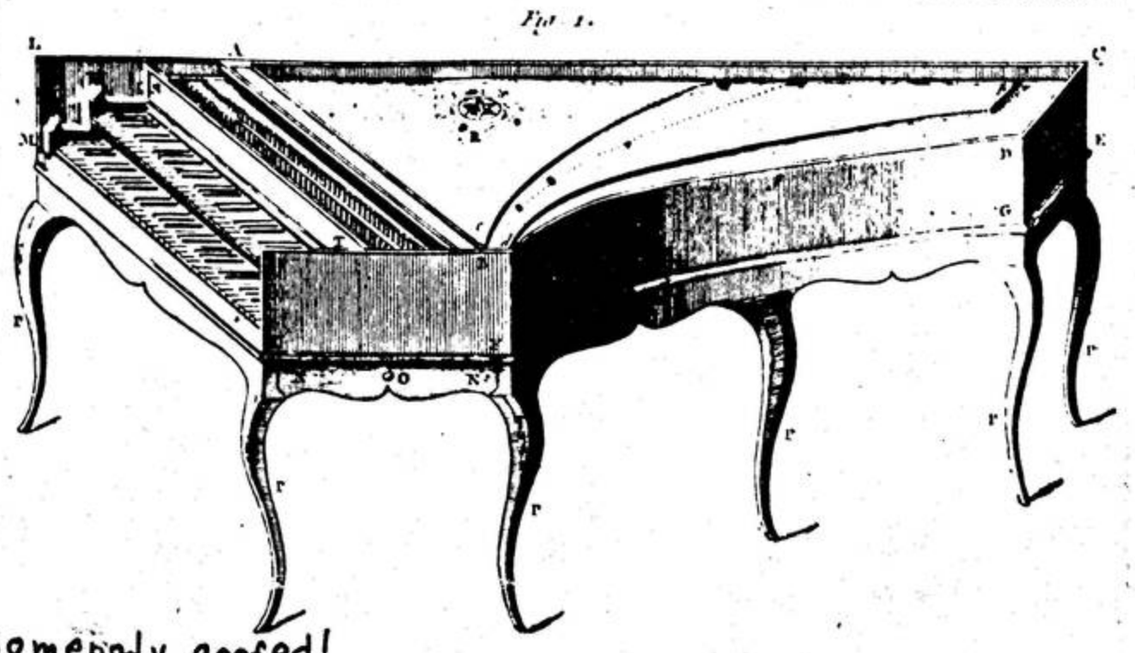


Somebody goofed!
This picture is NOT a clavichord, but a harpsichord. *I. Darreg.*

The Untempered Clavichord

How an incomparable musical treasure, once the solace of the many, has now become the esoteric pleasure of the few

By Charles Lekberg

The wing of a bird, according to biologist Julian Huxley, can evolve no further, and such, happily, is the case of the clavichord, perhaps the most beautiful—and practical—musical instrument ever created.

Yes, the clavichord—that strange little keyboard thing, so terribly soft, that young George Frederick Handel is said to have played late at night up in the attic against the wishes of his father, who didn't want him to become a musician.

Handel, like so many Europeans, especially Germans, from the 14th to the 18th century, was nutty about the instrument. Of course everyone now knows that the clavichord, obviously inferior, fell from favor as soon as the more brilliant, dramatic harpsichords and those marvelous, ringing, thundering pianofortes came along and made it obsolete.

Just tell that to the happy handful of today's clavichordists. They believe that keyboard activity has been on a distinct downhill course ever since the musical world turned away from their cherished instrument in the early 19th century—and for no better reason than that growing audiences and increasingly large concert halls demanded louder instruments.

But what can possibly be the advantage of an instrument that can be drowned out by mere conversation and that you can't accompany even the singing voice? Just that, when everybody quiets down to listen, or is chased out, it produces the most satisfyingly complete, most humanly sensitive, most spiritually elevating, most intoxicatingly introspective, most appealingly heart-stopping, most shatteringly breath-catching music you may ever have heard. And best of all, it's still around today.

Everything is for everyone who cares to enjoy it—no matter how elitist it may at first appear—and that is true especially for something like the clavichord, once the keyboard favorite of the common man during a time when its sister, the harpsichord, was reserved for the aristocrats.

The clavichord is so special, and so widely unknown—if it can be put that way—that you wonder what kind of world this is that believes that progress applies to everything. Because it doesn't.

No one seems to be able to make a better scissors. No one has yet created a finer fiddle than the model brought to perfection by Antonio Stradivari. And no one has improved on the clavichord, which reached its present form, perhaps in Italy, during the 14th century. The tastes of a decibel-hungry world have changed, but the glorious clavichord has not.

"Pianists looking for greater thrills often turn to the better-known harpsichord," says Harold L. Haney, editor and publisher of *Harpsichord* magazine, which deals with both harpsichords and clavichords. "Then they go from one make of harpsichord to another in search of the ultimate in musical revelation. But what they're really after is the clavichord."

The piano, which arrived in 1709, is a keyboard descendant of the mallet-played dulcimer, which is something like the modern-day cimbalom of Central Europe that you hear in Gypsy music. The harpsichord, whose period of greatest popularity extended from about 1600 to 1800, derives from the psaltery, an ancient zither-like instrument mentioned in the Bible, whose strings were plucked by hand.

The clavichord predates them both (the organ predates them all, but that's another story), growing out of a simple monochord, a key-tapped single string within a wooden case, sometime during the Middle Ages. But the clavichord is no more an inferior piano or harpsichord than one language is inferior to another.

The fortunes, or misfortunes, of the clavichord may be baffling, but its design is not. It's about as simple as anything you can imagine, though that simplicity carries with it enormous subtlety and refinement.

The organ, with its large cabinet, keyboards, stops, pipes, and wind-supplying machinery, may be complex. So also, to a certain extent, the harpsichord, with its keyboards, large and flat case, stops, movable jacks with plectra that must rise to pluck strings but then swiftly and carefully drop back without plucking a second time. Most important, neither organ nor harpsichord offers much, if any, chance for interpretive nuance of louds or softs, swellings and dying away of tone.

The piano, while capable of a great range of dynamics and expressiveness, holds within its heavy body a gargantuan soundboard and so many moving parts that the average pianist doesn't dare to think about what's happening inside. And a piano, splendid for large concert halls, is so powerful in an apartment, and often in a house, that it can frequently be heard all the way down the street. But the clavichord, by comparison, as complete harmonically as the organ, harpsichord, and piano, has unassailable simplicity, purity, compactness, and almost unending refinement and gentleness of tone.

"See how you make music?" E. O. Witt, instrument maker, said to me recently when I visited his workshop, set amid the cornfields and pastures near Three Rivers, Michigan. "The keys on the keyboard are levers. You press on this end and, like a teeter-totter, the other end rises to strike, or rather caress, the strings with a small metal tongue, or tangent."

I looked inside the small, oblong, walnut case, perhaps as large as a moderate-sized sewing machine, to see the strings, a pair for each note, stretched lengthwise at a slight angle within. On the left, near their moorings, they were damped with strips of felt. On the right they were attached to pins anchored solidly in the soundboard so that the vibrations could be enhanced. That was all there was to it.

Like all clavichord makers I questioned, Witt sells many more harpsichords than clavichords. "Maybe that's because this is a very subtle instrument," he says. "The sound ranges from about *p* through *ppp*, and I think it takes a certain maturity to appreciate."

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The sound of Witt's five-octave, double-strung instrument was heavenly. It was only the second time I had sat at a clavichord, and I didn't have everything sorted out yet. Little bits of piano repertoire and lots of old piano habits were all I could muster, and my weaknesses showed through.

"It's all in the touch," Witt said. Then he sat down and played some slow, dark, melting music of Johann Sebastian Bach, something in F minor, and the room took on a glow as the sound of the soft voice filled it.

I immediately heard the famous *Bebung*, that quivering, trembling quality peculiar to the clavichord tone, that hooks you as soon as you encounter it.

Bebung, a German word, is a kind of vibrato. You simply rock up and down gently on the keys as you hold them, and the sounding strings produce a corresponding wavering tone that is the equivalent of the vibrato of the singer or the violinist. But on a clavichord a whole chord, not just a single note, may be involved. You do it whenever your musicianship tells you to do it, which is often.

"You see," said Witt, "you control everything directly."

I wondered whether there were any special problems in making clavichords. "Not really, if you know what you're doing and work within the established tradition. Of course, you can't just take from the tradition. You inevitably add something of yourself as well.

"But as far as the materials go, there's no problem. None of the wood or metal parts is exotic. If you're knowledgeable and talented, you can learn to build good clavichords within, say, three to five years. That compares with a five-to-ten-year learning period for violin makers. And you can build a clavichord in one fourth the time needed to build a harpsichord."

One peculiar problem of the clavichord is that the sound is so fragile, even vulnerable, that you can't even record it well (which is another reason few people know about it). The only ones who seem to have recorded on the clavichord are Igor Kipnis, Ralph Kirkpatrick, and the late Thurston Dart. Dennis Vaughan, in *High Fidelity and Musical America* of August 1972, describes at great length how difficult it was for him to catch the sound of a single-strung clavichord made by England's Thomas Goff, and how he succeeded to a degree.

Then, talking generally about clavichords, he adds: "We have all become so used to amplification and magnification that we think nothing of the grotesqueness of a pair of lips smiling six yards wide on a screen, or of the comic aspect of love's sweet nothings being whispered at deafening volume. We have also had ten years of rock played at high decibel levels. This gross insensibility to scale is not only slowly degrading us, but we have now become almost embarrassed by really quiet sounds."

Indeed, Johann Sebastian Bach first played on a piano (and an early and therefore soft one at that) late in his life, at the court of Frederick the Great at Potsdam, and thought it was "very loud." For home music, Bach was used to the dry, rippling refinement of the harpsichord or the soft, clear, articulate singing of the clavichord.

Bach particularly loved the clavichord, although we'll never know for sure what works he wrote for that instrument. His practice was to write simply for the *Klavier*, a word the Germans used for any keyboard instrument. So today it is generally thought that you can play any of Bach's considerable output on any keyboard that seems suitable, whether piano, organ, harpsichord, or clavichord.

Beethoven, too, loved the clavichord for its expressiveness, even though much of his more stormy music would be unthinkable on one.

And it was thought that Mozart carried a clavichord around with him on his travels. There are legends that Mozart used one to compose *The Magic Flute* and that Haydn turned to one as a working instrument for his *Creation*. But there is no direct proof of this.

Of course the clavichord is not a substitute piano and should not be thought of that way. It's an alternative, and a superbly versatile one. "I find that all sorts of music can be adapted to a clavichord," says Carol Lems-Dworkin, Chicago concert pianist and music director of Kendall College in suburban Evanston. "You not only have early keyboard music to work with but, if you choose carefully, a great deal of later piano music as well.

"Just dig into the literature and look for compositions that don't have many sustained root notes deep in the bass part of the harmony requiring use of the damper pedal. What you really want is music that lies directly and continuously underneath both hands and that has long, singing passages.

"I haven't explored everything yet, but I know you can play Johann Sebastian Bach's *French Suites*, for example, various short preludes and fugues, the *Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook*, parts of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and much else, along with a great deal of the works of Bach's son, Karl Philipp Emanuel. Then there are Mozart's Viennese sonatinas and those of Clementi. And of course the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*.

"There's an almost limitless amount of Scarlatti available as well as many compositions of Handel, Couperin, and Rameau. Some of Purcell's airs in short binary form are lovely on the clavichord, and Purcell's suites should work, too. Mozart's and Haydn's sonatas are probably good, although I haven't gone through them all.

"Also there are the more lyrical works of Schubert, a few of the Romanian folk dances of Bartók, Stravinsky's *Five Fingers*, some of Chopin's more lyrical mazurkas and more sustained preludes—his *Minute Waltz* is a specialty of mine, though I obviously can't perform that last long run at the end—and some things of Vincent Persichetti. And that's just the start."

The clavichord's virtues are incontestable. It is beautiful. It is complete. It can be played to your heart's content without disturbing anyone in the next apartment, or the next room. It weighs only 70 or 80 pounds, compared with a vertical piano, which weighs from 250 to 400 pounds, and a grand, which weighs from 350 to more than 1,000 pounds.

The price of a clavichord is attractive, too, with a good four- or five-octave instrument ranging from perhaps $500 to $1,100, with kits costing much less (though at least two makers produce completed instruments costing about $2,000). And clavichord maintenance is minimal. You can easily retune, restring, or do most of whatever is needed yourself.

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(*Continued from page 2*)

If you're intrigued, let me leave you with some advice from Robert E. Taylor, Bethesda, Maryland, importer of German keyboard instruments, a piano teacher, and occasional indulger in jazz on the clavichord:

"One must spend some patient hours with an actual instrument—and a good one—in order to be won over. The clavichord may not be the kind of thing that will sweep the world. But it is a unique and wonderful little instrument and can be a true solace from the harshness of life." □

CLAVICHORD SOURCES:
MAKERS AND IMPORTERS

Christopher F. Bannister
Spur Route 518
Hopewell, New Jersey 08525

B.W.M. Benn
4424 Judson Lane
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55435

Arnold Dolmetsch Ltd.
King's Road
Haslemere, Surrey, England

Robert Goble & Sons Ltd.
Greatstones, Kiln Lane
Headington, Oxford, England

Hugh Gough
186 West 4th Street
New York, New York 10014

Eric Herz
5 Howard Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Sperrhake
c/o Robert Morley & Co., Ltd.
4 Belmont Hill, Lewisham
London, SE 13, England

Neupert
c/o Magnamusic
Sharon, Connecticut 08069

Sabathil
1084 Homer
Vancouver, Brit. Columbia, Canada

Robert S. Taylor
8710 Garfield Street
Bethesda, Maryland 20034

George A. Stilphen
Effingham Falls,
New Hampshire 03814

E.O. Witt
Route 3
Three Rivers, Michigan 49093

W.E. Zuckermann
P.O. Box 121
Stonington, Connecticut 06378

(END OF TOWN & COUNTRY ARTICLE BY LEKBERG 1974)

Additional clavichord information and pictures too, available in THE MODERN HARPSICHORD by Zuckermann.

November 1976

COMMENTS BY IVOR DARREG:

There are two (or sometimes more) sides to every question, so although I am the designer and builder of an amplifying clavichord in January 1940, I felt it comme il faut to give the traditionalists their say.

Naturally I disagree on some items--such as progress and the future of the clavichord as more than a mere museum or nostalgia piece. I happen to be a composer looking for ever-new avenues of expression.

The revival of the harpsichord and now the clavichord, in my opinion, is being greatly aided by the guitar vogue, whether the stuffy backward-looking snobs want to admit this or no!

If the harpsichord is a Spanish guitar with a keyboard, the clavichord is a Hawaiian steel guitar with a keyboard, and I don't care how vicious the invective the dilettanti and narrowminded critics and self-appointed reactionaries pour upon me for saying so.

There is no reason why the harpsichord and clavichord cannot be electrically amplified just as the different kinds of guitars have been. This is the only way in these noisy times that they can step into the gap being left by the decline of the piano.

To some extent, this is being co-opted and anticipated by certain electronic organs and synthesizers which offer passable harpsichord and clavichord imitations. Just because the uncouth and thoughtless have abused amplification is no reason to condemn it for serious music. I don't have to argue the point because I have amplifying-clavichord tapes which speak for themselves.

In my particular case as composer, the timbre of the clavichord, and its vibrato and expressive elasticity offer possibilities which can only be appreciated if there is enough amplification to reach the average listener; furthermore, the amplifying clavichord without any soundingboard sustains longer and permits multiple magnetic and other pickups to give the clavichord the same "stops" a harpsichord has. And more.

We can bring the "ppppp" range of the clavichord's expressive powers up to "pp" so people can hear this. Why leave something so valuable down below the threshold of audibility, just to please old grouches who do not want today's composers to be heard at all?

More importantly: the high harmonics present in clavichord tone permit the design of xenharmonic (i.e. non-twelve-tone) clavichords—especially 17, 19, 22, and 24-tone instruments. The piano simply does not have the right timbre for 22- or 24--tone music, but both clavichord and harpsichord DO, and this is why those scales have not set the world on fire during the long period that the piano eclipsed other keyboard instruments.

If the amplifying clavichord should be suppressed, the imitations by synthesizer and electronic organ and computer will flourish anyway, so the snobs cannot have their way forever.

At present I live in too small a place to experiment with the amplifying clavichord here, but will be glad to collaborate with others on such projects. I can demonstrate the sounds on my other instruments.

# # #

IVOR DARREG, 349-½ West California Avenue, Glendale CA 91203, phone (213)243-3477.

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My 1940 amplifying clavichord is pictured in SOUND SCULPTURE ed. by John Grayson, Vancouver B.C. Canada.

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