

# The Harpsichord at the Courtauld Institute

by Michael Thomas

A copy of the beautiful large single-manual harpsichord at the Courtauld Institute has recently been made at the Goble workshops. It now belongs to Mr Richard Lester who gave a most enjoyable recital on it at the Purcell Room. The quality of the copy is a great tribute to English harpsichord making.\*

This brings us to the question of whether it is a Spanish harpsichord or not. First we must dismiss from our minds the old 'national' conception, perhaps a legacy from the ideas of Raymond Russell. We know that there were kinds of harpsichords in France, England and Italy with the similar features below the obvious superficialities of local furniture construction. There were probably several types of harpsichords known in Spain also.

One possible Spanish instrument is the Domenico Rubino 1743 (probably CC-e<sup>3</sup>) which was found in the south of Italy. Although reminiscent of a Venetian,

it has a compass and, derived from it by Pythagorean rules, a shape unusual in this school. However, the tail is very pointed like a Venetian harpsichord although this too is found internationally. This has a nobleman in Spanish costume and St. Cecilia playing an organ, painted in the Spanish style on the lid. It is not possible to be sure that the lid belonged to the instrument as it does not fit well; it is a heavy lid and the instrument is a light one of the 'inner case' construction. The lid would have fitted a heavy outer case round this instrument. At any rate, it is so close it must have come off a single-manual harpsichord of almost exactly the same dimensions. So if this lid is Spanish, which art experts have verified, the Rubino at least represents the type of instrument for which it was made. It is also in some ways similar to the Antunes instrument in Eisbon (also CC-e<sup>3</sup>). There is no reason to think that basically similar instruments were not made in both Italy and Spain although the lions on

the side of the keys of the Rubino give the effect of a 45° cheek piece which we believe to be a Spanish characteristic, although again a dubious Baffo and several Austrian instruments also do this.



1. The Rubino harpsichord: Photo, courtesy of Sotheby Parke Bernet & Co.

This instrument was illustrated in EHM No. 6, page 184.

2. The harpsichord at the Courtauld Institute: Photo, by permission of the Courtauld Institute.



The Rubino harpsichord is like some Italian instruments inasmuch as the bridge is deduced from a standard scaling for the compass. The thin side, probably poplar, is parallel to the bridge. The knees are a common Italian type. It probably originally had five cross-bars under the bridge as small dowel holes can be seen, although this has been altered.

The second candidate is a harpsichord believed to be Spanish by Professor Galvez and Mr Puyana. It was found in a nunnery in Spain and it is thought to have been there since the eighteenth century. I have only seen this instrument briefly, but it is exactly what one would expect from Sweden: double-bent-side case and cross-grained Soundboard, all made of northern pine. The strings I have been able to measure are the light strings of the Fleischer or Swedish school, not of the thicker Hass tradition. It is like a lighter and probably earlier version of the Danish harpsichords by Mority Georg Moshack of 1770, although the latter has three cross-bars passing under the bridge and a straight-grained soundboard.

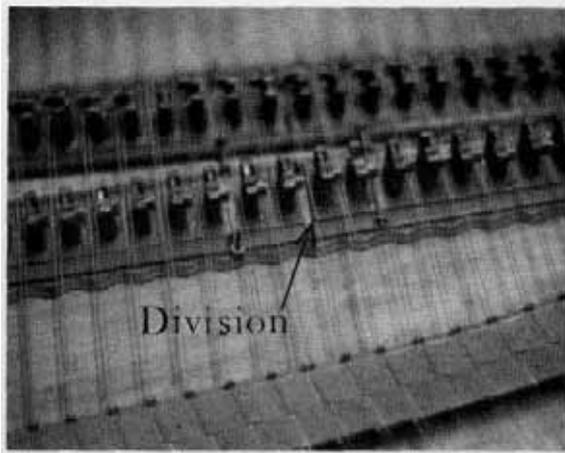
Does this mean that this harpsichord, although found in Spain, is Swedish or Northern Germanic? There are already two early German harpsichords in Spain and another which is almost certainly from the area in or around Switzerland; so the Spanish makers, obviously aware of Northern traditions, may well have built after this style themselves.

Another possibility is a small C/E to C<sup>3</sup> instrument in Barcelona. It is like the cross-barred instruments found near Florence, although the case has a great deal of additional veneer decoration not usually found

in Italy, and cheeks out at 45° at the side of the keys as seen in Austria. We know this basic style was pretty universal (as discussed below). It looks from the differences in decor as though it could be Spanish, but Professor Ricart-Matas, (who collected all the instruments in the Barcelona Museum) has pointed out to me that the names of the notes are written on them in the Germanic style.

There is also a missing harpsichord in Spain, reputed to be a case and soundboard. I have spent much time and money chasing this instrument but I have so far been unable to catch up with it.

The large five octave instrument (no FF#) at the Courtauld Institute is rather similar in shape to many harpsichords, especially some in Italy, of the same compass. However, the long pointed Venetian style \*M has been truncated. The tail of the bridge carries eight notes, again a common feature in the Venetian style. The wrestplank bridge bends away from the treble but then turns straight again and goes down the middle of the wrest plank to the base. This is a characteristic we have noticed in an Austrian instrument with a hollow resonating wrest plank, although the wrest plank under consideration is solid. The general curve of the bent side is logarithmic and parallel to the Pythagorean bridge at 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> ins, so the scaling combined with the compass determines the shape of the instrument. The instrument is one note larger than the usual large early-Italian instruments (Celestini 1605) but the bottom FF could easily have been added. At any rate, we know compasses are not as fixed as we had previously thought. Also



3. The divided slides: Photo, by permission of the Courtauld Institute.

the instrument seems to have been enlarged at some time.

The slides fan out from  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch apart to 3 ins apart in the bass. This fanning and the truncated tail are characteristics of the upright German instrument in the Nurnburg Museum. The Fleischer instrument also plucks further down the string (11 ins). The jack cover is shaped like a V which is seen in one Pisarenis instrument, but there it is a replacement. The great interest to us is that this is an instrument with inverted mouldings: that is, flat at the top like some French instruments, but has only one bar under the soundboard like the Pisarenis in Paris (see EHM No. 4, page 116, bottom). If it is a late instrument for Scarlatti then it will choir well and the chord should be played slowly and full, but it would appear more likely from the single bar that it is an earlier instrument for harmonic music. Art experts say it is almost certainly before 1680. The outer case is made of a wood which looks like lime or poplar, but the inner case is in two layers all the way down. The outer layer is Cyprus 1/8 inch thick, and the inner core is  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch pine. Inside this above the soundboard is a third layer which is ebony decorated with ivory. So the case is about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in all, but  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch below the soundboard. The mouldings are of ebony and of undulating motives, like Indian work. The whole ebony work resembles a little seventeenth-century Italian spinet, or a little four-foot organ from Italy which was made, presumably a copy, in about 1880 and is now with Mr John Barry.

The frame is made of double knees, made out of one piece of wood, and these rise up and limit the soundboard in the way I have described for the Dutch upright (EHM No. 4, Diagram 2).

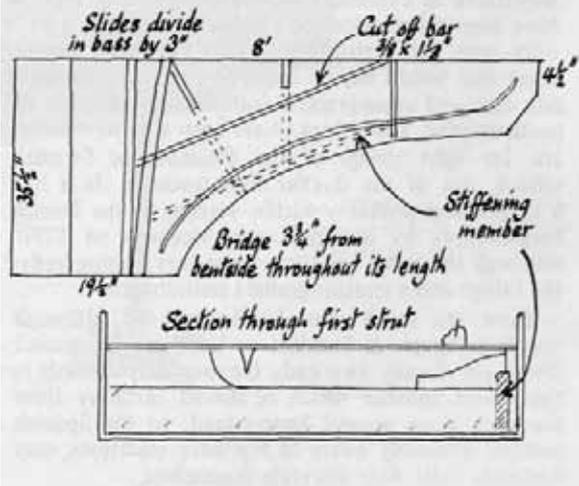
There is one parallel bar, so it is like the resonant instrument we have been trying to discover in France and additional evidence that such instruments were

universally known in the seventeenth century and therefore probably in France; but we do not know the date of the instrument in question. The complicated international characteristics can best be shown by a table.

1.	Pine case	Many countries
2.	Short scale	Italy, England and France in the seventeenth century.
3.	Use of ebony	Italy
4.	Truncated tail	Germany
5.	Cross grain in sound-board	France, Italy and England
6.	Fanning register	Germany (also Muller)
7.	Frame limiting sound-board	Norwegian upright, Dutch upright 1745
8.	Inner strut continuing from bentside to header	Cresci Livorno 1740: Pether, England 1775
9.	Single bar to sound-board	Italy
10.	Parallel bars	Italy, England, France
11.	Double thickness in case	Rare. Other instruments possibly Spanish
12.	Divided register for bass and treble between B flat and B	Spanish organs
13.	Top and bottom register not box slides	Livorno, Italy 1740: Venice, Italy 1704: Universal
14.	Leather-covered slides	France

The strongest evidence for the instrument being Spanish is given by the distance between the jack guides, representing the tone colours of the Spanish organs; and the divided slides between bass and treble, again a strong characteristic of Spanish organs.

Mr Andrea Goble has supplied the following diagrams.



It will be seen that like a great number of instruments found recently, that it is not possible to pin down an instrument which is not signed or dated.

The old idea expressed by Raymond Russell divides up harpsichords into national schools. If these were so clearly defined, we could easily locate an instrument geographically. But that theory does not leave room for the variation and migration of ideas all around Europe in the seventeenth century, such as existed in the music for which the instruments were made.

A later theory has polarised the two schools of Italy and Antwerp with intermediate harpsichords between.

However, instruments like the Ruckers have a close resemblance to many Italian ones in both tone and structure. The so-called intermediate 'school' was so vast and so varied that it included almost all the harpsichords in France and England before 1710, not to mention all the Swedish, German and Eastern instruments. But the real point is that Italian harpsichords are 'intermediate' in many ways (except for string lengths which are always relatively short in my experience), it is possible to see at least six types in Italy, and these show in embryo form almost all the ideas used in other countries.

My view is that there were a number of basic building techniques known all over Europe around 1500. All or most of these continued to be made in conservative Italy (with the Pythagorean scale), and they, or similar techniques, became more developed in other countries.

The great contrast between Italian and Ruckers is probably imagined because few people have heard sixteenth- and seventeenth-century instruments playing well, and realized that the similarities were greater than the divergencies. Neither did they know the variation in kinds of instruments in Italy and the Low Countries that showed how easily 'contrasting' instruments could be made only a few miles away from each other.

The trouble is that 'Ruckers' was a snob word and these instruments have been so written up, while instruments of different construction, perhaps made in the same town, have been neglected or even called incorrect fakes. In the same way, superficial resemblances in Italian instruments have led to the belief in an 'Italian type'. Yet prototypes of all kinds can be found there. A leading player recently described the early French walnut instrument in Verve as a 'country instrument'. Yet as a seventeenth-century instrument, heavily barred and bright like an Italian,

with a heavier case that was usual in French walnut instruments, giving an effect like the early Weber harpsichord, it is far more unique in musical history, and its relevance to playing technique, than one of the prolific Parisian School.

\* \* \*

So it may be possible that all these are 'Spanish' instruments which we have discussed above, that is, made in Spain.

There is a tendency nowadays among the more experienced makers not just to copy late and stylized versions of the harpsichord made in London, Paris and Flanders (i.e. Kirkman, Taskin and Dulcken). Makers are beginning to realize the existence of a vast number of unsigned instruments which have been ignored, but which are more suitable for the early music, and were made at a time when composition for the harpsichord was at its height. Some makers are analysing the characteristics of instruments and designing their own from basic premises. Others are copying instruments like the one we are discussing, which are instruments of far more general use and interest than the later eighteenth-century instruments. Of course, to build from fundamental principles requires years of study, experimenting with the effect of the different factors which control the tone, and also making up the early instruments. In this case the original is a beautifully-made instrument relevant to Spanish, Italian and Austrian music, which, because of its outstanding quality, was most difficult to copy and needed the highest standard of craftsmanship to reproduce it.

My own feeling is that despite the similarity with the Cresci of 1740 these beautifully-decorated instruments are, like the French claviorganum, of the 1550 to 1650 period. The instrument also has a lot in common with the single-barred Pisarenis, which would be about 1600, although in the latter instrument the bridge is only 3 ins from the side. I am therefore looking forward to recitals of earlier music which should show the sonority of the instrument through the block chords and harmony. I doubt whether it has much to do with Scarlatti, for whom I think the cross-barred soundboard is required, so that the percussive rhythmic drive can be given with the left hand.

I should like to thank Andrea Goble, Christopher Nobbs, Derek Adlam, and Mr Troutman of the Courtauld Institute for their generous help.

© The English Harpsichord Magazine  
Vol. 1 No7 Oct 1976  
Reproduced with permission.