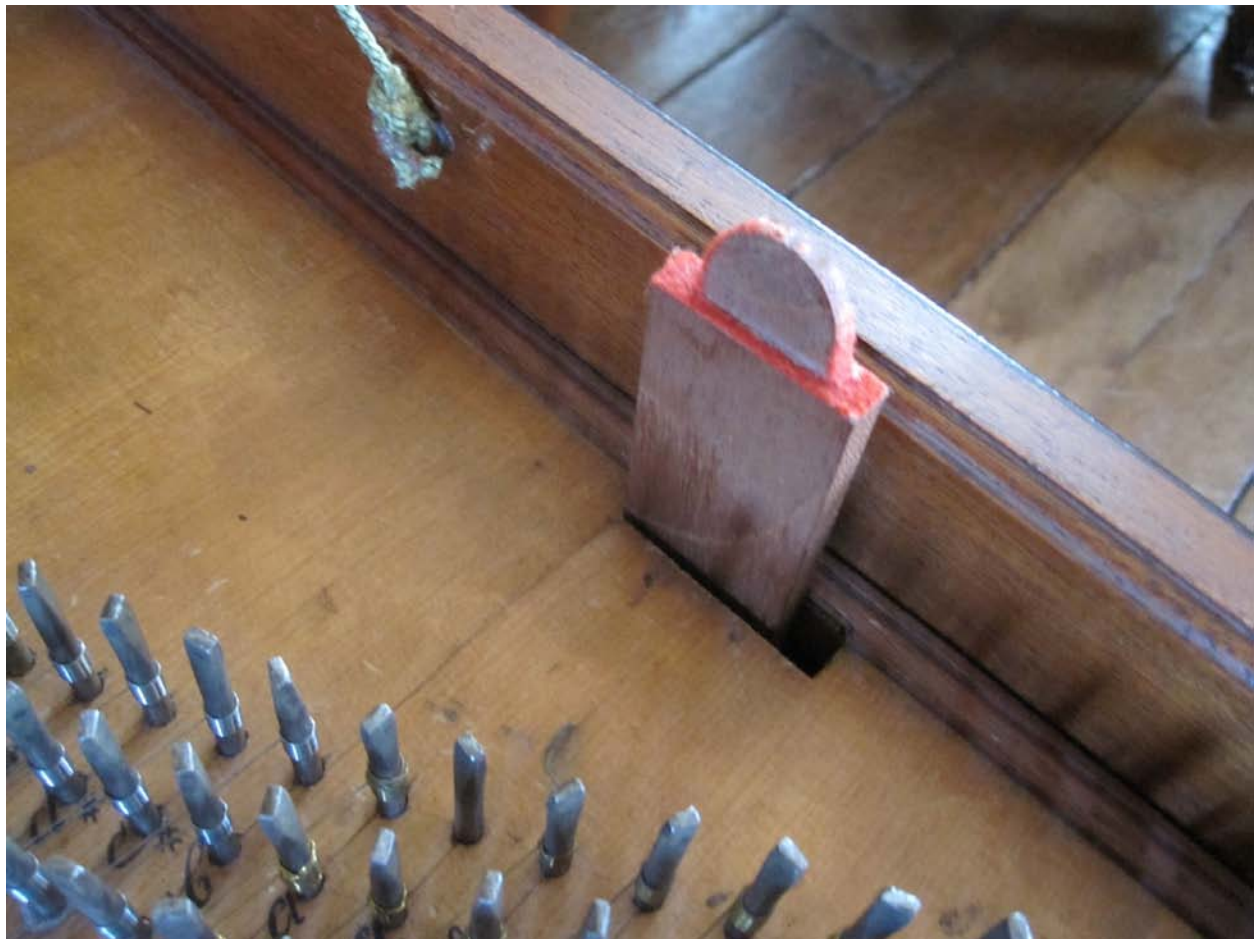


Nag's Head Swell

An intriguing feature of early square pianos was a device known as the swell, or more generally perhaps, nag's head swell. This was a feature that, on depressing a pedal or knee lever, raised the separate lid over the soundboard well and allowed the performer to go from a quite muted *ppp* to a sound more nearly like that of the open lid, or at least up to *mf*. This feature is generally to be found on pianos dating before 1790, and apparently enjoyed a relatively brief vogue, particularly in France and the continent, where colorful sound modifiers were popular.

This device was originated by harpsichord makers, where for instance Kirchman employed it to effect to give any dynamic possibility to the harpsichord, and Burkat Schudi took it to an extreme with his patented Venetian swell, a set of wooden blades like a Venetian blind, which opened and closed over the strings and soundboard.

Adam Beyer made frequent use of this device, and an example from Finchcocks is shown below.





In this particular example, the entire lid is lifted by the robust lift stick, rather than just the small lid flap. This makes closing the lid while playing a real challenge, as it wants to fall back with a heavy “clump!” and is distracting. If the lid flap is closed, as would be needed to give a real dynamic change, it invariably touches down first and adds to the clamor, so my review of this feature was not favorable.

Other examples are infrequently found in Broadwood pianos from the mid 1780s, as in the evidence from an incomplete system on piano SN 200 at the Colt Clavier Collection:



Once reconstructed, we can see how this device was arranged, in another 1784 Broadwood, SN 229, now reconstructed by the author.





Depressing the pedal pulls down the cross arm, and pushes up on a brass rod, covered in this case in a shoe of sole leather, with a little leather collar to limit the return travel. This impinges only on the lid flap, where a rebate around the edge is covered in close spun flannel. This allows the lid flap to close quietly during performance, and the resulting dynamic control is notable and effective, if difficult to use in modern music interpretation.

