

Hilary Thrupp - Clavichord & Spinet recital lecture

Being asked to speak on a certain subject rather implies that the speaker should know all about his subject. I don't. For which you may all be thankful because it means that you are not in for a long boring lecture! (I hope you are not in for a short boring one, though!)

I believe it says in your programme that I am down to speak about the spinet. You may be wondering what these other instruments are doing here, I have brought two keyboard instruments along - one of them is a spinet - I wonder if you know which? – just to give you an idea of where the spinet stood in relation to other keyboard instruments. I'll make it a bit easier for you - one of them is a clavichord and the other a spinet. While you are sorting them out, here is a third instrument which I thought I'd show you to give a simple idea of how things progressed in the musical world. The earliest musical instrument without doubt is the human voice — some of them more musical than others (which reminds me of the story of the country choirmaster who was trying to tell a young man as kindly as possible that his voice wasn't good enough, and he said "You've got a belly-full of music Jimmy, but a bad road out!) But singing is singing and there's a limit to that, so someone thought of stringing gut (later brass strings) across a sound board or from one point to another (like a harp) and plucking these strings with the fingers to produce sound. This was made by a friend of mine and he calls it a Nordic Lyre – L Y R E. I'm afraid I don't agree with his description, for I've always seen lyres as having open spaces between the top and bottom. I prefer to call this a form of psaltery. A psaltery - very early and primitive instrument, was placed on its back on a table, or on one's lap and played thus. I am not an expert on these so I can't play it properly, but this is just to give you an idea.

The earliest keyboard instrument that I have read about is the Hudraulus Organ which was introduced by an Egyptian inventor about 5 centuries before Christ. As its name implies, its air compression was provided by the supply of water to the wind reservoir. It had about 25 keys about 2 inches wide.

In the 10th century A.D. we come across the specification of the famous organ in Winchester Cathedral. It had two manuals (or keyboards) which were played by two performers, and it was said to have required 70 blowers. Organ practice must have been quite an expensive affair. The keys were quite broad and required the pressure of the whole fist to operate them. Playing was quite different in these days as you can imagine. But it was quite sufficient for the organ to thunder out the plainsong chords which were in use at that time.

In the 15th century, along comes the clavichord. This is a clavichord. It has been very kindly lent to me by Mrs. Dyer for this occasion. As its name implies it is a percussion instrument. (Clavier - hammer) Each note has two strings and they are hit by a brass tangent on the end of the key arm. It is a very difficult little instrument to play well and requires a certain technique. It has an extremely delicate touch. I will play one or two pieces on it to show you what it

sounds like. It is such a quiet little sound, I think I'll have to ask you all to stop breathing in order that you may hear.

Expert players can produce a certain amount of vibrato - as you would on a guitar or violin. However, care has to be taken here because if too much pressure is used you can actually make the note go "sharp". However it is a splendid little instrument for improving your touch if you are a pianist. Half an hour on this and your fingers will fly over the piano.

But of course, the instrument has its limits. At one time I owned this one, but after some few years I found it was insufficient for the job of accompanying the early songs that I am interested in. The clavichord is really only a solo instrument or one for practice - I believe the early organists used it for practising, rather than sit in a cold and draughty cathedral at the organ. So along came the harpsichord family. This consists of the virginals, spinet and harpsichord itself. They are all of them plucked instruments. In other words they all have jacks holding a plectrum which plucks the strings when the keys are played. The harpsichord is the biggest member, concert versions having usually two keyboards and up to 10 pedals. The spinet comes next, has only one keyboard and sometimes a stop like this one here, and lastly the virginals the smallest and simplest form of harpsichord. But chronologically I have put them the wrong way round for the virginals was the oldest, the spinet and harpsichord in their turns being improved models. By the way you can always tell the difference between a clavichord and a spinet (or harpsichord) by the shape. The clavichord is always rectangular and the spinet wing-shaped. Very early spinets could be found in many-angled shapes and indeed rectangular but they are now exceedingly rare if not extinct. The modern grand piano has retained the shape of the harpsichord.

Dealer's in antique furniture nearly always wrongly label an instrument as a spinet. Perhaps it sounds interesting. In fact I've found what they have is either a square piano or much more rarely a clavichord or virginals. Unfortunately, all too often the innards are removed and the case houses a cocktail cabinet or is a dressing table. I met somebody last year who had been very lucky indeed and had bought for £20 a square piano in its original state. It is to-day worth about £500.

My instrument here is really a miniature spinet, it designed by Dr. Carl Dolmetsch who wanted something in the harpsichord line that he could take on his travels round the world on recital tours. It was built to my specification in the Dolmetsch workshops by a young man named James Saunders. His initials and mine appear here. It is beautifully made and hand-painted on the sound-board. You must come and look at it afterwards. I think you'll agree it is a joy nowadays to see such splendid workmanship. Everything fits like a glove and all moveable parts slot in exactly. The case is walnut, the soundboard of laminated spruce — laminated to withstand the effects of central-heating! The keys are in box-wood and the accidentals ebony. The jacks (holding the plectrums) are made of a modern plastic (which sounds cheap, but is not) so no distortion can occur in them through variations of temperature. It has just over 4 octaves and is in my view just perfect for the playing of 16th to

18th century music and songs. To play Dowland or Campian on the piano sounds so very heavy and unsuitable. By that same token to play this on the spinet is equally wrong! (Beethoven - and Sinding). Most of the early keyboard instruments had no base or feet and were placed on a table top. Towards the end of the 18th century legs were added. These instruments were the main domestic keyboard instruments up to the end of the 18th century. By the way, perhaps some of you can see that the keys on the spinet are very short. This is because it was not considered etiquette at that time to use your thumbs when playing! If you use your thumbs it pushes your hands up and you need more room. The short keys I must say, do make it rather difficult to play, but one feels more authentic! Where did the name spinet come from. Some say it derived from the spines used as the plucking medium, other's that a certain inventor Spinetti gave his name to it. My favourite schoolboy howler is about a spinet. If you were well-to-do in the 17th century, you would undoubtedly have had your spinet painted certainly on the inside of the lid. If very rich, it might have been painted all over the outside too. I have brought along a book which illustrates some of these beautiful instruments, I will leave it open here for you-to have a look at later. I will now play on the spinet what I first played on the clavichord. I'm sure you will notice the difference at once.

SONGS:

P 98 Red Book. Come away sweet love

P 114 Fine knacks for ladies

P 44 Break now my heart and dye

P 58 What harvest half so sweet .

Blue Book Ann Boleyn's song.

TO END - Angler's Song "by Izaak Walton.

After my last song, any of you who are interested, do come and look at the instruments and the books. Those of you who can play, do please feel free to touch the keyboards. It is not often the opportunity arises I know to see these things - let alone try them out. So do help yourselves, carefully, but I would love you to know what the touch is like. Also if there are any (easy) questions you would like to ask, fire away, after this last song which is I think rather appropriate for us living as we do in the Test valley. It is called the "Anglers Song"