

ON THE HISTORY OF THE CLAVICHORD



Fretted clavichord, Hieronymus Albrecht Hass, Hamburg, 1728, cat. no. 344 © MIM, photo: Jürgen Liepe

The clavichord is without a doubt one of our oldest keyboard instruments. It's mentioned in various written and iconographic sources in Germany at the beginning of the 15th century and just one hundred years later, seems to have been known in all cultural centres.

We know little about the origin of the clavichord. Presumably, the instrument makers of the Middle Ages were inspired to construct this new instrument by the monochord, the organ, and the hurdy-gurdy. The monochord, inherited in the Middle Ages from Greek antiquity, was considered an ideal demonstration means for making vivid connections between pitch, interval size, and string length. It's a resonance box, which is overstrung with a single string. Markings on the box indicate the points where the movable bridge divides the string in such a way that lets the intervals reveal themselves »with sound«. Now, if this principle is mechanized using keys from the organ and the hurdy-gurdy, and the number of strings were to be increased, we'd get a clavichord on which you can also play polyphonically. The name is derived from *clavis* (= here key) and *chorda* (= here string).

For over three and a half centuries, nothing about the basic and technically simple design changed: A generally rectangular wooden box with a lid contains an attach-

ment stick inside on the left, a sound post right under the belly, and pin and block over the belly, the actual tone-creating system. The keyboard is attached to the long side of the box with the strings running down horizontally underneath. When the key lever is depressed, the metal tangent located at its end (which forms the web at the same time) causes the string to vibrate; the tone is heard. Unlike the harpsichord and pianoforte, the whole string doesn't vibrate at this tone, but rather only the portion of the string to the right of the strike point. Meanwhile, the rest of the string is dampened by punched strips of cloth or a board with felt.

Its simple design makes it easy to understand why the clavichord would soon become indispensable for musicians of both the late Middle Ages as well as the Renaissance and Baroque period: It's handy – therefore easy to transport when needed – and easy to maintain at a reasonable price.

Despite its undoubtedly high degree of utility, the clavichord played mainly a pedagogical role through the middle of the 18th century, along with the harpsichord, as well as the organ and regal. Musicians and theoreticians are particularly convinced of its educational benefits: »...because what you learn at the clavichord, you can then easily apply to playing on the organ, the

Clauizymell, the Virginal, and on all the other keyed instruments« This opinion of Virdung (1511) comes up again in all expert instrumental reports from Praetorius (1619) to Adlung (1768). Coincidentally, is also noted by the authors that the clavichords, compared to the quill pianos, have the practical advantage of keeping the notes better; also the player doesn't have to »struggle with the ... feathers« (Adlung, *Musica Mechanica Organoedi*, Vol. 2, p. 144, Berlin 1768). At the beginning of the 18th century, the clavichord gradually began to emerge from obscurity. The ever-changing musical ideas are both reflected at the same time as they materialize in the history of an instrument. Of course the external appearance of the clavichord isn't essential, but nevertheless a visible sign for its changing role in musical practice. Hieronymus Albrecht Hass (traceable to 1689–1752) was an instrument maker active in Hamburg, who, in addition to the usually simple clavichord versions, also finished instruments with precious materials and imaginatively decorated them by request. Thus the red-primed inside of the lid of the clavichord pictured here (cat. no. 344) from 1728, for example, is decorated with golden Régence banding, garlands of flowers, branches, and leaves. A scene from Greek mythology in which the power of music is symbolized is depicted in the centre of the lid. He designed the keys with particular care. They are overlaid with ivory and tortoise shell in a herringbone pattern.

At the same time as these external changes, people then went about working to improve the musical possibilities. Since about 1700, composers increasingly allowed themselves ever bolder modulations and freer treatments of dissonance. But there were limits to the music of such piano pieces for the up to that point so-called »fretted« clavichord. The term »fretted« is reminiscent of a style of playing the lute: By pressing one and the same string at different frets different sounds can be successively produced. Something similar happens with the fretted clavichord. The tone intervals are generated by always using the same choir of strings, but then striking it with the help of several key levers and tangents sitting on different, precisely calculated points. This process, charming even in terms of its tone explains why the number of keys of such fretted clavichords is always greater than that of the string pairs.

The fretting of our museum's clavichords was most consistently carried out with the Dutch instrument (cat. no. 2154). Only the bass strings from C to A as well as the strings d and d' are unfretted. Quadruple fretting is used twice – and only with f/fis/g/gis as well as dis¹/e¹/f¹/fis¹. Only the closely juxtaposed sounds are »fretted« or preferred in the sense of the older music. Only the fundamental tones of the most common keys on d and usually also a have a string to themselves, and that way suspended notes and flourishes can be played in the cadences. The unfretted layout of the bass strings has space-saving reasons and in particular the various stop points on a low choir are too far apart.

Another peculiarity of the early period of this type of instrument was preserved in the Dutch clavichord. Striking the lowest notes would, according to the keyboard layout, result in the scale E Fis G Gis A B H c. In fact, the result is C F D G E A B H c. Without significantly widening the keyboard, the (C) key is placed underneath and the other »claves« (D and E) in between. This is called »short octave.«

Due to the growing demands of the musical »connoisseurs and lovers« unfretted clavichords were more and more frequently being made during the 18th century, which means that each key is given a separate choir of strings. The still dominant practice of »short octaves« from organ building was renounced and the bass region was chromatically developed. The range was extended to up to five octaves; in so doing the clavichord received ever greater dimensions and was then tied to a fixed location. It's given legs or supports and becomes a graceful piece of furniture with a tasteful contemporary design. Adlung emphasizes the importance of a careful handling of the materials for the sound of the instrument, in addition to an appealing exterior (a. a. O., p. 158). In his opinion, all good clavichords call their price, otherwise they're only »... good kindling if you want to cook fish ...«

The clavichord ascribed to Johann Heinrich Silbermann fulfils all of these requirements for a good instrument in the most admirable of ways (cat. no. 598). Initialling wasn't common on the older clavichords. Only in the 18th century did organ and instrument makers, who were also making clavichords at the same time, start to hand letter the resonance soundboard, e. g. »H. A. Hass Fecit/Hamb: 1728«. Attributing an unsigned instrument to a particular instrument maker is generally only possible by comparing significant features of known instruments. Due to the careful processing of the materials and the paper rose window in the sound board, Curt Sachs thought it possible to ascribe the unfretted clavichord to the workshop of Johann Heinrich Silbermann, and dated it to the period around 1775.

Johann Heinrich was born in Strasbourg in 1727 as the youngest son of the renowned organ builder Andreas Silbermann. He was apprenticed to his uncle Gottfried Silbermann and elevated it like this example to mastery. From the 1782 *Musikalischen Almanach* by Johann Nikolaus Forkel, we see how the 20 years younger musical researcher viewed Silbermann: »His instruments are all too well known in the musical world, that it suffices to say something in praise of the same. Both his grand piano and pianoforte, as well as other partially self-invented manual and pedal keyboard instruments are distinguished by the cleanliness of their work and the beauty of their sound« (p. 200).

The fretted and unfretted clavichords were used simultaneously in musical practice of the second half of the 18th century. Although Johann Heinrich Silbermann had already constructed an unfretted clavichord by around 1775, another fretted clavichord was made as



Fretted clavichord, Netherlands, 1695/1705, cat. no. 2154 © MIM, photo: Jürgen Liepe

late as 1784 by the similarly famous German instrument maker Christian Gottlob Hubert. The scholar Johann Georg Meusel characterized Hubert in 1786 in a travelogue *Durch Gegenden des Fränkischen Kreises*, as »the famous instrument maker« in Ansbach, whom »an attentive traveller« absolutely must consult, because he's »famous not only for his good and reliable pianos [i.e. clavichords] and fortepianos possessing the most beautiful euphony ... but also for other musical instruments.« We learn more about Hubert from Meusel: »He is a very small man of quiet and noble character, but also a bit quick-tempered and obstinate and extremely accurate and on time in his work. He was born in 1714 in Fraustadt in Poland, and in 1740 came to Bayreuth, and from there in 1769 with the music ensemble to



Signature of Johann Heinrich Silbermann
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Ansbach.« He died in 1793 as a »High Royal Ansbach Court Instrument Builder.« Our museum owns one of those beautiful and »accurately« executed clavichords by Hubert. Unlike the pianos of the 19th and 20th centuries the natural keys of nearly all our clavichords are made from ebony and the accidental keys overlaid with ivory. Without a doubt, this was a matter of the direction fashion was taking at the end of the 17th century

until the start of the 19th in Germany and France. Curt Sachs, who managed our collection from 1919 until his emigration in 1933, explained this temporary fashion by the fact that the white hands of the piano-playing ladies were supposed appealingly contrast with the black of the natural keys.

A 50-year heyday of the clavichord began as late as the onset of changing fashions in 1750. The »sensitive time« discovered the advantage of the instrument, its delicate and musically flexible »soulful« tone. For the first time in the history of the instrument, now generally referred to as a »keyboard,« famous composers such as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Georg Benda, Christoph Willibald Gluck, and Daniel Gottlob Türk composed their own literature. They broke away most decisively from the musical norms of the baroque with free fantasias, rondos, and sonatas, which, among other things, were oriented to the harpsichord and its rushing, magnificent, but at the same time rigid sound. Playing that is sentimental and full of fervour was the demand of the time; it was now being masterfully realized on the clavichord. Thanks to the mechanics of the tangents with their direct contact with the string, the player could sensibly shape the sound, whereas sounds chosen once for the harpsichord couldn't be changed again. According to contemporary reports, the touch could be increased from pianissimo to fortissimo, wherein the dynamic possibilities of the clavichord couldn't be compared with those of the modern piano. The much-vaunted »bebung,« similar to the vibrato on a bowed instrument, was created by the repeated pressing of the keys after the touch and permitted soulful playing just as the »portamento,« a one-time increase of the pitch of a tone to the next higher. Thanks to the effortless mechanics,

all kinds of flourishes were able to be performed in the most delicate of ways.

The most famous master of the clavichord was Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. His *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (Attempt to play the piano in the true way) relates entirely to the expressive possibilities of this instrument. He mastered the art of the lecture completely. Charles Burney, a music scholar from England, visited him in 1772 in Hamburg and wrote about his playing: »If he is to express a long note in slow and impassioned movements, he is quite adept at artfully calling forth a moving tone of sorrow and lamentations from his instruments that is only possible on the clavichord, and perhaps it by itself,« (Charles Burney's *Tagebuch seiner Musikalischen Reisen*, Vol. III, 1773, p. 212). Devoted to the aesthetic qualities of the clavichord, the poet and musician Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart praised the instrument in his *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* written during his detention at Hohenasperg in the style of Sturm and Drang: »Clavichord, this lonely, melancholy, ineffably sweet instrument, when made by a master, has advantages over the grand piano and the fortepiano ... Those who prefer not to rumble, race, and storm; those whose heart is prone to overflow with sweet sensations, they pass over the grand piano and the fortepiano, and choose a clavichord ... Nowadays the clavichords have nearly reached their summit: the have between five and six octaves, are fretted and unfretted, with or without buff stops; and it seems as though it has attained a degree of unmatched perfection for the perceptive player« (p. 288 f).

Despite Schubart's enthusiasm for the clavichord, starting in around 1780 the instrument was increasingly displaced by the pianoforte. The perfection of the hammer action, the greater strength of sound, which made a giving concerts in halls possible, did more and more to displace the individual clavichord. The term keyboard, which was primarily used in the second half of the 18th century to refer to the clavichord, went over to the piano in the 19th century.



Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Franz Conrad Löhr, inv.-no. M. 589
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