

# Considerations when playing music composed for Early Keyboard Instruments on the Piano

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### Early Keyboard Instruments

#### The Baroque era (from appx 1600)

During the Baroque era the harpsichord, spinet, virginals and clavichord were well established and widely played. The sound of the harpsichord, virginals and spinet was produced through the depression of keys causing strings to be *plucked*. The sound of the clavichord was produced by the depression of keys causing strings to be *struck* (by small metal blades called tangents).

These early keyboard instruments were limited in terms of compass, tonal colour and dynamic range, so when playing Baroque music, care must be taken to ensure performances are not “dry” in interpretation.

A number of devices can be used:

1. Rhythmic accentuation: Dance rhythms abound in early music, and appropriate rhythmic characterisation and strength will add much to the interpretation.
2. Clarity of voicing: Early music is mainly contrapuntal, so it is important to bring out the clarity of each voice and the interplay – or conversation between different voices.
3. Articulation: Rather than using dynamics (as these were limited) tonal colour was achieved through articulation – especially through the *different lengths* of notes (detached, staccato, slurred etc.)
4. Dynamics: Although limited (as said above) these were largely left to the discretion of the performers. However, this does not mean that the performers of today, using modern instruments, should be limited in their exploration of the tonal palette that the modern instrument can deliver.

#### The Classical era (from appx 1750)

Just prior to the classical era, a new keyboard instrument, the fortepiano or pianoforte, was invented by Cristofori (appx 1720). The sound of this instrument was produced by the depression of keys causing strings to be *struck by a felted hammer*. This enabled a much greater dynamic range to be achieved *through the use of touch*. Also, there was an escapement mechanism which caused the hammers to fall away from the strings immediately after striking them, thus allowing swifter repetition of notes. And there were dampers which fell back onto the strings to damp the sound as soon as the keys were released.

The fortepiano also had both an Una Corda and a sustaining pedal (operated by knee levers).

While clarity of tone remains important in this era, the invention of the sustaining pedal enabled a rounder sound, which Haydn and Mozart were able to exploit in their compositions. However, as the sustaining pedal was initially operated by the knee, it was clearly not so much intended for the sustaining of long chords as for the enrichment of short ones.

The marks *sf* and *sfz*, much used by Beethoven, should be thought of in the context of the fortepiano, so care should be taken that notes and chords marked in this way do not sound intrusive - as they might if given full force on a modern piano. They should perhaps be thought more of a “lean into” a note or chord, than as an accented attack.

However, the instrument could be somewhat metallic in sound, compared with the instruments of the Romantic period.

### **From the Romantic era (from appx 1820) onwards**

The modern piano as we now know it has been much refined since the first model exhibited by Cristofori, with a much more subtle and rounded quality of tone, but the fundamental principles of the instrument have remained unchanged.

Once the iron (rather than wooden) frame – invented by Babcock in 1825 – and foot (rather than knee) pedals were in daily use, a much greater variety of tonal colour, dynamic range and accentuation became possible.