

WESTERN EARLY KEYBOARD ASSOCIATION

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Introduction to the Harpsichord

What is the History of the Harpsichord?

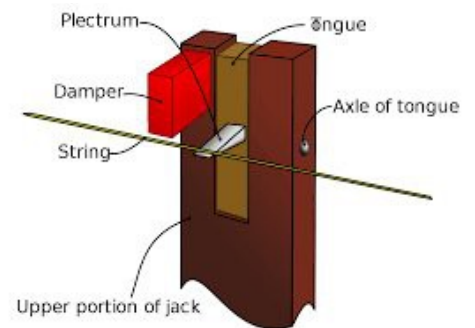
The harpsichord was a very important keyboard instrument used in the countries of Europe, during the years of approximately 1500-1800, before the modern piano was developed. Other keyboard instruments used during that time were the clavichord and fortepiano.

Are There Different Types?

Yes, harpsichords were made in different shapes and sizes, with various types of decoration, and with a variety of tone colors, depending on the era of history and the country in which they were made. Reed College owns an Italian harpsichord (left), a French harpsichord with two manuals (below), and a Virginal (next page).

How Does it Work?

Piano strings are hit with hammers which are covered in felt. Harpsichord strings are plucked. Originally, the plucking components, called "plectra," were made of quill from bird feathers. Plectra are now often made of plastic. Each individual plectrum is held in a wooden or hard plastic strip, called a "jack," which sits at the end of the key inside the instrument. When a key is pressed, the jack raises and the plectrum plucks the string.



How is it Different?

As compared to piano keys, harpsichord keys are shorter (and may be narrower) than piano keys, there are fewer of them, and the dip of the keys is shallower. Pressing harder or softer on a harpsichord key does not make the sound louder or softer. Also, when a finger is lifted from a key, the sound is stopped by a felt damper, so to sustain notes, their keys are held down. Harpsichords may have two or three sets of strings, and some have two keyboards (manuals), each with a different tone color. Harpsichords are more lightweight than pianos because they are made entirely of wood, without metal framing. Owners can learn to tune their own harpsichords.

How is it Played?

Playing the harpsichord takes much less finger and arm weight than the piano, and requires small and light movements. On the harpsichord, notes that are separated from others seem louder, while notes connected to others with legato seem softer. The harpsichordist learns to create the impression of dynamics - louder and softer - through the use of articulation, meaning the amount of separation

or legato connection between notes, as well as by the timing of notes. Harpsichordists also learn about the traditional styles of performing music from earlier centuries, which are different than the style of performance used on the modern piano. This is called “Historical Performance” and covers topics such as: articulation, ornamentation, rhythmic conventions, improvisation, tempo, characteristics of dances, national styles, types of compositions, editing issues, notation, and tuning.

Who Wrote Music For the Harpsichord?

Most piano students and teachers play music by Bach, Handel and Scarlatti, which was originally written for harpsichord, clavichord, or fortepiano. There are many other composers for these instruments, such as Byrd, Frescobaldi, Couperin, Froberger and Rameau. Even Mozart and Haydn performed some of their music on the harpsichord. Composers of the Romantic era did not write music for harpsichord, but modern composers do. The harpsichord can be used to play solo music or to accompany other instruments or singers.

Can I Buy a Harpsichord?

Yes. Harpsichords are usually more expensive than pianos because they are built mostly by hand. See examples for sale at harpsichord.com. The most accessible instrument may be the Zuckermann Italian Virginal (photo right), which is built from a kit and sells for \$2,000-\$5,000. If you wish to buy a harpsichord, contact WEKA for advice. See also this book: Edward Kottick, *The Harpsichord Owner's Guide: A Manual for Buyers and Owners*, 1992.



How Can I Learn More?

Contact WEKA for help to find a harpsichord teacher. Also, these books give useful information about playing the harpsichord, as well as Historical Performance topics, which may also be applicable to playing harpsichord music on the piano. *Available from Amazon and held at many college libraries. Open this flyer at www.wekaweb.org/resources to link to these books. Find used copies at bookfinder.com.*

- Ann Bond, *A Guide to the Harpsichord*, 1997. A good introduction for newcomers.
- Howard Ferguson, *Keyboard Interpretation From the 14th to the 19th Century: An Introduction*, 1975/1987. A standard reference, especially thorough about ornament signs.
- Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of JS Bach, Expanded Edition*, 2001. 337p. An essential reference for all Baroque dances as well as those by Bach.
- Jean Nandi, *Skill and Style on the Harpsichord: A Reference Manual for the Developing Harpsichordist*, 1990. Full of information and available free as a PDF from scribd.com.
- Howard Schott, *Playing the Harpsichord*, 1971/2002. A concise, standard reference.
- Richard Troeger, *Playing Bach on the Keyboard: a Practical Guide*, 2003. Thoughtful and thorough and helpful for the modern piano as well early keyboard instruments.

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