
H-France Review Vol. 23 (June 2023), No. 108

Robert Adelson, *Erard: A Passion for the Piano*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xviii + 238 pp. Notes, references, figures, and index. \$82.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9780197565315.

Review by Pheaross Graham, Stanford University.

After twelve years of continuous use, it was time to service my faithful Grotrian-Steinweg beyond its usual tuning, action regulation, and voicing. Relatively uncommon in the United States, eclipsed by Yamaha, Kawai, and Steinway, Grotrian pianos can pose problems in locating experienced technicians sufficiently familiar with their distinctive characteristics. Grotrians tend to sing above others in the treble, project with silvery, full-bodied richness, and possess a galvanized power in the bass, especially in larger models, as with my semi-concert grand. As is normal, the piano's hammers developed grooves in the felt over time, making the tone strident and less *cantabile*; frequent playing rendered the action somewhat less responsive to the brisk, repeated notes of Ravel's "Alborada del gracioso" (*Miroirs*) and "Toccata" (*Le tombeau de Couperin*). Putting the instrument through Liszt's war horses, like "Mazeppa" and the *Mephisto Waltz*, as well as Rachmaninoff's *Second Sonata* and *Third Concerto*, rendered the uppermost strings susceptible to breaking mid-performance. (Indeed, my guests and I recoiled in horror as single-hitch pin strings would shoot across the room at climactic moments.) My piano needed work.

I consulted with well-respected technicians to restore the instrument, excited about its rebirth but wary of losing the piano I knew sonically and tactilely. The cost, reaching into thousands, and the months-long process were daunting. Technicians contradicted each other; one proclaimed about another's proposals, "You might as well throw the piano into the ocean if you do that." So, I opted to wait, and from this disposition, I read Richard Adelson's *Erard: A Passion for the Piano*. What was this "passion" and what motivated engineering the soul of this famous company's instruments that inspired so many composers? My Grotrian ordeal resonated precisely with the dilemma Adelson describes in his thirteenth chapter about Mendelssohn, who so cherished his Erard that the prospect of sending it afar for repair was to risk losing an extension of himself forever.

What gives uniqueness of voice to a particular piano? Ontologically, what is the voice of a manufacturer? The musicological subdiscipline of voice studies has been asking these questions, although focusing on the human voice and surrounding assumptions of listeners.[1] From an organological perspective not limited to instrument taxonomy, what philosophical implications underlie constructing an ideal instrument of human expression? Although these questions are not covered in the book, Adelson nevertheless lays a crucial foundation in presenting historical

details that will certainly stimulate diverse inquiries into hermeneutics, theory, philosophy, and cultural analysis in subsequent musicological projects.

Adelson secured long-term access to the Erard collection and archive at the Musée du Palais Lascaris in Nice, which led to the co-edited publication of *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents, 1785-1959*.^[2] Thereafter, Adelson resolved to use that primary material “to tell the story of the Erard firm and their influence on music history” (p. 1). Fortuitous timing would have it that he would again stumble upon an unknown, voluminous archive conserved by living descendants of the Erard family. *Erard: A Passion for the Piano* thus draws from two archives to provide uncommon detail of the inner workings of the firm that would have otherwise remained inaccessible, lost in the mists of time.

Erard joins such writings on pianos as Richard Lieberman’s extensive, detailed company history, *Steinway & Sons*, and broadly Anne Swartz’s *Piano Makers in Russia in the Nineteenth Century*, which covers the greatly under-discussed history of the piano industry, considering performers, composers, state policies, culture, sociality, and economics.^[3] Adelson’s monograph will likely appeal to two audiences: those with a general interest in pianism and those particularly interested in French business history. Aiming for a broad readership, Adelson does not lose non-specialists with extensive musicological analysis or design schematics behind Erard’s innovations and developments. (For that, Edwin Good and Christopher Clark’s writing superbly supplements this aspect of Erard’s history.^[4]) Rather than developing an overarching, master argument, Adelson weaves his archival findings neatly for readers into an orderly, consumable package. Aiming for neutrality to the greatest extent possible, he seeks to deliver facts without overt interpretation, save noting general tendencies with his chapter headings. Adelson employs a distanced historiographical approach in a book comprised of fifteen relatively brief chapters, preceded by an introduction, and concluded by an afterword.

Perhaps a more effective approach to reading *Erard* comes with simply allowing a story to unfold linearly as chronicles, eschewing preconceived expectations of what the book ought to accomplish. In chapter one, Adelson presents Strasbourg as an important milieu of keyboard building. Sébastien enjoyed tremendous success with pianos due to his mechanical ingenuity and determination. He sought to afford the harpsichord “quasi-pianistic potential” (p. 7), resulting in the “*clavecin mécanique*” (or “*clavecin à expression*”) (p. 6). Aspects of this chapter complement Eva Badura-Skoda’s extensive study of the terms and nomenclature surrounding the piano in the eighteenth century.^[5] Sébastien, later with his brother Jean-Baptiste, amassed admirers at the *Concert Spirituel*, whose public favored their domestic French over imported English pianos. Louis XVI and the Baron de Breteuil signed a founding document for what would eventually become the Erard firm, protecting them against a jealous Parisian luthier. In chapter two, now competing with Parisian rivals, the firm Erard frères preferentially hired Germanophone workers, [presumably] stemming from their belief that Germans were “more disciplined and efficient than the French” (p. 9). Paying them well, they created the equivalent of a pension plan to encourage loyalty. The ability to obtain fine, raw materials, like mahogany, curly maple, and strings, was of prime importance. Enterprising, the Erards tapped into a national network that would sell their pianos, including former customers.

Chapter three shows how Sébastien Erard’s innovations were not focused solely on the piano. He made changes to the then ubiquitous, although feeble square pianos, and later with the hybrid piano-organ, which made it possible for the organ to express dynamic nuance like a piano.

Chapter four describes strategies the Erards used to become a modern business. The firm's marketing aimed at inspiring "brand loyalty" (p. 24), offering performers and teachers special discounts, and orders by correspondence. Erard claimed a foothold as a preeminent business and mitigated difficulties proactively, as with shipping, potential damage, humidity affecting their instruments, idle customers not paying, and dispute resolution.

Chapter five reveals that Marie-Antoinette was an influential harpist, so harp manufacturing became strategically important for the Erards. Sébastien brought enormous technological improvement to harp construction, requiring a patent. The French Revolution, as well as their ties to the royal family, delayed the Erards' attempt to obtain a patent in France. Only after establishing a workshop in London were the Erards finally able to obtain an English patent. Adelson notes a gap of more than two years in the archive's ledger in 1793, likely because the Erards feared the guillotine after being condemned by Revolutionary authorities. They probably exercised prudence in maintaining discreet sales correspondence.

Chapter six details how the Erards increased grand pianos in France, leading to their widescale adoption there. They championed their instruments' "hitherto-unknown level of perfection [with] their solidity, tone, and beauty astonish[ing] the most famous artists" (p. 53). Although favor for the grand piano in France was slow to pick up until the end of the eighteenth century, the Erards' efforts eventually helped to shape an independent French repertoire, otherwise scant. The Erards' gifting pianos to prominent musicians, like Haydn in 1800 and Beethoven in 1803, aided in propagating the piano, as described in chapter seven. Although Beethoven expressed dissatisfaction with his Erard piano, Erard nonetheless influenced him and other leading composers outside France. (Expanding on this line of inquiry, Tom Beghin's fascinating monograph, *Beethoven's French Piano: A Tale of Ambition and Frustration*, queries the impact of the Erard on sonatas like the "Appassionata" and "Waldstein" from the practical standpoint of working as a pianist on a replica.[6])

Chapter eight details Erards' financial struggle after expansion, significantly worsened by the French Revolution, pushing the firm to bankruptcy. The London branch financially resuscitated the Paris branch over a decade, aided by Pierre Erard's knowledge. Surviving bankruptcy, Sébastien's branch unveiled his crown jewel invention, forever revolutionizing piano technology through the double escapement (*double échappement*) action, as the ninth chapter describes. With greater responsiveness, increased potential for repeating notes, and a more powerful tone, the new action allowed even amateurs with modest playing techniques to achieve better results more quickly. Also, the invention opened new paths for virtuoso pianists, described especially in chapters ten and thirteen.

Emerging during his youth, Franz Liszt took the piano world by storm and could not have been a better representative for Erard (chapter ten). Adelson includes valuable written correspondence highlighting a mutually beneficial relationship. Chapter eleven details competition with other firms and desires for Erard to expand their enterprise. Keeping virtuoso pianists in close reach remained of prime importance, with some including Moscheles, Hummel, and Kalkbrenner. The Erards would conduct promotional tours. Their higher prices relative to others, however, called for reconsideration as sales slowed.

Chapter twelve narrates Sébastien's illness. Despite painful, experimental operations, sulfur baths, and "a diet of ass's milk and pumpkin soup" (p. 112), he could no longer manage the firm.

Stepping in, his brother Jean-Baptiste became more active, refining the double escapement action, improving hammer head positioning, and using metal reinforcements for the pianos. However, upon Sébastien's death in 1826, Pierre Erard would have to take the reins, but knew the firm would need a capable, motivated, and inventive successor to continue the firm. As Adelson writes, however, Pierre's same-sex orientation and childless marriage with his cousin meant that there would be no heirs to continue the Erard brothers' legacy, which ultimately led to the firm's decline.

Chapter thirteen examines Felix Mendelssohn's relationship with the Erard firm. As Adelson notes, Mendelssohn was especially fond of his Erard piano, and its unique qualities shaped his compositions. After much use of the instrument had resulted in wear-and-tear, Mendelssohn asked Pierre Erard, his close friend, to repair its action over a long distance, since he feared that local makers might unfavorably alter his piano. Adelson includes evidence of Mendelssohn's tight bond with the firm, showing an unknown autograph of what became the composer's "Andante in A major" from the *Lieder ohne Worte*, Op. 19b.

In chapter fourteen, we learn how, after Sébastien dies, Pierre was left to manage the firm independently. Pierre introduced his own design innovations and attempted to convince Frédéric Chopin to become an Erard artist. Pierre's untimely death resulted in his wife, Camille, managing the firm, who, in the final chapter, ushers in the sunset of the Erard firm. Extremely generous and benevolent, Camille would send many free pianos to artists and financially destitute students, fund concerts (in her own Salle Erard), and donate to charity, straining the company fiscally. Unable to keep up with other manufacturers' output and latest developments, the firm would go through substantial changes and mergers, ultimately with Erard disappearing from public view in 1961 after almost two centuries.

Adelson's book humanizes a historic firm, moving it out of the realm of myth, hopelessly distant from the present, and revealing its modern sensibilities, growth, and foibles. Adelson brings an immediacy to thinking about how such a widely present firm would proliferate successfully throughout the musical world, considering matters more typically passed over in research. The author's work is reminiscent in some ways of a positivist spirit less often encountered today, recalling work like Ursula Kirkendale's 1967 "The Ruspoli Documents on Handel," whose primary research considers even the celebrated composer's food bills rather than aesthetics or hermeneutics.[7]

While Adelson does not delve extensively into aesthetics, philosophical organology, possibilities related to voice studies, and larger debates or provide a robust technical understanding of Erard's innovations, his work invites greater sensitivity to this historically significant company. Adelson reminds readers that such an illustrious pianistic empire indeed came from an era with real people who faced nitty-gritty struggles. In returning to the book's subtitle, "a passion for the piano," the Erard family's commitment to excellence, drive, and inventive spirit ensured much of the piano's prominence. *Erard* is a valuable, welcome addition to historical business studies. This monograph demonstrates Adelson's skill at streamlining what must have been a scattered and vast collection of documents from two rich archives. It points readers to further rewards, with the third of his Erard trilogy, *Erard: Empire of the Harp*. [8]

NOTES

- [1] See Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel, "Introduction: Voice Studies Now," in Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xii-xli. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199982295.013.36>.
- [2] 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* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- [3] Richard K. Lieberman, *Steinway & Sons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Anne Swartz, *Piano Makers in Russia in the Nineteenth Century* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2014).
- [4] See Edwin M. Good, *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos: A Technological History from Cristofori to the Modern Concert Grand*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Christopher Clark, "Un Piano à nouveau genre d'Échappement": Sébastien Érard's Quest for Perfection," in Ziad Kreidy, ed., *Clefs pour le piano/Keys to the piano* (Château-Gontier: Éditions Aedam musicae, 2018), pp. 47-84.
- [5] Eva Badura-Skoda, *The Eighteenth-Century Fortepiano Grand and Its Patrons: From Scarlatti to Beethoven* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2017).
- [6] Tom Beghin, *Beethoven's French Piano: A Tale of Ambition and Frustration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).
- [7] Ursula Kirkendale, "The Ruspoli Documents on Handel," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 20, no. 2 (1967): 222-273. <https://doi.org/10.2307/830788>.
- [8] Robert Adelson, *Erard: L'empire de La Harpe/Erard: Empire of the Harp*, trans. Jacqueline Letzter (Muzeil: Les Harpes Camac, 2022).

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