

Erard square piano, 1804

In Gustave Flaubert's debut novel, *Madame Bovary* (or, more completely, *Madame Bovary: Moeurs de province*; 1856), Emma realizes she will never be able to give a recital on a 'piano d'Erard.' More recently, Daniel Mason's debut novel, *The Piano Tuner* (2002), relates how Edgar Drake was in 1886 commissioned by the British colonial office to repair an Erard piano that had been shipped to Burma to further the British Empire's expansion. The instrument had suffered in the tropical climate and been rendered unplayable.

Erard square piano 5761 was produced in 1804. It has a five-and-a-half octave range, FF–c⁴, and, as was typical of Erard's production from 1790 onwards, it has four pedals for lute, *forte*, celeste and *una corde*. The pedals are mounted on a bar running between the two back legs, and although the action uses a single escapement with the early style of dampers, and the *forte* pedal lifts the panel to the right front of the lid, the action appears complex, as is regularly remarked on. The case is mahogany, with a satinwood nameboard panel with a wide band at top and bottom of a complementary light wood (boxwood?). There is a gilt band around the casework and the four mahogany legs are fluted and tapered, with brass collars at their tops and delicately decorated brass cups. The curved nameboard announces in inked calligraphy: 'Erard Frères / Rue du Mail N^o 37 a Paris 1804.' The back is marked in pencil 'Hoffmann', indicating the factory craftsman, and various parts of the case as well as the lowest key are stamped '7'. The wrestplank has inked pitch indicators for the wrest pins. The serial number, 5761, is written in ink on the soundboard near the lower part of the bridge, together with 'Erard Frères a Paris 1804.'

Erard's ledgers survive, and these show that 5761 was supplied to Monsieur Aubry on 3 May 1805 for 744 francs. The entry runs: '13 floréal 13 / Mr Aubry Professeur de Musique Rue de la Loi chez le Limonadier en face de la fontaine / D^t £744 p... te. du piano à 2 cordes à l'ut N^o 5761 passé à ce prix à cause d'une remise le piano de Mme de Serent qui n'a été que de £168 au lieu de [£]192, vu qu'elle a Echangé son piano à 2 C. à l'ut Contre un à 3 cordes à l'ut c.../ Doit [£]744.' So, an allowance was given against Mme de Serent's instrument. This account is on the left-hand page, but the right-hand page indicates the allowance was indeed £192, with a further allowance of £144 given for an additional instrument from Mme S.Martial, leaving a balance of £408 (http://archivesmusee.philharmoniedeparis.fr/exploitation/Infodoc/digitalcollections/viewerpopup.aspx?seid=E_2009_5_101_P0001; fasc.217).

Sébastien Erard was born in Strasbourg in 1752, the fourth son of the ecclesiastical furniture maker Louis-Antoine Erard. He was brought up in a community of relatives who were skilled joiners, cabinet-makers and gilders, and possibly worked with Strasbourg-based members of the Silbermann family of specialist keyboard makers. He likely made his way to Paris in 1768, where one of his early patrons, the Duchesse de Villeroy, provided him with workshop premises in the Rue de Bourbon. He began to make five-octave pianos modelled on the English squares (particularly those of Johannes Zumpe) that were fashionable among the Parisian aristocracy. His success appears to have encouraged an older brother, Jean-Baptiste, to join him. By 1781, they were based at 13 Rue de Mail, which became their headquarters while their workshops appear to have spread along the rue (hence, *New Grove* points to an inventory taken on Sébastien's death in 1831 when there were 80 specialist workers spread across 19 workshops, all but three of the workshops devoted to piano construction). In February 1785, Louis XVI awarded Sébastien a dispensation to allow him to resist the efforts of Parisian luthiers to limit his expanding business. Royal commissions followed: a square piano made for Marie Antoinette in 1786–87, with a form and action familiar from English examples but with highly sophisticated cabinet work, survives in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands in Surrey. The two brothers forged their business partnership, operating as 'Erard Frères' from January 1788, and in 1790 Sébastien introduced a development of the piano which expanded its compass to five and a half octaves, using the four pedals found on square piano 5761. But, production declined drastically following the French Revolution, as many of Erard's aristocratic clients saw their fortunes change, and in 1792 Sébastien

set up business at 18 Great Marlborough Street, London. In London, harps became the main instruments made and sold, but in Paris pianos continued to be the core of the business. By the turn of the century, and with the establishment of the Consulate, Sébastien returned to Paris, where his company produced two grand piano models alongside square pianos. One grand piano completed in 1800 was presented to Haydn in 1801, and an almost identical instrument gifted to Beethoven in 1803 inspired the latter's *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* sonatas. Square piano 5761, of course, cannot make a claim for such high esteem.

Restored by Jean Maurer, 2016–2018.



