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The Death and Second Life of the Harpsichord

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The Death and Second Life of the Harpsichord

EDMOND JOHNSON

But nobody, save perhaps an antiquarian or two, thought of summoning to action the harpsichord . . . Had any temerarious musician seriously advanced the claims of the antiquated relic a contemptuous majority would have dismissed it at once as outmoded, feeble, merely quaint.

—Pitts Sanborn

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Writing for the *Nation* in 1925, the American music critic Pitts Sanborn did not have to look very far into the past to recall a time when the harpsichord was widely dismissed as being “outmoded, feeble, merely quaint.” Indeed, the instrument had spent much of the previous century as the silent denizen of storerooms, attics, and museum galleries, and very few of the “contemptuous majority” would have been able to claim any real familiarity with its sound. It was only around the turn of the twentieth century—and with the advent of a generation of fervent early music advocates and enthusiasts—that the instrument began to attract the attention and support that would eventually allow it once again to take a prominent place within the contemporary musical landscape. Over the course of a few short decades the harpsichord underwent a remarkable transformation: no longer the “antiquated relic” of the nineteenth century, it once again became, as Sanborn put it, “an instrument with a vivid independent life of its own.”¹

The choice of words is telling. Whereas it might seem strange to speak of an instrument as having acquired an “independent life,” the harpsichord’s peculiar history had long attracted similar patterns of

¹ Pitts Sanborn, “Landowska’s Contribution,” *The Nation* 121 (5 August 1925): 175.

speech. As far back as the middle of the nineteenth century the instrument's abandonment was described in terms of death or even extinction, and during its subsequent revival the harpsichord's modern history has been written with terms borrowed liberally from the lexicon of rebirth and resurrection. Indeed, the last two centuries have seen the instrument widely represented, both verbally and pictorially, with figurations that invoke either life or death.² To expand on the conceit put forward by the title of this article, it might be said that the harpsichord has had three lives and one (impermanent) death. The instrument's first life, of course, would encompass its prime, a time roughly spanning the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Near the end of this period the harpsichord came to its figurative demise, struck down, it is tempting to say, by the hammer blow of the ascendant pianoforte. Following the same figurative logic, the harpsichord's resurgence near the turn of the twentieth century would represent a sort of second life, whereas the dramatic and nearly wholesale adoption of more historically based models arguably constitutes a third (and current) existence for the instrument, a renaissance begun in the decades following World War II by such luminaries as Hugh Gough, Frank Hubbard, and William Dowd.

Though far from being the only historical instrument to receive renewed attention during the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, the harpsichord holds a special place in the history of the early music revival. No other instrument played as visible—or, perhaps, as controversial—a role in popularizing musical activities related to the revival. Having, as it does, a large and visually distinctive presence, the harpsichord has a tendency to garner attention wherever it appears, whether in a museum case or on the concert hall stage.³ In this study I

² In a 1923 history of the instrument, Norman Wilkinson wrote that “far from being laid up in lavender, [harpsichords] have, as often as not, been pushed carelessly into the outhouse or hayloft . . . and there have died an unheeded death.” Norman Wilkinson, “A Note on the Clavichord and the Harpsichord,” *Music and Letters* 4, no. 2 (April 1923): 162–69, esp. 162. Similarly, Wanda Landowska once described her agenda in reviving the harpsichord in vitalizing terms: her object was to “make it live again, to give it jubilant or pathetic accents, to evoke polyphonic purity, to make the coupled keyboards resound, to sing with lingering tones the amorous cantilenas.” Wanda Landowska, *Landowska on Music*, ed. and trans. Denise Restout (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 11.

³ As Sheridan Germann noted in her treatise on harpsichord decoration, “[A]n oboist or violinist need not worry whether his instrument's decoration is appropriate to his repertoire, but a harpsichord is too large and dominant not to be part of an audience's visual experience of a concert.” Sheridan Germann, *Harpsichord Decoration: A Conspectus*, vol. 4 of *The Historical Harpsichord*, ed. Howard Schott et al. (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 92. In a 1922 essay the harpsichordist Nellie Chaplin recalled how her instruments had attracted “a great deal of interest” during the extensive run of Frederic Austin's popular revival of *The Beggar's Opera*, reporting that “hundreds of people” had asked about her instrument. See Nellie Chaplin, “The Harpsichord,” *Music and Letters* 3, no. 3 (July 1922): 269–73, esp. 270.

explore the harpsichord's nineteenth-century "death" and its subsequent revival—the two periods of its history that have been most neglected. By reexamining the ways in which the harpsichord was portrayed in both words and images I shall show that the instrument's eventual acceptance in the twentieth century was far from a *fait accompli* but depended largely on an extensive and deliberate renegotiation of both its image and cultural identity. In the first section I explore the harpsichord's nineteenth-century existence as an evocative emblem of a vanished past: an instrument turned relic that was frequently laden with supernatural literary tropes and ghostly imagery. In the second section I move on to the instrument's revival, focusing on the ways in which the harpsichord was brought before modern audiences in a form that was ultimately heavily reengineered and reconfigured. Indeed, in its journey from museum piece to modern musical instrument the harpsichord underwent a marked transformation of both form and character. The process involved a gradual rejection of much of the cultural baggage that the harpsichord had accrued during its long dormancy in the nineteenth century and resulted in a transformation that ultimately won it a place in the modern musical world.

The Death of the Harpsichord

In truth, the harpsichord never quite disappeared. Noting that the instrument had appeared at Ignaz Moscheles's concerts historiques as early (or, perhaps, as late) as the 1830s, Howard Schott observed that "in a narrow technical sense it is probably correct that the harpsichord never really became extinct in the same sense as the dodo bird."⁴ It is reasonable to conclude that the vast majority of plucked keyboards were abandoned when instrumental fashions changed around the turn of the nineteenth century, but a few old instruments were inevitably retained by their owners. Some were kept as treasured antiques, and others served as historical curios. A select few even saw regular use for decades after the piano had become the dominant keyboard instrument.⁵ But if a few specimens remained in the hands of collectors and devoted musical antiquarians, for the most part the harpsichord existed during this

⁴ Howard Schott, "The Harpsichord Revival," *Early Music* 2, no. 2 (April 1974): 85–95, esp. 85.

⁵ Edward Kottick has noted that both Gioacchino Rossini and Giuseppe Verdi were taught to play the harpsichord as children, despite their growing up at a time when the instrument was already seen as outmoded. Edward Kottick, *A History of the Harpsichord* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 396. For the most detailed account of harpsichord making and performance during the early part of the nineteenth century, see *ibid.*, 391–406. For a broader history of the interest in early music during the first half of the nineteenth century, see Harry Haskell, *The Early Music Revival: A History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 13–25.

period not as a tangible musical object but as a fanciful idea residing in the collective imagination. Though rarely encountered by the general public during most of the nineteenth century, the harpsichord was far from forgotten: it lived on in the poetry and prose of the time, maintaining a sort of shadowy belletristic afterlife that continued long after most of the physical relics—all that wood, quill, leather, and ivory—had been relegated to the silent indignity of the rubbish heap.⁶

Literary Hauntings

By the middle of the nineteenth century the piano had reached near ubiquity in the parlors and concert rooms of the Western world, and the old keyboards that had held reign in previous centuries had been reduced to little more than evocative names—mere emblems of a past age. An example of this new role can be found in Robert Browning's celebrated poem "A Toccata of Galuppi's" (1855), one of the earliest instances in which an antiquated keyboard is explicitly employed as a symbol of antiquity. To be sure, in this poem Browning invokes not the harpsichord but its cousin the clavichord, but, as Larry Palmer has observed, nineteenth-century writers frequently took the names of early keyboards to be interchangeable.⁷ Indeed, with little awareness of their histories and mechanisms, the harpsichord, virginal, spinet, and clavichord were generally conflated under a common umbrella of instrumental obsolescence.⁸ More important than the specific genus Browning assigned to it is the way he treated the antique instrument, using it as the central poetic device in an imagined transhistorical dialogue with the

⁶ For instance, in Thomas Haynes Bayly's "My Great-Grandmother's Harpsichord," a short story that achieved some popularity in the 1830s, a father concerned with the musical education of his daughters (but reluctant to purchase an expensive new piano) seeks to restore a large harpsichord that had languished for three generations in his attic, only to conclude that the instrument is fit only for firewood (a fate that it ultimately suffers). Thomas Haynes Bayly, "My Great-Grandmother's Harpsichord," in *Forget-Me-Not: A Christmas, New Year's and Birthday Present for 1831*, ed. Frederic Shoberl (London: R. Ackermann, 1831), 263–70.

⁷ Larry Palmer, "Some Literary References to the Harpsichord and Clavichord, 1855–1923," *Diapason* 74 (September 1983): 18.

⁸ This conflation sometimes spread to early pianos, the appearance of which did not always differentiate them from other early keyboards. While touring Italy in 1897, Arnold Dolmetsch was shown an instrument that was reported to be the clavichord that had inspired Browning's poem; upon closer inspection, however, Dolmetsch discovered that the instrument was in fact a small square piano. See Mabel Dolmetsch, *Personal Recollections of Arnold Dolmetsch* (1958; New York: Da Capo Press, 1980), 27. Another example of confused taxonomy can be seen in figure 4 of this article: an engraving of a large harpsichord by Andreas Ruckers that was printed in an 1887 issue of *Art Amateur* with a caption that described it as a "clavichord."

eighteenth-century Italian composer Baldassare Galuppi. The poem takes as its subject the rich world of Settecento Venice, using music as the evocative connection between the present and the past: the narrator, upon hearing the tones of the titular toccata, is transported to the time and place where Galuppi himself “sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord.”⁹ Though leaving the details of the toccata (the mere agent of the poem’s historical evocation) mostly to the reader’s imagination, Browning does provide a sort of poetic harmonic analysis, in which pitch content mingles freely with mournful voices from the imagined past:

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—“Must
we die?”
Those commiserating sevenths—“Life might last! We can but try!”¹⁰

The poem continues with a rhapsodic catalog of the glories of this earlier age, before gradually adopting, in the tenth through twelfth stanzas, the somber tones of a meditation on mortality:

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Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o’er a secret wrung from nature’s close reserve,
In you come with your cold music till I creep thro’ every nerve.

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:
“Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.
The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.”¹¹

The beauties of the past have given way to images of their ruination, and the long dead composer—that “ghostly cricket”—has provided the keyhole through which the decaying spirit of this long vanished age can still be glimpsed. That Browning cast the clavichord as a prime character in his historical fantasy speaks to how potent the instrument’s associations with the past were by the middle of the nineteenth century. It makes little difference that Galuppi never wrote a single toccata, or that the

⁹ Robert Browning, “A Toccata of Galuppi’s,” in *The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning*, Cambridge Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 175. The poem was first printed in Browning’s collection *Men and Women* (1855). For a brief overview of Browning’s musical connections, see R. W. S. Mendl, “Robert Browning, the Poet-Musician,” *Music and Letters* 42, no. 2 (April 1961): 142–50.

¹⁰ Browning, “A Toccata of Galuppi’s,” 175.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

clavichord was hardly a major presence in eighteenth-century Italy. As a literary device the instrument's role is unambiguous: it functions as an evocative emblem of a time long past.

A similarly uncanny use of an old keyboard instrument comes to us from the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In the prelude to his famous 1863 cycle of poems *Tales of a Wayside Inn* a mysterious sound, straining the boundaries of verbal description, emerges from an unplayed harpsichord just after a violinist has finished performing for the assembled crowd:

And from the harpsichord there came
A ghostly murmur of acclaim,
A sound like that sent down at night
By birds of passage in their flight,
From the remotest distance heard.¹²

The harpsichord serves no other function in the poem's narrative than to add a sort of supernatural resonance to the moment.

Subsequent literary references are often even more explicit in associating the harpsichord with the specters of the past. Lewis Morris's episodic poem "Pictures—I," first published in 1883, is structured in twenty-one quatrains, each of which amounts to a free-standing vignette: little slices of life ranging in mood from sunny to profound and mournful. In one of the darkest stanzas we find a harpsichord placed at the center of a morbid scene:

Around a harpsichord, a blue-eyed throng
Of long-dead children, rapt in sounds devout,
In some old grange, while on that silent song
The sabbath twilight fades, and stars come out.¹³

Two similarly macabre accounts of the instrument come from the other side of the Atlantic, penned by the prolific American poet Madison Julius Cawein, a native of Louisville, Kentucky. In his 1896 poem "Haunted," Cawein's sentences heave with Romantic imagery as they exposit a mysterious scenario:

The sunset spreads red stains as bloody proof;
From hall to hall and stealthy stair to stair,

¹² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1867), 10.

¹³ Lewis Morris, "Pictures—I," in *The Works of Lewis Morris* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1891), 316–18. Lewis Morris (1833–1907) was born in Wales, though he lived most of his life in England. He was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1895 in recognition of his literary accomplishments.

Through all the house, a dread that drags me toward
 The ancient dusk of that avoided room,
 Wherein she sits with ghostly golden hair,
 And eyes that gaze beyond her soul's sad doom,
 Bending above an unreal harpsichord.¹⁴

In a variation on this poem that Cawein wrote some years later (entitled "Præterita"), the poet elaborated on the harpsichord's supernatural disposition, concluding the verse with the image of a golden-haired woman "Waking the Ghost of that old harpsichord."¹⁵

A more benign apparition is conjured in an unusual prose sketch published in 1889 by the French writer and artist George Auriol. In his "Le clavecin de Yeddo," Auriol emphasized the harpsichord's perceived otherness by placing it within the context of an imagined Orient:

Upon an old harpsichord of the time of Marie Antoinette—that has found its way, no one knows how, to the country of the Mikados—the frivolous Lou-Laou-Ti plays a love song. Perched upon the unsteady stool, like a doll upon a stand, with head thrown back, the young girl sings softly. Her delicate fingers dance madly upon the yellowed ivory, then sweep very gravely over the keys of ebony, and recommence to flutter distractedly hither and thither. The harpsichord, with its clear and caressing voice, seems, under the witchery of the little fairy, to find in its old heart shudders, murmurs, and vibrations long forgotten. And that puffed dress of blue, flowered with roses, is it not of a marquise?¹⁶

Auriol's miniature story capitalizes on the compound exoticism of a subject that is foreign in both time and place. Given the work's publication in June 1889 it is tempting to connect it with the *Exposition Universelle*, which had opened in Paris only a month earlier and offered a diverse display of cultural and historical objects.¹⁷ (Indeed, the mention of Marie Antoinette in the opening sentence is particularly suggestive, as a harpsichord

¹⁴ Madison Julius Cawein, "Haunted," in *The Garden of Dreams* (Louisville, KY: John P. Morton, 1896), 114.

¹⁵ Madison Julius Cawein, "Præterita," in *The Poems of Madison Cawein* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1908), 85–86.

¹⁶ George Auriol, "The Harpsichord of Yeddo," in *From the French: Pastels in Prose*, trans. Stuart Merrill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), 81–83. Originally published in French as "Le clavecin de Yeddo," in *La Plume* 1, no. 5 (15 June 1889): 49. Auriol's poem was a popular example of French prose poetry, and the English version was subsequently anthologized in a number of early twentieth-century textbooks. "Yeddo" is a variant romanization of "Edo," a historical name for the city of Tokyo.

¹⁷ In her work on the music of the 1889 exposition, Annegret Fauser has noted that the "discovery of new sonorities in early music shows parallels to the sonic discovery of 'other' music at the *Exposition Universelle*, whether the gamelan or opera transmitted through the telephone." Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 41–42.

that had formerly been in her possession was displayed at the exposition.) The story might also reflect Auriol's exposure to one of the many historical instruments that were adorned with scenes of life in an imagined Orient, a mode of décor that reflected a widespread European vogue for the exotic East in the decades surrounding the turn of the eighteenth century.¹⁸

When "Le clavecin de Yeddo" was reprinted the following year in an American anthology of French prose poetry, the text of the opening page was artfully set around a fanciful engraving by Henry W. McVickar (fig. 1).¹⁹ As if in an effort to invert the historical modes of chinoiserie, McVickar showed the European instrument and its player, here clothed in Western dress, alongside imagery commonly associated with Japan. McVickar's "harpsichord" is of an imaginative design that conjoins a small keyboard to an upright harp, an overly literal interpretation of the word that may suggest that the artist was unfamiliar with the instrument he was asked to depict.²⁰ Like Robert Browning's clavichord in "A Toccata of Galuppi's," the harpsichord here is portrayed by Auriol as a powerful evocator capable of carrying its listeners to another time and another place. As Lou-Laou-Ti continues to play (a powdered wig suddenly gracing her head), the accoutrements of her Japanese world are swiftly substituted for those from an imagined European past:

And suddenly all the statuettes change into graceful groups of pale Saxe, and bands of monkeys embroidered upon the silk screens become groups of rosy cupids that might have been painted by Boucher himself. And the black hair of Lou-Laou-Ti seems covered with a vapory snow.²¹

Perhaps one of the surest indicators that the harpsichord had emerged from the nineteenth century with a heavy freight of ghostly associations comes in the form of a satirical short story entitled "The Haunted Harpsichord," published by James Huneker in 1905.²²

¹⁸ At least one harpsichord on display at the 1889 Exposition, a 1728 instrument by Christian Zell of Hamburg, had a case painted in an Orientalist style, though the scenes were not of Japan but of China. This instrument is now in the collection of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg. For a list of instruments displayed at the *Exposition Universelle*, see the *Catalogue général officiel: Section II, Arts libéraux exposition rétrospective du travail et des sciences anthropologiques* (Lille: L. Danel, 1889), 74–90.

¹⁹ George Auriol, "The Harpsichord of Yeddo," 81.

²⁰ Fanciful as it might be, the form of McVickar's imaginary instrument is not entirely lacking historical precedent: a 1641 painting by Andrea Sacchi, for instance, shows a more elaborate open-framed clavicytherium (sometimes called a "keyed harp") that is being played by the Italian castrato Marc'Antonio Pasqualini (*Marcantonio Pasqualini Crowned by Apollo*, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art). This painting is discussed and reproduced in Kottick, *A History of the Harpsichord*, 24, and pl. 2.

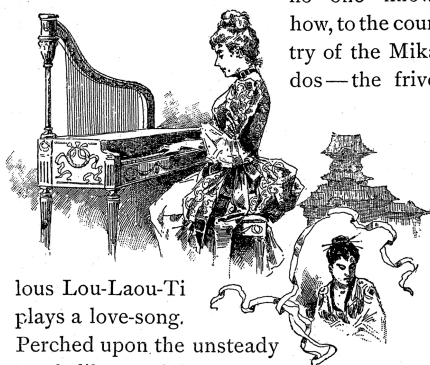
²¹ George Auriol, "The Harpsichord of Yeddo," 83.

²² James Huneker, "The Haunted Harpsichord," in *Visionaries* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 188–202.

FIGURE 1. First page of “The Harpsichord of Yeddo,” a prose poem by George Auriol; reprinted in *From the French: Pastels in Prose*, trans. Stuart Merrill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), 81–83

THE HARPSICHORD OF YEDDO.

UPON an old harpsichord of the time of Marie Antoinette—that has found its way, no one knows how, to the country of the Mikados—the frivo-



lous Lou-Laou-Ti plays a love-song. Perched upon the unsteady stool, like a doll upon a stand, with head thrown back, the young girl sings softly. Her white and delicate fingers

Huneker, who is remembered today mainly as a music critic for the *Musical Courier* and the *New York Times*, set his story in an intentionally indeterminate era that combines elements of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century. The story begins with two men speeding across the French countryside, hot in pursuit of a fugitive vassal. Stopping to rest at an unassuming roadside inn not far from the town of Amboise, the men listen as the innkeeper regales them with a tale redolent with the hallmarks of Gothic fiction. In this story within a story we are told that the inn stands before the ruins of a chateau that was burned to the ground in the years following the French revolution and that spirits from the ancien regime have not entirely vacated the premises.

It is at this point that the narrative suddenly engages in a fantastic reinvention of the musical past. The innkeeper tells of a duchess who made a frequent habit of hosting the composer Christoph Willibald Gluck during periods when her husband was away. One night, while the duchess and the famous composer of *Alceste* were playing a duet on the

harpichord, the duke discovered the pair and in a fit of jealous rage murdered them as they sat before the keyboard. Ever since, the innkeeper says, the place has been haunted by the sounds of a ghostly harpichord. At the conclusion of this ghost story the boundary between the inner and outer narratives is suddenly blurred by a spectral appearance outside the inn:

Music, faint, tinkling, we certainly heard. It came with the wind in little sobs, and then silence settled upon us. "It's the Chevalier Gluck, and he is playing to his duchess out in the fields. See, I will open the door and show you," whispered the fat landlord.

Just then the moonlight was blackened by a big cloud, and we heard the tinkling music of a harpichord again, but could see naught. The sounds were plainer now, and presently resolved into the rhythmic accents of a gavotte. But it seemed far away and very plaintive!

"Hark," said Michael, in a hoarse voice. "That's the gavotte from *Pagliacci*. Listen! Don't you remember it?"

"Pshaw!" I said roughly, for my nerves were all astir. "It's the *Alceste* music of Gluck."

"Look, look, gentlemen!" called our host, and as the moon glowed again in the blue we saw at the edge of the forest a white figure, saw it, I swear, although it vanished at once and the music ceased.²³

In spinning together such an incongruous assortment of historical details, Huneker in effect gave his readers a knowing wink.²⁴ (Indeed, he went so far as to provide the story with a parenthetical subtitle, "In the Style of Mock-Medieval Fiction," lest anyone miss the point.) But if the "Haunted Harpichord" is unabashed parody, it is certainly not without object. The confused and convoluted historical details are a jab at the sort of cultural conflation in which history is casually compressed (or even radically skewed), represented here by an anachronistic scenario in which *Pagliacci*, the 1892 verismo opera, and *Alceste*, Gluck's hit from 1767, can somehow coexist in a common pseudo-historical space. At the very core of this epoch-blurring tale is the "haunted harpichord" itself, an instrument whose supernaturally charged historical associations were still potent enough at the turn of the twentieth century to make it an appealing centerpiece for a satire on the romanticization of the musical past.

²³ *Ibid.*, 197–98.

²⁴ Huneker's use of the term "Chevalier" is likely a reference to a historical fantasy story by E. T. A. Hoffmann entitled "Ritter Gluck" (later published in French as "Chevalier Gluck"). The story—Hoffman's earliest publication—first appeared in *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 11, no. 20 (15 February 1809).

The Silence of "Antiquated Relics"

For much of the nineteenth century the harpsichord existed more as an idea than as an actual physical entity. Whereas it may have appeared with some frequency in the poetry and prose of the time, actual sightings remained rare, and those antique instruments that had avoided destruction remained mostly confined to private collections and were rarely accessible to the public at large.²⁵ This situation began to change around the last quarter of the century with the advent of a series of high-profile exhibitions that presented historical musical instruments, typically on loan from both public and private collections.²⁶ The first of these exhibitions was the *Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments*, which opened on 1 June 1872 at London's South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert).²⁷ The organizing committee for the exhibition was chaired by Queen Victoria's second son, Alfred (later to become the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha), and curatorial direction was provided by Carl Engel, the German-born musicologist and instrument collector who had since the 1840s made his home in London and established himself as one of the country's leading organological authorities.²⁸

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In the months leading up to the exhibition's opening the organizing committee actively sought out instruments that had been long hidden from view, seeking out possessors of "instruments noted for their decorative, archaeological, ethnological, or intrinsic technical merits" and encouraging them to share their treasures with the public at large.²⁹ The result was an impressive display of several hundred historic instruments—lent by collectors from across the United Kingdom and continental Europe—that was heralded as an unprecedented opportunity to

²⁵ The rarity of encountering such instruments was noted by Carl Engel, who wrote in 1874: "It is surprising how soon musical instruments become scarce when they are no longer in popular demand. How seldom is a harpsichord now seen! Yet it was still in favor as recently as the beginning of the present century." Carl Engel, ed., *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum* (London: George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1874), 346.

²⁶ For a broad overview of these exhibitions see Malou Haine, "Expositions d'instruments anciens dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle," *Revue Belge de Musicologie* 42 (1988): 223–40.

²⁷ The South Kensington Museum, founded in 1852 in the wake of the previous year's *Great Exhibition*, was rededicated as the Victoria and Albert Museum in May 1899.

²⁸ Engel, who wrote the catalog to the 1872 exhibition and was also the South Kensington Museum's principal advisor on instruments, provided a brief account of the exhibition's origins and planning process in an appendix to a catalog of the South Kensington Museum's permanent collection of musical instruments. See Engel, ed., *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum*, 347–49.

²⁹ See "Special Loan Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments at the South Kensington Museum," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 20, no. 1005 (23 February 1872): 279; and "Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 20, no. 1015 (3 May 1872): 511.

view little-seen relics from the musical past. In an article published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, for instance, the novelist Charles Reade implored the public to visit the exhibition, specifically noting the rarity of the instruments and the unlikelihood that they would again be seen together:

On the first of June the South Kensington Museum opened a special exhibition of ancient musical instruments. They have been obtained on loan from all quarters; money, powerful as it is, could not buy the greater part; and every man and woman, who loves music, or possesses a mind, should study them before the unique opportunity runs away, and this multitude of gems is dispersed for ever.³⁰

The public seems to have heeded Reade's words. The venture, which stayed open through the end of September, was deemed a huge success and subsequently laid the way for similar loan exhibitions that were held in major cities throughout Europe and the United States in the decades that followed.³¹

The thirty years that followed saw no fewer than sixteen major exhibitions of historical musical instruments, often held in conjunction with a larger exposition or world's fair (table 1). In cities like Vienna, Paris, Milan, and Brussels, crowds flocked to see long-neglected instruments of the past, with antique keyboards frequently receiving top billing. But if such exhibitions provided the public with the opportunity once again to see harpsichords, virginals, and spinets, they only rarely provided an opportunity to hear them.³² Whereas some exhibitions offered the occasional historical concert or lecture recital, for the most part the objects on display were treated more as silent historical relics

³⁰ Charles Reade, "Ancient Musical Instruments," reprinted in *English Mechanic and World of Science* 15, no. 377 (14 June 1872): 324. This article also appeared in *Dwight's Journal of Music* 32, no. 8 (13 July 1872): 266.

³¹ In a 1910 dictionary entry on "Musical Loan Exhibitions" Francis W. Galpin specifically credited the South Kensington exhibition with setting a model for all those that followed: "The idea of bringing before the public the art treasures of private collectors under the form of a loan exhibition is essentially English, the *Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments* held at South Kensington in 1872 being acknowledged as the prototype of the many similar collections which have since been made in Europe and America." Francis W. Galpin, "Musical Loan Exhibitions," in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 3, ed. J. A. Fuller Maitland (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 338.

³² For example, whereas the 1885 *Musical Loan Exhibition* (held in the upper galleries of the Royal Albert Hall) was generally well received, the limited opportunity for visitors to hear any of the antique instruments on display was noted bitterly by the press. An unsigned critic of the *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* wrote, "The errors and omissions of the executives of the International Inventions Exhibition with regard to the nature and quality of the musical performances provided for the entertainment of visitors have been commented upon in severe terms, not only in our own columns, but in the ordinary press." The writer, however, made positive mention of the handful of historical concerts that had been offered. Unsigned review, "Historic Concerts at the Inventions Exhibition," *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 26, no. 510 (1 August 1885): 477–79, esp. 477–78.

TABLE 1.
Major exhibitions of musical instruments in Europe and North
America held between 1872 and 1904

Year	Location	Exhibition details
1872	London	<i>Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments</i> (South Kensington Museum)
1873	Vienna	Part of the 1873 <i>Weltausstellung</i>
1878	Paris	Part of the 1878 <i>Exposition Universelle</i>
1880	Brussels	Part of the 1880 <i>Exposition Nationale</i> , celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Belgium's independence from the Netherlands
1881	Milan	
1885	London	Part of the 1885 <i>International Inventions Exhibition</i>
1888	Brussels	Part of the 1888 <i>Grand Concours International des Sciences et de l'Industrie</i>
1888	Bologna	
1889	Paris	Part of the 1889 <i>Exposition Universelle</i>
1890	London	Part of the 1890 <i>Royal Military Exhibition</i>
1892	Vienna	Part of the 1892 <i>Internationale Ausstellung für Musik- und Theaterwesen</i>
1893	Chicago	Part of the 1893 <i>World's Columbian Exposition</i>
1894	Edinburgh	<i>Loan Exhibition of the Society of Musicians</i>
1900	London	<i>International Loan Exhibition of Musical Instruments</i> (Crystal Palace, Sydenham)
1900	Paris	Part of the 1900 <i>Exposition Universelle</i>
1902	Boston	<i>Historical Musical Exhibition</i> , held at the Horticultural Hall and sponsored by Chickering and Sons
1904	London	<i>Special Loan Exhibition of Musical Instruments, Manuscripts, Books, Portraits, and other Mementoes</i> , celebrating the tercentenary of the Worshipful Company of Musicians (Fishmonger's Hall)

than as musical instruments. Cordoned-off on platforms or confined within glass-walled vitrines, the instruments maintained a mute existence and their observers were left to imagine their sound.

In an 1882 article in *All the Year Round*, a literary journal founded by Charles Dickens, an unsigned writer laments the silence of the instruments exhibited at the South Kensington Museum:

Some fine specimens of spinets and harpsichords are among the old musical instruments at South Kensington. One may walk round the

glass-case which isolates each, and see the whole wire-arrangement and key-board; but the tone is a tantalising secret to be preserved for the curiosity of other ages than ours.³³

Seven years later a writer reviewing the vast musical offerings of the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* for *Le Petit Journal* would note the startling contrast between the hush of the historical gallery and the clamorous piano-filled pavilion (a division labeled “Class 13”) in which modern instrument makers displayed their wares:

While the venerable musical instruments shown in the galleries of the Histoire du Travail are mute, while no sound escapes the Italian clavichords from 1547, the harpsichords from 1678 and the piano of Marie-Antoinette, what a racket, in contrast, in Class 13, where the modern instruments roar!³⁴

Given the enforced silence of the museum display, it is understandable that historical keyboards would be seen primarily in terms of their visual and historical value—as precious relics from the past rather than as useful musical tools. Indeed, the exhibitions of the nineteenth century generally privileged the historical over the musical, often featuring instruments that were closely connected with famous figures from the past. Reviews of instrument exhibits further reflected the bias of the visual over the musical. A passage from an 1872 report in the *English Mechanic and World of Science* is telling:

Then there are Italian spinets, one of which ought to interest the ladies; for it has nineteen hundred and twenty-eight precious stones outside it, and very little music inside. There is Handel’s harpsichord. He had more harpsichords than Cromwell skulls. But this time there really is a tidy pedigree made out.³⁵

Here, as with many other accounts of such exhibitions, the harpsichord is valued primarily for two qualities: its decorative appeal and its historical provenance—the elements that most strongly connected it with the

³³ “The Pianoforte Family,” *All the Year Round: A Weekly Journal* 29 (27 May 1882): 353–56, esp. 354.

³⁴ “Les Instruments de Musique,” *Le Petit Journal* (5 July 1889): 1; quoted in Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair*, 26.

³⁵ Charles Reade, “Ancient Musical Instruments,” 324. The instrument with “nineteen hundred and twenty eight precious stones” was, in fact, a 1577 spinet made in Milan by Annibale dei Rossi. Its elaborate *pietre dure* case made it a star of several nineteenth-century exhibits. It was purchased by the South Kensington Museum in 1867 for the then enormous sum of £1200 and remains in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. See Howard Schott and Anthony Baines, *Catalogue of Musical Instruments in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V and A Publications, 1998), 35–39.

past.³⁶ Furthermore, the writer's quip about George Frideric Handel's apparently prodigious number of harpsichords is an indication of the prevalence with which displayed instruments were claimed to have been played or owned by prominent historical figures, though such claims were frequently based on scant or dubious historical evidence.

This emphasis on history and appearance can also be found in Alfred J. Hipkins's beautifully illustrated volume *Musical Instruments, Historic, Rare and Unique*, published in 1888.³⁷ Though Hipkins was a serious and knowledgeable scholar of early keyboard instruments, *Musical Instruments*, with its oversized pages and colorful lithograph plates (mostly of instruments that were displayed as part of London's *International Inventions Exposition* of 1885) served primarily as a lavishly illustrated Victorian coffee table book, valued as much for its high production values as for the knowledge it contained.³⁸ Among the instruments described and depicted in Hipkins's book is what may well have been the most famous antique keyboard of the time, a late sixteenth-century spinet that continues to be one of the treasures of the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection (fig. 2). Though the instrument's origins are almost certainly Italian (its specific history prior to 1798 is a mystery to this day), the spinet was famous to the nineteenth-century public as "Queen Elizabeth's Virginal."³⁹ Indeed, its position as a historical marker and artifact was particularly emphasized at the 1885 exhibition, where the instrument was used as the star attraction of a recreated Tudor room complete with period furnishing and contemporary works of art.⁴⁰ What makes all of this even more remarkable is that the instrument's connection with the famous virgin queen appears to have been almost entirely speculative, based solely on the existence of a small crest on the front of

³⁶ Reade reports of having been able to hear the sound of one of the harpsichords, played by Carl Engel, the first curator of musical instruments at the South Kensington Museum, which Reade described as being "full of sweetness and tenderness, yet not deficient in grandeur." Reade, "Ancient Musical Instruments," 324.

³⁷ Hipkins, Alfred J. *Musical Instruments, Historic, Rare and Unique* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1888).

³⁸ A contemporary reviewer praised the book as being "among the most beautiful examples of printing it is possible to obtain." Unsigned review of *Musical Instruments: Historic, Rare, and Unique*, by Alfred J. Hipkins, *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 29, no. 539 (1 January 1888): 45. On Hipkins's considerable contribution to the revival of early keyboard instruments, see the unsigned article "Alfred James Hipkins," *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 39, no. 667 (1 September 1898): 581–86.

³⁹ Hipkins, *Musical Instruments*. The pages of Hipkins's book are not numbered; the illustration of "Queen Elizabeth's Virginal" is listed as plate 7 and followed by a brief description.

⁴⁰ International Inventions Exhibition, *Guide to the Loan Collection and List of Musical Instruments, Manuscripts, Books, Paintings, and Engravings, Exhibited in the Gallery and Lower Rooms of the Albert Hall* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1885), 110. The sixteenth-century Tudor room also featured several Italian lutes, as well as "furniture, paneling, and other fittings" arranged and lent by Mr. George Donaldson.

FIGURE 2. “Queen Elizabeth’s Virginal”; illustration from Alfred J. Hipkins, *Musical Instruments, Historic, Rare and Unique* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1888)



the case that was most likely added centuries later. Although nineteenth-century historians appear to have been aware of the instrument’s questionable provenance, the potency of the myth was enough to cement its place in the popular historical imagination.⁴¹ Many other keyboard instruments were similarly displayed bearing pedigrees that included having been played by a famous figure from the past. In France, Marie Antoinette’s spirit loomed large over a harpsichord she was said to have once owned; this instrument garnered much attention when it was displayed as part of the 1889 *Exposition Universelle*.⁴² It is worth noting, too, that

⁴¹ The most comprehensive modern assessment of this instrument can be found in Schott and Baines, *Catalogue of Musical Instruments in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, 29–31. The later discovery of a tiny date—1594—inscribed in the instrument’s elaborate sgraffito case further complicates its history. If the instrument was in fact ever owned by Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) she could only have possessed it in her last years. See Nanke Schellmann, “The Queen Elizabeth’s Virginal Scribbles, Scratches and Sgraffito,” *V and A Conservation Journal* 42 (Autumn 2002): 9–11, www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/conservation-journal/issue-42/the-queen-elizabeths-virginal-scribbles-scratches-and-sgraffito/.

⁴² Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair*, 33.

the veneration accorded historically important instruments for their biographical associations extended well into the inner confines of the music world. Franz Liszt, for example, some years after he had already acquired one of Beethoven's fortepianos, was reported to have purchased a harpsichord that in 1853 was claimed to have been Mozart's.⁴³

Hauntings in the Musical Museum

An intriguing connection between the public exhibition of early musical instruments and their "hauntings" in the literature of the age comes in the form of an anonymous poem published in *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Art*. The poem, titled "On an Old Harpsichord," appeared on 8 June 1872, one week after the opening of the 1872 *Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments* in South Kensington. The unsigned poet begins by linking the worn musical object with the age of its creation:

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Its varnish cracked, its paintings scarred,
Its dainty gilding sadly marred,
And turned to dingy umber,
It stands forlorn, a waif or stray
Of glories long since passed away,
An ancient piece of lumber.

What more? And yet how rich it is,
This harpsichord, in memories
And quaint associations,
Recalling that far time, when still
High birth and title had their will,
And kings were more than nations.⁴⁴

⁴³ "Mozart's Old Harpsichord, offered for sale at Weimar, has been purchased by Franz Liszt. The instrument played on by Beethoven is also in the possession of the celebrated pianist." Unsigned review, "Brief Chronicle of the Last Month," *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 5, no. 107 (1 April 1853): 173.

⁴⁴ "On an Old Harpsichord," *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art* 441 (8 June 1872): 368. The identity of the poem's author remains unclear, but when it was subsequently reprinted in the text of James Payn's novel *The Heir of the Ages*, Payn (the editor of *Chamber's Journal* at the time the poem was first published) provided the following prefatory note: "The two poems, entitled 'The Children' and 'On an Old Harpsichord,' ascribed to [the character] Matthey Meyrick in this novel, were written by a lad who died many years ago of consumption, before he attained his majority. I never knew him personally—our relation being only that of editor and contributor—but judging from his letters, no less than his verses, I am well convinced that in him his country lost a genius. The poems in question were written, I believe, in his nineteenth year." James Payn, *The Heir of the Ages*, rev. ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1888).

The poem, which spans ten six-line stanzas, encompasses nearly every trope that was commonly associated with the harpsichord. Above all, the decaying instrument calls forth a distant age. And it is perhaps not surprising that the touch of a key suddenly fills the room with apparitions:

I touch the keys—the startled chord
 Can scarce a weak response afford
 That wakes a low vibration
 Among the slackened, palsied strings:
 A feeble spell, and yet it brings a magic transformation.

An antique aspect veils the place,
 A weird, oppressive, ghostly grace
 That almost makes one tremble;
 A mystic light pervades the air,
 Faint footfalls gather on the stair—
 The belles and beaux assemble.

The belles and beaux? Alas, the ghosts!
 Thin shadows of once-reigning toasts,
 And heroes of the duel.
 They smile, they chatter, they parade,
 They rustle in superb brocade,
 They shine with many a jewel.⁴⁵

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The poem concludes with the sudden disappearance of the spirits. In fact, they stroll into the ether to the strains of Gluck's "Che farò senza Euridice?" leaving the harpsichord once more a mere relic:

The lights go out; the voices die;
 Among the strings strange tremors fly,
 That slowly sink to slumber;
 The harpsichord remains alone,
 A monument of glories done,
 An ancient piece of lumber.⁴⁶

A similarly mystical tone pervades an article that appeared in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* in February 1894.⁴⁷ Aptly titled "Musical Ghosts," it surveys the predecessors of the modern piano, focusing on the efforts of the prominent nineteenth-century instrument collector Morris Steinert.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ "On an Old Harpsichord."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ L. D. Mayland, "Musical Ghosts: Being a Research into the Ancestry of the Pianoforte," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* 37 (February 1894): 245–55.

⁴⁸ Morris Steinert would later give his significant collection to Yale University, where it remains today. Many of the details in Mayland's article come directly from Steinert's book

The article's author, L. D. Mayland, describes the old keyboards as being "scattered over the world in dark garrets, where they are regarded as merely pieces of obsolete furniture," and he describes Steinert's efforts to recover them:

[U]p under the red-tiled roofs, he found old clavichords which had been hidden there for years in the *obligato* society of disused furniture, dust and spiders. Sometimes it was to the astonishment of the householder that he revealed these treasures, so long forgotten; oftentimes he was met with vigorous protests of their absolute non-existence and peremptory refusals of the privilege of search; but a glass of beer or a cigar generally obtained willing consent.⁴⁹

In breathless tones Mayland described the moments when Steinert uncovered an instrument hidden in the musty attics of southern Germany:

It was a veritable treasure quest, and he frequently philosophized over his dusty instruments in the garrets where light was admitted by removing a tile. Strange and poetical fancies hover over these relics, to which the makers had modestly refrained from affixing names or dates. What had caused their retirement to these shades? Whose fingers had lingered upon their ancient keys? Why had music become so lost an art where such instruments still existed to tempt the yearning, poetic soul of the Bavarian to give it expression on those tuneful strings?⁵⁰

In the silent context of the museum display (or, for that matter, the hush of the dusty garret), historical and visual qualities inevitably take precedence over the musical, and it is not surprising to find that harpsichords so presented should become largely defined through their association with the figures of the past who had once played upon them—or, at any rate, were imagined to have done so. For the most part such instruments existed primarily as historical relics, objects used either to exemplify the virtues of period style, or alternately offered up for veneration in connection with whichever famous figure was thought to have once "lingered upon their ancient keys." In many ways the real story of the harpsichord in the nineteenth century is one not of dormancy, death, or even abandonment but of a transformation from musical tool into visual and historical artifact; in the words of the anonymous author

The M. Steinert Collection of Keyed and Stringed Instruments, with Various Treatises on the History of these Instruments, the Method of Playing Them, and Their Influence on Musical Art (New York: Charles F. Tretbar, 1893). Additional information about Steinert can be found in Larry Palmer, *Harpsichord in America: A Twentieth-Century Revival* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 8–13.

⁴⁹ Mayland, "Musical Ghosts," 246.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

of “On an Old Harpsichord,” the instrument had become “a monument to glories done, an ancient piece of lumber.”

The Harpsichord's Second Life

By the end of the nineteenth-century the harpsichord was indeed haunted—if not by actual spirits, at least by persistent associations with an abandoned musical past. From the otherworldly noises imagined to be emerging from its case to the specters envisioned in its midst, the supposedly “dead” instrument was in fact alive with the ghosts of its fancifully imagined history. Ironically, the very elements that made the harpsichord an object of fascination to nineteenth-century poets and museumgoers alike posed significant challenges for those who wanted to bring the instrument onto the modern concert stage. Although its evocative appearance and potent historical associations had done much to establish it as a venerable musical relic, this same reputation did little to help make the case for its acceptance as a serious instrument in an era preoccupied with its own modernity. How could an instrument so long viewed as being creaky and quaint possibly be received by audiences as anything other than a historical curiosity? How could a symbol of an archaic musical culture be accepted as a modern musical tool? Such questions loomed large for the first generation of revivalists, who had to carefully balance the appeal of the harpsichord's evocative history with the practical requirements of modern concert halls and the aural expectations of audiences weaned on a musical diet rich in Wagner and Brahms.

If there was a pivot point in the harpsichord's modern “rebirth” it would have to be placed somewhere between 1889 and 1912. During this period of rapid musical and societal change a series of events critical to the instrument's revival took place: the construction of the first modern-day harpsichords in 1889 (by the French firms Pleyel and Erard and the instrument restorer Louis Tomasini); the growing success of the musical activities of Arnold Dolmetsch, who built his first harpsichord in 1896; the public harpsichord debut, in 1903, of Wanda Landowska, later the instrument's most tireless and successful advocate; and, finally, the appearance in 1912 of the Pleyel Grand Modèle de Concert harpsichord, which would dominate much of the professional early music scene for nearly a half century after. Where prior to 1889 the harpsichord had been little more than a historical curiosity, by 1912 the instrument was well on its way to a full-scale cultural reentrenchment.

The early decades of the harpsichord revival can be seen as an informal campaign to counteract the way the instrument had been portrayed during the preceding century. Those who wished to perform early keyboard music

“on the instrument for which it was written” (to use the preferred revivalist rhetoric of the day) had to contend with a range of negative biases, ranging from objections to its appearance and tone to questions regarding its relevance in the modern music world. In an age steeped in teleological rhetoric it was easy to dismiss the harpsichord as a sort of paleolithic piano: a knuckle-dragging ancestor whose very existence had been obviated two hundred years earlier by Bartolomeo Cristofori.

The physical appearance of the historical harpsichord was a significant liability when it came to the instrument’s revival. There were the lid paintings and the often highly decorative casework, which had done much to make it a symbol of antiquity in the preceding century. And even the instrument’s shape and size flagged it as an anachronism.⁵¹ Although at the end of the eighteenth century the form of the average piano was not so very different from that of its plucked-string relations (wood-framed, narrow-compassed), by the middle of the nineteenth century a widening morphological gap had formed between the piano’s increasingly robust construction and that of the harpsichord, which by comparison must have appeared more and more like a frail vestige of a quaint yesteryear.⁵² In an age of factory-built pianos, the harpsichord’s hand-crafted and wood-framed construction instantly marked it as an atavistic intruder from the preindustrial past.

This was not lost on the critics. When Wanda Landowska presented a concert in April 1905 at the Queen’s Hall in London, on which she performed not only on harpsichord but also on a modern piano and a fortepiano, a writer for the *Bystander* found the “clavecin” an incongruous presence on the concert platform:

Sitting quietly in Queen’s Hall, and waiting for Miss Landowska to make her appearance, one reflected that there was a tremendous advance in mechanism from the long, thin somewhat anaemic-looking harpsichord to the substantial, modern piano, which, if it has any self-respect (and a self-playing attachment), will, nowadays, even play its own notes.⁵³

⁵¹ In an unsigned 1910 article on the harpsichords designed for the Chickering Piano Company, Arnold Dolmetsch called attention to the instrument’s relatively diminutive size, declaring that the “magnificent” modern pianos were the “gigantic descendants of the ancient claviers.” See “Busoni at the Harpsichord,” *Music Trade Review* 51, no. 10 (3 September 1910): 18, <http://mtr.arcade-museum.com/MTR-1910-51-10/18/>.

⁵² Writing in 1837, the novelist Thomas Love Peacock noted the dramatic change between the contemporary piano and the instruments he saw while growing up in the 1790s. Recalling the harpsichords of his childhood, he wrote: “Over what a gulph of time this name alone looks back! What a stride from the harpsichord to one of Broadwood’s last grand pianos!” Thomas Love Peacock, “Recollections of Childhood,” *Bentley’s Miscellany* 1, no. 2 (February 1837): 189.

⁵³ Unsigned review, “Matters Musical,” *Bystander* 6, no. 73 (26 April 1905): 194. Explaining the harpsichord’s presence on the modern stage, the reviewer wrote: “It is fashionable now to choose one’s furniture and surroundings from the oldest models, and

At the time Landowska was performing on an instrument that was a descendant of the harpsichords the Pleyel-Wolff-Lyon Piano Company had built sixteen years earlier for the Paris exposition. Although large by historical standards, it still retained many of the hallmarks of traditional harpsichord design. And although Pleyel had dispensed with the elaborate case paintings found on its 1889 instruments, the ornamentation of their newer instruments was at least historically suggestive.⁵⁴ The *Bystander* reviewer was also skeptical of the instrument's tone, the quality of which was described as being "thin and qualified by the scratching of the plectra":

And when one actually heard the clavecin, it was apparent that as great an advance has taken place from the musical point of view [as from that of design]. One felt for Louis XIV, who, if he desired music in the *salon*, was limited to the twanky utterances of this certainly elegant instrument.⁵⁵

Two years earlier Landowska had received a letter from Charles Bordes, the director of the Schola Cantorum in Paris. Although Bordes enthusiastically endorsed Landowska's interest in championing the keyboard music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he entreated her not to perform such music on the harpsichord, complaining that the instrument—"that cage for flies," as he called it—reduces "superb and often large-scale works to the size of its tiny, spindly legs."⁵⁶

Moreover, there remained a lingering sense that the instrument served little purpose beyond providing historical set dressing. This mentality can be seen in the instrument's inclusion in a French dictionary of furnishings, *Dictionnaire de l'ameublement*, first published in 1887.⁵⁷ Here we are presented with the harpsichord not so much as musical instrument but instead as ornate furnishing and object d'art. Although the dictionary explains the basic mechanism of the instrument and provides a brief overview of its history, the emphasis is firmly on issues of appearance, historical provenance, and monetary value. Even the treatment of the particular

something of the same spirit may have been responsible for the two recitals of old harpsichord music recently given by Miss Wanda Landowska at Queen's Hall." The reference to the self-playing piano reflects that instrument's burgeoning popularity in both America and Europe only a decade following the introduction of the Pianola, the first practical pneumatic piano player.

⁵⁴ See Jean-Claude Battault, "Les clavecins Pleyel, Érard et Gaveau, 1889–1970," in *Music Ancienne: Instruments et Imagination*, ed. Michael Latham (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 193–206.

⁵⁵ "Matters Musical," 194.

⁵⁶ Letter dated 31 July 1903, quoted in Landowska, *Landowska on Music*, 10.

⁵⁷ Henry Harvard, *Dictionnaire de l'ameublement et de la décoration depuis le XIII^e siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, vol. 1 (Paris: May and Motteroz, 1887–1890), 870–76.

FIGURE 3. Illustration of a “clavecin décoré de grotesques” from Henry Harvard, *Dictionnaire de l'ameublement* (Paris: May and Motteroz, 1887); though not disclosed in the *Dictionnaire*, the instrument was a Ruckers harpsichord owned by Paul Eudel



instrument featured in the accompanying illustration is revealing (fig. 3). That instrument, which today resides in the collection of the Musée de la Musique in Paris, was constructed by Andreas Ruckers in 1646, followed by an overhaul at the hands of the similarly renowned Pascal Taskins in 1780. Despite this venerable pedigree the *Dictionnaire* only described it as “clavecin décoré de grotesques.”⁵⁸ Interestingly, the Eudel Ruckers (named after one of its owners, Paul Eudel) appeared in print a second time in 1887, this time in the pages of a periodical called the *Art Amateur* (fig. 4).⁵⁹ Here the instrument is shown in what appears to be a drawing room filled

⁵⁸ For more information and modern photographs of the 1646 Ruckers in the Musée de la Musique, see <http://mediatheque.cite-musique.fr/masc/play.asp?ID=0162260>. In 1887, when the *Dictionnaire de l'ameublement* was published, the instrument was privately owned by Paul Eudel. It subsequently passed through the collection of Geneviève Thibault de Chambure before being purchased by the museum in 1964.

⁵⁹ I encountered this engraving only after it was (unfortunately) excised from its parent journal and sold as a print. I was therefore not able to ascertain the date and page number of the original publication.

FIGURE 4. Illustration from *Art Amateur* (1887) labeled “Clavichord [*sic*] of André Ruckers (1646)” in the collection of Paul Eudel



CLAVICHORD OF ANDRÉ RUCKERS (1646). IN THE COLLECTION OF PAUL EUDEL

with rococo furnishings, accompanied by a label that erroneously describes it as a “clavichord.”

Perhaps this emphasis is understandable in works dedicated to furnishings and art, but the same bias has cropped up in more music-centric sources as well. One of the earliest articles to speak explicitly of a “harpsichord revival” appeared in August 1901, in the unlikely pages of *The Girl’s Own Paper*. The article’s author, Frederick J. Crowest, who was known at the time for several books on music history aimed at a general readership, described the growing interest in old keyboard instruments as being part of what he poetically termed “the pause we make, betimes, to look back a little through the vista into the past.”⁶⁰ Crowest was particularly laudatory about the recent use of the harpsichord as a historically accurate prop in the staging of plays set in the past:

Only recently have there been pieces produced, in which, to perfect the *ensemble*, an actual harpsichord of last century date and make has been brought upon the stage, with most interesting and artistic effect. That

⁶⁰ Frederick J. Crowest, “The Harpsichord Revival,” *The Girl’s Own Paper* 22 (August 1901): 744–46.

this “actuality,” instead of its offshoot the modern “grand,” should have been produced is not only an indication of the lengths to which managers go to command success, but it gives the audience an opportunity of learning more about the qualities and capacities of the instrument than would the reading of dozens of histories of music or treatises on musical instruments.⁶¹

Although Crowest was certainly enthusiastic about the reappearance of the harpsichord, for him its value was less as a serious musical instrument than as a tool for the curious musical time traveler: “Of course, no one wishes to see a harpsichord in the place of every pianoforte, even if that were possible. None the less it and its music furnish a delightful field for those lovers of music who feel betimes a longing for an excursion into the far-off musical past.”⁶²

Among many critics there was a sense that the harpsichord was simply not up to the rigors of performing “serious” music. In a December 1907 review of Louis Diémer’s playing a “programme historique” in Liège, Belgium, the critic for *L’Art Moderne* sounded ambivalent about the instrument. He noted that Diémer performed “with his usual mastery,” but he found the harpsichord itself to be “archaic and too limited,” declaring it only successful when performing “the puerile and ravishing evocations of a purely descriptive and picturesque art.”⁶³ That same year a writer for the German periodical *Konzert* came to a similar conclusion while reviewing a recital given by Landowska at the Hôtel de Prusse in Leipzig. Discussing a program that included works by Bach “and his Italian and French contemporaries,” the writer noted:

Her harpsichord demonstrations provided us with proof that certain ancient compositions of a playful character (for instance, “L’Hirondelle” and “Le Coucou” by Daquin, or “Le Dodo” by Fr. Couperin) can achieve a certain charm from the sound of the harpsichord. But works in which the composer has set forth a weightier argument (such as Bach’s Italian Concerto and, to a lesser degree, even Couperin’s “Folies françaises”), require a power, weight, and the singing character far beyond the expressive capabilities of the harpsichord.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 744. When Crowest spoke of a harpsichord “of last century date and make” he was, though writing in 1901, presumably referring to the eighteenth century.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 746.

⁶³ “Certes le clavecin reste archaïque et de moyens trop limités, mais il se prête à ravir à ces évocations puériles et ravissantes d’un art purement pittoresques et descriptif.” Unsigned review, “La Musique à Liège,” *L’Art Moderne* 27, no. 52 (29 Dec. 1907): 411. The program under review also contained symphonic works by Pergolesi, Stamitz, and Gossec, with Diémer playing harpsichord continuo. Translation is mine.

⁶⁴ “Ihre Cembalovorträge erbrachten für uns auch den Beweis, daß gewisse alte Kompositionen spielerischen Charakters (so L’Hirondelle und Le Coucou von Daquin, oder Le Dodo von Fr. Couperin) erst durch Klangfarben des Cembalo ihren eigenen Reiz

This critic clearly felt that the harpsichord might suffice for playing the occasional historic trifle, but that it is inadequate for weighty masterpieces.

The famous aphorism credited to the British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham is typical of the regard in which the harpsichord was held in the early twentieth century. "The harpsichord," Beecham is once said to have quipped, "sounds like two skeletons copulating on a corrugated tin roof."⁶⁵ Whether Beecham made this proclamation or not, the sentiment expressed clearly resonated with many, and it quickly became a popular catchphrase among those who found the harpsichord's tone to be inadequate (perhaps, it is tempting to suggest, due to an absence of timbral flesh).⁶⁶ This aphorism encapsulates the difficulties of the harpsichord's struggles for acceptance in the early twentieth century. The image of skeletons (those consummate symbols of mortality) making love in a world of metal roofs and industrial corrugation would instantly have punctured the vaporous romanticism of the literary fantasies quoted earlier in this article. And beneath the surface of witty scorn, the image suggests a deeper critique: just as skeletons (frisky or otherwise) have no place on modern corrugated roofs, so too does the antiquated harpsichord have no place in the modern concert hall.

The Introduction of the "Modern" Harpsichord

The first new instruments to be constructed after the harpsichord's nineteenth-century hiatus were a group of three harpsichords produced around 1889 and displayed that year at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.⁶⁷

gewinnen. Andere und bedeutendere der von ihr vorgetragenen Kompositionen (so teilweise Bachs italienisches Konzert und zum geringeren Teile auch Couperins Folies françaises) gingen aber in ihren Anforderungen an die Kraft, die Wucht und den Gesangscharakter des Tones weit über die Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten des Cembalo hinaus." Quoted in Detlev Schultz, "Dur und Moll: Leipzig," *Signale für die Musikalische Welt* 65, no. 35–36 (8 May 1907): 592. The recital was held on 1 May 1907. Translation is mine.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Harold Atkins and Archie Newman, eds., *Beecham Stories: Anecdotes, Sayings and Impressions of Sir Thomas Beecham* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 34.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Sterne has noted that a similar turn of phrase was used in a magazine parody of the advertisements promoting Victor's Orthophonic Victrola phonograph: "Every instrument sounds like a skeleton's Charleston on a tin roof." Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 272. Although Sterne does not date his source material, the term "orthophonic" was introduced in 1925 and it seems likely that the quotation comes from the second half of the 1920s, when the technology was still a novelty, possibly suggesting an earlier coinage.

⁶⁷ For a detailed account of the early musical activities at the 1889 *Exposition Universelle*, see Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair*. For more details about the harpsichords newly constructed for the event, see Kottick, *The History of the Harpsichord*, 409–14.

Two of these harpsichords were the products of leading Parisian piano firms—Pleyel-Wolff-Lyon and Erard et Cie—and the third was built by the instrument restorer Louis Tomasini. Each approached the challenge of constructing new “old” instruments in a different way. Tomasini’s approach was the most historical. At the *Exposition Universelle* he exhibited two instruments side by side: the first was a genuine antique by Henri Hemsch (built around 1755), beside which Tomasini displayed a new instrument in which he had meticulously copied every detail of the mechanism and decoration of the original. Both Erard and Pleyel took more liberties with their first creations. Each firm based its instrument on a historical model—Erard on a 1779 instrument built by the firm’s founder, Sébastien Érard, and Pleyel on a 1769 Pascal Taskin harpsichord—but adopted modes of decoration that were modern reinterpretations of the past.⁶⁸ Whereas the Erard instrument featured a relatively restrained scheme of garlands and floral sprigs (not far out of step with the aesthetics of the nascent art nouveau movement), the decorators at Pleyel went for a full-scale historical fantasy of splayed cabriole legs and resplendent vignettes painted in a style vaguely reminiscent of Watteau or Fragonard.⁶⁹

But although the Pleyel harpsichord looked like it might be an escapee from the museum case, there was more to the instrument than was suggested by its historicist exterior. On the inside it employed some of the same developments Pleyel used on its modern pianos, most evident in the battery of six pedals that allowed for seamless changes in registration. As Martin Elste has observed, the Pleyel harpsichord was no mere historical replica but an instrument that combined the late nineteenth-century nostalgia for the musical past with an open embrace of contemporary technology:

The outer instrument stood for nostalgia, but two keyboards and the action with several registers and a variety of pedals operated with the feet in order to change registers as quickly and as smoothly as possible—the action represents progress and mechanization, the very topic of the world exhibitions.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Schott, “The Harpsichord Revival,” 85–86. The Taskin instrument, which now resides in the Russell Collection of Musical Instruments in Edinburgh, had come to prominence as the harpsichord used in public performances and demonstrations by Louis Diémer. Both the Erard and Pleyel firms studied it in preparation for building their own new instruments. The 1779 Sébastien Erard harpsichord is now in the collection of the Musée de la Musique in Paris. See also Sidney Newman and Peter Williams, eds., *The Russell Collection and other Early Keyboard Instruments in Saint Cecilia’s Hall, Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 32–35.

⁶⁹ Battault, “Les clavecins Pleyel, Erard et Gaveau,” 194.

⁷⁰ Martin Elste, “The Interaction of Visual Appearance and Sound: The Case of Harpsichordist Wanda Landowska” (paper presented at the thirty-ninth annual meeting of the American Musical Instrument Society, Library of Congress, 27–29 May 2010).

The instruments produced by Pleyel, Erard, and Tommasini in 1889 were not the only new harpsichords to be built in the closing years of the late nineteenth century. Seven years later Arnold Dolmetsch constructed his first harpsichord, the now famous Green harpsichord. Named for the verdant shade of its exterior paint, the Green harpsichord has often been described in the scholarly literature as being historically modeled. In truth its design reflected both Dolmetsch's desire to be innovative and his perception of what was required in an instrument that would be used in a modern concert hall. Having been engaged to perform the continuo for performances of *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze di Figaro* at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Dolmetsch was keen on building an instrument that could be heard in a venue capable of seating more than two thousand.⁷¹ In an attempt to improve the instrument's power, Dolmetsch produced a novel design in which the strings pass over a second soundboard placed in front of the jacks. Like the 1889 Pleyel, Dolmetsch's instrument also featured pedals for changing registration and, in an attempt to provide the player with expressive control of dynamics, an innovative knee lever that could instantly change the plucking depth.

Landowska's Pleyel

The most famous of all modern harpsichords made its debut at the 1912 Bach Festival in Breslau. This was Pleyel's Grand Modèle de Concert, which was designed at the behest of Wanda Landowska, who had been exclusively playing on the company's harpsichords since 1903. Having grown unhappy with the instruments at her disposal, Landowska requested a larger model that she would be able to use for her increasingly prominent recitals. In preparation for its design, she toured several collections of historic instruments with Pleyel's chief engineer, M. Lamy, ostensibly to gather ideas and inspiration from the instrumental achievements of the past.⁷² The final design, however, spoke more of the needs of the present than of fantasies of the past (fig. 5). The new instrument was nearly a wholesale reengineering of the harpsichord from the inside out: a glance under the hood reveals a vast array of moving parts, including a damping system of unprecedented complexity; an innovative (if ultimately unsuccessful) double-pinned tuning system (which caused the instrument to be widely loathed by those called upon to keep it in tune);

⁷¹ For more on the history of the Green harpsichord, see Edmond Johnson, "Revival and Antiquation: Modernism's Musical Pasts" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2011), 149–62.

⁷² See Landowska, *Landowska on Music*, 11.

FIGURE 5. Wanda Landowska and her Pleyel harpsichord; undated photograph, most likely taken in the 1930s; from the Library of Congress's George Grantham Bain Collection



a simple decorative scheme; a solid piano-like construction, with cut-aways on the sides of the keywell (which allow audiences to see the performers hands on the two manuals); and, perhaps most notably, a sixteen-foot register.⁷³ Like its historic forebearers, the Pleyel was

⁷³ A description of several of Landowska's instruments, including the 1912 Pleyel, can be found in Michael Latham, "Don Quixote and Wanda Landowska: Bells and Pleyels,"

initially still wood framed, but it now wielded a formidable arsenal of tonal options: two sets of strings at pitch, another an octave above, and one an octave below; lute and buff stops; and the ability to couple the keyboards together—all instantly changeable through the deft manipulation of its seven radiating pedals.⁷⁴ Though the 1912 Pleyel was not completely without ornament—ironically, the “spindly legs,” about which Bordes had complained a decade earlier, were one of the few decorative touches to remain intact—its design was a far cry from the historically evocative instruments that had so affected the nineteenth-century imagination.

Although the 1912 Pleyel did not look like a museum piece, it was not completely lacking in historical justification. Had anyone questioned either the size of the instrument or the presence of the sixteen-foot register, Landowska could have pointed to the so-called Bach harpsichord, an instrument that had been acquired by the Prussian state in 1888 after it was certified by the German scholar Philipp Spitta as having belonged to J. S. Bach. Beyond the obvious appeal of an instrument with such a prestigious provenance—however spurious it might be—the instrument’s large size, plain appearance, and plentiful tonal resources made it a convenient historical antidote to the prevailing image of a quaint and feeble-voiced antique.⁷⁵ Likening it to “a harpsichord on steroids,” Edward Kottick has noted that nearly all the instruments subsequently modeled on the Bach harpsichord featured “heavy cases, beefy framing, thick and heavily barred soundboards, open bottoms, leather plectra, pedals, and half hitches.”⁷⁶

Early Music 34, no. 1 (February 2006): 95–109. According to Latham, the tonal resources on the 1912 Pleyel included “a 16’ stop, an 8’ stop, and an octave [4’ stop] on the lower keyboard and on the upper keyboard an 8’ stop or alternatively the nasal lute stop, also at 8’ pitch.” *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷⁴ Wolfgang Zuckermann has written about the difficulties involved with the Pleyel harpsichord’s complicated tuning mechanism: “Pleyels are blessed with a fine-tuning system which is feared by professional tuners. This complicated system works something like a fine-tuning peg on a cello, where many turns produce only a small change in pitch. Neither the metal frame nor the tuning system does much to keep Pleyels in tune, but changing a string becomes a chore, and I find that tuning Pleyels takes at least twice as long as ordinary harpsichords.” Wolfgang Zuckermann, *The Modern Harpsichord: Twentieth-Century Instruments and Their Makers* (New York: October House, 1969), 164–65. Several excellent photographs and diagrams of the Pleyel harpsichord can be found in Claude Mercier-Ythier, *Les Clavecins* (Paris: Éditions Vecteurs, 1990).

⁷⁵ Kottick, *A History of the Harpsichord*, 414–18. For more on the history of the so-called Bach Harpsichord, see Dieter Krickeberg and Horst Rage, “Einige Beobachtungen zur Baugeschichte des ‘Bach-Cembalos,’” *Jahrbuch des Staatlichen Instituts für Musikforschung Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (1987/88), 184–97; and *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “Bach harpsichord,” by Martin Elste, accessed 10 January 2013, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41101.

⁷⁶ Kottick, *A History of the Harpsichord*, 415–16. Other makers who produced modern instruments inspired by the spurious Bach Harpsichord included Georg Steingraeber and Karl Maendler.

And so Landowska's famous Pleyel began what would be nearly a half century of dominance. During this time the instruments also became equipped with a heavy iron frame, which Landowska requested to help her instruments withstand the rigors of touring.⁷⁷ Although harpsichords by other makers were available, by the 1920s the Pleyel Grand Modèle de Concert was undoubtedly the most commonly used instrument among professional harpsichordists throughout the world—including, in addition to Wanda Landowska, Alice Ehlers, Putnam Aldrich, the duo of Philip Manuel and Gavin Williamson, and countless others.⁷⁸ Manuel de Falla used this instrument when he performed his Harpsichord Concerto, and it was the instrument used in the debut of the 1926 version of Ezra Pound's *Le Testament*. At over eight feet long, and weighing not far shy of five hundred pounds, the Pleyel was the harpsichord reimagined for the modern age. In an interview published in 1949 in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Landowska described the challenges she had faced in reviving her chosen instrument:

“Some people are under the impression,” she told us, “that I rediscovered the harpsichord, and that until I appeared on the scene the instrument had been only a museum piece. This is only partly true. Arnold Dolmetsch had already constructed harpsichords for Chickering in Boston and Gaveau in Paris, while the French firms of Erard and Pleyel had also brought out contemporary models of the instrument. But these harpsichords, if I may say so, were only . . . ,” Mme. Wanda closed her eyes groping for the right description, “well ‘toys’ is really not quite accurate, but it will do until we think of a more appropriate word. You see, these harpsichords did not exploit the grandeur and richness which one finds in the masterpieces written for the instrument. Wealthy amateurs would install them in their homes for the performances of easy gavottes and minuets. That is all. The harpsichord then manufactured was a quaint plaything, not a musical instrument in the truest sense.”⁷⁹

In deeming the first generation of modern harpsichords instruments to be little more than “quaint playthings,” Landowska seems to have suggested that their historically evocative appearances posed

⁷⁷ For the specifications of the later metal-framed Pleyel harpsichords, see Denise Restout, “The Pleyel Harpsichord,” *Diapason* 70 (July 1979): 16. According to Restout, the full metal frame of the instrument “was added to Pleyel harpsichords in 1923 at the request of Wanda Landowska (prior to her first concert tour in America) to strengthen the outer case of the instrument, so it can withstand rough handlings and changes of climate.” *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ See the chapter “Landowska's American Circle” in Palmer, *Harpsichord in America*, 68–82.

⁷⁹ Roland Gelatt, “A Landmark for Landowska,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 32 (25 June 1949): 49–50, 61, esp. 49.

a problem for the serious performer. Whereas “quaintness” was a desirable trait for both the museum display and the bourgeois parlor, it proved to be a liability in the concert hall. Indeed, surveying the harpsichords constructed in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, we find a striking rupture in the evolution of their design: by 1915 almost none of the instruments being built were decorated with anything approaching the level of ornamentation given the laureates of the 1889 exposition.⁸⁰ This is surprising, given the historically inspired custom casework available for many contemporary pianos. As Michael Latham has noted, Pleyel was offering several pianos during this time that “looked more or less like historical harpsichords, with their exteriors painted in what appears today to be a pastiche of 18th-century French taste.”⁸¹ The firm was clearly capable of manufacturing instruments replete with period details, but Latham suggested that such lavish ornamentation may have been far from desirable for a musician like Landowska, who focused specifically on providing a “modern interpretation of the past.”⁸²

Musical instruments live complicated lives. They are not just tools for music making but inevitably exist within a framework of political, social, and historical associations.⁸³ The harpsichord is no exception. Its modern revival was particularly fraught because of the need to renegotiate the instrument’s identity: at once to take into account its evocative histories—both real and imagined—and to present it to modern audiences in a way that would allow it to be taken seriously not just as a reliquary of the musical past but as a functional musical instrument. In the end the successful reintroduction of the harpsichord in the early decades of the twentieth century relied on a sort of instrumental exorcism—a move beyond the literary hauntings and historical confabulations of the nineteenth century toward a more sober conception of the instrument’s identity and the adoption of a more vital and pragmatic approach to its

⁸⁰ Exceptions to this rule can be found in a few of the instruments produced by Arnold Dolmetsch that were generally closer to historical models than other instruments of the time. Even Dolmetsch’s instruments, however, generally favored more restrained decoration and often featured some modern appendages such as registration pedals. See the illustrated catalogue *Arnold Dolmetsch and His Instruments* (Haslemere, UK: A. Dolmetsch, 1930), 1–6, 8–11.

⁸¹ Latham, “Don Quixote and Wanda Landowska,” 99.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ The instrument most studied for its social and cultural position is undoubtedly the piano. The classic work in this area is Arthur Loesser’s *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954). A more recent contribution is the collection of essays edited by James Parakilas, *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

performance. By the 1920s the instrument could legitimately be claimed to belong to the modern world.

The harpsichord had also become a very different instrument from the fragile antiques of the previous century. The following poetic extract reflects the distance the instrument had come, both mechanically and culturally. On a late night in 1924 a watchman at New York's Steinway Hall (credited only as "A. Bunte") was inspired to pen a short poem after having watched Landowska practicing on stage on her massive Pleyel:

One evening I hear a knock on the door.
 It was somebody I never seen before:
 Madam Landowska with her harpsichord.
 Of this instrument the Madam is very proud!
 Because it is wonderful and the latest out.
 The Madam herself is full of art:
 And she certainly knows how to play her part.
 With her energie [*sic*] and all her might,
 She studies late into the night.
 Please do not forget her worthy address—
 As we all hope and wish her the best success.⁸⁴

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Gone are the spirits of composers past, or the images of distant times and far-off lands. This modest verse, preserved in the pages of the *Music Trade Review*, betrays none of the antiquating tropes so popular in the nineteenth century, concentrating instead on Landowska's "energie" and "might," and making a special note that the Polish virtuoso's instrument is "the latest out."

The generation of revivalists that came to maturity after World War II reacted strongly against what they perceived as a lack of historical fidelity in such instruments, reserving their choicest vitriol for Landowska's Pleyel. In a 1971 interview the preeminent builder William Dowd went so far as to refer to the Pleyel as "the chief anti-Christ" of all modern harpsichords.⁸⁵ Joel Cohen and Herb Schnitzer, writing in 1985, effectively articulated the postwar consensus:

While the Dolmetschniks proselytized among amateur musicians and literary-artistic circles, Landowska was giving solo recitals in the same halls, and for the same audiences, as the famous violinists and pianist of those times. Not for her the timid tinkle of some antique keyboard: the harpsichords she played . . . were robust, metal-cast contraptions. The

⁸⁴ A. Bunte, "Music's Inspiration Stirs Steinway and Sons Watchman: Night Guardian of Steinway Hall Waxes Poetic After Hearing Madam Landowska Practice Her Art During the Still Hours of the Evening," *Music Trade Review* 78, no. 1 (5 January 1924): 16, <http://mtr.arcade-museum.com/MTR-1924-78-1/16/>.

⁸⁵ Harold Haney, "Portrait of a Builder," *Harpsichord* 4, no. 1 (1971): 8–19, esp. 13.

Pleyels she made famous through concerts and recordings were meant to fill large halls with plenty of noise; built inside with modern piano technology, they also contained almost as many oddball voicing contraptions as the Japanese electrical keyboards now invading our department stores.⁸⁶

Cohen and Schnitzer concluded that the Pleyel (the “metal monster,” as they unaffectionately call it) “wasn’t really a harpsichord,” and they end their diatribe with a parting shot: “The Pleyels boomed in the bass and boinked in the treble like the true pieces of late Victoriana that they were.”⁸⁷

Whether or not the Pleyel harpsichords ever actually “boomed” or “boinked,” they were anything but Victoriana. Asked late in life about the historical veracity of her chosen instrument, Landowska provided an astute answer: “I cannot sign a guarantee that this is how Bach wanted it. But I feel it to be so. You know, there were no factories in Bach’s day, and no standard harpsichord existed. I built mine as a ‘symbol’ of the early eighteenth-century instrument. To the best of my knowledge it is a faithful re-creation.”⁸⁸ In speaking of her harpsichord as a “symbol” and a “re-creation,” Landowska seems to acknowledge, however tacitly, that the instrument she had been playing exclusively for four decades was not in fact Bach’s harpsichord—or that of any other eighteenth-century composer—but instead a necessary and ingenious compromise, a representation of the musical past that had been reinforced and redesigned for the audiences of the present.

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ABSTRACT

Though far from being the only historical instrument to receive renewed attention during the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, the harpsichord holds a special place in the history of the early music revival. No other instrument played as visible—or, perhaps, as controversial—a role in popularizing musical activities during the revival. As a large and visually distinctive presence, the harpsichord has a tendency to garner attention wherever it appears, whether in a museum case or on the concert hall stage. In this article I explore the harpsichord’s nineteenth-century “death” and its subsequent revival—

⁸⁶ Joel Cohen and Herb Snitzer, *Reprise: The Extraordinary Revival of Early Music* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Gelatt, “A Landmark for Landowska,” 50.

the two periods of its history that have been most neglected. By reexamining the ways in which the harpsichord was portrayed in both words and images, I show that the instrument's eventual acceptance in the twentieth century was far from being a *fait accompli* but depended largely on an extensive and deliberate renegotiation of both its image and its cultural identity.

In the first half of the article I explore the harpsichord's nineteenth-century existence as an evocative emblem of a vanished past: an instrument turned relic that was frequently laden with supernatural literary tropes and ghostly imagery. In the second section I examine the instrument's revival, focusing on the ways in which the harpsichord was brought before modern audiences, ultimately in a form that was heavily reengineered and reconfigured. Indeed, in its journey from museum piece to modern musical instrument the harpsichord underwent a marked transformation of both form and character. The process involved a gradual rejection of much of the cultural baggage the harpsichord had accrued during its long dormancy in the nineteenth century and resulted in a transformation that ultimately won it a place in the modern musical world.