

Piano Traditions

by Howard Bass

The invention of the piano was first documented in the court of the Medici family in Florence in the year 1700.

Bartolomeo Cristofori, a native of Padua, invented a new type of action using hammers that struck the strings (rather than plucking them, as the harpsichord did) and was capable of playing soft and loud (*piano e forte*). Throughout the first century and a half of its existence the piano was used primarily for chamber and orchestral music. In time the piano overtook the harpsichord in popularity; pianos became larger, more durable, and louder, with a range of expressiveness and power perfectly suited for Classical- and Romantic-era sensibilities. Piano virtuosos, from Mozart to Liszt, were the heroes of the concert hall.

By the mid-19th century, the adaptability of the piano and the development of smaller square grands and especially the upright piano, which were more portable and eventually less expensive, broadened the instrument's appeal. By the end of the century, pianos had become standard fixtures in venues as diverse as the barroom, the brothel, the church, and the parlor.

As pianos became more accessible and affordable, they increasingly began to appear in solo and supporting roles in American music of all kinds. Scott Joplin's rags, Jelly Roll Morton's stride and boogie style, and the gospel of Thomas A. Dorsey testify to the piano's importance in African-American traditions. In dance music imported from the British Isles, the importance of the piano has grown exponentially since the early 20th century, providing a steady, percussive, and harmonic backup to the fiddle and flutes that customarily carry the tunes. Today, the piano is a mainstay at contra dances throughout the United States. Likewise, in rock, blues, and Latin music, to

name but a few genres, the piano, both acoustic and electric, vies with the guitar as the instrument of choice for accompaniment and solo performance.

All these styles — gospel, Irish, blues, Latino, American traditional, roots rock, and boogie — will be on display in "Piano Traditions." The program also includes a set featuring the piano's precursor, the hammered dulcimer, which remains popular in cultures throughout the world. The performers on this program demonstrate the strength and diversity of the piano's role in community-based musics: gospel by Ethel Caffie-Austin; Irish jigs, reels, and airs by Donna Long, of Cherish the Ladies, with fiddler James Kelly; blues, honky-tonk, and more with BluesWorks; the hammered dulcimer playing of Scott Reiss, with Hesperus; American contra dance tunes from Laura and the Lava Lamps, featuring Dave Wiesler on piano; traditional and original Latino music from Rémy Rodriguez; and the roots rock, boogie, and blues of Johnnie Johnson, called by some the "father of rock and roll piano."

This concert is being held in conjunction with the exhibition *Piano 300: Celebrating Three Hundred Years of People and Pianos*, organized by the National Museum of American History and presented at the Smithsonian International Gallery, S. Dillon Ripley Center, through March 4, 2001.

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