

THE PIANO – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

THROUGHOUT ITS COLOURFUL EXISTENCE the pianoforte has meant many things to many people. In its heyday its possession oiled the wheels of social converse and although one wag called it 'a parlour utensil for subduing the impenitent visitor', many a maiden hoped to captivate her suitor by dazzling at the keyboard. More recently during the Chinese Cultural Revolution its sounds were likened to the rattling of the bones of the bourgeoisie in a coffin. To me, involved for a third of a century in piano manufacture, the instrument embodies a fascinating combination of piano-making skills, music and history. (During his training David Grover worked in German piano factories and completed the German Master Piano Maker course; he read history at Cambridge and his book on the piano was published in 1976. He is a Director of piano manufacturers Whelpdale, Maxwell & Codd. Ed.)

The piano appeared in the early eighteenth century and by c.1870 achieved technical maturity. During this century and a half of development, countless experiments explored its exterior appearance and interior construction. One, at the 1851 Great Exhibition, was so bizarre that the exhibitor could not summon enough courage to disclose his name: 'a bed with a pianoforte which starts to play by itself when one lies in it'. Design developments which have won acceptance in this century have concerned either miniaturisation ('mini' was applied to the piano in the 1930s, before 'minicar' or 'mini' anything else were thought of) or new materials (e.g. wood laminates, advanced glues, polyester lacquer). The piano is a complex instrument of over 6000 pieces. The back construction illustrates the rigorous demands placed on the structure – the soundboard (known in the trade as 'belly') must retain its correct curvature while withstanding half a ton of 'downbearing' from 220 strings made from two fifths of a mile of steel and copper music wire of 45 different gauges and types. The soundwaves generated by the strings and amplified by the soundboard travel along the soundboard's grain at c.10,400 mph, which is fourteen times the speed of sound through air, known as the sound barrier.

The pianoforte enjoyed its heyday in the decades before the First World War. At the turn of the century there were over 200 makers (including a number who were assembling 'kits' in the back parlour) in London, among them the writer's grandfather and great

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grandfather. The arrival of the movies, gramophone and wireless, followed by the depression, eroded the industry's foundations but production recovered in the later 1930s. Following 1945 100% of British output was exported, and when in 1949 recommencement of supply to the home market was permitted, 100% purchase tax was imposed. For the British industry with output nudging 20,000 units in the best years, the 1950s, '60s and '70s were halcyon years with a high proportion of pianos exported world-wide and steady home sales, despite the novelty of television. In the early 1960s there were still eighteen makes in England; this number dropped to six by the recession of the early 1980s, and there are now three.

In the recent recession, the new piano market declined dramatically in most countries. Since 1980 world annual output has reduced by c.40% to c.600,000, and German production by two-thirds. The market in the U.K. has suffered more than most and currently more pianos are sold in Hong Kong than at home. Perhaps this is in part tribute to the work of the late Allen Percival and Assistant Dr. John Hosier, successively Directors of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts. In the 1960s Japanese producers expanded rapidly, followed in the late 1970s by the Koreans, who in their turn built up a substantial industry. In both cases, a virgin home market – soon supported by exports – provided volume production justifying advanced levels of mechanisation, while low wages provided an additional advantage compared with conditions in the west. China, its piano industry founded in the last century in Shanghai by a Scotsman, S. Moutrie, has now embarked on a similar course, although the pace of expansion, modernisation and improvement is less dramatic.

As these new competitors gradually improved quality and undercut in price long-established producers in western Europe, the manufacturing industry in the latter has been damaged. Even if the volume market should be largely relinquished to producers with costs which cannot be emulated in western Europe, there will always be a continued demand among more discriminating purchasers and musicians for the better class of instrument, which is the forte of the western European makers.

On-going considerations in the traditional countries include levels of

consumption in the 1990s, the often-heard observation that pianos 'last too long' (and certainly those by reputable makers offer decades of enjoyment), and competition from other leisure pursuits. The piano stood firm easily enough against the electronic organ in vogue from the 1960s until the early 1980s. Recently the digital piano has arrived; the 'DP' is no longer such a feeble imitation of the real, acoustic piano as it was a decade ago and, while no substitute, is found satisfactory by some. Its striking advantage is easy portability, but many overlook that like all electric goods its value depreciates rapidly.

Developing countries will play an expanding long-term role in the piano's future. Amongst non-western cultures, the instrument has long proved popular in certain countries which formerly were part of the British Empire and where western education is still highly regarded; Singapore is an instance. In the Indian sub-continent and in the Arabic countries with their own indigenous musical traditions, the piano has never caught on to any extent. Western keyboard instruments did in Japan following the post-war American occupation, and they are now in China where there is a shortage of pianos. Occasionally an amusing confusion concerning the instrument's true nature arises – I recall an order from a south sea island for a piano with three paddles (ousting the three pedals)!

In a western context, however, the piano remains the universal instrument at the centre of musical culture. Its 7¼ octave compass facilitates harmony in addition to melody, and so the piano provides phenomenal versatility for both original compositions and arrangements, seemingly from time immemorial to the latest musical craze. The complete instrument it remains fashionable, while its touch responsiveness and use of natural materials, with which mankind identifies, offer incomparable scope for self-expression. The vast repertoire of compositions and the numbers of young – and indeed not so young – learning to play all over the globe remain encouraging and safeguard the future for the pianoforte, which for 250 years has featured so largely in our heritage.

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