

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
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## *A Note from the Editor*

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**T**HE state of early keyboard teaching in this country at present is something that gives serious cause for concern: I do not mean at university or college level, where provision is ample and of a very high standard, but rather in schools and most importantly in the specialist music schools. Very few of the specialist schools have any serious early keyboard activity; few have any decent instruments and some do not have any early keyboard instruments at all. What is the reason for this and is it something that we can do anything about?

It appears that there is very little *demand* for harpsichord tuition in the specialist schools. This is a perfect chicken-and-egg situation: of course there is no demand when a school does not even have a decent instrument, let alone anyone teaching it. No student is going to get turned on to the harpsichord if all they have to work with is a clapped-out modern beast with half a dozen pedals and a miserable, thin sound. Neither is anyone going to find out the wonders of the repertoire by themselves: how does someone get to understand French Baroque music without some help over things like rhythmic conventions and ornamentation? No piano teacher I know teaches Couperin and Rameau alongside Bach and Scarlatti, standard fare though these two composers could be.

There are exceptions: the Yehudi Menuhin School's harpsichord teaching is flourishing, and some public schools are making a stand—King's School, Canterbury, for example has recently acquired a fine instrument and there is a handful of students taking harpsichord studies in addition to their other instruments. Part of the problem is that the harpsichord is seen as an adjunct to piano playing and no one can specialize in the harpsichord (still less the fortepiano) at this stage in their musical development. It can be argued that students should develop their musical skills to the utmost, explore as wide a range of music as possible and only then hone in on the instrument that is really for them. Yet this does not happen with the trombone or cello. Recent research conducted by Coopers and Lybrand revealed that the optimum age for beginning the study of a musical instrument is about five years old: after that it becomes increasingly unlikely that a child will take up a new instrument with any success.

**M**OST harpsichordists begin as pianists: the moulding of finger-technique and the skills of reading staff notation are developed first on this most common of instruments. Perhaps this is only to be expected, since the piano is so much more common an instrument than the harpsichord in the ordinary household. Yet the Hungarian piano pedagogue Josef Gát suggested that the harpsichord or clavichord was a much better instrument on which to start learning keyboard skills than the piano. Nowadays one should add the fortepiano to the list: the light keys, the need for tonal adjustments based on acute listening and the possibilities inherent in expressive articulation would all enhance the playing of the modern pianists and perhaps would also prevent the characterless virtuosity of so much modern piano playing.

A few harpsichord teachers I have spoken to did have some beginners—real beginners who had not played the piano first—but this remains exceptional despite the fact that many agree on its advantages. Can we expect any improvement in the future? Let us hope so, at least, and try to encourage young players to take up early keyboard instruments as early as possible.