



Darryl planing the soundboard for a virginal.

It is well known that different types and traditions of harpsichords were made throughout the historical period. Instruments from the eighteenth-century French school, Ruckers, Italian harpsichords and, more recently, German harpsichords have often been studied in detail. Research is generally connected to harpsichord makers and players who are searching for suitable instruments to make or play. For many years, models such as the 1769 Taskin harpsichord or instruments made by the Ruckers family have been copied and are frequently used by modern makers as their "all purpose" instruments. Other instruments have been built to fulfil a specific purpose such as continuo instruments, "Bach" instruments and so on. The popularity of various specific types of harpsichord has led to attention being focused on them rather than on other models for which the musical use is more limited or, to it put another way, they are not "sexy".

One type of harpsichord which has never received a surfeit of attention is the "native transitional" English harpsichord. These instruments were built in between the period of the English virginals which ended around 1680 until they were replaced by the Georgian harpsichords of makers such as Shudi and Kirckman, which first appeared in the 1720s. Despite spanning a 40 year period only a handful of instruments survive which were built by Charles Haward (1683), Joseph Tisseran (1700), Thomas Barton (1709), Benjamin Slade (1720), Thomas Hancock (1720 - in the Russell Collection), plus unsigned instruments by William Smith, Thomas Hitchcock and Francis Coston (also in the Russell Collection). There is also a harpsichord described and measured in the "Talbot manuscript" a collection of papers compiled c.1690-5 by James Talbot who measured and described all of the different types of musical instrument in use in England in the last decades of the seventeenth century.

These instruments have a number of characteristics which make them an immediately identifiable group. They have cases of solid walnut or walnut veneer (occasionally both in the same instrument) with the interiors usually veneered in a contrasting material. The earlier instruments have ebony natural touchplates, but

Early English Harpsichords by Darryl Martin

the later ones have keyboards in the more modern style comprising ivory naturals, but with "skunktail" accidentals, in which a slip of ivory has wider pieces of ebony on each side. The treble string lengths fall into two groups: the single-manual harpsichords, which are suitable for stringing with brass wire, and the double-manuals which need iron strings to play at the same pitches.

More importantly, the harpsichords are completely related to the contemporary bentside spinets. In all ways there are similarities - case materials, keyboards, string lengths - and it can easily be seen that the spinets are, in effect, "native transitional" harpsichords with the strings placed at an angle to the keyboard.

The term "native transitional" should probably be defined here. The instruments are "native" because they are made by English-born makers (on the whole) rather than by continental makers (such as Tabel, Shudi and Kirckman) who moved to London and built in a style that is related to the instruments by the Ruckers family. Tabel, who was the master of both Shudi and Kirckman, is reputed to have learnt his trade "from the successors of the Ruckers in Antwerp" according to a book published by a member of the Broadwood family. They are "transitional" because they form a distinct group of their own in between the earlier virginal and later Georgian styles.

Recently I was invited by the editor of an American monograph series to write about these instruments. It seemed a simple enough task to be presented with - there aren't that many instruments to examine, they are all in Britain, and three collections each have two examples, thus both reducing the time required to get access to and see the instruments and allowing immediate comparisons between instrument to be made.

Gaining access to the required instruments was, indeed, no trouble and they were all examined within a short period of each other. Each instrument generally had a day spent on it, taking a series of measurements according to a fairly standard format, developed over many years. Once the information has been collected in my notebook it is then transferred to computer and a catalogue entry is written together with a series of drawings of each instrument. Although the catalogue entry and drawings serve a useful purpose in themselves, most information is

gained from comparing the instruments with each other and with other traditions which might be related. So, for instance, one would expect that both the earlier virginal, and the later Georgian traditions would have similarities, and that there might also be relationships with instruments from different countries, principally France, Italy and Germany.

At present I am still writing up the results for publication, but I can give some general details of interest. The Russell Collection is especially fortunate because not only does it have two examples of "native traditional" harpsichords, but it also has two earlier English virginals and a number of later Georgian harpsichords, as well as three related bentside spinets. Moreover, the two "native transitional" instruments in the collection represent both the single-manual and double-manual varieties, and both were made at a similar time (the Hancock in 1720, the Coston probably just a little later), and one of the spinets is made by Thomas Hitchcock, who made another of the harpsichords I am considering.

It might be expected that a project such as this would answer lots of questions but, actually, it seems to lead to more questions which can never be properly answered. Why, for example, do the "native transitional" single-manual harpsichords have brass treble stringing when the earlier instruments, the later Georgian harpsichords and the double-manual harpsichords all have iron stringing? The answer is certainly connected to the bentside spinets which usually have brass stringing (although Thomas Hitchcock made spinets with both brass and iron stringing, seemingly interchangeably). In spinets it was probably to do with improving the sound in the very treble where the bridge is more evenly spaced on the soundboard, whereas if iron were used the bridge would either have to be much closer to the bentside or the builder would have to make a bigger instrument to give the same amount of vibrational area. But did the spinet or harpsichord use it first, and where did the initial idea come from? We can't really tell which was first, but the idea of brass scaling probably came from either Italy or France, both places which had some instruments with brass stringing before this date. Why were the double-manual harpsichords strung differently? Again we don't know. It is possible to use brass in double-manual harpsichords provided the top note isn't higher than about d^3 , but higher than that and the four-foot strings do not have enough room. A precedent exists in at least one French harpsichord (made in 1667) which has survived as a double-manual with brass stringing. Presumably, makers decided that the double-manuals had to be bigger anyway, so they may as

well be built with the common iron stringing. Where did the basic style come from? Probably France, which made instruments with walnut cases and ebony naturals for many years prior to the practice being adopted in England. However, some instruments (including the Hancock in the Russell Collection) have characteristics which are almost exclusively Italian, such as the use of box guides rather than separate upper and lower guides.



A copy, made by Darryl Martin, of the harpsichord described in the "Talbot manuscript" of c. 1690-95.

There are, of course, many other questions that require consideration and possibly the most important one is whether these instruments have always been unfairly treated by earlier researchers and if modern makers should consider copying these harpsichords? A number of makers (including myself) have copied some of these instruments and the Hitchcock double-manual is probably the most popular amongst them, although the Barton, Slade and Smith instruments have also been replicated, and there are instruments too which have been based on the Hancock. The model I used was the "Talbot manuscript" instrument. The William Smith harpsichord has received considerable interest recently due to its similarity to an instrument which features in a portrait of Handel. A sufficient number of these instruments has now been made to enable comment on the sound which is distinctively "English", and can perhaps best be described as "woody" or "nutty", quite nasal or throaty, while also being big and refined.

The connection with Handel has already been mentioned, and, of course, they very much the instrument for Purcell as well. While providing organological interest, these harpsichords are good musical instruments as well. They are ideally suited to the specific composers of the period, the form perfect continuo instruments where the brass stringing helps to carry the sound, and are also appropriate for earlier styles of music in which the voice parts are clearly differentiated.

[Photographs: Darryl Martin]