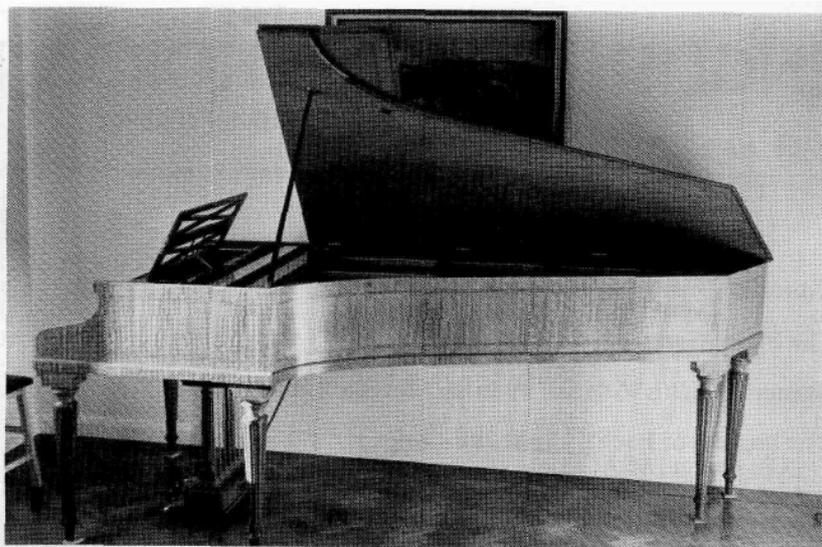


The Pleyel Harpsichord

by J. A.

Richard



It is not often that an article appears in the English Harpsichord Magazine devoted to a modern instrument. This fact reflects attitudes in the harpsichord world, where today's fashion dictates that only those instruments made in the 18th Century and earlier (or copies of them) are 'authentic' and hence acceptable, and that more modern instruments must be considered mere aberrations. Indeed, 'authenticism' has now degenerated into a cult and is, when viewed objectively, quite illogical in its attitudes to instruments. 'Authenticists' will revile any modern instrument, while extolling the virtues of an early Italian or a Schudi: and yet the evolutionary step from the Italian to the Schudi to a modern instrument such as the Pleyel. Why accept the first two of the three, and arbitrarily reject the last! I am certainly not against authentic instruments, but unquestioning 'authenticism' is simply narrow-minded and too often leads to faddishness. (I cite as an example of this the reverence with which I was once told that a certain maker spurned any more modern material for jack-springs than real Siberian boar's bristle.)

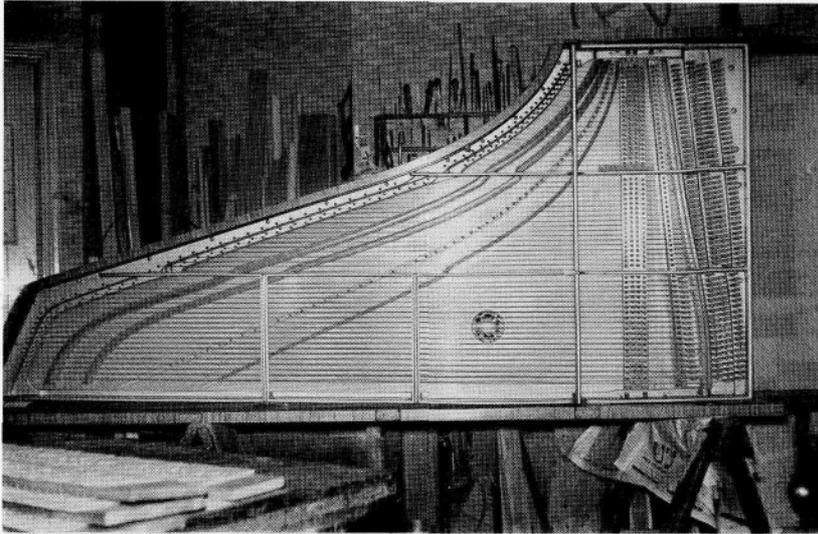
The Pleyel harpsichord is particularly significant because it was the instrument which, in the hands of Wanda Landowska, launched the harpsichord revival earlier this Century. Wanda Landowska was born in Poland in 1879, began to play the piano at the age of four, and later studied at the Warsaw Conservatoire under Michalowski, a renowned interpreter of Chopin. In 1900 she moved to Paris with a well-established reputation as concert pianist and soon decided — to the horror of her friends — to devote her energies to reviving the harpsichord, an instrument then

considered hardly worth serious consideration.

Her first task was to obtain a reliable instrument for her recitals, and her dream was to recreate a harpsichord which would speak with the grandeur and brilliance of the old instruments which then lay ignored in Museums. As a pianist, it was natural that she should enlist the help of the Parisian piano-makers Pleyel, whose reputation had been assured by their association with Chopin, and she sought out and studied as many harpsichords as she could find, accompanied by their chief designer. It is reasonable to suppose that most of the harpsichords they saw were in a poor state of regulation and repair, for example with 'hanging' jacks and half-hearted damping. Pleyel evidently applied considerable thought to these weaknesses and came up with solutions which, though not authentic, certainly solved the problem. Landowska specifically wanted a 16' register and Pleyel acknowledged why they had introduced this feature in their instruments by inscribing on the jack-rails; The 16' register was incorporated into Pleyel Harpsichords from 1912 at the request and following the proposals, of Wanda Landowska".

Above all, Landowska — as a concert player — wanted an instrument which had sufficient power to be heard in a concert hall and that was robust enough to withstand frequent moving. The Concert Harpsichord finally made by Pleyel in 1912 to her specification inevitably owed much to the piano-maker's art, but should not be dismissed on that account: after all, their art was only an evolution of the harpsichord-maker's craft.

The harpsichord shown in photograph No. 1 is



a typical example of the Pleyel 'Grand Modele de Concert', in this case finished in satin wood with a cherrywood banding: the length is 7'6", the width 3'6". The compass is FF to f' with the following disposition:—

Upper Manual: 8', Lute, Buff Lower Manual: 16', 8', 4', Coupler. All the registers are controlled by pedals. The particular instrument illustrated here has a colourful history. It left the factory in Paris on April 3rd, 1930, to be sold in Berlin to a Mr Neumann; (whether he was a musician or the Agent for Pleyel in that city is not certain). It then passed to Gertrud Wertheim, who had won a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music and was studying with Wanda Landowska. Later she was to become Guest Lecturer at the University of Breslau, and up to 1939 she broadcast regularly in Sweden, Switzerland and Holland, as well as teaching in Berlin and Amsterdam. The University of Portland, USA invited her to become Head of their Musical Faculty at Reed College, and she left Europe with her Pleyel, stopping on the way in England. It was then that War broke out. She heard that Wanda Landowska had managed to make her way to America but had been obliged to leave behind her own instruments. As the Pleyel was waiting in Southampton Docks, she magnanimously offered it to her former teacher and arranged for it to continue its journey alone. Later, this Pleyel was returned to England and to its owner, who had decided to make her home in this country.* After Gertrud Wertheim's death, the instrument was

* The Editor well remembers this harpsichord in the concert hall at Downe House School, nr. Newbury. It also resided for a time at Morley College, Lambeth.

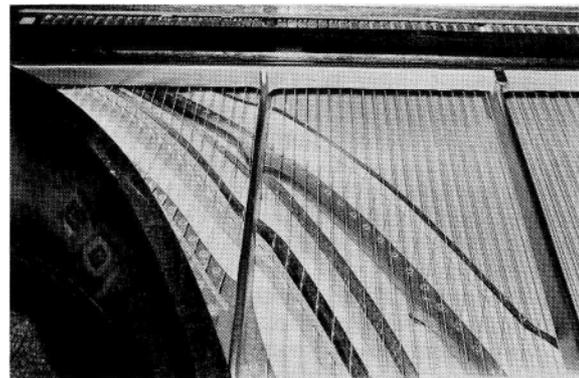
acquired by Lady Verney, who gave concerts on it at Claydon House and also used it in recordings.

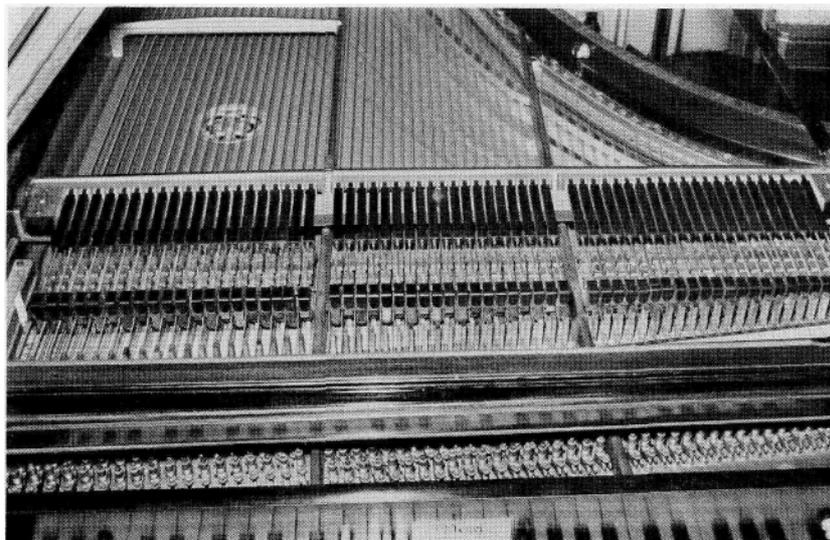
The second photograph, taken when the instrument was being restored in 1964, shows the general layout of the bridges on the soundboard.

The soundboard itself is peculiar in being made of three laminae — total thickness just under 14" — the grain of the top and bottom of these lying in the string direction. A notable feature under the board is the absence of any cut-off bar. The 4' hitch-pin rail consists of a small moulding lying above the board and a very small rail of about 3/8" square lying underneath.

The 8'scale is: c": 13 1/2" FF:
68"

By classical standards, the stringing is very heavy indeed. The 8' string diameters start at .0105" and end with wound strings in the bass, while all the 16' strings are wound, the lowest being a massive .106" in diameter. The total



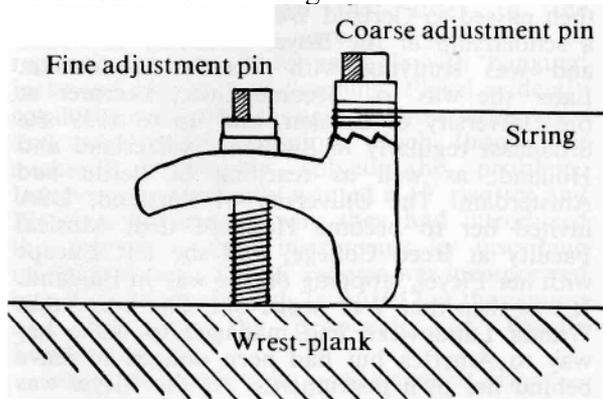


tension is in the region of 2M tonnes which dictates the use of a cast-iron frame, also clearly visible in the photograph. The strings of the 8' and 16' registers are hitched onto the metal frame, whereas those of the 4' are hitched onto the soundboard in the classical manner. This differential hitching is not very satisfactory, as the 4' strings inevitably move more than those of the other two registers. Attempts to resolve this problem were made in later Pleyels by the introduction of a metal 4' hitch-pin rail integral with the main frame: an example of this can be seen in the third photograph, taken of an instrument made in 1962.

Conventional 'flag' dampers fixed to the jacks would be totally inadequate to mute the heavy strings, particularly those of the 16' register and, as mentioned earlier, Pleyel solved the problem in a novel way. They did this by the introduction of overhead dampers which work very efficiently indeed. As can be seen from photograph No. 4, a metal rod hinged on a bar lies over the set of jacks which sit on each key. Every jack is capped with a pad and lifts the rod when a key is depressed. The rod carries a wooden head which is faced with felt and which sits between the pair of 8' strings belonging to each note, so that no dampers are needed on the 8' jacks. The 4' jacks carry adjustable dampers of their own, as do the 16' jacks, but the overhead damper additionally carries a felt for the 16' strings, which are therefore damped at two different places.

It appears that Pleyel were alone in favouring a tuning system designed to allow fine adjustment. In this system, each string is controlled by a double pin. It is wound round the first of these

pins which offers coarse adjustment by means of a ratchet, and which sits on a knuckle on the wrest-plank. To the rear of this ratchet-pin there extends a small wing, looking from above like a two-pronged fork, and between these prongs stands a second pin which is screwed into the plank. By screwing this second pin up and down, the ratchet assembly rocks forwards and backwards on its knuckle, thereby offering very fine adjustment for tightening or slackening the string, (see Fig. 1). In practice, the ratchet-pin is never used in normal tuning.



The Pleyel 'Micrometrique' Tuning System

For instruments with more than one manual, it was known that 'Bach liked them to be as close together as possible' (Schweitzer). In yet another departure from classical practice — and presumably at Landowska's express wish — Pleyel designed the two keyboards to be only about 1½" apart. This means that it is possible to play both manuals at the same time with one

hand, a feature often exploited by Landowska. A good example is in the second recording she made of the Goldberg Variations, where she plays the Aria on the upper manual, while stressing the eight-note 'ground bass' by playing it at the same time on the 16' register from the lower manual.

The jacks are of classical design and are made of hornbeam. When properly adjusted, the tongues lean slightly back from the vertical, but as they are thinner than the body of the jack, they do not protrude behind it. A small grub-screw adjusts rake on the tongue which is returned by a metal spring: plectra are of hard leather. All the jacks have a brass capstan-screw for height adjustment and they are also weighted. This weighting and the strong metal spring combine to make hanging jacks impossible and the action copes unflinchingly with repeated notes or trills.

The key weight on the upper manual is very light, certainly no heavier than on a classical instrument, but with the coupler on, the combined weight of all the jacks and the overhead dampers give quite a heavy touch on the lower manual.

A good classical instrument, with its resonant case and soundboard and low string tension, gives a firm — though not obtrusive — fundamental, completed by a wide spectrum of harmonics which impart a shimmering brilliance to the tone. Many modern harpsichords are heavily built with stiff, unresonant soundboards *but still retaining* the low string tensions of the older instruments. These strings are inadequate to 'drive' the soundboard and the tone is therefore weak in fundamental with a few very edgy partials. The effect is superficial and irritating and has given 'the modern harpsichord' a thoroughly bad name. The makers of these instruments have effectively fallen between two stools, by changing one aspect of classical design without having the courage to compensate in another. The Pleyel designers suffered from no such inhibitions: they went the whole way. The fundamental is very strong, complemented by fewer harmonics than in classical instruments, but 'harder' ones, which give a glittering edge to the tone. Authenticists who complain that this is 'not true harpsichord tone' would do well to remember that before the harpsichord's eclipse by the piano there were very large variations in tonal characteristics between different makers. Was not a large Haas very different from a Couchet, or a Taskin from a Kirkman?

Two very obvious features of the Pleyel are its volume and its sustaining power, both being directly attributable to the high string tension. By any reasonable subjective — or indeed

objective — standards, the Pleyel can be made to sound very loud, even thunderous, when the need arises. It also sustains well, and a chord played with all registers is audible to the player for about 25 seconds.

This brief description of the Pleyel is of an instrument which paved the way for today's widespread acceptance of the harpsichord. Of course, tastes have changed and, ironically, the Pleyel has fallen from general favour: indeed, the Firm of Pleyel no longer makes them. Perhaps, at some time in the future, tastes will change once more and these magnificent instruments will again find the appreciation they deserve.

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