

*Journal of the
American Musical
Instrument Society*

VOLUME XXIX • 2003



Copyright by the [American Musical Instrument Society](#).
Content may be used in accordance with the principles of fair
use under [Section 107 of the United States Copyright Act](#).
Content may not be reproduced for commercial purposes.

Howard Schott, editor. *The Historical Harpsichord, volume 4* [containing two essays: Sheridan Germann, "Harpsichord Decoration—A Conspicuous" and Richard Rephann, "A Fable Deconstructed: The 1770 Taskin at Yale"]. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002. 241 pp.: 270 black-and-white photos. ISBN: 0-945193-75-0. \$54.00 (hardcover).

As has happened before in this series, the book contains more than one essay. Here we have two of very unequal length, namely 213 and 27 pages respectively; nevertheless, the second essay can partly be seen as an exemplar of one of the main topics of the first, and so can justify the editor's decision to pair them.

Sheridan Germann has established herself as a skilled practitioner of, and authority on, harpsichord soundboard painting. Ever since her articles in this Journal 4 (1978) and *Early Music* 7/4 [October 1979], 8/4 [October 1980], and 9/2 [April 1981]) there has been the hope that her findings would be put into book format, and now, several years after the Pendragon Press preliminary announcement, this has finally been done.

In her introduction, the author summarizes the various elements that constitute the complete aesthetic appearance of a musical instrument, and the reader becomes aware that the essay is going to embrace many more topics than might have been initially anticipated. The use of marquetry, intarsia, veneering, printed papers, and sculptural features, both integral and applied, are considered, in addition to the various types of painting that these objects have been subjected to over the years. The design of stands and of music desks (and even the lack of the latter) are also discussed. The decision to divide the subject contents into five main sections, based on the geographic origin of the instruments concerned, is alluded to by the editor in his introduction. Features discussed are therefore under the headings of Italian (including Iberian), Flemish (including Dutch), French, German (including Austrian and Scandinavian), and English (including Irish and North American). This may be considered all rather arbitrary, but it keeps the topic within bounds, though it is amusing to read that Dr. John Henry van der Meer commented in a private communication to the author that "God did not invent the harpsichord five times."

This reviewer must immediately confess to disappointment that all the illustrations are in black and white, with a fair proportion of them less than perfect in quality for their chosen role of illuminating the text. The illustrations are not individually numbered, so that where there are sev-

eral stretching across two facing pages (as quite often happens), tracing the reference is not an altogether user-friendly process. In addition, because of the need for the illustrations to be printed on glossy paper, they are all collected together in the latter part of the essay.

Embarking on the first section of main text (Italy), this reviewer soon realized that, although it read as a thoughtful continuous essay by an author skilled in the use of art-history terminology, there was no reference at all to the illustrations at the back. Noticing that the illustrations themselves had quite sizeable captions, he then decided to soak himself in that latter section instead. This method worked better; so the book was then read in alternating sections (i.e., Italy captions and pictures, Italy text, Flanders captions and pictures, Flanders text, etc.). A snag with the method, though, was that occasional *recherché* art terms were met with before they were discussed in more detail in the main text. Certainly, a detailed glossary of both art and harpsichord terminology could most usefully have been appended, for one would hope that the book will interest a much wider readership than museum specialists. Quite often the photo captions duplicated what was said in the main section, so that more and more the reviewer wished that the illustrations had been integrated into one text only, the whole printed on paper suitable for both text and photographs.

Of course, illustrations in color would have added to the expense; nevertheless it is impossible to avoid frustration when reading seductive descriptions of painting color schemes, particularly those in eighteenth-century France, while having only black-and-white pictures to look at: one is almost back to publishing as it was fifty years ago. The reviewer seems to remember that the cost of Claude Mercier-Ythier's sumptuous *Les Clavecins* (Paris: Expodif Editions, 1996)—a much larger book including some fine color illustrations of soundboard and lid paintings—was only about half again the price of the present one. But obtaining first-rate color photos from reluctant museum curators is not the easiest of tasks, and no doubt the author had to use what she was offered, or what she already had. Nevertheless, let us be grateful that her important work is now in book form.

One of the subjects discussed by Ms. Germann is that of identifying later alterations to instruments (especially those subjected to *ravalement*) and even of deciding which instruments are “fakes,” by using clues from various artistic disciplines, including knowledge of changing styles of painting. This same topic of deception is at the heart of the first part

of Richard Rephann's essay, where his detailed study of the putative history of the elaborately-decorated 1770 Taskin harpsichord at Yale becomes almost a detective story. He examines in detail the lid's decoration in his attempt to demonstrate the false association of the instrument with Voltaire's mistress, Mme. du Châtelet, in the 1730s. (It is rather strange that Ms. Germann herself did not mention the Yale instrument in her essay, and it would surely have been useful to have had her opinion on the lid paintings.) He also shows that the depiction of Mme. du Châtelet's residence on the inner side of the lid flap is almost certainly based on a nineteenth-century lithograph, and appends an undated later photograph of the building, which shows definite structural differences. An authentic early eighteenth-century representation would, of course, have helped his proof much more, if it could have been found.

The second part of Mr. Rephann's essay considers the unusually wide register gap in this instrument, and is devoted to a discussion of the number and disposition of the registers. Here a strong case is made that the two 8' registers originally would have had each jack fitted with two plectra facing in opposite directions, one quill and the other *peau de buffle*.

This reviewer admits to having found the writing occasionally difficult to follow. Consider the following statement:

The Yale Taskin is a two-manual harpsichord with three choirs of strings: 2x8', 1x4'. The lower manual controls a down-looking 8' and a down-looking 4'; the upper manual controls an up-looking 8'. The handstops on the 1770 Taskin have up-turned-spatulate ends. The 8' on the lower manual and the 8' on the upper are controlled by a pair of handstops with up- and down-pointing upturned-spatulate ends. (p. 218)

This is an extreme case of verbal infelicity, admittedly, but it illustrates how a reader can be confused, and perhaps even misled.

When the author is referring to photographs of the instrument, again, as in the first essay, one cannot make out clearly what is being described due to rather poor reproductions (this time printed on the same paper as that used for the text). Yale's own catalog of its exhibition of musical instruments in 1960 even contains a clearer general photo than the one provided here, and has in addition two other photos (of the barring and the decorated soundboard) which could have been useful. It is a pity that those negatives were not, or could not be, used again. In addition, we learn that in an investigation in 1957 (as part of a so-called "restoration"), the extremities of the central panel of the top of the lid were ex-

posed, showing that it was indeed part of an earlier painting. However, it is not made clear how the lid was left after the later 1974 restoration. A recent photograph would have helped.

Yet another way in which it is difficult to chart one's way through the logic of the text is by constantly being referred to substantial footnotes, which need to be read fully if the argument is to be completely understood. Footnotes are here often as important as the main text. Two instances will suffice. Footnote 27 contains the only reference to plate 9, and it is only there that one can deduce how the quilling was left after its 1974 restoration—namely, with wide jacks with *single* plectra. Rather strangely, footnote 31 solves completely an uncertainty expressed in the text. Attributions and citations apart, it would have been worthwhile for all the other footnotes to have been subsumed into the main text.

One is also slowed down by an unfortunate mix-up in the labeling of the plates and figures. Three captions should be moved: that on page 230 to page 226, that on page 233 to page 230, and that on page 236 to page 233.

Nevertheless, many interesting and important structural features are discussed in detail. For instance, in this instrument, Taskin cut vertical slots into the 4' jacks (and possibly into the missing original 8' jacks also), the length dependent on their position in the compass, so that the bass jacks were made slightly heavier than those in the treble. It was also particularly useful that the Russell Collection's 1769 Taskin was so close in date to the instrument under discussion that it was able to be used for detailed comparison. This really becomes one of the most important parts of the essay.

Kenneth Mobbs
Mobbs Keyboard Collection
Bristol, U.K.

Jeremy Montagu. *Reed Instruments: The Montagu Collection, An Annotated Catalogue*. Lanham, MD, and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001. xx, 183 pp.: 8 black-and-white drawings. ISBN: 0-8108-3938-5. \$60.00 (hardcover).

This volume is the first issued in a proposed series of catalogs of Jeremy Montagu's collection of almost 2500 musical instruments. It will take its place as Volume IV, Part 2, when the series, arranged according to the order established by Curt Sachs and Eric Hornbostel, is completed. According to the author these volumes will not be long in coming, as