

John Player: and Cawton Aston

Boalch does not have much to say on Player. He records him as having been born around 1634 in Gloucestershire. He was apprenticed to Gabriel Townsend the virginal maker in 1650. He was made a freeman of the Joiners Company in 1658 and was master from 1684-8. He either retired or died in 1708 when his current apprentices were turned over to Cawton Aston, his workman. Player had a succession of apprentices¹ from Thomas Hill from 1662-1670 (who was later to take apprentices of his own), Jarvis Moore in 1669, Josiah Rogers in 1677, James Welsborne in 1684, John Riall in 1692 followed closely by John Wilson from 1693-1701. His last two apprentices were Gabriel Pelly from 1702 and Thomas Higgins from 1705 both of whom were bound to Cawton Aston in 1708; the latter was made a freeman in 1711.

Player was a maker of virginals and harpsichords as well as spinets, the one surviving virginal being dated 1664, when Thomas Day² was acting as agent in the buying of a harpsichord by Tisseran for Edward Hanford of Woolas Hall, Pershore in 1712, he wrote to Hanford² describing

"another harpsichord: it is of Player's making,
with split or quarter notes like Mrs. Stratford's..."

Hubbard quotes the rest of the letter³ and Day goes onto say that the instrument was priced at 30 guineas. It appears that a number of Player's harpsichords must still have been around as in 1712 Day doesn't seem surprised at the name being linked with harpsichords. We must therefore assume that Player did not concentrate mainly on spinets as did Hitchcock, for example.

The surviving spinets cover a period from c. 1675 to c.1705, the earliest apparently being that in the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁴ It exhibits several features suggesting an early date such as the oak case, the frame stand, the iron hinges and short compass. However the

box guide points to a later date; the apparently later spinet at Sizergh Castle has a leather guide and continuous soundboard over the wrestplank. It seems then that the former spinet is in fact early and that it is a forward looking use of the box guide.

The Sizergh spinet⁵ appears to be the only Player spinet exhibiting the leather jack guide as all the others have box guides. The use of yew or cedar for the case of this instrument is interesting as the GG/BB - c" compass dates it as quite early. As in the work of Charles Haward we see a gradual increase in size of the spinets as the date gets later, the Sizergh spinet being at least 4½" longer than the V & A one, and the unsigned example in the Russell collection⁶ is 3½" longer still.

The curious instrument restored by Chris Nobbs for Alan Rubin⁷ is very similar in appearance to the Sizergh spinet it too is made of cedar and has the same compass to c" the extension up to d" has been reversed but the double stringing suggests perhaps an experimental instrument. Player may have made one before and found that he needed to add the blocks to the soundboard the next time he made one. Whatever the explanation the double strung spinet never caught on in England although many were made in Germany⁸ and Italy⁹ in the 18th century.

Edinburgh's St. Cecilia's Hall houses, in the Russell Collection, a small spinet¹⁰ which bears many resemblances to the Sizergh spinet. The plan view is almost identical to the V & A instrument except for the generally larger size. The top and bottom keys are signed T.A. which may be either a misreading of C.A. or another apprentice whom Player had to make his keyboards for him. There can be little doubt that this instrument is by Player and also that it is quite early, certainly around the 1685 mark with its compass originally up to c" and with its keyfronts like those on the V&A instrument. Again the inside of

case and keywell are veneered in pear or cedar and the floral marquetry panel in several colours would agree with this date.

At this point we should look at the 5 instruments listed in Boalch that I have not covered. They are Nos 3,4,5, 7 and 8. The first of these is about the same size as the Sizergh spinet although its compass is GG/BB - d^{'''} little is known about this instrument and the compass may be an extension. The second, No 4, has an unusual compass; AA - d^{'''} apparent with the bottom two sharps split. This would mean that the AA is tuned to GG the BBb is split to give AA and the C* is split to give BB. Therefore one is left with the ordinary broken octave but with the addition of BBb, a compass otherwise unknown in English spinets.

Boalch's No 7 sounds quite early with its compass to c^{'''} and it is not the same as the Helmingham spinet as he suggests. No 5 in the Smithsonian Institution has a compass to d^{'''} which places it later than 1685. The last of these unseen instruments sounds initially to be similar in period to those described above with its signature on the Jack rail and nameboard marquetry panel with tulips and carnations. However it has a walnut case, arcaded naturals and a compass of GG.AA.BB - f^{'''} broken octave. What the split C* and D* are for is uncertain as the AA and BB are already supplied on their own naturals and it is no saving of space to have the GG* and AA* on the split keys. The layout seems very dubious and certainly warrants a thorough examination. The case is also very long being 1510mm that's nearly 5 feet!

The last remaining spinets by Player to be examined are Boalch's No 6 at Helmingham Hall and the unsigned one at Finchcocks.¹⁰ Both these instruments bear the initials C.A. on the bottom key and both are very similar although unlike any other of Player's spinets.

Cawton Aston was apprenticed to Player in 1693¹¹ and was made free in 1705, 3 years before Player's business was taken over by him. Therefore these two spinets date from the period 1693 to 1708 after which date Aston was

signing his own instruments on the nameboard. In 1709 Cawton Aston and Thomas Barton made a spinet, once owned by Edwin Ripin² and Aston's influence on Barton, recently set free of his apprenticeship to Stephen Keane, is noticeable in the keywell and cheek pieces of Barton's Harpsichord of 1709³ which are almost identical in design to the two Player Spinets above.

It is easily understandable that Player, who was in his early seventies when he retired (or died), would not have played a very active role in the making of his instruments in the last years of his business. By 1705 he probably wasn't signing them himself but had Cawton Aston, his foreman, workman and all but partner do even that for him.

After his brief association with Barton, Cawton Aston went on to have a long career making spinets to a design closer to those of Hitchcock than Player, one of which is signed "Cawton Aston Londini fecit No 268 A.D. 1726." (see description and illustrations).