Arnold Dolmetsch's "Green Harpsichord" and the Musical Arts and Crafts

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ANDERING THROUGH THE CROWDED GALLERIES of the 1896 Arts and Crafts Exhibition, a visitor would have been surrounded by a vast assortment of objects, the impressive variety of which reflected the progressive and egalitarian aims of the exhibition’s eponymous Society. Here one could find everything from stylized church lecterns carved in wood to decorative panels cast in bronze; from intricately-cut woodblock prints to the giant bold-lined cartoons used to plot the designs for stained-glass windows—in short, all of the trappings of an organization which had for the past eight years dedicated itself to advancing the cause of fine craftsmanship and “ignoring the
artificial distinction between Fine and Decorative art.” But even in the company
of this eclectic gathering, one piece would have stood out as being particularly
remarkable: a large single-manual harpsichord, newly constructed by Arnold
Dolmetsch and decorated by a young artist named Helen Coombe. Sitting on
a low platform at one end of a spacious gallery, it drew attention for its striking
decoration as well as for almost certainly being the first instrument of its kind
to be built in Britain in nearly a century (Figure 1). Measuring over eight feet in length, the harpsichord’s case had been treated
on the outside with nothing more than a plain coat of green lacquer, a decora­tive
decision forced by the need to have the instrument ready by the opening
of the exhibition. By contrast, the instrument’s interior was richly illuminated.
A glance inside the case revealed a meticulously decorated soundboard embe­l­lished with gracefully flowing ribbons entwining bundles of colorful fritillaries,
their checkerboard variegation delicately highlighted with lustrous silver paint.
Nearby, on the sinuous strip of soundboard lying between the harpsichord’s
bridge and its bentside, a continuous line of music had been carefully painted

An earlier version of this article appeared as a chapter in my PhD dissertation, “Revival and Antiquation: Modernism’s Musical Pasts” (University of California, Santa Barbara, 2011). I wish to thank Derek Katz and Stefanie Tcharos for their guidance during the early phases of this project. I am also indebted to Mimi Waitzman for her support and advice on this project, as well as for providing me with the opportunity to examine the Green Harpsichord. The instrument is part of the Horniman Museum’s Dolmetsch Collection (inventory no. M72-1983), acquired in 1983 as part of a collection of 131 instruments previously owned by the Dolmetsch family.

3 According to Edward Kottick, the last historical harpsichord built in England was likely constructed by the Kirkman firm in 1800. While Dolmetsch’s instrument marked the return of harpsichord making in England, the revival had started somewhat earlier in France, where harpsichords by several makers were exhibited at the 1889 Exposition Universelle. See Edward L. Kottick, *A History of the Harpsichord* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 405 and 409ff.
4 The instrument measures 2459 mm along the spine and 977 mm wide at the keyboard, making it larger than most two-manual historical harpsichords. For more measurements, see http://www.horniman.ac.uk/collections/browse-our-collections/object/13483/.
5 This distinctive flower (*Fritillaria meleagris*) also goes by the names “checkered lily,” “snake’s head fritillary,” and “guinea-hen flower.” It is native to northern Europe and the British Isles, and has been cultivated in England since Elizabethan times.

Figure 2 Detail of soundboard painting of the Green Harpsichord showing fritillaries and music. (Photographs by the author; reproduced by kind permission of the Horniman Museum and Gardens.)
much of the preceding decade, the Green Harpsichord marked a significant
turning point in his career. Just as its construction represented a new beginning
for harpsichord building in Britain, its appearance at the 1896 Arts and Crafts
Exhibition represented Dolmetsch’s formal debut into a wider cultural sphere.
Indeed, the instrument had been built during a period when Dolmetsch was
closely acquainted with William Morris, and its design and appearance reflect
the influence of this artist and intellectual who had been so central to the re-
invigoration of the decorative arts during the last quarter of the nineteenth
century. While the mutual admiration between Dolmetsch and Morris is well
known, we have only scant documentary evidence to provide details about his
engagement with the larger Arts and Crafts movement. I would suggest that in
its design and decoration, the Green Harpsichord tells part of this story, and in
this article I draw on both documentary and organological evidence to unpack
the relationship between a pioneer of the early music revival and one of the most
influential artistic movements of the late nineteenth century.

Arnold Dolmetsch in the 1880s and 1890s

Born in Le Mans, France in 1858, Dolmetsch hardly seems to have been prede-
tined for the role of an arch-evangelist of early music. While family lore main-
tains that his paternal grandfather was a great lover of both the clavichord and of J. S.
Bach (at a time when neither would have been fashionable), the young Arnold’s
life, while steeped in music, was very much in keeping with the fashions of the
late nineteenth century. As a child his musical education began with studying the
violin, and at the age of fourteen he left the local lycée in order to apprentice at his
family’s piano firm, experiences which provided him with extensive exposure to
the two dominant instruments of the era. At the age of 19, Dolmetsch abruptly
left Le Mans with a young widow named Marie Morel, eventually marrying
her at St. George’s Hanover Square in London on May 28, 1878, shortly after
the birth of their daughter, Hélène. The following year saw a rapid succession
of moves that brought the Dolmetsches as far as Louisville, Kentucky (where
Arnold did a brief stint as a piano tuner), before the young family eventually
settled in Brussels. There he began private lessons with the preeminent violinist

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6 This brief account of Arnold Dolmetsch’s early life is based on two major biographical sources. The first, published in 1958, was written by his third wife, Mabel Johnston Dolmetsch. A second biography was published in 1975 by Margaret Campbell. Where there are discrepancies of date between the two, I have adopted Campbell’s chronology, which generally appears to be the more accurate of the two. See Mabel Dolmetsch, Personal Recollections of Arnold Dolmetsch (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958) and Margaret Campbell, Dolmetsch: The Man and His Work (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975).

7 Dolmetsch also studied organ building with his grandfather, whose workshop was next door: see Arnold Dolmetsch, Dolmetsch and His Instruments (Hastlemere: Dolmetsch, 1929), 2.
Henri Vieuxtemps and subsequently enrolled as a full-time student at the city's prestigious Conservatoire. Four years later Dolmetsch moved his family once again, this time to London where he became a student at the newly opened Royal College of Music, continuing to pursue his studies on the violin. It was during this period that he made the acquaintance of the conservatory's founding director, Sir George Grove, perhaps his most prominent supporter within the British musical establishment. It was Grove who, upon the completion of Dolmetsch's degree in 1884, helped him to acquire a part-time job teaching violin at Dulwich College, a private primary and secondary school in southeast London.

While there is evidence to suggest that Dolmetsch's interest in old instruments may have been initially piqued during his time studying in Brussels, it was only during his tenure at Dulwich (where he was promoted to the position of Assistant Violin Master in 1887) that he would begin to be actively involved in the revival of early instruments and repertoires. Following the success of several concerts in which his students performed music from the English Renaissance, Dolmetsch gradually began to obtain a reputation as a devotee of "old music." This local renown helped him find a publisher for a two-volume performance edition of Corelli Sonatas in 1888, followed two years later by a set of six Handel violin sonatas. But despite these successes, Dolmetsch spent the 1880s working largely in isolation, a relatively minor musician operating on the fringes of London's musical scene (both in a figurative and, given his location in remote Dulwich, a literal sense).10

The 1890s were a transformative period for Dolmetsch. The decade saw a flurry of dramatic changes to both his personal and professional life: by the turn of the twentieth century he had a new wife (Elodie, not long divorced from his older brother), a new base of operation in central London, and, above all, a new milieu that he shared with some of London's most prominent cultural figures. This rapid ascent began when Dolmetsch was engaged by the composer Sir Frederick Bridge (his former harmony teacher at the RCM), to perform the musical examples for a prominent series of lectures at Gresham College in November 1890.11 The success of these lectures provided Dolmetsch with the confidence to rent a large concert hall in central London for his first major musical production. This concert, held before a sold-out audience on April 27, 1891 at the Princes Hall in Piccadilly, did much to cement Dolmetsch's reputation as an expert on early music and the instruments we now associate with it.12

It was also during this time that Dolmetsch made the acquaintance of Herbert Horne, an architect and writer who would prove to be a valuable connection and entry point into the group of artists and intellectuals at the center of the British Arts and Crafts movement.13 Horne, along with Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo and Selwyn Image, was a founder of the Century Guild of Artists, a loose consortium of craftsmen that had formed in 1883, preceding the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society by four years. The Guild is perhaps best remembered now for its elegant quarterly magazine, The Century Guild Hobby Horse.14

Beginning with a concert held on December 19, 1891, Horne allowed Dolmetsch to use the Century Guild's headquarters at 20 Fitzroy Street in Bloomsbury as a venue for his early music events, providing a location that was much more convenient for London concert-goers than Dolmetsch's residence in Dulwich.15 In addition, Horne invited Dolmetsch to contribute to the Hobby Horse, resulting in a lengthy and erudite article on the history of the viol that appeared in 1893.16 Moreover, his growing profile and his work with the Century Guild continued to

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8 According to Campbell, Dolmetsch attended a "Concert Historique" on December 23, 1879, during which the French cellist Auguste Tolbecque performed on a viola da gamba. This was likely Dolmetsch's first significant exposure to performance on a period instrument. (Campbell, Dolmetsch: the Man and His Work, 9–10.)


10 Dulwich is a suburban district six miles south of Charing Cross and relatively far from London's cultural centers.


12 Margaret Campbell provides a detailed account of the program in Dolmetsch: the Man and His Work, 36–38.


14 The Century Guild Hobby Horse was published from 1884 to 1892. It was briefly continued in 1893, with title truncated to The Hobby Horse, and published by Horne independently of the Guild.

15 Dolmetsch gave six concerts at 20 Fitzroy Street between December 1891 and May 1892. See Fletcher, "Herbert Horne: The Earlier Phase," 141.

16 Arnold Dolmetsch, "The Consort of Viols, the Viol d'Amore, the Lyra Viol, and the Viola da Gamba," The Hobby Horse 2 (1893): 51–63. While Dolmetsch's article was a departure for the normally art-focused periodical, the previous issue had featured an article by A. J. Hipkins on the depiction of angelic instruments in early Italian paintings in the National Gallery.
open new doors for Dolmetsch: the following years would find him performing and lecturing at functions sponsored by the Art Workers’ Guild, the Society of Arts, the Royal Institution, the Royal Academy, and even the Huguenot Society of London.

In addition to his increasingly busy performance schedule, Dolmetsch was beginning to take the instrument-making skills he had learned as a young man and apply them to both the restoration of historic instruments and the construction of new ones. After building a lute in 1893, the following year he began an ambitious project which resulted in the construction of four clavichords based on mid-eighteenth-century instrument by the German maker J. A. Hass. The first of these instruments was sold to the music critic and scholar John Alexander Fuller-Maitland, who was then editing the first modern edition of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book. The second of Dolmetsch’s clavichords was purchased by his alma mater, the Royal College of Music, while the third was acquired by Herbert Horne. The impact of these little instruments far exceeded the modest reach of their quiet tones. Indeed, a chance encounter with the Royal College of Music’s new instrument prompted a rapturous review from George Bernard Shaw:

Mr. Dolmetsch ... has actually turned out a little masterpiece, excellent as a musical instrument and pleasant to look at, which seems to me likely to begin such a revolution in domestic instruments as William Morris’s work made in domestic furniture and decoration, or Philip Webb’s in domestic architecture. I therefore estimate the birth of this little clavichord as, on a modern computation, about forty thousand times as important as the Handel Festival.

Coming as it did in 1894, Shaw’s hyperbolic claim was rather prescient. In the late nineteenth century, early music was almost exclusively heard in arrangements for modern instruments, and often performed by vast ensembles like those at the Handel Festival, where oratorios were routinely sung by choirs numbering in the thousands. While the suggestion that a quiet little clavichord might be “about forty thousand times as important” as one of Victorian England’s preeminent musical events must have struck many contemporary readers as little more than a playful quip, it points to the radical shift in performance practice that early music performers would adopt in the decades ahead. Just as unlikely was Shaw’s comparison of Arnold Dolmetsch to William Morris and Philip Webb, both of whom were significantly more prominent in their respective fields than Dolmetsch was in music. The comparison, however, was insightful, as it pointed toward the common interest all three figures had in reinventing the way modern society engaged with the past.

The Arts and Crafts Movement

Perhaps uniquely among major artistic movements of its time, the Arts and Crafts had a strong moral and intellectual underpinning. The movement had its formal start with the foundation of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1887. The society, initially led by Walter Crane and later by William Morris, sought not only to reform contemporary attitudes toward art and design, but also to transform the way goods were crafted in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. As art historian Gillian Naylor explains, the Arts and Crafts movement was inspired by a crisis of conscience. Its motivations were social and moral, and its aesthetic values derived from the conviction that society produces the art and architecture it deserves. It was originally a British movement; Britain, the first to discover that factory conditions are far from ideal, and the realization that technical progress does not necessarily coincide with the


18 The Fuller-Maitland clavichord is now in the Bate Collection of musical instruments at Oxford University; the Royal College of Music clavichord is still owned by the College and is now on display in their museum; and the Herbert Horne clavichord, with a lid painting by the artist himself, is in the collection of the Museo degli Strumenti Musicali in Milan.

19 Originally published on July 4, 1894 in the World and reprinted in George Bernard Shaw, Music in London (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1932), 3:237–58. Shaw’s suggestion that Royal College of Music students commissioned Dolmetsch to make the instrument does not appear to be completely accurate; documentary evidence suggests that Dolmetsch may have approached the college first about the possibility of commissioning such an instrument. See Nex and Whitehead, “Six Early Clavichords,” 279.

20 The first Handel Festival was held on the centenary of the composer’s death in 1859 and continued on a triennial basis for decades afterward. According to Grove Music Online, “by the 1880s this [festival] had a choir of 4000 and orchestra of about 450, with audiences of around 86,000 over four days.” See Temperley et al., “London (I),” Grove Music Online, accessed June 15, 2017, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/16904pg6.

21 Reflecting on one of the aims of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society at the time of its founding in 1888, Walter Crane wrote, “We desired first of all to give opportunity to the designer and craftsman to exhibit their work to the public for its artistic interest and thus to assert the claims of decorative art and handicraft to attention equally with the painter of easel pictures, hitherto almost exclusively associated with the term art in the public mind.” (Ideals in Art: Papers Theoretical, Practical, Critical [London: George Bell & Sons, 1905], 22.)
improvement of man's lot, brought with it the long campaign for social, industrial, moral and aesthetic reform that is still unresolved today.\(^{22}\)

This concern with the welfare of the common worker, along with a welcoming attitude toward any artist or crafts-person who was interested in exhibiting their work with the society, distinguished the Arts and Crafts from contemporary movements that were more insular in their membership and focused primarily on promoting a common aesthetic goal or a particular set of artistic techniques.\(^{23}\)

In many ways the Arts and Crafts movement was a peculiarly Janus-faced affair. While it embraced the past—rejecting the teleological narrative of technical innovation that was central to much of the nineteenth-century European worldview—it simultaneously promoted itself as producing works of art that were not only befitting of the present, but might help society move toward a better future.\(^{24}\) Like Impressionism and Symbolism, the Arts and Crafts movement can be seen both as a precursor to modernism and also as a pivot point between the representational aesthetics of the past and the experimental formalism that we typically associate with the first decades of the twentieth century. One only needs to glance at the famous prints produced by Morris & Company to see how motifs inspired by the past were transformed into formally innovative tessellations that, taken as a whole, can verge on abstraction.

**The Green Harpsichord**

In its early years, the Arts and Crafts movement had little involvement with music. For his part, Morris disliked much contemporary music—Wagner above all else—and it was not immediately clear what role a performative art might play in an organization that was so focused on the production of tangible objects.\(^{25}\)

In many ways, Arnold Dolmetsch was the ideal musician for such a group. On the one hand, he was a skilled craftsman who was dedicated to creating beautiful objects using age-old techniques, providing him a strong connection with the other members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. On the other, the early music he performed was both novel to nineteenth-century audiences and particularly compatible with the high value the Arts and Crafts movement placed on history and heritage. As historian Peter Stansky notes:

> The growing interest in English music of earlier times was part of the same impetus from which the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings arose, and of the historicism of the period, a growing interest in “roots,” and in approaching the development of society in a more respectful way, without the profound conviction that the world as it is, rather than as it was, bound to be superior.\(^{26}\)

Curiously, Arnold Dolmetsch does not seem to have ever written specifically about his own involvement with the Arts and Crafts movement, despite his extensive engagement with figures central to it throughout much of the 1890s. His published writings from this time are limited, however, and the few essays he did publish, including the 1893 *Hobby Horse* article, are tightly focused on whatever topic he was addressing at the time.\(^{27}\) I would suggest, however, that the Green Harpsichord itself might be read as a statement on the way music might be integrated into the Arts and Crafts movement.

The initial impetus for building the instrument is not entirely clear. Up to this time Dolmetsch had restored antique harpsichords, but he had never built one from scratch. His previous efforts in building newly-constructed “old” instruments had been limited to instruments that were considerable simpler in design than a large harpsichord. Many books and articles have credited William Morris

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22 It should be acknowledged that the egalitarian aims of the Arts and Crafts were not always successfully realized. While Morris and his colleagues were genuinely committed to improving the living conditions of the modern worker, many of the hand-crafted products celebrated by the movement—from fine wood furniture to limited-edition books—were well beyond the means of the average working-class family.

23 For more on this, see Lionel Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsmen: The Arts and Crafts Movement from the Cotswolds to Chicago* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1980).

24 In a dyspeptic letter to an acquaintance who had provided him with a translation of the libretto to *Die Walküre*, Morris responded, "I look upon it as nothing short of desecration to bring such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gaieties of opera: the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art. The idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express! Excuse my heat: but I wish to see Wagner uprooted, however clever he may be, and I don't doubt he is: but he is anti-artistic, don't it?" Quoted in J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London: Longman Green & Co., 1899), 299–300. For more on Morris and music, see Andrés Heywood, “William Morris and Music: Craftsman’s Art?” *Musical Times* 139, no. 1864 (Autumn 1998): 33–38.


26 Compared with Wanda Landowska, another prominent pioneer in the early music revival who tended to make broad statements about the role of early music and her rationale for playing it, Dolmetsch seems to have been inclined, at least in print, to concentrate on practical aspects of period performance practice. Even in his book, *The Interpretation of the Music of the XVII and XVIII Centuries Revealed by Contemporary Evidence* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1915), Dolmetsch is much more concerned with issues like correct ornamentation and the proper realization of a figured bass than in discussing the larger implications of performing early music in a modern age (which, for Dolmetsch, may not have seemed to require explanation or justification).
himself with first suggesting the harpsichord project to Dolmetsch, though no contemporary sources seem to confirm this connection. Regardless of whether Morris had made the initial suggestion for the Green Harpsichord, he certainly took an interest in its construction, and there is good reason to believe that the instrument was designed as a sort of tribute to both the man and to his artistic ideals. As Dolmetsch would recall decades later:

In 1896 I planned a Harpsichord on new lines. It was intended to play the Thorough Bass in Bach’s St. Matthew Passion and to accompany the Recitatives of Mozart’s Operas at Covent Garden. ... William Morris, then sickening for death, took a lively interest in this Harpsichord and would be informed of my plans and progress. His hope of seeing it finished was, alas! frustrated. Feeling the end approaching, he sent for me and a virginal, desiring to hear once more the Old English tunes he loved so well. He died before the opening of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition of 1896. My Harpsichord was well received there, but, how I wished Morris had seen it! How I missed the appreciation and criticisms of this great master and inspirer!29

The story of Dolmetsch rushing across London with a virginal in order to play Elizabethan music for the dying William Morris seems an unlikely coda to the life of a man who had for many years avoided music completely, but it suggests how close Dolmetsch and Morris had become in the few years since their first acquaintance.29

The design and decoration of the Green Harpsichord not only reflected Morris’s influence on Dolmetsch, but also point to a broader engagement with the ideals and aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts movement. While the exterior of the instrument was never completed, months of laborious work went into painting the instrument’s soundboard, the underside of its lid, and the area surrounding its keyboard.30 The pressure to finish the instrument in time for the exhibition was enough to compel Coombe to temporarily move in with the Dolmetsch family—now living in a house at 6 Keppel Street, Bloomsbury—in order to have as much time as possible to work on the instrument. During the time she was working on the Green Harpsichord, Coombe was at the beginning of her relationship with the painter and art historian Roger Fry, later to become her husband.31 In a letter to Fry that summer, she writes:

I stayed at Dolmetch’s. He tries to keep me prisoner until the harpsichord is finished, in the manner of the Italian Popes (there was a French Pope, you know) and I am only let out by the hour: however, I ran away yesterday while they gave the concert at Ham House.... Besides that, although it is charming to sit on the leads of Keppel Street while Dolmetsch serenades us—I weary a little of the many intricacies of Melodie’s estomac—it’s really as complicated and perverse as my own temperament. D[olmetsch] comes tonight and I’m not finished.30

While Coombe executed the bulk of the work on the instrument, it is clear that the designs were a collaborative effort. In subsequent correspondence with Fry she expresses anxiety about finding a model for the flowers used as a motif on the soundboard.30 Indeed, a very particular flower had been chosen for the design: the snake’s head fritillary, Fritillaria meleagris. The choice of the fritillary may well have had special significance: it was a favorite flower of William Morris, and it seems plausible that its inclusion on the instrument was either done at his request or as a subtle tribute. Morris’s particular fondness for the flower is noted in the first biography to be dedicated to his life, published just after his death, in which his biography, Aymer Vallance, wrote that “he made frequent use of the fritillary—or snake’s head, as it is popularly called—whose chequered, purplish head is one of the characteristic sights in the grass-fields of the riverside, particularly at Iffley, where it may be seen nodding in profusion in the late spring.”34 Fry also seems to have had some input into the instrument’s design:

Arnold Dolmetsch, Dolmetsch and His Instruments (Haslemere, Surrey: Arnold Dolmetsch, 1930), 3.


In their article on the use of tempera paint on keyboard instruments, Ann and Peter MacTaggart question the exact nature of the paint used to decorate the harpsichord: “It is perhaps significant that the Green Harpsichord, made in 1896 by Arnold Dolmetsch, was described as being painted in tempera and that in her personal recollections of Arnold Dolmetsch (1957) Mabel Dolmetsch refers to decorating soundboards in tempera for her husband (pp. 136–37). In fact she may have meant a medium which could have been more appropriately called glair, because in a private communication with the authors, Elizabeth Goble relates how she was taught to prepare paints with egg white, but also recalls that Mrs. Dolmetsch occasionally used whole egg as well.” See Ann MacTaggart and Peter MacTaggart, “Tempera and Decorated Keyboard Instrument,” Gulphin Society Journal 32 (May 1979): 50.

Fry’s involvement with the Bloomsbury group is chronicled by Virginia Woolf in Roger Fry: A Biography (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1940). As an art historian, Fry is perhaps best remembered for his early championing of Paul Cézanne and Post-Impressionism.

Quoted in Campbell, Dolmetsch: The Man and His Work, 101. “Melodie” is the Anglicized name sometimes used by Dolmetsch’s second wife, Elodie.

Worrying that the flower might be out of season, she tells Fry that she may need to consult botanical reference works at the British library. Letter quoted in Nancy L. Green, “From Little Holland House to Charleston: Bloomsbury’s Victorian Inheritance,” in A Room of Their Own: The Bloomsbury Artists in American Collections, ed. Nancy E. Green and Christopher Reed (Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2008), 24. Green cites an “undated letter, Helen Coombe to Roger Fry, King’s College Library, Cambridge University, Roger Fry Papers.”

Aymer Vallance, William Morris: His Art, His Writings, and His Public Life (London: George

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Figures 5 and 6: Detail of the descant line of Henry VIII’s “Without dyscord,” as painted on the soundboard of the Green Harpsichord. Note the correction made to the first A in the melody, where a void has been painted in to change the rhythmic value from a semiminim to a minim. (Photographs by the author; reproduced by kind permission of the Horniman Museum and Gardens).

design, as Coombe thanks him in a letter for having provided her with sketches for the medallions on the instrument’s lid.35

Bell and Sons, 1897), 132 33. This sentiment was repeated and elaborated by Arthur Stringer in 1903: “It was the Oxford fritillary, that little, checkered, purplish flower commonly called the snake’s-head, which blooms so beautifully along the Isis, about Iffley, in the late spring, which gave to William Morris one of his favorite flower designs.” Arthur Stringer, “William Morris as I Remember Him,” The Craftsman 4, no. 2 (May 1903): 130.

35 Quoted in Frances Spalding, Roger Fry: Art and Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 58. Original held by King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge as part of the Papers of Roger Eliot Fry.

The most striking element of the instrument’s decoration, however, is the line of music that is painted in Renaissance notation along the curve of the soundboard—a decorative feature that appears to be without precedent in the entire history of harpsichord decoration (Figures 5 and 6). The melody is the complete descant line of “Without Dyscord,” a three-part song attributed to King Henry VIII and preserved in a manuscript in the British Library (BL Add MS 31,922; Figure 7). The copying is meticulous: not a single note or accidental is out of place. The only differences between the manuscript and the painted line on the soundboard are a change in clef and the use of coloration in two minims near the end of the melody.36

36 In the manuscript, the C-clef is placed on the second line from the bottom, while on the soundboard it is moved to the middle line. In addition, two minims near the end of the melody have been painted on the harpsichord as colored (red) semi-minims, possibly a “correction” done at the request of Dolmetsch. While both forms of notation would result in the same rhythmic
While the inscription of a Renaissance vocal work on a harpsichord soundboard may seem an odd choice, the selection of "Withowt Dyscord" may have been chosen specifically for its connection with a publishing project that Morris and Dolmetsch had hoped to undertake together. As early as December 1893, Morris and Dolmetsch, along with the artist Edward Burne-Jones, had been in discussions about publishing a collection of old English songs. In an undated letter to Dolmetsch, Burne-Jones wrote, "I [am] excited about that British Museum MS you told me of, of the 300 ancient songs, and on Sunday morning, when Mr. Morris came to me I fired him up on the subject too, and now I want us, if possible to meet, we three, so as to take counsel together, how such a godsend can be best used.... If you edited the book, and he printed it, we should all have a blissful old age amongst us." By March 1894, word of the project had become public, with the *Musical Times* noting it in a review of one of Dolmetsch’s recitals.

The collection was to be published by the Kelmscott Press using works drawn from two British Library manuscripts: BL Add MS 31,922, the source of "Withowt Dyscord," and the "Ritson Manuscript," BL Add MS 5,665. Owned by Morris and named after his country house, the Kelmscott Press specialized in producing books featuring fine engravings, elegant typefaces, and handcrafted bindings. While the press had previously produced editions of historical literary works, including Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Thomas More’s *Utopia*, the planned volume of old English songs would have represented Kelmscott’s first foray into music publishing. While significant preparations seem to have been made, Morris’s death on October 3, 1896—the day before the Arts and Crafts exhibition was to open—effectively ended the project.

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KEYBOARD PERSPECTIVES X

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The 1896 Arts and Crafts Society Exhibition

When the Arts and Crafts Society Exhibition opened to the public on October 7, the Green Harpsichord was a featured attraction. The exhibition’s program included a special note informing visitors that “from time to time the Harpsichord (exhibit No. 178) will be played upon to exhibit its tone. Due notice will be given in the Gallery.” In addition to these occasional demonstrations, a full-length lecture-recital was held in the gallery on the evening of October 29, during which Dolmetsch explained the mechanism of the instrument and provided musical illustrations. When *The Studio* published a lengthy review of the exhibition the following winter, they singled out the instrument for particular praise:

One of the most deservedly popular items in the whole show was the harpsichord, designed by Arnold Dolmetsch, assisted by W. Nearn. At certain times—when its maker or Miss Dolmetsch played some old world sinfonia or suite—it was impossible to get near enough to hear, much less see it. For the dainty music of the plucked string is only remotely allied to the struck tri-chord of its descendant, the modern grand pianoforte.... Of stained green wood, with charming decorations painted by Helen Coombe, it was a singularly beautiful and graceful object. For complete re-infusion of an older spirit into modern work, this delightful instrument is absolutely perfect of its class. Refinement of design is fitly mated with refinement of sound. It has caught the fragrance of a simpler age when art was not so much sought after, because it was unconsciously present the while; and it is this rare gift of reproducing an obsolete thing, unaffectedly and sincerely, which ranks Mr. Dolmetsch’s work quite above many other items, which have found the source of their inspiration in not dissimilar fashion.

In declaring the instrument to be a “complete re-infusion of an older spirit into modern work,” the anonymous reviewer praised it in terms that reflected a major goal of the Arts and Crafts movement.

In fact, when designing his harpsichord, Dolmetsch had incorporated several innovative features. Following the conclusion of the exhibition, Dolmetsch used the Green Harpsichord as one of his primary performance instruments, hauling it around London for use in his lecture-recitals and concerts. At a lecture given...
before the Society of Arts in December 1896 (only a week after the instrument had been removed from display at the New Gallery), Dolmetsch brought along both a 1758 Kirckman double and the Green Harpsichord. Comparing the two instruments, he states:

The Kirckman is a beautiful instrument with two keyboards, five stops, combination and swell pedals, capable of producing many varieties of tone and instantaneous changes of stops. My new harpsichord possesses only two varieties of tone; but, by a contrivance of my invention, its tone can be increased or diminished at pleasure, not by putting stops on and off but in the same quality of tone; just as the harp player can pluck his strings with more or less power. It possesses a greater volume of tone than the old harpsichord, which renders it fit to accompany the recitations of such works as Bach’s “Passion,” when performed in a large hall.  

Dolmetsch’s introduction of a mechanism to expressively vary the instrument’s dynamics reflects his willingness to experiment with features not found on historical models. Because the mechanism of the Green Harpsichord was extensively rebuilt by Dolmetsch in the late 1920s, many details of its original action are unknown.  

A clue about Dolmetsch’s special “contrivance,” however, can be found in the photos taken by Emery Walker while the instrument was at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition. A slender knee lever can be spotted descending from below the right side of the keyboard and it seems likely that the player could use this device to continuously vary the depth with which the plectra plucked the strings.  

The Green Harpsichord also featured a transposable keyboard, a feature common on many twentieth-century instruments, but a significant novelty for its time. As Dolmetsch explained to his audience, “I may tell you in connection with my new harpsichord, for it is especially intended for accompaniments and orchestral purposes, and as the pitch is now rather variable—a great many people using the French pitch, and many still using the English pitch, whilst I have a pitch of my own, a semitone below the French—I have made this instrument so that it can be transposed to any one of those three pitches.”

The instrument’s volume also seems to have been a matter of special concern for Dolmetsch, and is perhaps the reason for the unusual soundboard configuration, with a secondary bridge and soundboard located between the jacks and the tuning pins (Figure 8). In the year following its completion, Dolmetsch used the Green Harpsichord to play continuo at Covent Garden for performances of

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44 Dolmetsch’s lecture, “The Chamber Music of Purcell, Handel, and Bach,” was presented on December 16, 1896 at the fifth Society of Arts meeting of the year, held at the Society’s house in the Adams brothers’ Adelphi development just off the Strand. The text of the lecture was reprinted in the Journal of the Society of Arts 45, no. 2300 (December 18, 1896): 77–80.

45 According to Howard Schott, the instrument originally had “only a single set of 8’ strings and a buff stop.” (“The Harpsichord Revival,” Early Music 2, no. 2 [April 1974]: 85–95.)

46 “The Chamber Music of Purcell, Handel, and Bach,” 79.

Figure 8 The Green Harpsichord in an illustration from the “Studio Talk” section of The Studio 19, no. 85 (April 14, 1900): 193. Note the secondary soundboard located between the jackrail and the tuning pins.
both Don Giovanni and Le nozze di Figaro, and later used it for a production of Henry Purcell’s King Arthur conducted by Hans Richter at the 1897 Birmingham Festival, apparently all with some degree of success. In a June 1898 article in Sketch, the instrument’s audibility is cited as its primary raison d’être: “Not that Mr. Dolmetsch has not added something of his own; but he will be the first to tell you that in making this modern harpsichord he has kept faithfully to the models of the olden time … the immediate cause of its manufacture being the fact that no old harpsichord was of sufficient power to be effective in a large concert-hall. This is the actual instrument which Mr. Dolmetsch has used at the Royal Opera for the past two years, and its effectiveness in that huge building will be fresh in the memory of all lovers of music.”

In combining an age-old mechanism with modern ingenuity and historically inspired decoration with contemporary aesthetic influences, Dolmetsch and Coombe had created an instrument that represented nearly everything the Arts and Crafts movement stood for. It combined an ardent veneration of the past—from the lutes in the keywell painting to the accurately rendered Renaissance notation—with an equally strong desire to innovate and to avoid slavish historical imitation for its own sake. Indeed, the appearance of the instrument at the exhibition seems to have prompted some members of the Arts and Crafts Society to ask whether music might lay claim to a place within their artistic sphere. The same anonymous critic for The Studio who had praised the Green Harpsichord went so far as to claim that “by his enthusiasm in old-time music, Mr. Dolmetsch has annexed a new field of art to the Arts and Crafts.”

The question of what “Arts and Crafts music” might actually sound like is the focus of a peculiar article published a few months later in the July 1897 issue of The Studio. The article is presented in the form of a heated discussion between several pseudonymous figures on the topic of “decorative music.” It is worth quoting here at length:

“Decorative music!” said the Lay Figure musingly. “I rather distrust that phrase; it is pretty, but like ‘impressionist architecture,’ one wonders if there is anything behind the title.”

“Yes, I think there is such a thing, although few modern composers have recognized it,” said the Enthusiast.

“Do you mean to imply that Wagner’s music is not decorative?” said the Decadent with a drawl. “I thought even the most artless art-craftsman today found inspiration in Wagner. I am sure I read some such statement lately.”

“I think,” said the Enthusiastic Amateur who had launched the phrase “decorative music” among a crowd of designers and writers, “I think what I mean is that we might go back in music to the earliest flowering of art, and develop it anew, much as we have gone back to the simplicity of early stained glass and Italian sculpture of the Donatello period, and to Cimabue, Giotto, Dürrer and the rest, instead of trying to carry farther the efforts of Brahms and Wagner.”

Eventually the conversation turns to Dolmetsch:

“The pieces of music he has revived are splendid examples on which I base my theory,” said the Enthusiast. “I think Dolmetsch has really done for music what the Century Guild did for decoration; that is, he has brought to light forgotten works of art, and set them forth daintily and delightfully. A sympathetic few will before long discover a new movement, and ignore his efforts, much as most chroniclers of the present ‘arts and crafts’ movement forget some of its pioneers, especially Messrs. Macmurdo, Selwyn Image, Horne, and the rest of The Hobby Horse men.”

In the end, a possible solution is proposed:

“I want the etching, the Morris cretonne, the Voysey wall paper, and the rest to find their exponents in music.”

“When you ask for it see that you get it,” said the Journalist flippantly. “How would you begin?”

“Possibly by re-introducing the spinet, the harpsichord, viol d’amore, viol de gamba

feature in The Studio. Of the series, Catherine Delyfer writes, “The idea of animating a lay figure and orchestrating dialogues between the main lay figure and the archetypal representatives of various trends in the contemporary art world was in keeping with The Studio’s attempt at giving voice to those decorative artists, craftsmen, designers, and industrial artists who were rarely heard and usually neglected as representatives of ‘low art.’” Catherine Delyfer, “The Studio and the Craftsman as Artist: A Study in Periodical Poetics (1893–1900),” Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens 71 (Spring 2010), accessed October 1, 2017, http://cve.revues.org/3101

“The Lay Figure ‘At Home’ with Music,” The Studio 11 (July 1897): 72.

Ibid.
and the rest,” said the Enthusiast; “and so to re-impose forgotten limitations, as the pioneers of decorative art re-imposed them in confident hope that after a period of imitation antique the new growth would appear without conscious effort as it has in decoration based on precedent, but not slavishly obedient to pedantic rules.”

Epilogue

The mid-1890s marked the point in Arnold Dolmetsch’s life at which he was most engaged with a non-musical milieu that fully embraced his work as a performer, scholar, and instrument builder. At a time when many in the musical establishment were quick to dismiss early music as little more than a curiosity — “archaeological rather than artistic,” as one contemporary music critic wrote — the enthusiastic support Dolmetsch received from the Arts and Crafts community did much to validate his efforts, not only also by providing him with spaces to perform and exhibit, but by promoting an aesthetic ideal that celebrated the past even as it looked toward the future.

Though a few Dolmetsch instruments were exhibited in subsequent Arts and Crafts Exhibitions, and while the Studio continued to champion his work, the partnerships formed in the 1890s did not survive the decade. In 1901, legal trouble led to a declaration of bankruptcy and a consequent sale of many of Dolmetsch’s cherished books and instruments. Among the instruments sold at auction in late October 1901 was the Green Harpsichord, purchased for £89 — the highest price paid for any instrument in the collection. Not long thereafter Dolmetsch resumed his performing career, undertaking ambitious concert tours in the United States, and subsequently spent years in Boston working for Chickering. He later did a stint with Gaveau in Paris before settling in Haslemere, Surrey, where he would remain for the rest of his life. Meanwhile, many of the artists who had been involved in the Arts and Crafts movement moved on to embrace newer artistic trends.

Dolmetsch was able to buy back the Green Harpsichord in the late 1920s, rebuilding it with a new and experimental action that allowed the dynamics to be varied through expressive touch — a natural continuation of the experiments he had begun some thirty year earlier. The instrument’s decorations were left untouched, a reminder of the brief historical moment in the mid-1890s when Arnold Dolmetsch, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Herbert Horne, Helen Coombe, and others embraced a common vision. Contemplating the Green Harpsichord today, we can still catch a fleeting glimpse of a phenomenon that can justly be said to exemplify the “musical arts and crafts.”

A contemporary article describes Dolmetsch’s new harpsichord action: “Someone has jestingly said that if Mr. Arnold Dolmetsch continues his research and experiments upon the harpsichord long enough he will one day evolve the pianoforte. Now Mr. Dolmetsch is not numbered among the most enthusiastic admirers of the piano, and his latest instrument is still more harpsichord than piano, but it does embody among its numerous ‘effects’ two piano-like features. It contains a damper-pedal which does something towards sustaining the tone by sympathetic vibration as in the piano, and one of its ‘stops’ gives almost the impact of a hammer in one of the old sweet-toned square pianos.”

54 Ibid.
55 “Mr. Dolmetsch’s labours as a populariser of old music are worthy of all admiration. But we cannot blind ourselves to the fact that the prime interest of these concerts is archaeological and not artistic, and that the attempt to reproduce the instruments of a bygone age for practical purposes is an anachronism on par with, say, a literary movement in favor of adopting the spelling of Chaucer.” C. L. G., “Music,” The Guardian, January 23, 1895, 24.
56 The auction was held on October 29 and 30, 1901, and a listing of the instruments is included in Catalogue of Musical Instruments, also the Collection of Antique Instruments and Library of Music formed by Mr. Arnold Dolmetsch (London: Puttick & Simpson, 1901). A hand-annotated catalog showing sale prices and buyers is in the collection of the British Library.