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Among the treasures in the Royal College of Music Museum of Instruments is one of the world's oldest extant harpsichords. It was made by Alessandro Trasuntino in Venice in 1531, and is one of only three known by this maker to have survived. We can admire its superb craftsmanship and gorgeous decoration, and enjoy the glowing sensuality of the reclining Venus depicted on the inside of the lid, but we cannot hear the instrument: restoring it to playing order would be structurally dangerous, and might also risk obliterating the organological evidence it contains.

For some 250 years, though, this now-silent harpsichord was in continuous musical use. During that time it underwent a series of alterations to bring it into line with the musical requirements of succeeding generations. The first major change occurred when the original disposition, which had one set of strings at 'normal' pitch and one set at octave pitch, was changed to two sets at the same pitch, the octave bridge being removed. For technical reasons this probably involved a change from iron to brass strings, and possibly a change in the overall pitch as well.

This alteration seems to have been made in the second half of the 17th century, perhaps to make the harpsichord more suitable for playing continuo, a role which was then increasing in importance. At the same time, or shortly afterwards, a new keyboard was made with a different compass: $G'-c'''$ in place of the original $C-f'''$, both with a short-octave bass. One of the new keys bears the date 1693. It is striking to reflect that at this stage the harpsichord was already over 150 years old!

It has now been possible to hear the Trasuntino by proxy, so to speak, owing to the outstanding skill of harpsichord-maker Malcolm Rose and the enterprising initiative of the American collector who commissioned two copies, one in its original 16th-century form and the other in its post-1693 state. These were built from the museum's published plans, drawn by William Debenham in 1977, and were presented, side by side, and with the original harpsichord nearby, in a special concert at the museum on 2 February, before being shipped to the USA.

In his introductory talk Malcolm Rose explained how the two new harpsichords had been made as closely similar as possible. The cypress of which they are built came from the same tree, and alternate slices were allotted to each instrument and used in the same places. Each soundboard had three identical roses, like the original. The inner structure of the RCM instrument is complicated by a number of internal braces, apparently added at various dates *ad hoc*. He explained that for the copies he had drawn on evidence from the closely similar Trasuntino in the Brussels Museum of Musical Instruments, which still has what is thought to be the original arrangement: a completely empty soundbox without knees or braces of any kind.

The '16th-century' copy had been strung in iron wire at a pitch of $a' = 400$ Hz (surprisingly low for Venice); the '17th-century' one had been strung in brass with a slightly higher pitch, $a' = 410$ Hz. Along with the change in disposition, this resulted in two instruments with dramatically different sounds. I should describe the earlier, iron-strung one as solid and sonorous: there is also more variety available, since one can select normal pitch, octave pitch, or both together. The brass-strung version, in contrast, pro-

duced a brighter, more complex sound, with more 'bite': nearer, in fact, to the kind of sound we have come to expect from an Italian harpsichord (which is not surprising, since the models for the instruments which appear on CDs and the concert platform are mostly of 18th- or late-17th-century type). There is less variety, since although the two sets of strings can be individually selected, the difference in sound between them is small.

An attractive musical programme gave the audience an opportunity to sample these tonal contrasts. The performers were Kevin Fitzsimmons and Mie Hayashi, both students at the RCM, and their teacher, Robert Woolley. The programme was an interesting exercise in matching instruments to repertory. Sometimes the choice was straightforward: Cavazzoni (1543) and Gabrieli (1596) were obvious candidates for the 'earlier' copy, as were the pieces by English virginalists. Baldassare Galuppi's A minor sonata of 1785 clearly belonged on the 'later' version, and very convincing it was, too, played with stylish varied repeats by Mie Hayashi. With other pieces there was perhaps an overlap. For Michelangelo's *Toccata settima* (published 1634)—a stunning piece with an outrageous chromatic climax—Robert Woolley chose the 'later'

version, perhaps because of the more emphatic attack it made possible. For dances by the Venetian Giovanni Picchi (1621), Kevin chose the 'earlier' version again. However, it was back to the 'later' copy for perhaps the most unforgettable item: Kevin's virtuoso presentation of Johann Caspar Kerll's little-known *Passacaglia*: my shorthand note on the programme reads 'The player really seemed to sweat'!

Producing close copies of museum instruments offers us a way of hearing their voices without disturbing precious and fragile originals. Elizabeth Wells, curator of the RCM Museum, hopes that, if sufficient funds can be raised, the museum will be able to commission copies of the Trasuntino, the Venetian virginal by Celestini and other instruments in the collection; the museum already has a playing copy of the rare 15th-century clavictherium. Meanwhile, the work of documenting the collection by means of drawings and catalogues continues as fast as resources permit, a splendid example being the detailed and richly illustrated catalogue of the keyboard instruments which was published in 2000 and is available from the museum. This contains some superb photographs of the Trasuntino harpsichord.

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