

The square piano in America

Square pianos started coming into America while it remained a colony of Great Britain, mostly imported by wealthy individuals who had purchased them in London for their homes in the colonies. Importation declined but was not entirely stopped during the revolution (1776-1783), though it was far easier to smuggle in smaller items than a pianoforte. The importation of pianos for resale only began after the successful conclusion of hostilities, and began to thrive in the late 1790s. John Jacob Astor was importing pianos for sale immediately after the war in 1783! These were usually made by Longman and Broderip and perhaps the odd Broadwood, though after 1795 a number of other makes would start to appear in the States as well. Clementi did a very vigorous business after the turn of the century here.

In addition to importation, a local trade in building was established in New York and Philadelphia. John Behrent built the first pianos in Philadelphia in 1775, with one Behrent reportedly at the Smithsonian in Washington. Charles Albrecht was building in the 1780s in Philadelphia as well, as seen below at the National Music Museum in Vermillion SD.



By the end of the 18th C several other large cities had a piano trade started, including Benjamin Crehore in Milton Massachusetts.



With the arrival of John Geib in America in the summer of 1797, a major builder from London was now on hand to begin a piano building tradition in numbers far exceeding the 10 to 12 instruments per annum from shops like that of Crehore. His first instruments, built in the Bowery in Manhattan, were copies of what he had been building for Longman and Broderip to a number in excess of 4000 instruments during his London period. Geib, through his sons Adam and John Jr., and later William, would be one of the largest suppliers in America through the early 1830s, and the company survived in name until 1870.



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The square piano held a certain fascination for early American buyers, and the grand size and shape was distinctly held as unattractive and undesirable. The country was caught in the thrall of egalitarian unity, and the grand would remain a sign of the elitist until well into the 19th C. For that reason it is possible to find early squares with some regularity, even though production in the States was slow to catch up to that in London and elsewhere.

The designs of square pianos in America closely followed that in London during the first quarter of the 19th C, with design features trailing the London tastes by a few months to a year or so. Pianos with six legs for instance seem to appear around 1808, while certain design such as the curved front corners are more commonly encountered in American pianos from the period of 1812 to 1815 than from London. Below is a Geib and Sons in the Sheraton style, circa 1813.



Although the Americans were loath to adopt the grand, they were not at all shy about fancy and colorful squares. Robert and William Nunns built for Dubois and Stodart of NY, and flights of fancy were given free reign!



Here we see the emergence of the pedestal stand which was employed for all the highest end pianos, and many made by Duncan Phyfe for the trade. Dust boards were decorated in gilt stars and leaf patterns, either on fine mahogany or brightly painted pine or poplar.



In Maryland and Ohio, German immigrants developed their own style of square pianoforte manufacture, often using modified Viennese actions or variations on the English action not seen elsewhere. Below is an example from the shop of Reuss, Cincinnati.



Photo courtesy of Frank Renfrow, Cincinnati

Following the introduction of an iron string plate by Broadwood in 1822, Alpheus Babcock emerged with the first full frame metal plate to support the string tension, in 1825. Reaction to iron in the piano was not immediately positive, and it would take 25 years for full iron plates to become relatively common in American squares, but the string plate solved a number of concerns and was rapidly adopted.



A design trend that took hold in America particularly was the Gothic style, and was reflected in piano design in the period 1845-1855, with four fat legs (usually hollow, with hidden recessed castors and fine veneer) and a Gothic arch motif carved on the front panels, as in the Nunns and Clark of ~1848 below.



With iron framing now in the picture, and the heavier strings it can support, as well as the successes in England at expositions and trade exhibits, the American piano industry was roaring. Larger and larger squares popped into existence, moving quickly from the standard 6 octave models to 7 and 7.5 octaves. This was led by Chickering, perhaps the most prominent name in America in the mid century.



Chickering pianos featured a fancy cast string plate in many star and circular 'crown' designs, beginning with an early design like a wagon wheel, and culminating in an elaborate fern leaf and floral affair.



The taste in case wood shifted from Santa Domingo and Cuban mahogany which was becoming harder to come by, to rosewood and occasionally walnut, though mahogany continues to appear throughout the 19th C, as in this Adam Stodart square of Feb, 1851.



Growing rapidly after 1860, Steinway and Son rose to prominence with high quality pianos including squares such as those shown below. By the late 1800s there were nearly 1000 piano manufacturers and 'stencil' makes available, supplied under whatever name you wanted by firms such as Steck. The most prominent names made grands, squares and uprights, but many companies continued to focus on squares until their demise.



Upright pianos did not begin to gain widespread acceptance until nearly 1880 in America, though production levels were up sharply following the Civil War. The square grand piano was considered the showpiece of the family, and any aspiring middle class worker sought to buy one, even second hand, to display proudly in the parlor. At prices ranging from \$260 to \$700 for generally acceptable pianos in 1850, they were a years' wages for a day laborer! By the mid 1880s the square grand had reached its zenith in America. Nearly 7 feet long, 40 inches deep, and weighing in at over 700 pounds, these were massive pieces of furniture. Moving one today we wonder at the magnitude of it all, as with the Mathushek below.



As if mass alone was not enough, in America decoration would also reach its ultimate peak, with name boards dripping in gilt, painted cameos, gemstone and mother of pearl inlay, with mother of pearl keys, as in the (Henry) Miller and Cummings example below!



Upright piano sales eclipsed the square grand around 1895, and by 1900 it was clear that the future of the square was to be very short. The trouble was that a great glut of square pianos were keeping prices down for new instruments. It was decided that something needed to be done to turn public desire away from square grands. On May 24, 1904 a well publicized event was staged by a conglomerate of piano dealers to eliminate the square grand, by staging a ceremonial bonfire of grand pianos.

GREAT PIANO BONFIRE.

Death Knell of "Squares" Sounded at Atlantic City.

Special to The New York Times.

ATLANTIC CITY, N. J., May 24.—While 150 delegates to the National Piano Dealers' Convention here waved red lights and danced in a great circle, 200 venerable square pianos were cremated on windswept Chelsea Heights at 10:30 to-night. The widely advertised destruction of the pianos was first proposed for the ocean front, but was barred therefrom by Mayor Stoy by reason of the danger.

The delegates went to Albany Avenue by trolley and marched out across the inside thoroughfare bridge to Chelsea Heights, where the torch was quickly applied to the relics.

The fire made as big a blaze as a burning house. The piano men burned the veterans to signalize the passing into history of the "square" make of instrument.

Later reports would put the number of squares burned at over 1000, but the more likely number is less than 50, just owing to the logistics of assembling the things into a proper pile. In any case the era of the square grand was over in America, with the last ones made in 1905. Mathushek briefly resurrected the design in the 1930s to hearken back to old times, with an abbreviated size instrument, but owing to the depression and general indifference it met with, the experiment was short lived.



In America today, the large square grand enjoys the poorest possible reputation of any musical instrument extant. The actions were never capable of the performance of a traditional grand, though they were superior to many uprights. But mostly, they suffer from incompatibility of parts. Action parts for most upright and grand pianos can be replaced with modern equivalents when they break without much adjustment. Not so the square, where every part needs individual attention. If a wrest plank needs replacing, same story. The American piano technician sees squares as a ball of worms, to be avoided at all costs. It does not help that most squares have seen 100 years of neglect before a technician is called, and customer expectations are for the thing to be 'tuned' i.e., cost, oh, about \$150 to make it right. Uh Huh...

They **are** somewhat of a difficult reach for tuning, though once set they tend to hold nicely if everything is in order. For a performance, they work best for period music. However, the serious piano student is so closely and carefully focused on one type of sound, one type of feel, and one technique, that there is no room for these monsters. Recordings on large American grands are extremely infrequent; they sound like normal pianos, feel different, and in the end, fail to express enough additional color to make it worthwhile attempting music on them for the studio. Professional restorers exist in the States to help you with your square grand, and mostly produce competent work, at prices that reach and exceed \$10K! You will be assured that your piano will sell for at least twice this, and occasionally some actually do, but largely, restoration of a large American square grand is a matter of preserving a sentimental attachment to a family heirloom.