

Reviving the Earliest Pianos



The hammer-action with escapement for sounding a keyboard string instrument—which today we call the piano—was devised by Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655-1731) some time in the last decade of the seventeenth century, working in Florence under the patronage of the Medici rulers of that city-state. The first reference to a finished and functional piano by Cristofori is recorded in an archival document dated 1700. Cristofori announced his invention to the world in an article describing the instrument in detail, accompanied by a drawing of the action, and including a discussion of its reception by professional musicians of the time. This article appeared in the Venetian press in 1711 under the name of Scipione Maffei, a well-known intellectual of the day, but apparently was largely written by Cristofori himself. It is clear that he regarded his invention of the piano as a momentous development for the future of music.

Cristofori's invention has proven to be arguably the most successful musical instrument in history. Three of his pianos have survived, all of them representing the fruit of his decades-long work of perfecting his invention. Only the earliest of them, dated 1720 and now in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, has been kept in playable condition, but it has undergone so many renovations and rebuildings that its present-day voice can be accepted only with caution as representing its original sound. Still, the three pianos represent a treasure-store of physical evidence, especially in combination with the existing documentary evidence. Given this, it is surprising that until the last fifteen years of the twentieth century there seemed to be little interest in this opening stage of the piano's history, and little curiosity about how Cristofori's pianos sounded and whether or not they worked satisfactorily.

The restoration of the Stearns harpsichord in 1979 had provided me a window opening into the Cristofori shop, and the question of the earliest pianos had been on my mind for some time. It was apparent that the antiques could not be subjected to the exercise and experimentation necessary for a better assessment of their competence as musical instruments. What was needed was a working model, or better, several working models, of the antiques. The approach of the three-hundredth anniversary—the tercentenary year 2000—of the first working piano stimulated institutional support for this work. In July, 1994, the Schubert Club in St. Paul, MN, commissioned a replica copy of the 1726 Cristofori piano in the Leipzig Instrumenten-Museum from me, and I delivered the instrument in 1997. From the beginning, that instrument was very well received. It was employed in two recording projects in that same year, the first by Elaine Funaro playing sonatas by Giovanni Benedetto Platti, the second by David Schrader playing sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti. From February through October, 2001, it was on loan to the Smithsonian Institution for the exhibition Piano 300, a retrospective of the history of the piano in recognition of the tercentenary of its invention. The Smithsonian had arranged to borrow the 1722 Cristofori piano in possession of the Museo nazionale degli strumenti musicali in Rome. Piano 300 was a runaway success, and public demand delayed its closing. Being unable to extend the loan arrangement with Rome, the curators asked to borrow the Schubert Club Cristofori copy until the exhibit finally closed in October, 2001. While this instrument was in Washington, it was employed in recitals and chamber music programs. A clip from Funaro's recording gave visitors to the exhibit an idea of the sound of the Cristofori piano.

The story of the Florentine piano does not end with Cristofori. Giovanni Ferrini—Cristofori's apprentice, then his assistant, and finally successor to his shop—continued production of pianos in Florence, refining and developing the design handed down by his master. These instruments appear to have been widely known and well respected. There is evidence of the presence of a Florentine piano in the Leipzig-Dresden area in the 1730s, and of others of them in possession of Maria Barbara of Braganza, Queen of Spain, patroness and pupil of Domenico Scarlatti. English grand pianos from Backers to

Broadwood are deeply indebted to the Florentine piano as transmitted by Ferrini, and the same is true of the pianos of Sebastien Erard.

Ferrini enlarged the range of his instruments, carrying the treble at first up to d3 and later even to e3 and f3. While Italian keyboard composers by and large accepted c3 as the highest treble note, that range was somewhat limiting elsewhere in Europe. A good many of Scarlatti's sonatas required d3 (a small number go even higher), and so does all of J. S. Bach's ensemble keyboard music from the 1730's. The enlarged Florentine piano as made by Ferrini is consequently essential in assessing the relevance of the piano to the music of J. S. Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. The only physical evidence of Ferrini's piano-making to have survived is a two-manual cembalo combining harpsichord action on the lower and piano action on the upper manual. Space limitation somewhat distorts the upper-manual piano action in this instrument, so that it is not entirely characteristic of his usual piano actions. Nevertheless this instrument, made in 1746, shows what the Florentine piano had become in the nearly half-century of its development. I began working on a reconstruction of a Ferrini piano in 2003, completing the instrument in 2005. It has been much used and well-received (see "Instruments in Use").

Interest in the piano as invented and first developed by Bartolomeo Cristofori, and as further enlarged and refined by Giovanni Ferrini, is growing. Other builders have joined in the work of reconstruction, and scholars are reassessing the position of the first pianos in the musical culture of the time. It seems clear that the revival of the Florentine piano will continue, that it represents the latest major discovery of the early music movement, and that it will revolutionize our understanding of the keyboard music of the high Baroque era.