

Other Makers

The preceding chapters deal with the four major makers of spinets in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who between them account for a large percentage of the surviving instruments. Whether they could have made such a claim when they were producing these spinets cannot be known for certain, but it seems quite possible.

Boalch mentions at least twenty makers from whom spinets survive and another twenty or so makers of harpsichords, spinets or virginals who could have made spinets during the period 1660-1730 (see appendix D). Surely, since the survival rate of Hitchcock's instruments would appear to be only about 2%, there must have been a great many spinets from the seventeenth century which did not survive and were broken up just as upright pianos are today.

Although instruments were altered, to update them by enlarging the compass, a spinet with an original compass of GG/BB - c^m can only be extended so far, as the Haward in Manchester¹ shows with its compass of GG/BB to f^m, before it needs rebuilding altogether. Thus when the music to be played calls for an instrument with a compass of FF - f^m what use is one with less notes! A problem encountered in 1638 when Sir F. Windebank wrote to B. Gerbier about a virginal he had received:²-

"...and it wantes 6 or 7 keyes, so that it is utterly unserviceable if either he could alter it or wolde change it for another that may have more keyes, it were well: but as it is our musick is marr'd."

No doubt, just as in the 18th century the lesser makers emulated the great makers such as Kirkman and Shudi, the lesser spinet makers would have emulated the spinets by makers such as Keene and Player. For example the spinet by Benjamin Sison at Port Sunlight³ looks so much like a Keene but the workmanship is poor and it is clearly signed.

The work of Benjamin Slade is certainly worthy of note since he was Master to Thomas Hitchcock who went on to be possibly the most productive spinet maker of the 18th century. Many influences are obvious in the comparison of their work. The spinet illustrated in Philip James's book 'Early Keyboard Instruments' and dating from around 1700, already shows the 45° angle between the cheek and spine, which Hitchcock was to use on all his spinets. The two remaining harpsichords by both makers also have many features in common apart from their being the only two surviving English harpsichords from the first quarter of the 18th century to have curved tails.

An intriguing collaboration between Benjamin Slade and Joseph Tisseran takes the form of a spinet much like one by Keene. Was Tisseran in partnership with Slade, apprenticed to him, or merely working with him as a journeyman between arriving from the continent and starting his own business?