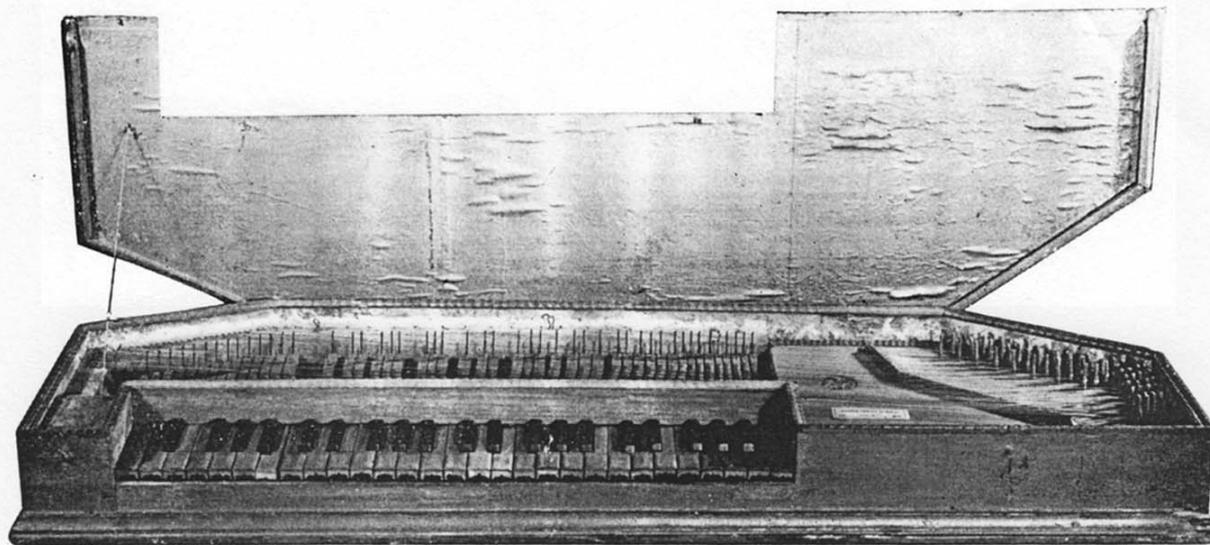


A MYSTERY CLAVICHORD



This picture, which was first shown to me many years ago by the late Dr Rodger Mirrey, appeared in the October 1962 issue of *The Antique Dealer and Collectors' Guide*, in a section devoted to answering questions sent in by readers. W. P. of Brussels asked:

Can you give me an opinion about this epinette. It has been estimated to date back to the 14th or 15th century. The case is painted grey-blue and the strings are of drawn brass. The instrument was restored in 1913 by Malli Junior of St.Gallen, Switzerland, who had to replace some of the treble strings with steel; otherwise it is in its original condition.¹

In their reply, the editors identified the 'epinette' as a small fretted clavichord, and said that it was unlikely to be older than the fifteenth or sixteenth century. They suggested that it could be of Italian origin.

This clavichord, which presumably existed in 1962, has never been seen or heard of since, and its whereabouts remain a mystery. However, a surprising amount of information about it can be deduced from a close examination of the photograph.

The picture shows a hexagonal instrument with the slightly unusual compass *C.D-c³* (without the lowest *C#*). The natural keys are covered with a light-coloured material, with the keyfronts carved in a trefoil pattern; the accidentals are dark in colour. An examination of the rack slots, clearly shown in the photo, reveals that the fretting started at note *d* with fretting in ones, twos and threes in the octave below middle *C* and standard triple fretting in the treble. The lid had a cut-out over the keyboard, so that the instrument could be played with the lid shut; there may have been a hinged flap covering this opening, but it cannot be seen in the photo. There is a small rose in the soundboard, and the bridge is in two straight sections. We can see that the inside of the instrument, above the soundboard and hitchpin rail, bears a pattern of some kind, which strongly suggests that it was finished with applied papers; such papers were used inside the lid, too, though the design, if any, is now too faint to be distinguished in the photo. Wire loops for an over-rail (now missing) are clearly visible. The top edge of the case is decorated with an unusual 'wavy' moulding.

All these details should enable us to deduce something about the origins of the clavichord through comparisons with other surviving keyboard instruments. In fact, two similar clavichords exist in public collections:

1. In the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg: No. MIR 1047²
2. In the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC: No. 65-590³

Neither of these is identical with the *Collectors' Guide* clavichord, though both have the hexagonal shape, light naturals and dark sharps, triple fretting in the treble, lid cut-outs over the keyboard, roses in the soundboard, decorative printed papers and over-rail (present in both cases). In view of the similarities, I think we can say with confidence that all three clavichords come from the same workshop.

The Nuremberg instrument has almost the same compass as the *Collectors' Guide* one, C-c³, but this time with the low C# present. It has the same two-part bridge, and similar wavy mouldings around the top edge (called in German *Flammleisten*); however, the keyfronts are different. A drawing has been published by the museum, and several makers (notably Andreas Hermet of Berlin) have made copies; those I have heard have been attractively bold-sounding.

The Smithsonian clavichord looks like an earlier, more tentative essay by the same maker, or perhaps by an apprentice in the same shop. The compass this time is C/E-c³ with a short octave. No *Flammleisten* – indeed, no mouldings on the case at all. Surprisingly, though, it has a conventional S-shaped bridge: could this be a replacement?

None of the instruments is signed or dated. However, a hint as to the place of origin comes from the *Flammleisten* found on two of them, since this kind of decoration is characteristic of South Germany in the Baroque period.⁴

Moreover, we can establish the date of their construction with a fair degree of certainty from the printed papers. Those on the Nuremberg clavichord are marked with the name of the designer/printer:

CES. C. M. SIMON HAICHELE IN AVG

Simon Haichele of Augsburg received an Imperial Privilege for the production of decorative printed papers in 1740; he died in 1749. The papers on the Smithsonian instrument bear the mark of Christoph Stoy, another maker of decorative printed papers, who was active in Augsburg c. 1720–30.

It seems then that we have three clavichords made in South Germany in the first half of the eighteenth century: perhaps they represent a late flowering of the triple-fretted type, which elsewhere would have been quite obsolete by this time.

Notes

1. It now seems that the restorer here referred to as 'Malli Junior' can probably be identified as Gottfried Emil Meili (1890–1954); at the relevant time he would have been working with his father, also called Gottfried (1860–1938), who is listed as 'Klavier- und Instrumentenmacher' for several years in the town archives of St Gall. Gottfried Emil seems later to have specialized in violin making.

Many thanks to Thomas Steiner for undertaking this research, and to Wolfgang Göldi, librarian at the Kantonsbibliothek St Gall, and Marcel Mayer of the St Gall town archive, for providing information.

2. Formerly in the Rück collection, Erlangen. Described in Martin Kares, *Verzeichnis der Europäischen Musikinstrumente im Germanischen Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, Band 3, Klavichorde*, Wilhelmshaven, 1999, pp. 57–9.

3. On loan from Pennsylvania University. Described in Michael O'Brien, 'The Smithsonian Clavichords', *Early Keyboard Journal*, Vol. 10 (1992), pp. 147–50.

4. Information from <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flammleiste>, retrieved 3 July 2018.