



REVIEW: BOOK

## Erard: A Passion for the Piano

Robert Adelson

New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

pp. xii + 238, ISBN 978 0 197 56531 5

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The Erard firm occupies a unique position in the tale of the development of the piano and the harp. The firm's various ground-breaking technical innovations paved the way for the modern actions of these instruments. Along the way, Erard pianos came to be associated with numerous famous pianists and composers. Yet there has not to date been an overarching account of the history of the firm, especially not one that was correct in all its details.

The present book fills this gap with aplomb. It is based in part on materials from the substantial 2015 edition of documents from the Erard archives (Robert Adelson, Alain Roudier, Jenny Nex, Laure Barthel and Michel Foussard, eds, *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents, 1785–1959*, two volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)), and in part on the Erard family archives, which author Robert Adelson discovered in 2016. The text is organized chronologically and consists of fifteen topic-driven chapters, beginning with the apprentice years of Sébastien Erard (1752–1831) in Strasbourg and his subsequent move to Paris at the age of sixteen. Once he began making his own instruments in the 1770s, he focused on designing both harpsichords with enhanced possibilities of dynamic shading and registration as well as instruments with a piano action.

The second chapter takes the reader from the year 1788 and the creation of the firm 'Erard frères' – Sébastien being joined by his elder brother Jean-Baptiste (1749–1826) – to the mid-1790s. It discusses the organization of the workshop, questions of training and payment of the workers, problems of finding supplies such as wood and strings at reasonable qualities and for reasonable prices, and negotiations with customers and instrument dealers. Chapter 3 focuses largely on the same period, but addresses square pianos and piano-organs. Chapter 4 provides further insight into the Erards' customer management, various methods of payment (for the modern reader, the most unexpected of these is probably payment in wine) and the logistics of shipping the instruments. There are also interesting discussions about the kinds of damage that could occur during transport, and how the Erard brothers dealt with dishonest customers.

Chapter 5 offers new insights into the circumstances that made Sébastien Erard travel to England in 1792 to set up a harp-manufacturing branch in London, while Jean-Baptiste stayed in Paris to run the firm there. As manufacturers of instruments that could be seen as luxury goods for the aristocracy, the Erards were indeed at risk during the French Revolution. However, the popular idea that Sébastien had to flee the dangers of the Revolution is here solidly debunked. The rationale for his trip was that establishing the London branch enabled him to obtain a patent for 'his newly invented system of forked discs that shorten the vibrating length of the strings by a semitone' (47). Obtaining this patent was apparently not possible in Revolutionary France.

Chapter 6 introduces the concept of the French grand piano (or *piano en forme de clavecin*, as it was called), while chapter 7, 'Gifts for Haydn, Beethoven, and Many Others', explains why these

instruments remain important for performers on period instruments today. In this chapter, too, Adelson puts to rest any doubts about whether Beethoven's Erard from 1803 was indeed a gift, doubts first voiced by Maria Rose van Epenhuysen ('Beethoven and His "French Piano": Proof of Purchase', *Musique, Images, Instruments* 7 (2005), 110–122) and repeated in some subsequent publications, including my own *Beethoven the Pianist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Adelson shows in great detail that Beethoven's Erard was definitely a gift (that is, it was not the case that Beethoven ordered the piano but never paid for it, as has been suggested), since the now-famous sales-ledger entry is indeed consistent with the firm's methods for accounting for instruments sent as gifts.

The early decades of the nineteenth century were a time of substantial innovation in piano construction. The Erards were doubtless a driving force, wielding influence which carried far beyond France. It is interesting, then, to learn in chapter 8 that the firm was simultaneously battling serious financial difficulties owing to what Adelson terms 'serious miscalculations' during a time of political unrest and instability. The piano-building Paris branch of the firm in particular had to deal with 'dismal' finances over many years (75). Ultimately it was Jean-Baptiste's son Pierre who helped the firm recover from bankruptcy. Pierre began to work in London under Sébastien's supervision in May 1814 and was left to run the London branch on his own as soon as September of the same year.

Chapter 9 introduces Sébastien Erard's arguably most famous invention, the double-escapement action of 1822, whereas chapter 10 explains how the young Franz Liszt, who arrived in Paris in December 1823, became central to promoting the new piano in public concerts. Liszt's triumph became 'simultaneously a triumph for Erard's new invention' in what Adelson calls a 'symbiotic relationship between pianist and piano maker' (90–91). Chapter 11, 'Piano Wars', introduces some other early romantic pianists and their instruments of choice. Chapter 12 focuses on the 1820s and family matters, including Sébastien's failing health and his nephew Pierre's homosexuality, which here is named the key to understanding his reluctance to marry and produce a 'potential heir to whom Pierre would transmit the family enterprise' (117). In 1838 Pierre did in fact marry Camille Février, who would then take over the firm after his death. Still addressing the 1820s, chapter 13 discusses the relationship between Felix Mendelssohn and the Erards.

Jean-Baptiste Erard died rather suddenly in 1826; in August 1831 Sébastien died after a prolonged illness, and both branches of the firm were then left to Pierre to manage on his own. Chapter 14 brings us from that point all the way to 1855, when Pierre himself died after a lengthy period of cognitive decline. The chapter mentions various of his inventions, discusses Chopin's piano preferences and includes an account of the famous 1851 Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace in London, at which the Erard firm was awarded the Council Medal for their pianos. The final chapter depicts the management of the firm by Camille Erard and subsequent developments until the year 1961, when the name 'Erard' vanished in a merger of the Erard, Gaveau and Pleyel firms.

A family tree, an afterword, copious endnotes, twelve pages of references and an index complete the work. The style is easy to read and the pace fairly brisk in spite of the wealth of detail included in all chapters. Historical, political, piano-technical and personal themes are skilfully interwoven, providing the reader with a rich picture of the personalities and achievements of the firm's various actors, and of the role that Erard's endeavours and instruments played in their various cultural contexts. The beginning of the book is especially valuable for outlining the French contribution to the story of the transition from the harpsichord to keyboard instruments with more, or different, expressive possibilities. Chapter 7 stands out because of its especially meticulous explanation of notetaking practices in the sales ledgers, as well as the Erards' practice of gifting instruments to various persons of interest.

The book does not include any in-depth technical discussions of the various inventions patented by Sébastien or Pierre Erard. Perhaps as a consequence, it is comparatively sparsely illustrated.

These observations are not meant as criticisms: publications about Erard's piano actions do already exist (and some are quite difficult to read, in part because of the inherent challenges in writing about keyboard actions), and the text fares very well without an abundance of pictures.

While the specific research about the Erards presented here is exemplary, meticulous and up to date, some passages of a more general nature might have benefited from a slightly less broad brush. Consider, for example, the title of the otherwise excellent first chapter, 'Making a Harpsichord Sound Like a Piano'. Erard built his first (now lost) piano in 1777, the same year that Johann Andreas Stein's earliest surviving piano action was built into a large 'vis-à-vis' combination instrument. The latter is a bare-hammer pulling action unlike any of Stein's later piano actions (see Michael Latham, *Pianos for Haydn and Beethoven: Change and Contrast* (Munich: Katzbichler, 2016)). With respect to the various expressive keyboard instruments of the time, obtaining dynamic contrast between *forte* and *piano* was only one of the problems their makers wanted to solve. Other goals were to bridge the gap between silence and sound while providing a variety of timbres. In short, when analysing stringed keyboard instruments from this period, one main conclusion is that there was no such thing as an established sound 'like a piano' (4). This is one of only a few examples where it would not have hurt to add just a little more nuance. None the less, this is an excellent and eminently readable book.

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