

The Fortepiano

The first fortepiano action, in which strings are struck by hammers, was invented by Bartolomeo Cristofori around 1700, and fitted into a harpsichord case. He called the instrument, *Gravicembalo col piano e forte*, a “harpsichord with soft and loud,” achieved via finger pressure. The young instrument became popular after about 1750. The sound of the early fortepiano is lighter and more transparent than that of the modern piano, and appropriate for late Baroque and Classical music.



Later, the instrument gained new qualities of tone, volume, size, weight, and range in response to changes in musical style, and was called *pianoforte*. Two types of action were common: the lighter Viennese action with a brighter tone (preferred by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert); and the heavier English action (based on Cristofori's) with a more mellow, deep tone. The latter persisted in the modern piano which had evolved by about 1880, complete with heavy construction, metal frame, and wound strings under great pressure. The earlier fortepiano models fell out of use; they are now reconstructed by modern builders, as are the harpsichord and clavichord.

Historical Performance

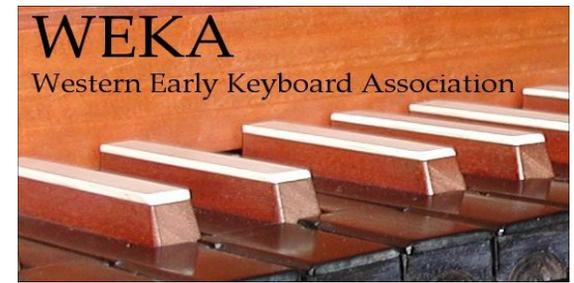
Playing these instruments takes much less finger and arm weight than the modern piano, and requires small, light movements. The keys may be shorter and narrower than modern piano keys, with a shallower key dip. Except for those fortepianos with levers for raising the dampers to create sustain as a special effect, sustain is accomplished with the fingers.

Players also learn about the traditional styles of performing music from earlier centuries, which are different than the style used today. This is called "Historical Performance" and covers such topics as: articulation, ornamentation, rhythmic conventions, improvisation, tempo, characteristics of dances, national styles, types of compositions, the Doctrine of Affects, notation, and tuning.

Modern players are generally taught to produce an even, legato tone and shape a smooth, long line - an entire sentence - unless otherwise marked. However, writers of the earlier era urged that constant nuances of “shadow and light” are needed to declaim the musical gestures at the smaller level of words. As J.J. Quantz wrote in 1752, “No listener will be particularly moved by someone who always produces the notes with the same force or weakness and, so to speak, plays always in the same color...”

See wekaweb.org/resources for a list of helpful books about Historical Performance.

9/19/25 LH



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October 4, 2024 - From the Court at Versailles to the Parisian Salons with Byron

Schenkman, Harpsichord
7:00pm Reed College Chapel

February 28, 2026 – Harpsichord Recital with Wesley Leffingwell

Including hands-on time for newcomers!

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Including hands-on time for newcomers!

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About the Instruments Shown

The Italian Single, French Double, and Virginal Harpsichords shown in this brochure are owned by Reed College, Portland, OR. The Spinet Harpsichord is owned by Paul Y. Irvin, and the Clavichord and Fortepiano are owned by Carol lei Breckenridge.

The Harpsichord

The harpsichord was developed toward the end of the 14th century and produced until about 1800. The instrument was still played alongside the newer fortepiano through the classical era, but forgotten during the romantic era. The harpsichord was then revived in the mid-20th century.

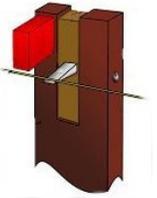


Harpsichords may have two keyboards (left) and several sets of strings with different tone colors, allowing the player to create tonal variety using various combinations of strings. The *lautenwerck* or *lute-harpsichord* has gut rather than metal strings and sounds like the lute.

The term *harpsichord* is often used for all plucked-string keyboards such as rectangular *virginals* (right above) and pentagonal *spinets* (right below).



The harpsichord has a plucking action. A quill, which is wedged into a wooden *jack*, plucks the metal string when the key is depressed. A felt damper stops the sound when the key is released. Like the organ, harpsichord action does not produce louder or softer dynamics via finger pressure, but a player can create the impression of dynamics and emphasis through nuanced use of both timing and of articulation and overlapping between notes.



The harpsichord favored by Renaissance and Baroque composers such as Bach, Byrd, Couperin, D'Anglebert, Frescobaldi, Froberger, Handel, Rameau, and Scarlatti and used for solo playing and accompaniment.

The Clavichord



The clavichord originated early in the 15th century and was popular through the 18th. When a key is depressed, a small metal *tangent* at the end of the key strikes the string. The resulting sound is very quiet compared to both the harpsichord and fortepiano, but its action can produce a range of dynamics, color, and vibrato. The clavichord, used for keyboard practice, composing, and performance in small spaces, was prized for its dynamic range and expressiveness, especially by 18th century composers.

