

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# Early Keyboards in Argentina

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## Introduction

EXCEPT FOR A PAIR of small church organs, no keyboard instrument made prior to 1800 survives in Argentina. This is quite logical since Spanish colonial development in South America was centred in the gold and silver mines of today's Peru and Bolivia. Argentina was very sparsely inhabited in baroque times: if just a handful of early harpsichords survive from countries like Germany and Spain it is statistically coherent to find none in Argentina. As for church organs most of them were dismantled and carried away by the Jesuits when they were expelled from all Spanish domains in 1767: of the few organs left, only two have survived.

## Harpsichords

There is only one antique harpsichord in Argentina, imported from Europe c.1900. Probably a baroque Italian instrument, the case has been severely tampered with and it is not playable today. Later in this century Argentina had more than its share of Pleyels and Neuperts. The first instrument based on ancient originals was a Hubbard French double, locally assembled (1974) by a pupil of Hubert Bédard. This caused quite a turmoil and soon a few first-rate instruments were imported from Europe, this time ready-made by Adlam and Dowd. A number of second-rate kits were also imported: inadequately assembled, only a couple of them turned into something like a playable instrument. Today there are three harpsichord makers and one of them (Leopoldo Pérez Robledo) can be considered of international quality. With the low local wages for skilled workers, instrument making should be flourishing: unfortunately many years of overvalued currency are causing manufacturers difficulties, having to withstand the lower prices of imported instruments.

With a large middle class of European ancestry, Argentina has by far the largest

audience for baroque music among Latin American countries. It is then shocking to find no harpsichords worthy of such name in the country's concert halls (except for a few bad/old/worn/small/modern German instruments). This is a consequence of a succession of governments that will spend millions of dollars promoting the careers of sports and classical-dance stars, but will not spend a few thousands of pesos to commission a local maker, for example, to make a decent harpsichord for the Conservatorio Nacional Superior de Música to replace its derelict modern German specimen.

Today local harpsichordists have instruments ranging from good to excellent, but having to carry them around makes public performances expensive, thus infrequent (again, there is no public funding for chamber music recitals).

## Fortepianos

Scattered through the country there are perhaps 50 fortepianos from the first half of the 19th century. All of them but one are square pianos and many are of British manufacture. There have been misguided attempts at partial restoration by local piano repairers. Funds for proper restorations have never been available and *none* of these instruments is in playing order today. A few years ago one of the country's leading harpsichordists imported an early Viennese fortepiano kit, had it locally assembled and performed on it in some public recitals.

## Organs

There are two baroque instruments extant and only one of them is in playing order: the recently-restored colonial organ at Buenos Aires Cathedral. It is a small Spanish instrument: one manual with six split ranks (base Diapason 8') and pedal (4' and coupler). The next extant organ is dated 1875 and from then on till the Second World War — the 'dark ages' of organ making — Argentina was flooded with European organs, mostly with tubular

pneumatic action. Though many organs are in a pitiful state, the maintenance standard is improving and today there are a few very able organ repairers and restorers.

Until very recently it was impossible to have a picture of pipe organs in Argentina since *nobody* — not even the Catholic Church, owner of most of them — had anything like a list of them.

Fortunately a few years ago the leading local expert in early organs, Dutch-trained Miguel P. Juárez, began making a survey of organs in the country (excluding one-rank portatives and harmoniums). All attempts to find funding were unsuccessful, so the work took years. Finally at the end of 1996 it was published as a book by the Conferencia Episcopal Argentina: *Censo y estudio de los órganos de la República Argentina*. It includes 195 instruments; twenty or so more are known to exist but it was not possible to get their stoplist or even to find them. In March of 1997 (after a few months of work by professionals giving again their time for free) the "Censo" has been converted and enhanced as a highly structured database for IBM-PC in Microsoft Access® format. Now the organs survey can be easily updated and augmented, and any player can read global statistics and make a 'query' looking for mixture stops, pedal extensions and the like. Thanks to the database we can draw the general conclusions that follow.

The typical organ in Argentina (approximately one of every two instruments) is a symphonic instrument made in Germany between the two World Wars, with tubular pneumatic action and

a disposition ideally suited to the aesthetic of a Max Reger.

To play German baroque music is no easy task here: one looks for an organ with 20 or more German baroque stops including mixtures. There are indeed quite a few such instruments in Argentina, but none of them has the sections as per the Werkprinzip and none of them has mechanical action, the console being often quite far from the instrument case.

Still worse is the situation for French baroque music. There are simply no instruments with anything like the minimum necessary stop list.

Fortunately quite a number of large Italian instruments from the second part of the 19th century survive, some of them with their original mechanical action. Two of them, with a full complement of baroque stops including the Italian ripieno, have already been restored to playing order and are excellent vehicles for Italian renaissance and baroque music.

Finally there are many instruments in Argentina made at the turn of the century by the atelier of Cavaillé-Coll under its successor, Mutin. A few of them are large instruments in both original state and decent playing order: though mostly lacking mixture stops and having slowish actions, they are still quite adept for performing the great French romantic organ music.

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## Looking forward...

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- further conversation with Jane Chapman
- Commissioning and Building a Harpsichord
- Christopher Benjamin Schmidchen and his Small Keyboard Tutor
- Education at Finchcocks, Kent
- The Harley Gallery and the Music Collection
- Ronald Brautigan and Mozart's sonatas
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