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Square Piano History

Square Piano History

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The Square Piano in England 1766 - 1866

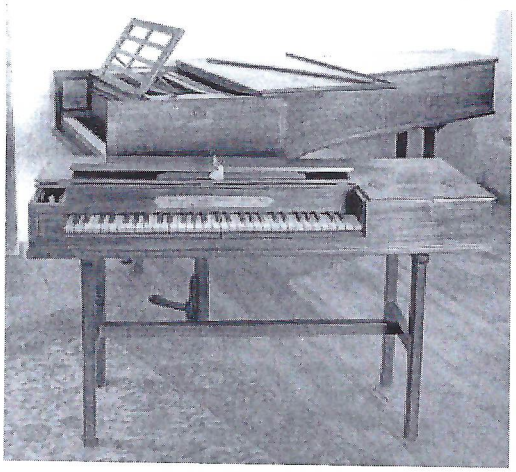
This short history fits neatly into just a hundred years. There were pianos before then (in Italy, for example) and the square piano survived longer in mainland Europe and particularly America, but the last Square piano made in England was delivered by Broadwoods in 1866.

In many European countries, the Guild system placed restrictions on the freedom of craftsmen and tradesmen to practice freely: the system maintained standards, it is true, but it did little to encourage, or even allow, enterprise and innovation. However, in mid eighteenth-century London, the grip of the guilds was weakening, and anyone could develop a successful business through his own ability and hard work.

Thus is was that Johannes Zumpe arrived from Fürth, near Nuremberg in about 1750. He worked for the harpsichord maker Shudi for a while, but soon set up his own workshop in Hanover Square. To all intents and purposes he 'invented' the square piano as we know it, although it is of course developed from earlier instruments, and the clavichord in particular. Amongst the many things he got right was to give his first pianos a massively stronger base structure, to resist the pull of the much thicker strings. As we will see from other pages on this website, later makers failed to realise the importance of this, when strings got even thicker.

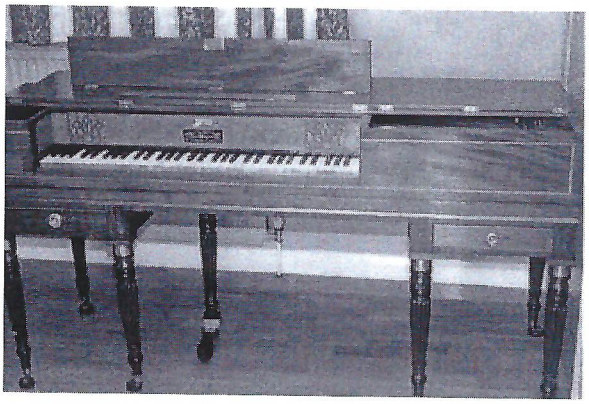
Zumpe's genius was to combine various elements into a small, practical, reliable, and relatively inexpensive instrument. His first surviving piano is dated 1766, and it seems likely that this was the year in which he introduced the English Square Piano to London.

These first pianos were barely four feet long, and eighteen inches wide – considerably smaller than even a contemporary spinet. The 1769 Zumpe below is being guarded by a lovely 1787 Broadwood grand.



One important adoption made by Zumpe was his use of covered or overspun strings for the bass notes. By adding weight without reducing flexibility, this technique enabled a relatively short string to give a reasonable sound. It was used for about the lowest eleven notes. There is some evidence of the use of covered strings in clavichords, but they were certainly never used in original harpsichords or spinets.

springs) and the 'new' (escapement or 'double' action and Irish dampers). Patent restrictions were part of this story, but there were many agreements, infringements, and lawsuits! By 1807, Broadwood pianos adopted both innovations, but it is notable that Broadwoods never had nameboard paintings. About this time, six turned legs became usual, replacing the French stand, as on this Clementi.



Gilt-brass collars, casters, paterae, and other embellishments were also available as we enter the Regency period. These are perhaps the most showy of all square pianos. The compass was also extended to six octaves somewhere around 1815, although it was not usual until ten years later. The fine piano below, made by Tomkison in the 1820s, is remarkable in having a compass of 6½ octaves. Note also the use of Rosewood, not only for the nameboard but for the whole case of this very special instrument. Rosewood was, however, usual for nameboards after the early 1820s: compare this with the lighter treatment of the earlier pianos, with their sycamore or satinwood nameboards.

OLDER STYLE



We often consider this rather sombre, dark-toned fashion to be 'Victorian', but it is worth noting that fashion was moving in this direction at least fifteen years before Victoria's accession.

Moving on a few years, the Broadwood below is typical of what for many of us was our first square piano. It dates from about 1830, when Broadwood's dominance of the market was at its height. This one has an iron string-plate and strengthening bar, and the usual six-octave keyboard. Such pianos turn up quite often in good condition and at very reasonable prices, because there were a lot of them in the first place, and they are more robust and reliable than earlier types.



The final example in this short history is another Broadwood (below) made in 1854, and a fine example of the very last English Square Pianos.