

The Clavichord

The clavichord, forerunner of the piano, was one of the most important instruments in Western keyboard history until the first decades of the nineteenth century. Bernard Brauchli's comprehensive history fills a major gap in the literature on this instrument. Beginning with the earliest known references, he traces the clavichord's evolution up to the mid-nineteenth century, ending with a study of performance technique. The clavichord's structural developments (traced largely through an analysis of extant instruments), literary documentation (much of it presented here for the first time in English translation), treatises and iconographical sources are presented in chronological order. What emerges from this in-depth study of the various sources is an overview of the essential role this instrument played both socially and musically for more than four centuries, restoring the clavichord to the position it justly deserves in history.

Bernard Brauchli lives in Pully (Lausanne), Switzerland and is widely known in the field of early keyboard music through his many concerts, recordings and research, most notably on the clavichord. He has made numerous recordings for EMI and for Titanic Records (USA). He is artistic director of the Cambridge Society for Early Music (Boston, Mass.) and founder and president of the Festival Musica Antica a Magnano, the Corsi di Musica Antica a Magnano and, with Christopher Hogwood, founder of the International Centre for Clavichord Studies, all in Magnano, Piedmont, Italy.

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Bernard Brauchli



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Contents

- List of plates *page* ix
Acknowledgements xvi
Foreword by Christopher Hogwood xviii
- Introduction 1
- 1 Origins of the clavichord 8**
- The monochord 9
 - The *organistrum* 13
 - Bowed monochords and *tromba marina* 13
 - The chekker 14
 - The keyed monochord 16
 - First references to the clavichord 16
 - The psaltery and the tympanon 17
 - The keyboard 18
- 2 The early clavichord: 1400 to the beginning of the sixteenth century 21**
- Iconographical documents 21
 - Early treatises 28
 - Literary sources 44
- 3 The clavichord in the sixteenth century 55**
- Extant sixteenth-century clavichords 56
 - Iconographical sources 77
 - Sixteenth-century treatises 84
 - Literary sources 90
- 4 The clavichord in the seventeenth century 95**
- Extant instruments 95
 - Seventeenth-century iconographical documents 113
 - Seventeenth-century treatises 116
 - Literary sources 129

5	The clavichord in the eighteenth century	136
	England, France and Italy	137
	Germany and its neighbouring countries	144
	Sweden and other Scandinavian countries	176
	Spain and Portugal	185
	The New World	189
	Eighteenth-century treatises	192
	Eighteenth-century composers and the clavichord	213
6	The clavichord in the early nineteenth century	230
	Germany	231
	Sweden	233
	The Iberian peninsula	234
	Nineteenth-century treatises	236
7	Aspects of clavichord performance practice	253
	Hand and finger positions, as seen in early treatises and iconographical documents	253
	The <i>Bebung</i> and <i>Tragen der Töne</i>	267
	Slurred notes	274
	Arpeggios	275
	Ornamentation	275
	Tempo	276
	Conclusion	278
	Appendix 1 A comprehensive list of iconographical documents on the clavichord	281
	Appendix 2 Technical terms in five languages	295
	Appendix 3 Leopoldo Franciolini	297
	Notes	299
	Bibliography	361
	Index	373

Plates

1.1	Anonymous (twelfth century), Guido of Arezzo and his Pupil Theobaldus at the Monochord	page 11
1.2	Anonymous (twelfth century), Monochord played by Boethius. (By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library)	11
1.3	Anonymous woodcut of a monochord from: Lodovico Fogliani, <i>Musica theorica</i> (Venice, 1529)	11
1.4	Anonymous woodcut of a monochord from: Michael Praetorius, <i>Theatrum Instrumentorum</i> (Wolfenbüttel, 1620)	12
1.5	Reconstruction of Michael Praetorius's monochord by Clifford Boehmer, 1980	12
1.6	Anonymous (Germany, c. 1380), Musician playing a Monochord. (Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)	14
1.7	Anonymous, <i>Schema monocordi</i> . Woodcut from: Johannes Aventinus (wrongly attributed to Nicolaus Faber), <i>Musicae rudimenta</i> (Augsburg, 1516)	15
1.8	Anonymous (thirteenth century), fresco with Psaltery ('medio caño')	18
1.9	Anonymous, Organ Keyboard and Pedalboard. Woodcut from: Michael Praetorius, <i>Theatrum Instrumentorum</i> (Wolfenbüttel, 1620)	19
2.1	Anonymous (Germany, c. 1400–50), Angel with Clavichord. (Photo Lothar Bemann)	22
2.2	John Prudd, Musician-Angel (England, c. 1439–47)	22
2.3	Anonymous, Detail from: The Twenty-four Elders Making Music (Germany, 1448)	23
2.4	Anonymous, The Infant Jesus Making Music (Utrecht, c. 1475)	23
2.5	Master of Mary of Burgundy, The Adoration of the Lamb (Belgium, c. 1475)	24
2.6	Geertgen Tot Sint Jans, Detail from: Glorification of the Virgin (1489)	24

2.7	Workshop of Martin Radeleff, Angel with Clavichord (c. 1495). (Photo Lothar Bemmman)	25
2.8	Anonymous, Musician-Angels (1425)	25
2.9	Adrian van Wesel, Adoration of the Magi (c. 1475–77). (Copyright Rijksmuseum-Stichting, Amsterdam)	27
2.10	Anonymous, Musician-Angels (first half of fifteenth century). (Foto Mas, Barcelona)	27
2.11	Anonymous, Angel with Clavichord (c. 1440)	28
2.12	Arnaut de Zwolle, <i>Compositio Clavicordi</i> (c. 1440–66). (Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France – Paris)	30
2.13	Diagram of distribution of the tangents on the strings. (Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France – Paris)	30
2.14	Reconstruction of de Zwolle's clavichord by Jean Maurer. (Copyright The Bate Collection of Musical Instruments, University of Oxford)	33
2.15	Workshop of Baccio Pontelli, intarsia of clavichord (c. 1479–82)	35
2.16	a. Plan of Arnaut's clavichord. (By permission of Oxford University Press)	37
	b. Plan of the clavichord of the Urbino intarsia. (By permission of Oxford University Press)	37
2.17	Reconstruction of the Urbino clavichord intarsia. (Copyright The Bate Collection of Musical Instruments, University of Oxford)	37
2.18	Attributed to Giovanni Maria Platini, intarsia of clavichord (1455–1500). (Copyright Ezio Quiresi, Cremona)	38
2.19	Anonymous, drawing of pedal-clavichord (after 1467) from: Hugo von Reutlingen, <i>Flores musicae</i>	41
2.20	Reconstruction of keyed monochord of Conrad von Zabern	43
2.21	Anonymous, engraving of keyed monochord from: Johannes Gallicus, <i>Liber Notabilis Musicae</i> . (By permission of the British Library)	43
2.22	Martin Gerbert, copy of a drawing of a keyed monochord by Johannes Keck (c. 1442)	43
3.1	a. Clavichord by Dominicus Pisarenensis (Pesaro, sixteenth century). (Cliché Publimages)	57
	b. Anonymous clavichord. (Copyright IRPA-KIK, Brussels)	57
	c. Detail of woodcut of stringed keyboard instruments from: Michael Praetorius, <i>Theatrum Instrumentorum</i> (1620)	58

	List of plates	xi
3.2 Anonymous clavichord (c. 1540)	59	
3.3 Anonymous clavichord (c. 1540)	59	
3.4 Anonymous, engraving of clavichord from: Antonio Valente, <i>Intavolatura de Cimbalo</i> (1576). (By permission of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Naples)	59	
3.5 Diagram of a clavichord with two soundboards	60	
3.6 Clavichord by Dominicus Pisarensis, 1543	63	
3.7 a. Building technique of 'common' clavichord b. Building technique of Pisarensis clavichord	65 65	
3.8 Anonymous clavichord (Italy, end of the sixteenth or early seventeenth century). (Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)	66	
3.9 Anonymous clavichord (Italy, c. 1550)	69	
3.10 Left side of same clavichord	71	
3.11 Antonio Valente, <i>Intavolatura de Cimbalo</i> (1576), <i>Fantasia de 1° Modo</i> , bars 187–8	72	
3.12 Attributed to Gaspar Vaz or Nasco Fernandez, detail from: Virgin with Child on the Throne (1535/40)	74	
3.13 Jan Gossart (Jan de Mabuse), detail from: Holy Family and Angels (c. 1500). (Photo José Pessoa, Arquivo Nacional de Fotografia – Instituto Português de Museus)	75	
3.14 Jan Barentz Muycckens, Double Portrait at the Clavichord (1648). (Copyright Collection Haags Gemeentemuseum 1997, c/o Beeldrecht Amstelveen)	76	
3.15 Hans Burgkmair, <i>Der Weisskunig</i> (before 1516)	78	
3.16 Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (c. 1500–59), The Clavichord Player	78	
3.17 Follower of the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, Young Woman Carrying a Clavichord (c. 1540). (Courtesy of Mrs Clayton C. Timbrell)	79	
3.18 Workshop of Jan Sanders (Van Hemessen), Young Woman Playing a Clavichord (c. 1575)	80	
3.19 Leonardo da Vinci, Rebus (c. 1500). (The Royal Collection, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II)	82	
3.20 Bernardino Licinio, The Concert (1535?). (The Royal Collection, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II)	82	
3.21 Jacques Cellier, drawing of a clavichord (c. 1587). (Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France – Paris)	83	

3.22	Anonymous woodcut of a keyboard with two accidental keys from: Sebastian Virdung, <i>Musica Getutscht</i> (1511). (Copyright British Library)	86
3.23	Juan Bermudo, <i>Declaración de Instrumentos Musicales</i> (1555), fol. lxii. (Reproduced with kind permission of Bärenreiter-Verlag, Kassel)	89
3.24	Jost Ammann, <i>The String Maker</i> (1568)	92
4.1	Positions of the keyboard: a. protruding; b. enclosed	103
4.2.	Positions of the strings: a. parallel to the keyboard; b. oblique	104
4.3	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, c. 1675)	106
4.4	Clavichord by Israel Gellinger (1670)	106
4.5.	Clavichord by Georg Woytzig (Stockholm, 1688). (Copyright Musikhistorisk Museet, Stockholm)	107
4.6	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, end of seventeenth century)	107
4.7	Rib crossing underneath the bridge	108
4.8	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, end of seventeenth century)	108
4.9	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, mid-seventeenth century)	108
4.10	Short octave C/E with split accidentals D/F# and E/G#	110
4.11	Short octave G ₁ /B ₁	110
4.12	The 'Viennese' short octave	111
4.13	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, end of seventeenth century)	112
4.14	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, seventeenth century). (Copyright Historisches Museum Basel; photo P. Portner)	113
4.15	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, end of seventeenth century)	113
4.16	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, second half of seventeenth century)	114
4.17	Anonymous clavichord (Portugal or Spain, seventeenth century). (Cliché Publimages, Paris)	114
4.18	Anonymous clavichord (Portugal or Spain, seventeenth century)	115
4.19	Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), <i>Couple Playing Music</i>	115
4.20	Drawing of damping cloth of clavichord	117
4.21	Christoph Weigel, <i>The Organ Maker</i> (1698)	117
4.22	Anonymous woodcut from: Michael Praetorius, <i>Theatrum Instrumentorum</i> (1620)	120
4.23	Drawing from Marin Mersenne, <i>Harmonie Universelle</i> (1636)	122

5.1	Clavichord by Peter Hicks (England, mid-eighteenth century). (Victoria and Albert Museum Picture Library)	137
5.2	Clavichord by Ugo Annibale Traeri (Modena, 1726)	139
5.3	Clavichord attributed to Giuseppe Solfanelli (Pisa, 1721)	139
5.4	Clavichord attributed to Bartolomeo Cristofori (Florence, 1719)	140
5.5	Plan of strings and keylevers	147
5.6	Clavichord by Johann Michael Heinitz (Germany, 1716)	148
5.7	Clavichord by Johann Hermann Hauser (Gimborn?, 1761). (Verlag Erwin Bochinsky, Frankfurt am Main)	149
5.8	Plan of soundboard and tuning pins	151
5.9	Clavichord by Johann Christoph Fleischer (Hamburg, 1728)	151
5.10	Clavichord by Hieronymus Albrecht Hass (Hamburg, 1728)	153
5.11	Clavichord by Barthold Fritz (Braunschweig, Germany, c. 1750)	153
5.12	Christian Gottlob Hubert's key guiding system	154
5.13	Key guiding system of an anonymous clavichord (Germany or Spain, mid-eighteenth century)	154
5.14	Clavichord with <i>Pantaleonzug</i> by M. Christensen (Copenhagen, 1759)	156
5.15	Soundboard of same instrument	156
5.16	<i>Pantaleonzug</i> of same instrument	157
5.17	Lute stop on an anonymous clavichord (Flawil, Switzerland, 1780)	157
5.18	Pedal-clavichord by Johann David Gerstenberg (Geringswalde, Germany, 1760)	158
5.19	Anonymous pedal-clavichord (Germany, after 1844)	158
5.20	Anonymous double clavichord (Germany or Norway, c. 1725)	159
5.21	Clavichord by Johann Augustin Straube (Berlin, 1783). (Copyright Collection Haags Gemeentemuseum 1997, c/o Beeldrecht Amstelveen)	160
5.22	Damping mechanism of <i>Cembal d'Amour</i>	162
5.23	Clavichord by Carl Lemme (Braunschweig, Germany, 1787)	165
5.24	Anonymous, Lady at the Clavichord (eighteenth century)	167
5.25	J. H. Tischbein the Elder, Self-portrait with His Wife at the Clavichord (1769)	168
5.26	J. A. Rosmässler, Title-page from: Johann Wilhelm Hässler, <i>Clavier- und Singstücke verschiedener Art</i> (Leipzig, 1782)	169

5.27	Emanuel Handmann (1718–81), The Music Lesson	170
5.28	Anonymous, Two Students Playing Music	170
5.29	Anonymous, Chamber Music with Lute, Violin and Clavichord	171
5.30	Anonymous clavichord (Austria or Germany, second half of eighteenth century)	171
5.31	Clavichord by Philipp Jacob Specken (Stockholm, c. 1750)	178
5.32	Clavichord by Johan Broman (Ronneby, Sweden, 1756)	180
5.33	Clavichord by Pehr Lindholm and Henric Johan Söderström (Stockholm, 1794)	180
5.34	Claviorganum ('organised' clavichord) by Pehr Lundborg (Stockholm, 1772)	181
5.35	Clavichord by Pehr Lindholm (Stockholm, 1785)	183
5.36	Keylever tie to pedal of pedal-clavichord by Gustav Gabriel Wolthersson (Sweden, 1759)	183
5.37	Hammers and tangents of <i>Hammerclavichord</i> by Mathias Petter Kraft (Stockholm, 1792)	184
5.38	Pehr Hörberg (1746–1816), Painting of a fretted clavichord	185
5.39	Anonymous clavichord (Spain, eighteenth century)	188
5.40	Anonymous clavichord (Germany, first half of eighteenth century). (Courtesy Moravian Historical Society, Nazareth, Pennsylvania; photo Robert Walch)	191
5.41	Peter Sprengel, <i>Handwerke und Künste in Tabellen</i> . Plate VI	201
5.42	David Tannenberg, Working design of a clavichord (c. 1780)	204
5.43	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's anonymous clavichord	225
5.44	Mozart's travelling clavichord by Johann Andreas Stein (Augsburg, 1762)	225
5.45	Clavichord by Johann Bohak (Vienna, 1794)	227
6.1	Clavichord by Henric J. Söderstrom (Stockholm, 1810)	231
6.2	Damping cloth according to Gall, 1805	241
6.3	Drawing illustrating Thon's description of winding a string onto a tuning pin	248
6.4	Drawing illustrating Thon's description of the loop made at the hitch-pin end of the string	251
7.1	Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (c. 1500–59), The Clavichord Player (detail)	256

7.2	Attributed to Gaspar Vaz (c. 1490–1568) or Nasco Fernandez (recorded 1512–41/43), Virgin with Child on the Throne (detail)	257
7.3	Bernardino Licinio (c. 1489–before 1565), The Concert (detail)	260
7.4	Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), Couple Playing Music (detail)	261
7.5	Anonymous (Flanders) after Peter Paul Rubens, St Cecilia Playing a Clavichord (detail)	261
7.6	Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder (1722–89), Self-portrait with His Wife at the Clavichord (detail)	268
7.7	Anonymous (S. Germany, Franconia?), Lady at the Clavichord (detail)	268
7.8	Marie-Louise Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842), Giovanni Paisiello at the Clavichord (detail)	269
7.9	Emanuel Handmann (1718–81), The Music Lesson (detail)	269
7.10	Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, <i>Die Kunst das Clavier zu spielen</i> , Tab. III, fig. 10	272
7.11	Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, <i>Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen</i> , Fig. IV (a)	273
7.12	Daniel Gottlob Türk, <i>Klavierschule</i> (1789), p. 293	274
7.13	Daniel Gottlob Türk, <i>Klavierschule</i> (1789), p. 354	275

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Foreword by Christopher Hogwood

With one of the most dismissive and wrong-headed sentences ever penned for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, John Robinson declared, in 1801, that ‘the clavichord gives a fretful, waspish kind of sound, not at all suited to tender expression’. Nothing could be further from the truth, but his barb epitomises the long-standing ignorance that has dogged this innocent instrument for two centuries.

In ArtSpeak, the clavichord is a ‘sleeper’ – an overlooked masterpiece, its true value for the most part unsuspected by the trade. As a work of art it would probably also be a water-colour – delicate, private, subtle – allocated to a small side-gallery, far from the grand sculptures, the vast canvases, and all the assertiveness and public grandeur of *l’art pompier*.

In a world of high-decibel music, lacking the stentorian tones of the grand piano, and the lung-power of the organ, it can never assist at the celebration of High Mass, or clamour at the fall of nations in a symphony, or commemorate the rise of Napoleon in a concerto. The world of the clavichord is private and personal: as E. J. Dent put it, ‘it’s like the influenza, & searches out all one’s weak places’.

But precisely because of its private, *aquarelle* nature, it was declared to be fragile and faint, even timid; at the arrival of the piano, we were told, it faded from the scene, was relegated to a dark corner, banished to the nursery for practice, and soon forgotten. Marginalised in this way by later, piano-centric historians, the clavichord was remembered as an instrument of last resort rather than first choice.

But this was not true. From the evidence of surviving instruments, from iconography, from documentation and treatises, and from its very repertoire, it can now be proved to have been the most lasting of all domestic keyboards. ‘Mother of all musical instruments’ in 1618, ‘the first grammar of all keyboard executants’ in 1732, and still ‘the true keyboard’ in 1805 – these titles argue stamina and staying power. Nor was the repertoire considered light or inconsequential; when the poet von Gerstenberg in 1787 searched to add ‘explicatory’ words to the C minor *Probestücke* fantasy by C. P. E. Bach, he found only two texts capable of underlining the seriousness of such a composition – the final speech of Socrates and the soliloquy of Hamlet.

Not before time, this volume presents the evidence to contradict Mr

Robinson, and fervent partisans (amongst whom I would number myself) can, through documentary and iconographic evidence, have an overview of the history of this resilient instrument for more than 500 years. The picture stretches from the earliest instruments, and shared repertoire of the 1500s, through that amazing half-century after the appearance of C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch* in 1753 when the instrument claimed an exclusive repertoire of several thousand pieces, and well into the nineteenth-century revival (or should it be survival?).

The focus, of course, is impressively domestic. As in the art world works on paper hold a more intimate message than oils on canvas, so, as Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart rhapsodised, 'when you improvise by the light of the moon, or refresh your soul on summer nights, or celebrate the evenings of spring; ah, then pine not for the strident harpsichord. See, your clavichord breathes as gently as your heart.'