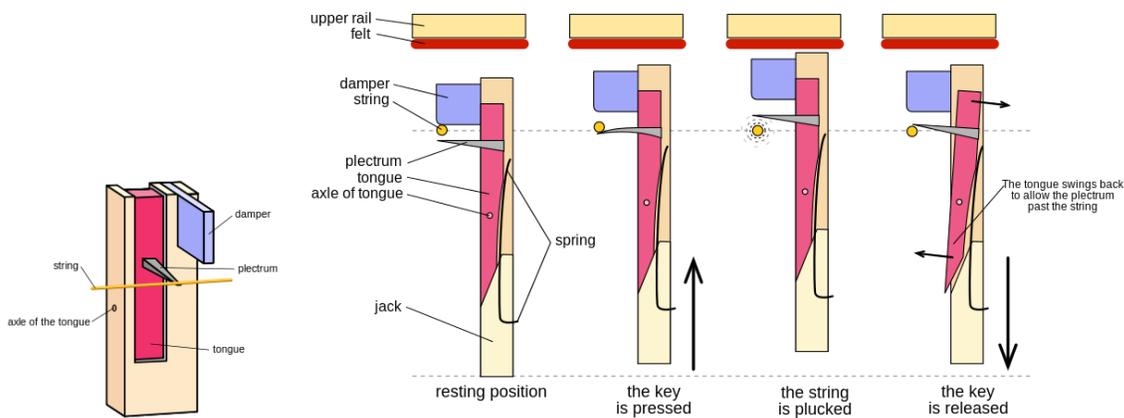
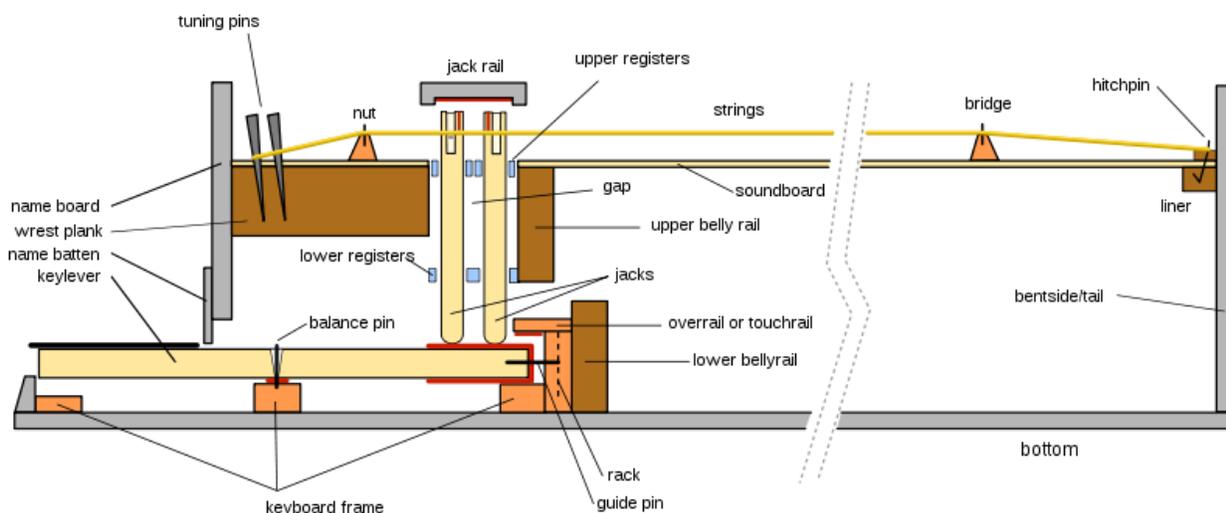


## Harpsichord History and Construction

The [harpsichord](#) is a stringed instrument with a keyboard, and can be considered an ancestor of the modern piano. The harpsichord developed in several countries in Europe from the time it first appeared in the late 1300's, until the mid-1800's when the piano began to take precedence. The development of the instrument, its music, and the stylistic practises for playing the harpsichord varied widely depending on the country and its musical characteristics and style. Even the names were different: [virginal](#) in England; [clavecin](#) in France, [cembalo](#) in Italy and [clavicimballo](#) in Spain. Important composers in the development of music for the harpsichord include: [Girolamo Frescobaldi](#) and [Domenico Scarlatti](#) (Italy); [François Couperin](#) and [Jean-Philippe Rameau](#) (France); [John Bull](#) and [Henry Purcell](#) (England); [Johann Jakob Froberger](#) and [Georg Philipp Telemann](#) (Germany). Harpsichords are still used today, especially to perform music of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, most commonly the music of [J.S. Bach](#) and [G. F. Handel](#).

Most harpsichords have a range of 4-5 octaves (often 59 notes). The metal strings of the harpsichord are plucked by a [plectrum](#), originally a sturdy feather quill from a crow or raven, now usually a piece of plastic. This plectrum is held in a narrow piece of wood called a jack, which is attached to the key mechanism. Each string has its own plectrum. When the key is depressed, the plectrum is raised so it plucks the string and then pivots out of the way so it does not touch the string on the way down. The string will continue to ring (although with a fairly quick decay) after it has been plucked, until the key is released. The following pictures are taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harpsichord#Mechanism>



The main limitation of the harpsichord is that the player has no control over the loudness or quality of the tone. Many developments were made to overcome this drawback. Some harpsichords have double sets of strings, each string with its own plectrum, with mechanisms to move one set out of the way so that a single set of strings can be played separately or together with the second set. Larger harpsichords may have more than one keyboard and the sets of strings for each keyboard can be coupled together. This can change the volume or quality of the sound, but no gradual increase (crescendo) or decrease (decrescendo) can be achieved on the harpsichord.

## Harpsichord Playing Tips to Consider:

Because the strings are plucked, the touch is different than a piano. You may feel more resistance and might want to experiment with finger/hand position. Also, because of the harpsichord's construction, it is equally important how your fingers release the keys. A lighter touch and a gradual or stroking approach to the keys is usually preferable and easier to control, since more arm weight or a more energetic attack does not make a difference to the sound produced. If you hear excess mechanical noise or clicking, it may mean that you are playing with too much effort.

There is no sustain pedal on a harpsichord. You may need to experiment with different fingerings, including the use of silent finger switches, to maintain legato. Also, since the strings will ring (although with decay) until the keys are released, harpsichordists typically overlap fingers when playing by releasing one key slightly after the next is depressed. Similarly, the notes of an arpeggiated passage may be held for longer than notated to enhance legato.

Ornamentation and improvisation were common features of music during the era of the harpsichord.

Many pieces of this era are based on dances. It might be helpful to know the strong and weak beats of the rhythm of the piece.

Rubato and slight hesitations before important beats may be used for expression.

All the voices in contrapuntal pieces (e.g. fugues) will sound as equal parts.

Because dynamic contrast is limited on a harpsichord, you may want to experiment with the following to add interest and contrast to your piece:

- Add ornamentation to important parts of the piece, such as cadences, high points of phrases, harmonic changes, and the final cadence. It may be helpful to analyze your piece to make sure you know where the cadential points are.
- Use a variety of articulation. Experiment with slurring small intervals and separating large ones rather than playing all eighth notes detached. Releasing after a note will accent the next note.
- The music naturally sounds louder when more notes are played or the note values are quicker. You may wish to consider ornamentation at points where you feel a crescendo would be effective.

3 types of Ornamentation to start with!

- Trills can be used to extend the sound on longer note values or to bring attention to cadences or points of harmonic interest. In music of this era, trills begin on the upper note.
- [Mordents](#) are simple ornaments (1-3 alternations) using the upper or lower neighboring notes (notes either a step above or a step below the original note). Two places to try mordents: upper mordents can easily be added between two descending notes in a melody line, and lower mordents can be used on the final melody note of a cadence.
- Rolled chords can also be used to emphasize and draw attention to cadences, rhythm and harmony, or to extend the sound of chords. Quick rolled chords moving upward with both hands at the same time are excellent for emphasizing strong beats or important harmonies and rhythms. Longer rolled chords moving upward and then downward, left hand to right hand and back to left are excellent for the last chords of final cadences.

Two websites to explore:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harpsichord>

[http://www.marthabeth.com/harpsichord\\_touch.html](http://www.marthabeth.com/harpsichord_touch.html)