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A Classification System for Ruckers and Couchet Double Harpsichords

WILLIAM R. DOWD

RECENTLY, while making a list of all known surviving Flemish and French double harpsichords, I found the Flemish instruments difficult to catalog by condition or date. There were examples ranging from pure transposing doubles in original condition to mature French harpsichords with only a Ruckers or Couchet rose and a scrap of Flemish soundboard to claim a place on the list of Ruckers or Couchet instruments. Clearly, some classification system was needed. I hope I have devised one which covers this diversity and thus will be useful to other researchers. This system is limited to double harpsichords and a few large single harpsichords which were rebuilt into doubles. These instruments were the ones most often rebuilt in the eighteenth century, and they had a great influence on the music and harpsichord-making practice of that time. There are four legitimate classes and a fifth to cover the fakes.

Class I instruments are musically unchanged from the time they were first built in Antwerp in the first half of the seventeenth century. I know of four examples:

1: 1615 Andreas I. Vleeshuis, Antwerp (Boalch 79¹) (keys missing; lower balance rail repinned to match the upper; otherwise unaltered).²

1. Donald Boalch, *Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord 1440-1840*, 2nd ed. (London, 1974). References in the text [B4, etc.] are to Boalch's lists in the articles "Ruckers" and "Couchet."

2. See Sybil Marcuse, "Transposing Keyboards on Extant Flemish Harpsichords," *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXVIII (1952), 419-421.

2: 1637 Hans II. Museo di Strumenti Musicali, Rome (B59a) (restored to playing condition by John Barnes, 1971).

3: 1638 Hans II. University of Edinburgh (B61).

4: 1640 Andreas I. Musée de la Croix, Namur (B109a) (keys missing; lower balance rail repinned to match upper; otherwise unaltered).

I have examined the first, the third, and the fourth, the plans of which are very similar, and have seen the keyboards of the second. All are standard Ruckers transposing double harpsichords.

The upper keyboard is at normal pitch and has a range of forty-five notes, C/E–c³, with a short octave in the bass. The lower keyboard has fifty notes, C/E–f³, and is transposed down a fourth. The c's on the upper keyboard are over the f's on the lower. Since both keyboards start on C/E, the upper C/E is over the fourth natural key on the lower keyboard (A) and the space for the three missing naturals on the upper is filled with a wide keyblock.

These instruments have two choirs of strings: 1 × 8' and 1 × 4'; and four registers of jacks: an 8' and a 4' on each keyboard. The dampers of these registers must be cut short enough to leave the strings undamped when a register is disengaged; when one keyboard is being played, the registers of the other must be disengaged to avoid damper interference. Therefore, there is no possibility of playing both keyboards simultaneously.

A curious feature on all of these instruments is a second string for each e \flat key on the upper keyboard, since they are above the keys on the lower normally tuned g \sharp in meantone temperament. These extra strings run, at a slightly higher level than the others, from metal posts fixed in the nuts to extra pins on the bridges. This device is important to understand since either the existence of the posts and extra pins or the marks left by their removal are certain evidence that an instrument was originally a transposer. Edwin Ripin³ makes a good case, based on iconographic evidence, that contrasting doubles were also built, but none is known to exist in a Class I state. If one assumes that they normally had a range of C/E–c³, then their plan would have been identical to the standard 2- or 3-jack single with the addition of a second keyboard in front. Some may exist in Class IV instruments

3. "The Two-Manual Harpsichord in Flanders before 1650," *The Galpin Society Journal*, XXI (1968), 33–39.

but it would be almost impossible to distinguish them from singles. Large singles with a range down to GG/BB or GG chromatic, often by Couchet, should be included in Class I because they could be altered into Class II or III doubles.

Class II instruments are those whose case and soundboard layout are unchanged but whose transposing keyboards are brought into line to make a contrasting double harpsichord. If the wide keyblock in the bass of the upper keyboard is removed and the three missing natural keys added, the bottom note will be apparent BB, tuned GG. It will then have the very useful seventeenth-century French range of fifty notes: GG/BB–c³. The lower keyboard would be rearranged to match the upper. Usually the keyboards were replaced rather than rearranged though sometimes the original key frames were used. The plugged pin holes and the marks showing where the upper wide keyblock once existed provide more evidence that the instrument was formerly a transposer.

Most often a second 8' choir of strings has been added and the registers reduced to three, one for each choir. The upper 8' jacks are either doggled to the lower or, especially if the alteration was French, there is a coupler. The string spacing and pin positions on the bridges remain the same, or nearly so, should an extra course be crowded into the bass to accommodate a split Eb or the c^{#3} and d³ in the treble. With the exception of the addition of a second 8' choir and the slight rearrangement of plucking points, Class II instruments should still sound more or less as they did originally. Excellent examples of Class II instruments are:

1612 Hans II. Musée d'Histoire Locale, Amiens (B17a).

1642 Hans II. Hugh Gough, New York (B64).

Class III instruments are those originally of Class I or II which have been extended to five (or nearly five) full octaves with a range of FF–e³ or FF–f³. Instruments so extended in France were said to be *mis en grand ravalement*. The cheekpiece was removed, the treble of the bentside was added to, and the cheek rejoined or replaced. The spine was often moved to the bass. The wrestplank was usually replaced although it was sometimes joined to. The keyboards usually date from the *ravalement*. The bridges are usually original with the ends pieced out. The 4' hitchpin rail and ribbing are often original;

the case framing is usually new. While the soundboard layout is often relatively unchanged except in the extreme bass and treble, the string spacing is almost always crowded from the Flemish standard of about 500 millimeters for three octaves to the French standard of 480 millimeters. Moving the pins along the bridges changes the scaling and the tone quality. Frequently a shortening of the scale is compensated for by moving the nuts (especially on instruments with new wrestplanks) and thereby changing the plucking points and, of course, the tone. A Class III harpsichord is quite altered from the original, but its lineage is clear and it often retains marked characteristics of the original Ruckers sound.

Not infrequently a Class III instrument is made from a Class II, rather than directly from a Class I transposer. For example, the beautiful 1646 Andreas II (B115) in the estate of the late Comtesse de Chambure shows evidence of having been a Class II instrument in the first quarter of the eighteenth century before it was converted to Class III in 1756 by François Blanchet and further enlarged in 1780 by Pascal Taskin.

Another excellent example of a Class III instrument is the 1627 Hans II (B44a) extended in 1753 formerly owned by Claude Mercier-Ythier. The 1680 Couchet (B6), extended by Blanchet in 1758 and later rebuilt by Taskin in 1781, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (formerly owned by Edwin Ripin), is an example of a Class III instrument made from a large single.

Class IV is a catchall for five-octave double harpsichords considered in eighteenth-century France as having been *mis en grand ravalement*. These instruments were made either from small Ruckers singles or were collages made from pieces of Ruckers wood and virginal soundboards. Each one is a special case, but almost all of them have new bridges or bridges that have been moved. Their musical ancestry has been obliterated. Examples are:

1612 Hans II. Paris Conservatoire (B31).

1621 Andreas I. Musée des Arts et Industries, St. Etienne (not listed in Boalch).

1627? Hans II. Yale University (B44).

It was probably the success of Class III instruments that caused the vogue for Ruckers *en grand ravalement*; the demand for true Class

III types could not be met by the supply of Class I and II instruments. The differences between Class III and Class IV instruments would not have been readily apparent to the eighteenth-century buyer. Greed would cause the Parisian harpsichord makers to undertake the more difficult task of making a Class IV instrument rather than the simpler job of building a new instrument.

Class V instruments are fakes of which there are really two kinds: those made in the eighteenth century to pass for Ruckers, and those whose original makers never meant to deceive but which were attributed to Ruckers and given a rose to prove it during the collector's period at the turn of the last century. The Jean Goujon (B4) at the Paris Conservatoire is a fine example of the first kind of fake. It was certainly meant to deceive when built. The Richard 1688 (B18) at Yale is probably of the second type. The Milan Taskin (B3a) is something between. It is a genuine Class III *ravalement* of an older harpsichord (probably a seventeenth-century French instrument), but certainly is not a Ruckers. However, it has a Ruckers rose and a bogus Flemish soundboard painting. Class V is different from the other classes in being a way-station rather than a permanent resting place. Before an instrument is suspected it is thought to belong to one of the other classes, and after it is unmasked it would be identified by the name of its original maker, if known. The Goujon is never now referred to as the 1590 Hans I.

The classification system would end here if it were not for the recent emergence of a different type or model of Class I transposing double, one with a chromatic bass to GG. The upper keyboard had forty-nine notes, F-f³, and the lower fifty-four notes, GG-c³. I first saw one in Paris in 1973, a 1616 Hans II (B22; now a Class II). At the time, I thought it an interesting freak or sport without appreciating its significance. I was making a drawing of a Ruckers *en grand ravalement* for my own use as a maker, starting with the plan of a standard C/E-c³ transposer and extending it by the same method used by Blanchet on the 1646 Andreas II (B115). I was startled to find that I could not make my drawing look anything like Blanchet's *ravalement*, an instrument I had considered to be the archetype of a Class III *grand ravalement*. As an exercise, working backward from a drawing of the 1646 Andreas II, I drew the instrument from which

it must have been made. Again there was little similarity between this derived instrument and the plans of the standard short-octave transposers. Its tenor scale was shorter and the bentside straighter toward the tail than the standard plan: both French features. It was becoming obvious to me that far more extensive changes had apparently been made to it than had been supposed. An examination by Sheridan Germann of the soundboard painting dispelled rising doubts about its being an authentic Andreas II; it had to be accepted. Moreover, there was no evidence that the bridges or bentside had been moved.

In 1976, I examined and measured the 1628 Hans II (B47) at the Château de Versailles, which is definitely a Class II instrument. It has beautifully-made French keyboards dated 1706, with the narrow French octave span in front, but fanned in back to reach the original Ruckers string spacing. A second 8' choir of strings has been added and a $c\sharp^3$ and d^3 crowded in the treble; it is otherwise musically unaltered. The marks of the removal of the extra $e\flat$ strings prove it to have been originally a transposer. Its range of GG– d^3 chromatic means that it was a GG– c^3 chromatic transposer. The plan of this instrument closely resembles the drawing I derived from the 1646 Andreas II and the mystery of that *ravalement* was solved. Moreover all of the other Class III instruments that I had examined proved to be extensions of this type. This is not to say that there are or were no Class III instruments made from the short-octave type; I simply do not know of any now. Indeed, as will be seen, it is much easier to make a Class III instrument from the chromatic model.

To allow for the extra notes, the Versailles 1628 Hans II is forty-five millimeters wider than the short octave transposer. Since a chromatic transposer has a range to GG chromatic, the spine then needs only to be moved over about twenty millimeters to include FF or, by respacing, the FF can be crowded in without moving the spine at all. To extend a short-octave transposer to FF requires that the spine be moved sixty to seventy millimeters, which, among other things, creates an abnormally wide tail and a generally distorted shape. As shown in the description of the plan derived from the 1646 Andreas II, the chromatic transposer has a shape and a scale much closer to eighteenth-century French practice—and probably had more influence on it—than the short-octave model.

Why were chromatic transposing instruments made when the short octave seems to have been the standard range in Antwerp until the mid-seventeenth century? They are not a later development, for one of them is dated 1616. A possible explanation, suggested to me by Grant O'Brien, is that these chromatic instruments were made for export to England where the music frequently demands chromatic basses. Could not Sir Francis Windebanck's famous letter⁴ complaining about the lack of six or seven keys on his newly received Ruckers double harpsichord refer to its C/E short octave rather than its unaligned keyboards? Indeed, the surviving seventeenth-century English instruments have a bass range to chromatic C or to GG/BB and a treble range to d³, e³, or f³. If one takes Windebanck's "6 or 7 Keyes" literally, the most reasonable addition to a C/E-c³ range would be to add four or five in the bass and two in the treble, giving a range of C-d³ or GG/BB-d³. It is worth noting that Gerbier's reply to Windebanck does not say that Ruckers would not make one to the required specifications. In fact Gerbier says he would, but that he couldn't alter this one and that nothing else was presently for sale.

This classification system would seem to cast a value judgment on the instruments involved: more specifically an implication that Classes IV and V are less valuable than Class III. This is neither intended nor is it true. It must be remembered that Class IV and V instruments were accepted in the eighteenth century as genuine and as having great value, a fact attested by the elaborate and expensive decoration lavished on them. They could not have maintained this status had they been musically inferior. It is hoped that this classification system will clear some of the fog surrounding the history of these instruments so that we can better understand the musical cultures and practices for which they were made or altered.

The proposed classification system is summarized in the table.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

4. Frank Hubbard, *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 67 and pp. 231-232.

TABLE

CLASS I

Original Ruckers Instruments

<i>Type A:</i> Transposer	<i>Type B:</i> Transposer	<i>Type C:</i> Large Single
Upper Manual: C/E-c ³	F-f ³ chromatic	C-c ³ chromatic or greater
Lower Manual: C/F-f ³	GG-c ³ chromatic	

Examples:

1615 Antwerp (B79)	no known examples	1679 Smithsonian Couchet (B5)
1637 Rome (B59a)		
1638 Edinburgh (B61)		
1640 Namur (B109a)		

CLASS II

Case unaltered; string spacing not or hardly altered; second 8' added; range same (d³ sometimes crowded in); keyboards either original, realigned or replacement

<i>Type A</i>	<i>Type B</i>	<i>Type C</i>
GG/BB-c ³ or d ³	GG-c ³ or d ³ chromatic	

Examples:

1612 Amiens (B17a)	1616 Private Coll. (B22)	1652 Couchet, Private Collection
1642 Gough (B64)	1628 Versailles (B47)	

CLASS III

True *ravalement* from a transposing double: case widened; string spacing crowded; range extended to FF-e³ or f³

<i>Type A</i>	<i>Type B</i>	<i>Type C</i>
<i>Examples:</i> none known	1627 Mercier (B44a) 1646 de Chambure (B115)	1650? Met Couchet (B8) 1669 Hague Couchet (B4) 1680 MFA Couchet (B6)

CLASS IV

1. Rebuild from a suspected small single but bridges moved and musical ancestry to Ruckers obliterated (Types A, B, and C no longer relevant)

Examples: 1612 Paris Conservatoire (B31)
1621 St. Etienne
1627? Yale Blanchet/Ruckers (B44)

2. Collages from pieces of Ruckers wood or virginal soundboards

Examples: Brussels 1612/1774 Taskin (B17)

CLASS V

Fakes

Examples: 1749 Goujon (B4)
1688 Richard (B18)
1780 Taskin (B3a)