

PHOTOGRAPHING HARPSICORDS IN MUSEUMS

by C. BEEBE

Let's face it. The Museums don't want people to take good photographs of their Harpsichords -- they would prefer you to buy their pictures. I developed this opinion on a recent trip when I was visiting 23 museums on two continents, expressly for the purpose of examining closely and photographing as many early keyboard instruments as possible. The trip was undertaken because of the lack of good published material on these instruments. I was not going to be deterred, and this article explains how I overcame the problem to return with 1500 slides of over 200 instruments.

Equipment and Techniques Used

Camera body	-	Pentax SLR ME Super
Lenses	-	Pentax 50mm 1.4
	-	Pentax 28mm 2.8
	-	Pentax 75-150mm 4 zoom
Flashgun	-	Pentax dedicated AF200S
Slide Film	-	Kodachrome 64 or Ektachrome 400

The Pentax ME Super is one of the smallest and lightest SLRs on the market. The standard 1.4 lens was an advantage in the poor lighting situations characteristic of most museums. Harpsichords are an awkward shape, and not always displayed to their advantage. The wide angle lens was especially useful because it was rarely possible to fit an entire instrument within the 50mm lens. It was possible to get shots of large decorated soundboard areas with this lens, then use the standard lens for more detailed views. The zoom was handy for close-up shots of instruments taken from behind barriers, or in glass show cases. I preferred to use Kodachrome 64 film for its colour. The faster and more expensive Ektachrome 400 was essential in Europe, where flash was generally prohibited.

The flash was always used with Kodachrome 64, permitting a wide depth of field. Practise is essential to avoid reflections on flat painted or gilded surfaces, or the too-common unopened glass showcases. Sometimes it was impossible to shoot through showcases because of glare caused by poorly aimed spotlights. This could be reduced on some shots by placing the lens right on the hopefully clean glass. A special adaptor was used over the flash to spread the lightbeam for wide-angle shots.

It was often difficult to obtain as good results with the Ektachrome 400 where flash was prohibited. Depth of field was restricted. The poor lighting of many museums still cast definite shadows. It was not always possible to have the even exposure throughout the frame expected from a good flash shot. Results were hard to obtain when half a soundboard was lit, and the rest in shadow. Sometimes it was necessary to shoot hand-held down to 1/8 sec, although it was helpful to have a steady hand and cabinets to lean on, or develop special brace positions. Don't expect to hold an SLR steady at such speeds if you have just run up a flight of stairs.

The results showed me it was possible, though much to the disappointment of the museums, to take excellent pictures of instruments in discouraging circumstances with simple hand-held equipment.

The Museums

The table shows a list of the museums I visited, with relevant observations. The visit to Europe was made in September, and many of the museums had their curators absent. It is always advisable to write ahead, although I arranged visits to the American museums by phone when in the country for an extended time. I received a polite reply or message from every museum in the UK. I disappointedly received only one reply from the European museums (Antwerp Plantin Moretus) and that arrived surface mail after I had returned home. Conditions of visit often change, and rules are often bent or broken at the curator's fancy. In some museums I was left to my own devices in an empty room. Others, two guards followed me around, or a nervous curator who would faint before opening a Harpsichord lid. Some curators unfortunately have formed the opinion that playing or touching a keyboard instrument damages it.

Of course, many museums have more instruments in storage than they will ever be able to exhibit, and if you can gain access, these "morgues" can prove; a treasure trove. Some museums forbid flash, tripod, or photography altogether. Others insist on filling out a complex legal document, saying copies of photographs must be supplied on request and the results must not be published without museum permission.

I can see little evidence for the discouragement of flash or tripod other than the museums not wanting good photographs taken of their instruments by outsiders. They miss out on the funds generated by the sale of their own publications, but when you take your own photographs you can shoot the items that interest you. I do not think exposure to light is a valid excuse for banning flash, considering that electronic flash has a colour temperature equivalent to daylight, and typical flash duration is as short as 1/30000sec - 1/1500sec. I can understand flash being a nuisance in crowded museums (spoilng the effect of the exhibits for others) and tripods causing crowding and possible bumping of exhibits. But considering the museums below, there seems to be no correlation between number of visitors and various rules.

MUSEUM	FLASH	PLAY	COMMENTS
USA Yale University New Haven CT	y	y	Probably the finest playing collection of early keyboards in the world, with representation from all schools.
Boston Museum of Fine Arts	y	n	Free-standing, but overcrowded display. Played instruments on a previous visit, although curator had to open lids. Playing not possible this visit because of curator's absence.
New York Metropolitan	y	y	Flash not encouraged. Photography and playing of special exhibits prohibited. Some small instruments in show cases. Large morgue.
Smithsonian Institution	y	y	Free admission. All keyboards free-standing behind rope, including often-copied 1745 Dulcken. Large morgue. Staff particularly helpful and friendly.
UK Victoria + Albert London	y	n	Like a giant aquarium--most instruments behind glass. Earliest authenticated dated Harpsichord. Possible to play one English harpsichord if they have an exact time two weeks ahead. Plans not kept in stock but available on three weeks notice.
Royal College of Music	y	y	Flash not encouraged. Plans in stock.

MUSEUM	FLASH	PLAY	COMMENTS
Fenton House	y	y	Flash not encouraged. Excellent playing collection of mostly English instruments. A few plastic instrument soundboard covers. Special permission normally required to play HM The Queen's 1612 Ruckers. Humorous curator in National Trust Property.
Russell Collection Edinburgh	y	y	Flash not encouraged. Plans in stock. Invaluable collection, superbly housed. Open limited hours only.
EUROPE			
Paris Conservatoire	n	y	Tripods forbidden too. Dimly lit. Possible to play instruments by prior appointment when museum closed. Several French Doubles.
Brussels Conservatoire	y	n	Currently rebuilding. Only a small part of collection on show.
Antwerp Vleeshuis	n	n	Everything faintly Ruckers exhibited in a fantastic but dimly lit building the family would have known. Curator busily unhelpful.
Antwerp Plantin Moretus	n	n	Printing museum containing interesting 1734 combined harpsichord + virginal. Possible to play by prior arrangement.
The Hague Gemeentemuseum	n	n	Surprisingly little English spoken here. Catalog out of print. Cheap plans off the shelf at book shop.

MUSEUM	FLASH	PLAY	COMMENTS
Nuremberg Germanisches Museum	y	n	Excellent collection, although poorly lit. Flash permissible after signing long-winded legal document in your choice of language.
Munich Stadtmuseum	n	n	A few keyboards, but mainly Asian instruments. Several clavichords + early pianos piled in a corner.
Munich Deutschesmuseum	y	n	Museum with hundreds of working science exhibits on an island. Continual German Demonstrations of keyboard instruments in giant salon. Display of action types. Instruments behind rope. Hinged perspex keyboard covers.
Salzburg Mozart Geburtshaus	n	n	Photography forbidden.
Salzburg Carolino Augusteum	n	n	A few instruments, some behind glass.
Vienna Kunsthistorischesmuseum	n	n	Rude guard closed museum 15mins early after deliberately pulling blinds down to try to discourage photography. Free-standing instruments. A few keyboard covers.
Milan Castella Sforza	n	n	Scratched perspex soundboard covers. Dusty exhibits. Some small instruments behind glass. Museum with archeological emphasis.
Basel Schola Cantorum			Sadly closed due to building repairs.

MUSEUM	FLASH	PLAY	COMMENTS
Zurich Landesmuseum	n	n	Two instruments. Hardly worth a visit.
Geneva Museum of Ancient Instruments	y	y	Limited opening hours. No instruments behind glass--even viols and crumhorn hanging on the wall. Tri-lingual demonstrations by dangerously old curator. Unquestionably the most hospitable of the European Museums.