

Recent Harpsichord Restorations (II)

by Michael Thomas

Recently we have found a rare large 'classical' French harpsichord. It is near Grasse. This is complete and ^virtually unrestored except for some eighteenth-century flower painting over the black varnish on the outside of the case.

This case is made of pine, the usual wood in the South. The length is 92", the width 33" because like most seventeenth-century instruments it has large blocks. The depth is 10 1/2" and the soundboard 2" lower. Such a big instrument would obviously have a very full tone and this depth of tone would be increased by the heavy bridge: .8" at the treble and shaped from 1" wood at the base. The compass is GG to c³. (A virginal, also found near Grasse is C/E to f³) The string length is long: c³= 7", c²= 15.3", c= 28.4". The longest GG is 69".

The case is more straight than the bridge, so the maximum distance between the bridge pins and the side is 5" in the alto giving 4" of free soundboard. This is the exact opposite of the early Italian described in the first part of this article.* The maximum distance to the 4' hitch pins from the 8' bridge is 5" so the 8" bridge is near the middle of its soundboard band. Whether this 8' band of soundboard is free is not yet known. But certainly some of the small bars seem to pass under the 4' bridge which would presumably give a thin percussive tone.

Also, in contrast to the 8', there

* See EHM Vol.3, page 47 (Oct. 1981)

**See EHM Vol.2, page 161 (Oct.1980) for an account of Tibaut.

is very little soundboard for the 4' bridge, it being hemmed in by the 4¹ hitch-pin rail and the parallel bar on the other side.

This is a feature we have noticed before, that in this period there seemed to be a big tonal contrast between the full 8'tone and the thin 4'tone. So the maximum distance from the 4'hitch pins to the 4' bridge is only 2.2" decreasing to .8".**

The strings appear to be recent as they are very untidy and are of heavy brass. There are no jacks. The keyboards, on a pine base, appear to be original. The leverage is positive, the pivot ratio is 29:24 for the bottom and 12:13% for the upper. The paintings include a bowl of roses, a tambourine, flutes, tulips and a red parrot.

Another big harpsichord (5 oct) has recently been found in Central France. The case is beautifully made in red lacquer with Chinese designs. Unfortunately, neither the keys nor the bridges appear to be original. The question is whether the soundboard itself is original, for it is parallel barred. This barring, which gives such a full effect is not known to me after Tisseran 1710 and the big Italians such as those of: Grimaldi. The soundboard in question even if not original, shows that somebody was making parallel-barred soundboards in the late 18th century. The Harpsichord at Helmingham

The lasc harpsichord to be discussed is the instrument dated 1643 at Helmingham which we restored with the help of Anrie and Ian Tucker who restored the action with the aid of a

grant. This instrument belonged to the same family as the Ham House harpsichord. It has often been said that the Ham House instrument was not seventeenth century and that the Helmingham Hall was not a Ruckers.

As one is taught to be cautious in all things, I should like to give the objective evidence for these statements, except that I can find no reason for this denigration other than that they are not in an Edinburgh collection.

The work of rebuilding the 1643 Ruckers presumably took place before the early 18th-century painting on the lid (more recent paintings have been stripped). This work resembles that on the instrument dated 1623 & on the Ham House instrument.

However, the early alterations on the 1643 are crude in comparison. The mouldings are not the simple mouldings cut clean with a plane, but more complex and as though made with a scratch scraper. There is a shelf at the back of the leader to strengthen it as in the other instruments, but it is much smaller, five inches wide and more like the "T"-shaped strengthening sometimes found in Italian instruments.

The instrument has been widened at the front to 33". All the new wood of the case sides is added at the back rather crudely. The bent side has 13' of pine, and the tail soundboard has 6/8" added mainly from under the bridge.

The soundboard has had about 3" added in the treble and 5" down the spine. This means it is twisted into the enlarged case, the tenor part of the bridge being very near the bent side, 3". There is a long new tail to the bridge that has the pins for added notes, probably FF to D. This tail follows the line of the new tail which is 8" wide (1623).

' So the bridge hugs the side like the design of a beginner who works from string length calculations. The Blanchet of Miss Dreyfus and a Ruckers from Marseilles do this, and I wonder if they have been rebuilt to some extent too.

This does not seem to have affected the tone which is still excellent as it is in the Marseilles instrument. Presumably the imbalance of the vibrating areas is not so upset because the 4" hitchpin rail was moved with the bridge.

The instrument was rebuilt again as the keys are dated Sep 30th 1784. They are 16/8" long with 1" extension. The upper manual of our Kircknam is only 15", so it suggests extended keys from a single manual instrument.

The wrest plank of 3" oak is about 1/2" narrower in the treble, which the wrest plank of the 1628 decreases by an inch from 9.25". The framing of the latter instrument is oak inside pine.

So it would seem that, if the 1623 and Ham House instruments are English, this enlargement was also by an Englishman familiar with the work, but not perhaps as skilled.

There is no sign of the soundboard going over the jacks as it did in the 1623 and no wonder, for this instrument was undoubtedly a Ruckers enlarged to the English requirements because of its short compass.

We placed the 1635 A. Ruckers on it and every detail, every joint and every piece of wood of the original part was identical. Furthermore, it is said that the paintings correspond to Ruckers' work in 1643. This must be the subject of another article.

The present scale is $C^3 = 6\frac{1}{2} : C^2 = 13\frac{1}{2}$: Bottom C = 52": FF = 65".

The bass strings go from gauge 14

to 10 at F. F# and G are unknown and steel A is No.9: C is No.8: e is No. 7: G# is No.6. No.5 starts just above middle c and the top is No. 4. These are pretty consistent with a Kirkman of the 1780 period, and presumably date from the time the keys were added, for they are thicker than Weber's earlier tradition.*

It is amazing the way the tone of Ruckers seems indestructible, Which brings us back to our starting place - that the wood is the most important factor in harpsichord tone.

* see "String Gauges of Old Italian Harpsichords" by Michael Thomas in GSJ XXIV page 69.

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