

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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“Take Six Eggs . . .”

Making and using egg tempera
on harpsichord soundboards

JENNY HAYLETT

WHY bother making your own egg tempera paint? It was probably not used on original instruments, and there are several ready-made alternatives available. For me, the first and most important reason is the purity and jewel-like brilliance of the colours. Coming a close second is the durability. Egg tempera paintings have survived intact since medieval times, their colours remaining undimmed and their surfaces free of the cracking and flaking associated with other media.

The first stage in making egg tempera is to visit Cornelissen's art shop in Great Russell Street, London WC1. This is a gem of a shop, with a Dickensian charm, which sells equipment that is impossible to find elsewhere. The assistants are helpful and well-informed, and for those who live outside London they can supply mail-order.

Your most important ingredients are the pigments and these should be chosen with care. Some are highly toxic and therefore unsuitable for the method of mixing and application that we shall use. One can make an enormous variety of mixtures out of a very few pigments; I have found by experience that it is artistically preferable and more practical to employ a limited palette. Use as many natural earth colours as possible. Some of the modern dyes and inorganic colours are resistant to being mixed with water and others will not remain in suspension. Many are of such

strength that any stray mixture or alterations will be impossible to eradicate. You might find violent green footprints all over your house, as I did.

Here is a list of my most used colours: Titanium White and Ivory Black are both a must. French Ultramarine is by far the most satisfactory blue. Although it always separates in paste form, once it is mixed with egg it handles beautifully. Ochre is the most important yellow, though I use Cadmium Yellow Light for making greens. Indian Red and Burnt Sienna both mix to rich reds and pinks, and if I want a red with a little more blue in it, I use Cadmium Red. The Cadmium colours should be used with care as they can be toxic if ingested orally. Both Raw and Burnt Umber come in useful, but can be a nuisance as they dehydrate so quickly. The only green I buy is Terre Verte. It is a delicate colour and quite transparent, but all the modern greens look too garish in this medium, so I always mix them—Ivory Black and Cadmium Yellow Light give a wonderful, strong hue.

The other items you will need to purchase are as follows: a ground-glass slab, a müller, which is a sort of glass pestle for grinding the mixture, a flexible palette knife and as many small glass jars with plastic lids as you have pigments to put in them. You will need only a couple of brushes, but they should be of the finest quality sable—say, a number 6, a 4 and an 000 if you have an eye for very fine detail. A chemist will sell you a large container of distilled water and a dropper very cheaply, provided you can convince him that you are not concocting home-made ear-drops for your child. Your pocket will now be lighter by approximately £150 and your bag correspondingly heavier, but do not be too put off by this: although the initial outlay is high, the pigments, if you use them sensibly, go a long way. I have not needed to restock on anything for six years. One further piece of equipment which I have found very useful is a Rowney Stay-Wet Palette for acrylic painting. This contains a semi-permeable membrane which keeps small amounts of colour mixes damp and therefore usable for longer periods than they would be on a dish.



When you are ready to mix the paint, choose a day when your house and diary are empty, and if you have an answer-phone, switch it on: mixing tempera is a messy business. Keep your kitchen sink clear and have plenty of newspapers laid out on the floor where you plan to work. Take your glass slab and place it on the paper, rough side up. Now pour a little mountain of pigment into the centre—gently, or your lungs and the surrounding furniture will also be powdered. With the palette knife, make a crater in the centre and pour in a small amount of distilled water. Grind the mixture to a paste with the müller, adding water little by little as necessary in order to reach a nice creamy consistency.

Take your palette knife again and scrape your mixture into the jar. This takes a long time, but have patience, because pigment, as you have discovered, is expensive and not to be wasted. These pastes can be stored successfully in the jars for long periods. Check them occasionally and if they show signs of drying out add a little distilled water and give them a good shake. Cling-film or polythene screwed on with the lids also helps their preservation. Black is the only colour that does not store well as a paste. It is inclined to grow mould, probably because of its animal origins. As one only needs small amounts of black, it can be mixed on the day of painting, or added to shades as needed in powder form.

AND where, you wonder, do the eggs come in? Not until after you have thoroughly washed the glass slab and müller, because the slightest tinge of pigment will ruin your next batch of paint. You should try to buy free-range eggs, because battery-produced eggs often contain residues of chemicals fed to the hens to improve yolk-colour and production. These can react unfavourably with the pigments and cause discolouration. Lay a square of kitchen paper on the table, together with a dainty pair of scissors and a spare jar. Carefully break your egg, discarding the white or saving it for meringues if you are of that inclination. Keep the box of eggs handy, because until you get used to doing the work of three hands with two, you will probably accumulate enough wasted eggs to keep yourself in omelettes for several days.

When you have an unbroken yolk, minus albumen, in the shell, tip it with great care into the palm of your hand and from thence onto the piece of kitchen paper. Now roll it around the paper until it is dry and quite free from slime. The next stage is the one where you will speculate on the wonders of nature, because you are going to pick up the yolk by its membrane, very delicately,



between your finger and thumb. Believe me, it is possible—some you win, some you lose. With the scissors, gently snip the membrane as it hangs, and let the yolk dribble into the jar below. At this point, you can also dispense a few drops of distilled water into the yolk and mix them.

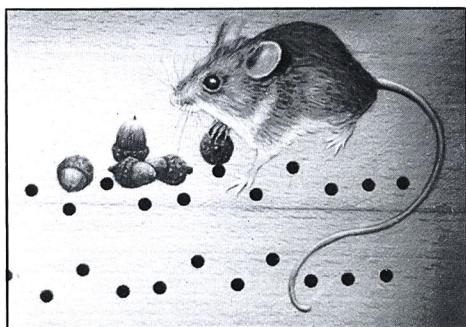
The final procedure is to mix together your pigment paste and egg yolk. You can buy little stacking ceramic dishes specially for this purpose, but empty Prince's fish paste pots also serve well. The important thing is that they must be thick enough to keep the eggs as cool as possible. This delays decomposition. Using a glass or plastic stick—the reverse of a plastic paintbrush is ideal for this—take a dipping of paste and knock half a dozen drops of it into the pot. With another clean stick drop in a lesser amount of egg. Mix them. Spread a small amount on the glass slab and either wait for it to dry naturally or accelerate the process with a hairdryer. When dry, the paint should lift off like a strip of plastic—pliable and of a piece. If it is at all crumbly it needs more egg. This part of the procedure is very arbitrary: every colour requires a differing amount of egg, depending on its inherent oil content. Do not mix too much at once though—the paint only keeps for one day at the most. If it starts to get sticky by the end of the day a little more water can be added.

Before applying paint, the soundboard should be sized. An authentic base is egg white, but I have always painted onto Melpol diluted about 10%, which has proved good. It is wise to try out the size on a scrap of wood, because not all varnishes take the paint successfully. I only draw my design minimally, because at the early stage the paint is very soft and any changes can be wiped away with a damp cloth.

NOW that you have got as far as applying the paint, the style of decoration will depend on either your personal taste or the customer's requirements. I personally never make copies of existing soundboards because I find it artistically unsatisfying, but that is because I am an artist and not a harpsichord builder. When working out a design, I prefer to decorate somewhat in the style of the original but let the exterior finish of the instrument and the individual shape play a large part in the effect. For instance, the early 18th-century Fleischer instrument with its long, elegant curves seems to cry out for a continuous border to accentuate this lovely shape. Its lines are flattered by small-scale, restrained decoration. Contrasted to this, a large Taskin needs something much bolder and more showy, as in the originals. The flowers are often more stylized, so there is an opportunity to 'bend' nature somewhat, and produce some wonderful, swirling stems and leaves.

One feature that plays a large part in the design is the rose, or lack of it. Historically, the rose was frequently decorated with pink flowers of the same name, which often appear as the hedgerow variety with very few petals, or else the deep, heavy heads of the cabbage type. The hybrid tea had not, of course, been produced at this period and therefore would look somewhat anachronistic on a harpsichord. In the absence of a rose, the space was often filled by a set-piece of exotic birds, perhaps set on a little 'island' of foliage, or a pastoral scene with the protagonists playing musical instruments. I studied one of these in which a grand lady was being gazed at admiringly by much smaller swains and serving-wenches; she appeared to be sitting in a large upright basket on wheels, which looked ready to roll away down the incline at any moment.

Certain flowers seem to have been popular on instruments—roses and rosebuds, of course;



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tulips, especially on instruments from the Low Countries; lavender, violets and bluebells. Fruit was another popular choice, especially cherries. Some of the flowers were completely fantastical, as were many of the birds represented. Some are just recognisable as parrots. Bees are often found, either on or in flowers, as are other occasional insects. These probably originate from the Dutch interest in highly naturalistic flower compositions. Other odd creatures making appearances are prawns, for some reason, and on a Ruckers harpsichord in the V&A a group of monkeys plays musical instruments. On the early Ruckers models we again come across continuous borders around the outside edges and both sides of the ribs. These are in the form of a filigree type of pattern, reminiscent of wrought-iron work and often painted in dark blue.

In truth, some of the original paintings look as though they were designed and painted in a bit of a hurry and many have become so discoloured with age and dirt that one can only guess at the original colouring. However, some are still in fine condition.

ON COMPLETION, the surface should be sealed. Although, as any of you who have boiled an egg will know, dried yolk becomes harder to remove from crockery the longer you leave it, the paint takes some months to harden properly. At the early stages it is very easy to scratch and very difficult to touch up. Harpsichord builders will probably have their own favourites, but they should always be tested on one of your previously painted offcuts. I like to use Windsor & Newton's acrylic varnish because it is removable and does not yellow. You can choose from either a matt or gloss finish—in fact, the gloss dries to an attractive satin sheen on wood.

I believe that it really is worth all this effort. The colours are exceptionally beautiful and the handling of it like painting with silk. The durability is very high, does not discolour with age and it remains elastic, it can expand and contract with the wood. If you have survived the preparation process you will find that egg tempera is a most satisfying medium in which to paint.

Jenny Haylett is an artist and teacher of singing and piano. She has decorated harpsichords for a number of years, principally for Andrea and Anthony Goble and Andrew Wooderson.