

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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# Early keyboard technology instruction in the US

Allan Winkler



The year 2019 came and went with little notice for an auspicious 70th anniversary in the world of early music. In November of 1949, two lifelong friends, Frank Hubbard and William Dowd, rented a cold loft space in a run-down corner of Boston and began making harpsichords and clavichords. Both men studied what was then a limited number of available antique instruments of different kinds, and were struck by how little those old instruments resembled what was then being made in the US and Europe. Their early work was an attractive departure from earlier piano-like harpsichords, bringing them a flood of enthusiastic buyers, and, more important, they laid a foundation for making early instruments of all kinds based on careful primary research.<sup>1</sup>

In fifty years of making harpsichords and clavichords I've seen the early keyboard industry expand beyond the demand of the market, and then recede as demand withered and its proponents retired. A byproduct of the renaissance inspired by Hubbard and Dowd in the US was the enthusiastic crowd of apprentices and aficionados it generated, and until the late 1990s it was fairly easy to find a workshop-trained technician to do harpsichord maintenance and repair, the key words here being 'workshop-trained'.

The demand for skilled maintenance falls into two groups: the private owner/musicians, and music schools. In the first group there are itinerant musicians who can usually troubleshoot repairs on neglected instruments they are expected to play, but the average at-home harpsichord owners must fend for themselves with

whatever skills they've learned from a builder, repair manual, or the wisdom mixed with misinformation floating around on blog postings or YouTube videos.

More of a problem is that every major music school has at least a few harpsichords and one or two other early keyboards: a muselar, a Viennese fortepiano and possibly a clavichord. Tuning unequal temperaments isn't so much the problem for staff piano technicians or teaching assistants, but the frequent need for maintenance on a variety of early keyboards that are heavily used is something that takes knowledge, skill sets and materials that even the best piano techs don't have access to. Most large university music departments and conservatories have their own piano workshops, or staff technicians on call, to maintain and rebuild pianos, but only a handful of those schools have technicians who can do similar work on harpsichords, and this is the primary problem that needs to be addressed.

Since early music performance has become integrated with mainstream musical training, music schools are looking for piano technicians with skills in harpsichord and early keyboard maintenance. To some degree, an understanding of early keyboards can be gained from out-of-print books and builders' manuals, and some materials are readily available from on-line retailers. However, the fundamentals of regular maintenance, specifically the voicing and regulation of harpsichords requires hands-on, in-person training, and the subjects of music wire, scaling and pitch are areas for which there is little or no accessible information. Older instruments, particularly classically designed harpsichords that are thirty or forty years old, still have many decades of musical life in them if they are intelligently repaired and upgraded.

Training in the art and science of maintaining harpsichords has been a concern of mine for many years, and in 2018 and again in 2019 I conducted a one-week course for eight people at the North Bennet Street School (NBSS), America's oldest technical college, located in Boston. The pandemic negated repeating this course in 2020 and 2021, but in the first two years, full enrollment was immediate, based on little more than word of mouth, with people from around the US, and

as far away as Athens, Greece. The interest for this kind of training is clear, and inquiries for more continue to come in.



I designed this short course primarily for piano technicians because of their familiarity with tools of the trade and working with actions, and also for itinerant harpsichordists who are often faced with performing on neglected instruments. Designing a course for the average home harpsichordist would require a different approach, perhaps allowing more time to become familiar with infrequently used skill sets, and how adept and comfortable this group might be working with sharp tools. Individual musicians may have their preferences for how their harpsichord is voiced, but the objective for my own small course was to give participants the basic knowledge of how to maintain, voice and set up a harpsichord so that a musician can sit down at it and easily say, 'Yes, I can work with this'.

A small, one-week course such as I offered obviously won't build the technical support for all the early keyboard instruments spread around the US. What is needed is in-depth training in one or more institutional settings to ensure the continued development and enjoyment of all early keyboards. Ideally, a course like this would span three or four weeks and allow for a deep dive into subjects like wire, scaling, voicing with quill, replacing aged-out plastic jacks, and some history of the instrument in its old and modern eras. This kind of training isn't aimed at nurturing new instrument builders as much as the careful, trained technical support for today's early keyboards.

This is something I hope can be established in the coming years in Boston or some other locations where there is ready access to instruments and appropriate workspace. It may be a difficult time to organize a project like this, but among my reasons for promoting this idea is a sense of debt to those who got this business started, to see to it that their scholarship and professional approach to early keyboards of all types is understood and continued.

*Allan Winkler started as an apprentice with Eric Herz in 1971, and has since continued as a leading member of the 'Boston School of Harpsichord Making', approaching reproducing early instruments through the fundamental study and analysis of original instruments.*  
<https://allanwinklerharpsichords.com>.

#### Note

- 1 See Mark Kroll (ed), *The Boston School of Harpsichord Building: William Dowd, Eric Herz and Frank Hubbard* (Hillsdale, NY, 2019).