

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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# The Colt Clavier Collection at

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*Founded fifty years ago, the Colt Clavier Collection is one of Britain's most extensive instrument collections, with over 130 early pianos and other keyboard instruments, which together chart the remarkably rapid development of the piano, from around 1775 until well into the nineteenth century. Yet this collection is scarcely in the public eye: known to a few specialists, perhaps, but largely hidden from view, the collection is not listed in any of the usual places (neither the British Music Yearbook nor the Early Music Yearbook lists it, and it does not have a telephone number). Rumours abound about its welfare: that it has fallen into disrepair, that it is suffering from financial distress and that instruments are being sold off, perhaps in response to the Museums and Galleries Act of 1992 which allows the 'de-accessioning' of items in public holdings that cannot be displayed or which are of little value to the museum. The Colt is a registered charity, not subject to the same financial pressures as, for example, the V&A in London, but nonetheless to investigate and hopefully lay to rest some of these concerns, H&F went to look at the collection.*

## A Collection in distress?

**B**URIED in the heart of the Kent country side, amongst the trees and between oast-houses and orchards just off the M20 motorway, lies the village of Bethersden, which is home to the collection of pianos and other keyboard instruments built up since the war by the late Charles F Colt. The collection is housed in a large timber-framed building, part of a community of show-houses of the firm W H Colt, Son and Co. Ltd. Started in 1944, with an 1827 Broadwood square costing £6, the collection now contains an impressively large number of instruments, some of which are in Germany and Switzerland but most of which remain in England. It is jointly owned and run by the collector's widow and a board of trustees, and everything is under the watchful eye of the manager, Mr W E Spiers, who has looked after the collection since Colt himself died in 1985.

There is a certain air of mystery—or at least a kind of seclusion—about the place: on entering the houses in this extraordinary village-within-a-village, one experiences an atmosphere of slight decay, mustiness, the smell of timber and furniture polish, and there is an eerie quietness. In the middle of it all, however, there is a great deal of activity, because a new annexe is being built to extend the accommodation available for the instruments. There is certainly the need for more

space. The instruments are fitted in with only the minimum of elbow room, although there has been some attempt to make apt or interesting juxtapositions. Cream walls and cork tiled flooring give a pleasing background, and many fascinating pictures and other artefacts relating to the subject of pianos and their makers fill what little space remains. The present hall, attractive though it is, is very crowded and some of the least important instruments are kept in other buildings—some simply for storage, others as items of furniture to grace the show-houses. Regulating the temperature and humidity cannot be very easy in the current circumstances. Heaters and humidifiers stand in corners, radiators along the walls, seemingly perilously close to some of the instruments. The new extension, due for completion later on this year, will extend sixty-four feet at right-angles to the main building and allow the instruments room to breathe more freely. At least the question of 'de-accessioning' can be answered: there are no plans to dispose of any of the instruments, although there is no intention of collecting any more either.

The largest group of instruments are Broadwoods, largely because of their availability—at its busiest, in the 1850s, the firm was producing around 2,500 instruments a year. Nevertheless, Colt had a fondness for them and was on the

board of the firm. Their proliferation inspires a certain disdain (the visitor can, as Spiers remarks, often find himself thinking all too easily, 'Just another Broadwood . . .'), yet in reality how fascinating it is to have so many similar instruments together for comparison. Tracing the development of this one maker through different modifications to the action and to the frame reveals a great deal—one might compare for instance the 1821 instrument which Broadwood dispatched to the Royal Pavilion in Brighton (G203B) with the 1824 instrument (G262B) which is substantially similar, but which has three iron bars strengthening the frame. This constructional detail was to become the subject of a heated argument between the firms of Broadwood and Erard, who in 1851 claimed that *they* had invented it. Broadwood stated that treble bracing was applied to their instruments in 1808 and the three bars were introduced in 1821, just after the royal instrument was completed.

**P**LENTY of instruments by makers other than Broadwood are included in the collection, of course, and all the principal firms are represented. A couple of Erards, dating from 1818 and 1868, make a very interesting comparison with each other and with a Graf of the late 1830s. (A second Graf listed in the catalogue is currently in Munich.) The difference between the tone and the action in these pianos seems to correspond directly to their nationality. One of the most revealing instruments to be found here is a Russian piano similar to one owned by Glinka (which is in a museum in St Petersburg). Listening to the strange bell-like bass one hears the pre-echo of so much that we consider characteristic in the orchestral writing of Glinka and the later "*moguchaya kuchika*" ("Mighty Handful")—a curious jangling quality with many confused high partials which could not be more different from the sound of contemporary European instruments, although the maker, Tischner, was from Prussia and was influenced by both Clementi and Broadwood in the design and particularly in the decoration of his pianos.

A large number of the instruments owe their presence in the collection to Colt's eye for fine workmanship or a pretty design (and occasionally a not-so-pretty design). There is a ghastly looking "dog-kennel" instrument by Lichtenthal (1840), which he saved from being used as firewood. Its dumpy mahogany case, standing only 40½ inches from the ground and lightly inlaid with boxwood, is like a rather unfortunate example of Victorian church furniture, but it was clearly a popular and practical instrument at one



Grand by Schneider (1851) was found in a copy of *Vogue*

time. There are other aberrations of shape as well: several *Lyraflügel* and a *Giraffenflügel* that was once in the hands of Hermann von Helmholtz, the acoustician, who—it must be admitted, in mitigation—also owned a very fine Matthäus Heilmann which is in the collection (G300).

**V**ERY many of the pianos which Colt brought to Bethersden have some story or other attached to them, lending them a charm that is often out of all proportion to the inherent musical qualities of the instruments. One of the most appealing examples is a Schneider piano, built for the Austrian section of the Great Exhibition of 1851: the casework of this instrument is unbelievably ornate—a bird's-eye maple case with wooden mosaic inlay, in an intricate pattern inspired by Tunbridge Ware, which is continued even on the inside. As a musical instrument, however, this piano can scarcely be regarded as anything extraordinary—it has a seven-octave compass and a conventional Viennese action; the hammers have a layer of leather covering the felts which helps to create an attractive sweet tone, but the sound has little body. The story of the piano's acquisition is typical of Colt: his wife saw the piano in a copy of *Vogue*, where it was a prop for a dress advertisement. Colt promptly tracked down the instrument's owners through the magazine and bought it. Also to be found here is a Tomkison piano that is illustrated in Nash's drawings of the Brighton Pavilion. The instrument has the inscription "For the King, December 21st 1821" written in Indian ink on the side of the bottom key. Colt believed a Kirkman piano that he owned was





Lichtenthal "Dog-kennel" upright: like a rather unfortunate example of Victorian church furniture

also made for George IV—one is mentioned in the inventory of the Pavilion's contents which was put together in 1833—but this was largely surmise on Colt's part and has not been substantiated.

In addition to the many pianos there are a few good harpsichords, amongst them a Shudi-Broadwood (1790), a late double by Joseph Kirckman and an unusual single manual by Jacob and Abraham Kirckman, whose pedal machine stop removes first the 4' then one of the 8' registers. The cord which operates this is broken at present and the original plectra have been replaced with Delrin. This instrument has a trestle stand containing a set of drawers underneath, curved to follow the bentside. Colt was apparently of the opinion that the harpsichord was a grossly inferior instrument to the piano, and although the collection does contain eight (two of which are modern instruments), he made very little attempt to collect many of them. This explains the absence of anything other than English instruments.

**I**N the Trust Deed by which the Colt Collection was registered as a charity the objects of the Trust are described as being (a) 'to advance the education of the public in and preserve for its benefit keyboard instruments of historic and artistic interest', and (b) 'to advance the public appreciation and knowledge of... music played on early keyboard instruments'. To this end, the Deed states, the Trust will 'preserve and maintain keyboard instruments' and 'establish and maintain a centre for such music [i.e., for early keyboard instruments] by organising and presenting concerts recitals and other appropriate performances'. Mr Spiers is careful to ensure that the aims of the Trust are preserved, but the collection

is not allowed to become too widely popular: it would certainly be impossible for Bethersden to cope with the influx of tourist trade enjoyed by nearby Finchcocks, for example, and visits to the Colt Collection are generally restricted only to those perceived to have a serious interest in keyboard instruments. The instruments continue to provide a resource for scholarly work, and they are used occasionally for recording, although they remain *in situ* rather than being taken out to recording studios. Even with the new annexe there will sadly not be room for concerts to be given at Bethersden and moving the instruments around too much is at present considered unwise. A pity—the instruments deserve to be both seen and heard.

What is of greater concern is that the amount spent on maintaining the instruments—on average, about £10 per instrument in the year to March 1993—seems so low. Even if one allows that many of the instruments cannot benefit from restoration and that the more robust instruments probably do not need it, tuning and general maintenance are a constant requirement: I would suggest that £1,403 is very little to spend on this vital area. It was clearly Colt's original idea that this should be a *playing* collection, but at present many of the instruments are tuned down, or in no fit state to be played. Maintaining a collection, especially one as extensive as this, is no easy matter and it is vital that the Colt instruments should survive in good condition. The Colt Clavier Collection is one of the most important groups of early pianos in the world and although it is not in danger of disappearance it is the responsibility of all of us that instruments as important as these are not allowed in any way to deteriorate. In this anniversary year, let us hope that they will be around—and, if possible, heard for centuries, let alone for the next fifty years.

It cannot be surmised what the future will hold for this invaluable collection: perhaps one may be permitted to hope that at some stage it will be possible to make it more accessible and to enable some of these fine instruments to be heard occasionally in performance.

*The Colt Clavier Collection may be visited by written appointment only, restricted to parties of three. Requests for visits should be addressed to the Manager, The Colt Clavier Collection, Bethersden, nr. Ashford, Kent TN26 3DD. The Collection is a registered charity, no. 273108.*

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