HARPS CLASS SCRIPT

**OPENING SLIDE: THE HISTORY OF THE HARPSICHORD**

Welcome to my class, the History of the Harpsichord! I am Jolicia atte Northclyfe of the Barony of the Cleftlands in the Midrealm. I’ve been a member of the SCA for almost 20 years. I’ve held various chatelaine and A&S officer positions, and have run baronial and kingdom events. My main SCA activity is serving as a court musician. My main instrument is recorder, but a few years ago I began studying piano, which led to my interest in the harpsichord.

**SLIDE: INTRODUCTION**

Today we are going to discuss how these beautiful and unusual keyboard instruments were constructed in period. We’ll talk about important composers and music collections, and explore the differences between harpsichords, virginals and spinets. We’ll also listen to a few tunes being played on the harpsichord, and admire images of highly decorated harpsichords.

I want to thank the good gentles at RUM for giving us this opportunity to gather virtually for this class.

This class began as an A&S Fair project. I had planned to enter a harpsichord performance in my regional A&S fair this spring – with my electric keyboard masquerading as a harpsichord. Unfortunately, the fair was cancelled due to the pandemic, so when RUM announced that October would be devoted to bardic classes, I saw it as an opportunity to turn my harpsichord documentation into a class.

Let’s get started!

OLDEST MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

It’s impossible to know when the first musical instruments were invented. It was probably as simple as someone discovering that blowing across the end of a hollow reed, or that striking a hollow tree trunk produced a sound.

The first musical instruments are also hard to pinpoint because they were made of animal skins, bone and wood, materials that don’t survive across centuries.

The oldest object that some scholars refer to as a musical instrument, a simple [flute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flute), dates back as far as 67,000 years. Other early instruments were horns used in religious ceremonies, and rattles and drums used to keep time for dancing.

About 10,000 years ago, Australian aborigines noticed that when termites hollowed the centers of small eucalyptus plant stems, it made a sound if you blew into the tube. It was the earliest version of the Didgeridoo.

Clappers and concussion sticks appear on Egyptian vases as early as 3000 BC. The civilization also made use of lyres, sistra, vertical flutes, double clarinets, arched and angular harps, and various drums.

Lyres were the principal instrument in ancient Greece and Rome. A variety of wind instruments, either reeds or flutes, flourished in Greece. Romans played a reed instrument called a tibia, featuring holes that could be opened or closed – a clear forerunner of the recorder and modern woodwinds.

MIDDLE AGES

By the Middle Ages, music was becoming more sophisticated and instruments capable of polyphony were needed. This time period saw the introduction of mechanical hurdy-gurdies that allowed one musician to play melody and harmony, as well as short and long lutes. Bells and clappers were used to warn people away from lepers.

The earliest examples of the recorder date to about the 1300s, and images of recorders are shown in many medieval paintings.

Around this time, bagpipes added an extra *drone* pipe was added to provide a non-stop droning single note.

RENAISSANCE INSTRUMENTS

During the Renaissance, instruments began to be used for solo performances, instead of just accompanying singing or dancing. Composers arranged increasingly complex pieces for a variety of instruments, and designing pieces of music for specific instruments. The polyphonic style dominated popular music, and keyboards and lutes developed as [polyphonic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyphonic) instruments. Polyphony refers to two or more simultaneous lines of independent melody.

INSTRUMENT PETTING ZOO (TWO SLIDES)

DISCUSSION – WHICH INSTRUMENT WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

EARLIEST ORGANS

The Greeks had organs that converted water energy into air pressure that was blown through pipes. Pneumatic organs were first constructed in fifth-century Spain and soon spread through England. The first organ with “leaden pipes” appeared in western Europe as a gift from Constantine V to Pepin the Short the King of the Franks in 757.

Organs during the Middle Ages ranged from portable organs worn around the neck to large pipe organs. This instrument became connected with churches in about the 10th century, according to written references of organs being played in Benedictine abbeys.

NEXT: WHAT IS A HARPSICHORD?

**SLIDE: WHAT IS A HARPSICHORD?**

A harpsichord is a horizontal, wing-shaped instrument that produces sound via a plucking action on strings. The fact that its strings are plucked and not struck differentiates the harpsichord from similar instruments like the clavichord and the piano. A harpsichord’s strings run parallel to its keys.

The harpsichord was prized in ensembles and in solo roles because its plucking action made it louder than other stringed organ-type instruments. It was a popular instrument during a time when well-educated and cultured people were expected to play an instrument and sing.

Harpsichords remained in active use through the 18th century for solo keyboard and chamber music. Their beautiful decoration made them a prized addition to manor homes and castles.

Cypress, spruce and fir were frequently used to make 16th-century harpsichords. These keyboards were often highly decorated with inlaid stripes of contrasting colors and painted patterns. Soundboards -- the surface that the strings vibrate against -- often had decorated roses made of layers of parchment or thin wood veneer in Gothic designs. Natural-note keys were covered with boxwood or ivory, and sharp-note keys were wood stained black and topped with ebony veneer.

Keyboard instruments were ideal for playing the polyphonic, or “many-voiced,” [music of the Renaissance](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/renm/hd_renm.htm), because more than one key or melody could be played at the same time. Much printed keyboard music survives from the mid-sixteenth century onward.

Keyboards were especially favored by noblewomen; they were seen as appropriate instruments for women to play in intimate settings for family and close friends.

Queen Elizabeth I used her talent on the virginals as part of her statecraft. She would allow a visiting ambassador to hear her play, to create the impression that the ambassador was part of her inner circle and someone she was fond of.

Mary of Burgundy, ruler of the Burgundian State, and Margaret of Austria, Governor of the Habsburg Netherlands, learned to play keyboard instruments.

The social rules regarding how men and women of the court should play instruments publicly is explained in this passage from The Book of the Courtier:

So the courtier should turn to music as if it were merely a pastime of his and he is yielding to persuasion, and not in the presence of common people or a large crowd. And although he may know and understand what he is doing, in this also I wish him to dissimulate the care and effort that are necessary for any competent performance, and he should let it seem as if he himself thinks nothing of his accomplishment which, because of its excellence, he makes others think very highly of.

**SLIDE: DISTINCTIVE SOUND**

The harpsichord’s unusual arrangement of strings, plucked by its jacks mechanism, creates the harpsichord’s unique sound. Take a look at this diagram of the jacks mechanism while I explain how it works to create notes.

The jack is a small piece of wood that stands on the back of each key when the key is at rest. Each key is attached to a vertical jack that rises when a key is depressed. As the jack ascends, a quill (or plectrum) protruding from the jack plucks the string. As the jack descends, the quill pivots to prevent a second pluck, and a cloth damper silences the string.

Most instruments had at least two sets of strings and jacks with the jacks facing in opposite directions. Strings were made of iron and brass.

This mechanism was ingenious, but it wasn’t able to produce variations in dynamics from pianissimo to forte. This drawback was one reason why the piano eventually replaced the harpsichord.

**SLIDE: HEAR A HARPSICHORD**

Now let’s hear “Allman” by William Byrd, from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, performed on a 20th century harpsichord. We’re going to learn more about Byrd and this important collection of keyboard music later in the presentation.

The music was audible during my test run, but it might not be heard on all devices. The clip is only about two minutes, so if you can’t hear it, I apologize. Just take a little break and we’ll resume soon.

**SLIDE: HISTORY OF THE HARPSICHORD**

Music historians believe that string keyboard instruments were first developed in Northern Europe. The oldest extant plucked string keyboard instrument, a CLA-VEE-CEE-THERE-EE-UM, dates to about 1480 Germany. The earliest known image of a harpsichord is a 1425 sculpture found in Miden, Germany.

This image shows an unusual upright CLA-VEE-CEE-THERE-EE-UM, currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This instrument is from the 18th century.

**SLIDE: EARLIEST EXTANT HARPSICHORD**

The oldest extant harpsichord dates to 1521 Italy, and is currently in the collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I’d say that a chance to see this instrument up close is a good reason for a trip to London, right?

**SLIDE: Henri de Zwolle: Early harpsichord designer**

AHN-Ree, ARE-MAUT, DAY, Zee-WOLL (Henri Armaut de Zwolle), is a very interesting figure in the harpsichord’s history. An organist and physician to Philip the Good of Burgundy, DAY, Zee-WOLL is remembered for his 1440 treatise on the design of various musical instruments, which includes the earliest illustration of a harpsichord. He discussed the overall shape, position of the bridge, number of keys and the general principal of the plucking mechanisms. But he did not include detailed information on how to build a complete instrument. Maybe he feared someone else would steal his idea? Maybe he could conceive of the concept, but not exactly how to pull it off. DAY, Zee-WOLL was definitely a brilliant thinker who needed to team up with an engineer who could make his ideas reality.

An extant copy of de Zwolle’s treatise is preserved in Paris.

**SLIDE: HARPSICHORDS IN 16TH CENTURY EUROPE**

During this time, there were two major hubs in Europe for the making of harpsichords – Venice and Antwerp.

About half of all 16th-century harpsichords were made in Venice, Italy, and many of these Venetian harpsichords could be found in English households and churches.

In Antwerp — which is the capital of Belgium in the modern era — four generations of the Ruckers family dominated harpsichord making during the late 16th and 17th centuries. Ruckers keyboards were highly prized for their quality, and were used throughout Europe, for as long as harpsichords remained popular.

Harpsichords were also made in England, France and German, but they differed from the Ruckers or Italian keyboards. English instruments had different soundboards, resulting in a sound that was less rich but more clear than other contemporary harpsichords.

Only a few English harpsichords from this time period are extant. The Great Fire of London in 1666, and rising household wealth that made it feasible to replace old instruments with new ones, might explain why so few harpsichords from the Renaissance have survived to the present day.

**SLIDE: TIME FOR MORE MUSIC!**

Let’s listen to The Battle, but Italian composer and organist Adriano Banchieri.

**SLIDE: DISCUSSION TIME!**

**SLIDE: HARPSICHORD, VIRGINAL, SPINET, ORGAN**

As I got deeper into my research on the harpsichord, I wondered how that instrument differed from other period keyboards, such as the virginal, spinet and organ.

**SLIDE: TRUE OR FALSE?**

Let’s see how much you already know about the similarities and differences among harpsichords, virginals, spinets and organs. Anyone care to share their answers?

Answer: all false. Let’s learn more!

**SLIDE: WHAT IS A VIRGINAL?**

Virginals and spinets are very similar to the harpsichord, but virginals and spinets are smaller than harpsichords, and are usually square-shaped instruments. All three instruments have plucked strings.

Virginals have strings that run at right angles to the keys. In a spinet, the strings run at an oblique angle to the keys.

The word virginal was used generically for all plucked keyboards into the 17th century.

Another related instrument is the clavichord, a 16th century instrument shaped like a rectangular box with the keyboard set into one of the long sides. The strings run parallel to the keyboard. The strings are struck, not plucked, which makes the clavichord a closer relative to the piano than the harpsichord.

This image shows a double virginal dated 1581, which is part of the Met’s collection. This double virginal is the earliest known instrument by Hans Ruckers, who we already know as a master harpsichord builder. Double virginals consist of a large virginal (called "the mother"), and a small virginal (called "the child"), tuned an octave above that of the large instrument.

Either instrument may be played by itself, or the small virginal may be removed from its space and placed on top of the larger one. When this is done, the keys of the "child" are activated when those of the "mother" are played, thereby causing both instruments to sound at once, in octaves.

When the instrument is opened, you can see the painted patterns on the inner surfaces, and the Latin inscription — which translated reads “Sweet music is a balm for toil” — hangs from the instrument like a banner. Portraits of Philip II of Spain and his wife Anne of Austria, face each other over the Mother keyboard.

**SLIDE: WHAT IS A SPINET?**

This Italian spinet from 1540 is still playable, according to the Met. I wonder who has had the nerve to try it out?

This instrument is richly decorated with panels of inlaid wood, mother-of-pearl, and tracery. Layers of pierced parchment recreate a Gothic rose in the sound hole. Dolphins appear in the inlay flanking the keyboard, and carved figures of grotesques bracket the keyboard.

Over the keys is a line of poetry meant for only the musician to see. It reads, "I'm rich in gold and rich in tone; if you lack virtue, leave me alone." It suggests that the keyboardist should have personal virtue as well as musical talent.

We know that the woman who commissioned this instrument paid 250 roman scudi for it, because the information is engraved on the spinet. The name of the maker isn’t known.

**SLIDE: ORGANS AND PIANOS**

The organ is a keyboard instrument, but one that is very different from the harpsichord in that it uses keyboards and pedals to force air into an arrangement of pipes to produce notes. Its origins go back as far as the invention of the water organ around 200 BC.

Pianos, which make notes with hammers that hit strings, are a later invention. Unlike the harpsichord, pianos allow a musician to play softly or loudly, depending on how the keys are struck. Pianos were invented in the 1700s.

**SLIDE: IMPORTANT COMPOSERS**

Some of the most important English composers for keyboard in period were two men you have probably heard of -- William Byrd and Thomas Morley.

**SLIDE: WILLIAM BYRD**

First we’ll discuss one of the greatest English composers, William Byrd.

He isknown for his sacred and secular music, and was a member of the Virginalist school, which is another way of saying that he was one of several English keyboard composers of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods.

Byrd obtained the prestigious post of Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1572. The Chapel Royal was a group of priests, singers and musicians that were part of the Royal Household and traveled with the king or queen. The position allowed Byrd to widen his scope as a composer for Queen Elizabeth’s court.

Byrd’s compositions for keyboard were collected in My Ladye Nevells Book, which is now part of the collection in the British Library. This collection, along with the Fitzwilliam Virginals Book, are two of the most important collections of Renaissance keyboard music. We’ll be examining these two collections in more detail later in this presentation.

**SLIDE: LISTEN TO BYRD**

For now, let’s listen to Byrd’s Galliard for the Victorie. The piece was inspired by a series of engravings depicting Henry Sidney’s 1578 battle against an Irish lord.

**SLIDE: English composer and organist Thomas Morley**

Let’s move on to Thomas Morley, who was a student of William Byrd. Morley was best known as a member of the English Madrigal School. As you probably know, madrigals are a form of vocal chamber music that originated in Italy.

Morley also served as singer, composer and organist at St. Paul’s Cathedral. He held a number of church musical appointments, and in 1592 was sworn in as a gentleman of the Chapel Royal, which appears to be an important step in becoming a noteworthy composer.

Later in his life, he spied on English Roman Catholics in the Netherlands and sent information back to London. What a colorful life! I bet no one suspect a church organist of having secrets!

**SLIDE: Composer and performer John Bull (b. 1562)**

John Bull was one of the most famous keyboard performers and composers of his time, second only to William Byrd.

Bull was educated as a chorister of the Chapel Royal in London, and later returned to take up the post of Chapel Royal organist.

Queen Elizabeth appointed Bull to the professorship of music at the newly founded Gresham College in London. In 1601 he began traveling through France, Germany, and the Netherlands, winning praise for his virtuosity as a keyboard player in European courts. Bull joined a royal court in Brussels, and became organist at the Cathedral of Antwerp.

About 150 of John Bull’s compositions for virginals and organ survive in the collection Musica Britannica and in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book.

Let’s listen to Bull’s In Nomine.

**SLIDE: European keyboard composers**

As a nod to the continent, here’s a brief mention of Italian, Dutch and English/Flemish composers. I’ll include more information on these composers as I expand this presentation in the future.

**SLIDE: KEYBOARD REPERTOIRE**

Before the mid-17th century, much of the repertory for string keyboard instruments was shared among harpsichords, virginals and spinets, depending on which instrument was readily at hand. Liturgical based compositions often would be played on the organ for its long, sustained notes.

The earliest extant keyboard music, printed in keyboard tabulature, is from the early 14th century, possibly because early musicians relied on improvisation. Printed keyboard music became popular in the 16th century. We’ll define and discuss keyboard tabulature in a few minutes.

England was late to begin printing keyboard music, but English composers were at the forefront of developing keyboard techniques.

**SLIDE: The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book**

The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book is a collection of almost 300 selections of keyboard music dating from 1562 to 1612.

It includes pieces by 30 of the greatest composers of the time, including our old friends John Bull and William Byrd.

At this time, most collections of keyboard music were compiled by performers. Historians believe the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book was originally compiled by an amateur keyboardist.

The collection was once called Queen Elizabeth’s Virginal Book, but music historians now believe she never owned it. The book is named for Viscount Fitzwilliam, who gave the collection to Cambridge University in 1816.

**SLIDE: My Ladye Nevells Book**

This is a collection of 42 keyboard composition by our old friend William Byrd. He selected and edited the pieces, but the music was copied by a musician working in Windsor Castle.

The book was probably a gift to Elizabeth Neville, wife of prominent nobleman Sir Henry Nevell. It may have been a gift from Byrd to Elizabeth Nevelle, who might have been Byrd’s student or patron.

**SLIDE: TABULATURE OF JAN DE LUBIN**

The 1540 manuscript “Tablature of Jan de Lublin” is the largest collection of keyboard music of 16 century Europe. It contains more than 230 compositions, two theoretical treatises and more. It is notated in the “older” German organ tablature notation, a combination of music notes and letters.

The repertory here covers a wide variety of musical genres and composers, including works of Polish, German, Italian and French origin, as well as Polish folk dances and vocal compositions.

The 'tablature of Jan of Lublin' illustrations what keyboardists of the region would have learned and played, including counterpoint, composition, organ-tuning, liturgical music and polyphonic vocal music from across Europe.

There are many additional period keyboard collections to explore, such as the Robertsbridge Codex, a 14th century manuscript that contains the earliest surviving music written specifically for keyboard, probably the organ. The Codex Faenza also dates to the 14th century. The 15th century Buxheimer Organ Book was compiled by the blind organist, lutenist and composer Conrad Paumann.

The 16th century English Virginals Books are also important early keyboard music manuscripts.

**SLIDE: What is keyboard tablature?**

This is a system for writing music that shows the musician what strings or keys to play. It differs from modern musical notation in that the numbers or letters stand for the strings of a lute or key of a keyboard, instead of the pitch to be played.

Note durations are marked by flags, just like modern notation. Sharps were marked by the addition of a loop at the end of the letter, and B natural and B flat were represented by H and B.

Various kinds of tablature were in wide use from the 15th to 17th centuries, mostly for lute and organ. The earliest extant keyboard music, from the early 14th century, was printed in keyboard tabulature.

The 15th century Buxheimer Organ Book, which is shown in this slide, presented the music’s upper line in regular mensural notation on a seven-line staff, while letters in the spaces below gave the notes for the lower parts.

**SLIDE: DISCUSSION TIME – KEYBOARD TABULATURE**

**SLIDE: Any Questions?**

This concludes my class on the history of the harpsichord. Thanks so much for attending! At this time, I can take questions. I don’t have a class handout, but I’m happy to share my script and the Power Point slides; my email is on the screen.