

The History of the Piano

A Reading A-Z Level Q Leveled Book
Word Count: 984

Connections

Writing

Complete a Venn diagram that compares two instruments from the book.

Social Studies

Create a timeline showing how the keyboard instruments in the book have changed over time. Include illustrations of the instruments on your timeline.

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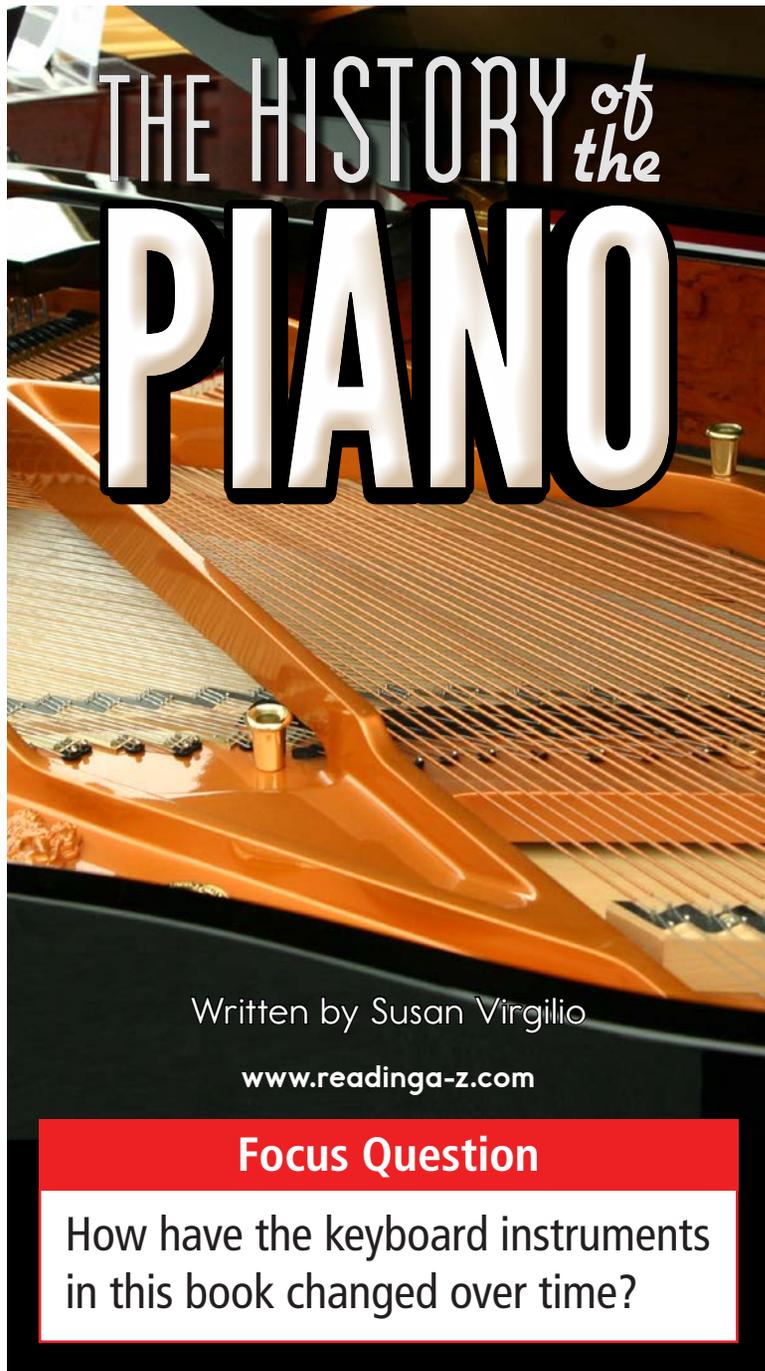
LEVELED BOOK • Q

THE HISTORY *of the* PIANO



Written by Susan Virgilio

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Focus Question

How have the keyboard instruments in this book changed over time?

Words to Know

ancestors	mechanism
attractive	pedals
composer	plucked
digital	project
felt	soundboard
lever	vibrated

Page 3: Steinway is a major manufacturer of high-quality pianos, with factories in New York (shown) and Germany.

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Level Q Leveled Book
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Early Keyboards

The piano is perhaps the world’s best-known musical instrument. Its sound is easy to recognize, no matter what type of music is being played. The piano did not always sound the way it does today, though. In fact, the piano’s **ancestors** had very different sounds.

The first widely used keyboard was the clavichord. This European instrument was first used in the 1400s. As with many other early instruments, its inventor is unknown. It was a long wooden box with wire strings of different lengths stretched inside.

A **soundboard** lay beneath the strings.

The soundboard **vibrated** with the strings and

helped **project** the tones. A clavichord could be 122 to 213 centimeters (4–7 ft.) long. People set it on a table to play it.

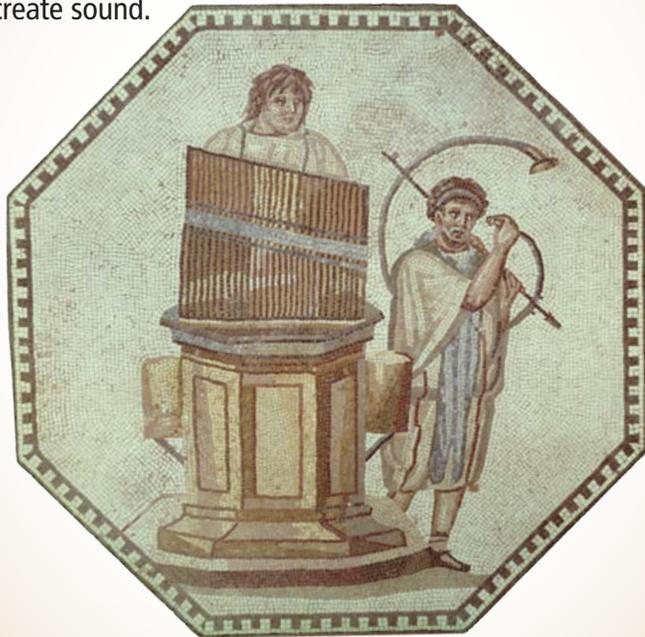


The clavichord was played in fifteenth-century homes.

When a player pressed a key, a tiny brass blade on a wooden **lever** hit a string. This made a tone. How loud the tone was depended on how hard the player pressed the key. Still, because of its design, the clavichord was not very loud. For that reason, people only played the instrument in homes.

Do You Know?

The first known instrument with a keyboard was used by the ancient Greeks. It was called a *hydraulus* (hy-DRAW-luhs). It used water to push air through different-sized pipes to create sound.



A Roman mosaic depicts one man playing the hydraulus (left) and another playing the horn (right).

The harpsichord was first used in the 1500s. It came in different shapes and sizes that looked very much like today's pianos. However, it worked differently from both the clavichord and the piano. When the player pressed a key, a lever with a quill at the end **plucked**—rather than struck—a string. This made it sound more like a harp than a piano.



A harpsichord could have two or even three keyboards.

The harpsichord was the most popular keyboard instrument of its day. It was louder than a clavichord, but it had a problem. Players could not control or change the volume, no matter how hard or soft they pressed the keys.

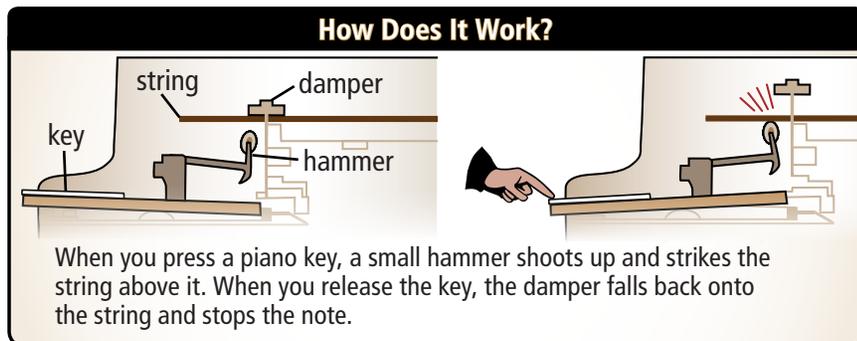
Word Wise

Many instrument names have Greek and Latin roots. The hydraulus got its name from the Greek root word *hydro*, meaning "water." The word *clavichord* comes from the Latin root *clavis*, meaning "key," and *chorda*, meaning "string." Can you figure out where the word *harpsichord* comes from?

The First Modern Piano

Bartolomeo Cristofori (bar-toh-loh-MEH-oh kree-STAW-foh-ree) made keyboard instruments in the early 1700s. He wanted to change the harpsichord so the volume could be controlled. To do this, Cristofori had to make the instrument work more like a clavichord. The strings needed to be hit, not plucked.

Cristofori changed the **mechanism** of the instrument and how it worked. First, he switched from a quill to a hammer. The hammer was covered in leather to create a better sound. When the player pressed a key, the hammer hit the string from below. When the player released the key, another part, called a *damper*, came down to rest on the string. The damper stopped the string from vibrating and ended the note.



This 1720 Cristofori grand piano is the oldest one left in the world.

This design made it possible to hit strings hard or touch them gently. Players could now produce both loud and soft notes. Cristofori called his instrument the *pianoforte*, a name made up of the Italian words for “soft” and “loud.” In time, the name became just *piano*.

Other instrument makers added to Cristofori’s design. One, a German named Silbermann, showed his version of the piano to the famous **composer** Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach had written many pieces for the harpsichord and didn’t think much of Silbermann’s instrument. This made Silbermann so upset that he destroyed it with an ax!

Pianos Everywhere

It took a while for European musicians to accept the piano. In time, though, Bach grew to like the instrument. Other famous composers, such as Haydn and Mozart, wrote many pieces for piano. By the late 1700s, Europeans wanted to hear more piano music.

Changes made to pianos improved their sound in big music halls. The hammers were covered in **felt** instead of leather. The softer felt created a rich, warm tone. Keyboards also grew from fifty-four keys to eighty-eight. Wing-shaped grand pianos became longer and larger to provide space for the added strings. Metal soundboards replaced wooden ones and gave tones a purer sound.



Some songs keep many hammers busy!

Elegance vs. Elephants

Years ago, a person who could play the piano well was said to “tickle the ivories.” That’s because wooden piano keys were once covered in ivory from elephant tusks. As a result, countless elephants died. Today, it is illegal to use ivory. Piano keys are now covered in plastic.



Louis Pratt, shown here in 1955, was a master ivory cutter. His company made ivory piano keys from African elephant tusks.

At first, all pianos were grand pianos. By the nineteenth century, however, pianos were very popular in Europe and North America. To keep up with demand, companies began making smaller, less expensive pianos. More people were then able to buy pianos that fit in their homes.

Women and the Piano

In the nineteenth century, women were encouraged to play the piano. The idea was not to turn them into performers but rather into wives. Women with musical ability were considered refined and charming.

Knowing how to play the piano also made it possible for women to give lessons. Becoming a piano teacher let women earn their own money at a time when such opportunities were limited.



As more and more pianos were sold, people began to play different types of piano music. For example, African Americans sang and played gospel songs on the piano. They also began experimenting with new styles of music. This led to the birth of ragtime, a jazzy form of music written just for the piano.

Famous Pianists

Many world-class pianists have made a name for themselves playing different types, or genres, of music. Some of them are:



Scott Joplin

The son of a railway worker, Joplin was the “King of Ragtime.” His “Maple Leaf Rag,” published in 1899, is the most widely known ragtime hit.



Sergei Rachmaninoff

(syihr-GYAY ruhk-MAH-nyi-nuhf)

The early twentieth-century Russian composer was also an accomplished pianist. He wrote and performed many beautiful classical piano pieces.



Billy Joel

The “Piano Man” made a name for himself starting in the 1970s by writing and performing rock tunes that featured the piano.



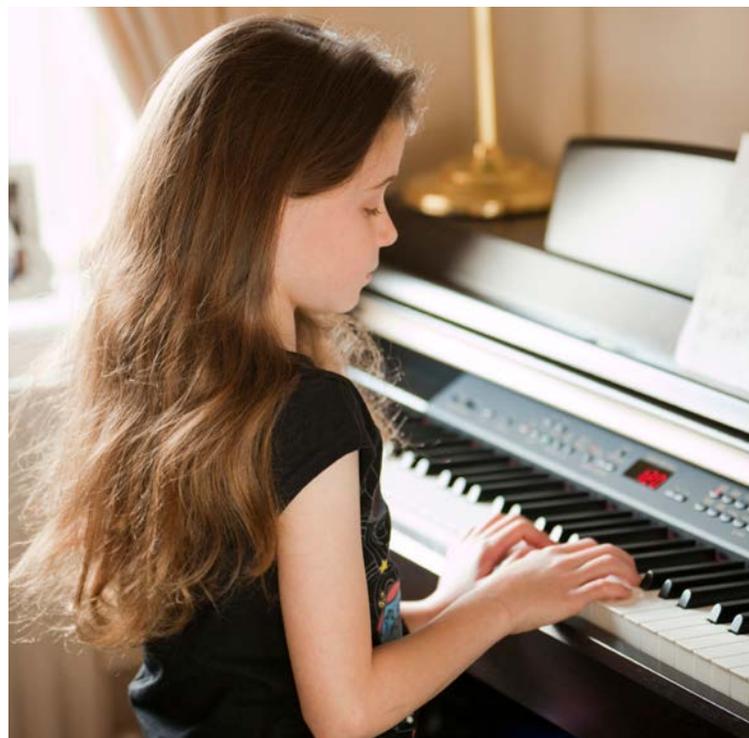
This player piano from the late 1800s is driven by an electric motor.

Modern Versions

When recorded music came along in the early twentieth century, piano sales dropped. People could listen to piano music in their homes without having to own or play a piano.

Piano makers came up with a new way to make pianos more **attractive** to buyers. They built self-playing pianos. These instruments had a mechanical device that was pumped by foot **pedals** at the bottom of the piano. The device held rolls of paper. Holes punched in the paper rolls caused notes on the piano to play by themselves when the pedals were pumped. Anyone could now play the piano—no lessons needed!

Digital versions of self-playing pianos appeared in the 1980s. A person could choose an electronic file, then press a button. The piano keys would move on their own while the music played. These **digital** pianos could also be played like a regular piano. The eighty-eight keys were weighted to feel just like those on a regular piano. A digital piano sounds and feels like a piano but is lighter and cheaper.



Today, many families own electronic, or digital, pianos.



This Australian band includes a digital keyboard player.

By contrast, the keys of digital keyboards are not weighted. The most popular size only has sixty-one keys. However, these keyboards are light, sturdy, and easy to move from place to place. Some traveling bands use them. Many digital keyboards can produce sounds of other instruments, such as a trumpet or flute. Some keyboards can make sound effects, such as a chirping bird, with just the touch of a key.

Cristofori would be amazed at the sounds coming from the newest versions of his invention. Whether it's a digital keyboard or a concert grand, though, the piano remains one of the most popular instruments around.

Glossary

- ancestors** (*n.*) family members from long ago (p. 4)
- attractive** (*adj.*) having a quality that is pleasing or draws someone near (p. 13)
- composer** (*n.*) a person who writes music (p. 8)
- digital** (*adj.*) of or relating to computer technology or electronics (p. 14)
- felt** (*n.*) a firm, soft cloth made by pressing fibers together while applying heat (p. 9)
- lever** (*n.*) a flat bar or handle that can be pressed and is used to operate a machine, instrument, or other device (p. 5)
- mechanism** (*n.*) part of a machine or a system of parts in a machine (p. 7)
- pedals** (*n.*) flat levers that are pushed with the feet to play certain musical instruments (p. 13)
- plucked** (*v.*) picked or pulled at something and let it go (p. 6)
- project** (*v.*) to be or cause to be louder (p. 4)
- soundboard** (*n.*) a thin board in a stringed instrument that is placed beneath the strings to create a louder sound (p. 4)
- vibrated** (*v.*) moved back and forth very quickly (p. 4)