

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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COPYING A 17TH-CENTURY FRENCH HARPSICHORD

By David Evans

Terence Charlston asked me to make him a third harpsichord; the model would be of my choosing. I decided on the anonymous French instrument of 1667 in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Originally the two manual (8', 8', 4' plus buff) harpsichord was strung in brass GG C to c³ it was later altered to an iron scale GG C to d³. The challenge was to make the new instrument with one manual 8', 8', 4' plus buff with the original brass scale and plucking points but with shifts to play at A 440, 415 and 392 without altering the dimensions or layout of the instrument.

The case was made in walnut with poplar rails and struts. The keyboard was made with a slightly wider span than the original, tapering in towards the jacks to match the rather narrow string spacing. The original nuts and bridges, which had been moved to accommodate the iron scale, left clear marks allowing their earlier position to be resumed. By using the space once occupied by the key well end blocks and the generous margins on the bridges, it was possible to extend the compass to d³ at 415 and at 440 with a single long 8' string. At bass end, by leaving out C# and making the bottom note B, this gave C to d³ at 392. The bottom string could be tuned to a just passable G at the higher pitch, since the bass response of this harpsichord is particularly good. The C# key is a dummy to keep the normal look of the keyboard.

Because of the narrowness of the original string spacing, the setting up of the action and the positioning of the 4' nut pins was exacting to say the least, but the result was well worth it and the instrument sounds very well indeed playing 17th-century French works.



The instrument



Detail of the rose