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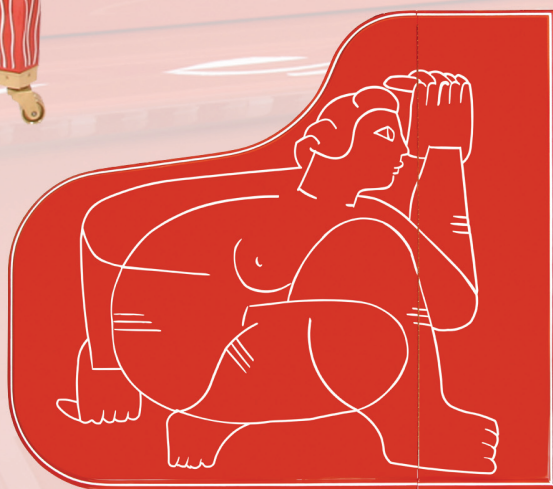
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PLEYEL

L'Art du Piano

PARIS
Depuis 1807



Marco Del Re

Pleyel Celebrates Its 200th Anniversary

By Ingrid Kraft
Portland, OR Chapter

Since 1807, Pleyel has been building beautiful pianos that incorporate innovations in design and sound. The company has persevered through the vicissitudes of the last 200 years with a dedication that comes from a great love for the instrument.

My personal appreciation for this exceptional instrument has grown since I became a technician for one of the few Pleyel dealers on the west coast. Recently, I had the opportunity to acquire one of these lovely pianos, and then I received an invitation to tour the Pleyel factory in Alès in the south of France. Talk about dreams coming true!

I spent 10 wonderful days exploring Paris and Alès, thanks to the hospitality of the fabulous Pleyel staff. Early in my trip, Commercial Attaché Armelle Donnet treated me to a concert in the historic hotel 'Le Clos des Arts,' to make sure I had a fitting introduction to the Pleyel piano in France.

History

The story of Pleyel begins with its colorful founder, Ignace Pleyel (1757-1831). Born Ignaz Pleyl in Austria, he quickly established himself as a talented young musician, one of Joseph Haydn's best pupils. After a short stint writing an opera for the king of Naples, Pleyel was offered the position of Kapellmeister at the cathedral of Strasbourg. There, following the fashion of the time, he changed his name to the French form, Ignace Pleyel. He married the beautiful Francoise-Gabrielle Lefebvre and started a family.

Ignace's life changed abruptly with the onset of the French Revolution, when religious music became forbidden. He took his family to London, where he utilized his composing talents to become quite wealthy. In 1792 he returned to his beloved Strasbourg and bought a *grand chateau*. He avoided the guillotine by composing music for revolutionary patriots. In 1795 he took a chance, moved his family to Paris, and

started his own business as a music publisher. Ignace published over 4,000 works of all the major composers of his time. He was the most sought-out music consultant for the royalty of Europe and continued to compose prolifically.

In 1805 he was keen to apply his resourceful mind to building pianos and opened his first workshop with partner, Charles Lemme. This relationship dissolved, whereupon Pleyel pursued his ideas alone. The first pianos bearing the Pleyel name appeared in 1807. Ignace's oldest son, Camille (1788-1855), joined the business in 1821. At the time of the elder Pleyel's death, the company was supplying pianos to the Empress Josephine as well as other European Courts. They were the rage throughout Europe and were shipped to the Americas and Asia as well.

Camille Pleyel gave up a concert career to run the family business. With his father's encouragement, he incorporated the industrial innovations of the time, such as a cross-grain veneering process and a patented soundboard. Also, the pinblock was improved in order to address the problems that excessive string tension caused to wooden frames. In 1828, the extended pinblock replaced a pinblock made of various thicknesses of wood and a split iron or cast copper plate was added.

Under Camille's direction, Pleyel was among the first

to introduce metal bracing systems into their pianos. Metal bars were placed ahead of and/or behind the soundboard, depending on the model and period. He later changed to iron bracing, which allows for greater string tension and volume.

On January 1, 1830, Camille organized the first public *salon* in Paris showcasing a Pleyel piano. He wanted to combine his interests in working closely with musicians and discovering new talent with giving the public the opportunity to hear his fine pianos. When Camille discovered the incredible artistry of Fredrick Chopin, he

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arranged a debut concert at Pleyel's Rue Cadet Salon. It was this strong relationship to Chopin that inspired Camille to build pianos even better suited to the romantic repertoire. As Chopin's sponsor, Pleyel provided him with pianos for many years. Chopin composed his 24 Preludes on a Pleyel piano and gave his last performance in the Pleyel Rue Cadet Salon in 1848. Chopin preferred the Pleyel to all other pianos, writing, "When I feel myself to be in sparkling form and strong enough to find my own unique sound, that is when I need a Pleyel piano."

Camille Pleyel made a name for the company, winning gold medals and filing patents for his innovations. He found a worthy successor in Auguste Wolff, an accomplished musician and composer. Wolff took over the business in 1855, industrializing the factory and increasing the reliability and solidity of the piano. Among his inventions were a piano with a pedal-board and a transposing keyboard. He designed an improved double-escapement action and an improved sostenuto pedal for grand pianos. He replaced wooden frames first with wrought iron and later with cast iron. Wolff also introduced over-stringing in the Pleyel baby grand, which was nicknamed affectionately "the toad" by composer Charles Gounod. The Pleyel Company received a medal for these many innovations at the 1862 Universal Exhibition in London.

Wolff's son-in-law, Gustave Lyon, an accomplished musician and renowned acoustician, took over the management of Pleyel in 1887. He researched string tension and developed a steel frame for Pleyels. Lyon also created a few unusual models, such as a double piano and the "Pleyela," a pneumatic player piano. Composers such as Fauré, Saint-Saens, Grieg, Debussy, Stravinsky, Honegger, Milhaud and de Falla recorded rolls of their performances for the Pleyela.

Under Lyon's management, Pleyel replaced its existing hall on Rue Rochecouart with a larger, more prestigious concert hall. The new La Salle Pleyel was completed in 1927. It was Paris's first integrated arts center and contained several concert halls, music studios, showrooms and art studios. Lyon created a revolutionary design for the main concert hall. Its wonderful acoustical sound ranks it among the four great historical concert halls with Carnegie Hall in New York, The Musikverein in Vienna and Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.

The hall suffered a catastrophic fire only nine months after opening, and had to undergo major rebuilding, requiring additional financing. When the stock market crashed, La Salle Pleyel was unable to survive the financial crisis and was taken over by Credit Lyonnais.

The stock market crash and WWII proved to be a difficult time in many ways for Pleyel, as for so many other

piano makers. However, La Salle Pleyel remained open and was heavily booked into and through the war years. The 1960s brought a widening of music styles to the concert venue. Jazz and chamber music were added to the line-up of concerts, showcasing some of the great piano soloists of the time; among them jazz giants Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ray Charles, and Miles Davis.

Gaveau and Erard merged in 1960, and then merged again with Pleyel in 1961. From 1971 to 1994, the Pleyel piano was produced in Germany. When Pianos Rameau SA acquired the company, manufacturing came back to France.

Pleyel Today

In 1998, Hubert Martigny purchased La Salle Pleyel and later the Pleyel Factory. Inspired by his wife, conductor Carla-Maria Tarditi, Martigny has worked to preserve and revive the company and La Salle Pleyel in Paris. Pleyel now continues



Photo 1 — Pleyel's Amboina Wood Piano

its legacy under the direction of CEO Arnaud Marion, who is responsible for Pleyel International's strategy and development. A detailed history of the company can be found in Marion's book; *Pleyel, History with a Future*.

President Alain Laffont also plays a central role in Pleyel's success today. He has performed every job in the factory, and before that he worked as an independent rebuilder and concert technician. This experience enables him to work with engineers to produce modifications to already proven designs. Mr. Laffont says that the company strives to keep

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Pleyel Celebrates

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the pianos’ scales and soundboard design similar to the instruments of the last hundred years. These designs produce the unique Pleyel sound: light and not harsh, yet deep and robust. The Renner action is designed to Pleyel’s specifications. The end result is a highly expressive piano with a long sustained tone – pleasing to hear as well as play.

In addition to standard production pianos, Pleyel has retained its tradition of meeting special orders and developing custom-made pianos. Selected visual artists are engaged for extraordinary designs for limited-edition collector pianos, such as the piano on the cover. Some piano cases are veneered with beautiful woods and marquetry (see Photo 1).

Factory Tour

Production Manager Sylvain Charles led me on a wonderful tour of the factory, where I enjoyed looking through a registry book that goes back to 1833 and lists pianos sold and shipped all over the world. On the factory floor, I found the large digital CNC drill especially interesting. It is designed to rotate on five different axes and it machines wooden parts with extreme precision (see Photo 2).

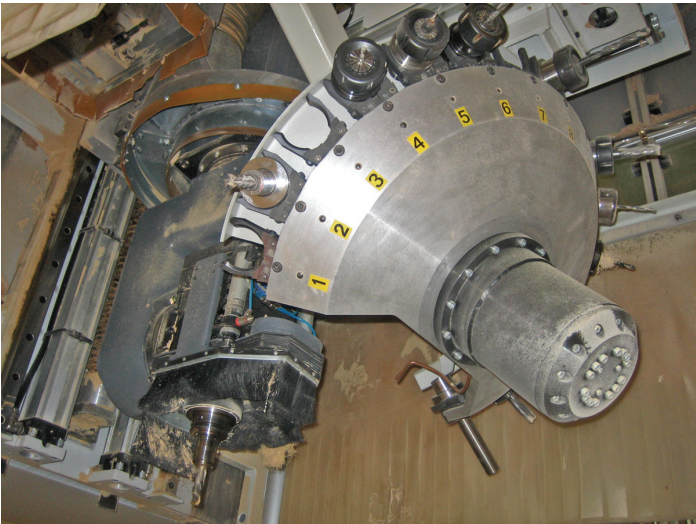


Photo 2 — CNC High-Precision Drill

One of my favorite parts of the tour was the grand production area, where Mr. Charles showed me his latest project – final regulation and voicing of a P280 concert grand (see Photo 3a). A classical pianist was coming to try the piano before it would be sent to Paris for her recording session. The P280 originally was modeled on the tone qualities of its predecessors, the A and AL models from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though the P280 has been out of production for nearly 40 years, Pleyel is reintroducing it with many modern improvements, such as a computer-optimized high-resistance plate and redesigned inner rim and brac-



Photo 3a — P280 Concert Grand



Photo 3b — P280 Inner Rim

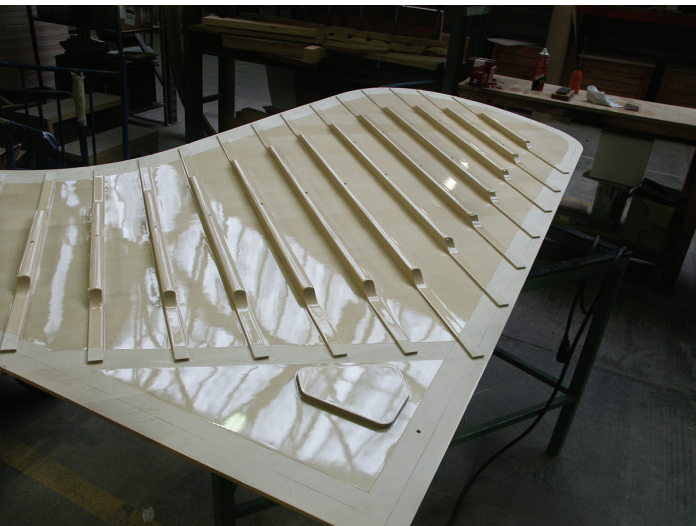


Photo 3c — P280 Ciresa Soundboard

ing (see Photo 3b). Solid spruce soundboards and ribs from the FiemmeValley in Italy are manufactured by the Ciresa Company and installed in the P280 and all Pleyel pianos (See Photo 3c). Alain Laffont designed the plate height adjustment, a system unique to Pleyel pianos, whereby counter adjustments are made until the correct height and downbearing is achieved see (Photos 4 and 5).



Photo 4 — Plate Height and Downbearing Adjustment



Photo 5 — Stringer

When playing the P280, one quickly becomes aware of the deep, warm tone in the bass, the delightful tone color throughout the entire piano, and the delicately clear treble. There is a DVD available from Pleyel of a performance of all 24 preludes by Chopin, played by French pianist, Yves Henry, at La Salle Pleyel. He performs every prelude twice, once on the P280 and once on an 1838 concert grand model from Chopin's time. It is fascinating to listen to the tonal differences

and similarities between the two pianos.

Tour of La Salle Pleyel

After leaving Alès, I journeyed back to Paris by high-speed train and met with Marketing Director Anne-Emmanuelle Kahn, and together we visited La Salle Pleyel on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. We donned hard hats to peruse the renovation project there, which is being directed by Francois Ceria of F.C.A. Architectes (see Photo 6).

As we walked through the hall, Ms. Kahn pointed out original art-deco touches that are being saved during the renovation. Ceria's architectural designs have been combined with the acoustic expertise of Russel Johnson and Tateo Nakajima from ARTEC. The goal has been to improve the hall for both acoustic power and audience pleasure, combining



Photo 6 — Author Ingrid Kraft (left) and Pleyel Marketing Director Anne-Emmanuelle Kahn



Photo 7 — Renovated auditorium of La Salle Pleyel (Jérémie Bouillon, photographer). Photo from Salle Pleyel, At the Heart of Modernity, by Pleyel CEO Arnaud Marion.

tradition with modern lines (see Photo 7). As with the Pleyel piano itself, the renovation of La Salle Pleyel is a beautiful combination of honoring the old and celebrating the new.

Ms. Kahn and I celebrated the end of my visit with lunch at a wonderful French bistro, sitting outside watching and listening to the heartbeat of Paris. We shared a toast to the future of Pleyel, "May the oldest existing piano manufacturer in the world prosper for many years to come. Happy Anniversary! *Anniversaire Heureux!*"

For more information, readers are invited to visit the Pleyel web site: www.pleyel.fr. ☒