

The square piano and its effect on society

by Andrew Lancaster

We live in an age of incessant noise; traffic, aircraft, telephone ring tones and voices speaking to mobiles, washing machines and vacuum cleaners all add to a general hubbub. An age where music is available all day, every day, music of every kind and of every standard. A trip to a supermarket can be an ordeal of being subjected to appallingly sung carols with a disco backing. On a recent trip to Derbyshire I tried to listen to the traffic reports on a well known radio station and had to turn it off because of the background disco type music, which prevented me hearing the report. An age of constant sound.

How different was life in the eighteenth century. Granted, city life must have been noisy; cries of coster mongers, carriage wheels on cobbles, the sound and press of crowds of people. But in the home, the gentle ticking of a long case clock, the muted sounds of voices in another room, the twitter of birdsong outside; it must have been so easy to find real peace and tranquility.

To hear music performed would have been a joy indeed, but for many (possibly the majority) a rare joy. Town dwellers had of course access to regular concerts. To use Newcastle on Tyne as a single example, concerts were regular events; often as one offs in various venues and often well advertised, producing welcome publicity for teachers seeking pupils. Newcastle had no purpose built concert hall in the eighteenth century; rooms above inns, schools or a variety of "assembly rooms" being pressed into service. Accommodation was variable; some venues were spacious and refined, but in others the band may have been obliged to stand, excepting the harpsichordist and cellist, while the audience could have been in surprisingly close proximity to the performers. The cost of the tickets made these concerts very much the preserve of the wealthy and leisured classes; tickets in Newcastle at the beginning of the eighteenth century being 2s 6d, rising by the end of the century to 3s 6d. This at a time when a shilling a day was a good income for many.

For the less well off, such music as they heard could have been an itinerant ballad singer or piper, or a fiddle and flute playing country dances at a local dance, or possibly an elegant string quartet playing genteel dances for even more elegant ladies and gentlemen at one of the seasons "assemblies".

Of course, music in churches was available for all. A quiet parish church may have had little in the way of good music, perhaps a parish band and choir, while a larger parish church could have had an organ. Louth parish church for example, had a fine organ built for it in the eighteenth century by Haxby of York. In larger towns and cities, the music in cathedrals and minsters were often, to use a hideous modern phrase, "centres of excellence". Church goers would have often been uplifted and enthralled by beautiful music. I sometimes wonder, in this age of easily accessed excellence in performance, how much the present decline in church going owes to the proliferation of guitars and tambourines in church music; certainly congregations in cathedrals are stable or rising. But perhaps this is a rumination too far.

The square piano seems to have originated in London in the 1760's. Various attributed to makers in Germany in the 1740's and to immigrant workmen coming to England, there is in fact no real evidence so far of the existence of the square piano before Zumpe began to produce them in London in around 1764. The instruments he produced were small, simple five octave pianos with the capacity to play both loudly and softly; an real innovation as both the harpsichord and spinet, the only keyboard instruments available to most, were not capable of this.

The square piano took society by storm. Selling at around £50 or so, Zumpe simply could not meet the sudden and seemingly insatiable demand for his instruments. Johannes Pohlmann, a countryman of Zumpe's, began making square pianos also. In 1767, a Miss Brickler was heard singing to the accompaniment of one Mr Dibden on "a new instrument called a Forte Piano". Within a very few years, London was experiencing a veritable square-piano fever. Many musical instrument makers, and, one suspects, cabinet makers too, leapt onto this most lucrative bandwagon and began to manufacture square pianos (black and white picture of early square piano).

So what was the vacuum which must have existed which the square piano so successfully filled?

The harpsichord and the spinet were both sophisticated and highly developed instruments by this time. The harpsichord was frequently used in the theatre and could also be found in larger houses, while the spinet, smaller and less expensive, was more suited to, and easier to accommodate in, a smaller home.

Both required regular tuning - not a cheap procedure. John Broadwood's extensive tuning business, recorded in his journals at this time, show an illustrious and well heeled clientele, whose harpsichords often needed to be tuned more than once a month. Tunings seem to have cost 5s in central London, 7s 6d for tunings further afield and rising to 10s 6d for tunings in Bekenham (sic) and Tames Ditton (sic). John Hervey, 1st Earl of Bristol, paid 17s 6d to have his harpsichord tuned in 1733 (not, of course by Broadwood!). One dreads to think what Dr Johnson's friends in Ashbourne, Derbyshire had to pay to have their instruments tuned - or how infrequently a tuner might have been available!

To these maintenance costs must be added the initial purchase price of the harpsichord. The Duchess of Marlborough paid Schudi £78.15s in 1769 for her harpsichord, while in 1784 a two manual harpsichord sold for £81.17.3d. Nor was the harpsichord an easy instrument for the average household to accommodate; its length alone ruled it out of many a home, even if the pocket of the householder could withstand the financial onslaught.

The square piano, by contrast, was incredibly stable in tuning. A well restored square piano today can happily remain in tune for five or six months. The same instrument when new, not subject to the drying effects of central heating and even worse, of de-humidifiers (implements of the Devil if anything ever was) would have seemed a godsend to anyone subjected to the expensive tyranny of keeping their harpsichord in tune. It simply must be the case that much keyboard music must regularly have been played on harpsichords and spinets which would have sounded so out of tune to our ears today that it would have been impossible to endure.

In the 1760's when the square forte piano was a true novelty, Zumpe could charge around £50. By 1783, John Broadwood was able to offer a five octave square piano with brass underdampers for £21. And by 1794-6 Broadwood was offering a five and a half octave square for twenty seven and a half guineas, while his cheapest instrument was retailing at twenty guineas. (picture black and white).

The rage for these instruments, which showed no signs of abating, was accompanied by a corresponding surge in the publication of music to be played on the pianos, of piano teachers eager to exploit the number of would-be-pupils seeking lessons, a rush of furniture makers producing pianos stools to match the instruments and elegant Canterburies to keep the music in. Operas were transcribed to be played on the forte - piano, popular songs of the day were in print and composers were quick to provide a constant stream of new and expressive pieces which exploited the potential of the new instrument. This music was n cheap, a single copy could cost 2 guineas and there was even a rather clever sales drive whereby a monthly edition was issued which contained a voucher; save enough vouchers, and they could be exchanged for a superior square forte piano!

Relatively portable, with a volume quite up to filling a room which could seat a couple of hundred people, equally at home accompanying a country dance or a young lady in song, the square piano, though itself superseded by the upright piano in the mid eighteenth hundreds, soon assumed a position in society from which the piano in general was not to be ousted until well into the twentieth century.

By the early eighteenth hundreds the compass of the square piano had increased from five octaves to five and a half octaves and was designed in a style recognisably "Regency" (picture of a Broadwood c.1815). By now, the forte piano was beginning to feature regularly in novels; Jane Austen's earliest novel "Northanger Abbey" has no piano, while in her second novel, "Pride and Prejudice", the piano is frequently mentioned. Elizabeth Bennett plays with spirit while her sister Mary embarrasses her family by her pedantic approach to playing. Lady Catherine de Burgh's petulant daughter does not play, but would have been "a great proficient" had her health allowed her to practice. The Broadwood piano pictured above is very similar to the Broadwood which plays such a significant rôle in "Emma" when it was given anonymously to Jane Fairfax. What was a nice girl doing to be given a gift worth some 40 guineas? No wonder the tongues in Highbury wagged! In Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" both Becky Sharp and Amelia Smedley have lessons with Mr Clementi, who was in fact one of the leading pianists and composers of his day. However, Thackeray attributes the square piano in the novel variously to John Broadwood and to Robert Stodart; both eminent piano manufacturers, but rivals.

It is evident that in the space of forty years the piano had become a significant feature in the home. Although the upright piano eventually ousted the square piano, it was the sudden enormous popularity of the square piano which produced such a change in the mindset of the nation that music, from being viewed as an entertainment to be enjoyed outside the home, became very much a domestic occupation. It is probable that, in 1720, the majority of people who wanted to hear music would have had to leave their domestic setting. By 1880 the reverse would have been the case, such was the ubiquity of the piano.

This positioning of music so centrally in the home was accepted to so great an extent, that it is possibly a contributory factor in the way in which the gramophone was so enthusiastically embraced when it became commercially available. The radio and the tape recorder soon followed ultimately leading to the situation in which we find ourselves today, where most rooms of most homes have a device on which music can be played, and where a Christmas trip to the supermarket is to the sound of "The Little Drummer Boy" being murdered in the aisles.

Andrew Lancaster runs Music Room Antiques and specialises in restoring square pianos from the 1760's through to the 1830's. Instruments restored by Andrew are available for purchase, and privately owned instruments can also be restored.

He has restored the square piano in Jane Austen's house at Chawton and many instruments restored by him can be heard in a series of recordings on the Athene label.

He can be contacted by phone on 01043 822189

His website is <http://www.squarepiano.net>