camp, his future uncertain. Only luck and a couple of lenient Viennese judges saved him from death. From 1944 to 1946, after Fiala had been sent to a camp near Leipzig, Ahlgrimm was unsure whether he was still alive until word reached her from her friend of several years, Richard Strauss, that Erich had been liberated and was headed home. In 1943 Ahlgrimm played (on the modern piano) a 79th birthday concert for Strauss in the Konzerthaus, and the following year, the harpsichord part in the Viennese premiere of Strauss’s last opera, Capriccio. He later arranged instrumental music from the opera as a suite for her to perform solo, the Capriccio Suite for Harpsichord (now published by Schott as Suite from Capriccio).

Despite their divorce in 1956, Isolde Ahlgrimm always insisted on giving Erich Fiala full credit for the idea that music must be played on instruments of its own time, properly restored, by musicians knowledgeable and trained in their use. She first played the fortepiano in the music of Mozart and Haydn simply because the couple was able to buy one cheaply in Vienna. Her first fortepiano, a beautiful 1790 five-octave instrument by Michael Rosenberger, found in an attic “across the Danube,” cost 20 Austrian schillings, an indication of how little valued such instruments were at the time. The result of this focus, however, was groundbreaking, and two young Viennese pianists, Paul Badura-Skoda and Jörg Demus, were inspired by Ahlgrimm’s Mozart Cycle of 1949 – here is how Badura-Skoda put it, in an e-mail received in August 2007, just before the
publication of the book:

“I am delighted to hear that you have been working on an authorized biography of Isolde Ahlgrimm. I owe her my first knowledge of the harpsichord and the fortepiano. Whenever I write about my ‘conversion’ to the fortepiano I am mentioning the fact that listening to her concerts ‘Für Kenner und Liebhaber’ here in Vienna was a revelation for me. I remember her performance of the complete Mozart sonata cycle, all from memory, played with fervour and elegance. She also added Variations and other works.

“Although we were on the most friendly terms,” Badura-Skoda continues, “I have no correspondence with her due to the fact that we were living in the same city. Another enthusiastic listener was my friend Jörg Demus. Of course we could not listen to all her concerts, but I remember particularly her performance of the Sonata in B flat, K. 333. After that event, we both became collectors of period instruments, performing again and again on Schantz or Walter.”

**Early harpsichords**

Ahlgrimm’s first harpsichord, an “historical” copy (loosely based on the Berlin Bach harpsichord) made in 1937 by the brothers Michael and Alois Ammer, was a wedding present from Fiala’s parents, wealthy part-owners of the still famous company Manner-Schokolade. In those days, the Ammer brothers, through their association with Ulrich Rück, whose instruments later formed the nucleus of the collection at the German National Museum, made harpsichords that, though not historical copies, were nevertheless far more “original” than the immediate post-war products that still bore their name. Their superior sound is clearly audible on Ahlgrimm’s recordings. Her second Ammer, from 1941, was traded from Wien-Film for a Pleyel, which was fancily veneered but whose musical properties she disliked. Both harpsichords had two 8’ registers (though only one set of 8’ strings – two alternate rows of jacks played from the upper and lower manuals), as well as 4’ and 16’, the 4’ located on the upper manual. Unusually for the time, both had handstops to change the registers, which explains why the registration heard on these recordings is so classical and restrained compared to other harpsichord recordings from the same period, where pedals were normally employed for quick registration changes to add color. “Monochromatic,” wrote Putnam Aldrich in surprise and alarm in 1951, when reviewing both Ahlgrimm’s recent release of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and that of his own teacher, Wanda Landowska, who recorded the work in the same year. There is nothing from the same period that sounds remotely like Isolde Ahlgrimm’s recordings, which still speak to us today of the inexhaustible gifts of this great and indomitable lady. Ahlgrimm always said that she came to know 18th-century keyboard instruments initially through Viennese fortepianos, so she was aware of “classical” harpsichord from the outset as well. The first harpsichord she ever played was in 1930 in England: she recalled that this had been an antique. Ahlgrimm’s work as harpsichordist was widely disseminated through recordings, but her role in the revival of the fortepiano of the 18th and early 19th centuries is still to be fully appreciated, a recognition made more difficult by the fact that no commercial recordings survive of the nine-concert Mozart Cycle, performed on the 1787 Walter fortepiano. (At least, Leonhardt bought it as a Walter. Ahlgrimm, who noted that Fiala

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was as much a dealer as a collector, was less certain. Leonhardt seemed not to mind: he told me in 1995 that it was a good instrument, regardless of its precise origin.) Ahlgrimm considered this accomplishment even more important and groundbreaking than the complete Bach for which she became internationally famous.

I hope that my own modest contribution in the form of a detailed biography will succeed in filling an obvious gap that exists in the retelling of this remarkable story of the early music revival. For those who believe that the restoration to prominence of the early Romantic fortepiano is a recent development of the period instrument explosion of the last few decades, it may be interesting to note that Ahlgrimm was playing Schubert, Schumann, and Beethoven on original pianos by Graf and Erard in the 1940s. The famous Viennese artist Josef Dobrowsky painted her portrait in 1940, the occasion being the first modern performance on Beethoven’s Erard, newly restored by the Kunsthistorisches Museum the same year. In 1942, almost her last concert in public was devoted to chamber music by Franz Schubert, including the Trout Quintet, performed on a matched set of string instruments, several of which were owned by Schubert himself and bore his signature and which were gut strung and tuned to the lower pitch standard of the early 19th century. Today this perhaps seems even more extraordinary than her work on Bach and Mozart. Let us hope that Universal, present owners of Philips and, hence, Ahlgrimm’s recorded legacy, will see fit to restore what remains of her work to the public domain, where it most properly belongs.

Peter Watchorn is a Cambridge-based harpsichordist, researcher, and writer. He was the recipient of the 1985 Erwin Bodky Memorial Award and was granted a D.M.A from Boston University in 1995. He is also president and co-founder of Musica Omnia, an award-winning non-profit CD label devoted to historical performance.