

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
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Care of . . .

Regular maintenance of your keyboard

THE HARPSICHORD action is elegant in its simplicity. Although the fortepiano action is manifestly more complex, in either case the subtleties may remain unconsidered until the actions begin to malfunction. On this page, we shall discuss any maintenance or tuning problems about which you have written to us. Of course, the aim will be to provide direct help, but because I believe that the process of arriving at a solution is at least as informative and important as the solution itself, my response may describe an approach which, I hope, will not only lead you to solve the particular problem yourself, but also prove useful in a variety of related situations.

Your observations are as welcome as your problems and questions. When you write, re-

member to include enough specific information about your instrument to allow for proper consideration of the matter. Relevant points may include the age of the instrument; its historical model (if any); for harpsichords, the material of the jacks, tongues and plectra; and for fortepianos, the material of the kapsel stems and bodies, and whether there are any checks or adjustment screws. If you would like to give the maker's name, please do, but it is not essential, and if you would like this or any other information withheld from publication, simply say so.

BEFORE we receive any questions, I thought it might be appropriate to give a few guidelines on how a well-set-up and -voiced instrument should behave. Reliability and predictability are among the principal virtues of correctly functioning keyboard actions. Below is a list of some operating features which contribute to 'virtuous actions', many of which can be tested independently of a given player's technique.

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For a harpsichord or other plucked keyboard:

- Every plectrum should repeat—repass its string—even when the string has stopped vibrating and the key is released *very* slowly.
- Some types of action are capable of quicker repetition than others, but long, fast trills should be possible on all instruments from at least middle C (c') upwards.
- Every note should damp after being played when the key released.
- When more than one set of jacks (register) is engaged and a key is depressed very slowly, resisted or supported by another finger underneath the key, the jacks should pluck their respective strings not simultaneously but consecutively, in a constant order throughout the compass. This non-simultaneity is known as the stagger. The distance between plucks should not vary appreciably on adjacent notes, though it may change gradually from bass to treble.

For a fortepiano:

- The hammer should be free-flying when it strikes the strings. If you depress the key very slowly, the hammer should “let off” before it reaches the strings—that is, it should not reach the strings—otherwise it is said to be blocking.
- The let-off point should not vary appreciably on adjacent notes, though it may change gradually from bass to treble.
- When no pedals or knee-levers are in use, the hammer head should strike all the strings associated with its particular note, preferably centred on the hammer head.
- A hammer should not bounce against the strings—i.e., play more than once on one striking—even when the key is struck at the loud limit of its dynamic range, and even when there are no checks. On checkless actions, the dynamic range may be narrower than on instruments possessing checks, and if a hammer bounces on a well-regulated checkless piano, then it is being struck too hard.
- Notes should be able to repeat very rapidly at all dynamic levels.
- Pedals and/or knee-levers should operate quietly.

For all keyboard instruments:

- In conditions of stable temperature and relative humidity the instrument should hold its tuning.

THOUGH often regarded as a chore, the tuning of early keyboard instruments is actually an art and a science. Even the best-voiced and most meticulously set up instruments fail to please if they sound out of tune. If you are among those who put off tuning until the instrument sounds almost unbearable, consider the following:

- The first responsibility of routine maintenance is tuning. Tuning often reveals other problems before they become serious and keeping an instrument in tune tends to stabilise it, reducing the need for more frequent tuning.
- Adequate tuning can be maintained for relatively long periods following a ‘professional’ tuning if unisons, octaves and 4' (if applicable) are kept in tune with the temperament octave—the bearings—even if it has wandered a bit.
- Good tuning, as distinct from adequate tuning, responds to the requisites of the music and varies with the repertoire being played.
- The aim of all tuning is to satisfy musical ears.
- Like all skills, tuning and tempering can be learned and become easier with practice.

PERHAPS some of these comments will spark a question or observation which would interest all of us. Whether you have an old nagging problem with your instrument, an intermittent or newly discovered one, maybe it is a problem that you do not just have to live with. Write it down and send it in. Undoubtedly, there are many others who have been wondering about it too unfruitfully, in the privacy of their practice rooms!

• . . **Mimi**
Waitzman