

Longman and Broderip Spinet, 1780

FF/GG (lacking F[#]) to f³, English bentside spinet with a mitred tail, built by Thomas Culliford for Longman and Broderip. Culliford made many instruments for Longman and Broderip, a music publisher and instrument seller set up in 1776 as the successor to two companies, the first of which marked when James Longman (1746–1803) began trading from 26 Cheapside, London, in 1767. Francis Broderip (1750–1807) joined the company in 1775, and instruments bearing just Longman and Broderip's names date from 1776. From 1782, the company also had premises at 13 Haymarket (Longman and Broderip was declared bankrupt on 27 May 1795, but managed to continue selling instruments until its final liquidation in 1798, at which point it was succeeded by Longman, Clementi, and Co. – later Clementi and Co., then through a succession of partnership changes, lasting to the mid twentieth century as Collard and Collard – and Broderip and Wilkinson). The nameboard inscription, in familiar inked calligraphy, reads: 'Longman and Broderip Musical Instrument Makers / N^o 26 Cheapside London. It therefore dates to before 1782. However, this instrument has a twin, preserved in the Royal College of Music collection (RCM0285) and listed in Boalch, which is marked in ink on the top surface of the baseboard under the front rail of the keyframe: 'Culliford Maker Jan^{ry} 1780.' Whereas the RCM instrument is marked 'XIII' on the lower surface of the front rail of the keyboard using a sharp tool, this instrument is scratched 'II', presumably originally having been 'XII'.

The primary argument for considering the two instruments as twins is that their dimensions and basic construction is identical. The bodies are largely spruce or other coniferous, though with oak to the bentsides and tails and mahogany for the main lids. The trestle stands are of stained beech with bolts that are assumed to be identical, the cases are veneered in mahogany panels with 3.5mm sycamore stringing. The spine is 1904mm long without moulding, the moulding adding 7mm to this. Brassware includes strapwork hinges, a lock and clasp at the centre of the keywell flap, jackrail hook, and s-shaped hooks along the bentside. Both spinets are single strung throughout, with 60 notes. However, the RCM spinet has two large satinwood panels framed in mahogany with boxwood or dark fruitwood stringing to the panels above the nameboard in the keywell, whereas the instrument in my collection has a single mahogany panel above the nameboard, framed with sycamore stringing that matches the case panels.

The spinet in my collection, however, has a story to tell. It was found at auction in Suffolk some years ago, having been converted with no sense of its importance as a historical instrument into a desk. The keyboard and action had been removed and discarded. The keywell had been moved back into the case to create a writing desk, the keyboard flap had been discarded and the lid had been reduced in size so as not to impinge onto the writing surface. The nameboard and the mahogany panel to the keywell remained, but had been inverted so that the panel was below the nameboard. The case had, void of its action, been fitted with boxes and wells for files. Remarkably, though, the case, trestle stand, ironwork, and nameboard all remained. The spinet was brought back to life by Jean Maurer, who restored it by duplicating the RCM spinet action and string scaling (these are detailed in the catalogue: Elizabeth Wells, ed., 2000: 60), as well as by using appropriate materials (crow plectra, pig bristle springs, pear jacks, etc). Mahogany was used to restore the main lid and flap, matching to the lid which remained, and the keyboard was taken from a pre-1780 square piano (i.e., which lacked F[#]), with replacement braces.

A small number of spinets survive from the eighteenth century, and those that do tend to have undergone substantial restoration. This is not surprising, given their inherent fragility, their predisposition to woodworm, and the fact that their awkward shape precludes their use as pieces of furniture. The reality, then, is that this instrument, with a recent but carefully considered action, is one of few that can be played without fear of damage, and offers an excellent way to experience the domestic equivalent to a harpsichord.

