

First, let me begin by saying that I am personally committed to the cessation of poaching or harvesting any wild elephant for any reason, and certainly reasonable efforts to crush the trade in new or poached ivory should be pursued. I do have an informed position that new ivory is not being used for antique musical instruments, and particularly for the keys of period harpsichords and early pianos. In truth it would seem the surest way to reduce ivory to near worthlessness is to cut it to fit an early keyboard instrument due to the non-standard size and extreme scarcity of these instruments. Those of us who study early keyboards and use them to teach students in informed period keyboard practice have no use for modern ivory for any purpose. It is the history contained on the surface and within the antique ivory itself that has use. The earliest keyboard instruments had their keys covered in boxwood or similar, and this is equally valuable to us, such that were an early keyboard to be stripped of the wood covering and modern ivory applied it would amount to a kind of vandalism.

As the study of early keyboards is not familiar to everyone, let me give an example from recent research. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the firm of Kirckman in London was well known as an early maker of harpsichords, but occasionally a smaller cousin to these large harpsichords, called the spinet harpsichord, is to be found bearing the Kirckman name. In the community of historians who wish to understand the Georgian period of business and commerce in better detail, there was a question of whether all instruments, large and small, were made in the same shop, or were farmed out to other makers, as an early conglomerate. Inspection of the instruments side by side was inconclusive until attention was turned to the scribed ivory keys. All early keyboards until perhaps 1800 bear these scribe lines, and are characteristic of the keyboard maker whose scribing tool and technique was uniquely his own. Large Kirckman harpsichords all have the same scribe mark, approximately 7 mm from the joint of the head and tail of the key as shown below:



1750 Kirckman harpsichord keys

We also see that up to the scribe line, the key is slightly rounded over for player comfort:



However, on the 1748 Kirckman spinet, the earliest known, we see the scribe line is only 4 mm from the joint and lacks the rounded edge entirely, indicating a completely different builder outside of the original shop:



1748 Kirckman spinet

We now know the Kirckman firm was far larger than a simple craftsman shop, and was making use of a wide distribution of builders, but the first clues came from this examination of the key ivory. This is the sort of evidence that would be lost if these instruments must be stripped of their ivory. There is far more research on widely distributed instruments than can ever be done effectively in one country. Early instruments must be able to travel from country to country and owner to owner. In the process, the loss of these elephants 150 to 300 years ago is mitigated at least a little by the evidence

they still bear of the builder's tradition. This is history as sure as that from any book, and can be effectively read only if it remains intact. Which pages of Melville shall we redact because he writes of hunting whales, or Kipling and his tigers?

No new ivory is ever knowingly applied to historical harpsichords, the last of which was made in 1800. The keys of early pianos and harpsichords are far shorter in length than those of modern instruments, and old ivory from such a piano can only be used on another old piano, although it rarely is ever found off the instrument it was made for. No new ivory is used or wanted on square pianos, the last of which was made in 1867 in England and 1905 in America. Even the early grand piano retains the keyboard dimension of the smaller ones, and is equally worthless as an object of ivory trade. Ivory cut for these smaller keys is useless on modern pianos as it cannot fit, and useless for any other purpose as well. It might as well be burned as to reduce it to the dimensions needed for early keyboards.

Might we agree that in the case of these specialized early instruments which are easy to date as being pre ban, and which are totally outside of the new ivory trade, that we will respect their history and refrain from vandalizing them, or banning them from America and thus cheating our children of the experience of playing Haydn on an instrument he once knew. It is my request that the Commission return to Americans the ability to secure early keyboards at auction or private sale under the CITES restrictions formerly in place, in the sure knowledge that no living elephant will be impacted by this decision, except perhaps in a positive way from awareness of their special place in history.

Regards,

Thomas Strange  
Easley SC, Carolina Clavier Collection, March 2, 2016



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