

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

Vol. 20, No. 1 Autumn, 2015

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCAt)

THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY PLEYEL PIANOS: An Appreciation

By Richard Troeger

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Eric Visscher, Director of the Musée de la musique, Cité de la musique, Paris, and Brigitte Cruz-Barney, Assistant to the Director, for providing formal permission to quote from the online Pleyel Archives. All endnotes citing the Pleyel company logs reference the online "Erard, Pleyel, & Gaveau Archive Collection," Musée de la musique, Cité de la musique, Paris (<http://archivesmusee.citedelamusique.fr/en/pleyel/archives.html>.) Instead of pages in the archives, citations refer to the "Elements" (the online units presenting two log pages at a time) for ready reference by the vast majority of readers.

I particularly thank also Christopher Clarke for generously supplying me with the text of his article "Affect in Action" prior to publication, as well as Anne and Chris Acker of PianoGrands; The Cobbe Collection (and Alison Hoskyns), Hatchlands Park; Elliott Dunlap; Patricia and Michael Frederick of the Frederick Historic Piano Collection; Paul Irvin; John Khouri; Cedric Dupont Antiques, Florida; several private (and patient) piano owners; and always Elaine Fuller.

Technical comments made without attribution are my own observations.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, there has been an upsurge of interest in Pleyel pianos of the mid-nineteenth-century, among many pianists and at least two enterprising instrument makers. An example is the recent Chopin recording by Sam Haywood, made on one of the composer's last personal pianos (reviewed in this issue). Having received the disc, I reconsidered my own explorations of mid-century Pleyels, and looked through my notes concerning them. It occurred to me that those accumulated responses might interest readers who, like myself, explore the Romantic repertoire but are mainly oriented to earlier keyboard instruments or to the modern piano. Like many specialists in pre-Romantic music, I play from the later literature as well, and have long studied what early recordings tell us of late-Romantic performing styles. Also, I am drawn to what seems to be the most conservative aspect of Pleyel's output: devotion to the concept of a lyrical instrument, rather than one calibrated for maximum power.

The instruments themselves are far from being in the unicorn class, but examples from the "Chopin period" and just after seem to turn up much less frequently than Erards of the same era. These pianos do not always age well; further, the (entirely appropriate) retention of worn, original action materials can adversely affect one's experience of what was formerly a lively keyboard, just as the tone is affected when once-soft hammer coverings harden with use and age. Despite these typical limitations, I have had the

good fortune to have access from time to time to several well-restored Pleyel pianos (mainly 1840s-50s). These lively, responsive instruments allow shadings and variations of timbre that have been lost or diminished in the piano's subsequent evolution.

Pleyel made relatively few concert grands before the late 1850s and the instruments I have experienced most closely have been salon models, which appeared in various sizes over the years.¹ The following discussion will be limited to these instruments.

My primary purpose is to discuss how Pleyel pianos of the 1840s and '50s respond to the player; but I will open with a summary of background information and technical aspects, including some points about soundboards and ribbing that seem not to have appeared in the published literature. This summary, which forms Part 1 of the present essay, is presented merely as background to the player's experience, discussed in Part 2 (to be published in the next issue of this magazine). My reactions as a player are of course personal, although I have tried to be objective.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

The firm was founded (officially in 1807) by the composer Ignaz Pleyel (1757-1831), who was succeeded by his son Camille (1788-1855). The Pleyel grand pianos from the mid-1820s to mid-'50s exhibit a number of traits that were more or less enduring over that time span; and some of them persisted until the end of the century, resisting the new winds blowing from America. Within a few years of Camille's death, certain "progressive" developments were gradually introduced. Auguste Wolff (1821-87), the company's third director, is often lauded for his innovations; but he seems to be equally notable for preserving several older features and options. Parallel stringing and the single-escapement action (to take two examples) persisted side by side with a newer action,

crossed strings, and other changes until the end of the century, when the more venerable styles were at last abandoned. Elements of the (very handsome) outward appearance were retained as well. Through most of the nineteenth century, both highly innovative and distinctly conservative tendencies are apparent in the Pleyel instruments.

French musicians during the later nineteenth century, or at least the Pleyel adherents, appear not always to have felt vital interest in the fundamental changes happening to the piano elsewhere, or even *chez Pleyel*. Thus, César Franck's piano, made in 1852 and soon "antiquated" by general developments, was used by Franck from 1871 until his death in 1890. The instrument, a salon model with a four-bar metal frame, is quite close to the pianos played by Chopin in his later years. By way of contrast, Chopin, like many professionals, seems always to have wanted the latest "edition" of the Pleyel instrument.

Although slow to adopt some of the piano world's progressive tendencies, Pleyel was very inventive within its own aesthetic. Under Camille Pleyel particularly, the firm made many experiments and variations, most notably before the early 1840s. As the anonymous author of the website "Pianosromantiques" puts it, the instruments of the 1830s exhibit "soundboards veneered in mahogany or rosewood, hollow hammers, strings going alternately over and through the bridge, ivory agraffes², experimental actions (*mécanique à grande puissance*), different position and number of bars, etc.... By about 1842, the models became more standardised, and only really differed in casework and length."³ The last comment does not allow for certain variations (e.g., changes made in consequence of new types of music wire), but reflects the greater overall stability of design. I have had the opportunity to compare data between an 1846 salon Pleyel (four-bar frame, CC-a⁴) and a comparable 1855 model (three-bar frame;

seven octaves; one of the last built before the death of Camille Pleyel) and found them virtually identical in terms of striking points, string scaling, basics of framing (see below) and dimensions and proportions of the action.

A telling factor about Pleyel pianos is that, despite the preservation of a general concept, no two were necessarily quite alike, a point made clear by Christopher Clarke in several publications.⁴

COMPASS

Pleyel's grand-piano keyboards extended first from CC to f⁴, then rose to g⁴, then to a⁴ by the early 1840s.⁵ Something of Pleyel's conservative aspect manifests even in this regard. It is commonly stated that a full seven-octave compass (AAA-a⁴) was in place by the mid-1840s, but although Pleyel was progressive enough to move forward in this way, the extended range bestowed upon concert grands from early 1844 was restricted to them alone for over a decade.⁶ CC-a⁴ continued to be typical of the salon grands until early 1855. The description "Queue D 6 3/4 [octaves]" is provided for the ten batches of salon grands in the maker's log for 1854, and for the first group produced in 1855.⁷ Only thereafter was the salon model typically AAA-a⁴. Until then, the notes below low C were possibly regarded in the same light as Bösendorfer's extended bass range in more recent times.

PRODUCTION

The concert models were very much a minority in the firm's output. Many more salon grands were built, and yet these too were in a minority compared to the flood of small domestic instruments. For example, the fabrication log for 1840 shows 35 salon grands and the same quantity of concert grands; the remainder of the 710 instruments commenced that year

consisted of squares and uprights.⁸ Thus, the grands that year formed slightly under 10% of the output. Although I have not surveyed more than a few years of the logs in this respect, 1845 seems to have been especially productive of grands, along with increasing activity generally. Instruments begun that year total 1,016, of which 214 were salon grands and 25 were concert grands: altogether some 20% of production.⁹ In 1855, out of 1,189 pianos commenced, we find 123 grands (21 of them concert instruments).¹⁰ Despite the increased production, the percentage of grands that year is down to a more normal 10%. (As one might expect, production in the unsettled year of 1849 was rather low although the proportions remain similar, the grands numbering 64 out of 613 instruments.¹¹)

TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

ACTION

Although religiously repeated in the modern literature, and based on remarks in certain Romantic-era commentaries, the actions of Erard pianos of the period are not really significantly heavier than Pleyel actions. (Erard's actions varied in weight; and colleagues have told me of encounters with Pleyels possessing notably heavy actions.) It is clear from Christopher Clarke's discoveries among many surviving Pleyels that the company in any case produced actions of varying weight according to players' different requirements.¹²

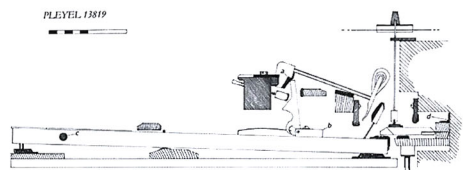


Fig. 1. Action of Pleyel Piano 13819 (Cobbe Collection), courtesy of the Cobbe Collection Trust and Christopher Nobbs.

Strongly influenced by Broadwood in many respects, Pleyel used the English-style single-escapement action exclusively until 1856 and retained it in some instruments until 1900.¹³ The action is shown in Figure 1. (Its essentials are keylever, hammer, hopper to drive the hammer, an escapement for hammer and hopper, and a check to catch the rebounding hammer. The key must make a full return before the note can be sounded again.) From observations of actual instruments and photographs, the action parts (hammer shafts etc.), already notably enlarged in comparison to English pianos, did not become markedly heavier from the 1830s to the 1850s or later, although many subtle variations were introduced.

Elements that may have been altered multiple times involve slight (or not slight) changes in proportions, angle of the hopper, and so forth. Paul McNulty reports finding the hammers in a Pleyel of 1830 to be 20mm closer to the balance pins (fulcrum) than in an instrument made in 1834.¹⁴ Such alterations occur during a period of notable variation in the instruments generally. Reflecting a slightly more stable time, the two actions from the aforementioned pianos of 1846 and 1855 show no changes in the essential size, weight, or proportions, although the governance of the hopper's return has been re-designed. Pleyel made some notable elaborations of the single escapement over the ensuing decades, possibly toward tighter control of the hammer's return so as to accelerate repetition. I have not seen or played these varieties of the action, but photographs of a specimen from the early 1890s can be readily viewed courtesy of the Pianomuseum Haus Eller.¹⁵

As to touchweight, Kenneth Mobbs found two Pleyel grands of 1841 and 1846 to be the heaviest of all the historical piano actions he surveyed, including Erards.¹⁶ The 1841 instrument (Finchcocks collection) required 93 grams to make a minimal sound on FF, 78 on c¹,

and 64 on f³. A then-unrestored Pleyel of 1846 (actually 1847-48; Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands) weighed in at 82, 82, and 75 respectively. I was able to perform the same test on the well-restored 1855 instrument mentioned earlier, and found it to fall between the Mobbs samples, at 87, 79, and 73 grams. (All of these trials include the weight of the dampers.) Mobbs includes a mean level of samplings of the same notes from 20th-century grands, respectively 97.8, 81.8, and 75.2 grams. Steinways (1982-83) weighed in at 99, 84, and 79.¹⁷

HAMMER COVERINGS

In modern times it has often been thought that Pleyel pianos were essentially rather sharp and percussive in timbre. More recent research has shown that what the 19th-century commentaries say is (not unexpectedly) accurate. They use such adjectives as "dark," "mellow," "veiled," and "silvery" to describe the sonorities; one would therefore not expect strong transients in the attack, or similar qualities, such as are brought out by work- and age-hardened felt.¹⁸

The makeup and variations in Pleyel's hammer coverings are the subject of much exploration and discussion today.¹⁹ Pleyel seems to have begun with leather hammer coverings, moved to leather layers topped by specially compounded soft felt, and c.1850 began to move toward a simpler arrangement of felt over a layered leather core. There was and is no single "solution" to the issues of tone and hammer makeup, for these were subject to long-term experimentation as well as adjustment for individual preferences. Clarke cites the great variability among Pleyel hammers and their coverings (including use of leather atop a felt core, rather than the reverse), and concludes again that variation was the rule.²⁰

The basic concept of Pleyel's hammer coverings (described in period and present-day commentaries) is that a firm core and soft

surface produce a bright sound when played *forte* and mellow timbres at lower dynamic levels (a capacity in some considerable abeyance on modern pianos). Among other sources, Clarke quotes Carl Czerny (writing 1845–46), who described the new timbral/dynamic differentiation quite precisely, in terms of its being a distinct change of aesthetic from that of the early 19th-century instruments.²¹

The varied constituents of Pleyel's felt hammer coverings until 1850 or later could include silk, cashmere, rabbit fur, and vicuna wool, as well as a fine grade of sheep's wool. It goes without saying that original hammer coverings should be preserved; but again, their continued use in extant, otherwise restored instruments does not elicit the effect that they had when new, and can produce very sharply edged tones even at low dynamics. "All of these particular fibres are much finer than those of the coarse (and more durable) carpet-grade wools used in modern [single-layer] hammer manufacture. The fragile fibres (including the fine wool) that comprise Pleyel's various hammer-felt formulas compact far more with use than modern hammer felt (losing their springiness) and would have broken down and worn out quickly."²² The multiple variants on the hammer-covering theme in the 1830s–'50s were symptoms, not only of a search for the perfect sound(s) but perhaps also for durability.

Efforts have been made to reconstruct the original style(s) of hammer coverings. The outcome from some of these interpretations suggests that, through the hammer coverings, Pleyels can be made either so mellifluous as to preclude real *fortissimi* or, contrarily, to sound so "hard" as to lose the velvety lower dynamics.

FAUSSE TABLE

The "*fausse table*," a term with no established English equivalent ("secondary soundboard," "passive soundboard," "dust cover," "string

protector") is a thin board laid slightly above the strings and usually extending to just short of the case sides, although in Pleyels leaving off over the treble area. (The boards were commonly made of unfinished soundboard-quality spruce whether in English squares or Grafts. From early on, Pleyel normally veneered them.) This arrangement has caused much puzzlement. Claude Montal (1836) states the purpose succinctly if a trifle obscurely: "Its function is to modify the quality of the sound and to augment its volume slightly."²³ (There is no mention of dust.) Jean Jude cites one Jean-Baptiste Lepère who in 1840 applied for a patent toward providing multiple (one to four or even more) supplemental soundboards to pianos for the sake of increasing their power.²⁴ These ideas seem to depend on the *fausse table* acting as either a reflective surface in the sense of a speaker's sounding board or further transmitting the piano's vibrations sympathetically.

The *fausse table* disappeared from Pleyels c.1850. With my small experience of this feature in functioning position on Pleyels (it can be raised in tandem with the lid), I can only say that I am puzzled by the notion that it increases the volume. It seems to reduce some upper overtones. I understand from various remarks that as a dustcover (a function imputed to it in modern times) it is useless.

FRAMING

Like all pianos of the time, the Pleyel instruments gradually gained in string tension and heaviness of framing, but remained in clear relation to one another and to a central concept. The various examples that I have heard in person and on recordings seem to imply that alteration of the fundamental qualities was not desired over the years, although "improvement" was constantly sought.²⁵

It is now accepted that the reason for the

lack of any extant Pleyel grands from before perhaps 1820 is that none were made.²⁶ The earliest surviving Pleyel instruments are square pianos, which remained a staple of production for decades. That grands were new in Pleyel's experience might explain the rapid changes among the earliest surviving specimens in the use of metal framing to reinforce the case, as well as heavier wooden framing. We see a progression from three iron bars in the treble of one of the earliest extant examples (Piano No. 930, c.1827; its three-bar arrangement is found some 15 years earlier on Broadwoods); to the same plus a metal plate as treble hitchplank (through the early 1830s); to a full-compass metal hitchplank with bars by the later 1830s. (Iron bars were often included below the soundboard as well to provide further reinforcement.)²⁷ Pleyel adhered to a composite metal frame (neither cast nor welded together but bolted into one piece) throughout the nineteenth century, with several variations along the way. A full five-bar frame of this type appears by 1839, a famous example being the "Chopin piano" No. 7267 of that year. A four-bar composite frame soon took over and continued into the 1850s. A three-bar version appeared by 1855 at the latest and endured (with two bars eventually added by the spine and cheek) at least into the 1880s. By the late 1840s the treble *capo tasto* bar appeared (this feature was apparently retro-fitted to some earlier instruments.). The wooden framing shows many variations as well, although the case rim and liners seem to have been made with greater consistency.

In a recent article, Paul McNulty gives certain frame measurements from an 1830 Pleyel. He describes a 20mm case rim and a soundboard liner of laminates making up a 60mm thickness.²⁸ I have compared this data to examples from the 1840s and '50s (including the 1855 instrument mentioned earlier): the rims and liners are identical. It is likely that rim, heavy liner, and soundboard were seen as an acoustic system,

the liner (cut back on the top inner edge so as not to bind the soundboard directly to the full 60mm width) being perhaps intended to reflect vibrations back into the soundboard rather than allow them to drain into the case. Despite the increasing string tension, and the correspondingly heavier wooden and metal bracing to support it, Pleyel's approach to rim and liner appears to remain fairly constant through the century. Again, basic concepts were adhered to over a long period during which significant development of the piano occurred elsewhere. Camille Pleyel and his successor Wolff were of course "progressive" by the common 19th-century mindset, and interested in greater power and sustain, but appear nonetheless to have been reluctant to compromise the fundamental vision. Even amid the many changes that commenced after Wolff became director, older elements were maintained side-by-side with newer approaches, whether contained in a single instrument or among older and newer styles of piano offered concurrently. In the longer term, the firm seems generally to have introduced carefully incremental change, a point which stands in marked contrast to some of the more startling innovations such as the veneered soundboard.

The salon grand is itself a prime example of old and new co-existing *chez* Pleyel. Crossed strings appeared first in a group of grands (style "Moyen Patron No. 2"), No. 6044-049, commenced in mid-1868.²⁹ Another group of the same model (47179-84) appeared the next year; they are followed immediately in the log by concert grands ("G.P. 1") with the new feature, no. 47185-190.³⁰ The model "P.P. [*Petit Patron*] 3" with crossed strings seems to make its first appearance in 1869, whether one of the batch (No. 47545, the only one directly indicated as possessing *cordes croisées*) or all of them is not clear.³¹ Pleyel may have gone over, at this point or not much later, to crossed strings on most grands, but the (more or less) seven-foot salon

grands at least were offered with the option of parallel or crossed strings until 1899.³² The late-century logs do not indicate parallel stringing on known extant instruments designed thus, nor is this option presented as anything unusual in a Pleyel catalogue dating from 1894, where it is mentioned only regarding the salon grand, just as the other models are specified with *cordes croisées*. The parallel stringing as well as the single-escapement action remained quite normal choices, at least for the one model.

SCALING

As with all makes of piano throughout the nineteenth century, the Pleyel frames were required to withstand more and more tension as techniques of steel production changed, allowing string scaling to be lengthened in expectation of increased sustain and sonority. Clarke cites the company's shift from a c² scale of 285mm for iron stringing (1839) to one of 294mm for Webster steel (1852).³³ (The two pianos of 1846 and 1855, cited earlier, share a scale of 296mm; naturally, small variations occur in assembling instruments.) Erard was already using a yet longer scale by 1845, cf. the Erard of that year at Hatchlands, with c² at 303mm.³⁴

With the unleashing again of the explorative side of the Pleyel firm after 1855, and their eventual adoption of essentially modern "patented steel," scales increased far more radically, e.g. 353mm on a Pleyel concert grand in the Cobbe Collection ("c. 1889," actually 1882).³⁵ This explosion of change parallels the company's short-lived development in 1858 of a concert grand 285cm in length, subsequently brought down to 260cm).³⁶

BRIDGE

Throughout Pleyel's history, the bridge of the grand pianos is normally divided. Following the example of English pianos, a separate

bass segment is employed for the covered strings. Another innovation was responsible for the continuous (one-piece) bridges that are found in several salon-style and larger instruments dating from 1853, 1854, and 1855. (Two of these, No. 21730, now in Italy, and No. 21731, now in America, were the Model "A" instruments [226cm] displayed at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855.³⁷) This change may have been introduced in an attempt to approximate elements of the longer bass scaling of the full-size concert grands. The result is good, with no noticeable break in timbre where the covered strings begin, but this approach seems to have been dropped again. Another variation was the "*chevalet prolongé et suspendu*" promoted in a Pleyel catalogue of 1853.³⁸ The bass end of the bridge was slightly cantilevered so as to bear the last few strings without encumbering the stiff edge of the soundboard (stiff because of the proximity to where the board is glued to the case liner).³⁹ This practice reaches back to French harpsichord building in the eighteenth century. Paul Irvin has suggested that Pleyel might also have experimented with cantilevering the top of the bass bridge so as to extend it backward without likewise lengthening the case and soundboard.⁴⁰ Otherwise, the bridge was designed for sustaining power and immediacy of response and is another element that changed little through time.⁴¹

SOUNDBOARD AND RIBBING

Major variations appear in the soundboard assemblies. The radical experiments (mid-1830s) with veneered soundboards and greatly diverse ribbing were abandoned for subtler variations that developed during the 1840s.

Most typical of the Chopin-era pianos from the later 1830s and throughout the 1840s is the strongly angled wood grain of the soundboard, not parallel to the spine as in most harpsichords (and Erard pianos), but inclining away from the spine toward the bentside, so as to form an

angle of approximately 60 degrees to the bellyrail and nearly perpendicular to a central area of the bridge. (The angle of soundboard to belly varies in early examples from approximately 52 to 68 degrees.) Inevitably, other arrangements are to be found as well. Some examples from the early 1840s show the soundboard grain almost parallel to the bellyrail: that is, nearly perpendicular to the spine. An example from 1839 shows the soundboard grain at about 25 degrees to the belly. Although this characteristic might stem from a later modification, the board nonetheless retains the typically light upper “cutoff bar,” rather than the heavier type that came in later, suggesting that the soundboard is indeed original to the instrument. (The so-called “cutoff bars” appear both above and below the soundboard. The upper one is a narrow, curving strip of wood; the one below is more substantial. The two members respectively mask and reinforce the joint between the soundboard wood itself (which leaves off at the curving bar) and the matching but non-continuous wood on the gap/spine side.) Such instances may have been experiments toward, or anticipations of, the next prevalent style, which angled the grain at some 20 degrees to the bellyrail, again receding to the player’s right. This layout, which seems to have been employed occasionally throughout the 1840s, became the dominant approach in the 1850s and held sway for many years. Pleyel adopted the newer Steinway-like tendencies (grain more or less parallel to the main bridge) by the mid-1890s, but the 20-degree grain angle still appears at least as late as 1904.

Pleyel pianos in which the soundboard grain runs parallel to the spine seem to be rare; the only examples known to me date from 1862 and c.1870. Broadwood kept the grain parallel to the spine into the 1830s. By the 1840s, at least some Broadwoods show the grain angled from the belly rail toward the bentside. Perhaps Broadwood, followed by Pleyel in so many regards, in turn took up one of Pleyel’s innovations.

Ribbing shows enormous diversity, but again most particularly prior to c.1842. The subject cannot be briefly summed up, but the ribs generally form a kind of web across the soundboard. (Indeed, Pleyel’s ribbing concept probably derives from the dainty web of ribbing—greatly enlarged by Pleyel—found in many Broadwoods from early in the century.) Most often from the early ‘40s and on, but occurring earlier as well, the basis is a series of perhaps 11 to 16 ribs crossing the soundboard in parallel but fanning out in the treble. Ribs may intersect with other ribs; some earlier examples show a series of X’s positioned across the soundboard.⁴²

During the 1830s, whatever the variations in ribbing, one frequently finds two curving members placed in positions analogous to the cutoff bar and *boudin* (4’ hitchplank) in eighteenth-century harpsichords. These members are sometimes connected by a third piece branching from one to the other. Again, the English influence is apparent. A typical feature of the Broadwood and Clementi pianos of the early 1800s is the presence of a (relatively) substantial cutoff bar placed (on the underside of the soundboard, of course) quite near to the bridge’s position; often or usually, such a member is extended by a curving piece in the treble. One more variation in Pleyels is the presence of yet another curving member (on the underside of the soundboard) running closely parallel to the bridge.

In the 1840s and continuing into the 1850s, the “cutoff bar” and “*boudin*” became constants or near-constants; as before, they cut through the straight ribs that cross the soundboard. These straight ribs tend to be oriented at 50 to 60 degrees to the soundboard grain, whether the latter is angled at 20 degrees or 60 degrees. Altogether, each of these two frequently occurring patterns is something of a “rotation” of the other. Illustrations 1 and 2 show the treble ribbing and overall ribbing on two representative instruments, salon grands of 1845 and 1855, respectively.

In both styles, the ribs are typically heaviest in the middle of the soundboard and lightest in the bass and treble areas.⁴³ The same appears to be true of the thin soundboards themselves, thickest at the centre and thinnest in treble and bass.⁴⁴ The ribs themselves tend to be tapered toward their ends.

Whether these variations were made in pursuit of stability or particular tone qualities is a fraught question, since so many other variables are also operating, but the aural results of at least the two dominant patterns (soundboard grain angled at 60 and 20 degrees) appear to be quite similar, probably owing to the related elements of the web-like ribbing. The pre-1840 pianos, being lighter in scaling, string tension, etc., are not candidates for direct comparison. Generally, of course, they tend to have a somewhat smaller sound of the same character, in some specimens a bit “woody” in the treble (a common characterization). My direct experience with these is far less extensive than with post-1840 instruments.

It is notable that the lines of the wood grain between the bridge and the soundboard’s edge are much shorter and more direct with the 20-degree orientation than with that of 60 degrees; indeed, with the former, the grain is more or less perpendicular to the bridge for much of its length. Since vibrations travel approximately twice as fast along the wood grain as across it, it is therefore possible that the 20-degree position allows a shorter cycle of reflections between the liner and the bridge. That is, the vibrations reflected back from the heavy (60mm) liner move more efficiently with the 20-degree soundboard angle.⁴⁵

By the mid-1870s the salon grands, retaining (like other models) the 20-degree grain orientation, became ribbed more plainly, losing the “boudin” while retaining the cutoff bar. The now heavier ribs are laid out parallel to one another (abandoning the earlier tendency to fan out) and are set at a narrower angle to the

soundboard grain (approximately 35 degrees). The ribs, themselves tapered, are still graduated in size, with the heaviest in the middle of the soundboard. The wooden framing (rim, bracing) is much as in the early 1850s, the liner slightly more massive even than before.⁴⁶ It is conceivable that the liner’s mass was adjusted to preserve something of the old balance between increased string tension, soundboard response, and case drain-off.

PROGRESS

A fascinating if futile subject for speculation is what Chopin would have made of the various developmental stages of the pianos with which his name is linked. Through the later nineteenth century, at least some of the Pleyel instruments became significantly distanced from those the composer knew. What would have been his reactions to the company’s (difficult to regulate) double-escapement action, or to the sonorities of crossed strings and lengthened scales? There is no known instance of the composer retaining an older piano in preference to newer ones. On the contrary, Pleyel seems to have supplied him with a new instrument from every few years to every few months.⁴⁷ But would he at some point have declared the latest progress to be retrogressive?

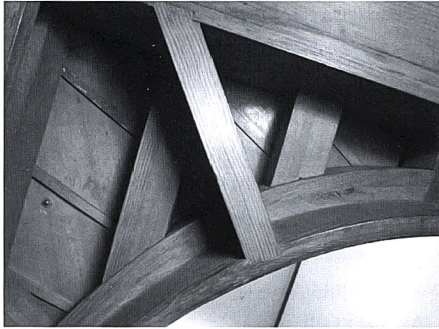


Illustration 1. Pleyel Piano No. 11820 (1845), detail of ribbing, treble.
(Courtesy Patricia Frederick.)



Illustration 2. Pleyel Piano No. 21742 (1855), detail of treble ribbing
(Courtesy Anne and Chris Acker.)

- ¹ I will not attempt to disentangle all of Pleyel's terms for concert and salon grands, but will refer here to the two types generically. The models changed every few years, as did their designations. The latter included several letters (most commonly A and D: concert and salon grands respectively), names (e.g. "*Petit Patron*," "*Petit Modèle*"), and numbers ("No. 1," "No. 2") in combination with other terms. Pleyel's grands of the 1820s and '30s were "concert grands," of some 240cm in length (248cm by the later '40s; 260 cm by 1867) and slightly abbreviated versions as well. More "domestic" grands were introduced around 1839, instruments now ranging in length from some 180cm to the concert instrument at 240cm. In the late '40s and early '50s, salon grands measured about 212-214cm; 220cm became the standard some few years later. (This model with either crossed or parallel strings remained popular throughout the century.) Starting in the late 1850s, Pleyel began to produce an ever-widening variety of grand pianos, a notable difference from the two basic models presented in 1853. A Pleyel catalogue for that year is reproduced in Jean-Jacques Trinquès, *Le Piano Pleyel d'un millénaire à l'autre* [Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003], 307-10. A catalogue of 1867, with comparisons to that of 1853, is transcribed in Jean Jude, *Pleyel 1757-1857 La Passion d'un Siècle* (Fondettes: Imprimerie du Centre Loire, 2008), 331-41. Jude, *Pleyel 1757-1857*, 179 and Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, "Chopin et la manufacture Pleyel" in Eigeldinger, ed., *Frédéric Chopin Interprétations* (Geneva: Droz, 2005): 96 both reproduce a Pleyel catalogue from 1840, which describes the models of that period. These include two grand pianos: a seven-foot, five-inch concert instrument and a six-foot salon model, the "*Petit Patron*".
- ² The agraffe is a guide (usually metal, screwed into the pinblock or plate) which positions the strings vertically and laterally. Agraffes replaced the pinned nut. Each course of strings possesses its own agraffe, passing through a hole and pressing up against the hole's upper surface, which is contoured for one, two, or three strings.
- ³ Anonymous, Online, <<http://www.pianosromantiques.com/pleyelhistory.html>>, Accessed 20 July 2015.
- ⁴ The most thorough accounts I have found in English on Pleyel technicalities are the items by Christopher Clarke, listed in the Bibliography. I recommend them to the interested reader.
- ⁵ The g⁴ on No. 930 (c.1827) seems to be a later addition.
- ⁶ The new seven-octave concert model is mentioned in the review *France Musicale* (12 May 1844) according to Jude (*Pleyel 1757-1857*, 188). Pleyel Pianos No. 10709 and 10710, both designated in the workshop log as "A" (concert grand) with seven octaves, were commenced at the start of 1844. (Cf. "Erard, Pleyel, & Gaveau Archive Collection," Musée de la musique, Cité de la musique, Paris, Online, <<http://archivesmusee.citedelamusique.fr/en/pleyel/archives.html>>, Pleyel Archives, Registres de fabrication, Années 1833 à 1846, No. de série 2990 à 12 871, No. inv. E.2009.5.7E.2009.5.7, Element 150.) Jean Jude states that No. 9726 and 9727 (commenced in early 1842) were the first seven-octave grands. They do not appear to be so designated in the log (*Ibid.*, Element 131). Cf. Jude, *Pleyel 1757-1857*, 187. In any case, these are not the first seven-octave Pleyels. The company had made what might have been experimental seven-octave models as early as 1833-34, if only for exhibition display. "*Un piano à queue à sept octaves*," and "*Un grand pianino à deux cordes, sept octaves*" are mentioned in *Notice de produits de l'industrie française* (1834):15; the seven-octave grand is mentioned in *La Romance, Journal de musique* (1834-35): 82 and in the *Gazette musicale de Paris* 1 (1834): 220. The pianino would appear to be seven octaves from C⁴ to c⁵, according to a description in the *Mémorial encyclopédique et progressif des connaissances*, (4-5, François Malepeyre, 1834): 243. All of these passages are given on the website <http://www.lieveverbeeck.eu/Pleyel_Expositions_1827-1844.htm>. Pleyel's seven-octave pianino(s) are probably No. 3050-51, found in the fabrication log (*Pleyel Archives*, 1833-46, Element 2). The grand was likely made in 1833 and antedated the extant logs. I

should add that, experimental or not, further seven-octave pianinos (No. 3394-99) appear a few pages later in the log (Pleyel Archives, 1833-46, Element 8).

7 "Erard, Pleyel, & Gaveau" *op. cit.*, Pleyel: Registres de fabrication, Années 1846 à 1856, No. de série 12 872 à 22 884, No. inv. E.2009.5.8, Elements 136-188. This segment of log entries covers the period from the beginning of 1854 to the end of 1855.

8 "Erard, Pleyel, & Gaveau" *op. cit.*, Pleyel: Registres de fabrication, Années 1846 à 1856, No. de série 12 872 à 22 884, No. inv. E.2009.5.8, Elements 136-188. This segment of log entries covers the period from the beginning of 1854 to the end of 1855.

9 Pleyel: Registres de fabrication, Années 1833 à 1846, No. de série 2990 à 12 871, No. inv. E.2009.5.7, Elements 169-189.

10 Pleyel: Registres de fabrication, Années 1846 à 1856, No. de série 12 872 à 22 884, No. inv. E.2009.5.8, Elements 165-88.

11 Pleyel: Registres de fabrication, Années 1846 à 1856, No. de série 12 872 à 22 884, No. inv. E.2009.5.8, Elements 46-56.

12 Christopher Clarke, "Pleyel's Pianos during Chopin's Parisian Years: Their Characteristics and their place in contemporary Piano Building," in Florence Gétreau, ed., *Chopin and the Pleyel Sound* (Briosco: Villa Medici Giuliani, 2010), 233. [Trilingual publication.]

13 The year 1856 is given in René Beaupain, *Chronologie des Pianos de la Maison Pleyel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), 120.

14 Paul McNulty, "The Making of a Pleyel, Part II," (Makers' Reports), *Harpsichord & Fortepiano Magazine*, 14/ 2 (Spring 2010): 6-7. McNulty mentions that following the original dimensions of the 1830 instrument resulted in a keydip of 8.8mm, which is unusually deep. (8mm is considered typical of Pleyels).

15 See photographs of Pleyel, Wolff & Cie., No. 104198 (given as 1894, actually 1891) in the Sammlung Dohr Köln, Pianomuseum Haus Eller, Online, <http://www.pianomuseum.eu/hammerfluegel_liste.htm#_1894_pleyel>, accessed 20 July 2015. The action is described by the Museum as "*englische Mechanik ohne doppelte Auslösung*" ("English action without double escapement").

16 Kenneth Mobbs, "A Performer's Comparative Study of Touchweight, Key-dip, Keyboard Design, and Repetition in Early Grand Pianos, c. 1770 to 1850" (*Galpin Society Journal* 54 [May 2001]):18-24.

17 *Ibid.*, 22.

18 Some of these comments are summarized in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's excellent *Chopin, Pianist and Teacher as seen by his pupils*, transl. Naomi Shohet with Krycia Osotowicz and Roy Howat, ed. Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25-26. By the way, it is commonplace to read in modern commentaries of a weak treble as also characteristic of the Pleyel instruments, but that has not been my experience with any examples that I have encountered.

19 On his website, Max di Mario offers detailed discussion in several online articles regarding this complex topic. Cf. M. Di Mario, <<http://acortot.blogspot.com/>>. See also Flavio Ponzi, <www.flavio-ponzi.it/ING/PleyelRossini_ING.html>.

20 Christopher Clarke, "Affect in Action: Hammer Design in French Romantic Pianos," in Thomas Steiner, ed., *Proceedings of the Harmoniques* (Colloquium, Lausanne) (Berne: Peter Lang, 2015; publication scheduled for Autumn, 2015):12-13 (draft). See also Clarke, "Pleyel's Pianos during Chopin's Parisian Years, Their Characteristics and Their Place in Contemporary Piano Building," in Florence Gétreau, ed., *Chopin and the Pleyel Sound* (Briosco: Villa Medici Giuliani, 2010), 236.

21 Clarke, "Affect in Action," draft, 3-4.

22 Private communication (November 2014) from Elaine Fuller, based on extensive knowledge and practical experience of natural and historical fibre materials and techniques.

23 "*Sa fonction est de modifier la qualité du son et d'en augmenter un peu le volume.*" C[laude] Montal, *L'Art d'accorder soi-même son piano* (Paris: Meissonier, 1836), 14.

24 Jude, *Pleyel 1757-1857*, 323.

25 Cf. correspondence in the *Revue musicale* (Vol. 18, 1851) among the elder Fétis, Camille Pleyel, and C. Sax. Available online under the title "Correspondance Pleyel - Fétis - Sax," at <http://www.lieyeverbeeck.eu/Pleyel_Sax_Correspondance.htm>. Unfortunately, Camille Pleyel's contributions are largely restricted to rather irritated rebuttals of Fétis' comments.

26 Dating the Pleyel instruments up to the early 1830s is problematic, in part because the earliest Pleyel log books are missing. (The extant volumes commence with 1829 [sales records] and 1833 [workshop logs].) The earliest

surviving Pleyel grands appear to date from the late 1820s, although the standard piano atlases place No. 930, for instance, as c.1811 rather than c.1827. (See Jean-Jacques Trinques, *Le Piano Pleyel d'un millenaire à l'autre* [Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003], 225-301. Trinques argues convincingly for a revised dating of the earlier Pleyel instruments.) There is considerable evidence from extant instruments that Pleyel dating even as far as 1850 became subject to falsification, or perhaps merely crude estimation for the sake of a complete (if useless) chronology.

- 27 Trinques, *op. cit.*, regarding No. 1559 (1830), 265. This instrument bears three iron bars above and seven below. Perhaps some of these, like the extension of the compass to g^3 , were later modifications. It should be noted that many early Pleyel grands were reworked some decades later at the factory, and sometimes show added reinforcement, as well as features characteristic of a later date. Such alterations often included replacing the fallboard with a new one bearing the newest style of inscription. The presence of an anachronistic style of inscription is often a first clue to other modifications.
- 28 Paul McNulty, "The Making of a Pleyel, Part I," *Makers' Reports, Harpsichord & Fortepiano Magazine* 14/ 1 (Autumn 2009): 6. McNulty also remarks on the soundboard not being glued to the bellyrail except in the treble, and states that the bass is much better for this. The point was proven by experimentally inserting a wedge at the bellyrail/soundboard gap, producing a strong reduction in bass response.
- 29 Pleyel: Registres de fabrication, Années 1868 à 1874, No. de série 45401 à 57900, No. inv. E.2009.5.11, Element 14. This may have been an entire batch of instruments with crossed strings, but No. 46048 is the only one individually annotated as having the new feature, and it is traditionally cited as the first exemplar (cf. Beaupain, 121).
- 30 *Ibid.*, Element 37. In both these groups, successive instruments are labelled repeatedly "*cordes croisées*." It is clear from these instances that Pleyel's first use of crossed strings was not a one-off experiment.
- 31 *Ibid.*, Element 44. Again, the unique indication for crossed strings among this group is the log annotation for No. 47545.
- 32 Mentioned in Beaupain, 124.
- 33 Clarke, "Pleyel's Pianos," 233-34.
- 34 Alec Cobbe with David Hunt, *Composer Instruments* (The Cobbe Collection Trust/National Trust, 2000), 57.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 65. Clarke, who fully discusses the adoption of steel strings, mentions a scaling as high as 370mm. Clarke, "Pleyel's Pianos," 234.
- 36 Beaupain, 122.
- 37 Anonymous, "*Sentimenti ad alta fedeltà*", Online, <<http://www.fondoambiente.it/Attivita-FAI/Index.aspx?q=herbert-schuch-suona-fortepiano-pleyel->>. Accessed 20 July 2015.
- 38 Reproduced in Trinques, 308. This "*nouveau système*" cost an extra 100 francs.
- 39 I thank Michael Frederick (Frederick Collection) for this explanation; I have not myself seen an example of the extended bridge.
- 40 Paul Irvin, private communication, March 2015.
- 41 Clarke comments on the calibration for quick response of Pleyel's "low, flat" bridges. Cf. "Pleyel's Pianos," 239.
- 42 See for instance, Online, <<http://www.pianosromantiques.com>>, photographs of Pleyel Piano No. 6197 (1837), including a full view of the underside showing the ribbing. (A plan view of the upper side is also provided, and another of No. 12478 of 1845.) his site offers numerous photographs of many Pleyel pianos (as well as Erards and Boisselots) from before 1850. Features shown on many of these instruments include actions, wrestplank details, keyboard cavities, soundboards, ribbing, and framing.
- 43 Flavio Ponzi discusses this point at www.flavio-ponzi.it/ING/PleyelRossini_ING.html.
- 44 Noticeable by tapping; and suggested by McNulty, "*The Making of a Pleyel, Part I*," 6.
- 45 My thanks to Elaine Fuller for pointing out this possibility and to Paul Irvin for further discussion of the point.
- 46 Illustrations of Pleyel ribbing of this era can be found on the anonymous website "Fotoarchiv für historischen Klavierbau", Online, <<http://hammerfluegel.info/coppermine15/index.php>>.
- 47 Jean Jude has tabulated most of these instruments in *Pleyel 1757-1857*, 235-38. (Since that publication two other pianos associated with Chopin have been identified.) These instruments are primarily salon grands; they include also squares and uprights. Records are scanty for the 1830s, but starting with 1843 there is evidence of a new instrument virtually every year, and sometimes more frequently. Of course, shifts from one location to another account for some of the variety. The full list of pianos (apparently some two dozen) with which Chopin had any documented relationship has been tabulated by Alain Kohler. Cf. Kohler, *Les pianos Pleyel chez Chopin pendant sa relation avec George Sand*. Online book at <http://www.musicologie.org/15/les_pianos_pleyel_chez_chopin_pendant_sa_relation_avec_george_sand.html>.