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# Instruments, historical

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A general term for instruments of previous eras, particularly those considered appropriate for the historically-informed performance of early music. The term should not be confused with “historic instruments,” which denotes those individual instruments distinguished by their rarity, symbolic value, association with prominent persons or events, innovatory significance, and so on.

Within the Western classical tradition, interest in historical instruments has tended to be a subcultural activity, with the majority of musicians and audiences preferring instruments of their own day to earlier types. Particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, historical instruments were often derided as “primitive” in sound and mechanism, and as unsuited for the performance of either modern or historical music. Thus, for example, the increased dynamic range, pitch range, and durability of 19th-century pianos were seen as “improvements” over fortepianos, harpsichords, and clavichords of previous eras. Though evidence of this view appears in the popular press as late as the 1980s (when *New York Times* music critic Bernard Holland referred to period instruments as “the dead ends of instrumental evolution”), in general the zeitgeist of European and American early-music scenes has shifted to revere antique instruments over modern ones for the performance of pre-19th-century repertoire.

The accelerating pace of innovation and mass production during the industrial revolution led, by the late 19th century, to a reaction in some quarters aimed at fostering higher quality and greater individuality and simplicity in instrument manufacture, as exemplified by fine hand-made examples from the past. This nostalgia, writ large by the British Arts and Crafts movement, was bolstered by exhibitions of historic instruments (for instance at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where antique keyboard instruments owned by Morris Steinert were displayed) and by the formation of important permanent collections in museums such as the Kensington, later the Victoria and Albert, in London, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Here, in the context of fine art, displays of especially beautiful or curious old instruments aroused interest in their sounds.

The prominent British instrument collectors and scholars Carl Engel, A.J. Hipkins and F.W. Galpin influenced this development through their publications and by advising American antiquarians such as Mrs. John Crosby Brown, James Henry Darlington, Sarah Frishmuth, Belle Skinner, and Frederick Stearns, whose instrument holdings became the nuclei of public collections that offered examples for careful study by contemporary makers, as well as for occasional performance in educational concerts. For example, in the 1890s, music critic Henry Edward Krehbiel and collector Moritz Steinert gave lectures in New York City on historical keyboards, illustrated with short performances on instruments from Steinert’s collection. American concert-goers also enjoyed increasing exposure to 18th-century music, for example through Ferruccio Busoni’s keyboard recitals (1910, 1911), Gustav Mahler’s performances of Bach with the New York Philharmonic (using a Steinway piano with tacks in its hammers to replicate the sound of a harpsichord), and concerts by the Handel & Haydn Society of Boston (founded 1815) and the Bethlehem Bach Choir (founded 1898).

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By the turn of the 20th century ensembles had formed in America to specialize in performance on historical instruments. For example, from 1891 through 1905 the Mozart Symphony Club of New York offered “Three Centuries of Romantic, Classic and Popular Music Interpreted on the Instruments of the Times.” George Proctor in Boston played the harpsichord for a private performance organized by Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1900 at which the viola d’amore was also heard. Also in Boston, from 1905 to 1911 Arnold Dolmetsch supervised a department of Chickering & Sons devoted to making harpsichords, clavichords, virginals, lutes and viols. The availability of Dolmetsch-Chickering instruments, which were unsurpassed in their day for fidelity to historical models, facilitated the more “authentic” performance of early music. Busoni’s advocacy of Dolmetsch’s work, and Dolmetsch’s own somewhat eccentric performances, gained American adherents for his instruments, some of which were acquired by prestigious schools such as Vassar College. The American harpsichord maker John Challis began his career in 1925 by attempting to copy a Dolmetsch-Chickering clavichord. By such means the groundwork was laid for the Early-music revival of the mid-20th century.

Charismatic performers, notably the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, promoted this endeavor in America after World War I (Landowska first performed in the United States in 1923). While Landowska’s Pleyel harpsichords were remote from Baroque models in design and sound, her fame inspired American performers to explore more deeply the resources of historical instruments. Organists in particular received encouragement from Albert Schweitzer, who championed a return to “classical” principles in organ building. A major step toward this goal was the installation in 1937 of a German Baroque-style organ by Aeolian-Skinner (designed by G. Donald Harrison) in the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Germanic Culture at Harvard University, from which Emma Azalia Hackley broadcast recitals nationwide beginning in 1942 (that famous organ was replaced in 1958 by an equally influential, mechanical-action instrument by Flentrop). Harrison’s retrospective approach was prefigured in the early 1930s by neo-Baroque organs of Walter Holtkamp.

During and after World War II some aspiring American craftsmen first beheld antique instruments in Europe; in 1947, for example, Frank Hubbard went abroad to study museum collections and worked in England for Dolmetsch and the clavichord builder Hugh Gough before returning to open a harpsichord workshop with William Dowd, a former apprentice of Challis’s (Gough himself settled in New York in 1959 to produce clavichords, harpsichords, and several lutes). Meanwhile the 1930s and 40s saw an influx of European early music performers to the United States, notably Anne (Tschopp) Gombosi, who brought to Boston the instrumental traditions of the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. The Boston Camerata, which Gombosi co-founded, in turn promoted the success of Hubbard & Dowd, the recorder and flute maker Friedrich von Huene, and other Boston-area pioneers who trained the next generation of makers of “revival” instruments, among them Walter Burr, Eric Herz, Robert Marvin, Thomas Prescott, and others who helped establish Boston’s primacy in the American early music scene.

Indeed, across the United States, the youth-oriented counterculture of the 1960s and 70s brought increasing attention to historical instruments associated with the Western Classical tradition, such as the harpsichord and recorder, as well as to historical instruments associated with folk traditions, such as the Appalachian dulcimer. These young people provided a market for newly built instruments, as well as cheap labor for instrument shops like Hubbard’s and Dowd’s. During this period, the amateur market for historical instruments became such that a number of makers began offering dulcimers, psalteries, clavichords, harpsichords inexpensively in kit form. Among the most successful were the

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harpsichord kits produced by Zuckermann Harpsichords. Though the instruments resulting from these instrument kits tended not to be of high quality, they were the start of many harpsichord makers' careers.

Also during this period, some folk and rock musicians began incorporating harpsichords, recorders, clavichords, or lutes into their recordings, including Pete Seeger, the Weavers, the Beach Boys, the Monkees, Jimi Hendrix, and Jefferson Airplane. Jazz pianists Erroll Garner, John Lewis, Junior Mance, Sun Ra, and McCoy Tyner recorded songs on harpsichord; Oscar Peterson played clavichord on his 1976 recording of "Porgy and Bess." Combined with the already copious number of period ensemble recordings of Classical repertoire released between the 1940s and 70s, these musicians helped historical instruments to reach mainstream status.

Another avenue by which historical instruments became more widely available during the 20th century was through repair or restoration of original examples. Civil War reenactment bands, for example, could often acquire 19th-century brasses and drums for less than the cost of new equivalents, and for some old forms, such as over-the-shoulder saxhorns, no modern equivalents existed (until the 1980s, when brass maker Robb Stewart began making them). Similarly, 19th-century square pianos could sometimes be obtained cheaply and restored to reasonable working order for use at historic sites where "authentic" music performance was desired. Also, Baroque-era bowed instruments that had previously been modernized began to be returned to approximations of their original condition, and manufacture of appropriate gut strings and Baroque-style bows resumed on a small scale.

This development was paralleled by an outpouring of reprint and Urtext editions of 19th-century and earlier music, giving performers unprecedented access to repertoire suited to historically informed performances—which were increasingly recorded commercially. The quality of these editions, performances, and replica or restored instruments varied greatly, but the net effect was to spur excitement about early music, particularly among young aficionados who participated in collegiate ensembles that served as laboratories for "authentic" performance practices. Remarkably, the American Collegium musicum movement took root not in conservatories, which train professional performers, but in university departments of musicology that married analysis of original source materials (manuscripts, treatises) with practical application through student performance.

From the mid-20th century, proliferating collegiate ensembles and a growing number of successful professional groups such as the New York Pro Musica Antiqua (founded 1952) constituted a substantial market for replicas of historical instruments. American builders received further orders from the members of specialized performance-oriented organizations such as the American Recorder Society (1939), the Organ Historical Society (1956; devoted mainly to preservation), the Viola da Gamba Society of America (1963), the Lute Society of America (1966), the Westfield Center for Early Keyboard Studies (1979), and Early Music America (1985). Interest went so far as to encourage speculative reconstruction of instruments for which no historical prototypes exist (e.g., Willard Martin's *Lautenwerk*), "copies" without validity ("natural" trumpets with fingerholes), and even production of novel types (e.g., George Kelischek's Kelhorns, plastic gemshorns).



Grand piano built by Bartolomeo Cristofori, 1720.

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This growing enthusiasm among academics, amateurs, and, increasingly, music critics, for historical instruments and their music was presaged, years earlier, by the warm reception accorded Ralph Kirkpatrick's sensational performance, at a meeting in 1939 of the American Musicological Society in New York, on the world's oldest piano (by Bartolomeo Cristofori, 1720), which had been rebuilt at the Metropolitan Museum of Art under supervision of Curt Sachs. Sachs, a former museum curator, believed that museums have a responsibility to return instruments in their collections to playing condition so that they can be heard and fully appreciated. He observed that, otherwise, fragile old instruments might be allowed to deteriorate structurally while serving only to delight the eye. His view, however, raised troubling questions about how best to balance the desire to hear these intriguing relics against the need to preserve the irreplaceable evidence they embody.

With the emergence of conservation (as opposed to restoration) as a distinct discipline within museums, attention turned to the unique problems posed by historical instruments, which, unlike most museum pieces, were wanted to fulfill their original working function. Conservators experienced in instrument making, most prominently J. Scott Odell of the Smithsonian Institution, John R. Watson of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and Robert Barclay of the Canadian Conservation Institute, focused attention on fundamental issues having to do with authentication, deterioration both from natural causes and through use, and ambiguity of context.

Connoisseurship regarding instruments lagged expertise about fine arts, and new research involving techniques such as dendrochronology proved that many prized instruments in museums were fakes, forgeries, or too optimistically attributed, hence not suitable subjects for costly restoration or replication. Most instruments, especially those incorporating biological materials such as wood or leather, deteriorate over long timespans whether they are played or not, and these effects often cannot be corrected unless original material is replaced. In addition, playing itself is destructive due to unavoidable wear and tear, accidents, replacement of ephemeral parts such as drum heads or violin strings, and routine maintenance procedures such as cleaning and lubrication that subtly erode original surfaces, gradually change critical dimensions, and further obscure the original state. Hence, instruments that are regularly played are endangered, and repair and restoration, especially if inadequately documented, compound uncertainty as to the maker's intentions. Considering that extant historical instruments are all more or less altered (admittedly, sometimes improved) from their intact condition, and knowledge of their contemporary playing techniques, voicing, tuning, mechanical regulation, and so on is incomplete at best, we cannot know with certainty and precision how they were intended to sound and work. Consequently, every restoration involves subjective judgments that might be overturned by future discoveries, and risks obliterating precious evidence that had not been recognized.

With these caveats in mind, and because old instruments provide practically the only tangible evidence for how music sounded before the advent of recording, the need to preserve at least the best, rarest, and most representative of them unaltered to the extent possible, and documenting them thoroughly, is imperative. Fortunately, copying them offers a solution, albeit imperfect, to the problems enumerated above. An accurate copy might play and sound more like the subject instrument did when it was new than it could today. Making a copy greatly reduces risk of wear and tear on the original, and copies can be multiplied so that many musicians can benefit from playing them. Also, copies can be altered and experimented upon without endangering the original. And the process of comprehensive documentation and precise replication (facilitated by provision of technical drawings, x-rays, material analyses, etc.) generally require more careful observation of all aspects of the original than simply repairing it would do. Finally, the insights gained from copying can contribute to advances in instrument making and organology, among other ways by disclosing long-forgotten systems of design (e.g., proportional schemes) and methods of construction (e.g., sand-casting organ pipe metal) that can be applicable today.

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