

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
(MIRCAt)

# Care of . . .



## *Regular maintenance of your keyboard*

**W**E have received a number of queries about sticking jacks. By 'sticking jack' I understand a jack body which is sluggish in its register slot. Before trying to solve this problem, make sure it is the problem you really have, by methodically eliminating other possibilities. Work mentally from the keyboard upwards through each component of the action, thinking about the other possible causes for the effect you observe:

- Perhaps the key is sticking, not the jack.
- Maybe the quill is hanging: that is, not repassing its string.
- The tongue may not be returning fully.
- The jack could be catching on a protruding pivot pin.
- A damper may be obstructing the return of the jack . . . and so on.

Then devise tests for each component which do not irreversibly alter the status quo. For example, to check the key, remove the weight of the jack(s) from the key to be sure it is operating freely and smoothly. To see if a quill is hanging, push the string out of the way while the key is depressed and then release the key to see if the jack returns fully when the quill no longer has to repass the string. To check the tongue, operate it on its own. Remove the jack from the instrument and holding the body horizontal, with the plectrum pointing towards the ceiling, observe whether the spring is sufficiently robust to return the tongue against gravity. Make sure the tongue rotates freely about its pivot . . . and so on.

If the jack is sticking in the register, you will probably be able to see rub marks. Hold the jack in glancing light to see where it might be binding. If the marks are below the register level, the problem may be in the lower guide. Whether upper or lower guide is at fault, usually work-

ing the jack by hand up and down in the slot a few times solves the problem. In effect, you will have burnished the sliding surfaces. Do not coat the jacks or register with graphite or any other supposedly slippery substance. This just increases its dimensions and makes it dirty. In box registers, a particle of dust can cause a jack to stick, and simply blowing down the slot, dislodging the dust, can solve the problem.

Do not be tempted to swap jacks around to solve any problem. In a good harpsichord, each jack is individually fitted to its own register slot, and each plectrum is individually cut to the correct length and strength for the string involved. Jacks simply are *not* interchangeable.

Ask yourself why one jack alone should be sticking. Often, on well set-up instruments, many or all of the jacks may begin sticking at once, because the action is responding evenly and as a whole to some change in relative humidity. If the humidity is abnormally high, the stickiness will probably disappear when the humidity returns to normal levels. To prevent sticking, try to control the environmental conditions—temperature and relative humidity—and make them as stable as possible. Changes cannot always be avoided, especially if an instrument needs to be moved. Try to find out the conditions at the new location and replicate them beforehand at home, observing the effects on the instrument. If possible, move the instrument into the new environment a day or two ahead of time to give it a chance to acclimatize. Many problems correct themselves once given the time to do so. Beware of excessively damp or dry conditions. No wooden keyboard instrument can accommodate extremes of wet or dryness. The latter can be particularly dangerous, causing irreversible damage to structural parts, soundboards and actions. The former is perhaps more likely to cause sticking, but when the instrument is returned to its normal environment it will correct itself. All this may cause you to pause before making a permanent adjustment

to an instrument which, before a move, was functioning perfectly. In general, be suspicious of sudden problems.

As a last resort, you may have to modify the register, but great caution should be exercised. A register must be made very precisely to function properly and misjudged or unnecessary alterations can seriously harm the action. If the slot is to be enlarged, one or two strokes with a very fine, flat needle-file will suffice. Do not scrub up and down with a file: it only cuts in one direction. Use it gently but firmly and at right angles to the edge which is to be reduced. Count the strokes—one or two should do the trick. *Do not* file the back edge of the slot, because this will have a detrimental effect on the repetition and the strength of the sound produced by the quill. If filing is necessary, file only from the front edge. Leather-covered registers should, of course, never be filed.

Leather-covered registers present problems of their own, but sticking jacks is rarely one of them. As jacks travel up and down they wear the leather, usually making themselves too loose rather than too tight. Nevertheless, leather, like wood, is vulnerable to changes in relative humidity, shrinking when dry and expanding when damp. Humidity changes or ragged cuts which leave feathery bits of leather protruding into the slot void can cause a jack to become sluggish. Only a very sharp pair of small side-or end-cutters (which have never been used on metal) should be used to snip them cleanly away—if they are visible. Take care not to cut or nick the slot sides. No greater modification of leather should be undertaken without removing the register from the instrument completely, and seeking advice from the builder.

**S**OMEONE has asked how to get dust off a soundboard. Good cleaning relies on good access and the only way to get good access to the soundboard is to remove all the strings. But this is not recommended as a routine maintenance measure.

There are several ways to approach the problem. A pair of hand-held bellows can be very effective in blowing dust to an open area of the soundboard—such as the spine side, beyond the lowest bass string. It is then possible to vacuum it up using a soft, long-bristle brush to push the dust towards the suction of a vacuum cleaner nozzle. Another method is to brush the whole soundboard in between the strings—covering the metal ferrule of the brush with masking tape, if necessary, to protect the strings from it. Both of these methods have as their principal drawback that much of the dust goes back into the air and settles again on the soundboard. Brushing between the strings can also leave dust streaks on the soundboard, visible when strong light falls on it from the keyboard end.

Custom-made wooden baffles which covered the strings and soundboards were provided for many early fortepianos. Although the intended function of the baffles is not known, they would certainly have acted as dust covers. Perhaps the best approach today is one of prevention: keep the instrument closed and covered whenever it is not in use.

**. . . Mimi  
Waitzman**

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