

A Short History of the Piano

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Earliest of stringed instruments

Bronze age Zither from around 3000 BC in Africa. The **Ground Zither** was one string over a hole dug in the earth. This was followed by several strings with gourds added as resonance bodies.

The **'Zither'**, with several strings strung over a resonance body reached Europe in the 11th century.

It was soon followed by the **'Dulcimer'** around the 13th century, which was the first instrument to be hit by little hammers. It is to this day used as a folk instrument in many countries around the world and is the closest predecessor to the keyboard with hammer mechanism.

In Africa very early on the **thumb piano** was used, again with a gourd as a sound chamber. This is used until the present day.

Early instruments with keyboards like the 'Hydraulis', the Hurdy-Gurdy, Leonardo da Vinci's 'Organistrum' as well as keyed monochord and polychords and the Geigenwerck were milestones in the development of the piano. But both Clavichord and Harpsichord families, appearing at the beginning of the 15th century owe their beginnings to the dulcimer.

In the **Clavichord** (first appearance in 1404) the action is based on a little tangents striking the strings. The strength of the note can be controlled by the player. The pitch is slightly bent as a note is played louder, creating a 'vibrato' or 'Bebung' effect. This was Bach's favourite keyboard instrument – other than the organ.

In the Spinnet, virginal and harpsichord the strings are plucked and therefore the strength of the note cannot be influenced. It was popular until the early 19th century.

So at the end of the 17th century 3 types of keyboard instrument were in general use: organs, harpsichords (incl. virginals and spinets) and clavichords.



The first piano with a hammer mechanism as we know it today was the **Fortepiano**, invented by the 'father' of the pianoforte, Bartolomeo Cristofori in Italy 1709. It has a four octave compass. Its strings are wound to their underside and the tuning pins pass right through the wrest plank, resulting in keeping the tuning much better than harpsichords. It didn't come to significant use or even fame in his lifetime.



The Fortepiano was heavy and bulky to carry, and so we see the Rise of the Square Piano. It appeared first in 1740 as a 'Tafelklavier'(Tablepiano) in Germany. With a simplified Cristofori action the **Square Piano** was built mainly in England by designer Zumpe and was taken on from 1771 by John Broadwood.



An unusual 'piano' – the **Glassharmonica**, 1761 uses a footpedal to control the rotation of glassbowls.

The eminent piano teacher/harpsichordist/composer and businessman **Muzio Clementi** had come to London and was hugely involved in pushing the mechanics of the early square piano forward including foot pedals. He developed a flourishing sales business towards the turn of the century, but saw himself largely as a harpsichordist still. He wrote around 70 Sonatas of which the early ones could be played on harpsichords but the later ones were written for square piano with pedals in the early 1800's.



The Stein pianos with a '**Viennese**', lighter action were known to the young Mozart and favoured by Beethoven. It had a 'Prellmechanik' and an 'escarpement' in the action of the key and was altogether more able to perform with dynamic and expressive variety.



A Viennese Piano with 7 pedals – an area where piano manufacturers tried to outdo each other



A Broadwood from 1830, with pedals and great expressive power... AND the modern piano as we know it now!

Ref: David Crombie, The Piano, Balafon Books, 1995