

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

Vol. nn, No. n Season, YYYY

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

An unusual square piano ‘ravalement’

Paul Simmonds



Illus.1 Longman & Broderip square piano after restoration

In November 2021 I bought through our local auction house in Switzerland a square piano (illus.1). I was drawn to it by its decorative casework; it certainly had little else going for it then. Its nameboard revealed it to be from the house of Longman & Broderip, Cheapside, London (illus.2) and the stamped number under the hand-stops front left, 585, dated its manufacture to around 1786. It has a second inked number, back left, 582. It was in a distressed state: the soundboard had split in a number of places and was curling up in front where it had separated from the ribs underneath. At some point a coating of shellac had been inexpertly and messily applied to it. One of the hand stops had jammed and was broken. On the positive side, all the hammers and dampers were present, either in place, or in a plastic bag. At some point the hammers had been re-hinged with an inappropriately soft red leather and would fall off given the slightest encouragement. Some keyfronts were detached, but had been secured in the said plastic bag. The trestle-stand, clearly old but not original was barely supporting the instrument, and the auctioneers had wisely displayed the piano without it. I secured the piano for, by Swiss

standards, a low price.¹ So far, par for the course, you might say.

Once I had got the instrument home it became gradually apparent, on closer examination, that this piano had a story to tell. The first unusual feature was the presence of a fourth hand stop, the function of which was, and still is, to raise all the hammers nearer to the string-band.² However, part of the mechanism, that which would have kept the hammers in this position until released, was missing. A threaded piece of brass rod, about 12mm in length, and two screw holes bear witness to where this had been fitted. To date no-one I contacted involved with the restoration of square pianos has encountered such a device on a similar instrument.

I had not been able to look underneath the piano while it was at the auctioneers, as it was sitting on a shelf. On examining it closer at home a second feature had me temporarily puzzled; the bottom-boards are a good 7cm thick and a section 9cm deep and running the full length of the keyboard has been cut away. The key-



Illus.2 Nameboard of Longman & Broderip piano

frame, presumably originally in one piece, was now in two sections, as the bits at the extremes of the treble and bass have broken off, or indeed had been deliberately removed. After a few hours' sleep I woke at four in the morning realising I was dealing with the top half of an organized piano.

The organized piano can be said to have its origins in the *claviorgan*, the most well-known example of which is the 1579 Theeuwes, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.³ The piano sat on a small organ having one or more registers and by means of stickers or trackers underneath the piano keys both instruments could be played at the same time (illus.3). These combined instruments were extremely popular in the last two decades of the 18th century. Longman & Broderip advertised 'organized piano fortes' which were 'peculiarly well constructed for public and private concerts' (illus.4). Very few of these instruments have survived to the present day, maybe two or three in playing condition, the most well-known being the Merlin piano recently auctioned from the Colt collection. Recordings of such instruments are even rarer.⁴ The piano or organ could be played alone or together. The method of disengaging the two instruments varied; on my piano I am certain this was achieved by means of the fourth

hand-lever, mentioned above. The hammers were raised just enough that the 'old man's heads' no longer engaged with the hammers, the key-dip being dictated by the front board of the key-frame.⁵ When the organ was discarded, there would be no further need for this hand-stop.⁶ The fashion was short-lived, barely reaching the start of the 19th century. The sheer impracticality of keeping both instruments in tune with one another would have been a damper to its popularity, but I suggest that the rapid development in piano technology had more to do with it. From the start of the 19th century the repertoire for the new instrument was becoming more idiomatic and sophisticated, far removed from the keyboard music of the 18th century. British keyboard music from the second half of the 18th century was harpsichord-centred, but often with organ specified as an alternative medium, or *vice versa*. Compilations by John Stanley, William Walond, George Berg and John Simpson fall into this category – there were many more. An instrument offering both possibilities on which this music could now be played was certainly an attractive sales ploy, providing one could afford it. The newer repertoire was however firmly in the pianoforte camp, distinctly unsuited to the organ, either combined or alone, a certain death warrant for the organized piano.

Tuning the organ was effected by hinging the piano back



Illus.3 Showing the gap in the baseboard for the organ trackers, and the leather pads under the keys for contacting the trackers

and supporting it during the tuning process by means of hefty prop sticks. A closer examination of my piano revealed two sets of three screw holes in triangular formation on the back-boards, suggesting the one-time presence of two strong hinges for this purpose, and two wedge-shaped cut-outs underneath almost certainly indicating where the prop sticks, hinged to the organ part, would have engaged. On the extreme front corners are further triangular sets of screw holes, possibly to do with the seating of the piano on the organ. Underneath the keys are leather pads which would have engaged with the tops of the organ stickers. Decoratively, my piano bears a striking resemblance to an organized piano in Bristol made by Christopher Ganer which has two sets of organ pipes, a stopped diapason and a 4' flute/principal. Whether Ganer had anything to do with my piano, though, remains speculation, although an attribution to him is tempting as he is known to have supplied pianos to Longman and Broderip.

The soundboard needed to come out, that was clear, and either to be repaired or replaced. I seriously considered the latter option, not only because of the mess it was in, but also as it became clear that it was not original. In squares of this period the soundboard extended beyond the wrestplank, fitting flush with the right-hand

side and back. In later squares the triangle behind the wrestplank was often fitted with an ornamental fretwork lattice, lined underneath with green silk. On my piano the triangle had been filled with a piece of plywood. On removing the soundboard I found more evidence of a replacement. Holes in the belly rail above the mousehole indicated that the instrument once had the strip of beading common to pianos of this period. There were no corresponding holes in the soundboard. Although the ribs seemed convincing they were clearly replacements. Notches in the liners indicated where the original ribs had been positioned, and the existing ribbing didn't even extend as far as the liners, and were positioned slightly differently. That problems had arisen with the replacement soundboard at some point was clear from a desperately incompetent repair attempt. The mousehole had been cut down to the bottom boards to allow a chunk of wood to be fed through and glued underneath the soundboard. My only consolation was that this had at least been done with water-soluble glue, which meant that removal was relatively easy. I decided to repair and refit the existing soundboard, and to replace the triangle of plywood with a piece of soundboard wood.

This done, I could turn my attention to the action, and here it became clear that work of a totally different

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Illus.4 Longman & Broderip newspaper advertisement, 1788

nature had taken place, probably much earlier than that involving the soundboard. As noted out above, all hammers were present and correct, or so I thought. They all seemed of the same vintage and resembled each other in detail, indicating a set, but they were the wrong sort of hammers for 1786. A hammer of this period had a mortice in the middle through which an iron guide-pin fixed to the hammer rest protruded. This was to restrict the sideways movement of the hammer, keeping it focused on the strings it was to contact. The hammers were individually hinged, and at the hinge point there would be a gap between them of 4-5mm. Holes on the hammer rest board are present, where no doubt guide pins had originally been fitted.⁷ The hammers now on my piano are typical for a square of around 20 years later. These hammers are mounted closely, side by side with virtually no gap. I then discovered that five of the hammers did not match the others; they are of the older style with the guide mortice which had been carefully papered over and coloured down to match the rest of the hammers. They are irregularly juxtaposed throughout the compass. Why this should be is a puzzle. One explanation could be that they replaced broken hammers. Another, to my mind more likely explanation, could be that there was insufficient space on the mounting rail for a complete set of the newer hammers with their wider hinge dimensions. The original hammers would have been narrower at this point. The newer hammers are longer

than the originals would have been, and the mounting rail has been adapted to take this into account; it has been refitted, back around 2mm in the bass, somewhat more in the treble.

The piano retains its single English Zumpe-like action, although here also I feel an adaption may have been made. The pins screwed into the keys topped with leather 'old man's heads' seem to have been moved about 10mm towards the player. There is a marked line of holes in the keys where the originals might have been positioned. The pins with the leather tops have all been bent back, away from the player, and the tops are aligned with these holes. Why this was done is a further puzzle; could it be that the small upward movement of the key 10mm towards the player would make a difference to the playing feel?

To summarise; I suggest that the piano underwent a 'ravalement', sometime between 1810 and 1820. Why this was done to a five-octave piano is puzzling, as by this time a minimum of five and a half octaves was standard, and the Geib action had become a normal feature of all British squares after the 1790s. I can only assume that whoever owned the piano wanted to retain it, rather than buying a more modern model. The casework is decorative and this could have been a reason to keep it. A similarly decorated square, formerly in the Colt collection, also by Longman & Broderip and from the same period, has also undergone 'modernisation', with its originally five-octave keyboard extended by half an octave.

I feel that the work on the action was done competently and the musical result is interesting. The piano is much easier to play and control than my little Beck square, made nine years earlier and retaining its appropriate set-up. Tonally, the contrast in sound between the two instruments could not be greater; the Beck has the characteristic bright sound, whereas the Longman & Broderip has the more mellow sound of a square from the early 1800s.

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Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Michael Cole for his helpful suggestions and to David Shuker for information regarding organized pianos.

Notes

- 1 How an English square came to be in Switzerland we have been able to piece together from the previous owner, but that is another story.
- 2 Most square pianos of this period had three hand stops; one for raising the treble dampers, one for raising the bass dampers, and a third which brought a strip of cloth in contact with the strings, giving a muted effect reminiscent of the buff stop on harpsichords.
- 3 For the background to these combination instruments, see Eleanor Smith, 'The Current State of Claviorgan Research', *Harpsichord & Fortepiano*, xxiv/1 (Autumn 2019), pp.8-11.
- 4 One recording exists to my knowledge: on a CD recorded for Radio France Olivier Baumont includes five delightful pieces by Balbastre, played on an organized piano by Erard (1791), now in the Musée de la Musique in Paris. A photograph with detailed information on the instrument is included; see www.editions.radiofrance.fr.
- 5 This theory is borne out by information regarding the organized square by Erard in the Musée de la Musique in Paris, which states that the piano was disengaged from the organ by raising the hammers.
- 6 My initial thought was that raising the hammers acted as a *quasi una corda*, making the piano softer, but I feel my suggested explanation is more convincing. See n.5 above.
- 7 Broadwood squares had no mortices after the mid-1790s; Clementi continued to fit hammers with a mortice guides until at least 1804. I am grateful to Michael Cole for this information.



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