ADDITIONS TO THE COLLECTION
OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

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Among the many gifts for the music collections of the Museum, a particularly notable one has been received recently from an anonymous donor. It is a group of musical instruments, a harpsichord, a pianoforte, and a harp.

The harpsichord, whose wing-shaped body has the form so familiar to us in our concert grand pianos, belongs, according to its structure and decoration, to the end of the seventeenth century and is of typically Italian make. One of its characteristic Italian features is that it has an outer case from which the instrument itself is removable. Three gilded columns, between two of which sits a crowned mermaid of wood and stucco, support the case. It is profusely decorated. The outside walls and lid are painted in sepia with floral scrolls and rinceaux. On the inside of the lid are two landscapes with figures in tempera. The front section shows, in an opulent setting of trees, Tobias and the Angel; the larger section an equally lush landscape with a duck hunter. The conventionalized foliage and the aerial perspective have the flavor of the work of Gaspard Dughet, Poussin's brother-in-law, who painted chiefly in Rome. These landscapes and the floral decoration on the outside of the case suggest that it was made in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The instrument itself has a compass of four octaves and three notes and is equipped with three sets of strings, one four-foot and two eight-foot, with only one bridge for all the stops, which is quite unusual. The corresponding three rows of jacks can be shifted by means of metal pins in the left wall of the case. (Knobs above the keyboard for operating the stops more easily were invented much later.) A change of stops while playing was therefore not possible on our instrument; the pins controlling the stops could be pulled out only between pieces or between movements. The jacks are equipped with leather plectra; the soundboard is decorated in the usual Italian manner with a leather rose of interlacing ornament. The keys are of ivory and ebony, the ebony ones having an inset strip of ivory. At each end of the keyboard there is a satyr of carved wood.

In shape and construction this harpsichord is not very different from the pianoforte by Bartolommeo Cristofori, one of the priceless treasures of the instrument collection of the Museum. This is by no means accidental; for Cristofori’s new instrument, which enabled the player to produce crescendos and diminuendos by simply varying his finger pressure, was in fact a harpsichord with a hammer action built in. Cristofori had been for many years a harpsichord maker and all the experience gained in the old tradition was used to serve the new fashion for changing tone volume by degrees, to build a gravicembalo col piano e forte. Oddly enough Cristofori’s ingenious invention found no followers in Italy, and at first only a few in the North, in Germany and France. The time-honored harpsichord resisted its young rival the piano for a long time, in fact until the end of the eighteenth century. But not without making some concessions; one of these was the “Venetian swell,” an attempt to equal the piano’s gradation of tone by mounting over the strings a set of slats that opened and closed like a Venetian blind. So we find the two instruments side by side for almost a century. Even in Beethoven’s day publishers offered the same music for both, music often unmistakably written for the piano.

Harpsichords were too expensive and too beautiful as furniture to be thrown away when the piano conquered the scene, and many of them were transformed into pianos. The second
xvii century Italian harpsichord with one manual. There are three sets of strings, one four-foot and two eight-foot.
Keyboard of the Italian harpsichord with the frontboard removed

Keyboard and soundboard of the French harpsichord, showing the built-in hammer action
Harpsichord made by Ioannes Goermans, Paris, 1754, and later rebuilt into a piano.
Details of the decoration on the French harpsichord. ABOVE: Chinese musicians with a two-keyboard harpsichord, a recorder, and fantastic fiddles. LEFT: Musette player. The score is a “cotillon.” RIGHT: Sound hole with pewter medallion showing the initials of the maker
of our instruments is one of these, a rococo harpsichord with piano action built in later. This beautiful instrument, inscribed \textit{IOANNES GOERMANS ME FECIT PARISIS 1754}, is an offshoot of the great tradition begun by the famous Antwerp dynasty of harpsichord builders, the Ruckers. Although it is equipped today with a simple hammer action, its structure and proportions reveal the harpsichord. The deeply recessed space in the front, only partly filled by one keyboard, shows that there was a second keyboard. Consequently there must have been several stops; and, indeed, a close inspection of the soundboard confirms this. It has today only one bridge, over which triple strings are carried; but a curved double line in blue, crossing the soundboard in a space left free by the flower decoration, marks precisely the place where a second bridge, for the four-foot stop, was fastened. Actually, behind this line can be detected traces of the holes for the hitch pins to which the four-foot strings were attached. Thus it appears that the original mechanism had one four-foot and at least one, probably two, eight-foot stops.

The decoration is of great distinction. The soundboard, in typically Flemish manner, is painted with flowers and birds, the sound hole adorned with a medallion of pewter showing, as the instruments in the Ruckers tradition do, the initials of the maker flanking an allegorical figure, in this case an angel playing a harp. The lid and the walls of the case—there is no outer case such as the Italian harpsichord has—are also lavishly decorated: the outside with musical trophies and floral ornaments, the inside of the lid with black and gold \textit{chinoiseries}, groups of musicians playing various instruments and bird and flower designs. Around the lady playing a two-bank harpsichord, in decorative detail very like our instrument, we find a recorder player and two muscians with viols; the one with the viola da gamba holds his bow in the characteristic position, palm upward.

\textit{Pedal harp with “simple action,” xviii century. Naderman, Paris}