

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Clavichords at Vassar College

Laurence Libin



Illus.1 Dolmetsch-Chickering clavichord ('Plvs fait doucevr'), Boston, 1909, serial number 30

Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, New York, was founded in 1861 to provide young women with an undergraduate liberal-arts education equivalent to that available elsewhere for men. As was normal for a female academy, Vassar had a large, well-equipped music department, where early (pre-Classical) music caught students' attention already in the late 1860s. Course catalogues of the period show that capable keyboard players learned Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavichord* (sic) while advanced organ and piano students could take private lessons in thorough-bass. Beginning in 1868, Frédéric Louis Ritter, second director of Vassar's School of Vocal and Instrumental Music, and his wife, Fanny Raymond, also a member of the faculty, organized 'historical recitals' on campus that included selections from as early as the 13th century. In 1888 Ritter lectured his class on the history of instruments; that same year the College library acquired 'a beautiful and costly [book] entitled *Musical Instruments*. It contains descriptions, with illustrations

in colored plates, of rare historical instruments'.¹ This lavish new volume, *Musical Instruments Historic, Rare and Unique* by Alfred J. Hipkins, with colour plates by William Gibb,² signalled growing antiquarian interest in old and exotic instruments, a trend in keeping with the Arts & Crafts movement that resonated with Vassar's students.

In 1891 Edward Morris Bowman, a founder of the American Guild of Organists, succeeded Ritter as professor of music; the following year, likely at Bowman's invitation, the music critic Henry Edward Krehbiel, whose wife had attended Vassar, presented a lecture-demonstration at the College on antique keyboards from the private collection of Morris Steinert, with Steinert himself demonstrating his instruments. Among other early-music proponents who appeared on campus around the turn of the 20th century, Arnold Dolmetsch performed in 1903 and 1909, latterly on a Dolmetsch-



Illus.2 Clavichord by John Challis ('Mvsica laetitiae comes medicina dolorum'), Detroit, 1950, serial number 50.122

Chickering clavichord decorated in Arts & Crafts style. According to Mabel Dolmetsch, students were so captivated by Arnold's performance in 1909 that they raised money to buy that clavichord for the College;³ but in fact his performance inaugurated the instrument, which Vassar had bought a few months earlier (illus.1). Dolmetsch's pupil Jean Stuyvesant Sinclair, from 1908 an instructor in music at Vassar, also presented recitals and lecture-demonstrations, using her own Dolmetsch-Chickering clavichord.

It is not known when Vassar began collecting historical instruments, but in 1899 a local piano manufacturer gave the College a 1796 Broadwood & Sons square piano that was occasionally played in faculty recitals. Other individual gifts of antique instruments followed, but the first extensive donation arrived in 1938-39 from the estate of the late Rt Rev James Henry Darlington, Episcopal bishop of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a notable collector whose granddaughter graduated in Vassar's class of 1942; this unexpected gift, which included a 1610 Vincentius Pratensis harpsichord among other keyboards, further fuelled interest in early music on campus.⁴ Darlington's instruments joined previous acquisitions in the Treasure Room of Belle Skinner Hall, since 1932 the music department's home, named for Ruth Isabelle ('Belle') Skinner, president of Vassar's class of 1887 and an important collector in her own right.

Vassar College possesses four clavichords of special value for early-music education: an anonymous, unplayable Germanic example from the Darlington collection, previously owned by Morris Steinert; a late-18th-century

Swiss example attributed to a member of the Looser family, organbuilders in rural Toggenburg, also from the Darlington collection; the 1909 Dolmetsch-Chickering (serial number 38) modelled after the 1784 Christian Gotthelf Hoffmann original that Arnold Dolmetsch sold to Belle Skinner in 1908; and an aluminium-framed John Challis clavichord (serial number 50.122), range AA-F, made before Challis began using metal soundboards (illus.2).⁵ Challis, incidentally, was apprenticed for four years to Dolmetsch, whose influence is evident in Challis's adventurous designs and refined craftsmanship.⁶

The College purchased its Dolmetsch-Chickering and Challis clavichords directly from their makers for performance and teaching purposes. The celebrated poet Elizabeth Bishop, a graduate in Vassar's class of 1934, fondly recalled her encounters with the Dolmetsch-Chickering; she ordered her own Dolmetsch clavichord in 1937.⁷ Vassar's instrument now has a row of four vacant tuning-pin holes formerly for notes B and C, the first two pairs of strings angled backward from the bridge pins; perhaps because a crack developed along the line of those tuning pins, they were repositioned closer to the front so their strings now angle forward from their bridge pins, like the rest of the bass strings. This alteration, which necessitated resetting one or two bridge pins, might have been done by Wolfgang Staub, at one time Vassar's piano technician and around 1939 an instrument restorer at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. While the clavichord rests on a traditional trestle stand, threaded steel plates recessed at the four bottom corners could receive separate screw-on legs.



Illus.3 Anonymous Germanic clavichord (a wreck), origin unknown, probably 18th century

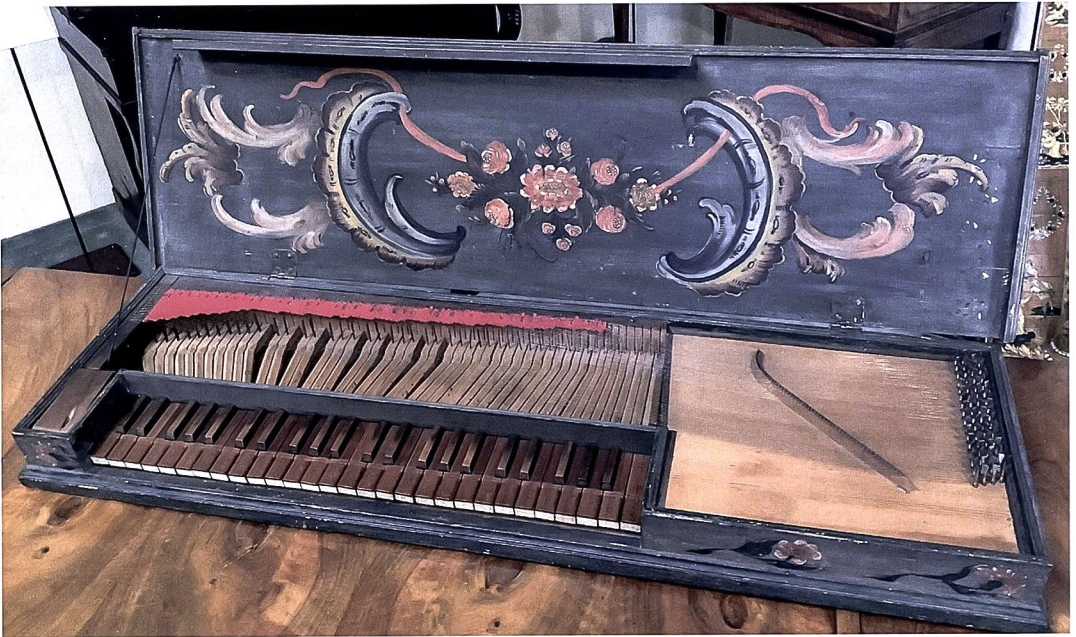
The anonymous, poorly-preserved Germanic clavichord (measuring 119.3 x 39.5 x 10.5 cm, not including mouldings nailed to front and sides along the bottom) (illus.3) suffered major interventions before coming to Vassar. Among many other changes, someone overpainted its softwood case, rehinged the lid flap, repositioned the tool compartment lid pivots, and introduced a felt-padded pressure rail. Screw holes on the back of the 'nameboard' show where a music rest was once fastened. The bottom moldings are mismatched; the side pieces, thinner and of a different wood from the front piece, are likely not original. Heavy green paper lines the interior walls; some of this paper, too, has been overpainted.

A photograph of this clavichord while still in Bishop Darlington's music room shows pairs of lyre-shaped legs hinged to its bottom. Sometime after the photo was taken, one pair of legs was lost, the case twisted badly, and its walls, 1.1 cm thick, became partially detached from the 2.2-cm-thick, single-plank bottom. This detachment allows a view of the interior under the soundboard, revealing a single shallow soundboard rib extending at a slight angle from front to spine; several parchment reinforcing strips; and indications that the 3-mm-thick soundboard, which slightly overhangs the angled bellyrail, might have been removed for repair or replaced. Moulding might originally have surrounded the soundboard but no trace of it remains. A long internal reinforcing beam, 8 cm wide by 2 cm tall, crosses the bottom diagonally roughly along the string line, passing through a cutout in the bellyrail adjoining a rectangular mousehole open at the bottom. The continuously single-curved, brass-pinned bridge terminates at the bass end in a carved bracket shape but ends abruptly at the treble, where the adjoining soundboard area shows several cut marks.

The C-f keyboard, *Stichmass* c.49 cm, has heavily-worn ebony natural heads 3.6 cm long, notched between two

pairs of score lines, and an assortment of ebony and black-stained tails of varying widths. The key fronts are simply black-stained end grain, perhaps replacing lost applied fronts, an impression suggested by the unusually long overhang of the ebony heads. The accidental blocks, 7.3 cm long at the bottom and 1 cm tall, are of stained fruitwood with bone caps, some replaced with ivory. All the levers, sawn from a plank about 1.2 cm thick, were weighted with lead at the distal end (wood plugs replaced some weights) and carved to a customary ridge along the central portion between the balance pins and tangents. Old inked numbers appear on the bottom of the levers near their distal end along with more recent penciled numbers beneath the head end. The tangents, of brass, are mostly rectangular or slightly tapered and vary in size, generally with a longer striking surface at the bass. Small slots atop many of the keys indicate earlier tangent placements. No doubt because of binding due to the case's twist, the C and f keys have been shaved narrower on their outer sides for clearance and the removable 'nameboard' may have been trimmed shorter at the left end, where its top molding does not angle forward as at the right end to meet the top moulding of the cheeks. Numerous repairs to the keys include shimming, splicing, heat bending and replacing rack blades.

A paper label glued near the bass hitchpins specifies string materials (*Messing* and *Stahl*) and German gauges. While not original, the present strings (the lowest ten pairs being of finely open-wound iron) appear old and fasten to unpierced, hand-forged tuning pins grouped in four straight lines along the right side wall. The tuning pins are of two diameters, thicker for the lowest ten bichords; all but two of these bass pins are grooved on top to simplify winding the strings, but the present windings avoid these grooves. Case distortion, tangent displacement and possible bridge repositioning preclude reliable measurement of the intended string lengths, but



Illus.4 Clavichord by a member of the Looser family, attributed (painted lid interior), Toggenburg, late 18th century

fretting seems to have been mostly paired, except for As and Ds and the lowest twelve bichords. Behind the brass hitchpins, which were overpainted along with the hitchpin rail, a second row of plugged pin holes nearer the spine suggests an initial error in positioning.

The two lines of balance pins, for naturals and accidentals, run only 7 mm apart, both lines running parallel to the key fronts. The naturals pivot about 11.7 cm from the fronts, with the distance from front to tangent of 22 cm for C and 34.4 cm for F. Oddly, the eight treble-most balance pins occupy a separate section of the oak balance rail; this division corresponds to a division at the same point in the rack. The reason for these separations is uncertain, but the highest eight key levers differ subtly from the rest, so apparently either mistakes were made during construction or major alteration later became necessary.

Bishop Darlington seems to have had this clavichord renovated in Pennsylvania, likely following earlier intervention by Steinert, who preferred having his instruments in playing condition. Notably, circular paper punchings (shims for key levelling) surround the balance pins beneath worn felt punchings; these disks replace an earlier cord fulcrum, a fragment of which survives. Many of the paper punchings, which might come from newsprint, bear English words including 'Philadelphia'. The clavichord's description in Darlington's inventory reads, in part, 'Purchased from Steinert, Yale College,

through the courtesy of Professor Wilson in 1910, who came on the Bishop's invitation to Harrisburg in 1918 and gave a lecture in the Assembly Hall in the See House on the subject of "Early American Musicians, their music and the instruments they used"⁸. The purchase date of 1910 suggests the clavichord was either left behind when Steinert gave the bulk of his collection to Yale in 1900, or acquired by him thereafter. Like the clavichord's maker, age and place of origin, 'Professor Wilson' has not been identified, but questions posed by this unprepossessing instrument underscore the usefulness of even decrepit examples for stimulating students' curiosity.

The well-preserved Swiss clavichord (illus.4) has been reliably attributed to Wendelin or Joseph Looser on the basis of its distinctive painted decoration and embossed paper natural-key fronts otherwise found only on known Looser house-organs. The naïve Rococo decoration on the front and lid interior, like that on several Looser organs and also on a chest attributed to Wendelin Looser, features rocailles and flowers on a greenish blue-grey ground.⁹ The embossed key fronts have the numbers 17 and 10 respectively at the lower left and right corners flanking what seems to be a fleur-de-lis above a cherub head surmounting an inverted heart; the numbers presumably represent the year 1710. Wendelin (1720-1790) might have acquired a stock of these papers from his unknown teacher or another source and used them throughout his career, then passed the remainder to his son, Joseph (1749-1822).¹⁰

No other Looser clavichord is known, and few other Swiss clavichords. This survivor was lightly restored and restrung in 1989-90 by Walter and Berta Burr, who also replaced the missing nameboard and noted some earlier interventions, perhaps by Wolfgang Staub. Of particular interest, two empty wooden spools for iron music wire were found in the clavichord's tool compartment. The spools, probably contemporary with the instrument, bear inked gauge numbers 6 and 7 and the embossed stamps (a rose and initials HMF) of a Nuremberg wire drawer.¹¹ Because of this clavichord's singularity, some descriptive details are noted below in hope they might help define the maker's style and lead to identifying related instruments still to be found. Measurements are given in cm.

Looser clavichord

Range: C-c³, 49 notes, 31 pairs of strings (fretted)
 Case of pine, width without bottom molding: 109.7
 Case width to right of keywell: 36.8
 Case width to left of keywell: 7.6
 Width of keywell: 65.2
 Case depth front to back without bottom molding: 32.1
 Case height without lid: 8.9 including bottom; case constructed on the bottom, not around it
 Bottom thickness: 1.9; solid pine plank shimmed beneath at the left rear and right front corners to compensate for the case's twist
 Toolbox to left of the keywell with unpainted lid (maybe a replacement) pivoted to open toward the spine
 Mouldings are attached around the bottom and lid (except along the spine) and cut into the top edge of the case walls; some attached moulding has been replaced
 Spine and side thicknesses: all 1.2
 Back of spine is unpainted, showing dovetailed corners, the lowest dovetails halved where they rest on the bottom; the four front corners also show exposed dovetail joints
 Lid construction: a single flat, knotty panel with tongue-and-grooved 'breadboard' mouldings at sides and with keyboard front panel affixed; nails hold two flat, folded sheet-iron hinges joining the lid and spine
 Raised lid is held by a cord at the bass side, secured by a nail at the lower end and at the upper end by a looped wire that penetrates the lid; that loop seems to fit into a hole crudely scraped through the tool compartment lid
 Some small wormholes appear in the bottom and spine; the number '105' has been chalked (?) beneath the bottom toward the left side

Decorative painting on the underside of lid and front of case, otherwise plain blue-green paint overall (some retouched by Berta Burr), except the bare spine; the lid underside shows a symmetrical floral array centered on a descending red ribbon that rests at both ends atop facing rocaille Cs with foliate wings extending outward toward the sides
 Wrestrail runs along the right side, bearing four straight rows of slender unpierced tuning pins (maybe replacements) with very narrow heads that protrude above the case walls, damaging the underside of the lid
 Bellyrail is separate from the right key cheek and angled slightly leftward toward the spine
 Mousehole with chamfered edge, shallowly rectangular at the top, with the lower part of the sides curving outward and downward toward the bottom
 Hitchpins of iron are aligned atop the rack board and in a separate rectangular block along the left side
 Keyboard 1.3 thick, sharply carved out under the natural heads; inset patches on the underside of levers 13-23
 Keylevers are bevelled behind the iron balance pins to form central ridges, and notched at the rear end of each ridge
 Keylever numbering: sequentially in ink on top behind the balance pins, accompanied by string gauge numbers:
 Gauge 00 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Notes 1 1 2 3 5 5 7 7 7 7 4
 Gauges inked in a different hand on the right side of key lever ridges:
 Gauge 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
 Notes 5 5 2 2 5 5 7 7 7 4
 Gauges 2-6 marked *meß* (brass), 7-11 *weiß* (white, i.e., iron), but the change to gauge 5 is unmarked and change to 6 has an illegible mark; these marks are unclear and might be misread here
Stichmass: 46.9-47.0
 Natural top length, front to nameboard: 9.6; two-piece plumwood tops
 Natural head length: 3.7; edges rounded before two pairs of score lines, front overhanging about 2 mm
 Natural tail width: C D E tails slightly wider than F G A B tails
 Key fronts of embossed paper, 2.2 x 1.2: embossing is indistinct but seems to represent a centered fleur-de-lys at top above a cherub head above an inverted heart flanked by large ornate foliation and '17 10' respectively at lower left and right corners

Accidental length: 5.6 along base; uniformly 1.1 tall; brown-stained pearwood blocks

Key guidance: iron pins with flattened sides riding in rear rack

Balance rail is rectangular with small blocks added on top as fulcrums in front of chromatically staggered balance pins, both lines of pins parallel to the front

Naturals pivot 10.2 from front, accidentals pivot at 11.1; front to tangent 20 at C, 27 at c³.

Spruce soundboard with grain parallel to front and spine; a row of cleats beneath secures a crack

Bridge: mostly straight but with a gentle J curve at treble, approximately triangular in cross-section but with flattened apex, pinned in one row on a ledge cut at the left side of the apex; ends are concave, the bass end pinned to the soundboard

C string length: 93.7, bridge pin to tangent

c² string length: about 25 from bridge pin to tangent (tangent is offset to the left of a scribed guideline on the key lever)

c³ string length: 12.2, bridge pin to tangent

Listing cloth was installed during restringing

Tangents of brass, about 1 mm thick toward the top, 3 cm tall, most embedded on a scribed guideline aligned with the rack, but some are offset and/or bent laterally to adjust the temperament

Fretting, on 31 pairs of strings: C-A unfretted, then mostly paired except (currently) single e, a, e¹, a^{#1}, and b¹, and some triple-fretting in treble, unclear due to tangent displacement (Walter Burr suggests g¹-g^{#1}-a¹ / a^{#1} / b¹ / c²-c^{#2} / d²-d^{#2} / e²-f² / f^{#2}-g²-g^{#2} / a²-a^{#2} / b²-c³). Originally maybe g¹-g^{#1} / a¹ / a^{#1}-b¹ / c²-c^{#2} / d²-d^{#2} / e² / f²-f^{#2} / g²-g^{#2} / a²-a^{#2} / b²-c³.

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Notes

- 1 *The Vassar Miscellany*, xviii/3 (1 December 1888), pp.90, 98.
- 2 Alfred J. Hipkins, *Musical Instruments Historic, Rare and Unique* (Edinburgh, 1888), published by Adam and Charles Black.
- 3 Mabel Dolmetsch, *Personal Recollections of Arnold Dolmetsch* (London, 1958), p.74. After his 1909 lecture-recital, Dolmetsch remained on campus the following morning to give lessons on the new clavichord to several interested students; see *Vassar Miscellany*, xxxix/3 (1 December 1909), pp.196-197. For Dolmetsch's building work in the USA, see Peter Bavington, 'An annotated transcription of the Chickering early-instrument log-book' and 'A key to some of the personalities named in the annotated transcription' (2022), at <http://www.peter-bavington.co.uk>.
- 4 See Kathryn L. Libin, 'The Instrument Collection of Bishop James Henry Darlington at Vassar College', *Musique-Images-Instruments*, ix (2007), pp.127-146.
- 5 The Challis clavichord was joined by a one-manual, two-pedal Challis harpsichord (58.202), both decorated by Challis's partner, Ephraim Truesdell, and a single-choir Challis 'petit' harpsichord (45.58) made in Ypsilanti. A paper label under the clavichord's soundboard gives Challis's address as 85 East Vernor Hwy., Detroit. Challis's pamphlets and price lists from 1941 and 1948 accompany these instruments.
- 6 Challis's papers came posthumously into possession of Dr William Frayer, who donated them in 2016 to the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.
- 7 Bishop's attraction to the clavichord is detailed in Deryn Rees-Jones, "'I am in Need of Music": Elizabeth Bishop and the Energies of Sound and Song', in Angus Cleghorn (ed), *Elizabeth Bishop and the Music of Literature* (Cham, 2019), pp.7-18.
- 8 Typescript, Vassar Department of Music archives.
- 9 Chest auctioned in Zurich by Koller (1 December 2016); see https://www.kollerauktionen.ch/en/100570-0220----2251-BEMALTE-TRUHE_-Toggenburg_-wo-2251_427828.html. See also https://second.wiki/wiki/toggenburger_hausorgel and <https://www.windblaess.org/orgeln/wendelin-looser/>.
- 10 See Otmar Widmer, 'Hausorgelbau im Toggenburg', *Anzeiger für schweizerische Altertumskunde*, xxxix/2-3 (Zurich, 1937), pp.135-54, 241.
- 11 See Sabine K. Klaus, 'Newly Discovered Documents on the History of Nuremberg Music Wire Makers to the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century', *Early Keyboard Journal*, xiv (1996), pp.43-63.