

THE HISTORY OF THE MEERBACH CLAVICHORD IN THE GEELVINCK MUSIC MUSEUM, ZUTPHEN.



From auction catalogue, Conway Hall, London, 6 April 2017:

Lot 64: Clavichord, probably late 18th century
An unfretted clavichord, probably German or Swedish ...'

I am a clavichord maker, based in London, U.K. Four times a year an auction of second-hand pianos is held in London. The items on offer vary greatly in age and quality, from superb and highly valuable instruments to more humble uprights and baby grands. As each catalogue is published, I scan it for items of interest. Occasionally early keyboard instruments appear, and of course when they do my interest is aroused.

So it was that on 16 April last year I found myself in the auction room with two friends. Before us was a large unfretted clavichord with a compass of five octaves and two notes, *FF-g³*; the catalogue described it as 'possibly German or Swedish, late eighteenth century'. The maker was unknown.

It seemed to be an example of what is rather loosely called the Saxon school. This refers to clavichords made in the second half of the eighteenth century in what are now the modern *Länder* of Saxony and Thuringia, by such makers as Christian Gotthilf Hoffmann and the brothers Friederici and Horn. Saxon-school clavichords are generally rather sober in appearance when compared with those made in the Northern part of Germany, lacking such embellishments as painted cases and soundboards. But their most

significant technical feature is the use of a 'walking-stick' or J-shaped bridge: in effect, a long, straight bridge arranged obliquely on the soundboard, with a short curved section at the treble end.



Plan view (before restoration)

Note 'walking-stick' bridge, becoming quite massive at bass end;
octave strings in the bass with separate bridge; left-
hand edge of soundboard extended over treble keylevers

As you can see from this plan view, the clavichord under examination had just such a bridge, increasing in mass towards the bass end. Less typically Saxon, though, were the set of octave-pitch strings with their own soundboard bridge provided for the lowest seventeen notes, since octave stringing in the bass is a feature of the North-German style, and is not normally found on Saxon-school clavichords. Another unusual feature was the way in which the left-hand edge of the soundboard had been extended over the treble keylevers, evidently to give a little more room around the treble curve of the bridge.

The covering of red leather on the case, and the painting inside the lid, a land- and sea-scape in a dark, foreboding style, were both clearly non-original. But how did they come to be there?

At the auction on April 2017 the instrument was acquired, along with the Heilman and Graf fortepianos, by the Geelvinck Music Museum, our hosts today, and since that event we have been able to identify the maker and to find out a great deal more about its history. This has been achieved as a result of a joint effort, and I should like to acknowledge in particular the contribution of Lothar Bemann, without whose invaluable database of surviving clavichords we should not have got off the starting block, so to speak; of Jurn Buisman here at the museum who discovered the origins and

meaning of the painting inside the lid; and of my colleague Sander Ruys, who has so painstakingly restored the instrument and has discovered information hidden inside it.

It has all been a fascinating piece of detective work, but rather than explaining how each new item of information was discovered and new clues were followed up, for clarity I shall present what we now know about the clavichord in the form of a chronological survey.

To begin, then, at the beginning: the clavichord was made, probably around 1800, by Johann Christian Meerbach in Gotha, in the Duchy of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, now in the modern state of Thuringia. How do we know this? By comparison with three surviving signed and dated instruments by Meerbach.

SURVIVING SIGNED AND DATED CLAVICHORDS BY J. C. MEERBACH



1799: Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
(Moravian College)



1802: Zittau, Saxony, Städtische
Museen, No. 2742/2600



1820–21: Gotha, Thuringia, Schloss
Friedenstein museum, No. 3073

The earliest of these is in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, owned by Moravian College, which was founded in 1742 – long before American independence – as the Bethlehem Female Seminary, a boarding school for young women; it seems the instrument was acquired to give music lessons. It bears Meerbach's signature on a paper label inside the toolbox, which gives the date 1799.

The second signed Meerbach clavichord is in the local museum at Zittau: it too bears a label inside the toolbox with Meerbach's name and the date 1802.

The third signed clavichord is in Schloss Friedenstein Museum in Gotha itself: once again, it is signed on a paper label fixed inside the toolbox, which gives the date 1821. Intriguingly, there is another label hidden within the space under the soundboard, identical in every way except that it gives the date as 1820. Perhaps this indicates that construction was spread over two years: maybe we can excuse Meerbach for slowing down a bit, since by 1820 he would have been over 80 years old.

PRINCIPAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE GEELVINCK CLAVICHORD AND THE THREE SIGNED CLAVICHORDS BY MEERBACH

Compass <i>FF-g</i> ³	all four clavichords
J-shaped bridge with massive bass end	all four
Octave strings in bass	all four
Bridges double-pinned (except round treble curve)	all four
Soundboard extended over keylevers	all four
Keyslip in front of keys	all four
Keys guided by pins between levers	1802, 1820–21, Geelvinck
Distinctive natural keyfronts	1802, 1820–21, Geelvinck
Blotchy tortoise-shell decoration on hitch-pin rail	1799, 1820–21, Geelvinck

The similarities between the four instruments, the signed and dated clavichords in Pennsylvania, Zittau and Gotha and the unsigned one here in the museum, are very striking. All four clavichords have the same compass of five octaves and two notes. All four have the characteristic Saxon walking-stick bridge: this is found on many clavichords, but the increase in mass towards the bass end seems to be a special feature of Meerbach's style. All have octave strings for the bass notes; the only difference here is that in the Geelvinck and the two nineteenth-century clavichords these are provided for 17 notes whereas on the 1799 only 15 notes have them. In all four clavichords the soundboard is extended over the treble keylevers, and all

have a thin slip of hardwood in front of the keys, something commonly found on square pianos but unusual on clavichords.

The method of guiding the pins on the Geelvinck instrument is by means of metal pins between the keylevers at the far end. The same system is used on the 1802 and 1820–21 clavichords, but interestingly the 1799 instrument, which may be the earliest of the four, has the more traditional system of horn slips working in a rack.



KEYFRONTS

1802



1820–21

The thin
keyslip in front
of the keys is
also visible in
these pictures



Geelvinck

This shows the distinctive style of the keyfronts, with a plain surface enlivened at the bottom with a small ogee moulding. These are found on the Geelvinck clavichord and the 1802 and 1820–21 clavichords, and they may be on the 1799 one too but I cannot confirm that at the moment. You can also see in the photos the thin hardwood keyslip that conceals the gap between the keys and the front wall of the instrument.



HITCH-PIN RAILS

1820–21

1799 is similar and
1802 may be



Geelvinck

This shows the imitation tortoise-shell decoration on the hitch-pin rail, which is found on the Geelvinck clavichord and also on the 1799 and 1820–21 instruments. It was this which, when taken along with all the other similarities, finally convinced me that all four instruments *must* be by the same maker, since it is so distinctive and so unusual: I know of no other clavichords that have this kind of painted decoration in that particular position.

I am therefore confident that we can attribute the Geelvinck clavichord to J. C. Meerbach with a high degree of certainty. We do not know a great deal about him yet, but here are a few details from Lothar Bemann's ongoing research, mostly derived from the State Archives at Gotha.

J. C. MEERBACH OF GOTHA

- 1738 born
- 1769 first marriage. One daughter, who died in infancy
- 1787 made a clavichord for J. F. Hartknoch
- 1795 mentioned in Gotha *Handlungs-Zeitung* article
- 1799 made the clavichord now in Bethlehem PA
- 1802 made the clavichord now in Zittau
- 1808 second marriage in Gotha (at age 70)
- 1809 entry in Meusel's *Künstlerlexikon*
- 1820–21 made the clavichord now in Gotha
- 1824 died, aged 85 or 86

Meerbach seems to have been remarkable for longevity: he married for a second time in his seventieth year, and he completed the latest known clavichord in his 80s. Before anyone raises it, I shall say that we are alert to the possibility that he might have had a son, also named Johann Christian, who took over the workshop on his father's retirement, and who could be the maker of the later instruments. At the moment there is no evidence at all to support this. The records seem to show that our Meerbach had only one child, a daughter from his first marriage, who died in infancy; but research into the maker and his family continues.

PREVIOUS OWNERS

Some time between 1851 and 1934:
acquired by Helmholtz piano company (probably)

1942: Helmholtz collection merged with Neupert collection

1968: Neupert collection acquired by the Germanisches
Nationalmuseum

1970: transferred to Colt Clavier Collection

We do not know who for whom the clavichord was made, or what happened to it during the rest of the nineteenth century. It seems that at some stage it was probably acquired by the piano-making firm of Helmholtz in Hanover (that's Helmholtz without a T, nothing to do with the great acoustician). Several piano manufacturers amassed collections of old keyboard instruments, whether out of antiquarian interest or as a result of accepting obsolete instruments in exchange for new pianos. In England, for example, the firm of Broadwood amassed such a collection (now dispersed).

In 1934 the Helmholtz firm closed, and in due course 52 instruments from the Helmholtz collection were added to the large number already in the ownership of the firm of J. C. Neupert in Bamberg. It is almost certain that the Meerbach clavichord was among them, since it was not previously recorded as being in the Neupert collection; but it was certainly included when, in 1968, the whole collection was transferred to the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. The clavichord was catalogued and given an

inventory number: the museum did not hold on to it very long, however, for in 1970, in a momentous decision, it was transferred to the Colt collection in Bethersden, Kent, England, in exchange for a 1784 Broadwood square piano.

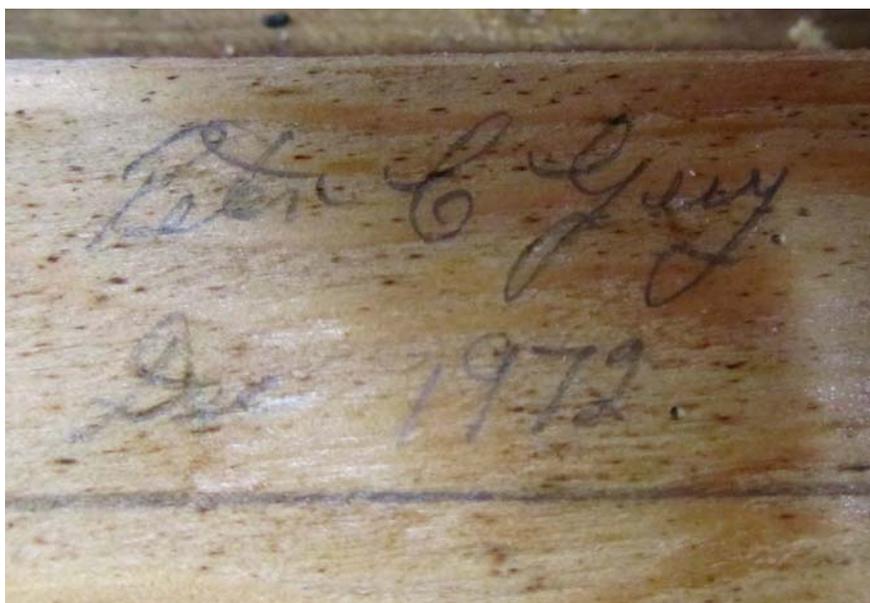


Part of the Colt Clavier collection in Bethersden, Kent, U.K.

The Colt Clavier Collection, consisting mainly of early pianos, was one of the largest privately owned collections of keyboard instruments in the world. The founder, Charles F. Colt (always known as Mick or Micky Colt) was the owner of a firm making timber-frame houses, and the collection was for many years kept in what were originally 'showroom' buildings at the firm's headquarters in a small wood on the outskirts of Bethersden.

Mr Colt's knowledge and expertise in the field of the early piano was unrivalled, and it's hardly possible to overstate the contribution he made to the fortepiano revival. Indeed, all of us that are interested in studying early keyboard instruments must acknowledge a great debt to the private collectors of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Almost all the great public museum collections owe their existence to their assiduous acquisitive activities. Without them, the instruments would simply have been discarded when they were seen as obsolete (as indeed many were), and we would not have available for study the corpus of surviving examples that we have today.

But of course, private owners are free from the constraints that may apply to public museums: they are at liberty to do what they want with their possessions. Mr Colt was certainly not willing to leave the clavichord as he received it. He entrusted the structural and musical restoration to Peter Guy, a skilled joiner employed by the company who normally worked on making staircases for the houses.



Restorer's signature inside the soundbox

(Photo by courtesy of Sander Ruys)

Fortunately for later researchers, Mr Guy left his signature inside the clavichord where it was discovered by Sander Ruys during the course of his restoration. By a stroke of luck I was able to trace him. He retired from work many years ago, and cannot remember anything about the clavichord; however, he wrote me an amusing recollection of life at the Colt Collection, from which I shall quote:

I went to work for 'Micky' Colt in 1967 as a joiner ... it was also not long before I was asked to work on pianos, harpsichords, sofas, and – apparently – clavichords!

Mr Colt was always buying new ones ... they usually came off the back of a lorry at the works as a wreck and a cardboard box of bits. One piano that arrived was very heavy, which was taking about eight of us to carry down the ramp, and Micky was tinkling the ivories to see if it would play as we struggled down the ramp.

I was always aware [that] my expertise was as a joiner and not as piano maker or restorer. When I raised my concerns, I was introduced to a lovely chap called Derek Adlam ... and over time he guided me through

[the] practices and techniques needed to replace nuts, wrestplanks, wrestpins and the repair of soundboards etc. ...

There were always coasters on the lids so Micky's wine glasses would not mark the instruments. Micky would stand at the end of whichever instrument was being played by Derek Adlam, with a glass of wine soaking up the music.

Back to the clavichord. The leather covering of the case was applied at the instigation of Mr Colt, who also commissioned the lid painting. In the Golden Jubilee catalogue of the collection, published in 1981, he explained:

One likes musical instruments to be visually pleasing, so the case has been covered in antique red leather and the underside of the lid painted ... by Hector McDonnell.



The lid painting by Hector McDonnell

This gives no clue as to the subject of the lid painting. One of my colleagues, examining it in the auction room, thought it might depict the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. However, the Irish artist Hector McDonnell (born 1947) is still living; he had forgotten the painting, but with some persistence Jurn Buisman was able to jog his memory, and received a charming handwritten letter from him explaining the origins and meaning of the picture. I shall quote part of it:

Mr Colt was restoring the clavichord you now have during the period when I was a regular visitor to his collection at Bethersden, and he commissioned me to think up and paint some scenes of a faintly mythological nature for the lid. As archaeology had been my passion as a teenager, and I had worked on a dig on the island of Kythera on a Minoan site, I devised the idea of creating a great historical landscape that would hint at the myths that grew out of the real events which caused the devastation that overcame the Minoan civilisation circa 1600 BC. That, essentially, is the background of what you see on your clavichord lid. It shows all of Southern Greece seen from a great height, with the ship taking Theseus to Crete in the distance, and the island of Santorina ... on the point of erupting – an event which caused a massive tsunami which destroyed all the major Minoan sites on the northern shores of Crete.

After Mr Colt died in 1985, the collection remained at Bethersden under the control of his widow, Mrs Lore Barbara Colt, and a board of trustees. It was still possible for those with a special interest to visit, but it seems that there were no funds available for restoration. Even maintenance, both of the instruments and the buildings that housed them, was minimal, especially after the building firm moved elsewhere in 2012. In that year an incident occurred which was reported by one of the witnesses (Claudio di Veroli) as follows:

[Among the] clavichords, I noticed an ... unfretted one, with a ... painted lid, perhaps a late re-decoration ... we were in another room when suddenly we heard a great noise, we ran to it and were astonished to find that the roof had broken and water was coming [in] by the bucket, precisely inside the strange-looking clavichord! ... we moved it to a safe place, put it vertical on the floor to help the water out from the instrument, and finally with some paper towels we removed as much water as possible from the soundboard. Hopefully it is something that can be restored.

It is likely that this incident was the cause of the damage which made the instrument unplayable until the recent superb restoration by Sander Ruys.

For tax reasons, the legal ownership of the clavichord and four other instruments had been vested in Mrs Colt, and when she died in August 2016 her heirs decided to send these instruments to the London auction where the clavichord was bought by the Geelvinck Music Museum. So that completes the story of the clavichord up to Sander's restoration and its inauguration at this summer's Fortepiano Festival here in its new home in Zutphen.

One final word. Our knowledge about the life and works of J. C. Meerbach is still very incomplete. There would now be scope for a monograph focusing on this maker if anyone chose to undertake it.

Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to all those who have helped with this research, including Derek Adlam, Lothar Bemann, Jurn Buisman, Peter Guy, David Hackett, Volker Heinrich, Hector McDonnell, Ibo Ortgies, Ian Pleeth, Stewart Pollens, Sander Ruys, William Spiers, Claudio di Veroli and Wolfgang Wenke.

TIMELINE ON NEXT PAGE

The Meerbach Clavichord in the Geelvinck Music Museum, Zutphen

TIMELINE

- c. 1800 Made by **Johann Christian Meerbach** (1738–1824) in Gotha, in the Ernestine Duchy of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (now in Thuringia, a *Land* in the Federal Republic of Germany). The original owner is not known.
- 1851 The piano-making workshop of F. Helmholz was founded in Hanover. It is not known when the Helmholz firm began to acquire a collection of old keyboard instruments. It seems very likely that at some stage they acquired the Meerbach clavichord.
- 1934 Closure of the Helmholz concern.
- 1942 A total of 52 instruments from the Helmholz collection, probably including the Meerbach clavichord, were acquired by J. C. Neupert GmbH in Bamberg.
- 1968 The Neupert collection, including the Meerbach clavichord, was acquired by the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. The clavichord was given the number MINE71. By this time, the signature had been lost and the maker was unknown.
- 1970 The clavichord was transferred to the private collection of Charles F. Colt (1911–85) at Bethersden, Kent, U.K. in exchange for a 1784 Broadwood square piano (Nuremberg museum number MINE.504).
- 1972 The clavichord was restored by Peter C. Guy for C. F. Colt, with guidance from Derek Adlam. At or around this time the case was covered in red leather, and the inside of the lid was painted by Hector McDonnell (b. 1947). Legal ownership of the clavichord (with some other instruments) was transferred to Mr Colt's wife, Lore Barbara Colt.
- 1985 Death of Mr Colt. The instruments remained at Bethersden for many years but restoration and maintenance activity virtually ceased.
- 2012 The building concern (W. H. Colt, Son & Co. Ltd) transferred their operations to Woodchurch; the instrument collection remained at Bethersden.
- The clavichord was filled with water as a result of a roof leak; it was rescued by two visitors to the collection, Claudio di Veroli and Ibo Ortgies, who happened to be on the spot, but some damage occurred.
- 2016 Death of Lore Barbara Colt.
- 2017 On 6 April the clavichord, along with four other instruments belonging to Mrs Colt, was sold at auction in London, and was acquired by the Geelvinck Music Museum.
- 2018 Restoration by Sander Ruys.

Peter Bavington, August 2018