

Harp in the Royal College of Music Museum of Instruments

by Nancy Hurrell

One of the most impressive collections of harps is at the Royal College of Music Museum of Instruments, London. There are eight harps on view: two French single-action pedal harps by Cousineau, a London Erard single-action, two double-action pedal harps by London makers Erat and Stumpff, an Irish Egan Royal Portable Harp, a Welsh triple harp by Bassett Jones which belonged to the celebrated harpist, John Thomas, and a small Welsh single-row harp, possibly John Thomas's first harp. The harps are well displayed in glass cases, spanning the back wall of the second floor of the museum. The museum has recently expanded its opening hours to Tuesdays to Fridays from 2:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. My appointment with the museum's curator, Jenny Nex, to examine the harps, was arranged well in advance, and Jenny guided me through the collection, allowing me to survey and photograph the harps.

The Royal College of Music was founded in 1882, and the collection of musical instruments was built up from gifts to the college. The Founder of the RCM, the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, and Sir George Grove, its first Director, envisioned the college owning a musical instrument collection, as well as a library of manuscripts, and portraits of musicians. Today, the two well-established RCM collections, the Department of Portraits and Performance History and the Museum of Instruments, are brought together under the umbrella, the *Centre for Performance History (CPH)*. The CPH collection includes some 350 portraits and 10,000 prints and photographs, and nearly 900 instruments. With the aid of grants and donations, the museum has made important purchases, such as the record books from the London harp factory of Erard.

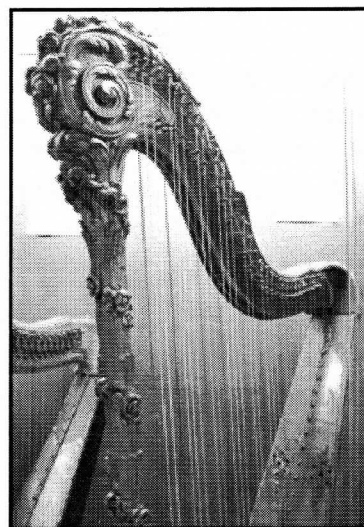
This year the Museum of Instruments published extensive catalogues of the collection, in three parts. The first two parts cover wind and keyboard instruments. *Catalogue Part III: European Stringed Instruments*, by Elizabeth Wells and Christopher Nobbs has a section on harps, with excellent photos and detailed information on each harp.

The RCM Harps

Georges Cousineau Single-action Pedal Harp, Paris, c. 1775 [RCM 114]

In the style of late 18th c. French harps, the harp has a gilded scroll top decoration on the column, and a back of seven staves of maple. The harp has 34 strings, and a *crochet* (hook) mechanism for sharpening the strings. The height is 65.4 in., and the depth from front of pillar to back of knee block is 24.5 in. The gilded column is carved in a pattern of vertical slender leaves, in overlapping rows. A sumptuous floral decoration, carved and gilded, begins at the top of the scroll, and continues as a floral garland wound from top to bottom of the column.

The ornate gold column is so striking that one might overlook the charming simple decoration painted on the soundboard, of animated birds and insects. Painted on a natural varnished background, six individual flies and dragonflies appear above



Cousineau harp, c. 1775 [RCM 114]

and below two flying birds in pursuit of them. On the bottom right of the soundboard, a plump bird has caught a dragonfly in its beak. Four clusters of soundholes are disguised with floral bouquets. Gilt scalloped edging along the center strip and edges of the soundboard, frames the scene. And a tiny leaf pattern in gold is painted down the center string strip, relating to the carved column design.

Georges Cousineau (1733–1800) began his workshop in 1758, and in the 1780s was joined by his son, Jacques-Georges (1760–1836), as *Cousineau and Son*.



Cousineau harp, c. 1775 (detail)

Inscriptions on Cousineau harps are generally found as brass plate cut-outs, and on painted ribbons at the tops of soundboards.

The c. 1775 Cousineau in the RCM collection has the name "COUSINEAU" stamped twice on

the top right on the soundboard. I wondered if this embossed stamp was added at a later date. In discussion with Jenny Nex, the idea arose that this label may have been put on the harp by an importer. Jenny showed me a copy of an interesting ad, from *The Times*, London, from 1789, "HARPS / Just imported from France, / By LONGMAN and BRODERIP...THESE HARPS are from the Manufactories of Naderman, Cousineau and Son, and other Eminent Makers..." Due to the turmoil of the French Revolution in 1789, harps from aristocratic families were sold quickly, and it is possible that this harp may have been "branded" for sale.

Georges and Jacques-Georges Cousineau Single-action Pedal Harp, Paris, c. 1785 [RCM 199]

Dated c. 1785, this harp was made in the *Cousineau and Son* workshop, Jacques-Georges having joined his father's business. The harp has a gilded scroll top decoration, with sculpted acanthus leaves at both the top and bottom of the column. The back of nine staves is made of maple. Inscriptions are in two places. On the back of the neck are cut-out brass letters: *COUSINEAU PERE ET FILS A PARIS*. And at the top of the soundboard is a painted ribbon inscribed: *COUSINEAU PERE ET FILS LUTHIERS DE LA REINE* ("*Cousineau and son Luthiers to the Queen*"). Cousineau became luthier to Queen Marie Antoinette in 1781. The harp's *bequilles* (crutches) mechanism was an invention of Cousineau and his son. Each pair of *bequilles*, like small metal fingers, rotate and pinch the string, raising the pitch without pulling it out of line.

There are 35 strings. The harp is 64.5 in. in height, and the depth from pillar to knee block is 26.5 in.

The most striking feature of this harp is the painted soundboard. Three complete oil paintings of landscapes with figures cover the soundboard, instead of small individual motifs. The top painting is of a coastal scene, with two women and a child near two small boats, and a rustic village of huts and villagers on a nearby hill. The middle painting is a charming scene with a couple by a lake. The man is fishing, and the woman has an infant strapped to her back. There is a bridge with three arches over the lake, and buildings of a town beyond. The scene at the base of the soundboard is a close-up of a country village with stone buildings and round tower. A lady leans over the balcony of the tower, and below, by a stream, a man is fishing. Mother-of-pearl and ebony inlay strips decorate the edge of the soundboard, and parallel lines of inlay are on the center strip.

This exquisite harp is on the cover of the catalogue, and the museum sells postcards of it. I am aware of three other Cousineau and Son harps decorated with strikingly similar artwork. One is in the Salvi Collection, in Italy, dated c. 1790 (Catalogue no. 265), and another harp, dated c. 1800, is in the Musical Instruments Museum, Poznan, Poland. And recently, a Cousineau harp dated c. 1780, with paintings of buildings and bridges almost identical to the RCM harp, appeared at auction, in the Mallett London catalogue.

Sebastian Erard Single-action Pedal Harp, London, 1800 [RCM 298]

Sebastian Erard (1752–1831), around 1789, created the new design of three rams' heads decorating a rounded capital, cast in gesso and gilded. This became the model for harps, replacing the carved scroll tops of earlier, pre-revolutionary French harps. Another innovative concept seen on this harp is Erard's rounded back construction, instead of staves. There are 42 strings, and the harp has Erard's new *fourchette* (fork) discs mechanism for sharpening the strings. The height of the harp is 67.5 in., with a depth of 30.5 in. There are shutter panels on the back, and a pedal to open them. The inscription on the brass plate is engraved: *Sebastian Erard's PATENT No. 333. / No. 18 Great Marlborough Street LONDON*. On the top of the capital is an engraved plaque, detailing the provenance of the harp.

It was originally purchased by Madame de Ronssecy around 1800, and eventually in the 1940s, it belonged to the Duchess of Wellington.

The natural varnished soundboard has painted motifs, with bunches of grapes at the top. Underneath, hung from pink ribbons, are clusters of roses and morning glories combined with bagpipes, lute and an open music book. Upon closer examination, one notices common gardening tools as well: spade, sickle, and watering can, and also milk jug and bowls. Further



Erard harp, 1800, detail (RCM 298)

down, the decoration becomes quite stylized, perhaps the work of a different artist. Neo-classical urns, triangles, and foliate decoration appear in a symmetrical pattern, with beaded circles framing symbolic bows and arrows.

In 1994, the Museum purchased the London Erard ledger books from Clive Morley. I was able to browse through these fascinating record books, covering the period of c. 1797 to 1917, and I found the entry for an 1895 Erard harp I have shown in a gallery talk at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Jacob and James Erat Double-action Pedal Harp, c. 1830 [RCM 309]

In 19th century London, the Erard harp design was widely imitated by other harp makers, including Erat. The Erat harp has a curved back design, and *fourchette* discs is the mechanism. The decoration on the gilded capital is three winged caryatids, similar to Erard's Grecian design of around 1811. An inscription on the brass plate is engraved: *J. & J. ERAT. PATENT HARP / Manufacturers. / 23 Berners Str. London. No. 1813* [with royal arms]. The harp has 43 strings, and the height is 68.7 in., with a depth of 31 in. It had five shutter panels at the back; they have been removed.

The soundboard, now slightly yellow, would have been painted white, as a background for the neo-classical motifs painted in gold. The centerpiece of the painted decoration is an urn, surrounded by delicate, curled foliate patterns.



Erat harp, c. 1830, detail (RCM 309)

The gilded column has acanthus leaves at the bottom, and on the top of the base are two female winged figures holding lyres. Like the column's capital decoration, these would have been cast in plaster and gilded. A few days before my visit to the RCM, I actually saw some Erard plaster moulds for this exact design of winged figures, at Morley Harps, in Lechlade. Clive Morley had given me a tour of Morley Harps, which took over Erard's company in 1890, and the plaster moulds were part of the Erard workshop.

Johann Andreas Stumpff Double-action Pedal Harp, c. 1837 [RCM 373]

In a similar design to the Erat, this Stumpff harp has rounded back construction, and three winged caryatids on the capital. The harp has 44 strings, and a *fourchette* mechanism. The inscription on the brass plate is: *PATENT HARP, INVENTED BY / J.A. Stumpff. LONDON / No. 44. Great Portland St. Portland Place.* The brass plate on the other side has a royal arms and the inscription: *Maker / TO HIS MAJESTY THE KING OF GREAT BRITAIN &c.* The height is 68.5 in., and the depth is 31.5 in. The gilded column has acanthus leaves at the bottom. There are two hippocampus on the top of the harp's base. The simply decorated soundboard is painted white (now yellow with age), with gold lines along the borders.

**John Egan Royal Portable Harp, Dublin, c. 1829
[RCM 108]**

This *Royal Portable Harp* by Egan (see page 1) is painted green with gold shamrocks decorating the column, neck and soundbox. With 33 strings, a *fourchette* mechanism was activated by Egan's invention of hand operated ivory ditals (levers) on the inside of the column. Egan thus combined the pedal harp technology of the day with an Irish revival harp design. An inscription on the brass plate, with a royal warrant, is engraved: *J. Egan 30 Dawson St. Dublin / Harp Maker by Special Appointment to His Most Gracious Majesty George IVth / & the Royal Family. / No. 1904.* A brass button at the bottom of the column and a corresponding button at the top back of the harp, would have had a leather strap attached.

The height of this harp is 36 in., with a depth of 20.5 in. Egan produced his "portable" harps in different sizes and shapes, and this is an example of the design with a thick upper column. Earlier models (e.g., Egan harp in the Victoria and Albert Museum) have very slender, greatly bowed columns. Egan harps were sometimes painted other colors (black or blue), but all have some form of gilt shamrock decoration. The RCM Egan, No. 1904, has a border of shamrocks around the edge of the soundboard, and around the edge of the soundbox. This same design pattern can be seen on other Egans, including Thomas Moore's harp, No. 1858, in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

Also, on display is an interesting advertisement for Egan's *Royal Portable Harp*, with a woman dressed in an Empire style gown, shown playing the harp, with the instrument resting on her lap.

**Welsh small single-row Harp, early 19th century
[RCM 260]**

This fascinating instrument, by an unknown maker, looks like a miniature Welsh triple harp, only it has a single row of 20 strings. (Triple harps have three rows of strings.) The harp is strung on the right side, and would have been played on the left shoulder, in the traditional Welsh manner. The height is just 38¼ in., with the depth 15¾ in. It may have been a child's toy. It has the distinctive high-headed shape of the Welsh harp, with a slender, straight pillar topped with a backwards-turned scroll on the finial. A small forwards-turned scroll decorates the treble end of the neck.

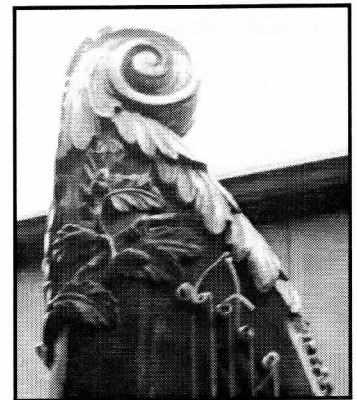
There are traces of gilding on both scrolls. In the Welsh harp style, there is a carved fluted block joining the neck to the top of the stave back (five staves). Six soundholes are on the plain soundboard. The harp was originally painted red and gold, but the paint has oxidized, and it now appears black.

It is believed by Ann Griffiths that this may have been John Thomas's first harp, acquired by his father in Newton Nottage, Porthcawl, in c. 1833–4, from the widow of Thomas Evans.

**Welsh Triple Harp by Bassett Jones, Cardiff, 1838
[RCM 295]**

The Welsh triple harp by Bassett Jones is important not only for its splendid design and decoration, but also because it belonged to the famous Welsh harpist-composer, John Thomas (1826–1913). John Thomas won this magnificent harp, as a child. There has been a long-standing tradition in Wales to award harps as prizes at the *eisteddfod* harp competitions. An engraved brass plate attached on the right of the neck is inscribed: *Rif 4 Cymreigyddion y Fenni / I JOHN THOMAS yn Unarddeg Oed / Am Ragori ar y Delyn. / HYDREF 1838 / Bassett Jones / Gwneuthurwr / Caerdydd / Rif 115 ("No. 4 Abergavenny Welsh Gathering. To John Thomas, aged eleven, for excellence on the harp. October 1838. Bassett Jones, maker, Cardiff. No.115").*

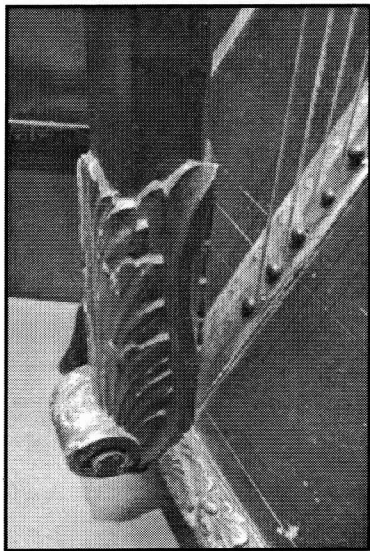
This high-headed Welsh harp has the traditional straight column, handsomely topped with a gilded backwards-turned scroll, decorated with carved acanthus leaves, acorns, and oak leaves, all of gold.



*Bassett Jones harp, 1838, finial
(RCM 295)*

The bottom of the column also has a carved and gilded scroll with acanthus leaves. At the bottom of the soundboard there is a border of similar gilded leaf and acorn decoration, and again on the top of the neck. The plain soundboard is framed with thin black lines, and gold painted edges and center strip. There are 99 strings, in three rows, two diatonic outer rows and a chromatic

row in the center. Traditionally, Welsh triple harps were played on the left shoulder, opposite from the pedal harp. It is interesting that this harp is strung and played “in reverse,” that is, strung so that the player holds the harp on the right shoulder, like a pedal harp. The harp has a stave back, and has a height of 80.1 in, with a



Bassett Jones harp, 1838, column base (RCM 295)

depth of 28.75 in.

John Thomas was a student at the Royal Academy of Music, switching from the traditional Welsh triple to the pedal harp. He was appointed professor there as well as the RCM, and he was Harpist to Queen Victoria. A photograph of

John Thomas posing with a Gothic style Erard harp is also on display.

The RCM collection of harps offers a rare opportunity to view eight harps spanning an important seventy-five year period in harp history, from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century. One sees attempts at continuing harp traditions, while adapting to new mechanisms and designs. In Ireland, Egan hoped to revive a traditional Irish harp shape, capable of modern chromaticism. The Bassett Jones harp continues the traditional Welsh design while stringing it on the right, like pedal harps. Viewing 18th c. French harps next to early 19th c. harps of the Erard model, shows the trend of harps to become larger and more solidly built. The earlier harps, with exquisite paintings and fanciful motifs are truly works of art.

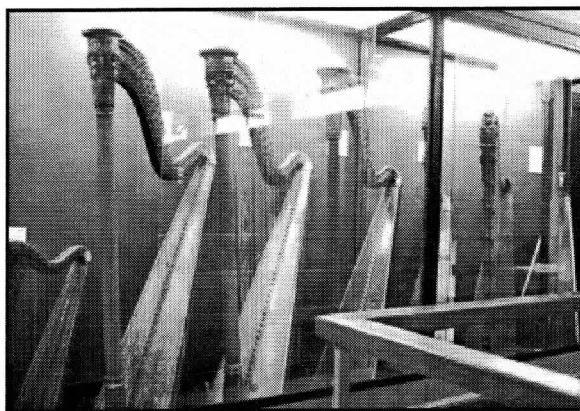
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RCM Harps

Nancy Hurrell is the current chair of the Historical Harp Society's Survey Project. She is a harp consultant for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where she assists with harp restoration and presents gallery talks. She has recorded sound files for the MFA, and Nancy performs and records with early music ensembles in the Boston area. www.hurrellharp.com