

Calendar

Feel the Pluck

Thomas Jefferson's Music

While Thomas Jefferson was our ambassador to France, he discovered ice cream and brought the recipe back home. He also brought a harpsichord.

Drafter of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, third U.S. President — architect, lawyer, inventor — he could claim yet another accomplishment. He influenced the style and performance of music in early America.

Some of the first European compositions that Americans ever heard were a result of the cultural exchange he fostered. An insatiable reader and book

collector, he also amassed a collection of important (and now extremely rare) printed

music of all kinds.

"There are thousands and thousands of items," says award-winning harpsichordist Jennifer Paul, who has created a concert program from these treasures. "Orchestral music, violin music, operas, lessons. Pieces by Vivaldi, Corelli, Handel. Drinking songs!"

When Jefferson went to Paris, he took his two daughters with him, and both began harpsichord lessons there. His wife learned to play, too. "So although he didn't play, he made sure every important woman in his life did. Jefferson played violin. He also sang. And he tuned the family harpsichord. He regretted later in life that he hadn't learned to play it. But I think he was busy with a few other things."

Like many harpsichordists, Paul played piano first — for 17 years. Then, in graduate school, she switched. "It was just one of those strange things. It was like everything I had done up to that point had led to it." Still, she spent seven years mastering it.

Piano and harpsichord may

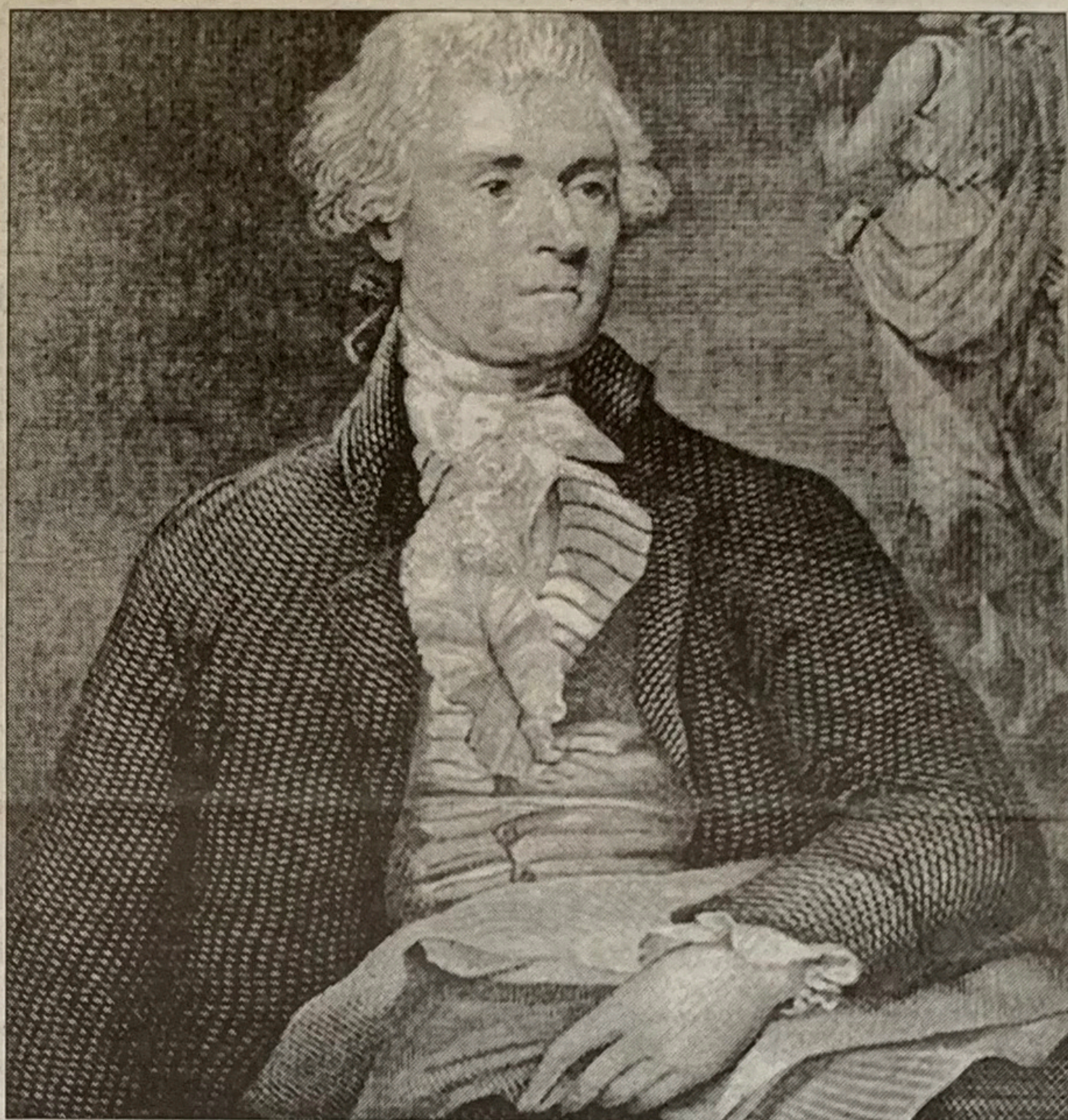
resemble one another — both have strings and keyboards — but, says Paul, they're "totally different animals." Piano hammers hit strings; a harpsichord's plectrums pluck them to make those distinctively bright, sharp sounds. "When you push down a harpsichord key, you actually feel the pluck. It's almost electrical, as if you might produce sparks."

After her concerts, Paul invites audience members to experience the sensation. They may also discover how sensitive the instrument is. "When you play piano, you use your upper body muscles, back muscles, and the weight of your arms. You don't do any of that with a harpsichord. It's up to your fingers to translate the music you're trying to express." It's easier to depress a harpsichord key than a piano key, but also easier to make mistakes. "Sometimes I play Scott Joplin, just for the heck of it. And the jump-off with the left hand is very difficult to do cleanly."

First developed in the late 1400s, the harpsichord is a much older instrument than the piano. "The first piano wasn't even built until something like 1725. The story goes that Bach heard it and didn't care for it. A hundred years later he would have reacted differently" — after it had developed into the beautiful instrument we know today, with dynamic possibilities not offered by the harpsichord.

"But that limitation is one of the great things about it. It's an instrument of illusion. You can create the illusion that you're getting louder and softer by your articulation — how you play staccato or use certain kinds of accents. It's like performing magic tricks."

Harpsichords are still being made in the old ways. One of Paul's best friends in Los Angeles, where she lives, builds reproductions. Paul herself owns four instruments, one of them a copy of a 1760 French design. "But there are many different kinds — French, Flemish, Italian. I sometimes compare the French



Jefferson in Europe at age 43

model I own to a chocolate éclair or a cream puff. It's such a richness of sound. The Italian instruments are very in-your-face — very spicy."

Paul has taken her Jefferson program abroad and to 10 of our 50 states. She has played it at the Library of Congress, founded with Jefferson's book collection, and at his alma mater, William and Mary College, in Williamsburg, Virginia. The pieces include one by Paul's favorite 18th-century French composer, a harpsichordist famous in his day, Claude-Bénigne Balbastre, with whom one of Jefferson's daughters studied in France.

Paul says her concert, to be played here on Saturday night, "celebrates not only great harpsichord music but a great collection of one of the most brilliant men of all time. You know that question you often ask kids? If you could meet anyone in the whole wide world, living or dead, who would it be? My choice would be this genius. His first collection of books was lost in a fire, so he started to collect a second library. The music was a part of that collection. How persistent he was! To lose it all and then start all over again!"

Jefferson's harpsichord probably never went to the White House. "By the time he got there, the girls were grown and living elsewhere." For years it graced Monticello, the Virginia estate that Jefferson designed and where he pioneered scientific farming. No one knows where the instrument is today.

— Jeanne Schinto

A Declaration of Music:
The Harpsichord Music
Collected by Thomas Jefferson
Concert by Jennifer Paul Saturday,
March 18, 7:30 p.m.
First Unitarian Universalist Church
4190 Front Street, Hillcrest
Suggested donation: \$8
Info: 619-298-4580 or
619-283-7804

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Jennifer Paul



Replica of Jefferson's harpsichord