

# MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS FROM THE SPHERE FREDERICK II OF PRUSSIA

Frederick II, the King of Prussia, was known to be a talented and enthusiastic transverse flute player. The Englishman Charles Burney, certainly a reliable witness, wrote in 1773: »The music started with a flute concerto, in which the king recited the solo movements with great precision. His embouchure [lippping] was clear and even, his fingers brilliant, and his taste pure and genuine; I was very pleased and even surprised by the neatness of his performance, in both the allegros and his sensational expression in the adagios. In short, his playing surpassed in many respects everything I had ever heard among enthusiasts, or even from professional flautists« (*Tagebuch seiner musikalischen Reisen* (Diary of his musical journeys) Vol. 3, Hamburg 1773 p.p. 109–10). Adolph von Menzel depicted the King's evening »House Music« with his painting *Das Flötenkonzert*, which is in the National Gallery of the National Museums of Prussian Cultural Heritage. In the painting, Frederick the Great plays the transverse flute and is accompanied by four string players and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, a son of Johann Sebastian Bach, on a keyboard instrument. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach is referred to by Menzel in a sketch for the painting as a »Court Harpsichordist.« The painter uses this word in quotation marks, unlike the Kapellmeister and Concertmeister indications with Graun or Benda. Perhaps Menzel, who painted a fortepiano still located in Potsdam today, had an idea that even since the time around 1745 at the Prussian court except for the harpsichord also – and perhaps only – the novel instrument with the hammer action, the pianoforte, would be used to accompany the royal flute. In 1752, Johann Joachim Quantz, who was also the king's flute teacher, said this about it: »But on a piano however, everything necessary [specifically gradation of volume] can be most easily accomplished; because above all this instrument, what we call the piano, possesses the necessary properties for good accompaniment: and it just comes down to the player and his judgment. On a good clavicord however, it has precisely the same nature when being played, but not in respect to its effect; because it lacks fortissimo« (*Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Approach to a statement on playing the transverse flute), Berlin 1752, p. 231).

The fortepiano that was at the court of Frederick the Great came from Gottfried Silbermann, who was mainly known as an organ builder. When Johann Sebastian Bach visited the King in Potsdam in 1747, he gave him a theme, on which Bach improvised on one of the Silbermann fortepianos.



Friedrich II., copy after a painting by Antoine Pesne, 1683–1757  
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He later worked this theme in the *Musikalisches Opfer* (Musical Offering). Describing the view of Bach and of Frederick II towards the fortepiano, Johann Friedrich Agricola, a pupil of Bach and in the service of the King since 1751, wrote in 1768: »Mr. Gottfr. Silbermann at first made two of these instruments. The blessed Kapellmeister Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach saw one of them and played it. He had extolled and even marveled at its sound: But at the same time complained that it was too weak in high notes, and was too hard to play ... Finally, as Mr. Silbermann had really found many improvements, particularly in respect to tractament [the descent of keys], he sold another one to the Royal Court in Rudolstadt ... Shortly thereafter the major of the King of Prussia had one of these instruments sent from Mr. Silbermann, and after it won the applause of his Grace, he ordered several more. Everyone who saw and heard these instruments in particular, just as I had seen one of the two old ones, quickly realized how hard Mr. Silbermann must have worked on their improvement. Mr. Silbermann had had the laudable ambition of showing these instruments, his more recent work, the blessed Mr. Kapellmeister Bach and to have them examined by him; and on the other hand full seeking his ut-



Portable harpsichord that belonged to Queen Sophie Charlotte and Frederick II, Jean Marius, Paris, 1700/1704, cat. no. 288 © MIM, photo: Jürgen Liepe

most approval« (note: Jakob Adlung, *Musica Mechanica Organoedi*, Vol. 2, Berlin 1768, p. 116 f.). Our museum currently owns a fortepiano by Johann Heinrich Silbermann, which is in large part similar to the instruments by Gottfried Silbermann in Potsdam (cat. no. 12). The very light hammers that produce a soft, but nuanced sound are characteristic. Quantz's remark about the »fortissimo« of the pianoforte is in reference to the extremely delicate sounding clavichord; compared to the harpsichord – or above all the modern grand piano – the old fortepiano stands out with its deliberately low sound.

Despite his penchant for piano, Frederick the Great likely performed in accompaniment to the harpsichord as well: During his extensive military campaigns he brought along flutes; and in camp he certainly didn't have a fortepiano at his disposal. By contrast, a collapsible traveling harpsichord (*clavecin brisé*) was in Hohenzollern possession: Frenchman Jean Marius was its inventor. Whether or not he was a harpsichord maker is doubtful; he may have had his instruments wholly or partially built by others. The *clavecin brisé* of our museum (cat. no. 288) was used by the Duchess of Orleans on trips and then donated to Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia. It has a tuning device for a variation of the mean temperament.

That Frederick II brought flutes along on his campaigns is known thanks to a letter to the Fredersdorf treasurer: The king sent him an instrument damaged by war with the request to have it sent to Quantz for repair. His involvement in flute construction was one of the duties of Quantz; two of Frederick II's transverse flutes located in the Museum are said to have passed through his hands. Friedrich Gabriel Kirst worked in Potsdam for the king from about 1775. Friedrich Nicolai wrote this about it: »Flute maker Kirst (in the Dutch territory) receives income from the king« (*Beschreibung der Königlichen Residenzstädte Berlin und Potsdam und aller daselbst befindlicher Merkwürdigkeiten* (Description of the Royal Residence of Berlin, Potsdam, and of the Peculiarities Found There), Berlin 1779, Vol. 2, p. 993). Kirst had worked with the Potsdam woodwind instrument maker Freyer and took over his workshop after his death. Kirst's successor was a son of the late Freyer, Johann Gottlieb. The relatively dark tone of some transverse flutes from Kirst is reminiscent of instruments of Quantz. Frederick II's Royal Pianist – like Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach – was Christian Friedrich Carl Fasch. In 1791 he founded the Berlin Singakademie, which still exists today, and which became famous not least because of its revival of Bach's St. Matthew Passion in 1829 led by Mendelssohn. Today the Singakademie still has a harpsichord built by Johann Christoph Oesterlein in 1792 in its collection. It's on permanent loan to our museum from the Singakademie (cat. no. LG 2). This instrument is one of the few surviving testimonies of Berlin harpsichord construction, which includes other names such as Mietke, Rost, Schramm, and Oesterlein (father). In around 1718, Johann Sebastian Bach had a double harpsichord made by Mietke, the Prussian court-instrument maker, for the court in Köthen.



Transverse flute, attributed to Johann Joachim Quantz, Potsdam, mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, cat. no. 5076 © MIM, photo: Jürgen Liepe