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The Harpsichord

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The Harpsichord

One of the most fascinating keyboard instruments which precedes the pianoforte is the harpsichord. The harpsichord played a primary role in eighteenth century music. It assumed a position similar to that of the concert grand piano during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet, today the harpsichord is not considered an obsolete instrument. It has undergone an unprecedented revival during the present century, and the harpsichord presently enjoys a unique popularity.³

The origin of the harpsichord is somewhat involved in doubt and supposition. The clavichord, one of the earliest keyboard instruments, was invented by the Italians in the fourteenth century while Italy was the center of European art activity.¹⁴ The clavichord was copied by the Germans and was continued to be used in Germany because of its simplicity in structure and its cheapness.¹⁴ In England the virginal succeeded the clavichord toward the end of the fifteenth century. Another keyboard instrument similar to the virginal was the spinet. It appeared about the same time. The virginal and spinet had only one string to each note and were usually only four octaves.¹⁴ The spinet was built like a harp upon a horizontal framework.¹⁴ Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the spinet and virginal were succeeded by the harpsichord.¹⁴

The harpsichord was actually developed from the psaltery, which was the English name given to the instrument that existed in both dulcimer and zither form.² The relation of the psaltery to the harpsichord was stated as early as 1511 by Sebastian Virdung, who wrote that keys were added to the psaltery.⁸ The harpsichord, therefore, may be described as a psaltery with keys. For playing convenience, legs were added. It also became fashionable to decorate the cases with lacquer paintings.

In Italy, where the harpsichord officially originated, it was called "clavicembalo", a combination of "clavis" meaning key and "cymbalum" meaning psaltery.¹⁰ The instrument that is now recognized as the harpsichord, with a lower forte keyboard and an upper piano keyboard, was invented about 1640 by Jan Couchet, a member of the Rucker family of Antwerp, Belgium.² The Ruckers had previously developed several versions of the double keyboard and introduced the use of stops.² The renown of the harpsichord as king of the keyboard instruments from the fifteenth century to 1750 was due to the master builders, the Ruckers.³

Composers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries seldom wrote for a particular keyboard instrument, but rather for any keyboard available. Their scores were outlines, with or without a figured bass, presenting ideas to be dealt with in accordance with the abilities and limitations of the instrument at hand.¹³ In the early and middle sixteenth century, the harpsichord had no literature of its own. It was used only for court dances or as a chordal framework in music for several instruments.³ The earliest harpsichordists used lute music rearranged for their instrument. In fact, during the seventeenth century the harpsichord competed with the lute, the favorite secular instrument in many European countries.³

The golden age of the harpsichord was from 1650 to 1750. The harpsichord was especially important in the orchestra where the player was also the conductor of the orchestra. In the salon, the harpsichord accompanied other chamber instruments. The harpsichord was used in the church as support for the choir. The need for a keyboard instrument stronger than the harpsichord did not occur until the audience emerged who began to listen to music in public places rather than in drawing rooms and salons.²

The harpsichord actually represents the most complete form of a group of keyboard instruments in which the strings are plucked by means of a mechanism known as a "jack".⁵ Each jack is equipped with a quill or leather thong that plucks the strings. Pressing a key raises the corresponding jack and plucks the string.² The simplest instrument in the harpsichord family has one jack and one string to each key. In comparison, the clavichord's strings are pressed by a small brass tangent; the piano's strings are struck by a felt-covered hammer.⁷ The harpsichord usually varies in length from six to eight feet, with two keyboards of five octaves each.³ The harpsichord may be complex, having as many as five strings to each note and several keyboards.⁵ The harpsichord is shaped like a grand pianoforte. The strings are usually in a line with the direction of the individual keys. The space and layout is the natural form and allows enough space for the action.⁵ The two keyboards permit contrasts of tone by the use of different plectra and the bringing out of a melody over its accompaniment.⁷

A harpsichord generally has two strings of eight foot pitch to each note, one string of four foot pitch, and in larger ones a string of sixteen foot pitch. The stop levers control the tension of the strings.² No crescendo or diminuendo is possible; therefore, the different timbres are necessary. The pedal keyboard, invented by Burkhard Shudi of England, has been used occasionally; J. S. Bach owned one.³ Some English instruments had a Venetian swell, which enabled the lid of the harpsichord to be opened and closed, producing a degree of dynamic change.³ The large harpsichord had "sparkling clarity", yet lacked expressive power. It remained a somewhat unemotional instrument because inflection by the performer was impossible. Therefore, when Bartolomeo Cristofori invented an instrument

in which the strings were struck with felt-covered hammers, the harpsichord lost favor to the pianoforte.

I have been fascinated with the harpsichord since my discovery of its personality several years ago. When I decided to explore the harpsichord, I found that the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book is a large manuscript collection of excellent English literature for the harpsichord. The collection was made during the first and second decades of the seventeenth century. The book includes dances, fantasies, motets, preludes, airs, contrapuntal inventions, masquerades, and liturgical plainsong. Many composers are represented, the most famous being William Byrd, John Bull, and Orlando Gibbons.¹

I chose to study "The Woods so Wild" by William Byrd. It is a short secular song with thirteen variations of the basic melodic line and harmony. In studying, I realized the great difference in the technique of the harpsichord and the technique of the piano. Rhythmical sloppiness and weak fingerings are extremely evident on the harpsichord. The only way to strike the keys is with rapid action followed by easy rest.⁴ There must be considerable overlapping of one tone into the next in order to create a legato sound.⁹ The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book suggests two kinds of ornaments, the mordent and the slide. The trills, which are largely up to the discretion of the performer, are used for placing accents and sustaining the tone.⁴ Ornaments are especially important for variety on a harpsichord which has only one keyboard and no stops.

The revival of interest in the harpsichord in the twentieth century may be contributed to the fact that there is always interest for a new sound, although the instrument which produces it is old.¹² The harpsichord provides clean, uncluttered sound. There is a wide variety of

instruments available that are a pleasure to hear, to see, to own, and are easy to transport and maintain. The harpsichord is used today, as formerly, in small ensembles, as continuo, and as a solo instrument.¹³ To play and hear music on the instrument it was written for serves as an insight to every musician. The harpsichord has an immediate, intimate, responsiveness that develops sensitivity in articulation, phrasing, and degrees of staccato and legato.¹³ Performers are encouraged to improvise embellishments on melodies within the restrictions imposed by the composers or by traditions.¹³ "The harpsichord, no longer considered an archaic ancestor of the piano, has taken its rightful place as a great contemporary instrument. The end of the twentieth century may well be remembered as another 'Age of the Harpsichord'."¹²

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