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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*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. *Vol. 1: Inventions, Business, Composers and Performers*, xxiv + 521 pp. *Vol. 2: Erard Family Correspondence*, xx + 613 pp. Documents, original French text, 40 b/w illus., bibliography, and index. \$250.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 2 Volume Set - 978-1-107-09291-4; [ISBN Vol. 1 - 978-0-521-19466-2; ISBN Vol. 2 - 978-0-521-76659-3.] \$200.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-316-40765-3.

Review by Ruth K. Inglefield, The Peabody Conservatory of Music of Johns Hopkins University.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of the Maison Erard on the history of musical instruments in general and the development of the piano and harp in particular. Sébastien Erard (1752-1831) invented both the double escapement for piano and the double-action pedal mechanism for harp—and these innovations have remained central to piano and harp building for over a century. Some of Erard's contributions also advanced the construction of organs, and he even experimented with improving the mechanisms of wind instruments. Among his extensive contacts and customers were composers, performers, and royalty from around the globe. And although the firm itself closed in 1959, the Erard name will forever be prominent among those associated with driving the explosion of musical and artistic creativity that characterized Europe in general and Paris/London in particular throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The two volumes just released provide a comprehensive overview of this legacy. The five editors include four organologists, three musicologists, a harpist, a pianist, and three curators of musical instrument collections. The research of these uniquely qualified individuals has resulted in a set of documents that illuminate and personalize both the inventions and the sociocultural aspects of the Erard era. Judiciously selected from the recently rediscovered Gaveau-Pleyel-Erard archives, the documents include thorough and detailed records as well as previously unknown letters from composers such as Fauré, Liszt, St.-Saëns, and Mendelssohn. The editors present them in English and the original French with scrupulous care, respect, and insight; the product is at once scholarly and engrossing.

This is not the first attempt to chronicle the achievements of the Maison Erard. In addition to essays, articles, and dictionary entries we find René Beaupain's *La maison Erard: Manufacture de pianos (1780-1959)*, published in 2005; it provided 283 pages of information about patents and prices from sales catalogues—but only for piano.[1] Beaupain also published similar books covering the houses of Gaveau and Pleyel, and the trilogy does represent a useful resource.[2] A detailed book covering the invention of the double-action harp appeared in Nice as recently as 2011.[3] Numerous dissertations (including one by this reviewer) have studied different aspects of the Erard legacy but again cannot be described as definitive.

The genius of *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp*, however, does not lie solely in the fact that it is comprehensive. Rather, it is the presentation, and the attentiveness behind it, that strikes one increasingly. Exercising the most courteous restraint, the editors offer us the opportunity to participate in recognizing

the significance of the chosen material—by allowing the documents and (especially) letters to tell their own story without undue interference. The extensive and valuable annotations are always relegated to footnotes and the flow of original material is not interrupted. It is difficult to imagine a more erudite work, yet its approach encourages the reader to experience another era as effectively as might occur with a good novel.

Volume One of this work is devoted to inventions, the business, and Erard's musicians—the composers and performers affiliated in some way with the firm. Inventions are described in considerable detail, with due presence given to the two most significant: the previously mentioned double escapement for piano and the double action for the harp. Erard's actual applications for the necessary patents are included in this section, along with information about some of his earliest clients. The business section is comprised mostly of actual documents: an interesting “Denunciation of Sébastien Erard to the Revolutionary Authorities” (p. 49), requests for wood shipments, many exchanges concerning pricing and outstanding bills, quite a few concerning piano-organs (example on p. 99), the occasional confirmation of wine received in lieu of payment (p. 121), and numerous apologies for delayed harp shipments while waiting for patents to be awarded.

The following sections—letters from composers and performers—are among the work's most valuable contributions. Beginning with a spectacular testimonial from Mendelssohn (p. 226), we soon come upon a group of letters concerning the donation of an Erard “expressive touch” organ to the Conservatoire (p. 232f) by Camille Erard, wife of Sébastien's nephew Pierre. Numerous letters from composers—ranging from St.-Saëns to Fauré, Massenet and Ravel—are addressed to Albert Blondel, who directed the firm from 1879-1935. They praise the Erard instruments and frequently recommend promising young performers, requesting that the Maison Erard facilitate their appearances in Paris or London. Collectively, they also indicate the extent to which royal patronage of earlier times was in part replaced by the generosity of large instrument houses during this period (a generosity that continued despite the financial woes it often caused.)

There are countless interesting letters from legendary performers requesting instruments, comparing the Erard instruments (usually favorably, but not always) with those of other makers, or just asking for advice. One letter even requests advice on the political climate in the US—an apparent coincidence given the timing of this review. It was written by virtuoso pianist Sigismond Thalberg to M. Digtgros of the Erard firm and appears on p. 291:

“When I wrote to you a few days ago...of my projects for America, I did not know that the presidential elections were being prepared there... I have been told that long before, the whole country is plunged into a great agitation and that this time it will perhaps be even greater because of the new group 'Know Nothing.' It would be unfortunate to arrive in this country only to wait with folded arms...we must know the opinion of your contacts in the United States.”

Again—all letters and documents are annotated and supplemented as appropriate with background information given in detailed footnotes, complete with sources for further investigation.

Volume Two, devoted to the correspondence of the Erard family, consists largely of letters from Pierre Erard (1794-1855), head of the London branch from 1814, to his “dearest Uncle” Sébastien in Paris. While all the replies have been lost, Pierre's letters provide a good deal of intelligence about musical activity in London at this time and elucidate the struggles and achievements of the Maison Erard on both sides of the Channel. Information from the surviving ledgers of the London harp-manufacturing operation is particularly valuable, as Erard's double-action harp patent was first obtained in London. The editors have made an excellent effort to track down some of the earliest harp sales; numerous purchasers bore titles, and most appear to have had significant social and financial status. The ruckus between those who favored the single-action harp and champions of the new double-action instrument is documented well, as are the

attempts of several prominent harpists to make "improvements" to the existing Erard models.[4] (Pierre also ensures that his uncle is duly informed about the less-savory details of these individuals' public and private lives.)

The importance of the Liszt-Erard relationship to the piano side of the business is made clear in many of Pierre's letters (p. 537f); indeed, Liszt remained associated with the firm throughout his life. An excerpt from one of his testimonials (p. 539) reads:

"Let them not tell me any more that the piano is not a suitable instrument for a big hall... I bring as witnesses the three thousand people who filled the immense Scala theatre yesterday evening... all of whom heard and admired, down to the smallest details, your beautiful instrument."

Pierre's letters are not always full of good news. We learn of his concern for Sébastien's health during several illnesses, and we read letter after letter indicating that the generosity of the Maison Erard toward its customers frequently led to varying degrees of insolvency. Pierre seems frequently to be reporting difficulties collecting money owed, seeking loans from prominent acquaintances, and trying to avoid lawsuits. At other times, his letters concern sales from the extensive and valuable family art collection, dealing with patent infringements and attempts to bring a full piano factory to London. One is eventually relieved to read of the success achieved by Liszt with the new Erard pianoforte (pp. 818-22) and to learn that business improved as a result.

Once again, annotations and supplementary material are impeccably delivered.

What more could one desire from these two volumes? If there is one area that seems ever so slightly neglected, it would be visual. Just forty illustrations are provided, twenty per volume. There are many diagrams and photographs of early Erard pianos and harps that might have been included as part of the abundant supplementary material. Perhaps they were omitted because they were not originally located in or with the specific letters and documents brought to attention here, but there is frequent mention of highly decorated instruments, and it would have been lovely to see a whole group of them.

That said, these excellent volumes deserve to be widely welcomed—first and foremost, perhaps, by the piano and harp communities as well as musicologists specializing in the history of instruments. But period and cultural historians should also appreciate the breadth and depth of material offered here. While the piano and harp may occupy center stage, they are surrounded by and provide an extraordinary reflection of the rich social and cultural landscapes of Paris and London during a gloriously fertile, fascinating, and seminal period.

NOTES

[1] René Beupain, *La Maison Erard: Manufacture de pianos 1780-1959* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).

[2] René Beupain, *La Maison Gaveau: Manufacture de pianos 1847-1971* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009); and René Beupain, *Chronologie des pianos de la Maison Pleyel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

[3] Musée du Palais Lascaris, *Erard: L'invention de la harpe moderne 1811-2011* (Nice: Editions Nice Musées, 2011).

[4] Efforts by virtuoso harpist François Joseph Dizi (1780-1847) to "dethrone" the Erard harps in favor of his own model are covered in particular detail, complete with descriptions of spying expeditions, legal battles, and Dizi's eventual capitulation and reconciliation with Pierre Erard.

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