

The Skagit Early Keyboard Museum

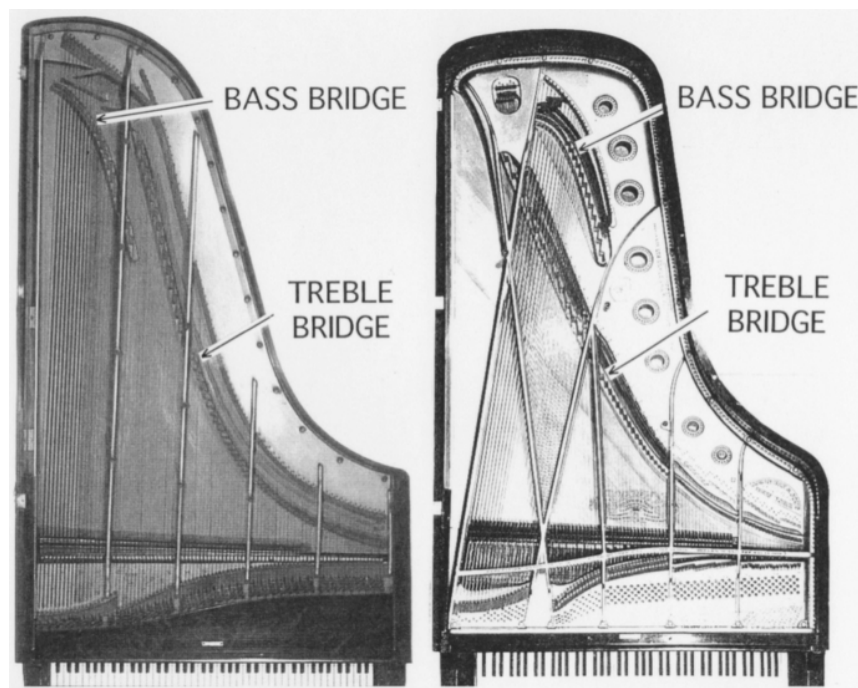
George Bozarth & Tamara Friedman, Curators

A Tour of SEKM

“The best instruments of the past are perfectly suited to the requirements of musicians who can find in them the perfect partners for their artistic expressions.”

The original and fine replica instruments at *SEKM!* include concert-quality Baroque and Classical clavichords, a Baroque *Lautenwerck*, and numerous square and grand fortepianos in the contrasting Viennese and English traditions dating from 1795 to the 1880s – Johann Andreas Stein (1780), Anton Walter (1795), Nannette Streicher (1804), Johann Fritz (1814), Nannette Streicher (1820), Conrad Graf/Ignaz Bösendorfer (1830), and Friedrich Ehrbar (1880s) vs. John Broadwood (1805), Kirkman (mid-19th century), Chickering (1867), and Erard (1869, 1875).

All of the keyboard instruments in *SEKM!* are straight-strung, that is, the bass strings do not cross over the middle and treble strings, making the registers more distinct in tone, less homogenous than modern pianos. The inner voices in music stand out easily since their color is distinct.





The instruments you'll hear today are all-wooden in construction. The outer frame and the bracing under the soundboard bear the tension of the strings. The only exceptions are later 19th-century instruments: the Kirkman, the two Erards, the Chickering, and the Ehrbar all have iron bracing. Jonas Chickering was one of the pioneers in introducing iron bracing, likely because of the harsh weather in Boston.



⇒ A late Baroque *Lautenwerck* (Leipzig, ca. 1740), conceived from historical descriptions and built by Stephen Sørli (Amhurst, MA)

Not a single *Lautenwerck* has survived, nor is there any contemporary depiction known, apart from a rough engraving from the early 16th century. Fewer than ten *Lautenwerck* makers are known by name, and only two or three of them left us reasonably detailed descriptions of their instruments. Nonetheless, the instrument is mentioned fairly often in music books from the early 17th- to mid-18th centuries. According to contemporary accounts, the *Lautenwerck* made a sound that could deceive a professional lutenist – a fact considered almost miraculous at the time.

Johann Sebastian Bach's interest in the *Lautenwerck* was considerable. He is known to have drawn up his own specifications for such an instrument to be built for him by Zacharias Hildebrandt.

In an annotation to Jacob Adlung's *Musica mechanica organoedi* (*Musical Mechanics for the Organist*, 1726; published in 1768) **Johann Friedrich Agricola**, a student of Johann Sebastian Bach, described a *Lautenwerck* that belonged to his mentor:

The editor of these notes remembers having seen and heard a "Lautenclavicymbel" in **Leipzig in about 1740, designed by Herr Johann Sebastian Bach** and made by Herr Hildebrandt, which was smaller in size than a normal harpsichord but in all

other respects similar. It had two choirs [or sets] of gut strings, and a so-called little octave of brass strings. It is true that in its normal setting (that is, when only one stop was drawn) it sounded more like a theorbo than a lute. But if one drew the lute-stop (such as is found on a harpsichord) together with the cornet stop [perhaps an undamped 4' brass stop], one could almost deceive professional lutenists.

The inventory of Bach's possessions made at the time of his death reveals that **he owned two *Lautenwercke***, as well as three harpsichords, one lute, and a spinet.

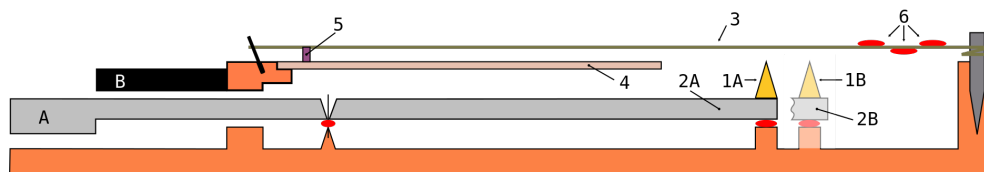
Gut Strings. The use of **gut strings** is of primary importance in a *Lautenwerck*. However, simple replacement of metal strings with gut will not give satisfactory results. The lower pitched strings of the *Lautenwerck* are thicker and under less tension. Thus, *Lautenwercke* are often **smaller** than their metal-strung cousins. Extreme shortening of the strings, in comparison to the harpsichord, reduces the tension a *Lautenwerck* must bear. **Lighter construction** is thereby made possible, enabling a *Lautenwerck* to respond better to the less energetic gut strings. The **soundboard** can be half the thickness normally found in harpsichords. For greater stability of tuning, our *Lautenwerck* has strings made of fluorocarbon, with copper-wound bass strings.

No Dampers. As gut strings have more internal friction than their metal counterparts, they generally sustain less. This allows one to dispense with dampers to a large degree. Individual instruments will dictate where dampers are needed (and how effective they need be), but one rarely finds *Lautenwercke* fitted with dampers on every string. Any resulting "over-ring" enhances the lute-like effect.

More than one jack per string. One final difference: Harpsichords normally have **one** jack per string. *Lautenwercke* often have more than one jack independently serving the same string. Tonal variation is achieved by plucking the string at different points along its length. That is the case with the *Lautenwerck* you will hear today.

⇒ Classical clavichord (South Germany/Vienna, late 18th century; replica by Owen Daly)

The key acts as a seesaw – press down the near end of the key and the far end rises, striking its small metal blade, called a tangent, against the brass strings. The string continues to sound until the key is raised, the tangent drops, and the string descends onto the damping felt. Moving the key slightly up and down, one can create a vibrato, employed to highlight the most expressive notes of a melody.

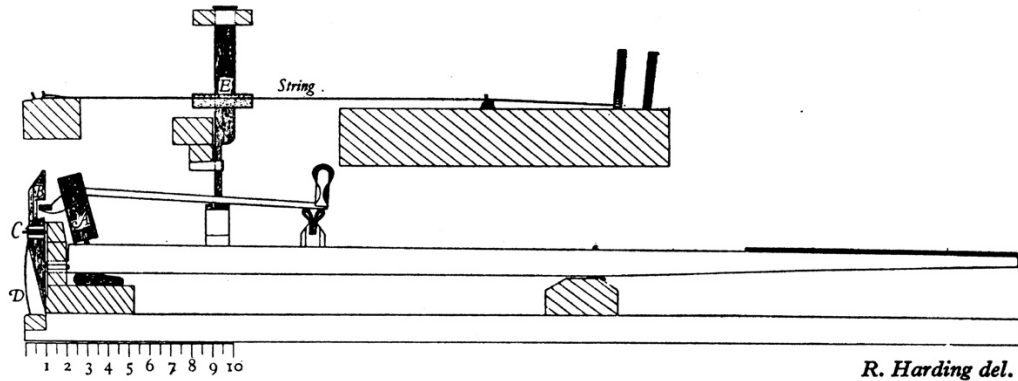


Fortepianos and Pianofortes

The SEKM! collection illustrates the two tracks in the technology of piano actions—South German/Viennese and English/French/American.

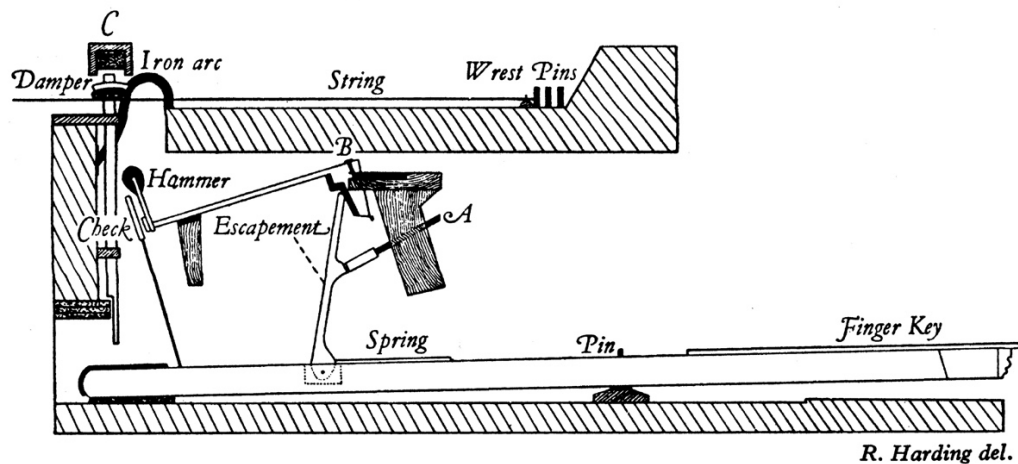
Of the pianos you will hear today, the 1795 Walter/Regier, 1814 Fritz/Clarke, 1820 Streicher/Wolf, and 1830 Graf-Bösendorfer/Regier have Viennese actions, the 1805 Broadwood and 1867 Chickering have actions of the English school.

In the Viennese action the hammer is hinged at the far end of the key and flips the hammer up to hit the string (*Prellmekanik*). This action is quick and light, but highly efficient.



Stein ("Viennese") Action

In the English action the hammer is hinged to a rail running over the key and is pushed or bumped up to move the key (*Stoßmekanik*). This action was heavier to the touch than the Viennese action. The modern Steinway action is a descendent of the English action.



Broadwood ("English") Action

Johann Fritz was one of the **most successful makers** in the Viennese Classical period. **Less renowned today** than his contemporaries Anton Walter, Conrad Graf, and Nannette Streicher, he built pianos that, in terms of **their sonority and as pieces of furniture**, were perhaps the **most elegant of any**. Typically, they had cases in the **ornate Empire style**.

Very little is known about **Johann Fritz**, despite the fact that he seems to have been **a fairly prolific builder**, with a number of his instruments **surviving** to this day. Many aspects of his work suggest that he **learned to manufacture fortepianos in the workshop of Anton Walter in Vienna**. The case of our Fritz replica is in the **plainer Walter style**, though **Walter** too built pianos in the **Empire style**.

Johann Fritz's fortepianos were **exported** widely to several other countries and were made with **refined craftsmanship**.

Fritz's **six-octave fortepianos**, made from **around 1810 to 1825**, were particularly distinguished by their **refined tonal registers**, from **reedy basses** through **mysterious tenor** and **fluty soprano registers** to **lark-like trebles**. Most of the surviving pianos have **four pedals**:

- an **una-corda pedal** (which shifts the keyboard to fewer strings/note, like the soft pedal on a modern grand piano),
- a **moderator pedal** (by which tongues of cloth are brought between hammer and string to produce a soft, sibilant sound)
- a **forte or damper-lifting pedal**, and
- a **Janissary pedal** producing, at will, **bells alone, or bells, cymbal, and bass drum** for playing the pseudo-Turkish music popular at the time.

In addition, a **knee-lever** on the left brings into play the **bassoon stop**, a roll of silk-covered paper upon which the bass strings buzz in imitation of a bassoon.

The “Viennese action,” in which **the light, leather-covered hammers are mounted directly on the keys** themselves, creates a **direct and sensitive link** between player and the strings.

⇒ Nannette Streicher fortepiano (Vienna, *ca.* 1820), built by Thomas and Barbara Wolf (The Plains, VA, near Washington, DC)

Nannette Streicher learned her trade from her father, **Johann Andreas Stein of Augsburg**, who is credited with having invented the “**Viennese action**.” Nannette supervised the Vienna workshop while her husband, **Johann Andreas Streicher**, managed the “front office.” She was a good friend to Beethoven and helped him with practical household matters, as well as supplying him with fortepianos. Her firm sold

their pianos throughout the Hapsburg lands and beyond. When Mendelssohn visited Goethe in Weimar, he played on the great writer's Streicher grand fortepiano.

⇒ The "Grafendorfer." Conrad Graf fortepiano, with elements of the earliest extant Ignaz Bösendorfer fortepianos (Vienna, *ca.* 1828–early 1830s), built by Rodney Regier (Freeport, ME)

The "Grafendorfer" is similar to the types of pianos the 20-year-old Frédéric Chopin encountered when he visited Vienna in 1829 and 1830–31. He composed and gave concerts on Graf fortepianos. The veneer on this fortepiano is book-matched flame mahogany, which turns golden when lit up by stage lighting.

Original English and American Pianofortes

⇒ Original John Broadwood square piano (London, *ca.* 1810)

Square pianos were the typical space-saving instrument from the mid-1700s to the mid-19th century. Though much smaller than a grand piano, when fitted out with **buckskin-covered hammers**, they can produce a mighty sound. This pianoforte is the most colorful in our collection.

⇒ Original Chickering grand piano (Boston, 1867)

Known as "The Governor's Chickering," this piano was once owned by **Miles C. Moore**, the fourteenth and **last territorial Governor of the Washington** before it achieved statehood on November 11, 1889. He had made his fortune in trading with the miners and others in the mountains and then in banking, after he married the daughter of the owner of Baker Boyer Bank in Walla Walla. Eventually he became the bank's President. The Chickering resided in a dedicated music room of their Victorian home (built in 1883), which served as "the Governor's Mansion" and where visiting dignitaries of the period were entertained by the sounds of this piano. Every time the mansion was sold, the piano went with the house.

In the mid-19th century Chickering and Steinway vied constantly for supremacy in the piano world. In 1867 they both entered pianos in the **Universal Exhibition in Paris**, Chickering choosing an instrument like our model. Steinway won a gold medal at for their concert grand, but Frank Chickering was awarded the "**Imperial Cross of the Legion of Honor**" by Emperor Napoleon III for his service to the art of music. The result was a widely publicized conflict over which firm won the highest award.

After the Exhibition, the Chickering was taken to Rome by Charles Francis Chickering and presented to Franz Liszt, who held master classes on the piano every Wednesday

afternoon. Edvard Grieg performed on it when he visited. (That piano is now in the Liszt Memorial Museum in Budapest.) The flamboyant Louis Moreau Gottschalk toured with a Chickering grand piano in the 1850s and sixties, the young Amy Beach concertized exclusively on Chickering pianos in 1883–85, and Edvard Grieg composed on a Chickering in the cottage at his home, Troldhaugen. After Steinway sponsored an American tour by Anton Rubinstein in 1872–73, Chickering retaliated by contracting with Hans von Bülow for an American tour in 1875–76.

Over time “The Governor’s Chickering dried out in the eastern Washington climate and fell into disrepair, until its last owner had it restored, but then downsized and sold the piano to us.

Finding replacement parts for a 140-year-old instrument was not an easy task. In the end a replica of **an 1860s Steinway(!) music rack** was employed, and the mismatched pedal lyre was retained and refinished to match the rest of the instrument better.

More dramatic was the creation of a new action for the piano. The decision was made not to try to replicate the unique Chickering action, but rather to replace it with **a modern Renner action**, which then had to be created to work in the pre-existing piano. All the new keys were hand cut and the action was literally built from the bottom up. The result is an action which is reliable and a joy to play—it’s lighter than that of a modern Steinway—but in no way lessens the original sound properties of the piano.

In two ways the Chickering’s case and stringing are significantly different from that of a modern grand piano. The piano has **a slightly “cocked-hat” orientation**, which allows the soundboard to extend to the left beyond the longest bass string, and together with the beefy rim construction, produces **an extremely rich bass sound** coming off the piano’s lid. Moreover, the piano is **“straight-strung,”** rather than “cross-strung,” the latter technique used on all modern instruments and developed so that shorter pianos would imitate the sound of the instruments with longer strings at a time when pianos were being designed for a piano-hungry public with less room for housing the larger instruments. “Straight-strung” instruments, from harpsichords through mid-19th-century pianos, exhibit **greater variety of tone by register**. Many experts consider the scaling (the relationship between string length and pitch) and balance in this piano to be the best among Chickerings. Constructed of irreplaceable **Brazilian Rosewood**, this instrument is adorned with reeding (the **cable-like “rope” carving**, à la Boston seaport) and **massive cabriole legs**.