



COMMUNICATION: REPORT

Database of Harpsichord and Clavichord Makers Goes Online

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To those working in the field of stringed keyboard instruments, the name ‘Boalch’ is familiar, referring to a core reference text containing biographies of harpsichord and clavichord makers as well as listings of their known surviving instruments. Donald H. Boalch (1919–1999) was a proficient linguist who worked professionally as a librarian specializing in the sciences, but he had a lifelong passion for music, particularly that for the keyboard (Charles Mould, ‘Boalch, Donald H.’, in *Grove Music Online* www.oxfordmusiconline.com (5 June 2023)). The first edition of his volume *Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord 1440–1840* was published in 1956 by Macmillan. Boalch continued to update his work, producing a second edition in 1974 (Oxford University Press), while a third edition, published in 1995 (also OUP), was edited by Charles Mould. An important feature of the latter edition was the separation of the biographies and instrument data into two distinct sections.

Today, computerized databases offer far more nuanced interfaces for the kind of information held in reference texts such as Boalch, and to this end a team of enthusiasts and scholars has been creating a new online portal, *Boalch-Mould Online*, <https://boalch.org>. The biographies are under the editorship of Lance Whitehead, while the system design and catalogue of surviving instruments are managed by John Watson, with Peter Bavington serving as Associate Editor for Clavichords. It is to be noted that a great deal of the work is undertaken on a voluntary basis, and the dedication of the expert team is to be commended.

This database is not a simple transfer of information from the third printed edition of Boalch. The date range now extends well beyond 1840 to the year 1925 and all of the biographies are being reworked, incorporating much new material published since 1995 by scholars including Patrizio Barbieri, Francesco Nocerino and Giovanni Paolo Di Stefano (Italy), Laurence Libin and John Watson (United States), Eva Helenius (Sweden), Dorthe Falcon Møller (Denmark), Jan Bouterse (Netherlands) and Benjamin Vogel (Poland). A significant amount of new biographical research is also being undertaken by Lance Whitehead, particularly making use of material that is now available online, rendering searching possible without a great deal of travel. The biographies section thus includes insurance information from the records of the Sun Fire Office and legal information from the Proceedings of the Old Bailey, as well as material from London Lives and Gale Primary Sources (including some 15,000 references to the words ‘harpsichord’ and ‘spinet’ in the Burney Newspapers preserved at the British Library). Parish archives and rate books are also being meticulously searched for new information that can narrow down date ranges, make links between makers more certain and firm up previously hazy details of makers’ lives. Importantly, a list of published and archive sources is included for each maker, with hyperlinks to the online Proceedings of the Old Bailey, in addition to the HathiTrust Digital Library (including issues of the *Mercure de France*) and the Digitale Bibliothek of the Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum (including Mattheson’s *Das neu-eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg: Schiller, 1713), Petri’s *Anleitung zur praktischen Musik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1782) and Walther’s *Musikalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig: Wolfgang Deer, 1732)). Makers of component parts, such as brassware, are also being included, recognizing that there

were (and are) many relevant associated trades involved in instrument making. Moreover, women are being given more credit and their contributions to musical-instrument businesses recognized, notably by giving widows who carried on running their family firms entries under their own names in the database.

Not surprisingly, the new edition contains as many as 290 new makers, including Adam Seintzel, a maker of German or Austrian heritage who appeared before the Revolutionary Tribunal during the Reign of Terror in Paris (*Mercure Universel*, 1794), a Native American named Joshua who made a spinet for the Wyalusing Indian congregation in Pennsylvania and a Mr Lang, who may have finished as many as fifty-five instruments in the name of Joshua Shudi when the firm was under the direction of his widow Mary. Several provincial British makers have also been identified, including Edward Kenny (Nottingham), Edward Nicholls (Rochester), Huglins (a specialist jack maker from Dublin) and Anthony Parsons (Sheffield). Having in 1734 been granted a patent for an engine designed to pump water from mines or coal pits, Parsons advertised in the *Derby Mercury* (5 August 1736) that he was laying aside all but organ building and was giving a sale of his stock of harpsichords, spinets, flutes, violins and hautboys over three dates to coincide with the Sheffield Races. Women harpsichord makers also featuring for the first time include Anna and Margherita del Mela, Jane Harris, Mary Shudi and Rachel Weber.

Usefully, on the home page, new users can find introductory videos, demonstrating how to search the database and how to contribute information. Searches can be undertaken according to various data types, including the maker's name, date of construction, place of construction, the collection where an instrument is now held, the instrument's compass and any maker's marks or inscriptions found on the instrument. Many institutions have made photographs of their instruments available, some by linking through to their own databases and websites. Photographic searches can be ordered according to date, maker's name or holding institution.

Users are encouraged to send in any new information, as the database is constantly being updated and refined to make it as useful and accurate a resource as possible. Editorial control is firm but receptive, since it is important to make sure that the information presented is as reliable as it can be.

A new feature is the microblogs section, where the editors are highlighting new information or themes that have come up during their work. We can read about the role that pubs and taverns played as places where instrument makers lived, worked and socialized. We can understand better the complexities of family life within some of the great dynasties such as that of Kirkman, where there were multiple premises for both work and home, as well as a succession of generations involved in the trade. Instruments not previously listed are also highlighted, enlarging the data set of surviving instruments from which scholars can learn.

To date, entries relating to British makers and to instruments in public collections have perhaps received the greatest attention, this being the area where the editors can most easily seek out information. It is to be hoped that scholars and enthusiasts studying instruments from other countries and perspectives will feel able to share their information (after publication elsewhere if required) so that this resource can become truly universal, enabling scholarship in this field to be accessible and useful to people working in a wide range of disciplines.

To find out more and to explore the database yourself, visit <https://boalch.org>.

Jenny Nex is a musical-instrument specialist, curator, lecturer and musician based in Edinburgh. Besides her initial music degree, she holds a postgraduate qualification in historically informed performance, an MA in Museum & Gallery Management and a PhD that examined the businesses of instrument makers active in early industrial London. In 2005 Jenny took up the role of Curator of the Museum at the Royal College of Music and in 2013 moved to a similar role in the Musical Instrument Collection at the University of Edinburgh. Her research and teaching focus on understanding and interpreting musical instruments, and on the business and economic activities of musical-instrument makers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.