

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# FORTEPIANO-HARPSICHORD DUOS IN TWO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SALONS

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By: Rebecca Cypess

Apparently written for Sara Levy (1761–1843), a Jewish salonnière and virtuosic keyboardist who lived in Berlin, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's concerto for harpsichord, fortepiano, and orchestra (Wq. 47, 1788) has long been considered a historical curiosity. If, as some scholars have suggested, the concerto represents a juxtaposition of the "traditional" harpsichord and the "modern" fortepiano, then the piece as a whole symbolises the composer's uneasy position as a link between the venerable heritage of his father and more forward-looking trends like the *Empfindsamer Stil* (sensitive style).

How accurate is this narrative? The fortepiano did not, in fact, immediately or suddenly replace the harpsichord; rather the two instruments coexisted comfortably for decades. Within the circle of Sara Levy, both types of instruments flourished side by side. In 1794, Levy corresponded with a representative of the Silbermann workshop of Strasbourg to inquire about the prices of new fortepianos and harpsichords—a correspondence that suggests that she kept both types of instrument in her lavish home and used them in her musical salon. Later, Ludwig Rellstab, son of Levy's friend Johann Carl Friedrich Rellstab, recalled that even in the early nineteenth century, Levy would often insist on playing concertos by Sebastian and Philipp Emanuel Bach "on the harpsichord (not the pianoforte)."

With this context in mind, the possibility that Levy commissioned a concerto for harpsichord and fortepiano together seems normal. It is likely that if this concerto had been published during the eighteenth century, the part books for the two soloists would have been designated simply for "Clavier I" and "Clavier II," like most other keyboard duos of the period. In fact, Levy and her sisters, all trained musicians and some of them quite renowned for their skill, owned numerous works for two keyboards which might have been played in the harpsichord-fortepeiano combination as part of their salon performances.

I came to the harpsichord-fortepeiano combination through Sara Levy. Imagining a concert of music that might have been played at one of her evening salons, I encountered her manuscript copy of Johann Sebastian Bach's organ trios, BWV 525–530, in which each of the organist's hands plays a treble melody line, while the bass line is executed by the organist's feet on the pedals. Yet Sara did not own an organ, so why this manuscript? An answer lies in the arrangements of the same works that survive in the collection of her sister, Fanny von Arnstein, which indicates performance on two keyboard instruments: the top line of the trio is played by one of the keyboardist's right hand; the second line is played by the other keyboardist's right hand, and they both play the bass line in unison with their left hands. This is the same arrangement practice that François Couperin described in 1725, in the preface to his *Apotheosis of Lully*:

This trio, as well as the *Apotheosis of Corelli*, and the complete book of trios that I hope to publish next July, may be executed on two harpsichords, as well as all other types of instruments. I play them [on two harpsichords] with my family and with my students, with a very good result, by playing the first soprano line and the bass line on one of the harpsichords, and the second [soprano line], with the same bass line, on another at the unison. The truth is that this requires having two copies [of the score] instead of one, and two harpsichords as well. But I find that it is often easier to assemble these two instruments than four separate professional musicians.

Although Couperin noted that no new part books needed to be made in order to create this version of a trio sonata, dozens of manuscripts do survive from the eighteenth century that reflect this arrangement practice, of which the Arnstein copy of the Bach organ trios is only one.

The presence of Fanny's maiden name, "Vogelchen Itzig," on the cover of one of those manuscripts confirms that she took them with her from her native Berlin to her marital home in Vienna. Might she and Sara have played these pieces in the keyboard-duo version together during their salon performances? And, if they played C. P. E. Bach's double concerto in the harpsichord-fortepiano combination, could they have played other double concertos and keyboard duos, including these arrangements of the organ trios, in the same instrumentation?

Since 2014, fortепianist Yi-heng Yang and I have been experimenting with the harpsichord-fortepiano combination. Our first objective was to understand Sara Levy's performance practices (the first results of which can now be heard on the recording *In Sara Levy's Salon* [Acis Productions, 2016] in a recording of the C-minor organ trio, BWV 526), but studying Levy's practices opened our eyes to uses of this instrumentation in duo sonatas, double concertos, and arrangements of chamber works throughout the eighteenth century.

This interest in the fortепiano–harpsichord combination is expressed most clearly in combination keyboard instruments. Throughout the century makers explored novel ways of combining various sound-producing technologies within a single instrument. As new inventions were introduced, they were folded into the already diverse keyboard culture, expanding the palette of sounds available to the player. Such instruments should be understood within the culture of invention and experimentation that led, during the same period, to the development of musical automata, orchestrions, the glass harmonica, musical clocks and so forth. Like these other instruments, combination keyboards attest to the concern with diversity of sound—a diversity for which modern terminology cannot fully account.

The astonishing account of Philipp Jacob Milchmeyer's *mechanischer Clavier-Flügel*, written by the maker himself and published in Carl Friedrich Cramer's *Magazin der Musik* (1783), places primary importance on variety of timbre; he boasts that his instrument could produce no fewer than 250 distinct sounds. Significantly, Milchmeyer's invention could be played by

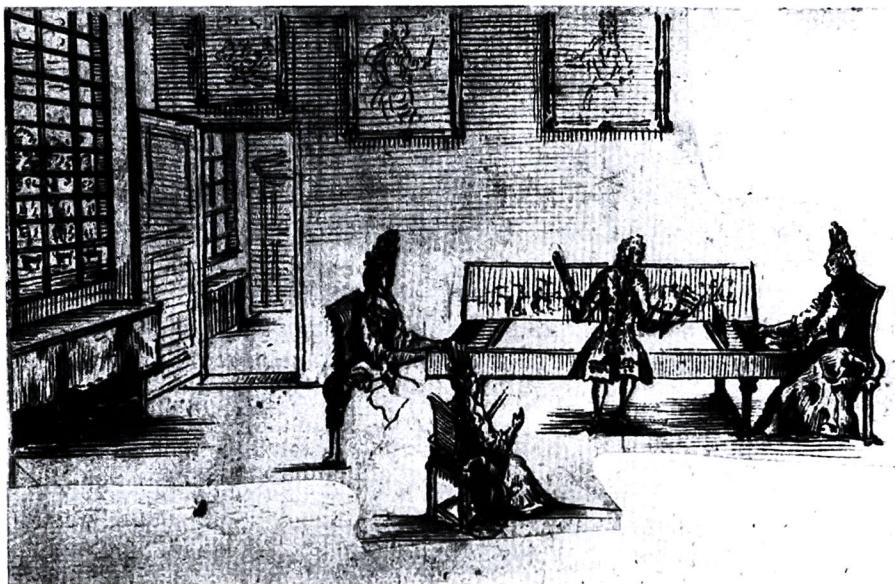


Fig. 1. Two ladies at a *Vis à vis*. Drawing from *Recueil. Musique e musiciens*, vol. 9, *Instruments à cordes*. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, shelfmark Kd-3 (9)-Fol. Reproduced by permission.

either one or two keyboardists, making it ideal for the performance of keyboard duos and double concertos. Moreover, Milchmeyer suggested that the instrument was especially useful for playing arrangements of chamber works—perhaps arrangements similar to those of the Bach organ trios owned by Fanny von Arnstein—because it could imitate the sounds of a mixed chamber ensemble.

It is not surprising that no examples of Milchmeyer's incredible instrument have survived, since he cannot have made very many of these elaborate and fanciful objects. However, some combination instruments with more modest aims do survive, including the famous *Vis à vis* fortepiano-harpsichord by Johann Andreas Stein. Andreas Staier and Christine Schornsheim have used this instrument to record works for two keyboards by Mozart, but much more seems possible and warranted: given that Levy and her sisters used free-standing harpsichords and fortepianos to play keyboard duos and double-concertos from the Bach family, and given that so many manuscript arrangements of works by other composers—from Handel to Pleyel—survive in libraries today, it seems that the fortepiano-harpsichord combination may be a fruitful one for a vast array of chamber music from the period.

Salons like that of Sara Levy formed an important site for experimentation of various sorts. This included the progressive social experiments for which the Berlin salons are most famous today: women in Sara's circle (not all of whom were musical) hosted both Jews and Christians; artists and intellectuals; and philosophers and socialites. In addition, some salons were sites of demonstration and testing of scientific inventions. Within this environment, experimentation with novel and interesting instrument combinations would have fit

comfortably. New musical instruments were technology novelties—something worth seeing, hearing, and experiencing because they displayed the maker’s ingenuity and the owner’s progressive tastes. Such inventions opened new sound-worlds and expanded the listener’s understanding.

Moreover, the 18th-century drawing shown in Fig. 1 provides further confirmation that performance of keyboard duos at double- or combination keyboard instruments was a practice associated especially with women. The music master who stands by, directing the ladies, recalls Couperin’s statement that he played them with his students, presumably for pedagogical purposes.

The fortepiano-harpsichord combination was certainly a novelty within the salon of another woman of the late eighteenth century: Anne-Louise Boyvin d’Hardancourt Brillon de Jouy, who not only played duos on harpsichords and fortepianos together, but composed them as well. When Charles Burney traveled through Paris in 1770, he visited Brillon’s salon, and he described the experience in the journal that he was keeping in preparation for writing his *General History of Music*:

After coffee we went into the music room where I found an English pianoforte which Mr. Bach had sent her. [Brillon] played a great deal and I found she had not acquired her reputation in music without meriting it. She plays with great ease, taste, and feeling—is an excellent sightswoman, of which I was convinced by her executing some of my own music. She likewise composes and was so obliging as to play several of her own pieces both on the harpsichord and pianoforte.

Burney’s description of Brillon’s music making is telling: she is emotive, tasteful, and nonchalant; her skill is excellent. The works that he mentions in particular are her duos for harpsichord and fortepiano, which she is known to have played together with her daughters.

In making special note of the presence of an English pianoforte in Brillon’s music room, Burney drew attention to its novelty. This was doubtless a square piano of the sort that Zumpe was making in England.

The “Mr. Bach” whom he mentions here is Johann Christian, who had by then set himself up in London and apparently acted either as agent for this transaction, or perhaps even as the maker of this instrument. The French keyboard scene was still dominated by the Taskin school of harpsichord making and remained so until after the Revolution, so Brillon’s ownership of an English piano was noteworthy. Moreover, Brillon composed trios for harpsichord, “pianoforte allemand,” and “pianoforte anglais,” indicating that her English square piano was complemented by a German wing-shaped piano, perhaps similar to those that Sara Levy owned.

Two other composers in Paris—Henri-Joseph Rigel and Jean-François Tapray—published works for harpsichord and fortepiano together. They both knew Brillon, and she owned and played music by both of them, but their publication of these pieces in such a distinctive instrumentation suggests that they expected at least some other keyboardists to be able to make use of them. Rigel’s duos included a note on the title page that “One can play these duos with four people, on the pianoforte with two violins and a violoncello, [parts for which] have been printed separately,” thus opening them to a wider purchasing public than would otherwise have been possible, but he must have anticipated that the fortepiano-harpsichord versions would also have been commercially viable.

In the passage quoted above, Couperin situated the keyboard duo within the context of family and pedagogical relationships. In playing duos on two like keyboard instruments, performers could learn from one another’s technique even as they bonded through the shared emotional experiences enabled by the music. The same benefits would have attended the playing of fortepiano-harpsichord duos later in the century. Within the salons of Levy and Brillon, this performance practice allowed for the articulation of sympathetic family relationships, and the pieces composed in this instrumentation for those salons are essentially connected to their particular social situations. Whether notated or not, whether the instrumentation was specified or left to the choice of the player, fortepiano-harpsichord duos formed an important element of musical culture in the second half of the eighteenth century.

#### Endnotes

- 1 On the likelihood that this piece was written for Levy, see Peter Wollny, *‘Ein förmlicher Sebastian und Philipp Emanuel Bach-Kultus’: Sara Levy und ihr musikalisches Wirken, mit einer Dokumentensammlung zur musikalischen Familiengeschichte der Vorfahren von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* (Wiesbaden, Leipzig and Paris: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2010), 41–42.
- 2 Christoph Wolff has characterized the juxtaposition of the harpsichord and fortepiano in this combination as a synthesis of the “traditional” and the “modern”; see Christoph Wolff, “A Bach Cult in Late Eighteenth-Century Berlin: Sara Levy’s Musical Salon,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 58/3 (Spring 2005): 30.
- 3 On the persistence of a variety of keyboard instruments and their usage, see Rebecca Cypess, “Keyboard Duo Arrangements in Eighteenth-Century Musical Life,” *Eighteenth-Century Music* 14/2 (September 2017): 183–214 and the citations there.
- 4 A letter from Johann Friedrich Silbermann to Sara Levy is transcribed in Wollny, *‘Ein förmlicher Sebastian und Philipp Emanuel Bach-Kultus’*, 53–54.
- 5 “auf dem Flügel, (nicht Pianoforte).” Ludwig Rellstab, *Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin: J. Guttentag, 1861), 117.
- 6 ‘Ce trio, ainsi que l’Apothéose de Corelli; & le livre complet de trios que j’espere donner au mois de Juillet prochain, peuvent s’exécuter à deux clavecins, ainsi que sur tous autres instrumens. Je les execute dans ma famille; & avec mes élèves, avec une réussite très heureuse, sçavoir, en jouant le premier dessus, & la basse sur un des clavecins: & le second, avec le même basse sur un autre à l’unisson: la vérité est que cela engage à avoir deux exemplaires, au lieu d’un; & deux clavecins aussi. Mais, je trouve d’ailleurs qu’il est souvent plus aisé de rassembler ces deux instrumens, que quatre personnes, faisant leur profession de la musique.’ François Couperin, ‘Avis’ to *Concert instrumental sous le titre d’Apothéose composé à la mémoire immortelle de l’incomparable Monsieur de Lully* (Paris: L’auteur and Le Sieur Boivin, 1725), unpaginated.

## Fortepiano-Harpsichord Duos in Two Eighteenth-Century Salons

<sup>7</sup> On Italian makers' efforts in this regard, see Stewart Pollens, *The Early Pianoforte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 98–107. On experimental and combination keyboard instruments in the later eighteenth century, see especially Michael Latcham, "Franz Jakob Späth and the 'Tangentenflügel: An Eighteenth-Century Tradition,'" *Galpin Society Journal* 57 (May, 2004): 150–170; Latcham, "Swirling from One Level of Affects to Another: The Expressive Clavier in Mozart's Time," *Early Music* 30/4 (November 2002): 502–530; Latcham, "Mozart and the Pianos of Johann Andreas Stein," *The Galpin Society Journal* 51 (July, 1998): 114–53; Latcham, "The Apotheosis of Merlin," in *Musique ancienne—Instruments et imagination. Actes de rencontres internationales harmoniques, Lausanne 2004. Music of the Past: Instruments and Imagination: Proceedings of the Harmoniques International Congress, Lausanne 2004*, ed. Michael Latcham (Bern, Berlin, etc.: Peter Lang, 2006), 271–298; Latcham, "Johann Andreas Stein and the Search for the Expressive Clavier," in *Cordes et clavier au temps de Mozart. Bowed and Keyboard Instruments in the Age of Mozart*, ed. Thomas Steiner (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 133–216.

<sup>8</sup> Many of these inventions are discussed in Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Chapter 1, 'Lessons at the Ocular Harpsichord'.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Cypess, 'Timbre, Expression, and Combination Keyboard Instruments: Milchmeyer's Art of *Veränderung*', *Keyboard Perspectives* 8 (2015): 43–69.

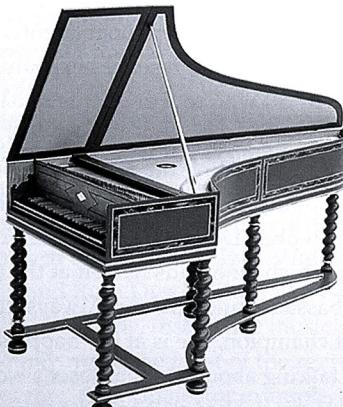
<sup>10</sup> Charles Burney, *Music, Men, and Manners in France and Italy*, ed. Herbert Edmund Poole (London: Folio Society, 1969), 19–20.

<sup>11</sup> A handful of Brillon's compositions have been published in modern editions, but the manuscripts, held in the collection of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, are easily legible. A catalogue is in Bruce Gustafson, "The Music of Madame Brillon: A Unified Manuscript Collection from Benjamin Franklin's Circle," *Notes* 43/3 (March, 1987): 522–543.

<sup>12</sup> "On peut executer ces duo en quatuor sur le piano-forté avec deux violons et violoncelle qui sont graves séparément." Description of Henri-Joseph Rigel, *Trois duo pour le forte-piano et clavecin* in *Journal de Paris*, 1 December 1778, p. 1349. Reproduced in Henri-Joseph Rigel, *Duo pour piano-forte et clavecin*, op. XIV no. 3 (Versailles: Éditions du Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles, 2008).

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