

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

The vital rôle of humidity

MARTIN ROBERTSON

Martin Robertson of the Early Keyboard Agency warns us to be on our guard against the problems of the modern British climate.

MANY PEOPLE ARE unaware of the havoc that can be caused by the wide variations in humidity which are a feature of the British climate. Summers may be hot and dry or they may be cold and wet, while winter days can range within a short time from bitter cold to mild and very damp.

During the course of caring for our large collection of early keyboard instruments, we have been monitoring the relative humidity (moisture content) of the air for many years. Cold dry winds or central heating can mean a drop to the dangerously low level of 20% rH, both potentially damaging to the fragility of fine instruments, as well as old furniture, valuable books and computers. These variations can cause problems in relatively stable instruments such as modern pianos, the constant drying atmosphere of central heating being chiefly responsible, but the delicate adjustments of a reproduction harpsichord are particularly vulnerable and the instrument may become completely unplayable within a very short time. Soundboards may also split or warp, veneer may crack and peel off and joints become loose if an unacceptably low level of humidity is maintained.

Conversely, a very high reading can cause sticking keys and action, mildew, and rusty strings.

The moisture in the air can be monitored by means of a digital Thermo-Hygrometer, a simple electronic instrument giving dual readings of temperatures and humidity. Appropriate equipment to adjust the environment as necessary, to the optimum level of 50 to 55% rH, is simple to install and operate, and the modest outlay is far less than the cost of repairs and servicing. We have proved more than once that a harpsichord, carefully set up and adjusted in our workshops where we maintain a constant level of humidity, has gone wildly out of adjustment after being delivered to a modern house or college. After a while the instrument will acclimatize to its new surroundings and should remain stable for a long period of time provided that the humidity is regulated, but "prevention is better than cure".

The Early Keyboard Agency incorporates EKA Optair, specialists in humidity control equipment.

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Robert Deegan Harpsichords, Tonnage Warehouse,
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