

# In the Erard Archives

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Adelson, Robert, Alain Roudier, Jenny Nex, Laure Barthel, and Michel Foussard, eds. *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents 1789–1959*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xx, 1174 pp.

**T**HIS HANDSOMELY PRODUCED, TWO-VOLUME PUBLICATION makes a large number of documents from the Erard firm's archives readily available to the English reader. The catalyst for the project is the pianist, organologist, and Erard scholar Alain Roudier. He brought to the attention of the AXA insurance group (owner of various remaining parts of the old Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel merger) the historical significance of these archives, which had been languishing in the basement of the Salle Gaveau. *History of the Erard* is just one recent output of the project: the letters from Pierre Erard to his uncle Sébastien translated here have been published in French over the past ten years in three other volumes. Another resource is the website of the Centre Sébastien Erard ([www.sebastienerard.org](http://www.sebastienerard.org)), where one can view color images of letters and ledger books. This can be used fruitfully in tandem with the book under review. Numbers and drawings sketched by Sébastien on Pierre's letters are mentioned here in footnotes, but are not actually shown, and thus remain tantalizingly invisible in the book; however, these materials can be consulted on the website.

All of the above bear witness to a growing interest in the Erard firm. Produced by a group of organologists, musicologists, and musicians with expertise in the technical and socio-economic sides of the piano and harp industries, the publication of *History of the Erard* is well-timed. For one, the status of Beethoven's Erard piano has been undergoing a reevaluation, owing in great part to recent work by Maria Rose and Tilman Skowroneck.<sup>1</sup> And the momentum continues with an ongoing project called "Beethoven and His Foreign Pianos," led by Tom Beghin at the Orpheus Institute in collaboration with the piano builder Chris Maene. Results from the project have begun to emerge with regard to Beethoven's

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Rose, "Beethoven and His 'French Piano': Proof of Purchase," *Musique, Images, Instruments* 7 (2005): 110–22; Tilman Skowroneck, "The 1803 Érard grand piano," chap. 4 in *Beethoven the Pianist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 85–115.

Broadwood (as readers of this journal might be aware<sup>2</sup>), and now we await the imminent turn to the composer's Erard and Maene's replica of it. Erard pianos from this time tend to get 'lumped in' with the English, but Skowroneck notes that Beethoven's Erard, while based on English models, featured a lighter construction than contemporary Broadwoods.<sup>3</sup> As is often the case, generalizations, even well-informed ones, prove less than reliable guides—all the more reason to increase our familiarity with early Erard pianos.

The Erard archives own the distinction of being the most comprehensive record of a musical-instrument building firm anywhere, from any time. They offer a glimpse into the piano and harp industries in London and Paris and the economy and community of which the firm was part. While the book's title states its chronological span as 1785–1959, most of the documents derive from the 1790s through the 1820s. Of course, this is the crucial period for Sébastien's contributions to harp and piano building, now summarily referred to as the double-action harp and double-escapement piano action. The picture that emerges from the book is that of rather messy and staggered developments propelled by innovative problem-solving in conjunction with market demand and competition. Pianos by the Erard firm are generally better-known for what they portend for later nineteenth-century pianism and virtuosity through their association with the likes of Liszt. Meanwhile, the early history of the Erard piano remains hazy partly due to the limited number of instruments that have survived in playing order, as well as the greater attention paid to Viennese and English pianos from the late eighteenth through early nineteenth centuries.

Volume I opens with an Introduction that orients the reader with short biographies of Sébastien, his brother Jean-Baptiste, and the latter's son Pierre. It additionally sketches out the evolution of the Erard piano, harp, and Sébastien's more sporadic experimentations with the organ. (An overview in list or tabular form of what instruments were being made and sold when and where would have been helpful.) Here we encounter the common notion that the Erard pianos gifted to Haydn around 1801 and received by Beethoven in 1803 influenced Viennese piano building. But this notion is in need of fine-tuning. One reads the following in the Introduction: "The piano builder Anton Walter, whose instruments are so intimately linked to Mozart and Beethoven, began building pianos with the

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<sup>2</sup> See Tom Beghin, "Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Op. 106: Legend, Difficulty, and the Gift of a Broadwood Piano," *Keyboard Perspectives* 8 (2015): 81–121; and "An Altar to Apollo: Visions and Realities of Beethoven's Broadwood," presentation at *The Historical Pianist: A Conference-Festival*, Royal Academy of Music, London, April 22–24, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Skowroneck, *Beethoven the Pianist*, 89.

*sopra una corda* register in 1802, just after the arrival of Haydn's Erard, which featured this mechanism."<sup>4</sup> Though this statement thereby implies that Walter's addition of the shift was inspired by Haydn's Erard, it is also possible that the source was the Longman & Broderip that Haydn brought from London in 1795. Moreover, Skowroneck alerts us that the shift on an 1802 Walter (the earliest known Viennese exemplar with the shift) produced a *tre corde* rather than an *una corda* effect: activating the knee lever caused the hammers to strike three strings instead of the Viennese default of two.<sup>5</sup> The mechanism may well have been borrowed, but here it was used for the opposing effect. The question of influence thus calls for nuanced answers.

The rest of Volume I comprises selections from the Erard archives organized under the categories "Inventions," "Business," "Composers," and "Performers." "Inventions" presents a small number from the many requests for patents by the Erard firm. Only three are provided, but they include Sébastien's most important ones: requests for French patents for the double-action harp (1811) and double-escapement piano action (1822). The text of the patent requests is given without the accompanying figures, making the text rather difficult to follow. The bulk of the volume is taken up by the "Business" section, most of which reproduces the letters that were sent by the Erard firm to its clients and agents from 1791 to 1797. Here is information about the specifications and prices of instruments for potential clients (discounts were offered for merchants, teachers, and artists), making it possible to keep some track of what instruments were being sold when. But the purpose of most of these letters is to chase endlessly after overdue payments or to state the date and rate of an instrument shipment and date of expected delivery. Many other quotidian details emerge, such as the sourcing of materials like strings, wood, and soundboards; tips to address certain unwanted piano action noises; and piano packing and transportation. Despite some tragicomic instances of transactions gone awry (Haydn receiving his piano with a warped soundboard, wine casks being stolen and refilled in transit, etc.), the overall impression is nevertheless one of great efficiency.

In addition to the letters, ledger book excerpts and lists of early buyers can give us a rough map of customer demographics. (More excerpts from the ledger books can be seen on the aforementioned website of the Centre Sébastien Erard.) Persons mentioned by the documents have been researched and details about

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<sup>4</sup> Adelson et al., *History of the Erard Piano and Harp*, 1:19.

<sup>5</sup> Tilman Skowroneck, "Anton Walter and the *una corda* shift," blog entry from April 24, 2014, <https://skowroneck.wordpress.com/2014/04>.

them printed in footnotes whenever possible. Correspondence with composers and performers occupies the remainder of Volume I and includes previously unpublished letters. Here the book takes us from figures like Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Thalberg to the late nineteenth century and beyond. Letters from Fauré offer a peek into the heated climate at the Paris Conservatoire, the competitions and curricular reforms he oversaw, as well as the gender distribution in the classes there. In short, there is material here that could provide fodder for not only organological but also more socially-oriented projects. The Introduction to Volume II develops this potential. It begins by examining some of the clientele mentioned in the London branch's harp ledger books, housed at the Royal College of Music in London and not reproduced at all in *History of the Erard*. The next section of the Volume II Introduction discusses the unveiling of the double-escapement piano action and Liszt's role in its promotion.

If the piano is at the forefront in Volume I, the bulk of Volume II concerns the sales and developments of the harp in London. Here are translations of all the letters from Pierre to Sébastien that are preserved in the Erard archives. We sense Pierre's devotion to his uncle and nearly-constant anxiety as he manages the finances of the London branch, which he took over beginning in 1814. A running thread through the letters is Pierre's relationship (mostly competitive, even comical, but at times cordial) with harpist and sometime-harp-maker François Joseph Dizi. This relationship is just one of many examples that point to the rather cutthroat musical environment in London at the time. Letters discussing the timing and substance of patent requests, and preparations to oppose such requests filed by competitors, will be of interest to scholars of organological and legal issues.

The piano gradually returns to the fore in the latter part of Volume II, when Pierre sizes up the Broadwood and Stodart firms to lay the groundwork for the introduction of his uncle's latest pianos from Paris. Erard's double-escapement piano had its public triumph via the young Liszt's performances in 1824. Pierre's letters concerning Liszt's London visit contain comparisons with English and (fleeting) Viennese pianos that could serve as points of departure for probing the exchanges between, and opinions about, regional styles in piano building. They bear out Cyril Ehrlich's remark that "It was in London, more than any other city at the turn of the century, that manufacturers and pianists impressed their techniques of construction, composition, and performance upon each other."<sup>6</sup> Between Volumes I and II, then, we not only gain access to two musical

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<sup>6</sup> Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 21.

centers—Paris and London—but also witness the Erard piano's initial derivation from English pianos and subsequent confrontation with the tradition from which it had arisen. In this cursory narrative are many blanks awaiting further excavation, which *History of the Erard* partly aids in filling in, and partly serves to accentuate. Both outcomes succeed in prodding us to a deeper understanding.