



One particular show in 1955 caught my eye recently, and I wanted to share it with you.

Back in the 1950s and '60s, a world class pianist by the name of Liberace had his own television show. It was an extension of his live show that he would perform at clubs and other venues. He controlled the presentation and was able to express to his audience his love for the piano and the music he could play on it. One particular show in 1955 caught my eye recently, and I wanted to share it with you. This episode, which can be viewed at https://archive.org/details/The_Liberace_Show_1955 is about the history of the piano as told by Liberace with some stunning examples. I hope you will take the time to watch him play these beautiful instruments.

He first speaks about the Clavichord, a small keyboard instrument originating in Germany in the 17th century.

It was much smaller than a modern grand piano, and had a triangular or rectangular shape. It created a uniquely metallic sound by using a metal edge to strike a metal string, unlike the modern piano which uses felt covered hammers to strike a metal string.



Moving forward in time, he arrives at the harpsichord. Different than the clavichord, the harpsichord uses a stiff, quill-like structure called a plectrum to pluck metal strings instead of striking them. It was larger than the clavichord, thus producing a louder sound, but was more complex still. Better quality harpsichords contain multiple layers of strings allowing the musician to manipulate tonal quality by deciding how many strings to use per note. They have longer strings which create the base sound and another set of shorter strings for each note tuned an octave higher adding to and boosting the harmonics of the note. Some have two of the lower strings and one higher string per note. Each string set can be turned off or on allowing for greater control of the tone and volume of the instrument, considering volume cannot be controlled by the keys.

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Reaching the more modern piano, Liberace comes to what he calls a “spinet” which is not really a spinet at all, but a large square grand piano. A square grand uses felt or leather covered hammers to strike the strings, but has a very rudimentary repetition mechanism. Following that, he moves on to a more advanced fortepiano from the early and mid 1800s which has a more advanced repetition mechanism than a square grand, uses the same felt hammers, but is in the more iconic piano shape we all know and love. This is the piano that Chopin or Liszt would have played on.

He finishes his presentation with some ragtime on a full size upright. The upright piano is certainly different than the grand and is great for saving space. I especially love the song he plays, “There’ll be no new tunes on this old piano of mine!”