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THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY PLEYEL PIANOS: An Appreciation, Part II

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Part I of this essay described the background of the Pleyel grand pianos during the "Chopin period" (with reference to instruments from later in the century) and technical aspects that affect the sound and action. The focus was on the salon grand, one of Chopin's preferred types and generally conceded to be the company's most successful model during the period in question. The present segment will look at these instruments as a playing experience for those most accustomed (like the author) to earlier instruments and for the player of the modern piano. These observations are based on explorations of Pleyels in various circumstances over the years.

SOUND QUALITY

As remarked in Part 1, there seems to have been no single "Pleyel sound" at any one time during the period in question. However, the common factors are a dark, round, but clear tone, and intimacy rather than sheer volume, although the smaller grands are quite loud enough for salons and even small halls.

One often associates a clear tone with brightness, but the clarity of the largely mellow Pleyels is partly a result of the nature of the tonal sustain (described below). Clarity is furthered by the parallel strings in the bass. Although the arrangement of crossed strings is typically hailed in piano histories as an achievement in sonority, fundamental to the progress of the instrument, it was not universally welcomed in the nineteenth century. Hans von Bülow famously complained to Bechstein that certain passages in his repertoire were compromised by the new arrangement.[1] Recently, Daniel Barenboim has made headlines for commissioning a piano built in the modern style but with parallel stringing.[2]

Some keyboard instruments of whatever kind, particularly harpsichords, can give a sense of their voluptuous timbres when one sounds only a single note. Pleyel pianos are not so indulgent. Tones sounded without relation to one another, as when first "trying out" an instrument, can seem curiously inert, yet the entire organism acquires life when the notes take their places in a musical context.[3] An early Pleyel in good condition sings out clearly, and the varying timbres across the compass (characteristic of course of all pre-Steinway pianos) both clarify the voicing of musical textures and blend euphoniously in a particular, glowing manner that I have heard on no other make of piano, early or late, excepting Conrad Graf's instruments--although the latter's particular euphony is of a somewhat different nature.[4]

The reference to Graf recalls the recurrent comment in the literature, concerning the Viennese instruments' ability to clarify the close voicing of the low-range C Major chord at the opening of the second half of the Andante from Mozart's Sonata K.310. That passage became a test of mine when exploring Pleyels, as with

other antique pianos, and to my surprise I found them nearly as successful in the passage as the earlier instruments. The tone manages to sound with a "romantic" voluptuousness while remaining transparent, a quality that in some contexts one can only wish for on a modern grand.

I was happy to find that on well-restored specimens the attack of a note did not begin with a burst of transients. This quality (and/or a certain "honking" characteristic) was present on some examples owing to work-hardened hammer felts or to some lack in newer replacements. However, with the various factors properly set up, the Pleyel has a unique voice of great intimacy and colour. Played below fortissimo, these instruments do not evidence the sometimes shrill upper partials so common in today's pianos; on the other hand, striking hard can elicit the inharmonicity lurking in the tone above a certain dynamic level. Pleyels here resemble clavichords, for the very highest level of even the finest clavichord's dynamic range seems best utilised only to indicate an outer limit rather than to dwell there. (Chopin himself used fortissimo only occasionally.) More significant for most musical circumstances, departure from a given dynamic context can stand out for timbral reasons, as will be discussed.

As mentioned in Part I of this article, the intended effect of Pleyel hammer coverings was to allow a strong differentiation of timbre from one dynamic extreme to another and all points between. Chopin referred to his own piano as a "perfidious traitor" and it is well known that he could not abide strident attacks. One sees what he meant when playing a properly restored instrument, for mis-proportioned dynamics stand out not only dynamically but by the sometimes harsh intrusion of non-matching timbres. The Pleyel instruments are by no means "veiled" when played forte or fortissimo and as Chopin implied, they are also not accommodating. Like a responsive clavichord, they readily show up any lapse in the player's control, and a misplaced dynamic level even on a single note can stand out very readily--or, as Chopin often put it, "bark like a dog."[5]

I do not mean to imply that a Pleyel of the period cannot handle heavy, aggressive textures such as the agitated chord exchanges toward the end of the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata Appassionata. But an unfocused beating of the strings has to be avoided. Again, like the clavichord, Pleyels require the player to listen to what is offered, not to impose an idea from without. On more intimate levels, the flowering of the tone can suggest, for example, the timing of an arpeggio that opens a nocturne. For students of 19th-century performance practice, as for earlier performance styles, knowledge of the original instruments is indispensable.

A pleasing aspect is the sustaining power of a good specimen, and the nature of its tonal decay. For example, on the 1855 instrument mentioned in the technical discussion, the notes $d\#^1$ and a^1 (I chose two representative, middle-range notes) both possess a total duration of some 18 seconds; with the sustaining pedal down, the sounds last for about 30 seconds. Bass notes, without pedal, were found to sustain on the same piano for between 25 and 30 seconds. This capacity approaches the sustain of the same pitches on a good-quality modern grand.

Waveform diagrams of modern piano tone typically show (following the attack) an initial high amplitude (including small-level declines and renewals) followed by two or three successive renewals (each after a marked decline) with ever lower amplitude. (One can of course perceive directly at least some of this ebb and flow.) In addition to their sustaining capacity, the Pleyel instruments seem to decay more smoothly than modern pianos, with less noticeable ebb and flow as the sound diminishes.

If this 18-second duration seems unusual (I timed the notes on several occasions), I can only say that Pleyels, like other pianos, survive in

various states of acoustical well-being. I have found the same quality of duration (although I had no watch available) on well-preserved Pleyels from the 1840s. I have also heard specimens from the early 1850s, structurally equivalent to the 1855 example that, owing to deterioration of one or another kind, lack such fine sustain. To create a long-lasting tone was a known concern of Camille Pleyel's.[6] Given how readily pianos can show their age, I incline to think that in their original state, Pleyels typically sustained very well indeed.

The combination of a gentle attack (below strenuous dynamics) with the sustaining capacity and steady decay enables very smooth legato. A simple progression of four-part chords sounds much more relaxed than with the (comparatively) fraught tension inherent in the tone of modern pianos; the contrast is reminiscent of the relaxed feeling of quarter-comma meantone vs. equal temperament. Experimenting with simple chordal textures on several instruments in good condition, I found that, particularly at a median dynamic level or softer, the effect was reminiscent of a gently voiced organ stop. Exploring further, I was astonished to find that, despite the good sustain, one could hold down the damper pedal through a series of changing harmonies (at a moderate pace) and with judicious dynamics produce, not a blurred jangle, but only a slightly "veiled" lustre. As players will know, such prolonged pedalling on Viennese pianos of the 1820s or before often requires only that each successive chord be attacked at a dynamic minutely above the volume of the prior chord; and such flexibility is still present to a degree in mid-century Pleyels. This quality is rather remarkable, given the sustain capability; it is likely that the mellow tone, parallel stringing, and variation of possible attack conduce to this effect.

The Pleyel merits another comparison to the clavichord. Both instruments, by certain qualities and responses of timbre and dynamics, go rather far in instructing the player as to what approach to a given texture is most effective. It is my impression that the Pleyel pianos offer adverse reaction to some dynamic proportioning and encourage others, so that any yapping dogs are silenced. The modern piano, by its very uniformity, is accommodating of misplaced emphases to a far greater degree than most 19th-century instruments. Artur Schnabel (who disliked period pianos) particularly praised Bechsteins for this very quality of neutrality, remarking that the instrument did not interfere with his own musical intentions.[7] (In the 20th and 21st centuries, pianos have, of course, largely abandoned the strong dynamic/timbral differentiation achieved through (quite labour-intensive) discreetly layered hammer coverings that was a distinctive feature of the Romantic piano.[8]

The mid-century Pleyels (like other, earlier pianos) are decidedly not neutral. They have an opinion, and just as the capacities and limitations of Baroque instruments have helped to make sense of performance practices described in treatises, so of course can the Romantic pianos elucidate their own repertoire. Pleyels in fact seem to be highly suggestive regarding restoration of the 19th-century palette of inflections.

ACTION

Even with the larger and heavier parts (compared to early-19th-century Broadwoods), Pleyel's single-escapement action offers a sense of immediate, uncomplicated control that is lacking in more complex mechanisms. The company defended its conservative adherence to the single escapement as late as 1875, with a statement more evocative than precise: "This action places the artist's hand in direct rapport with the string which can vibrate under his impulsion."[9] Certainly the hand is placed in a more direct rapport with the hammer than with

any double-escapement mechanism.

Despite the emphasis in modern commentaries and histories on the "progress" represented by double-escapement actions, 19th-century pianists do not always seem to have cared what type of mechanism the piano offered, provided it worked efficiently. Liszt, for example, often performed on Erards (famed for their double escapement) but after much use of them was apparently happy to tour (in the mid-1840s) with a single-escapement Boisselot, a make of instrument for which he had a particular affection. He kept one in his study and remarked that he had worn the ivories down, but planned never to part with it.[10] His pupil Hans von Bülow, a famous promoter of Bechstein pianos, definitely preferred the single-escapement action, and considered it superior to (at least) Bechstein's own efforts at a double escapement.[11]

For one coming primarily from earlier Viennese pianos, the Pleyel's at first seemingly massive actions offer a startling combination of a weightier feel, nearly modern key dimensions, the single escapement, and a key-dip of 8mm (or slightly more). These factors at first seem cumbersome in terms of the full return needed for repetition. Although these actions are frequently described as either quite light or noticeably heavy (with no comparison given), the fact is that their weight was variable (as mentioned in Part I). Certainly, depth of touch can be confused with heaviness, as in so many period descriptions (early 1800s) of English vs. Viennese pianos. As Kenneth Mobbs points out, the English action of Beethoven's time was not really so much heavier than the Viennese, as slightly deeper.[12] On the other hand, players accustomed to modern actions can find the Pleyel disturbingly light and shallow, especially as recent pianos often show a keydip of 11mm. The Pleyel octave span, too, is usually some 1.5mm narrower than today's standard; and uniformity seems to be of huge importance to mainstream pianists.[13]

Most players being based in either the Pleyel's past or future, then, the need to clear the key at 8mm for repetition is usually a novel sensation that must be assimilated.(Then too, the key dip can exceed 8mm, if the action fabrics are compressed. Pleyel used a padded rail near the distal end of the keyboard to limit the motion.) Yet another aspect of the action that would make the Pleyel feel heavy to fortepianists and "odd" to Steinway artists is the location of the key levers' balance point. The fulcrum is more forward than in modern pianos, usually located (measuring from the keyfronts) about one third back along the overall length of the levers, as opposed to halfway as in modern actions. This design factor undoubtedly provides more power to the action, but could disturb the player who prefers a Cadillac to a sportscar. Nonetheless, with the action properly set up and lubricated, the key moves in a smooth descent with little if any sense of intermediate mechanical hurdles and provides very good repetition. I understand that once adjusted properly, these actions require little maintenance. For the player accustomed to it, a well-regulated Pleyel action feels undemandingly co-operative, reliable, smoothly responsive to subtle dynamic shadings, and in fact very comfortable.

An important point regarding touch and dynamics is that, although the action weight can approach that of the modern grand as far as weight required for silent keyfall, its sensitive response also offers the instrument's full dynamic range to the fingers alone, "weight" technique being scarcely required. In one sense, then, the action tends to be heavy; in another, light. As with the clavichord, once more, the instrument's full dynamic compass is compacted within a small range of physical responses. The appropriate playing technique is surely the approach described by (and said to be characteristic of) Chopin: relaxed but scarcely participating arms, loose and active wrists, and relaxed fingers, the latter falling upon the keys

(as Chopin put it) rather than striking or pushing them.[14]

A.J. Hipkins, who observed Chopin closely when playing, stated that "Chopin kept his elbows close to his sides and played only with finger touch, no weight from the arms."[15] The composer himself, in the draft for his planned piano method, included the following: "Just as we need to use the conformation of the fingers, we need to use the rest of the hand, the wrists, the forearm, and the upper arm. One cannot try to play everything from the wrist, as Kalkbrenner claims." [16] The point here, in view of the accounts by Hipkins and other observers, seems to be to support and enable certain movements by means of the arms and forearms (as by "the rest of the hand") rather than to play with movements based in the arms. Chopin's comment is made in obvious opposition to Frédéric Kalkbrenner's approach, limited to wrist and fingers, as being too constrictive. Kalkbrenner, a brilliant pianist, used Pleyels (and was, indeed, closely involved with the company); he obviously found no need to utilise other than wrist and fingers in playing.[17] For both his and his younger colleague's approaches, preserving suppleness at all times is fundamental. Even for the fullest dynamics and textures there is scarcely any need (if at all) for more than occasional and minimal arm weight.

At first encounter with so deep a single-escapement action I found trilling a bit problematic, but then recalled that Chopin advocated changing fingers in trills; and the suitability of this technique became immediately obvious. Such fingering (e.g., 32313231) can be useful on the harpsichord and early pianos; but I found it particularly helpful on Pleyels before I became more fully conversant with the action. (Trilling by wrist-rotation does not seem to be particularly apt for deep single escapements.) It also occurred to me, as probably to the reader at this point, that the French 19th-century "high-fingered" piano technique may have developed as single-escapement actions became deeper. However, I cannot say that I have ever found such an approach necessary.

Even when at first unfamiliar with these actions, one can control them quite reliably down to a low pianissimo. Playing at very soft levels with the mellow clarity of tone and variety of colour is perhaps one of the instrument's most beguiling qualities. However, the timbral colouring continues into the higher dynamic regions; and although Liszt famously found Pleyels insufficient for his expansive public performances, the forte levels are more than adequate in a salon setting. In fact, after youthful reading about Pleyel pianos as rather quiet instruments, I was surprised at first exposure to discover how full the volume can be.

TIMBRE AND TONE

Chopin's well-known statement about "creating his own tone" at a Pleyel, as opposed to the less personal, manufactured-in-advance tone that he found in Erards, is usually cited in terms of the Pleyel action, but the remark goes beyond the obvious point of a finely regulated mechanism responding accurately to a sensitive player.[18] Pleyel's actions are indeed responsive in that way, but Chopin's comment actually extends to the production of the varied tone qualities associated on Pleyels with different dynamic levels. Given the very immediate brightening and mellowing of timbre when moving up and down the dynamic scale, Chopin could "create his own tone" through the subtly prismatic effect of changing timbres in any passage rendered with delicate variations in dynamics; and the effect is heightened with colour changes by tessitura. It would be for this capacity in shading and colouring that Chopin preferred the Pleyel over the Erard's "ready-made" but less variable tone. By the responsive action's direct enabling of the subtle correlation of timbres and dynamic levels, in addition to the

inherent variety across the compass, the instrument must have given Chopin a wider palette of colour and effect than he could find elsewhere. In fact, it can persuade the player that different touches, rather than dynamics, vary the timbre.

The price of the Pleyel's colourful shadings is that its demanding nature leaves the player much more exposed than the "safe" Erard. Again, the immediate variation of timbre at closely related dynamic levels requires that the player consider the nature and strength of dynamic accents with especial care--and render them with equal care. (Hence the composer's characterization of the instrument as a "perfidious traitor.") Certainly, the newcomer can be put off by the action itself, but perhaps for Chopin's reason as well. The notion, so often trotted forth, that the composer's physical weakness caused him to prefer the Pleyel, seems quite irrelevant, indeed mistaken: he stated that he preferred the Pleyel pianos when he was feeling stronger and able to "create his own tone." Indeed, he expressed a preference for Pleyels immediately upon his arrival in Paris, when he was not in a moribund condition; and he seems to have played quietly even at his Parisian debut. The real point of his subdued approach is not weakness, but that he was oriented, as is commonly agreed, to the fine nuances of music-making in the salon rather than larger venues. For Liszt, in (the classic) contrast, the more outspoken Erards, Streichers, and Boisselots were naturally the pianos of choice.

We think of mid-century Pleyels primarily in relation to Chopin; but after all, they were used for a wide variety of repertoire. Nonetheless, in considering the Pleyel as a general-purpose instrument for sometimes casually surveying keyboard literature, orchestral scores, etc., I suppose that one could easily be reminded of Chopin's other oft-quoted remark on the Pleyel serving as an indicator of how badly one is playing.

To include a non-Chopinesque blue note: the various Pleyels that I have explored seemed curiously neutral with 18th-century repertoire, appearing to require slow tempi and sounding as if the music were framed behind glass and a bit faded. I mention this otherwise irrelevant, whimsical response only because it brought home to me in a new way the issue of how one reacts to what is familiar or unfamiliar, regardless of relevance. There seems no reason that Bach or Mozart should sound more "removed" on an 1845 Pleyel than on a 2015 Steinway, unless Schnabel's preferred quality of neutrality is an influence here.

DAMPING

As is commonly recognized, the damping on Pleyel pianos, and the English pianos from which they derive, is not quite instantaneous. These instruments possess an extremely light damping mechanism. The makers could certainly have provided more complete damping, but the light wooden damper heads are likely one component of a finely calibrated playoff among their own weight, the soft felt, and the string tension (much higher than on a Broadwood of c.1800; the latter could employ lighter dampers to make a comparable damping arrangement). Given that English and French harpsichords of the late eighteenth century preserved the traditional sloping cut to the dampers, which allows their respective strings to vibrate sympathetically when a stop is turned off (the dampers withdrawing entirely from their strings), Broadwood and Pleyel may conceivably have planned their damping systems to preserve and continue something of this aesthetic.

The end result is that the individual dampers function efficiently enough as to cutting off the sound when needed, but the overall lightness of the damping allows the string band as a whole (when the sustaining pedal is not employed) to resonate with a minute but charming effect,

a little halo of sympathetic vibration, most notable in thin textures. (Stephen Birkett puts it well: "By design choice, damping was not as instantaneous as one would expect on a modern piano, producing an after-ring which is quite characteristic."[19]

The slight lustre added by the damping arrangements of such makers as Pleyel and Broadwood is very beguiling and adds to the liveliness of the sound (like unmuted strings passing from bridge to tuning pins in a clavichord). Players and restorers who require sharp silence should reflect that they are working contrary to the expected sound. In any case, ambiguity should be welcome in an age increasingly limited to binary choices.

DAMPER PEDAL

Although this resource functions as on the modern instrument, a little more discretion is required with the mid-century Pleyels. The response is so quick and the soundboards so vibrant that even playing without pedal can have a very "wet" effect, and with the dampers lifted that effect is greatly augmented. (These qualities are more pronounced from the listener's perspective than from the player's up-close position.) It is not surprising therefore to learn of Chopin that "he changed fingers upon a key as often as an organ player."[20]

Texture allowing, the natural lustre of the unpedalled sonority is another useful colour option. As with vibrato on bowed instruments until the early twentieth century, the pedal in the nineteenth century seems often to have been regarded (apart from its required use in widely spread textures) as a (frequent) colour resource rather than a background constant. Perhaps this characteristic lies behind the common attribution of "dry" playing to 19th-century French pianism generally.

Raising the foot to return the dampers must be accomplished with a motion more caressing than abrupt, because the full complement of dampers, striking upon the resonant string band with less than complete damping, can create audible thumps.

UNA CORDA

Further colour resources are provided by the so-called *una corda* pedal.[21] As today, the device shifts the action to engage two strings, but to far greater effect than on the modern instrument. Used at mezzo forte levels and below, the timbre, although not entirely removed from the primary sound, presents another aspect of the piano's voice: a distant, elegiac quality. At low dynamics and in conjunction with the sustaining pedal, it is especially haunting. However, the una corda also reduces the sharpness of attack in louder playing that, with all three strings, would be much brighter. Thus, the left pedal provides a valuable extension of the instrument's palette of mellow timbres into somewhat higher dynamics.

ARPEGGIATION AND ASYNCHRONISATION

The Pleyel's warm, clear sound, together with the immediate and precise dynamic response, seems almost to encourage various degrees of chord breaking and sometimes even bold arpeggiation. Unnotated arpeggiation was of course part of the Romantic playing style; it is easy to associate it with the general euphony of the instrument.

As Kenneth Hamilton points out all too accurately, one can sit down at a Chopin-era Pleyel and bring to it all of the predispositions bred by modern pianos and modern performance practice.[22] But that is to miss the point of what these instruments have to tell us. If we are to use period pianos, we need as well to explore--and accept--the styles of timing and emphasis that can be learned from accounts of 19th-century performances and from recordings by artists raised in that environment. It is not uncommon, when the "liberties" of pre-World

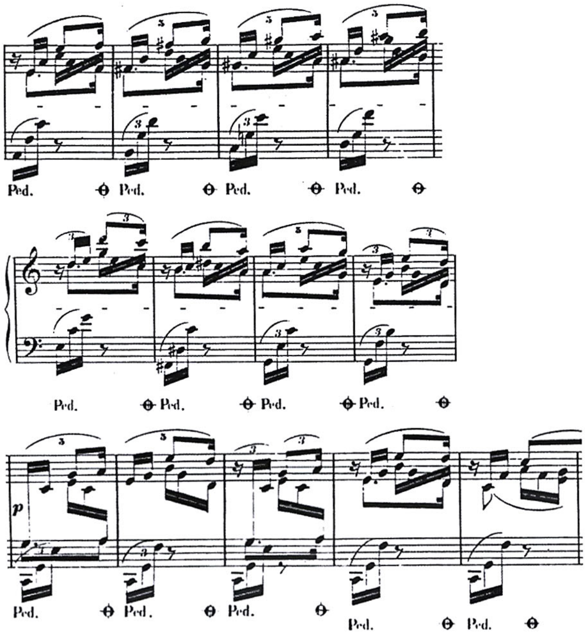
War II players are discussed in books, articles, and recording notes, to find these differences of approach treated at first in terms of a certain tolerance, or even apologetically, and then nullified by attempts to talk away the import of these well-documented (and literally recorded) practices so as to accommodate current conservatory standards. Among these practices are freedom in time (especially when not notated in the score); arpeggiation (apart from what is notated in the score); and asynchronisation of the hands. The last two, particularly, are anathema to current mainstream pianism. All three were of course part of common practice in the nineteenth century and before.

Arpeggiation so slight as not to be directly perceptible to the listener can soften a chordal attack, particularly if it is at a dynamic level that might make it "bark." This point is familiar to harpsichordists; the technique is also useful with early pianos, and I have found the Pleyel to be particularly receptive to it. Similarly, the instrument responds well to asynchronisation ("breaking of hands") between bass and treble (also an 18th-century device). This technique, accentual in itself, can yet soften strong dynamic accents that might otherwise sound harsh. Both of these approaches seem to "fit" the timbre of the Pleyel with particular grace, perhaps owing to the general euphony and the gentleness of attack at lower volume levels. In the case of Chopin's music, there is the well-known issue of the composer cautioning against excess with these techniques or even disapproving of "breaking of hands" altogether.[23]

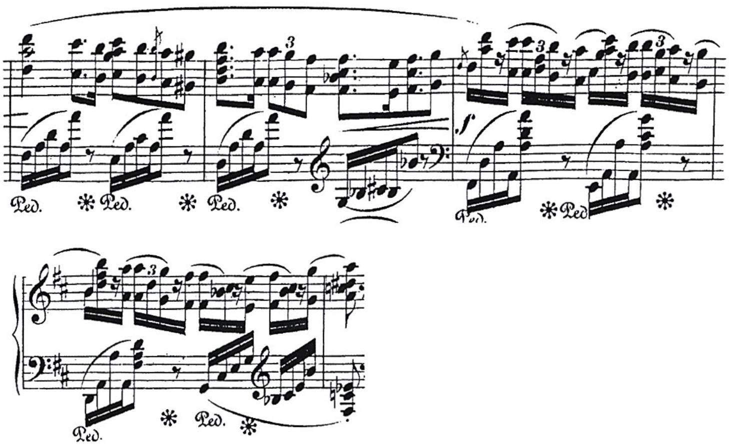
The fact is that Chopin sometimes writes in asynchronisation. Note that in his Prelude No. 1 in C, the melody in the central line is simultaneous with the bass in some instances but frequently set off by a semiquaver value rest on natural accents in the phrasing, displaced in the manner of one of François Couperin's "suspensions." (See Example 1.) These notated "accents by time displacement" correspond to points of particular intensity in the melody and phrase structure. Notes of this middle line placed directly with the bass (b 18-20) are relatively straightforward, both stressing the chromatic accents and yet apparently to be "passed through" en route to the beginning of the descending motion in b. 21. These notational nuances are quite deliberate: Chopin specifically revised b.18-20, crossing out the original semiquaver rests in his manuscript. The agitato tempo marking means that the semiquaver-value delays work out quite naturally in terms of asynchronisation. This carefully notated melody is often not brought out by modern players; a comparison to Alfred Cortot's recordings is instructive. Cortot boldly renders the melody in a way that most students of 18th-century French harpsichord repertory will recognise at once.

Similarly but in a denser texture, the passage in Example 2 appears, in b.63 ff., to suggest a slightly arpeggiated texture, somewhat "feathering" and embellishing the original statement (b.61-62) as opposed to the jerking short-long rhythmic treatment it often receives. Use of an arpeggiation sign in either instance would obfuscate rather than clarify the effect in question, because it could readily suggest a too-broad breaking of the texture. Early 20th-century recording artists often treat these and like passages as a notational approximation of asynchronisation (in addition of course to often using the device without its being suggested in the notation). Modern players tend to play the rhythmical displacement from the sonata literally, with more or less strict rhythm, rather than take up what seems to be a notational suggestion of rhythmic subtlety.

As illustration, a comparison of recordings of the work by Raoul von Koczalski (a disciple of Chopin's pupil Mikuli) and Martha Argerich is apt. Both are superb players; they are widely divergent in the way they allow the work to unfold. Koczalski certainly employs varied and expressive shadings of asynchronisation,



Example 1. F. Chopin, Prelude No. 1, C Major, op. 28, b.17-29.[24]



Example 2. F. Chopin, Piano Sonata in B Minor, op. 58, Allegro Maestoso, b. 61-65.[25]

whereas Argerich does not, but the difference between the two players is especially notable in areas of constant surface rhythm. Koczalski treats the floods of even semiquaver notes as embellishments of a varied, deeper series of utterances--rhetorical, indeed, and deeply probing. Argerich plays more or less straight through in a "brilliant" style. The Pleyel instruments appear to me to be quite open to Koczalski's kind of spaciousness: probing the phrases through delicacy (and boldness) of timing in a way, again, not usually characteristic of today's mainstream pianism. (It is interesting to note that Josef Hofmann, often described as an early "modern" among pianists, breaks the first chord of Example 2 in his 1935 test recording.)

Asynchronisation and arpeggiation can of course become mannered; indeed, that was a concern about them in the nineteenth century. But any practice can become a mannerism, including uniformly "straight" playing (a mannerism of much mainstream piano and organ playing) or, for another example, obsession with simple metric groups (a sometime concern of modern harpsichord playing). Given the variety of timbres on the Pleyel and the euphony of the tone generally, the devices just discussed seem on this instrument to be as natural as breathing; and they indeed admit more fresh air to the romantic blossoms that sometimes cannot open fully in a conservatory atmosphere.

To bring out some of the various layers in the musical textures, and shade back others, is part and parcel of the literature and style of the Romantic piano, and is a major feature in the playing of the first generations of recording artists. These factors seem to be of less concern among students and even many performers of today (with some welcome exceptions). (I have wondered if the two-dimensional style of piano playing typical of certain forms of popular music has altered expectations generally.) Then too, the desire to create as big a sound as possible is surely another contributor to the lack of contrast and relief so frequent in modern treatment of piano textures. In fact, good differentiation of texture can produce a "bigger" effect through perspective (as any clavichordist knows) although it might not register so in sheer decibels. Bringing clarity to textures, sorting out filler from bassline and melody through the diversity of colour both "horizontally and vertically" (i.e., across the compass and up and down the dynamic range), and bringing light and shade to such elements as an orchestra does: these are elements that the Pleyel encourages by its very nature. Again, one of its primary features is a palette of subtle colours that greatly assists the "sorting" of musical tissues, and that palette simply does not exist on the modern instrument. (Similarly, the Romantic era itself offered a variety of experiences with pianos of various makes and styles, a variety now reduced to virtually a single standard.) For such issues as these, and others, mid-19th-century pianos can be invaluable teachers, and among them the Pleyel seems to be the greatest precisionist.

Pleyels have not yet been fully rediscovered. Approached on their own terms they have much to confide. We can hope that ongoing research and more frequent performances and recordings will reclaim this area of our diverse piano heritage.

1 Bülow's letter is quoted at length in Alan Walker, *Hans von Bülow: A Life and Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 191.

2 Cf. *The Guardian*, 26 May 2015.

3 My first experience of a J.H. Silbermann spinet was when an instrument-maker friend was sounding single notes that I heard across the museum space. My impression of a dry, uninteresting tone was utterly confounded when he asked me to play the spinet for him. With two notes sounded together, the instrument opened up magically. The tones blended and sang in a crystalline way of which the single tones had given no suggestion. Colleagues have told me of having much the same experience with Silbermann spinets.

4 Hans von Bülow referred to each octave of the instrument as having a distinct voice, and urged students to respond to these characteristics, to shade and colour accordingly. Cf. an account of a von Bülow masterclass in the 1880s, in Harriet Brower, *Piano Mastery, Talks with Master Pianists and Teachers*, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1915), 239. Bülow's attitude of course contrasts strongly with modern praise of the homogeneity of timbre on modern pianos which are not really designed for any of the classic and Romantic repertoire, having been developed, and certainly put into general use, only well after the body of the literature had been composed. See also generally *The Piano Master Classes of Hans von Bülow*, Two Participants' Accounts, transl. and ed. Richard Louis Zimdars (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

5 In this respect, as in others, the comparison to clavichords is apt, although a sensitive clavichord will easily "respond"

even more disagreeably than can any piano, with notes emerging at the wrong dynamic, blocking, etc. I recall a guest sitting down to one of my clavichords and finding that two experimental tries on single notes merely spat back.

6 Cf. a famous letter (1841) to Jenny Montgolfier, in which Camille Pleyel exclaims over the joy of achieving a "fourth C" sustaining 2-3 seconds longer than usual and goes on to mention the puzzle of why two pianos made at the same time and from the same stock of materials do not sound the same. The relevant text is readily accessible at <http://www.pianosromantiques.com/pleyelhistoryfr.html> Pleyel is unconsciously paraphrasing Jacob Adlung a century earlier, who made the same comment in regard to clavichord making.

7 Artur Schnabel, *My Life and Music* (New York: Dover, 1988), 180-81.

8 Alfred Dolge still regards the Romantic aesthetic of graduated firmness in hammer coverings, and the resulting timbral variety, as normal in his 1911 publication *Pianos and their Makers* (Covina, Calif.: Covina Publishing Co., 1911), 97. Cited by Clarke, "Chopin's Pianos," 236.

9 *"Cette méchanique met directement la main de l'artiste en rapport avec la corde qui doit vibrer sous son impulsion."* Cited without further attribution as a statement from Pleyel, c.1875, in Jean-Jacques Trinques, *Le Piano Pleyel d'un millénaire à l'autre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 242. Réné Beaupain remarks that the statement occurs in a Pleyel tarif specifically dated 1875 *(Chronologie des Pianos de la Maison Pleyel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), 120.

10 Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt, the Weimar Years 1848-1861* (Ithaca: Cornell 1989), 75.

11 From the Bechstein company's own statement (written in the historical present): "Bülow makes sometimes very detailed and useful remarks on piano action.... But he often complains about the double escapement "à la Erard" (a standard in modern pianos), as he prefers the traditional single escapement mechanism of the British pianos.... Therefore Bechstein enlarges his product range and for a time builds both single-escapement and double-escapement pianos." Norbert Ely (with revisions by Bechstein; English version by UMS, Berlin), "C. Bechstein: The Legend Lives On", Public relations information by C. Bechstein Pianofortefabrik AG, 2012, p.13, Online, <http://bechstein.com/fileadmin/media/documents/international/Aktuelles/CB_History.pdf>, Accessed 22 July 2015.

12 "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, 22.

13 Another blow for uniformity--almost the last--was struck recently when the deliberate choice was made to alter the basic tone of the Bösendorfer from its traditional mellowness to something brighter and more percussive. Compared to the modern scene, 19th-century players had far more variation both to cope with and to enjoy.

14 See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin, Pianist and Teacher as seen by his pupils*, transl.Naomi Shohet with Krysia Osotowicz and Roy Howat, ed. Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 28-49.

15 A.J. Hipkins, quoted in Edith Hipkins, *How Chopin Played. From Contemporary Impressions collected from the Diaries and Notebooks of the late A.J. Hipkins* (London: Dent, 1937), 5.

16 Quoted and translated in Eigeldinger, *Chopin, Pianist and Teacher*, 40-41.

17 Kalkbrenner's approach to piano technique is outlined in Eigeldinger, 96 (Note 17).

18 "When I feel out of sorts, I play on an Erard piano where I easily find a ready-made tone. But when I feel in good form and strong enough to find my own individual sound, then I need a Pleyel piano." Cited in Eigeldinger, 26.

19 Stephen Birkett, "Pleyel," Online <http://real.waterloo.ca/-sbirkett/pleyel_info.htm>. This webpage's succinct summary of certain aspects of the Chopin-era Pleyels is widely quoted on the web and elsewhere without attribution.

20 Hipkins, 5.

21 Although the early squares possessed pedals with sustaining and mutation effects, even the earliest Pleyel grands seem to have possessed only two pedals: sustaining and una corda.

22 Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 31-32.

23 Asynchronisation and unnotated arpeggiation are sometimes cited as having been disliked by Chopin. The composer, however, insisted on these points in the context of teaching. (See Eigeldinger, p. 41 and 108.) Every teacher reins in certain traits in undeveloped players. In practice, Chopin is known sometimes to have played freely in time rather than metronomically; that he was meticulous in marking arpeggios was his own notational preference.

24 Chopin, Prelude No. 1, op. 28, b.17-29, Edition Breitkopf, 1839, Pl. no 6088, at "International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP)", Online, <http://imslp.org/wiki/Preludes,_Op.28_%28Chopin,_Fr%C3%A9d%C3%A9ric%29>, Accessed 22 July 2015.

25 Sonate pour le piano dédiée à Madame la Comtesse F. de Perthuis par Frederic Chopin, op. 58 (Leizipg: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1845, Pl. no. 7260, at "International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP)", Online, < http://imslp.nl/imglnks/usimg/f/fa/IMSLP130312-PMLP02364-FChopin_Piano_Sonata_No.3__Op.58_BH_FE.pdf>, Accessed 27 July 2015.