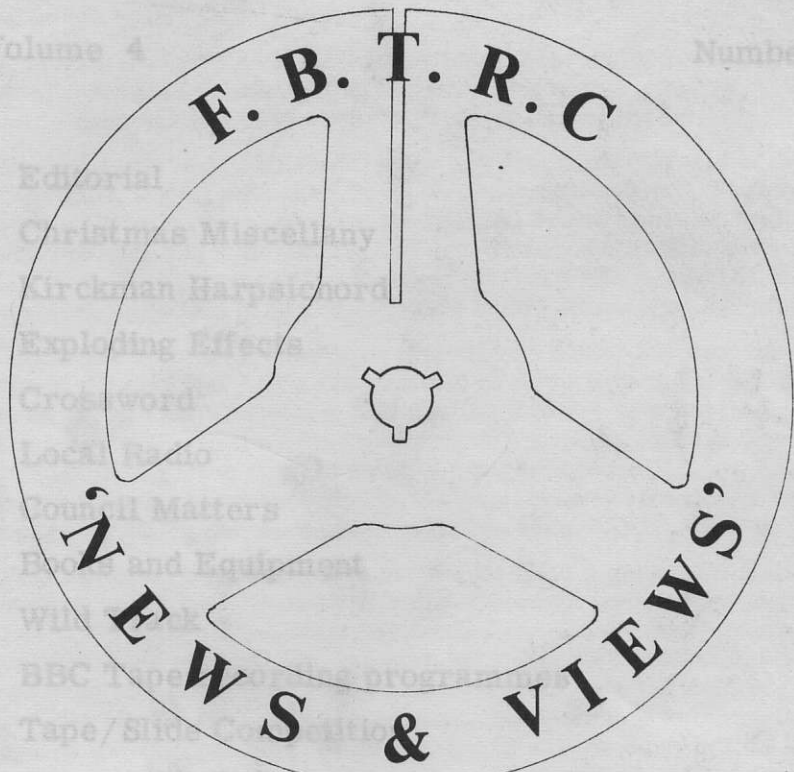


FEDERATION OF
BRITISH TAPE RECORDISTS
AND CLUBS

WINTER 1969 EDITION

Volume 4

Number 16



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RECORDING THE 1772 KIRCKMAN HARPSICHORD

by M.A.GERZON

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford has a small collection of historic musical instruments, including a 1772 Kirckman harpsichord. A former member of Oxford University Tape Recording Society (OUTRS), Paul Hodges (who is now a BBC recording engineer) has a keen interest in old keyboard instruments, and obtained permission for OUTRS to record him playing the Kirckman.

The first recording session was almost disastrous, as the stereo microphone amplifier (used by OUTRS to avoid the hum problems associated with microphone transformers) went wrong and had to be repaired on the spot. We had already been delayed by the fact that the victorian (?) electrical sockets of the Ashmolean had defeated our Fitall plug, and we ended up with a rather poor mono recording, made in great haste.

A second session was arranged a few months later, and we arrived better prepared, with two Revoxes and a B & O, fed by a coincident stereo pair of Reslo VRT ribbon microphones via an equalised low noise microphone amplifier constructed by our secretary Peter Craven. The live sound of the Kirckman is surprisingly firm in the bass and clear in the treble, not at all the 'tinkly' sound expected from modern harpsichords and for this reason we did not want to 'gimmick' the sound by such tricks as putting the mikes in the lid! As the acoustics of the room were dreadful, we did, however, use a closer microphone position than usual.

The recording went smoothly (after OUTRS' customary chaos in setting up), but we found that we had to grossly under-record our tapes in order to avoid the loss of the spiky transients produced by harpsichords (which do not register on meter or magic eye). It is necessary to retain these transients if the sound quality of the instrument is to be retained as far as possible on the tape. However, we were using BASF PES 35 LH tape, whose low hiss and high output (on a suitably biased and adjusted tape recorder) allow one to under-record drastically without the hiss becoming very noticeable.

On playing the tapes back on Quad electrostatic loudspeakers, we were rather disappointed with the lack of realism of our tapes; the firm bass was not very evident on the recording and the treble was slightly unpleasant. As we have found Quad speakers give the most accurate idea of what the signal fed into them is like (that's why many people don't like them!), we felt that our equipment perhaps was not good enough to capture the harpsichord properly. The HMV disc "Music for Virginals, Clavichord and Harpsichord" (HQS 1100) has always struck me as being a very fine recording, and so a direct comparison between the recording and the Kirckman harpsichord on the disc was made.