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Stars, the Chorus and a Pantomime Horse

Peter Bavington *reports on a recent keyboard instrument sale at Sotheby's in London*

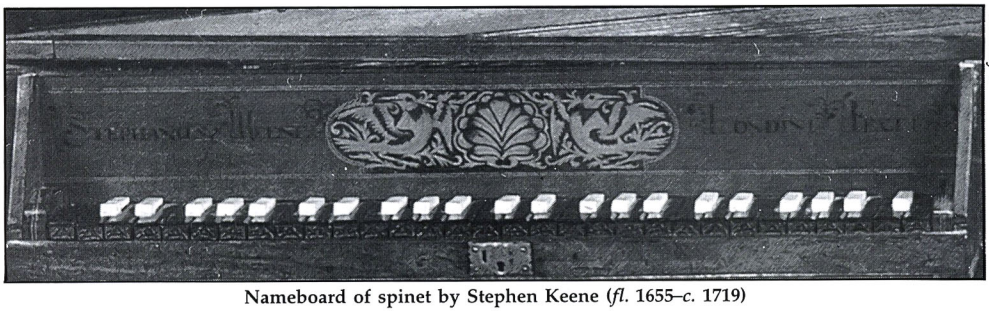
MANY musical instruments from the past are held in public collections, and nowadays, as a result of the diligent work of conservators and scholars, accurate information about them is widely disseminated. As a result, our understanding of old instruments has increased enormously and continues to advance. In contrast, knowledge of that part of our instrumental heritage which remains in private hands is patchy. Despite the generous access afforded to students by some collectors, instruments—even important ones—may remain unknown and inaccessible for years. Not the least important function, therefore, of the musical instrument sales held each autumn by the London auction houses is to lift the curtain briefly on a few of these items. For the four or five public viewing days which precede each sale, the instruments are open to examination and study, after which they may disappear to unknown locations, frequently overseas.

In recent years, most of the keyboard instruments have appeared at Sotheby's, and no fewer than twenty-one were offered at their last sale on 17 November 1994. To the organologist, perhaps the most interesting was a spinet by Stephen Keene. Beginning his career towards the end of the virginal era (an impressive large-compass virginal by him is in the Russell Collection, Edinburgh) Keene went on to become one of the most prolific early makers of bentside spinets. His work, and that of his contemporaries, established the spinet as the standard middle-class domestic keyboard in England for the following century. He seems to have concentrated on smaller instruments: as far as is known, no harpsichords by him survive.

The Sotheby's spinet has a characteristic marquetry panel on the nameboard (a symmetrical design of stylised birds and foliage) with the maker's name in ink letters. Typical of the period is the G_2–D_6 compass and 'broken' bass octave, with divided $C\sharp_2$ and $E\flat_2$ keys. The instrument shows every sign of being in substantially original condition and without serious damage. The jacks (so often missing or replaced on old instruments) seem to be the originals: the topmost one bears an ink inscription *54 JJ 703* (not '704' as stated in the catalogue) which, it has been suggested, might indicate a date of 1703. The stand also looks original, or at any rate early: it consists of six elegant turned legs linked at low level by turned stretchers and at the top, directly below the spinet, by a frame ornamented with a moulding and a roughly carved frieze of stylised leaves. The catalogue describes these as 'later' but I see no grounds for this as the leaves are of a piece with the frame and seem to be contemporary in style.

The whereabouts of this spinet are known from at least 1885, when it was exhibited at the London International Inventions Exhibition; moreover it is widely known through its illustration in a pioneering organological work, *Musical Instruments, Historic, Rare and Unique* by A J Hipkins and W Gibb (1888). It was sold for £32,200: above the catalogue guide price, but not wholly excessive for a historic instrument in fair condition.[1]

Two Italian harpsichords appeared in the sale, one signed *B Gasparino Saberino* and dated 1712, and one signed *Filippo Fabri* and dated 1584. These two instruments are in poor condition and have suffered both from alterations made during the historic period and from misguided modern



Sotheby's

Nameboard of spinet by Stephen Keene (*fl.* 1655–*c.* 1719)

restorations, so the prices reached (£16,100 and £9,200 respectively) seem high. Both went to the same buyer, a private collector in Germany.

The other harpsichord in the sale was more promising: a 1770 single by Jacob Kirkman, whose harpsichord-making career lasted for over forty years from about 1750 until his death in 1792. Numerous Kirkman instruments survive, and they show a remarkable consistency: only small differences may be found between harpsichords separated in time by thirty or forty years. The compass, for example, is nearly always five octaves from F_1 although the earlier instruments, like this one, generally omit the lowest accidental key—$F\sharp_1$—whereas the later include it.

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When I came across the harpsichord, a pair of feet were protruding from underneath it which turned out to belong to Mr Kenneth Mobbs, who was examining what the catalogue described as the machine-stop. Mr Mobbs is the author, jointly with Alexander Mackenzie of Ord, of an article on this subject in last year's *Galpin Society Journal*[2] which goes a long way towards explaining the persistence of the single-manual harpsichord in late eighteenth-century England, whereas in contemporary France the double-manual instrument reigned supreme. It seems the musical potential of the machine stop may have been misunderstood: properly adjusted, it gives access to a graduated range of registrations, not merely to an instant *piano* for simple 'echo' effects as previously thought. It turned out, however, that the present instrument never had a true machine stop, merely a rudimentary mechanism for taking off one of the eight-foot registers by means of a pedal (now missing). Although most other parts were present and in fair condition, to restore this harpsichord to playing order would be a lengthy task, since the structure is weak as a result of the failure of many glue joints. It was nonetheless sold for the substantial sum of £31,050.

Remarkably similar in outward appearance was the only grand piano in the sale, a Broadwood of 1802. As one would expect from the date, the beautiful burr-walnut panels of the Kirkman are here replaced by blander mahogany; otherwise in shape, size and general style the instruments could be mistaken for each other. Unlike the Kirkman, the piano has a fitted music desk typical of the period, complex in

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design and adjustable in several directions, with provision for candlestick shelves, concealed when not required. Heaven knows how many tiny mortice-and-tenon joints and subtle hidden hinges and grooves are involved in one of these creations, all fitted together with an accuracy which seems to belong more to precision engineering than to woodwork. Perhaps it was the use of stable mahogany timber that made these masterpieces of craft skill possible.

The nameboard of this piano, with the makers' calligraphic signature in an oval cartouche, provided a pretty front cover for the catalogue. Unfortunately, the action had at some time been completely modernised, with felt replacing the original hammer leathers. Nonetheless, judging from the sounds I was able to evoke from it, it could be a useful instrument, and little work would be needed to put it into playing order. It sold for only £10,350, which was above Sotheby's estimate but still seems low to me.

The contrast with the price of the Kirkman is striking in view of the fact that both are typical products of celebrated makers. One factor, of course, is that the Kirkman is *eighteenth-century:* anything from before the magic date of 1800 tends to have a higher value. Another factor, perhaps, is that (despite the efforts of some noted exponents) the English fortepiano tends to be musically less appreciated than its Viennese contemporary. Or perhaps it is just that the harpsichord still seems more intriguing to collectors than the commonplace old piano.

HAVING admired the stars of the show, we turn our attention to the chorus line: in this case, a group of no fewer than twelve square pianofortes of various dates. Sadly, all of them showed signs of distress, arising not only from the inevitable decay caused by time and use but also from insensitive restoration work.

Two nonetheless stood out as beauties: first, one by Christopher Ganer, whose extreme elegance, in proportions, in materials and in execution, reflects that period between about 1780 and the collapse of taste around 1830, when it seemed impossible for an Englishman to make anything ugly, whether furniture, buildings or instruments.

On lifting the lid one discovers the inner cover still bearing its original green silk. Most square pianos (and some grands) originally had this board, whose function seems to have been to conceal the action (perhaps thought unsightly) from view: in many later examples, however, the green is merely paint.

Sotheby's

Pianoforte by William Southwell *c.* 1785

An unusual feature was the pedal-operated *una corda*,[3] achieved not by moving the keyboard (impossible on a square) but by damping alternate strings at about a third of their length. Could this mechanism have been original? It had every appearance of being so: but it seems strange to use a pedal for this purpose whilst relying on a hand lever for the damper control, so much more important musically.

This was the only piano in the sale which could be said to be in good playing order: however, this state had been achieved by means of a highly intrusive 'restoration', including a thick glassy varnish on the soundboard and a gold-painted bolt securing the wrestplank. Perhaps this was the reason why, despite its handsome appearance, it failed to sell.

By contrast, the other outstandingly pretty piano—a contemporary of the Ganer, made by William Southwell of Dublin—was sold for an astounding £32,200, despite the mutilation of its structure by the addition of an ugly iron plate (true, this was concealed under the Venetian swell). Southwell was an ingenious and innovative maker as well as a master of visual appeal. Two of his innovations were to be widely and rapidly accepted: the 'Irish dampers' flexibly attached to the key-levers, and the 'additional notes', whereby the compass of the square piano was increased in the treble by means of extra key-levers carried on a separate frame, their hammers rising through a slot in the soundboard. Other ideas remained uniquely his own, such as the 'upright square', a space-saving design whereby the strings crossed horizontally in front of the player's face.

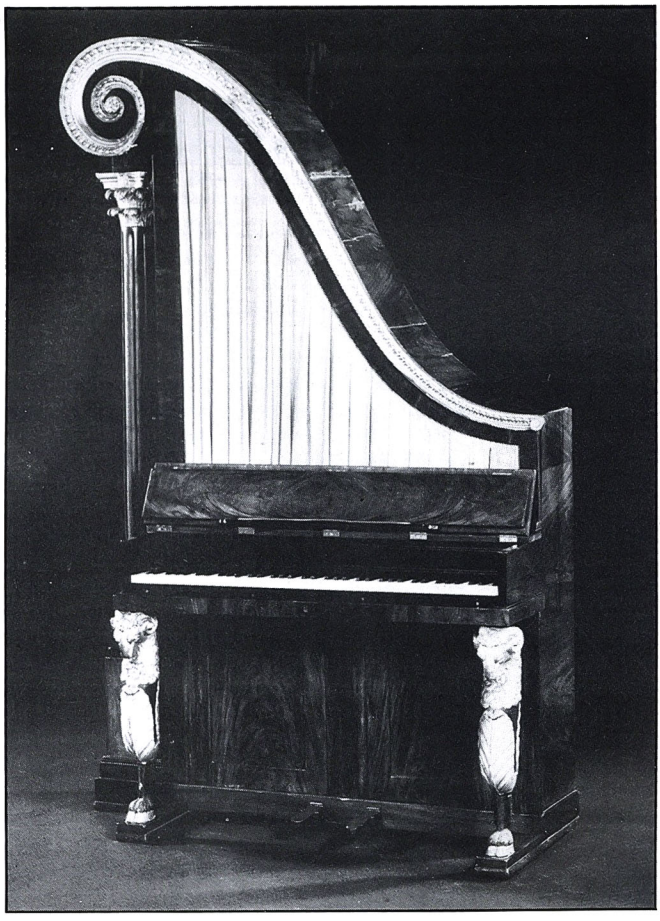
The present piano shows further evidence of his unconventional approach. It is one of the few non-German instruments to use a *Prellmechanik* or 'hooking' action, with the hammer mounted on the key-lever. Moreover, although I include it among the squares because of the arrangement of the strings and soundboard, it is actually semi-elliptical in shape, allowing for a spectacular display of veneer on the lid, in a pattern described in the catalogue as 'a central shaded half-paetera [*sic*] with outer segmental veneers'. A number of similar pianos by Southwell survive, including one in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. Wonderful—but, to my taste, on the showy side of true elegance.

Of the other squares, only two attracted enough bids to reach their reserve prices. One dated 1810, one 1825, both bore the magic name *Clementi*: in other respects they seemed much like the unsold squares, sad, damaged and unloved. Nonetheless, it was instructive to examine these pianos as a group. With dates ranging from *c.* 1780 to *c.* 1830 they illustrate the development of the instrument over a particularly fertile half-century. One sees the change from single to double actions; the trial and abandonment of devices such as the buff stop and lid swell; the increase in compass by means of Southwell's 'additional notes'; the adoption of pedals, especially for damper control (the earlier instruments have a hand-lever for this); the increase in the size of the case, the area of the soundboard, and the weight of the strings. And there are incidental beauties: the pretty legs of the *c.* 1820 Tomlinson, and the strikingly elaborate blacksmith's work revealed on removing the cover of the 1792 Buntebart and Sievers (part of the trapwork by means of which the pedals operate the damper lifters and buff stop).

My favourite was the little early Pohlman, so close to a clavichord in style and, judging by one or two playable notes, having a warm sound which I associate with pianos by this maker. Unfortunately the geometry of the early single action, whereby most of the keystroke is mere lost motion, rules out a sensitive touch.

SO much for the stars and the chorus. A final character now makes his entrance: the clown, or perhaps I may say the pantomime horse on the grounds that his outer covering misrepresents what lies within. I refer to what was indeed the final lot, a splendid and typically massive giraffe piano case of *c.* 1820, on opening which one sees that all the innards—strings, soundboard and action—have been removed, and a mediocre modern iron-framed upright has been fitted into part of the space. This hybrid, despite its unnatural condition, sold for £3,220, well above the catalogue guide price: evidently someone values it as a conversation-piece. Or will it reappear in a sale two or three years hence, with its missing parts miraculously restored?

Sotheby's



Composite Giraffe piano, possibly by van der Does (*c.* 1820), containing a later action by Nissen

Notes

[1] All prices are given inclusive of the buyer's premium

[2] *Galpin Society Journal* XLVII (1994), pp. 33–46

[3] Wrongly described as a 'harp stop' in the catalogue

My thanks to Christopher Nobbs and Kenneth Mobbs for their help in preparing this report. Any remaining errors are my own.