

SQUARE PIANO

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Sounds of the piano in Colonial Australia

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We know the sound of the modern piano so well that that of the pianoforte in its infancy will seem almost as strange as it must have to the Aboriginal people whose lands had so recently become occupied. The pianofortes that came to Australia were English-made (as would be expected from the exclusive mix of English, Irish and Scottish immigrant), and were known as 'square' pianos. They were destined for a domestic market. Thousands were imported into Australia in the first fifty years of the colony. Most have now disappeared or remain only as shells of their former selves – croaky-voiced and unplayable.

In 2019 I was fortunate enough to obtain from harpsichord-maker Carey Beebe, a playable 'Robertson' square piano, manufactured in England in the first half of the nineteenth century. Soon after, I came across two pianoforte restorers in regional Bathurst who willingly undertook the task of its restoration.

Before starting, certain considerations were discussed.

What was the purpose of the restoration? Was it for public performance? Was it the preservation of an historical entity, not necessarily fulfilling its original function? Could it provide clues as to performance practices?

And then: How far should the restoration go – replacement or retention? Should it be maintained as a museum piece with as many original parts as possible or, should we aim for a perfect mechanism that would deliver a polished performance. We decided on something in between. The aim would be to recreate the sounds of a significant period in Australian social history. The square piano was often a treasured possession, sitting at the centre of the home, drawing in the family, the community or merely one or two. It fulfilled the same function as the upright did later in the century – contributing to entertainment, culture and social cohesion. Our Robertson square piano may be nearly 200 years old, with some clackety false teeth, but overall it can still give a pretty good idea of what music sounded like in the homes of colonial Australians.

Background to the Fortepiano

These days, many will have heard pieces played on a 'fortepiano', the forerunner to today's modern piano. These elegant grand pianofortes were variously called piano e forte, pianoforte, piano forte, pianoforté and fortepiano, all of which emphasised a function unavailable to the harpsichord player, that is, a dynamic (loud and soft) range. The fortepiano was characterised by a responsive mechanism that allowed great rapidity of finger action, effective dynamics, and clarity of tone. The two most important centres of production were the Viennese and the English. The Viennese instruments were said to have a 'speaking' (clear) style, while the English featured a more 'singing' (sustained) sound. These grand fortepianos could stand confidently at the front of a small orchestra, able to deliver the virtuosic demands of newly written concertos and solo works by Haydn and Mozart and their contemporaries.

The Square Piano in Australia

But not everybody in nineteenth century Europe could afford these magnificent instruments, nor did they necessarily want, or have the facility to play, the demanding works of some composers. Yet playing the piano was a common and highly regarded skill. We see reference to this in Jane Austen's 'Emma' when the impossibly talented Jane Fairfax unaccountably receives "a very elegant looking instrument – not a grand, but a large-sized [Broadwood] square pianoforte". So, what exactly is a 'square' pianoforte, what is it doing in Australia, and what is its relevance today?

The 'square' pianoforte as it was known, filled a place in society similar in the first half of the nineteenth century to that of the upright in the second. It was ideal for the home. The square piano's rectangular (not square) shape, its turned-wood legs and burnished veneer made it a decorative and useful article of furniture if nothing else, easy to fit into a moderate-sized room and able to be shifted around at will. But it was much more than that. Its importance in the social fabric of the colony is hard to overstate. One need look no further for evidence, than the sheer volume of instruments that arrived in Australia.

According to piano-historian Michael Atherton, during the 1830's approximately 10 imported pianos arrived on every large ship to hit Australian shores. The manufacturer Broadwood supplied pianofortes not only to London but to the new colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). The vast majority of these were square pianos which were affordable, compact and stackable. Accompanying the pianos was a wealth of music, as evidenced in the over three thousand separate sheet music scores in the library of Sydney Living Museums.

Unsurprisingly, as most imported goods came from London in the early years of the colony, pianos and their associated music scores were by English manufacturers, and those composers whose works were circulating in London, and were popular.

Musically speaking, the English square piano's warm and unobtrusive tone made it ideal for accompanying a single singer or instrumentalist - violin and flute parts were often available, allowing for duets and trios suitable for a social occasion. Portfolios from the Sydney Living Museums give a valuable insight into the type of music that was played. Many of the songs and pieces are by composers whose popularity has long since disappeared. But as well as popular tunes, for the pianist there is to be found significant numbers of solo works by those composers who spent significant (and often financially rewarding) time in London during the course of their careers, such as Joseph Haydn, his student Ignace Pleyel, and Johann Baptist Cramer. There is even a piano duet version of 'Messiah' by Georg Frederic Handel.

Characteristics of Early Pianos

Despite the change of mechanism that allowed an actual rather than a simulated dynamic range, early pianos (including both grand and square varieties) still had much in common with their predecessor the harpsichord, and very little in relation to the modern piano. Characteristics included natural resonance which could be enhanced by various pedal mechanisms; a low level of dynamic which created an intimacy suitable for the salon or small chamber; distinctive tonal colours across the range of registers redolent of different voices; and a shallow and easy depression of the key requiring a light touch. These characteristics reveal the early pianoforte's limitations as well as strengths, a fact that composers understood very well.

About the Robertson Square Piano

The Robertson square piano (No. 949) used in this recording was manufactured in Liverpool by James Smith around 1835. Its provenance is sketchy (lost!) but it was possibly located during some part of its history at Ballangeich between Warrambool and Mortlake in Victoria in the ownership of William Tomlinson (1828-1908) and his family who ran the post-office there. Its musical features are typical of an English piano (such as Broadwood) and includes a dynamic range of very soft to moderately loud; tonal variation from full and rich in a resonant bass, mellow mid-range and a pleasing but thin treble; range of 73 notes; and a foot pedal for greater sustain. The English preference for a *legato*, full sound is amply demonstrated with our Robertson. Its qualities are nicely demonstrated with examples of the types of works that were shipped for the Australian market.

Conclusion

The square piano and grand fortepiano could be regarded purely as a transitional instrument placed between the harpsichord of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the modern piano in the twentieth. But these instruments, hand-crafted in hundreds of different workshops, were an entity in themselves, with their own characteristics and music. They are the reason composers composed the way they did, working within those limitations and strengths to make the music of what we call the Classical and Romantic eras. In Australia, and many households throughout England and Europe, they fulfilled a much-needed role in the social fabric of a nation, its entertainment and cultural development. There are many still in existence that deserve restoration, study and to be performed on once again.

John Christian Bach (1735- d. London 1782)

Sonata in B flat Op. 5 No. 1 from 'Six Sonatas for the Piano Forte or Harpsichord', London
Allegretto, Tempo di Minuetto

In 1768 Johann Christian Bach (known in London as John Christian) was the first to publicly showcase the qualities of a pianoforte with one by Christoph Zumpe, and from that it could be said that he was in favour of the instrument. He had arrived in London in 1764 and had soon, in partnership with countryman Carl Friedrich Abel, established a career as an entrepreneur of a concert series. To this he contributed many compositions for soloists and chamber groups, and it is possible that the pianoforte was used as a continuo instrument, though unlikely, in the light of its limited power of projection, on its own. Grounded in the traditions of the harpsichord, Bach occupied a period of transition between the era of the harpsichord and that of the developing pianoforte (as seen in the title of his collection of sonatas). His Sonata in B flat highlights the differences and similarities of the two instruments as it contains elements of both. Two obvious differences are tonal colour and dynamic variation. Bach makes liberal use of the terms *piano* and *forte* in both movements, seeming to delight in the different effects they produce. The opening 4-bar melody in the first movement is noteworthy for its lyricism. But underlying these modifications, articulation is retained and specified and ornamentation abundant.

Joseph Haydn (1732- d. Vienna 1809)

Twelve Variations in E flat major Hoboken XVII: 3

Joseph Haydn was an experienced composer long before the pianoforte had established itself as a viable new keyboard, popular with players. Favourable circumstances allowed him to observe and contribute to the changes that took place in the early development of the pianoforte and its repertoire. Between 1766 and 1770 (about the same time Bach was premiering the pianoforte), Haydn did much to reshape and develop the piano sonata. In 1766 he had moved to Eszterháza with the court where he was for the first time, free to work as he wanted. By 1770, divertimenti for harpsichord had given way to sonatas for pianoforte, and with a few exceptions, the harpsichord had disappeared off the list of the Haydn catalogue of works. During his visit to London following an invitation from impresario Salomon for the London concert season, Haydn is known to have composed several sonatas and piano trios specifically for English patrons. He intentionally acquainted himself with English preferences, which included much use of the pedal, legato playing and rich, resonant sonorities. The English sonatas have proven to be among his most popular, perhaps because they transpose to the modern piano effectively. Well-suited to the English pianoforte is the set of twelve variations composed between 1770 and 1774. In these, Haydn provides a wealth of variation through many different means. He can be seen to be exploring the tone colours of the middle and upper registers, even within the one phrase, where a sudden jump to a clear higher register may surprise or charm but always feels right (Var. XI). Occasionally the left hand has a more speaking part, rendered possible by the greater strength and warmth of the middle register (Var. X). The tune may be expanded by swift running passages (Var. VI)

rendering short phrases long and linear. Broken chords are made to sound polyphonic by their different voices (Var. IV). Ornamentation might be inbuilt (Var. IV), but also occur as little notes (Var. X, V). Articulatory requirements might be primary and specific (Var. VIII) contrasting abrupt sounds with smooth. However there are no specific indications for pedalling or dynamics.

Ignace Pleyel (1757- d. Paris 1831)

A Favourite Sonata for the Piano Forte Op. 92, No. 2, London
Adagio/Allegro Molto, Adagio non troppo, Allegretto

One of Haydn's best-known and successful students was Ignace Pleyel. As a skilled composer he was highly regarded, gaining a world-wide appreciation. However, his composing period was limited as he embarked on other ventures, setting up a music publishing house, and later a pianoforte manufacturing business which continued long after his death. Pleyel composed many instrumental pieces whose enormous popularity had much to do with their accessibility. As a populist composer, Pleyel has attracted a fair share of criticism. But while they may be lacking in depth, his sonatas for pianoforte (with or without another instrument), demonstrate a thorough understanding of the capabilities of the instrument. Pleyel announces the sonata, the first movement, and the key with pomp. Immediately, articulatory slurs forming couplets remind the player of traditional loud/soft pairings, now rendered with ease on the piano forte. Like Bach's sonata, Pleyel's is littered with *piano* and *forte* signs, with the addition of the occasional *crescendo* and hairpin. Running passages abound. With all of these instructions, Pleyel is making full use of the pianoforte's dynamic resources, resonance, and *legato* capability. The regretful mood of the first movement gives way to the solemnity of the second in which three distinct registers are engaged. This lovely hymn-like movement develops as variations as Pleyel, initially placing the theme in the mellow middle register, moves in the first variation to an ethereal treble, then a rich, moving bass in the second. The playful third movement is a rondo, deliciously light and free, with patterns and potent silences working hand in hand.

Johann Baptist Cramer (1771- d. London 1858)

Sonata in C major (c. 1800) from *Trois Sonates pour Le Piano-Forte composées et dédiées à Joseph Haydn* Oev. 23 No. 2
Largo assai, Allegro agitato, Allegretto

John Baptist Cramer, remembered today primarily for his piano technical studies, was first and foremost a pre-eminent concert pianist, considered one of the finest by Beethoven himself. Contemporary reviewers give some idea of the quality of his playing, and more interestingly from the point of view of performance, how he played. Described as having an exquisitely '*cantabile*' touch by one commentator, he was able to make the pianoforte 'sing like the human voice'. Cramer's Sonata in C is a much more dramatic work than previously encountered

The *Largo assai* that opens the sonata could be considered a prelude or overture rather than of a separate nature to the *Allegro Agitato*. Cramer is liberal with articulatory markings, often changing them on repetition, from *staccato* to slurred and vice versa. By far, the predominant dynamic is *pianissimo*. Into these seething inner workings, *fortissimo* erupts, most effective as broken octaves in the bass regions where it becomes almost threatening. But *fortissimo* is relative in square piano terms, not absolute – relative to the *pianissimo* settings and relative to the modern piano (think *mf*). The last movement, another rondo, is back in the joyful key of C major, and designated *Allegretto*. Cramer's moderate tempo encourages a playful mood surprisingly offset by similar bass passages. Cramer the performer seems to be stretching the capabilities of the English pianoforte to its limits in this composition.

Further reading

David Breitman, *Piano-playing Re-visited: What modern players can learn from period instruments*, University of Rochester Press, first published 2021.

Michael Atherton, *A Coveted Possession: The Rise and Fall of the Piano in Australia*, Black Inc., pub., 2018

Notes by Diana Weston, 2022



Diana Weston grew up playing an historic piano – a Collard & Collard, 1875 'boudoir' grand. Her piano teachers included Sr. Mary Madeleine and world-renowned concert pianists Tessa Burnie, Igor Hmelnitsky and Winifred Burston, the latter her mentor throughout her early years. For many years she played in chamber ensembles and acted as an accompanist before settling on the harpsichord as her Masters instrument. On completing her Masters in Performance Research at UNE, Armidale, NSW, she formed Thoroughbass, an ensemble dedicated to the performance of both early and contemporary music featuring harpsichord and other period instruments. After performing at the Geelvink Fortepiano Festival in The Netherlands, directed by Dr Michael Tsalka in 2016, Diana developed a strong interest in early pianos, realizing that as a harpsichordist, she was well-placed to continue studies and performance in another form of early instrument. Fortunately, she regained the same Collard & Collard she had grown up with and had donated to The Royal Australian Historical Society. With this and a restored square piano – a Robertson c. 1835, she has been exploring the music of the classical era from the perspective of the harpsichordist.

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