

Harpsichord & fortepiano



MAKING A BOISSELOT

By Paul McNulty

Franz Liszt befriended his contemporary Louis Constantin Boisselot at or before age 14, and remained close to the family and loyal to the brand throughout his life, signing as godfather to Franz Boisselot, purchasing pianos in 1842, 1847 and 1862, and once performing for 100 workers gathered in the courtyard at the Marseilles factory following the triumphal 1842 Spanish tour. The Boisselot piano used on that tour is still in Lisbon, a gift to the Queen of Portugal, who in turn bestowed a diamond encrusted gold snuffbox upon Maestro Liszt. During a recent re-inaugural performance held at the Lisbon Royal Palace for dignitaries and donors for the newly restored Boisselot, televised live, the piano broke under the strain, experiencing what is known as pinblock shear.

Knowing the risks involved in restoration, the authorities in Weimar chose instead to commission a replica of the piano referred to as #2800, which is the subject of this report. Boisselot sent #2800 to Liszt in Odessa for his 1847 tour of the Ukraine and Turkey. That piano, #2800, was kept ever after by Liszt in Weimar, where he moved with Carolyne von Seyn-Wittgenstein, whom he had met in Kiev at the end of his tour. A spirited woman ("my Amazon!" - F. Liszt, "a Monstrum in Excessum... what an infernal racket!" - R. Wagner), Princess von Seyn-Wittgenstein devoted her efforts and her distant Russian husband's finances to freeing Franz from the headaches of life as a touring virtuoso. She somewhat moderated his intake of spirituous liquor, encouraged his composition, and worked on his correspondence, writing a substantial portion of his "Life of Chopin". She rented a villa in Weimar for them, painting three rooms red, white and blue - for Russia. Liszt and his brilliant mahogany piano were in the red room, she worked and wrote in the blue room, and the white room was for her daughter, whom she raised as a Russian princess. From 1847 on, therefore, we have no more tours, but a number of important compositions from the hand of Franz Liszt, including the Sonata in B Minor and the lengthy revision of *Totentanz* (1847-53).

A letter of 1860 from Liszt to Boisselot praises #2800 in glowing terms: "a daily partner in my battles with the music of the past, present and future... I have nearly played through the keys, but I love it, and I will never part with it." #2800 has suffered since, particularly during restoration work carried out 50 years ago, and its haphazard storage in the then Eastern-block controlled Weimar.


The complicated structure of #2800 is easy to grasp in the photographs I have taken, showing how in the 1840s Boisselot was able to bury his iron braces under the soundboard, whereas in the 1830s he had placed them above the soundboard, passing through deep notches cut into the bridge. Notching a bridge kills the notes on either side of the notch, and the allergy Boisselot developed to this acoustic effect stimulated him to add a unison of three strings for a non-existent Bb5, the better for A5 to sing, together with stringing the dumb notes above each brace, Viennese fashion. The stringing is marked out with exceptional care, the bridge being formed of vertical beech laminate (capped with pear) forming sudden kinks to accommodate the gaps in the scale at each brace. The top four octaves double exactly in length. Piano strings in 1847 were no longer iron, but English Webster steel, the original factory providing Stephen Paulello with his wire, which I have used for this project (sounds very good).

The hammers of #2800 were re-felted at some point, removing the two approximately 5mm outer layers and attaching one thick layer. I was able to consult Christopher Clarke's contemporary Boisselot and its original hammers, visiting him and it, and, also referring to the detailed photos he kindly provided, made a set of hammers closely observing the measures of each layer of covering. The hammers are constituted of pencil cedar cores covered with two layers of ox or horse (I substituted cow), one layer of deer and two layers of felt, the outer being softer. In the upper register the layers decrease to three.

The felt I use comes from Würzen Filzfabrik, the inner layer being something regarded as too soft for modern hammers, the softer outer layer being their special key end felt, medium density, available in various thicknesses; I chose 5.5mm, and dressed it down from there. Christopher graciously offered the use of his splendid replica of a hammer covering machine, which attaches a layer of leather or felt at a predetermined pressure, given by weights hung on a stout gut cord. I could not have left the workshop for the three weeks I seemed to need to make one set of hammers, but managed at home after a fashion with an enormous balance, suspending a weight at one end with a waiting hammer at the other end, needing between

10 and 25 kilos to clamp a layer of felt. Gluing bits of thick veneer to the ends of a piece of felt gives plenty of traction to the spring clamp to hold the pressure apparently necessary.

At this juncture my Boisselot copy is 12 hours away from installing the hammer mechanism, so I still know no more than the reader about how it will sound. There has been an unholy amount of veneer inlay with brass trim, which had added many hours to the work. Still, we are past all that; by the time this goes to print, people will have heard it debuted at a Wigmore Hall concert (26 July) with Viviana Sofronitsky performing on five of my pianos: Stein 1788, Walter & Sohn c. 1802, Graf 1819, Pleyel 1830, and Boisselot 1847.



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