

A two-manual harpsichord by Joannes Ruckers, Antwerp, 1617,  
*ravalement* attributed to John Crang, London, circa 1740–1750



This superb instrument is one of the very few Ruckers harpsichords remaining in private ownership. The present occasion is a rare opportunity, perhaps the last in the foreseeable future, to acquire an instrument by a member of the Ruckers family, historically the preeminent masters of harpsichord making. The instrument's *grand ravalement* (enlargement and musical updating) in England about 1740–1750 can be attributed to the noted London harpsichord and organ builder John Crang – a rare, perhaps unique instance of a Ruckers *ravalé* in England by an identifiable master. With splendid painted decoration applied during the *ravalement*, the instrument is also an impressive example of Georgian decorative art.

Report  
by  
John Koster

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#### Provenance:

Said to have been brought to the United States in 1900 by a member of the Steinway family, the instrument was owned by Alexander Steinert (1861–1933), head of the piano manufacturer and Steinway dealer M. Steinert & Sons, Boston. It later belonged to Robert Haas of Los Angeles, where the current owner acquired it in the 1950s.

#### Literature:

Donald H. Boalch. *Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord, 1440-1840*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: George Ronald, 1956), “Summary check-list of Ruckers instruments,” p. 94, number 33; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 135; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., edited by Charles Mould (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 584.

Eric Blom and Denis Stevens, eds., *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Supplementary Volume to the Fifth Edition (London and New York, 1961), p. 384. According to this source, the instrument was listed as Ruckers number 43 in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *Grove* (1940), which is not readily available to consult.

Grant O’Brien, *Ruckers: a Harpsichord and Virginal Building Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), listed in the “Catalogue of Ruckers instruments,” p. 245 as “an English ravalement of a normal [Ruckers] transposing double-manual harpsichord.”

## Description

### Summary

This was originally a standard Ruckers transposing two-manual harpsichord with two sets of strings (8' and 4'), four sets of jacks, and two keyboards a fourth apart in pitch. The upper-manual compass was C/E to c<sup>3</sup> (45 notes); the lower-manual was C/E to f<sup>3</sup> (50 notes). As happened with almost all Ruckers harpsichords, the instrument was altered in accordance with the musical requirements of the later Baroque. The present state stems from a *ravalement* carried out in England about 1740–1750. The case and soundboard were extended in width by about 95 mm in the treble to accommodate new keyboards with the enlarged compass of GG, AA to f<sup>3</sup> (58 notes); the bridges and hitch-pin rails were repinned for slightly closer spacing of the strings; a second set of 8' was provided; and the disposition became 8' and 4' on the lower manual and a dogleg 8' playable from both manuals.

The soundboard retains the original Ruckers painted decoration (retouched and extended in places) with flowers, borders, and arabesques, and the soundwell is decorated with typical Ruckers printed paper. During the *ravalement*, the case was redecorated with brilliant red lacquer on the interior of the lid, the keywell, and jackrail as a ground for gold *chinoiserie* of flowers, leaves, a basket of fruit, and birds. The exterior has similar decorations on panels with a green ground surrounded by greenish black. Handsome chased brass hinges were provided for the lid, and a stand was made in the current English fashion.

Inscriptions:

Cast into the gilt lead rose, flanking an angel facing left:

*IR*



In ink or black paint on the name batten:

*IOHANNES RVCKERS ME FECIT ANTVERPIÆ*



Painted on the soundboard in front of the 4' bridge in the treble:

*1617*



By an eighteenth-century hand in ink on the back of the batten between the keyboards:

*This side not to be done*  
(i.e.: do not decorate)



Incised, presumably by a tuner or repairer, with a chisel or screwdriver in the eighteenth-century English portion of the bottom, under the keyboard:

F L W



Dimensions (without moldings):

Length 2239 mm

Width 880

Keyboards, action, and disposition:

These elements stem from the eighteenth-century English *ravalement*. The well-made and visually exquisite keyboards, adorned with arcades at the natural fronts and skunktail sharps, have oak levers. Approximately two-thirds of the jacks, with pearwood bodies, survive, although all the tongues are modern replacements. As indicated by the numbering of the sets of jacks (2 on the lower-manual 8'; 3 on the 4': see photos below) and by the notches in the slots of the registers, the eighteenth-century disposition was:

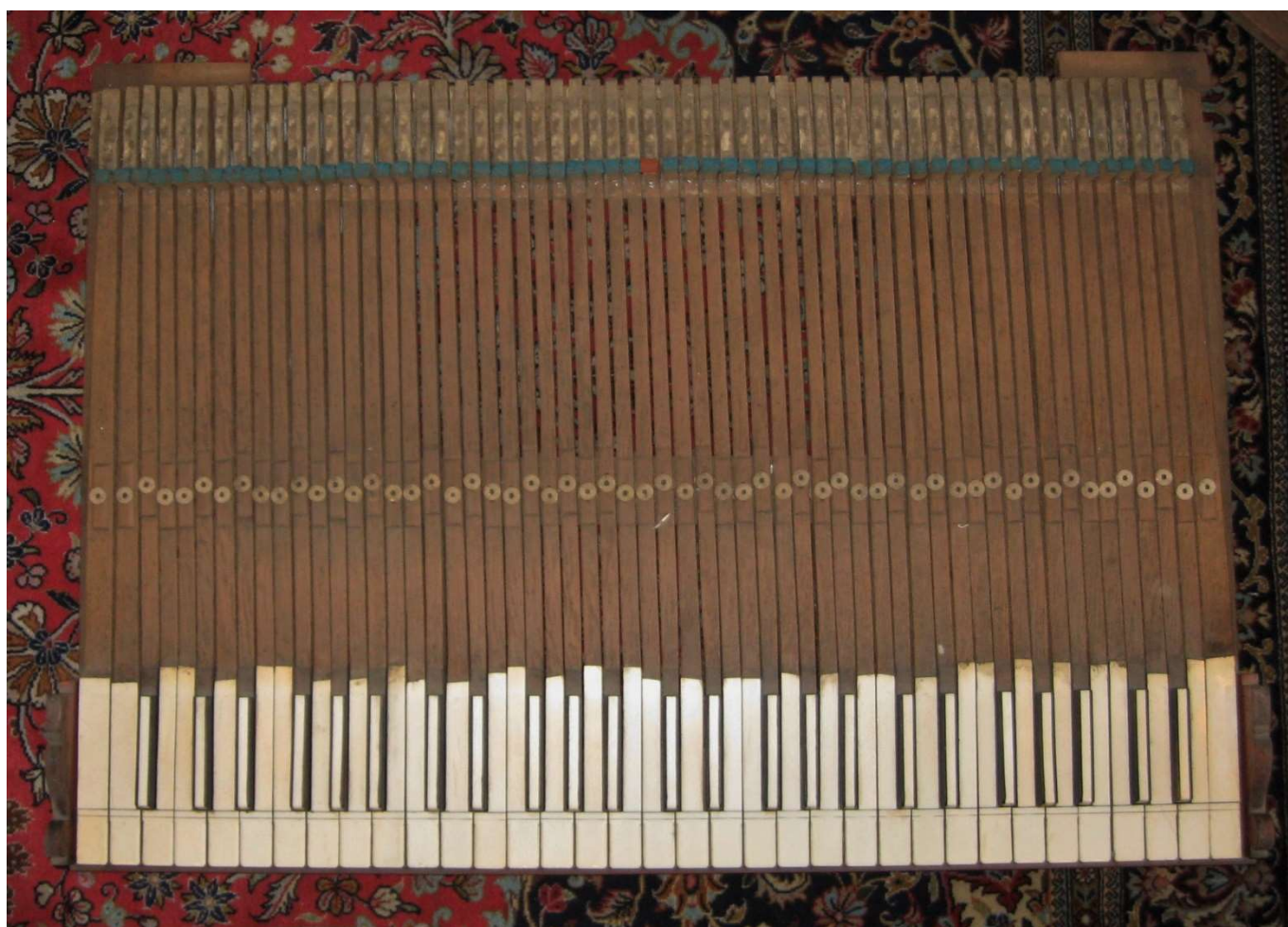
← 4'            lower keyboard  
→ 8'            lower keyboard  
← 8' dogleg    lower and upper keyboard.

The registers are moved by three stop levers with brass knobs protruding through the nameboard.

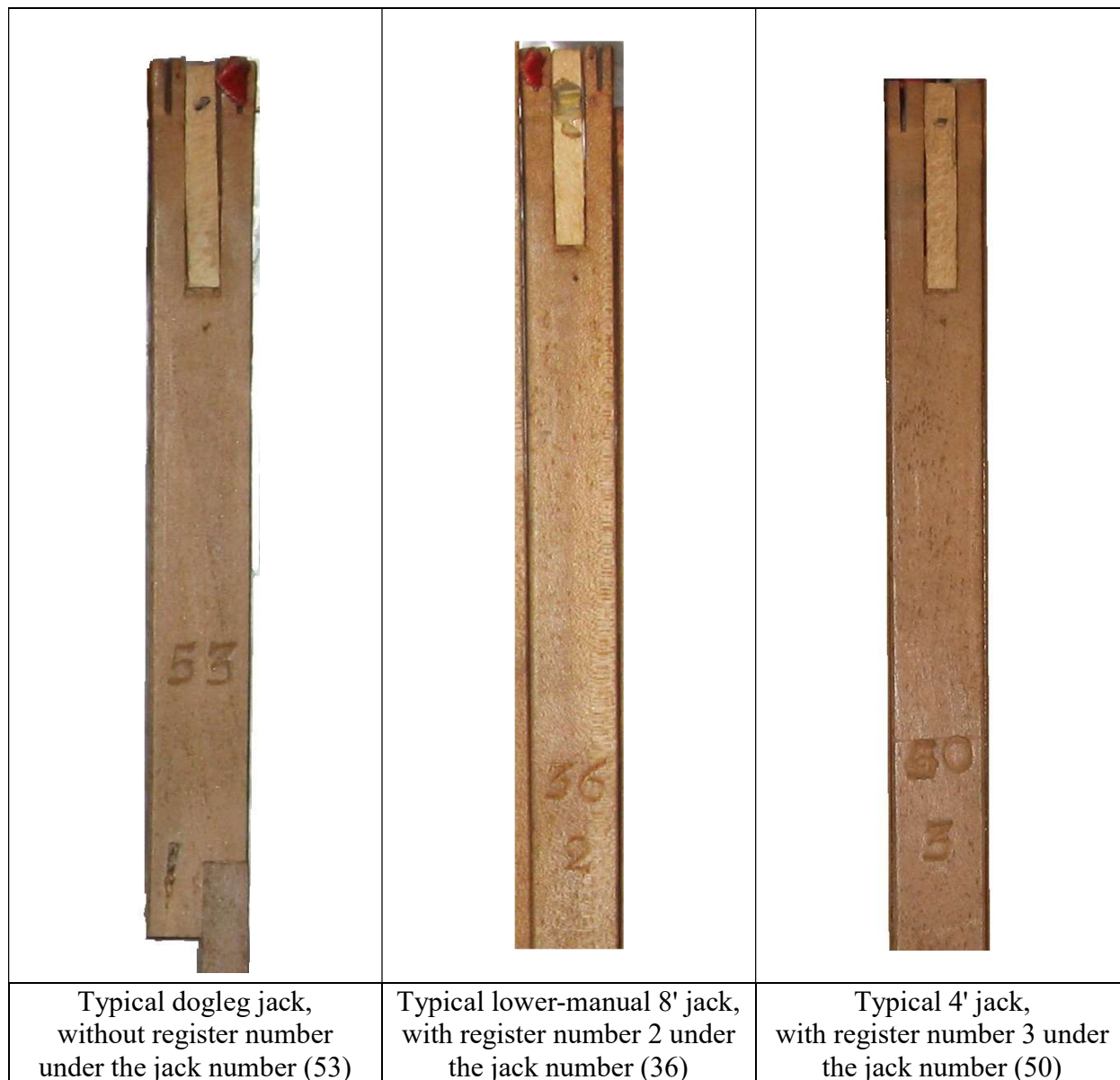




Upper manual



Lower manual



Scaling:

The present scaling stems from the *ravalement*, when the bridges were repinned and the nuts replaced.

String lengths in mm		
	← 8'	4'
$f^3$	116	56
$c^3$	159	68
$c^2$	334	148
$c^1$	658	304
$c$	1097	557
$C$	1579	887
$GG$	1692	1005



## Construction:

The original Ruckers components, in addition to the soundboard and bridges, include the bentside, tail, spine, and upper belly rail, all of poplar. Various extensions, replacements, and other alterations, typical of what was done during *grand ravalement* of Ruckers doubles, were made in England about 1740–1750. The bentside was extended in the treble with a piece of oak, and a new cheekpiece was made, also of oak, with a vertical-grain reinforcement at the exterior front. To suit the greater width of the case and the reduced width of just three registers instead of the original four, a longer and wider wrestplank was provided along with new nuts and a new nameboard. At the tail and towards the bass end of the bentside new, somewhat higher 8' hitch-pin rails were installed to relieve some of the additional pressure on the bridge caused by the addition of the second 8' set of strings.

Visual access to the interior under the soundboard is limited, but one can see through the opening between the two belly rails that the typical Ruckers opening in the spine for the tool compartment was sealed up and that at least some of the interior framing was replaced. The exterior of the spine has been reinforced with an oak board along most of its length. The entire bottom was probably replaced during the *ravalement*. The portion under the keyboards in front of the nameboard appears to be from the *ravalement*, while the main portion is a modern replacement. The molding covering the edges of the bottom along the cheekpiece, bentside, and tail was added during the *ravalement*.

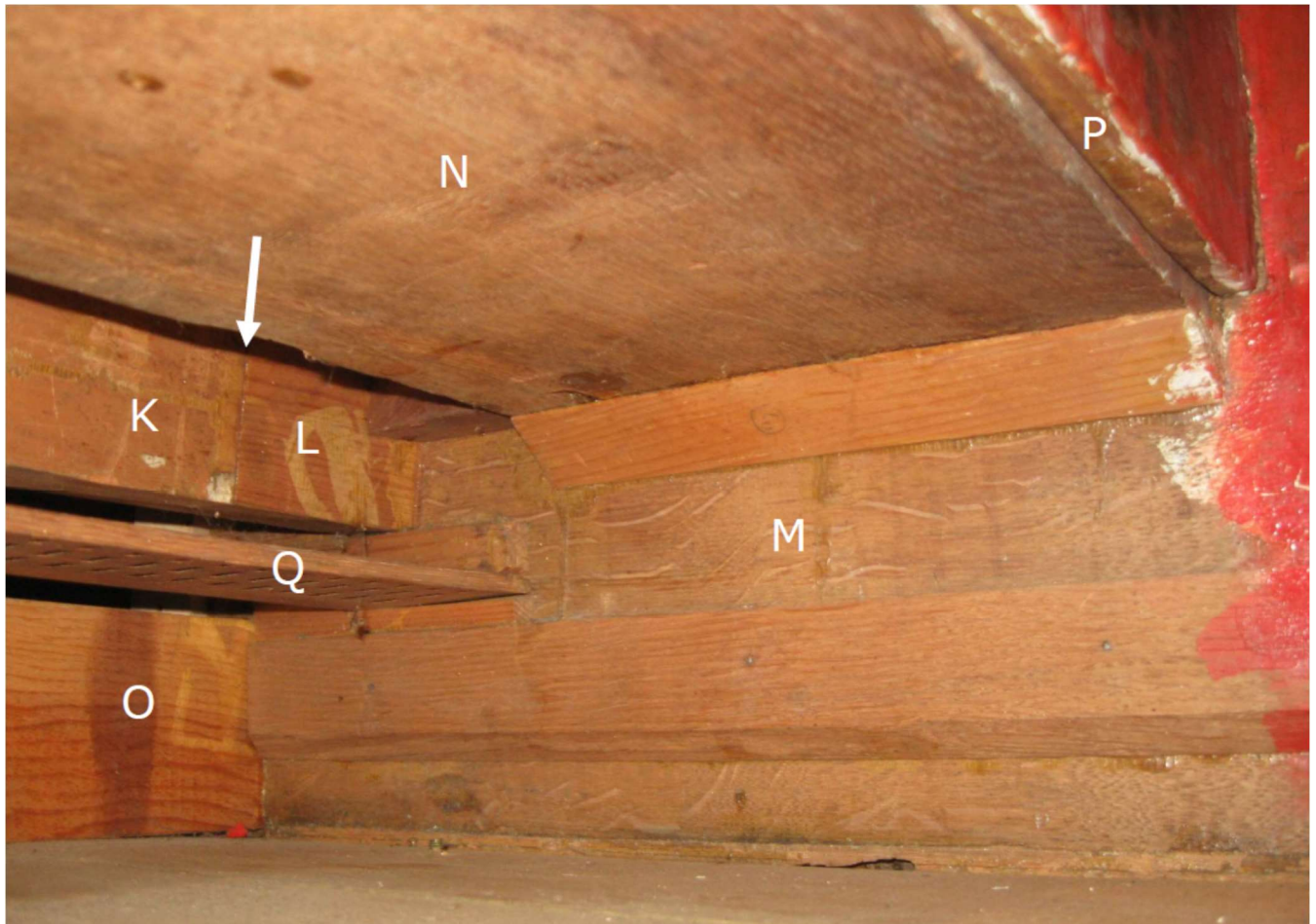




Interior at the check/bentside corner

- A – the original Ruckers poplar bentside
- B – the original Ruckers poplar liner
- C – oak bentside extension from the *ravalement*
- D – oak liner extension from the *ravalement*
- E – cheek liner of oak, from the *ravalement*
- F – the original Ruckers poplar 4' hitch-pin rail
- G – reinforcement of the 4' hitch-pin rail, probably added during the *ravalement*
- H – upper brace, from the *ravalement*.
- I – the soundboard

The arrows indicate the joints between the original Ruckers parts and their extensions added during *ravalement*.



Interior of the keywell towards the cheekpiece:

K – the original upper belly rail

L – extension added during *ravalement*

The arrow indicates the joint between the belly rail and its extension.

M – oak cheekpiece, from the *ravalement*

N – wrestplank, from the *ravalement*

O – lower belly rail, from the *ravalement*

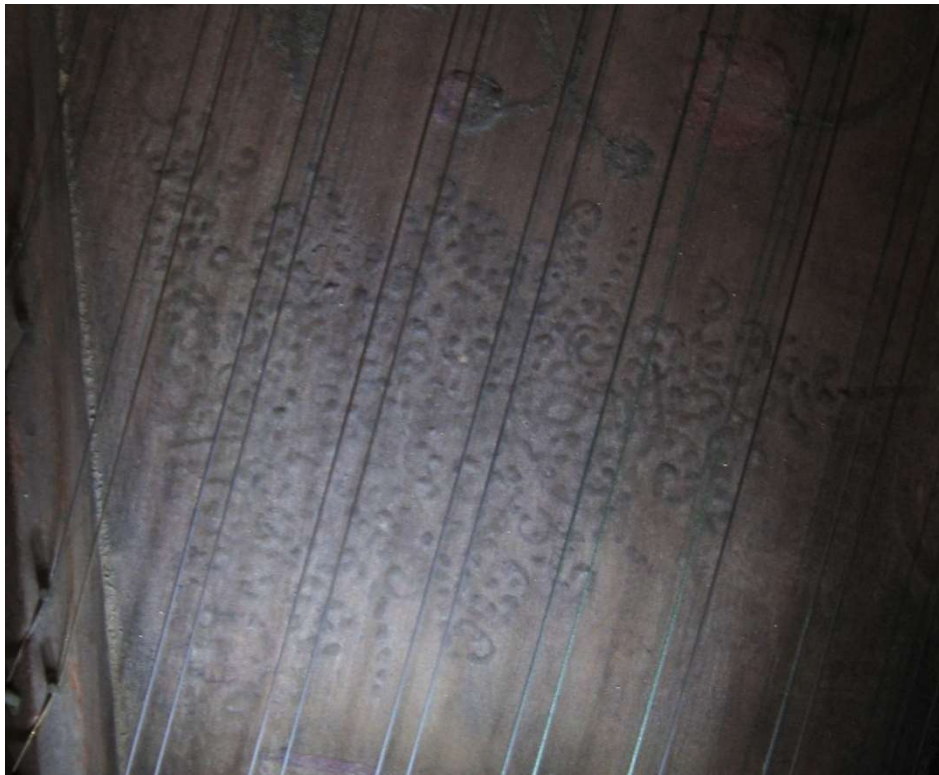
P – nameboard, from the *ravalement*

Q – lower guide, from the *ravalement*

### Decoration:

The soundboard retains the original decoration with flowers, borders, and arabesques by the anonymous artist who painted Joannes Ruckers instruments from about 1598 to 1624. The densely placed elements are typical of this artist's late style.





An arabesque photographed in raking light to show the typical three-dimensionality of the paint

The soundwell is decorated with typical Ruckers printed paper.





As O'Brien has noted (*Ruckers*, p. 245), the paper (type 17 in his list of papers, p. 141) covers all the surfaces of the enlarged soundwell. Although he suggests, presumably because of unspecified details of the printing, that the paper came from a (larger?) Ruckers instrument made after 1642, there appears to be some disruption in the application of the paper in the area of the joint where the extension was added to the bent side during *ravalement* (in the area indicated by the broken red line in the photo above). Also, the paper at the treble end of the nameboard (to the left of the joint indicated by the arrow in the second photo above) seems to be from a different batch. Thus, the majority of the paper might, after all, be from 1617 (or at least from before the *ravalement*), eked out on the case extensions with copies or paper salvaged from another instrument.

The remainder of the decoration is from the time of the *ravalement*. The new wrestplank was painted to match the Ruckers soundboard decorations. The interior of the lid, the keywell, and the jackrail are decorated in *chinoiserie* of flowers, leaves, birds, and a basket of fruit, and birds in gold with details in black and brown paint together with gold and silver borders on a ground of brilliant red lacquer ground surrounded by black borders.







On the exterior are similar decorations on a light green ground surrounded by greenish black borders.





The main lid is attached to the instrument with handsome chased brass hinges.



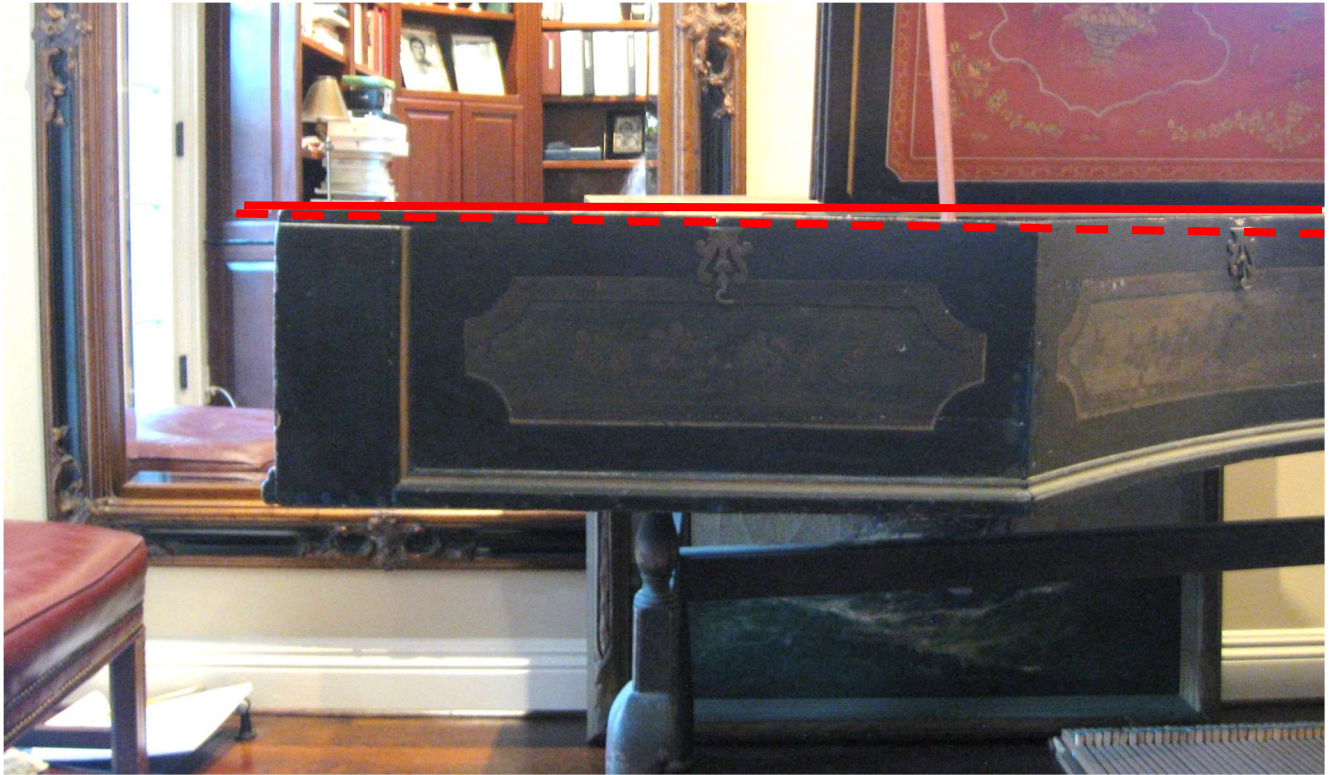
The stand, with legs cabriole below the stretcher and turned above, is of the common English type of the period. That, however, turned section lacks the usual upper elements (as circled in the photo below right), suggests the possibility that the height of the stand has been reduced.



Leg of the English stand under the Joannes Ruckers harpsichord | Leg of a typical eighteenth-century English harpsichord stand of this type

Condition:

The corpus of the instrument, which has been maintained under string tension since a restoration in the 1950s, appears to be in sound condition. As can be seen in the photo below by the very small angle between the solid line following the upper edge of the spine and the dashed line following the upper edge of the cheekpiece, the “cocking” of the latter is minimal, much less than on most eighteenth-century English harpsichords and pianos.



The report in Boalch, *Makers*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1995), that an earlier, too heavy restringing done by Steinway technicians in 1900 “crushed the case” and broke “every glued joint” would seem to be exaggerated. A future owner, however, might well wish to improve some of the structural repairs done during previous restorations, for example, the screwed-on metal L-channels reinforcing the bass end of the wrestplank, shown in the photo below. The main bottom board is a modern replacement, as, possibly, might be some of the lower braces, barely visible through the belly-rail gap.



The soundboard appears to be in basically sound condition, although, as usual in harpsichords of any age, there are some cracks, relatively minor, especially towards the treble. The surface of the soundboard is rather dark and grimy, the painted decoration is abraded and degraded in places, and there is some apparent water damage in front of the 4' bridge up to about a<sup>2</sup>. (The painted decoration from the *ravalement* on the wrestplank is rather more badly degraded than that on the soundboard.) In the limited view of the interior through the gap between the belly rails one can see that the underside of the soundboard has been reinforced in two places with a layer of soundboard wood about 8 cm. wide. The neatness of the work suggests the possibility that this reinforcement might already have been done during the *ravalement*, when the reinforcement to the underside of the 4' hitch-pin rail (see G in the photo on p. 9 above) might also have been added. A layer of wood rather crudely glued as a counter-bridge under the 4' bridge is doubtless a modern addition.

The wrest pins are modern zither pins. They and the stop levers from the *ravalement* are quite rusty. The brass hinges and various other metal parts are also corroded.

Although the present owner maintained the instrument in playing condition, it has not been thoroughly tuned or regulated in recent years. In any case, a restoration to the current state of the art would be appropriate should the next owner choose to do so. In addition to work on the soundboard and structure, cleaning, and cosmetic treatment, this would involve restringing with wire of historical types, replacement of the zither pins with historical reproductions, and considerable attention to the action, including reversal of alterations made to the disposition some decades ago. These changes, evidently intending to provide a French-like arrangement, involved exchanging the lower-manual 8' and 4' jacks so that the latter would be between the two 8' registers, and reversing the plucking direction of the two 8' registers, so that the lower 8' now plucks to the left and the upper to the right (thus necessitating the removal of the original doglegs and adding new doglegs on the opposite side of the jacks). Also a shove coupler was contrived by adding to the lower-manual keys blocks on which the new, shorter doglegs rest, such that the upper manual could be uncoupled by pulling the lower manual forward.



A lower-manual key lever with added coupler block

The addition of the coupler blocks necessitated the removal of the front portion of the original jack-rest pads. All but one of the upper-manual pads are intact. As mentioned above, all the jack tongues are modern replacements, pierced for bird-quill plectra. The lower-manual 8' quills, however, have been removed and *peau de buffle* plectra were glued to the front of the tongues.



The interior *chinoiserie* is generally in good condition. There are some minor cracks in the underlying wood of the lid and some small losses of the red lacquer. In the keywell, the areas of lacquer not protected by the namebatten and keyboard end blocks are somewhat darkened by exposure. The painted decoration on the exterior is somewhat rubbed and murky. There are small losses at the endgrain of dowels that have been inserted (some possibly already during the *ravalement*) to reinforce various joints.



The decoration is in particularly degraded and murky condition on the exterior of the lid, where only ghosts of the painted panels and borders can now be seen, although some brighter decoration can be seen under a lid-flap hinges that can be lifted up.

No doubt, the stability, condition, and appearance of the painted decoration would benefit significantly from treatment by a paintings conservator.



### Additional comments

As noted in the description of the instrument in O'Brien, *Ruckers*, analysis of the plugged holes of the original bridge and 4' hitch-pin positions shows the instrument to have been a standard Ruckers transposing double. Especially characteristic of this were the doubled pins to provide separate strings for the upper-manual  $E\flat$  and lower-manual  $G\sharp$  keys, as in the photo below, showing the plugged holes of the double 4' hitch pins at  $e\flat^2/g\sharp^2$ .



Plugged holes in the bridges also show that there was an intermediate state in which a second 8' choir was added and the 4' strings were moved slightly to the right so they would not be directly under the added 8' strings.

In the earlier part of his career, Hans Ruckers used a rose with his father's initials, HR, the latest example being from 1616. Afterwards, he used three different roses, all with the initials IR, for the three different types of instruments, virginals (the earliest known example is from 1620), single-manual harpsichords (the earliest known from 1627), and two-manual harpsichords (the earliest known from 1618). O'Brien noted that the rose in the present harpsichord, dated 1617, is of the first type, later found only in virginals, but suggested, quite reasonably, that the maker had not yet established his three-rose system. (The 69 mm diameter hole in the soundboard of the 1617 harpsichord is slightly larger than the usual hole in this maker's virginal soundboards, 66 mm, for example, in the one of 1622 in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Thus there is a slightly wider margin around the visible outer edge of the cast rose than in the example of a virginal rose shown in O'Brien, p. 162, fig. 7.26.) This circumstance, indeed, corroborates that this instrument was made between 1616, the latest date for the HR rose, and 1618, the earliest date for the double-manual IR rose. This is especially fortunate, as the date on Joannes Ruckers harpsichords made between the beginning of his career and 1624 was normally painted on the wrestplank. The 1617 painted on the soundboard would have been copied from

the date on the original wrestplank when it was replaced during the eighteenth-century *ravalement*. On the back of the rose one can see the “characteristic star-shaped pattern ... consisting of four equally-spaced intersecting lines” found only in this type of rose (O’Brien, p. 161).



The back of the rose with the distinctive star-shaped pattern

The spelling of the maker’s first name on the name batten, IOHANNES rather than the usual IOANNES, would usually suggest that the inscription is not original. The batten, however, has been extended at both ends to fit the widened case (see the photos below), the style of the lettering is that of the few extant original inscriptions, and the IOHANNES spelling is found on at least one other instrument, a virginal of 1598 (Paris, Musée de la Musique). Thus, the inscription might be original after all.



### ***Attribution of the ravalement***

The suggestion reported in Boalch, *Makers*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1995), that the “instrument shows signs of Kirkman’s work” is not well founded. Although the instrument as rebuilt in England does show a general resemblance to eighteenth-century English harpsichords as made by Jacob Kirkman (1710–1792) and other London makers, various details, such as the oak key levers and the typography of the numbers stamped on the keys and jacks, are at odds with Kirkman’s work. The use of oak, rather than the limewood usual for harpsichord keys, suggests that the *ravalement* was done by a builder accustomed to making robust keys for the comparatively heavy action of organs. Details of the keys, including the skunktail sharps and the arcades, show a strong resemblance to those in a harpsichord (originally combined with an organ) by John Crang, London, 1745, in the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments (see [http://collections.ed.ac.uk/mimed/record/17882?highlight=\\*.:](http://collections.ed.ac.uk/mimed/record/17882?highlight=*.)). The key levers of this instrument are of oak and the numbering on them appears in photographs to have been made with the same set of stamps used for numbering the new jacks installed during the *ravalement* of the 1617 Ruckers. Crang (1710–1774), established in London by about 1740 as an organ builder, was also a notable maker of harpsichords and spinets. Although a detailed comparison of the 1617 Ruckers harpsichord with the Crang harpsichord of 1745 and other instruments from his workshop remains to be done, the available evidence strongly indicates that he performed the *ravalement*.

