

For a century and a half the piano has been one of the most popular solo instruments for Western music.

Unlike string and wind instruments, the piano is completely self-sufficient, as it is able to play both the melody and its accompanying harmony at the same time.

For this reason, it became the favorite household instrument of the nineteenth century.

The ancestry of the piano can be traced to the early keyboard instruments of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—the spinet, the dulcimer, and the virginal.

In the seventeenth century the organ, the clavichord, and the harpsichord became the chief instruments of the keyboard group, a supremacy they maintained until the piano supplanted them at the end of the eighteenth century.

The clavichord's tone was metallic and never powerful, nevertheless, because of the variety of tone possible to it, many composers found the clavichord a sympathetic instrument for intimate chamber music.

The harpsichord with its bright, vigorous tone was the favorite instrument for supporting the bass of the small orchestra of the period and for concert use but the character of the tone could not be varied save by mechanical or structural devices .

The piano was perfected in the early eighteenth century by a harpsichord maker in Italy (though musicologists point out several previous instances of the instrument).

This instrument was called a piano e forte (soft Mid loud), to indicate its dynamic versatility; its strings were struck by a recoiling hammer with a felt-padded head.

The wires were much heavier in the earlier instruments.

A series of mechanical improvements continuing well into the nineteenth century, including the introduction of pedals to sustain tone or to soften it, the perfection of a metal frame, and steel wire of the finest quality, finally produced an instrument capable of myriad tonal effects from the most delicate harmonies to an almost orchestral fullness of sound, from a liquid, singing tone to sharp, percussive brilliance.