

Crafts, professions of excellence

HARPSICHORD MAKING

Related professional: Jacques Magnette
Workshop: SNC Magnette & Ertz

The harpsichord, spinets, and virginals are handmade plucked-stringed-keyboard musical instruments which can have one or two keyboards. Strings are plucked with a small plectrum, unlike the piano, where they are struck with muffled wooden hammers.

The difference between spinets, virginals and harpsichord is mainly due to the way strings are positioned and the angle they make with the keyboard. While the harpsichord is long and wing shaped, the virginal is rectangular or polygonal in shape so that strings are making a right angle with the keys, rather than being parallel with them. The spinet is an early harpsichord having a single keyboard, a smaller soundboard than regular harpsichords, and normally also a weaker sound.



Figure 1. *Virginal flamand de Hans Ruckers* c. 1583. Anvers (Paris, Musée de la Musique). Figure 2. *Spinet built by Johann Heinrich* c. 1765). Silbermann Germany. Figure 3. *Italian Harpsichord unknown maker* c. 1693. National Museum of American History.

The harpsichord is the ancestor of the modern piano, which Bartolomeo Cristofori originally called "harpsichord col piano e forte", referring to its ability to produce loud and soft sounds. Later, the name was shortened to "pianoforte" and finally to "piano".

The first harpsichords appeared in the 14th century. This information comes down to the present day thanks to a letter from King John I of Aragon to the Duke of Burgundy in which he refers to "an instrument similar to the organ but sounding with strings". At the end of the same century, in Italy, appeared the first document that explicitly mentions the harpsichord (*clavicembalum*), whose creator would be the physician and astrologer Hermann Poll. During the Renaissance and especially during the Baroque period, this luxury instrument, reserved for the upper classes, spread throughout Western Europe thanks to its wide musical possibilities. Consequently, new schools for musical instrument manufacture emerged in Italy, Germany, England, and France.

The manufacture of harpsichords was at first monopolised by Italy, but Antwerp also played an important role. The anonymous virginal *Duke of Cleves*, with its sarcophagus-shaped walnut case, and the one built by Hans Bos are noteworthy. This was the first harpsichord with the characteristic decoration of the Flemish school, based on arabesques and dolphins on printed paper.



Figure 4. *Anonymous virginal Duke of Cleves (1568)*. Source of the picture: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O368610/virginals-unknown/>. Figure 5. *Virginal built by Hans Bos (1578)*. Source of the picture: <https://www.patrimoniocional.es/en/node/438>

In 1555 Hans Ruckers was born and became the founder of the Ruckers-Couchet family, one of Europe's most influential Flemish harpsichord makers.



Figure 6. *Double Virginal By Hans Ruckers (1581)*. Source of the picture: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/503676>

Some of the most outstanding Baroque composers composed and performed wonderful works for harpsichord such as Girolamo Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali*, Domenico Scarlatti's *555 sonatas*, Johann Sebastian Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5* and Johann Sebastian Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

At the end of the 18th century, the harpsichord gradually began to be forgotten, partly due to the popularisation of the “pianoforte”. But the sound of the harpsichord did not remain trapped in the Baroque period. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, interest in the instrument was revived by the Polish harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, who performed old works, but also commissioned new works from prestigious composers.



Figure 7. *Wanda Landowska (1879-1959)*. Source of the picture: <http://amisdebanyuls.canalblog.com/archives/2016/03/11/33473871.html>

The special timbre of the harpsichord and its richness in harmonics make this instrument unique. This is why it is still fully established in European classical academic music, but also appears in film, anime, video games, and other musical genres like pop, flamenco, tango, and rock. Let’s mention The Doors, with “*Love Me Two Times*”, the Beach Boys with “*God Only Knows*” and the Beatles in ‘*Fixing a Hole*’. Luckily antique harpsichords continue to be restored and new pieces are created to fulfil the needs of such a wide variety of musicians.

What are the skills and expertise of professionals in this profession?

Many music lovers speak of the "musical triangle" formed by the composer, the performer, and the listener. But there is a fourth element that makes the musical miracle possible: the maker of the instrument. The skills of a harpsichord maker are growing every day, thanks to curiosity, challenging spirit, perseverance and above all passion.

A harpsichord is an antique instrument that today is taken out of its original context. A harpsichord maker must have the knowledge of ancient music and of the techniques of old masters to build instruments on which musicians can play ancient music pieces. To make, to restore, to maintain or to tune, he or she will use a wide range of tools such as chisels, scrapers, planes, varlopes, guillotines, gouges... Like in many crafts professions some of these tools are "homemade", to better fit with the needs of the maker.

A harpsichord maker must have knowledge and skills in woodworking, in mechanic and of course in music. As mentioned by Jacques Magnette, each wood has specific acoustic properties, and mechanical resistance or is more adapted for decorative purposes. The choice of wood is key to obtain a good instrument. It requires patience to wait for the wood to dry in the open air, delicacy to handle and protect it, precision to choose the one that can be in balance with the environment in which it will remain, an attentive ear to turn it into an instrument, and an aesthetic sense to design a unique piece.



Figure 8. *Jacques Magnette, harpsichord maker.* Source of the picture: <https://madineurope.eu/en/profile/jacques-magnette/>

Main materials

Depending on its parts, a harpsichord, is made of various materials, going from metal, leather, mother of pearl, bird feathers, parchment, or even sometimes plastic which is used to make each small plectrum, in charge of pinching the string.

But of course, as mentioned above, the main material is wood, which is chosen among different species depending on its function in the instrument and its own properties. For example, the soundboard needs a wood that supports the tension of the strings and at the same time amplifies the vibrations coming from the strings, providing good acoustics to the instrument.

Main parts of a Harpsichord

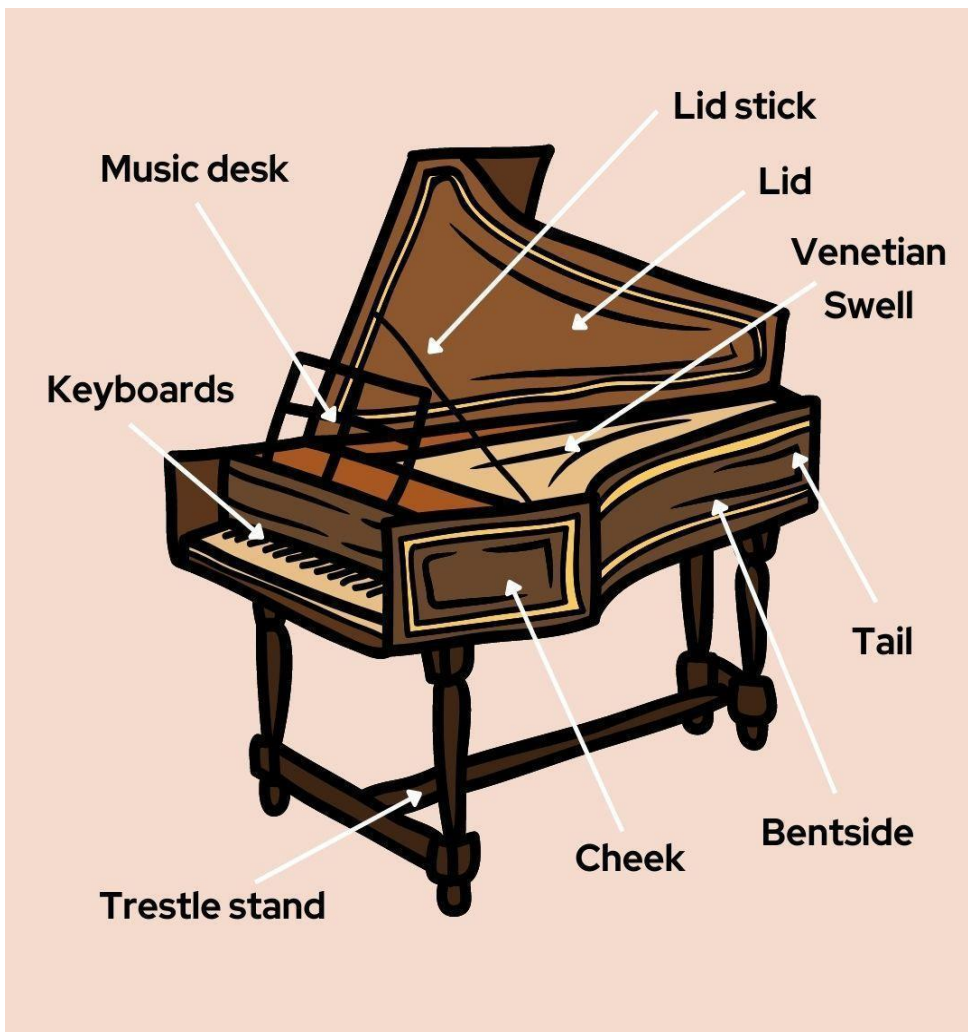


Figure 9. *Main parts of a harpsichord.* Source of the picture: Mad'in Europe

What markets are related to this profession?

Even though a harpsichord maker is often working alone in his workshop, this loneliness is compensated by frequent contacts with musicians, music academies, conservatories, orchestras, concert organizations and recording studios. Whether they will play Baroque Bach's or Vivaldi's music or in more contemporary context, the Harpsichord can be seen as a crossing centuries and styles instrument.

But the music sector is not the only playground linked to the harpsichord. Fine arts also have their role. Makers regularly collaborate with gilders, decorative painters, in layers who turn each instrument into bespoke pieces of art, which enriched the interiors of wealthy families. Some of these masterpieces can be seen in several works by the famous Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer.



Figure 10. *A Lady Standing at a Virginal*. Johannes Vermeer. c. 1670-1674. National Gallery, London. Figure 11. *Lady Seated at a Virginal*. Johannes Vermeer. c. 1670-1675. National Gallery, London. Figure 12. *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals*. Johannes Vermeer. c. 1670-1672. Leiden Collection, New York.

Some extraordinary plucked-stringed-keyboard musical instruments are exhibited in museums like the Vleeshuis Museum in Antwerp, the Gruuthusemuseum in Bruges and the Musée des Instruments de Musique in Brussels.

Where to learn the profession in Belgium

The best way to learn how to make an instrument is to be the apprentice of masters in their own workshops. In partnership with the province of Liège and its cultural service, Jacques Magnette, harpsichord maker, shares in his workshop SNC Marnette & Ertz his know-how acquired during 30 years of practice. <https://clavecin.be/>

If you have the possibility to go to France, more precisely to Paris, you can be an apprentice of Reinhard von Nagel in his workshop Atelier von Nagel. <http://www.vonnagel.paris/>

Sources:

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(Accessed: 2th July 2022)

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