

MUSIC

and the magic of the piano

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'Music is the most magical and mysterious of all the arts and also the most difficult to describe. The word "music" has its roots in the Ancient Greek mousike technē, which means "the art of the muse". We understand music to mean a collection of physical sounds which must somehow be organised so that the ultimate objective - creating a specific effect - is achieved by means of gesture and motion.'

[The complete encyclopedia of musical instruments by Bert Oling and Heinz Wallisch, Rebo, 2003, p12.]

A crucial instrument of Western music is the piano, which during Victorian times became the standard instrument for making music in the house. This was mainly due to the Industrial Revolution that created a prosperous middle class who could purchase pianos at affordable prices. Pianos were and are extremely popular instruments for private household ownership, especially among the middle and upper class. Like many other inventions, the piano was founded on earlier technological innovations. In particular, it benefited from centuries of work on the harpsichord that had shown the most effective ways to construct the case, the soundboard, the bridge and the keyboard.

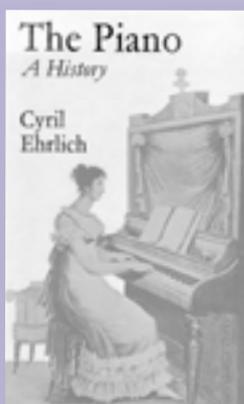
Bartolomeo Cristofori, an Italian keyboard instrument maker in Florence, Italy, invented the first instrument that resembled the modern piano. An inventory made by Cristofori's employers, the Medici family, reveals the existence of an early Cristofori instrument by the year 1700.

'He named it the *gravicembalo col pian' e forte* (harpsichord with soft and loud) from which the words "pianoforte" and later just "piano" are derived. The reason for this name was the fact that the instrument could produce soft and loud sounds simply by varying gradations in volume within a single musical phrase. This gave it great advantage over the harpsichord, on which this was not possible.' [Piano by Chris Coetzee, New Holland, 2003, p.10.]

Other predecessors were of course the organ and the clavichord. At first Cristofori's invention did not take off. It was only later when the design of the pianoforte improved through the efforts in Germany by Gottfried Silbermann in the early 1740s that this instrument gained acceptance. This encouraged others to improve on Cristofori's original idea. By the 1770s the German piano maker Johann Andreas Stern had made further improvements and a decade later Englishman John Broadwood would strengthen the piano's overall design.

By 1752, the piano's superiority over the harpsichord and clavichord was being trumpeted by the highly-esteemed Johann Joachim Quantz (with CPE Bach the most famous musician at the court of Frederick the Great) in one of the major treatises in musical history known as *Essay on the instruction of how to play the transverse flute*.

No instrument succeeds, however, without musicians to champion it. The first music for the piano was written by Lodovico Giustini *Sonata da cimballo di piano e forte* published



in Florence in 1723. Although Domenico Scarlatti wrote some important sonatas, it was J.C. Bach in London in the 1760s and 70s, and Haydn and Mozart in Austria in the 1780s and 90s, who were most influential in popularising the piano. In the years that followed, composers such as Chopin and Liszt certainly made important contributions to music for the piano.

The huge changes in the evolution of the piano have somewhat vexing consequences for musical performance. The problem is that much of the most widely-admired music for piano - for example, that of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven was composed for a type of instrument that is rather different from the modern instruments on which this music is normally performed today. Even the music of the early Romantics, such as Chopin and Schumann, was written for pianos substantially different from ours. It was not until the later years of Brahms' career that the piano reached the form that lasted through most of the 20th century.

'Modern pianos come in two basic configurations and several sizes: the grand piano and the upright piano.

'Grand pianos have the frame and strings placed horizontally, with the strings extending away from the keyboard. This avoids the problems inherent in an upright piano, but takes up a large area of space and needs a spacious room with high ceilings for proper resonance. Several sizes of grand piano exist.

'Upright pianos - also called vertical pianos - are more compact because the frame and strings are placed vertically, extending in both directions from the keyboard and hammers. It is considered harder to produce a sensitive piano action when the hammers move sideways, rather than upward against gravity; however, the very best upright pianos now approach the level of grand pianos of the same size in tone quality and responsiveness.' [Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.]

The piano is a crucial instrument in Western music in both classical and jazz forms, and has played an important and mostly forgotten part with the history of films. With the advent of cinema in the late 1890s the piano acquired a new, leading role. It provided the sound to the otherwise silent movie and most of all to cover the irritating sounds produced by the projector. Pianists now had a stimulating new vehicle for their talents and soon were in much demand. At first there was no specific repertoire, only the improvisation of the pianists. However, by 1909, certain film companies issued suggestions for music and by 1913 bulky catalogues were available covering the needs for every mood or circumstance. The success of the piano in cinemas led to its widespread adoption in other places such as shops, schools and even factories.

However, this soon ended with the advent of the sound film in 1927, resulting in the abrupt ending of the cinema pianist. In the lavish Hollywood scores that set the tone of the new era, the piano was mostly forgotten except for the few biopics portraying the

lives of various great composers such as **A song to remember** (with Cornel Wilde as Chopin) and **Song without end** (featuring Dirk Bogarde as Liszt).

On occasion, a film score as in the case of Richard Addinsell's *Warsaw Concerto* (composed for the 1941 film **Dangerous Moonlight**) would achieve mainstream concert interest.

Yet, although with the advent of radio and television, and the decline of the importance of domestic music making as an important form of social interaction, the piano still is able to attract people to play as a hobby or for relaxation. Modern day singer-songwriters such as Billy Joel, Carol King, Enya, Alicia Keys and others still continue to compose and perform on the piano, thereby ensuring that it remains a vital part of modern music.

'The piano is not doomed, and its history contains enough premature obituaries to deter Cassandras. For musicians and musical people, it will survive through its marvelous repertoire and because it remains the master key to a vast literature.' [The piano by Cyril Ehrlich, Dent 1976, p.201.]

This is just a briefing on the topic and a way to make people aware of this versatile and well-loved musical instrument. There is quite a lot of literature available covering history, tuition, scores to play and even on repair and maintenance. Please consult the accompanying booklist on page 26.

