

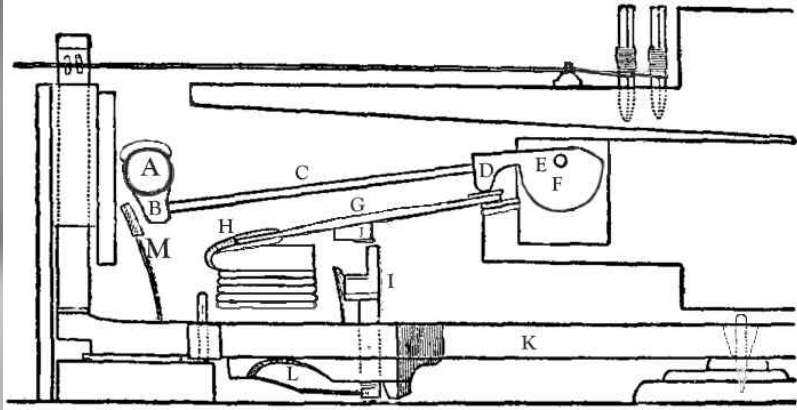
Bartolomeo Cristofori: Inventor of the Piano



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Have you ever wondered where the piano came from? Who invented it? Why? It was not built from scratch, that much is clear. The piano was actually born from a modification made to a harpsichord around 1700 by the instrument designer and curator, Bartolomeo Cristofori. He was working in the court of Prince Ferdinand de' Medici, in Florence, Italy, when one day he was asked if he could create an instrument similar to the harpsichord but with the ability to play loudly and softly without having to pull a lever to physically change the instrument. With some thought, and plenty of imaginative work, he was able to create an action to fit inside the harpsichord that strikes the strings instead of plucking them as harpsichords actions do. About a decade later, Scipitone Maffei, a well known writer, produced a diagram of Cristofori's work and cleverly named his new invention the "gravicembalo col piano e forte" (harpsichord with soft and loud).

The first piano had about fifty keys, less than two thirds of the usual eighty-eight we find on modern pianos. It also did not have any pedals, (something I discussed in detail in my September newsletter.) There were far fewer strings and no harp (cast iron plate) meaning that the strings were kept at a much lower tension, (something I will cover in a future issue.) It was an entirely new and highly sought after instrument for the aristocrats, but it was still too expensive and difficult to produce to be available to the general populace.



Above is a picture of the first piano and next to it is the diagram of its action. Some parts that you may be able to recognize are the key (K) and the hammer (A and B). The string is pictured at the top. The damper, though it is not labeled, is to the far left end of the string. At this link (https://youtube.com/watch?v=uZjcV3_0PqQ), you can find a video of this “action” in action.

This new instrument gave rise to many new pieces of music to be written specifically for it. The harpsichord can only play at one volume forcing the musical expression available in harpsichords to be limited to notes, chords, and timing. The piano added another layer of complexity to the music it can produce because it can play at a range of different volumes depending on how fast and hard a key is played. This design has been improved upon further over the last 300 years; obviously the grand piano in your living room looks different than the one in Prince Ferdinand’s. The hammers have changed, the overall shape has changed, the action has added more parts to allow it to function better and faster, and there are more keys. What we have today is somewhat different, but this is where it all started.

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