



ROYAL
COLLEGE
OF MUSIC
London

Royal College of Music Museum
Western Classical Music - KS3 & 4
Harpsichord Pack

What is a harpsichord?

A harpsichord is a musical instrument in the keyboard family. They were widely used in music during the Renaissance (1400 – 1600) and Baroque (1600-1750) periods.

Harpsichords were often used as part of the basso continuo (which means continuous bass line). They would play chords, while a cello or viola da gamba would play the bass line. Basso continuo gives the music forward movement.

Helpful Hint

It is the distinctive sound of the harpsichord that is the biggest clue the piece you are listening to is from the baroque period.

The strings inside a harpsichord are plucked instead of hit with a hammer. This gives them a metallic, tinkling sound.



Harpsichord by Alessandra Trasuntino (Venice, 1531)

This harpsichord is on display in the Royal College of Music Museum.



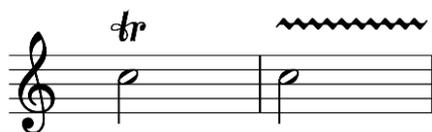
Baroque music is all about decoration.

At this point in history, decoration was an important way of showing off! Even the architecture and art became extravagant, with busy and ornate patterns.

The same can be said of the music from this period!

You can recognise baroque music by its busy texture called polyphony, where the musical lines move independently of each other.

Baroque music is decorated with ornaments. Can you match these musical ornaments to their written notation?(Answers at the end of the booklet)



Trill

Grace note
(appoggiatura or acciaccatura)

Turn

Mordent (a super short trill)

Harpsichord by Jacob Kirkman (London, 1773)



Baroque music is all about contrast.

The contrast between loud and soft and terraced dynamics (sudden changes in the volume level, sometimes creating an echo effect).

The contrast between solo and ensemble.

Unlike a piano, which responds immediately to the way we touch it, a harpsichord cannot produce loud and soft sounds so easily. Whether you press the keys of a harpsichord softly or firmly, the sound that comes out is pretty much the same.

Harpsichord makers experimented with cool features to help produce a wider variety of loud and soft sounds. This harpsichord has two keyboards, a number of 'stops' above the keyboard and pedals. All of these features help to change how many strings are playing at once and help to add variation in tone and volume.



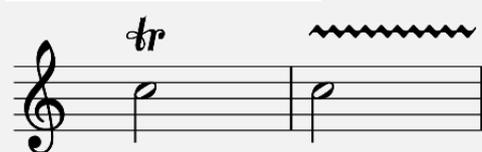
WATCH: Double-Manual Harpsichord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yksurjVWQu8&feature=youtu.be>

Quiz answers



Trill



Grace note
(appoggiatura or acciaccatura)



Turn



Mordent (a super short trill)