

# On choosing a Harpsichord

Exhibitions such as that in London this year, or those which form part of Festivals of Early Music, as at Boston or Bruges, provide the aspiring harpsichordist with an admirable chance to compare the many types of instrument available before deciding which to buy.

Our aspiring harpsichordist may be a beginner in search of a first instrument, or someone who has already had experience of playing on other peoples' instruments and now wishes to acquire his own. The circumstances may vary considerably, but we hope that our suggestions may be helpful in making a satisfactory choice.

Anyone coming new to the harpsichord needs to know something of its recent history. At the start of the revival, harpsichord makers tended to base their ideas too much on the modern piano, with the result that their instruments were much too heavily built. To withstand a strain in the region of 20 tons the piano has to have a stout frame and other features in proportion. In fact it is built round a rigid frame and does not require a base. A string that is hit needs to be under higher tension to withstand the blow than one that is plucked; but, until the 'revolution' which started shortly after the war (in the 50s) makers seemed to be afraid that a lightly-built harpsichord would be unstable, and so made 'plucked pianos' with heavy case and frame, heavy action, rows of pedals, leather plectra etc., all of which deprived the instrument of its natural resonances and characteristic tone quality.

Everything about a harpsichord can be so much lighter than the piano strings and their tension, soundboard,

action and case, the last being built up from its base like a box with the soundboard to form a lid. Not until makers took another look at the harpsichords of the best period, of the 17th century and the first years of the 18th, did they realize what was wrong with the 'modern' harpsichord. Frank Hubbard was a leader of this revolution towards the 'traditional' harpsichord, which gathered momentum in the 1960<sup>s</sup> and 1970<sup>s</sup>. Today most makers are 'traditional', and offer harpsichords which are copies of, or at least based on historical originals. A good thickness for a soundboard would be 1/2", and for the case, in the region of 3/4". Don't judge a harpsichord by the number of its pedals - the traditional harpsichord had none until it was trying to compete with the early piano: their presence only tempts the player away from the principle of 'terraced dynamics' and into fussy changes of registration. Try to imagine the use you intend to make of your harpsichord. Is it to be:

(a) mainly for solo playing,  
(b) for continuo and some solo playing with a baroque chamber group, and giving concerts which involve transporting the harpsichord, or  
(c) mainly for continuo use and some modest solo playing at home? If your answer is (a) there will be many harpsichords and spinets of all kinds to tempt you, from a large two-manual 'French' instrument down. But be practical, and consider how it is to fit into your home. (Will it have to go up narrow or twisting stairs?) If you can afford it and you want to be able to play Bach's Italian Concerto and Goldberg Variations, you will need a two-manual instrument. If

on the other hand, your interests are in the direction of the English virginalists or Couperin, you will find a single-manual adequate for your needs. For a two-manual (French) harpsichord the normal disposition would be: 8' on the upper manual, 8' +4' on the lower, with a shove coupler to link the two. A single-manual could have 2x8", or 8'+4', or, better, 2x8'+4!', and there would be the further choice between an Italian or Flemish model, the latter being, probably, the better as a general-purpose instrument. The dedicated harpsichordist would want to play Italian music on an Italian instrument, but that's a luxury for the few! If (b), practical considerations are important. For concerts, a harpsichord is better than a spinet or virginal when grouping an ensemble on the platform. But you must also consider how it is to be transported & how it will fit into your home. The transport of a harpsichord can be costly unless you have your own car, large enough to take it, and willing helpers to lift it. If your car is not suitable, will it pull a trailer or would it be better to think about hiring a van? A harpsichordist soon acquires the habit of measuring up a car in terms of the harpsichord and vice versa! Musically, a single-manual instrument would be adequate for

continue use. Where solo playing is involved, the limitation of a single manual should not prove serious.

If (c) fits your circumstances you may be wondering how much space your harpsichord would occupy in a room. Will it be competing for wall space with book shelves? As a rough guide a single-manual Flemish model might be about 6'6" long and 1'9" wide at the keyboard end. Don't forget that the player will need another 2'6" so the length - harpsichord + player - will be about 9 feet. If space is a real problem, you may ask yourself whether a virginal or spinet might not be adequate for your needs. Even then the length might be about 5'.

In these hard times, price may be a greater problem, and you may have to consider building one of the many kits offered, or a 'semi-kit' with the case already assembled. If you have the necessary skill and patience, you could end up with an excellent instrument. If you are very ambitious you could get working drawings of a fine museum instrument, but might find it uneconomic to buy the relatively small quantities of woods and other materials needed (unless you intend to make a number of instruments).

The action should be very light, & the keys much shorter than those of the piano, with short fronts. E.H.