

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE MAKING OF A PLEYEL

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By Paul McNulty

Two years ago our workshop accepted an order from the Warsaw Chamber Opera for a piano, which, according to our suggestion, might be suitable for the piano and orchestra works of Chopin. To this, end, we looked for an early Pleyel, since the alternative, Fryderyk Buchholtz, Chopin's Warsaw builder, had not been well-served by the press following Chopin's premier of the second Concerto in F Minor on 17 March 1830.

The following is an excerpt from Benjamin Vogel's article on Chopin's pianos:<sup>1</sup>

There was no mention of Buchholtz in reviews of the concert, possibly to avoid offending the manufacturer, who had gained great esteem in Warsaw. The instrument was deemed inadequate for the requirements of the concert hall, although the fault may have been on Chopin's side, as he was known for a subtle dynamic. On 27 March 1830 he wrote Tytus Woyciechowski in Poturzyn: "Ernemann was quite delighted, but Elsner [Chopin's teacher] regretted that my pantaleon was dull and that the bass passages were not heard. That evening, although those in the galleries and those standing in the orchestra were satisfied, the parterre complained about soft playing [...]"

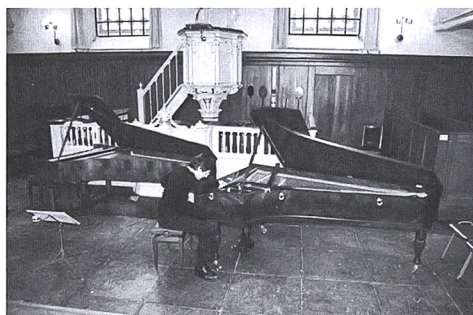
That is why Mochnacki, in *Kurier Polski*, after praising me to the sky, especially for the *adagio*, ends by advising more energy. I figured out where this energy lies and in the second concert I played not mine but a Viennese instrument. Diakow, a Russian general, was so kind as to give me his own instrument—much better than that of Hummel—and only then was the audience, much more numerous than at the first concert, content. [...] Elsner told me that only after the second concert could they judge me, but to tell the truth I would rather play my own [piano]. However, the general opinion is that the instrument was better suited to the venue." Karol Kurpinski also noted in his diary: "The instrument itself was not adequate for such a spacious venue".

About the second concert, on 22 March, the local press wrote:

Indulging the wishes of many connoisseurs, this evening Mister Chopin played on a Viennese piano, such as Hummel usually used in his concerts. Its tones, albeit less powerful than those of the English piano, were nonetheless considered to be more distinct. That said, considering the construction of our theatre one should doubt whether any piano would prove to be strong enough for it.

The article goes on to describe in some detail Chopin travelling in Poland, Austria and Germany, coming to know the pianos of Streicher, Matthaus Andreas Stein, Graf and Pleyel, before he left Warsaw forever on 2 November 1830, to arrive in Paris in mid-September 1831. It was in December that he wrote to his friend Tytus Woyciechowski that he had visited Pleyel and found his pianos "Non plus ultra". He played his first and most successful Paris concert on 26 February 1832 using a Pleyel, performing, among solo works, his F Minor Concerto and the Variations with orchestra op.2 (on "*La Ci Darem da Mano*", the same which gave Schumann to acclaim: "Behold, gentlemen – a Genius!").

We found concert (2m, 43cm) Pleyels roughly from this period in Brussels and in Paris, and, since the Brussels instrument has a veneered soundboard and the Paris op.1555 has spruce, Paris became our model. I own op.3422, a rosewood 2m, 25cm Pleyel wreck, with veneered soundboard, and it has been invaluable in research. Thankfully, in my afternoon in Paris I had the foresight to measure the distance from the key balance pin to the pivot of the *Stosser* (the pivoting upright stick, attached to the key, which impels the hammer butt, into which is glued the hammer shank). At the other end of the shank is glued the hammer. In op.1555, the *Stosser* is 20mm closer to the balance pin than is the case in op.3422, giving the player a mechanical advantage; it is lighter, less powerful, and to my early concern, possibly



Paul McNulty tuning the new Pleyel.

much deeper in touch. I stuck with it, however, and found the keys do play easily, there's plenty of power, and the touch is 8.8mm.

The hammer mouldings of op.3422 are original, though the old felt coverings are not. In Paris, the hammer shanks and mouldings are recent replacements, and gave no impression. I have referred to the op.3422 hammers for dimensions, and have used leather for the coverings, following information I was able to collect about Pleyel and other French makers practice in this period, including my own investigation of Hummel's 1830 Erard in Bratislava, which retains its original leather hammers. For the iron bars above and below the soundboard I have been able to make wooden casting models (1% larger in all dimensions) from the iron bars of op.3422, which are identical to those of op.1555, excepting the bass bar, lying under the soundboard, which was simple to lengthen for the op.1555 concert model.

Once having decided which piano to copy, we made a trip to Paris to look over the instrument at *Cité de la Musique*. There the curators had kindly placed it in the workshop on its legs, and we crawled over it for hours, taking lots of pictures, and measuring the soundboard thickness with a magnet device. It was later possible to interpolate rib locations from the photos, using some from the 1991 restoration which they let us photocopy, where the only bottom of any sort, a small section in the treble, had been removed.

The 1991 strings were measured and were seen to follow closely Christopher Clarke's interpretation of gauge marks in France from this period. The wound strings were made by Baumgartel in Germany, who calculated using Malcolm Rose "c" wire for the core, with brass windings. There are six monochords and two

pairs of bichords in the wound section, an octave and two notes more of brass, then the strings switch to the main bridge, where all is iron. I used Vogel's Wespenthalisches Eisen, which is fabulous. In 1830 steel was available – just – but at least Pleyel in 1829 had not calculated for stronger material, so the measures for the Vogel wire work out fine. I used Bernhard Stopper's programme, with some prompting on our part to get variables for different materials, and it was quite useful to discover the range of comfort in the string plan as given, which we did not alter.

The castings for the iron bars came out ok, and the problem then became to find a suitable green colour for the painting of the iron work. My 3422 Pleyel had been painted gold in these parts, but not under the felt strip along the leading edge of the hitchpin plate. Here we scraped paint and sent it for analysis, which revealed a shellac and copper oxide. We decided against using the original chemical mix because one of ingredients is poisonous, but we found a paint which worked perfectly, to my eye, measured against our original plate. It starts out robin's egg blue, then slowly turns to frog green.

*Next issue will include more on this exciting project.*



The Pleyel copy by Paul McNulty

1 Benjamin Vogel, "The Young Chopin's Domestic Pianos," in *Chopin In Performance: History, Theory, Practice*. (Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, Warszawa, 2005), 57-78.