

The English Virginals: 1

By Richard Luckett

Debate about 'virginals' begins with the term itself. In this article I use it primarily, though not exclusively, in the modern sense of a rectangular plucked-string keyed instrument. As writers on early English keyboard music from Hipkins and van den Borren onwards have pointed out, it was not restricted to this meaning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but was used generically for all plucked-string keyed instruments. The difficulties can be gauged from the convoluted language in which Balthazar Gerbier writes, in 1638, to Sir Francis Windebank about the purchase of a Ruckers instrument: 'The virginnall I do pitch upon is an excellent piece . . . Its a dobbel staert stick as called, hath four registers, the place to play on att the inde'. Gerbier could think of no English equivalent for low-german *steertstuk*, but needed to distinguish between a virginal with a place to play on 'att the inde' and one with a place to play on at the side: it seems probable, from his phraseology, that the latter was the more usual sense.

The word Gerbier required was, of course, 'harpsicon' or 'harpsical', denoting a virginals laid out harp-fashion; but the expression, though in intermittent use in 1638, was not to become commonplace for another twenty years or so. The 1663 edition of John Playford's *Musicks Hand-maide* presents 'New and Pleasant Lessons for the Virginals or Harpsycon', whilst *The Second Part of Mustek's Hand-maid* (1689) implies the full modern terminology for the three basic shapes of keyed instruments, with lessons set for 'the Virginals, Harpsichord, and Spinnet'. Despite this the old usage persisted in particular circumstances: on Henry Purcell's death in 1695 Dr. Blow and Bernard Smith were appointed to share his place as tuner of the Royal 'regalls, organs, virginalls' and other instruments. The term is, in this instance, traditional. So it seems that after 1660 the word continued to have its ancient sense, but more frequently suggested the modern meaning. Soon it was scarcely used at all, except in out of the way places such as Scotland and the American colonies. In such cases the sense is unclear. Lady Grisell Baillie's Mellerstain Castle accounts, where it features, also refer to 'herpsicords' and 'spinets', so it may mean that the rectangular instruments continued in common use away from the centres of manufacture and fashion. Its broader significance had obviously vanished completely when Dr. Burney, attempting to describe the shape of one of Zumpe's pianos, compared it to 'one of the old virginals'.

Frank Hubbard, in his *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making*, has compared the surviving English virginals to a marching platoon of soldiers: 'They burst into view in 1641. Seventeen dated examples are found in the thirty-eight years between

that date and 1679. There are no stragglers, no prototypes, and few variants'. Since he wrote one more dated virginals (by Thomas Body, 1662) has answered to the roll-call; it is neatly in step with its fellows. Hubbard's observation about the lack of prototypes is, as I shall argue in the second part of this study, not entirely accurate. But the general impression he conveys is wholly convincing. The English virginals, whether made in London or Exeter, are a remarkably homogeneous group of instruments. As Hubbard goes on to remark: 'The ranges began long by Flemish standards (C-e^m) and ended longer (GG/BB-fⁿ)', but this is about the only evidence of evolution to be detected'. The cases are chiefly of oak, the lids in most cases being vaulted; the keyboards are to the left of centre and recessed; the foreboards extend the whole length of the instruments; the plain exteriors are fitted with straps and lockplates of ironwork.

In external appearance they resemble domestic chests of the period. Opened, they surprise by the profusion of decoration: embossed and richly gilded papers are used as liners; birds, tulips, roses, raspberries, and ink chasings enliven the soundboards; the soundholes are elaborately carved; vivid paintings, usually in a popular style, embellish the interior of lid and foreboard. The natural keys are of box or ebony, the accidentals may be stained or of ivory. The majority of those original stands that survive are of frame construction, with elaborate turning.

Before considering the instruments' musical qualities it is appropriate to investigate the uses to which they were put. A confusion of the two senses of 'virginal' has created the erroneous impression that 'virginal music' was specifically intended for performance on the rectangular instrument, rather than on plucked-string instruments generally. In fact it is as likely to have been played on the harpsichord or on the pentagonal spinet. But it must be emphasized that this does not exclude the rectangular instrument; some commentators, understandably anxious to assert the scale and quality of the best virginal music, have suggested that virginal music was intended *primarily* for the harpsichord. Nevertheless, the term is neutral, as the title-page of *Parthenia* shows: it is a rectangular virginals that the lady plays, though her position, derived from a Flemish engraving of St. Cecilia, is in no sense a guide to the appropriate technique.

The argument, to which Hubbard gives the weight of his considerable authority, that the virginals was to the harpsichord as the upright piano to the concert grand, is misleading. The distinction comes as a consequence of the concert tradition, and virginal music was never played under modern concert conditions. When Tomkins

wrote his *Sad Pavin, For these distracted Tymes*, or any of the other pieces composed during his final years of enforced retirement under the Protectorate, he cannot have had in mind any form of public performance. Such performances as had a claim to be 'public', in that they featured the player in a professional capacity, were nevertheless private in that the player entertained, at most, the patron and his friends. A reference (in the accounts) to 'brackets' for the virginals at Ingatestone Hall, the home of Byrd's patron Lord Petre, makes it probable that the virginals there was a rectangular instrument. Since the English virginals are distinctly loud instruments the only reasons for preferring a harpsichord can have been a wish to use varied registration, a need for a specific compass, or desire for a specific tone quality. We can only speculate about the last factor. But the fact that many of the harpsichords in England would have been imported Italian instruments which, despite the presence of two sets of strings, allowed of no changes of registration, makes the first part of the argument unconvincing.

The same is true of the requirement for an extended compass. The compass of the English virginals exceeds that of many contemporary continental instruments, and if at first sight there are discrepancies between the ranges called for by the music of the period and the surviving instruments, this proves, on closer examination, to be a minor problem. *Parthenia* ('the Maidenhead of the first musicke that ever was printed for the virginalls'), first published in 1612/3 and reissued three times between 1646 and 1655, remained, according to Anthony a Wood, 'the prime Book for many years that was used by Novices and others that exercised their hands on that Instrument'. Two pieces, Gibbons' *Fantazia of foure parts* and *The Lord of Salisbury his pavin*, require A A, a note lacking on several of the earlier virginals (e.g. Townsend, 1641; Thomas White, 1642 and 1653). But this fails to allow for possible short octave arrangements, and a distinctive feature of the English virginals is the comparative elaboration of such devices. We find not only the conventional extension of compass by, for instance, an apparent BB actually sounding GG (e.g. Leversidge, 1670; Jones, 1671; Rewallin, 1675), but also a system by which a jack may be moved from one mortice in the guide to another, whilst still remaining governed by the same keylever. Thus the bottom key of the Thomas White virginal of 1642, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, may either activate the plucking of the apparent note, C, or another, heavier, string—presumably either GG or AA. Since those pieces which call for these notes will almost invariably call for C as well, it is to be presumed that the apparent C# was detuned to C. But there is no guaranteeing that the apparent C# sounded that note in the first place, since it may itself have formed part of a short octave system. To the uninitiated this seems fairly baffling, but there can be no doubt that complex short-octave systems were quite normal, and the spare mortice persists as late as the Charles Rewallin virginal of 1675. It is dangerous, therefore, to leap to conclusions as to what can and cannot be played on a virginals of a given compass. In any case two of the later virginals, the Fenton House Hatley of 1664 and the Russell Collection Keene of 1668 have compasses (FF to c³ and d³ respectively) that would have been adequate for the entire canon of seventeenth century English music. In one respect the compass of most of the later virginals, from the

Thomas White of 1554 (now at Cardiff) onwards, exceeds the requirements of the surviving repertoire*. The ranges ascend to f³, yet this note seems superfluous; for practical purposes c³ is the limit, and the Purcell *Chaconne* on the *Timon of Athens* curtain tune is quite exceptional in calling for d³; it is significant that, assuming the theatre music came first, the piece cannot have been composed before 1694.

The conventional picture of English keyboard music in the seventeenth century depicts a gradual decadence, followed by a brief recovery of the lost glory. The great age of Byrd, Bull, Gibbons, Farnaby and Tomkins gives way to the trivia of the 1663 *Musicks Hand-maide*; the resurgence is prematurely signalled by *Melothesia* (edited by Locke in 1670), preluded by *The Second Part of Musick's Hand-maid* (1689), and consolidated by the posthumous Purcell *Choice Collection of Lessons* (1696). But it must be remembered that we know very little about the circulation of manuscripts, or even the intentions of the compilers, and this lack of knowledge is complicated by the personal and private nature of keyboard music. The chronology proves to be more apparent than real. 'Golden Age' music makes frequent appearances in post-Restoration manuscripts; Tomkins, the last exponent, was still composing in 1654. French compositions, by such masters as Chambonnières and La Barre, occur comparatively frequently in English sources, and must be taken into account. The contents of virginal books intended for teaching, such as those owned by Priscilla Bunbury, Anne Cromwell, or Barbara Fletcher, should not be regarded as representative of music in the mid-century, though they are often charming enough. The date of composition of a piece of music, like the date of construction of a musical instrument, can be misleading. We may safely assume that a virginals, built in the 1650s, might, in the course of its career, have been used for both Byrd and Purcell.

The other customary employment of the virginals would have been as an accompanying instrument. Again, the issue is not clear cut, and it is important to bear in mind the uncertain nature of much of the evidence. The virginals was one instrument amongst many; in matters of accompaniment its rivals were the lute, viol and organ. The lute, in its 'theorboized' form, remained the primary instrument of vocal accompaniment until the 1680s, but there is evidence for the use of the virginals as an alternative: Pearson's *Private Musicke* of 1620 suggests the virginals as substitute for viol consort accompaniment ('the Proficient can play upon the Ground'); Playford refers to the 'harpsicon' as an accompanying instrument in

* The Thomas White at St. Pagan's Folk Museum, Cardiff, is given as 1654 by Donald Boalch (*Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord* 2nd ed., p. 190). He notes that the date now reads 1664, but has been altered from 1654. In fact the date now reads 1684, and it is hard to say with any confidence what the original date (for it has undeniably been altered) actually was. Nevertheless, I see no reason to doubt 1654. 1652; the 'harpsicon' is proposed for the continuo on the title-page of William King's settings of 'Mr. Cowley and others', published in 1668. Anthony a Wood, in his account of Oxford music making during the last years of the Protectorate reveals that at the 'musick-meeting' the virginals was used for a continuo to consorts, and he refers explicitly to both 'virginals' and 'harpsicon'. John Playford proposes lute or virginals continuo on the title-page of *Court-Avres* (1655). Such practices sometimes

run counter to the advice offered by Thomas Mace in *Musick's Monument* (1676), though he does recommend the 'pedal', John Hayward's harpsichord with foot-operated register changes, as a fit instrument for use in 'ayery' and 'jocond' consorts. The significance of these references is that a keyed plucked-string instrument was regarded as proper for accompaniment; before Hayward exercised his inventive skill even Mace might have recommended the use of a virginals in particular circumstances. Guillaume Vaughan's engraving on the title-page of *Musicks Hand-maide* (1663), which was also used for the *Second Part* and for a number of song-books, even as late as the fifth part of *The Banquet of Musicke* (1691), shows a lady playing a virginal (which Vaughan has failed to reverse); she is accompanying a lady singer and a gentleman essaying a dangerously high position on the treble-violin. It is to be presumed that such a use had nothing exceptional about it.

The virginals, then, was an all-purpose instrument, used for keyboard solos and for accompaniment, though in this latter capacity it would seldom have been a natural first choice. Both these tasks it shared with the harpsichord, but on terms of equality. It is the independent status of the rectangular instrument, its position as something other than a cheap substitute for the harpsichord, that we have to bear in mind when considering its musical attributes. Gustav Leonhardt, writing of the Flemish version in Edwin Ripin's anthology *Keyboard Instruments*, has suggested that no one who purchased a virginals did so because they wanted a 'miniature harpsichord'. His reaction is comparable to that of Alec Hodsdon and Cecil Glutton who, in an article entitled 'Defining the Virginal' (*Musical Times*, May, 1947) contend that, since in the virginals both nut and bridge are placed on the soundboard, there is a basic difference between it and the harpsichord. Their argument is not tenable in detail, but the observation from which it stems—that there is a radical difference in sound—is patently true. It is this distinctive sound that makes the popular notion that the virginals was 'superseded' by the spinet seem inherently unlikely.

On 4 April, 1668, Samuel Pepys went to Aldgate Street 'and there called upon one Hayward, that makes Virginals, and there did like of a little espinette, and will have him finish that for me; for I had a mind to a small harpsichon, but this takes up less room'. His diary entry as well as illustrating the use of the word 'virginals' as a generic term, also provides us with an interesting insight into

motives for purchasing one of the then novel spinets. Pepys was indeed buying a 'miniature harpsichord'. He did not, it seems, consider a rectangular instrument: it was a harpsichord he wanted in the first place. A virginals would have saved little space, for the instruments are comparatively bulky. The spinet not only took up the least room but, as Gustav Leonhardt has pointed out, had an appearance in accord with current fashions in furnishing—and Pepys was by nature a man of fashion. So he ended by purchasing an instrument which, though like a harpsichord in tone, is clearly deficient when compared with that instrument. This is particularly so with the small late-seventeenth century spinet, which has a poor bass, a tenor unable to sing out because of the comparatively heavy case, and a treble muffled by the unavoidable contortions that the bridge goes through in this vital area. A virginals is a different proposition: its light build and extensive soundboard give it great carrying power, whilst the close plucking-point ensures brightness and incisiveness. The tenor speaks with a roundness of its own, and the bass, if properly strung, is distinctively plangent. The quality of the treble depends a good deal on sensitive quilling and, for the higher notes, on careful tuning. (The best sound comes at a particular point and no other: once this is found it is as well to tune the virginal to it; the alternative, if the instrument must be played at an arbitrary pitch, is to restring accordingly.) Given a correctly strung and conscientiously tuned instrument Hub-bard's accusation that the treble is feeble seems quite undeserved. Rather, the treble matches the tenor, though it lacks something of the tenor's bloom and makes its full effect on the ear sooner after the attack—a characteristic which helps explain why so many English keyboard pieces are built on a tenor and move in such brilliant figurations in the treble. The effect is reminiscent of, though distinct from, that obtainable on some early Italian instruments. The reasons why virginals possess these qualities, and the extent to which the English virginals stands apart from the Flemish and Italian models, I shall examine in the sequel to this article.

The illustrations to which Mr. Luckett refers are held over until our next issue.

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