



Sounds of Saxony – getting closer to Bach: instruments by Ferdinand Weber in the Cobbe Collection

ALEC COBBE

The sound of the Saxon instrument is less brilliant than that of the Hamburg school, rather sharp and with characteristic color not found in other regions. For this reason it is not especially appreciated in modern times, although different builders unquestionably sought this sound. Johann Heinrich Harrass built in a quite similar manner; thus Johann Sebastian Bach certainly heard this particular sound from his youth on. In fact, Bach's works sound more transparent and precise on a Saxon-Thuringian instrument, once one is accustomed to the individuality of the tone quality.¹

FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN THE PERFORMANCE OF BACH'S HARPSICHORD MUSIC ON an instrument with tonal qualities with which Bach himself might have been familiar, the observations (quoted above) of Hubert Henkel, the distinguished author of the catalogues of the Leipzig instrument collection,² are of paramount interest. For a collection such as the Cobbe Collection, which focuses on assembling solely original instruments (rather than copies), the matter of bringing to the collection a 'Bach' harpsichord with these special Saxon qualities had seemed to be an insurmountable challenge, since there are scarcely ten surviving Saxon originals in existence (virtually all in museum collections and none in these islands). In contrast, eighteenth-century English-made harpsichords survive in their hundreds, as a result of the prospering middle classes and long political stability. While there were Germanic makers who made successful careers in London, most notably Burkat Shudi and Jacob Kirkman, the former was a Swiss-German and the other came from Alsace. Only one of them sprang from Saxony and the Saxon

1 – Ferdinand Weber (1715-1784), harpsichord, London, 1746

Made in London shortly after his arrival from Dresden in 1745 (Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands Park)



2 – Johann Martin Bernigeroth (1713-1767), engraving of Frederick Augustus III, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, Leipzig, 1734 (British Museum)



3 – Johann Homann (1664-1724), map of Saxony and Thuringia, Nuremberg, c.1720 overlaid with names and locations of selected Saxon instrument makers⁴ (Cobbe Collection)

tradition; this was Ferdinand Weber, and he remained in London but briefly.³

This paper outlines three rare instruments by Ferdinand Weber in the Cobbe Collection: an extraordinarily interesting harpsichord made in London by the thirty-year-old Weber just a few months after he had arrived from Saxony, one of his two surviving spinets and one of his two surviving ‘Forte Pianos’, both made during his Dublin years. We see that the harpsichord is distinctively different from those then being made in London – above all, in its sound ideal. We follow Weber to Dublin where he established himself permanently, and where, among numerous commitments, he became harpsichord maker to the Archbishop of Dublin’s daughter-in-law, Lady Betty Cobbe, the present author’s great(x5)-grandmother. Weber’s Dublin instruments also differ from their London peers.

Ferdinand Weber’s certificate of apprenticeship was given in December 1735, and signed by a commissioner appointed on behalf of the ruling King-Elector, whose titles are quoted on the document in full:



The Most Serene and Most Mighty King and Lord, Frederick Augustus, King of Poland, Grand Duke of Lithuania, Reuss, Prussia, Mazovia, Samogitia, Kyovia, Vollhynia, Podolia, Podlachia, Livonia, Smolensk, Severia, and Chernigov, Duke of Saxony, Julich, Cleves, Bergengern, and Westphalia, Lord High Marshal and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Landgrave of Thuringia, Margrave of Meissen, also of Upper and Lower Lausiz, Burgrave of Magdeburg, Prince and Count of Henneberg, Count of the Marck, Ravensberg, and Barby, Lord of Ravenstein.⁵

That is, in short, the same King Augustus III of Poland and Frederick Augustus II, Elector of Saxony (1696-1763), who, in the following year, conferred on Johann Sebastian Bach the title of *Compositheur* to the Royal Court Orchestra. Whenever the composer wrote to him (and he appealed on a number matters concerning his position in Leipzig), he used the same cornucopia of titles (Plate 2).



4 – *Attrib. Johann Heinrich Harrass (1665-1714?), double-manual harpsichord, c.1700*

The legs are probably a 1930s restoration. (Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung, Berlin)

opposite

5 – *Elias Gottlob Haussmann (1695-1774), JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH, 1748*

(Bach Archive, Leipzig)

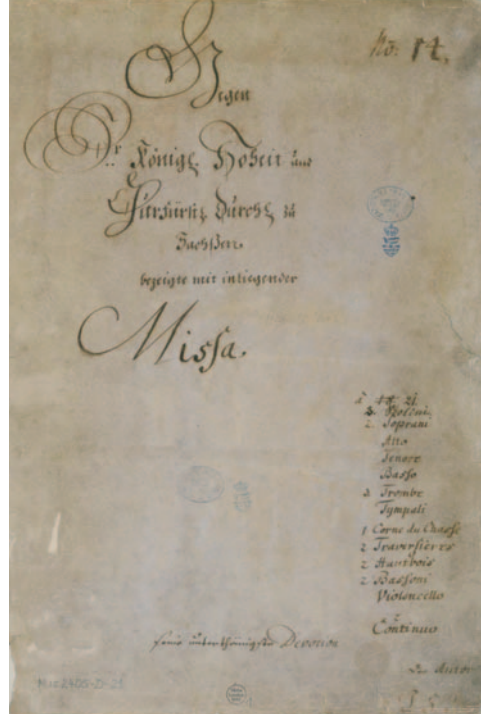
6 – *Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), title page for the Gloria Missa in B Minor, 1733 dedicated to the King-Elector*

(Saxon State and University Library, Dresden)

The inventory of J.S. Bach's estate, drawn up in 1750, values five harpsichords, with no details other than that the most valuable one was veneered and 'if possible is to remain in the family', and the least valuable was described as 'smaller'. In his magisterial essay 'The harpsichord culture in Bach's environs', John Koster suggested that it is likely that the variety of harpsichords within Bach's household reflected, to some degree, the variety of harpsichords found in those areas of Germany where Bach was active, i.e. Saxony and Thuringia (Plate 3).⁶

Bach spent most of his working life, from the age of twenty-three until his death at sixty-five, within fifty miles of the city of Leipzig (ten and a half German eighteenth-century *meilen*), with the last twenty-seven years living and working in the city itself. In a survey of surviving Thuringian and Saxon harpsichords, Koster observed a diversity of practice, frequently independent of the French and Flemish traditions of northern Europe, based on the instruments of the famous Ruckers family dynasty in Antwerp. The majority of Saxon harpsichord makers were primarily organ builders, which may explain why they envisaged their harpsichords, as Koster nicely puts it, as 'colour machines' – i.e. with several registers with different plucking points acting on the strings to produce sounds of differing timbres. Such instruments might be considered to be the ideal vehicles for Bach's keyboard music (Plate 4).

Ferdinand Weber had arrived in London by April 1745, when he is recorded as organ builder in charge of the organ in St Mary's Lutheran Church.⁷ Perhaps he had



received a recommendation for this position before leaving Germany. Just three or four years later, in 1748/49, he resettled in Dublin, where he would become the most sought-after keyboard instrument maker in Ireland. While Shudi and Kirkman confined themselves largely to harpsichords, exclusively following Flemish models, Weber, by contrast, maintained the full-blooded German tradition of building all types of keyboard instrument: organs, harpsichords – both horizontal and upright (clavicytheria) – clavichords, spinets and pianos.

Weber trained in Meissen, apprenticed to the distinguished organ and instrument builder Johann Ernst Hähnel in 1728 to learn the ‘art of building the organ and other instruments’, and completed it ‘honestly ... diligently ... honourably and according to the rules of the art’ on 10th December 1735.⁸ What he did between then and his arrival ten years later in London is undocumented, but it seems most likely that on completing his training, he continued working in the vicinity of his master, Hähnel, who, by 1737 was completing the Dresden Court Chapel organ, and by 1738 held the title of Court Organ Builder to Augustus III, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony. This course is indicated, not least, by Weber being referred to, shortly after his arrival in Ireland in 1749, as ‘that excellent Artist, Mr Weber, from Dresden’.⁹

Hähnel’s circle included the celebrated Pantaleon Hebenstreit, the inventor of the pantaleon (a giant dulcimer of which none survive, equipped with strings of gut and metal and played with hard or soft beaters – again a box of colours and timbral variety). With

his invention, Hebenstreit created a stir both in Germany and France where Louis XV had insisted that the instrument be called a pantaleon, after Hebenstreit himself. Hähnel was contracted as sole maker of it, following Hebenstreit's falling out with the famous Gottfried Silbermann, who had first been commissioned to build it but stood accused of flouting the terms of the contract. Later, Silbermann, perhaps in retaliation, successfully sued Hähnel for pirating his *cembal d'amour* (a kind of clavichord where the tangent strikes the centre of a string twice as long as usual and both portions, to left and right of the tangent, resonate). Hebenstreit, by then vice-kapellmeister at Dresden, leapt to Hähnel's aid and took up the case with the King-Elector and the judgement against Hähnel was quashed.¹⁰

So Hähnel was at the centre of Dresden instrument-building at a time when Bach was becoming increasingly involved there. For instance, in 1733, as Weber was midway through his apprenticeship, Bach's eldest son, Wilhelm Friedmann, was appointed court organist at the Sophienkirche in Dresden. Hähnel's friend Hebenstreit was crucially involved in that appointment, being vice-kapellmeister at a time when the kapellmeister post was vacant. Shortly after this, Bach dedicated to the King-Elector the Kyrie and Gloria of what later would become the great Mass in B minor, which were performed in the same church (Plates 5, 6). This was part of Bach's bid to gain the post of court composer to the Dresden electoral court, in which he was, after some delays, successful. When Ferdinand Weber arrived in London, he would have brought with him not only his diligent training in the keyboard instrument building of Saxony, but also impressions and memories of such events from the centre of the Bach environment.

THE 1746 WEBER HARPSICHORD IN THE COBBE COLLECTION

THE WEBER HARPSICHORD NOW IN THE COBBE COLLECTION IS ONE OF JUST FIVE SURVIVING horizontal harpsichords, which together with one clavictherium (upright harpsichord), two spinets and two forte pianos comprise his extant oeuvre. It is his earliest surviving instrument and the only one dating from his time in London. A pencil inscription under the soundboard records that it was completed in June 1746. The nameboard inscription, with its highly individual lettering, displays at its centre the numeral 2, an opus number confirmed in the pencil inscription: 'no 2 / London[?] 27 June 1746 / Ferdinand [Weber]'. It is presumably, therefore, the second instrument Weber made following his arrival in London (Plates 1, 7, 8). This inscribed nameboard is highly unusual when compared with other inked nameboards of the time in London. With the exception of the next earliest Weber instrument to survive, a Dublin harpsichord of 1751 (Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels), his subsequent stringed instruments (all made in Dublin) display identical engraved paper labels on their nameboards (see Plate 19).

We do not know to what extent Weber might have modified his Saxon practices in the months he had spent in England before embarking on this instrument (a period



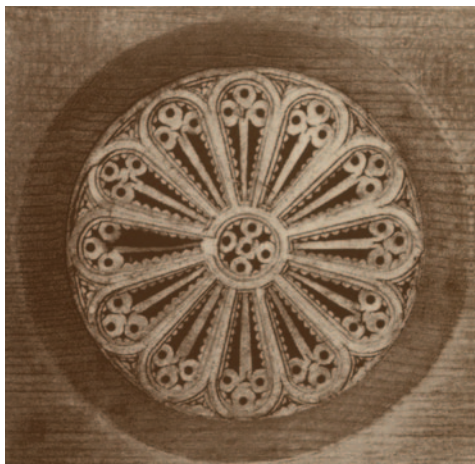
7 – Ferdinand Weber, harpsichord, London, 1746
(Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands Park)

8 – Nameboard inscription of the Weber harpsichord
The lettering is highly unusual and contrasts markedly with the normal London nameboards.





9 – The vellum rose in the Weber harpsichord of 1746 (left), of similar design to that used in Dresden by Johann Heinrich Gräbner the Younger in a harpsichord of 1774 (right)



opposite 10 – John Lodge, after Robert Pool and John Cash, *FRONT OF ST THOMAS'S CHURCH* engraving, Dublin, 1779, published in *VIEWS OF THE MOST REMARKABLE PUBLIC BUILDINGS, MONUMENTS AND OTHER EDIFICES IN THE CITY OF DUBLIN...* (Dublin, 1780) opp. p.90 (Irish Architectural Archive)

during which he was also looking after the organ in St Mary's Lutheran Church, London); no earlier instrument of his survives. Close examination, however, has made clear that the Weber differs from English harpsichords of the time in almost every major respect other than the decorative veneering of its case. That its external appearance should resemble veneered English instruments, rather than the generally plain Saxon ones, would have been an absolute necessity if it were to be saleable. The solid walnut lid and the sides of the case richly veneered in figured walnut in fielded panels are what would be expected in a high-quality English instrument.

Inside the instrument, however, while the ribbing on the underside of the soundboard shows Flemish influence (as does that in one of the earliest surviving Saxon harpsichords, the 1537 harpsichord by Hans Müller of Leipzig),¹¹ it is different to that used in English instruments. The ribbing is also different to that in a surviving Gräbner harpsichord of 1739 made in Dresden.¹² But Saxon instruments are notable for their individuality in construction; no two are the same. In the interior bracing of the 1746 harpsichord, too, Weber follows his own method, which does not resemble Kirkman and Shudi's characteristic system which they learnt from the Fleming Herman Tabel, a pupil of the Ruckers dynasty. Moreover, Weber's string scaling is different from English harpsichords. He retained notable Saxon features, such as the use of a pierced vellum rose. Indeed, the 1746 harpsichord has a rose of near-identical design to one still being used in Dresden in 1774 by the maker Johann Heinrich Gräbner the Younger (Plate 9).¹³ Weber used this rose design also on his Dublin clavictherium of 1764, but vellum roses on later Dublin

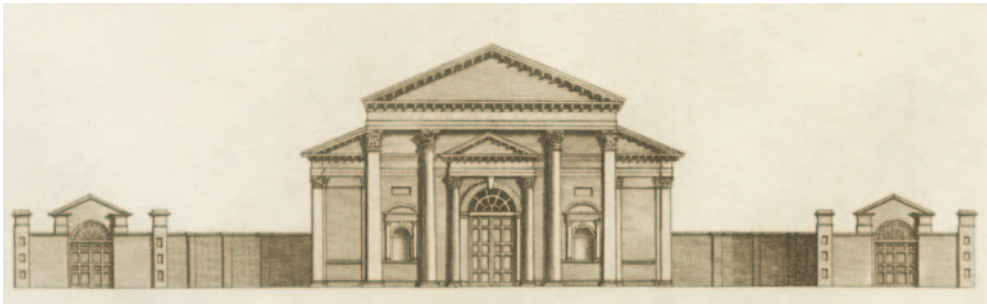
harpsichords are of a somewhat different design. This suggests that he may have brought roses with him when he left Dresden.

Weber's harpsichord also features, for a London-made instrument, a distinctive and early adoption of a buff stop with a Germanic construction. This too can be fitted into the German colouristic tradition.¹⁴ By the inclusion of a nasal (lute) register in a single manual instrument with just two 8ft sets of strings, he was stepping outside usual English practice but evoking a Germanic fascination with the variety and combinations of timbre exploiting the resources of two 8ft stops and one manual to the full. The ingenious mechanism allows the nasal register to be used alone or in combination with either or both of the other sets of jacks. Though its original music desk is missing, that surviving on one of Weber's later instruments made in Dublin and preserved at the Royal College of Music, London, incorporates a curvaceous element reminiscent of those on Dresden instruments.¹⁵ Most startlingly, what distinguishes the 1746 Weber from the English instruments of Shudi or Kirkman is its silvery, nasal and reedy timbre in all registers. In this it is redolent of the organs of Saxon makers such as Gottfried Silbermann; its precisely defined, transparent tones are ideally suited to contrapuntal music.

FERDINAND WEBER IN IRELAND

AFTER FOUR YEARS IN LONDON, WEBER SET OFF FOR DUBLIN. PERHAPS THE INCISIVE and less blended sound of his harpsichords had not met with favour in London. Charles Burney's (later) view that Germans 'work better out of their country than they do in it', and that the harpsichords of Shudi and Kirkman 'surpassed in goodness all the keyed instruments that [he] met with in his tour through Germany', may have been representative.¹⁶ The London trade was, moreover, dominated by several well-established makers in addition to the latter two.

In Ireland the situation was different. Even though Dublin was then the second largest city in the English-speaking world, the name of only one harpsichord maker occurs in eighteenth-century city records prior to 1749 (Richard Stoyte), and no Dublin-made harpsichord survives from the first half of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ True that Irish musical





tradition was more bound up in harps, pipes and fiddles, but mid-eighteenth-century Dublin was an international musical centre, and records of harpsichords there occur from 1702 onwards, notably in association with the cathedrals, Dublin Castle and the theatres. Presumably these were largely imported from England, as, for instance, organs had been since the late seventeenth century.¹⁸ Weber must have realised that Dublin provided a field of opportunity for a maker with his training and credentials. His prices for harpsichords in Dublin, ranging from around £22 to around £36 (depending on whether they were single or double manual, or fitted with a lid swell),¹⁹ were considerably lower than those of the two principal London makers: Kirkman charged fifty guineas for a single and eighty guineas for a double manual harpsichord; Shudi, thirty-five guineas and eighty guineas respectively in the 1760s to 1770s.²⁰ With these prices and the sheer quality of his work, he would become the leading instrument builder in the kingdom.

Weber had arrived in Dublin by the middle of 1749,²¹ and after lodging in Dame Street set up a workshop at the top of Marlborough Street (no. 71), an aristocratic vicinity. St Thomas's Church, which in a decade or so would be ambitiously rebuilt (complete with an organ by Weber) as a version of Palladio's *Il Redentore* in Venice, was nearby on Marlborough Street (Plate 10), and just across the street was the palatial town house of Marcus, Earl of Tyrone and his family (Plate 11). Built c.1740 in stone to designs by Richard Castle, this was the Dublin home, until her marriage, of the Earl's youngest daughter, Lady Eliza Beresford, who would become one of Weber's more significant clients.

By October 1749, ‘the excellent artist from Dresden’ had completed a ‘curious’ organ for Tuam Cathedral. The use of the word curious suggests it was different to what was normally expected of an organ; perhaps Weber had installed an organ with Saxon qualities. Sadly, almost nothing of Weber’s organ-building survives; the Great organ flutes of the otherwise rebuilt instrument of St Werburgh’s are attributed to him by the late Prof Brian Boydell,²² and the remains of a chamber organ at Dr Steevens’ Hospital are all that is left. He is stated to have made a harpsichord in 1752 for Thomas Roseingrave, the friend and champion of Domenico Scarlatti, and for Dean Delany, husband of the celebrated Mary Delany.²³ A surviving receipt of 1757 records him hiring out a harpsichord to the Duchess of Bedford, wife of the then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and in 1758 he is seen supplying a clavichord to Richard Lovell Edgeworth, showing that he maintained the German tradition of being a maker of all principal types of keyboard instrument – organs, harpsichords, spinets and clavichords.²⁴ In building clavicytheria, he upheld a German tradition that was completely ignored in London but which became instilled into the Dublin world (Plate 12). Irish makers such as Henry Rother and Robert Woffington were still following Weber’s lead with such instruments in the 1770s and 1780s.

Amongst the earlier records relating to Weber’s activities in Ireland are payments to him in October and May 1756 and in December 1763 in the spasmodic accounts of the Earl of Tyrone’s daughter, Eliza. Following her marriage to Thomas Cobbe in 1755, she was now known as



12 – Ferdinand Weber, *clavicytherium*, Dublin, 1764 (private collection, Ireland)

A clavicytherium is a harpsichord in which the soundboard and strings are mounted vertically, facing the player.

opposite

11 – John Lodge, after Robert Pool and John Cash, *THE EARL OF TYRONE’S HOUSE* engraving, Dublin, 1779, published in *VIEWS OF THE MOST REMARKABLE PUBLIC BUILDINGS, MONUMENTS AND OTHER EDIFICES IN THE CITY OF DUBLIN...* (Dublin, 1780) opp. p.117 (Irish Architectural Archive)



October the 29 - - - - - L 1 d
29 paid Mr Webber for tuning a lute
bringing the harpsicord to town - - - - - 1 14 1/2

Lady Betty Cobbe, and the payments are for tuning and moving ‘the harpsichord’ between Newbridge House – the Cobbe house in north county Dublin – and her town residence, then probably at the Archbishopal Palace St Sepulchre’s on Kevin Street (Plates 13, 14). A transcript of an account book kept by Ferdinand Weber (itself, a rare survival), covering his instrument and other activities from the mid-1760s, shows he had established a large clientele consisting of the city’s elite.²⁵ In this book are the names of many of Lady Betty’s circle, including two of her brothers, the Earl of Tyrone and the Hon John Beresford. The musical Earl of Mornington features, and Mrs David Latouche, of the banking family, possesses a piano in 1765, one of the earliest records of piano ownership in either London or Dublin. Lady Betty’s account in Weber’s book beginning in 1766, when she had already been a client for ten years, is among the earlier to commence and one of the longest running (Plate 15). While her accounts of 1756 to 1763 talk about ‘the harpsichord’, by the 1770s Weber tunes two harpsichords at Newbridge and one in town, and, on other occasions, one harpsichord at Newbridge and two in town. Newbridge House was only nine Irish miles (about eleven statute miles) from the town house in Dublin, so her instruments may have continued to be transported between the two residences, as recorded in 1756; alternatively the multiplicity of instruments may indicate that, in time, both houses became fully equipped. It is unclear therefore as to whether these records (which never detail more than two harpsichords on any one date) represent two, three or even four harpsichords (two

Dublin 29th November 1777		
The Hon Lady Betty Cobbe		
1766	Co tuning her 2d harpsichord in Town	5 5
1767	5 ^o do March 3 do April 11 do	1 8
	April 28 ditto	
1767	7 ^o Co ditto at Newbridge	11 4 1/2
1768	18 ^o Co ditto at ditto	11 4 1/2
1769	17 ^o Co ditto at ditto	11 4 1/2
1770	10 ^o Co ditto in Town Nov 14 ditto	16 3
1771	December 11 ^o ditto	
1772	8 ^o Co repairing her 2d harpsichord in Town	1 14 1/2
1773	27 ^o Co tuning her 2d harpsichord in Town	5 5
1774	1 ^o Co do do do	5 5
1775	1 ^o Co 2 ^o 3 ^o at Newbridge	11 4 1/2
1776	10 ^o Co 2 ^o two Harps at do	11 4 1/2
1777	24 ^o Co 2 ^o one do at ditto	11 4 1/2
1778	7 ^o Co 2 ^o two 4 one 3 ^o at ditto	11 4 1/2
1779	17 ^o Co 2 ^o two do in Town	10 10
1780	28 ^o Co 2 ^o one do do	5 5
1781	7 ^o Co 2 ^o two do at Newbridge	11 4 1/2
1782	11 ^o Co 2 ^o 3 ^o at ditto	11 4 1/2
1783	22 ^o Co 2 ^o 3 ^o at ditto	11 4 1/2
1784	1 ^o Co 2 ^o 3 ^o at ditto	11 4 1/2
1785	3 ^o Co 2 ^o 3 ^o at ditto	11 4 1/2
1786	26 ^o Co 2 ^o one 3 ^o in Town	5 5
1787	1 ^o Co 2 ^o 3 ^o Piano do	5 5
1788	17 ^o Co do May 2 ^o do do	10 10
1789	4 ^o Co do two Harps do do	10 10
1790	18 ^o Co 2 ^o one do at Newbridge	11 4 1/2
1791	14 ^o Co do two do in Town	16 3
November 17 ^o one do		
Pied.		£ 15 1 2

15 – Transcription of Weber’s Dublin account book showing the account for Lady Betty Cobbe over eleven years, 1766–77

(transcription by Victor E. Smith, a descendant of Weber; National Museum of Ireland)

opposite 13 – John Astley (1724–1787),
LADY BETTY COBBE (1736–1806)

oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm. The portrait is possibly a study for her full-length figure in the Earl of Tyrone’s family group portrait that hangs at Curraghmore.
(Cobbe Collection, Newbridge House, Co Dublin)

14 – Lady Betty Cobbe, payment to Weber in her account book, 1756 (Cobbe Papers: Hugh Cobbe)



in each house). In addition to her harpsichords, Lady Betty had further instruments: a spinet that was repaired in 1771 and tuned at Newbridge, along with two harpsichords in 1774, and a piano.

In his book on Bach's forty-eight preludes and fugues, David Ledbetter has suggested that the spinet was perhaps more universal than the harpsichord in German households and an appropriate instrument for Bach performance.²⁶ Survivals from eighteenth-century Germany are again sparse. Apart from seven spinets made in (French) Strasbourg by Gottfried Silbermann's nephew and pupil Johann Heinrich Silbermann, there are few: none from Hamburg, where there are no records of them; one from Dresden, a double manual spinet by Christoph Heinrich Bohr made in 1713, though nothing further is known of this maker. One of Ferdinand Weber's two extant spinets is in the Cobbe Collection (Plate 16). Made in Dublin in 1780, it has the same compass as an English spinet, but its sound is more that of a small harpsichord, with the nasal qualities of the 1746 instrument,



17 – Ferdinand Weber, piano, Dublin, 1774, one of two surviving pianos by Weber

*opposite 16 – Ferdinand Weber, spinet, Dublin, 1780
(both Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands Park)*

rather than the more intimate, characterful and plummy sound of English spinets.

Weber was one of the first to produce pianos in these islands. This is unsurprising given his origins in Saxony during the very years that Silbermann was famously developing his versions of Cristofori's invention. Weber's accounts record him tuning a 'Forte Piano' from 1765 – that is, before the earliest piano to survive from a London maker (Johannes Zumpe). The first appearance of a piano in Weber's accounts for Lady Betty is with a charge of 5s 5d, for tuning in town, on 1st November 1775. It is reasonable to assume this was the latest addition to her instruments since there is no mention of a piano in any of the previous nine years. It was Weber's practice to give a year's tuning gratis on a new purchase, so Lady Betty's instrument was probably supplied in November 1774.

Only two pianos by Weber survive – one of 1772 in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and an unprovenanced instrument of 1774, currently under restoration, recently acquired by the Cobbe Collection (Plates 17-20). Both these surviving pianos have undoubtedly original and characterful Italianate trestle supports, with different respective profiles, which hinge upwards underneath for transport (Plate 21). A third, stated to be from 1774, was in existence in 1909 and illustrated by Grattan Flood, with a



Weber piano, Dublin, 1774
(Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands Park)

18 – Engraved label on nameboard

The same printed label appears on all but two of Weber's surviving stringed instruments.

19 – Ornamental fret on the keywell cheek

Such treatments are found on Continental instruments but never on London instruments. In this case, the fretted member acts as an aid to withdrawing the action.

20 – Inked signature

right 21 – Trestle supports



photograph which shows the same system of folding trestle legs, the latter with a different profile again from either of the extant instruments.²⁷ A pencil inscription on the action frame of the Cobbe instrument records that it was made or completed on 19th November 1774, so it is likely that Lady Betty's piano was very similar if not identical. Apart from employing a *Stossmechanik* action,²⁸ and, like clavichords, being of rectangular shape, neither of the two surviving instruments, with their highly unusual folding and braced trestle legs, and elaborate under carriages for the dampers, resembles the London-made pianos of the time by Zumpe and others. The Weber instruments also recall clavichord construction more closely than do London pianos, with 'roof-carved' key levers and an incorporated lidded tool box by the left cheek. The 1772 instrument has two different sets of hammers, like a *clavecin royale*, with a slide stop changing from one set to the other. Both instruments have mechanisms for damper lifting, and a lid swell, capable of being operated by both handstop and pedals.

LADY BETTY COBBE AND HER MUSIC

LADY BETTY AND HER HUSBAND THOMAS WERE BOTH MUSICAL. HE WAS SON AND HEIR of the music-loving Charles Cobbe, Archbishop of Dublin, and as a teenager had subscribed in 1746 to John Travers' *Eighteen Canzonets* and a year later to



22 – *Attrib. Henry Walsh (fl.1765-80), LADY BETTY COBBE'S MINUET*
in her manuscript music book, commenced 1760
(Cobbe Papers: Alec Cobbe)

William Boyce's *Twelve Sonatas for Two Violins and a Bass*. He was one of the two 'Gentleman Vocal Performers' in the fashionable Dublin Musical Academy, founded by the Earl of Mornington in 1757, of which Thomas's mother-in-law, the Countess of Tyrone, was a patron.²⁹ In 1756 Lady Betty supplemented whatever musical education she had received during her Beresford upbringing with seven months tuition on the harpsichord from 'Mr Walsh' – presumably George Walsh, organist of Christchurch Cathedral, an engagement possibly arranged by the Archbishop. Walsh's son, and successor at St Patrick's, Henry, may have succeeded him as Lady Betty's harpsichord teacher and may, perhaps, have been the composer of *Lady Betty Cobbe's Minuet* in her book (Plate 22).³⁰ Henry Walsh is also known for having given, on 19th May 1768, what is thought to have been the first-ever public solo performance on a piano – just two weeks before the first solo appearance of the instrument in London in June, played by Bach's youngest son John Christian Bach.

What was the music performed in the Cobbe household? Singing clearly played a major role, and given the Archbishop's crucial involvement, as Dean of Christchurch, in the staging of *Messiah* in 1742, it would be surprising if the two volumes of Handel's keyboard suites had not featured in the Cobbe family music literature. The question is

illuminated by a rare survival – Lady Betty’s manuscript music book of 1760. It contains and gives evidence of opera attendances and detailed information of what she performed on her Weber instruments, including a teacher’s examples of fingering. Here are to be found transcripts of arias and keyboard pieces by Abel, Arne, Boyce, Corelli, Fischer, Tenducci and Mattia Vento. She possibly encountered Giusto Ferdinand Tenducci during his Dublin season, since two unpublished songs of his are in her book in a hand that resembles his own. A second, later, music book reflects her conversion to Methodism, and contains hymns sung at the Countess of Huntingdon’s chapel in Bath, where they were spending increasing amounts of time from the 1780s onward.

WEBER AND HIS PORCELAIN TRANSACTIONS

WEBER’S ADHERENCE TO HIS SAXON ROOTS IS FURTHER DEMONSTRATED BY HIS SUBSIDIARY endeavour of importing porcelain from Meissen. Transactions during the 1770s relating to import costs and marketing the porcelain in Ireland appear in his account book alongside his musical accounts. Descriptions confirm that this was indeed the Meissen porcelain that had inspired Augustus II the Strong (father of Augustus III) to almost maniacal expenditures. Lady Betty and Thomas Cobbe were extremely interested in porcelain and had bought it in quantity during their sojourn in London in 1758, both Chinese and British. Her brother, Lord Tyrone, was among Weber’s porcelain customers, but Lady Betty seems not to have been tempted. During the 1760s, the Cobbes had assembled a huge service of Worcester porcelain, and may have been put off by the high prices of Weber’s wares. He offered complete tea and coffee ‘equipages’ of forty-three pieces (the standard number for a complete set of tea china) at prices ranging from around £10 to £27, but an equivalent Worcester set, also of forty-three pieces, could be purchased for a fraction of that cost – anything between around £1 and £3. Larger sets offered by Weber include what were probably Meissen table (dinner) services of 183 and 186 pieces, costing, respectively, the staggering sums of £284 7s 6d and £170 12s 6d.³¹ But again, the cost of a ninety-two-piece, richly decorated Worcester service (in mazarine blue enamelled in flowers), listed in a Christie’s catalogue of a sale of Worcester porcelain in 1769, was a mere £21 10s 4d.³² From the evidence of such accounts of Weber’s that survive, his porcelain venture appears not to have been profitable.

EPILOGUE

THIS ARTICLE BEGAN BY CELEBRATING THE FACT THAT FERDINAND WEBER’S HARPSICHORDS brought the timbral quality of Saxon instruments – what might be termed an ideal Bach sound – to English-speaking lands, and by highlighting their significance today for Bach performance. The instrument of 1746, made when he was fresh



23 – Frontispiece and titlepage of J.N. Forkel, *UEBER JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACHS LEBEN, KUNST UND KUNSTWERKE* (Leipzig, 1802), the first full-scale biography of Bach
(Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands Park)

from his arrival from Saxony, does so even more vividly than do his later harpsichords. Curiously, from present day perspectives, his patron, Lady Betty Cobbe, or indeed anyone else in Weber's Dublin world, was not likely ever to have heard the name Johann Sebastian Bach, though any who met the instrument-maker were only two handshakes away from the great composer. Music written in London by Bach's pupil Carl Friedrich Abel does indeed appear in Lady Betty's book. She probably knew of Bach's youngest son, the London Bach, John Christian, and may even have possessed his printed sonatas for 'harpsichord or pianoforte' or the sonatas of 1773 dedicated to Lady Melbourne, in which the first sonata develops the opening theme of his father's *Partita No. 1* for the clavier. But filtration of Sebastian Bach's music into England was a very slow process, even though the seeds of an English Bach revival were planted by the mid 1770s. Sir John Hawkins and Charles Burney made mention of Bach in their histories of music (respectively 1776 and 1776-89), the former printing the aria and two of the Goldberg variations, but they failed to appreciate his importance. There was perhaps resistance in England and Ireland to the idea that any musician might be superior to Handel. Even in Germany in 1782 the view was expressed 'Had Bach possessed the high integrity and the deep expressive feeling that inspired Handel, he would have been much greater even

than Handel; but as it is he was only more painstaking and technically skilful.³³ It was not until the first decades of the nineteenth century, when Nikolaus Forkel's biography of Johann Sebastian appeared in Germany in 1802 and its translation in London in 1820, that the revival of interest in Bach's music started to gather serious momentum (Plate 23). This would lead up to the first performance of the *St Matthew Passion* (composed in 1727) to follow those in Leipzig organised by Bach himself. It was conducted in Berlin by Felix Mendelssohn in 1829; the English would not hear it performed in full until 1854, while the Irish had to wait until 1889.³⁴

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Hubert Henkel (translated by Lucy Hallman Russel) on Saxon harpsichords in Igor Kipnis (ed.), *The Harpsichord and Clavichord: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 2007) 204.
- ² Musikinstrumenten-Museum der Karl-Marx-Universität.
- ³ Students of Ferdinand Weber will ever be indebted to the detailed studies of Jenny Nex and Lance Whitehead, 'A copy of Ferdinand Weber's Account Book', *The Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, vol. 33, 2000, 89-150, and 'The Stringed Keyboard Instruments of Ferdinand Weber', *The Historical Harpsichord, vol. 5 – Aspects of Harpsichord Making in the British Isles* (New York, 2009) 116-53.
- ⁴ Johann Ernst Hähnel (1697-1777), Ferdinand Weber (1715-1784) Gottfried Silbermann (1683-1753), Zacharias Hildebrandt (1688-1757; Silbermann pupil), Christian Ernst Friederici (1709-1780; Silbermann pupil); Christian Gotthelf Hoffmann (fl.1763; d.1811; Friederici pupil?); Johann Heinrich Harrass (1665-1714?); Gräbner family, and finally the inventor Pantaleon Hebenstreit (1668-1750).
- ⁵ Certificate of Weber's apprenticeship cited in full in W.H. Grattan Flood, 'Dublin Harpsichord and Pianoforte Makers of the Eighteenth Century', *The Journal of the Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, XXXIX, 1909, 139.
- ⁶ John Koster, 'The Harpsichord Culture in Bach's Environs', in: David Schulenberg (ed.), *Bach Perspectives*, IV, 1999, 57-77.
- ⁷ Nex and Whitehead (2009), 'The Stringed Keyboard Instruments of Ferdinand Weber', 117.
- ⁸ Certificate of Weber's apprenticeship, op. cit.
- ⁹ George Faulkner, *The Dublin Journal*, October 1749.
- ¹⁰ Bernard Brauchli, *The Clavichord* (Cambridge, 1998) 162.
- ¹¹ Museo degli Strumenti Musicali, Rome.
- ¹² Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Dresden.

- ¹³ Musikinstrumenten-Museum der Karl-Marx-Universität, Leipzig; Hubert Henkel, *Kiel-Instrumente* (Leipzig, 1979), cat. no. 91, plates 56, 57, 71.
- ¹⁴ But it is only one tradition. Other German builders seem to have had no time for it. (At this early date a buff effect was achievable on some English two-manual instruments by muting a strings with the lute stop jacks and playing them with the lower manual dog-leg jacks.)
- ¹⁵ For instance, on the Gräbner harpsichord of 1782 (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg).
- ¹⁶ Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany*, 2 vols [1773] 1775, II, 147.
- ¹⁷ Richard Stoyte, working as a harpsichord and spinet maker in Golden Lane in 1745. John Teahan, 'A List of Irish Instrument Makers', *The Galpin Society Journal*, 16 May 1963, 28-32. By the latter end of the eighteenth century, seventeen harpsichord makers are listed in Dublin, but Irish-made harpsichords have hardly fared better than German, and only a small handful of those makers are represented by surviving examples.
- ¹⁸ Notably Renatus Harris, who sent over an organ for St Patrick's Cathedral in 1697 which was there set up by his assistant Jean Baptiste Cuvillie, who settled in Dublin until his death in 1728. From then, John Byfield appeared from England and spent a number of years looking after the two cathedral organs; he later sent over from England an organ for Christchurch Cathedral, in 1752. See Gerard Gillen, 'Organs and organ-building', in Harry White and Barra Boydell (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Music in Ireland*, 2 vols (University College Dublin Press, 2013) II, 801-03.
- ¹⁹ Nex and Whitehead, 'A copy of Ferdinand Weber's Account Book', 97-98.
- ²⁰ Donald H. Boalch (Charles Mould, ed.), *Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord 1440-1840* ([1956], 3rd ed. Oxford, 1995) 108.
- ²¹ Records for tuning the organ in Trinity College chapel show a payment to him for a repair on 23rd June 1749. Barra Boydell, 'John Baptiste Cuville, Ferdinand Weber, and the Organ of Trinity College Chapel Dublin', *The Organ*, no. 72, 1992, 22, quoted in Nex and Whitehead, 'The Stringed Keyboard Instruments of Ferdinand Weber', 117.
- ²² Brian Boydell, 'Ferdinand Weber', in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 3 vols (London, 1984) III, 845. Boydell's attribution to Weber of the St Werburgh's organ is upheld by Gillen, 'Organs and organ-building'.
- ²³ Flood, 'Dublin Harpsichord and Pianoforte Makers of the Eighteenth Century', 141.
- ²⁴ National Library of Ireland, MS 1524, R. Edgeworth, *Accounts*, s.l, 12 April 1758, 82; cited by Toby Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure* (New Haven and London, 2004) 359.
- ²⁵ The transcription of Ferdinand Weber's account book, made by his descendant Victor E. Smith, 'verbatim et literatim', is currently lodged at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. It has been published and discussed by Jenny Nex and Lance Whitehead, see note 3.
- ²⁶ David Ledbetter, *Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier – the 48 preludes and fugues* (New Haven and London, 2002) 23-25.
- ²⁷ Flood, 'Dublin Harpsichord and Pianoforte Makers of the Eighteenth Century'. Of this instrument (current whereabouts unknown), there was a tradition that it had belonged to Sarah Curran (1782-1808).
- ²⁸ *Stoss* – German for 'push' or 'knock'. The hammer-shank is struck near its hinge; the speed of the hammer-head is accelerated. The key's movement is stopped before the hammer reaches the string so that it is free to rebound a short distance from the string and therefore doesn't 'block' the sound of the note it has just initiated.
- ²⁹ An unnamed diarist quoted in Frances Gerard, *Picturesque Dublin Old and New* (Dublin, 1898) 222: The dilettante Lord Mornington lived at 24 Merrion Street, Dublin, in 1769. To him was due the formation of the Musical Academy, constituted wholly of amateurs moving 'in the highest sphere

of society', professionals and mercenary teachers of the art being excluded. Their meetings and concerts were held in the Music Hall in Fishamble Street, money raised being devoted to charitable purposes. The noble founder united in himself the offices of president of the society and leader of the orchestra; the lady patronesses were the Countess of Tyrone, the Countess of Mornington, the Countess of Charleville ... and Lady Freke; the lady vocal performers, the Right Hon. Lady Caroline Russell, Mrs. Monk, Miss Stewart, Miss O'Hara and Mrs. Plunket. The gentleman performers were Hugh Montgomery-Lyons and Thomas Cobb [*sic*]. Lord Mornington was likewise a proficient violinist and a very good amateur composer, while his glee 'Here in Cool Grot' is still occasionally sung. Playing the organ was another of his accomplishments ... It was in this atmosphere that the first Lord Mornington acquired his musical taste, and it was to his excellence in this accomplishment that he owed his advancement to a peerage. His compositions mightily pleased the musical ear of George III, who was glad to bestow a mark of his favour upon the noble composer. It may be said, however, that this royal favour was less of a blessing than a curse, his fortune not being adequate to keep up the position of an Earl.

- ³⁰ George Walsh (d.1765), organist of Christchurch Cathedral from 1747 and, additionally, from 1760, of St Patrick's Cathedral. His son Henry succeeded him at St Patrick's in 1765.
- ³¹ Nex and Whitehead, 'A copy of Ferdinand Weber's Account Book', 112.
- ³² The Worcester prices are taken from a six-day sale of Worcester Porcelain at Christie's, London, 14th-16th and 18th-20th December 1769: 'A Catalogue of A large and elegant Assortment Of The Worcester Porcelaine Consisting Of A great Variety of Table and Desert Services; Tea and Coffee Equipages; Baskets, Leaves, Compteeers, Jars and Beakers; Porringers, Caudle-Cups, Sauce-Boats, and sundry other Articles; most of which are finely enamell'd in Figures, Birds, Flowers, Landscapes, &c. and enrich'd with Gold. Which will be Sold by Auction by Mr. Christie, At his Great Room, Pall Mall, Thursday the 14th of this instant December, 1769, and Five following Days (Sunday excepted).'
- ³³ J.F. Reichardt, 'Johann Sebastian Bach', in *Musikalisches Kunstmagazin*, IV, 1782, 196-97; reprinted in H.-J. Schulze (ed.), *Bach Dokumente III – Dokumente zum Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs, 1750-1800* (Kassel, 1972) 357-60.
- ³⁴ I am grateful to David Byers for drawing my attention to a notice in *The Irish Times* of Friday 12th April 1889 announcing the performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in St Patrick's Cathedral during Holy Week, under the direction of Charles Marchant, stating this will be the first occasion on which the *St Matthew Passion* will have been given in Ireland. The same notice makes the interesting observation that the occasion would be a novelty since the custom for some years had been that Bach's *St John Passion* was performed at this time.