

# MAKERS' REPORTS

THE MAKING OF A PLEYEL (PART II) BY PAUL MCNULTY

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The hammers were made using a sheep leather from the recent project of the Kunsthistorischesmuseum Wien, where the original formula was employed. This particular batch is a bit hard for string contact, but it works wonderfully well in the three inner layers. It's quite bouncy, as the collagen has not been stripped out with harsh modern chemicals. In the three middle layers I used a European antelope of some sort from Kohlbacher near Salzburg, who continues his 150-year family tannery, with a degree from Vienna University for tanning, no less. He makes beautiful leather – oil tanned. For the outer layer of chamois, in the bass and tenor, I have used two layers of mouflon, becoming thinner and fewer in the treble, ending with a single layer of roe deer.

The Pleyel frame is constructed of 20 mm oak boards, laminated vertically where necessary, as in the bellyrail and in the bentside liner, both of which are 60 mm. As for the bellyrail, another 20mm board is attached in the treble to extend the perimeter of the soundboard glued to it, a bit closer to the player. As for the bentside, its three members are steamed with a wallpaper steamer for two periods of 90 minutes (as my steamer is small and runs dry) in a metal box thickly clad in foam insulating blocks, with a meat thermometer in place to indicate we are at 95+ C. Gloves on, the boards are carried in a group to the form and forced into the shoe which grips the treble end, then wrapped and bent and mashed together around the curve, which is tighter than the end result, anticipating springback. The form has in place the 32cm wide 20mm thick outer frame, or case side wall, previously bent, and they all are bent to fit each other.

The clamped assembly is wheeled into our hot storeroom—30 C at 30% relative humidity—and stays a week before disassembly, after which the separate boards are dried a week further and hog-tied to prevent unbending. Then all are laminated on the form, which has been adjusted to fit the exact curve of the drawing. The laminations prevent any appreciable springback, and after some further curing, the bentside is dressed to shape and joined to the outer frame.

The 20mm bentside outer frame (the outer frame = the walls of the piano, so to speak, to which are attached 2.5mm layers of oak inside and out,

then veneered outside) is attached to an assembly comprising wrestplank, bellyrail, cheek and spine, with spine liner. This step of construction leaves the bentside liner to be attached, plus the tail and its liner. The liner refers to the gluing surface for the soundboard perimeter, and the hitchpin rail – a single unit, in Pleyel's case.

Speaking of gluing the soundboard: in this Pleyel, the soundboard is not glued to the bellyrail except in the treble, and is glued for most of its width to a 20mm square spruce rail, or apron, which itself is rebated into the bellyrail, simply resting there, without being glued. My feeling is that this allows low frequencies to develop better, but it may as well have been designed to allow the soundboard not to be restrained as the case moves under tension.

His apartment, invaded by surprise, was only lighted by some wax candles, grouped round one of Pleyel's pianos, which he particularly liked for their slightly veiled, yet silvery sonorousness, and easy touch, permitting him to elicit tones which one might think proceeded from one of those [h]armonicas of which romantic Germany has preserved the monopoly, and which were so ingeniously constructed by its ancient masters, by the union of crystal and water.

I have now, months later, tested the two Pleyels I have made, and merely sticking a wedge into the soundboard/bellyrail gap, effectively preventing movement, kills the bass – alarmingly. With this feature, not seen (by me) on other Pleyel models, the tenor and bass are most satisfying. I would add, after my delight about the bass, that the treble can best be described in Liszt's words: his apartment, though I think after all he had an 1838 grand and an 1848, so why an upright? For all of that, the two grands I have made have lustrous big trebles, and, when playing the cascading figures at the end of the introduction to the "La Ci Darem da Mano" variations, using the una corda, the "crystal and water" wheeze wins hands down. The Warsaw Chamber Opera directors are very enthusiastic about this remark.

## CHOPIN'S PIANO BUILT ANEW BY CHRIS MAENE

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*In 2004 the workshop of Chris Maene made a replica of the first-ever Steinway piano and made a new copy of Chopin's piano.*

### The Steinway No. 1

In 2004, the Maene workshop received permission, the first in the world, to make a replica of the first-ever (oldest extant) Steinway piano: the so-called Steinway No. 1 Kitchen piano from 1836. It was a success story which was not only captured in a documentary by Bram Crols but which also toured the world as the Steinway No. 1 replica was used by Steinway worldwide for concerts.

For Chris Maene and his colleagues / co-workers this project was a fairytale icing on the cake, a result of 70 years of experience and three generations of Maene family instrument making.

With the Chopin year 2010 in sight, Chris Maene decided to carry out his great dream: the making of a real concert grand. For a great time and up to the present day the Maene family has enjoyed international fame for the making of historic keyboard instruments, but these were mainly harpsichords and fortepianos (the predecessors to the modern piano). The making of a true concert grand requires extra care and tooling, something that is not granted to every instrument maker. Through the growth of the workshop and recent investment in personnel and machinery, this became possible for the Chris Maene workshop.

Chris Maene said, "As an instrument maker as well as collector of historic keyboard instruments (he has a collection numbering 170 plus instruments), the Pleyel concert grand is the ideal transition instrument from fortepiano to Steinway concert grand. For 30 years, my workshop has made replicas of early harpsichords from the 1600s to the Steinway Piano no. 1 from 1836. The Chopin year 2010 is the ideal moment to make my dream come true: to make a concert grand piano."

### Chopin and Pleyel

Chopin spent 18 years of his life in France (from 1831 until his death in 1849). In fact, Erard was a large piano manufacturer in France. Despite this, Chopin was always outspoken in his preference for Pleyel. From the 14,000 pianos that Pleyel made in these 18 years, Chopin must have played hundreds (instruments that he received during his stay, those that he had delivered for his concerts, and those he knew through his students and friends), the greatest number of which were small upright pianos (such as Pleyel got to know through Wornum in England), after that square pianos

and in fewer numbers, small grand pianos (of which Pleyel and Broadwood made the mechanisms).

Chris Maene notes: "Pleyel's clients were the people in their salons where their cultural life was played out. Nevertheless these salons are not to be compared with concert halls, and the grand pianos were a great deal smaller than a concert grand. Still, every maker tried to make larger instruments. The point of these prestige instruments was to make the best of the best and to gain publicity for one's brand. In 1842-3, Pleyel made his first two 7-octave concert grands. The oldest surviving concert grand by Pleyel is no. 9726 from 1843, which is classed in France as a "monument historique". In my collection I have an identical concert grand no. 9861 from the same period (this is extensively decorated). For me, the replica of this Pleyel is the ideal instrument with which to display Chopin, because the Chopin concerts today have been moved from the salon to the large concert hall."

### Transition from the fortepiano to the modern Steinway

This concert grand by Pleyel in 1843 is the ideal transition instrument from the fortepiano to the modern Steinway. Some of its features are:

- The obvious sharing out/division of the piano into three registers: bass, middle and descant. A modern piano has a homogenous sound from bass to descant.
- The wooden body with its strong supports is much tougher/stronger/sturdier than the fortepianos and can be compared to modern pianos.
- In contrast with earlier fortepianos, the Pleyel concert grand has a metal frame assembled with bars and plates. Through this, stronger strings can be used with more tension which results in greater volume (Modern concert grands have a cast-iron frame, even stronger strings, more tension and greater volume.),
- In the case of fortepianos the hammers require of different layers of leather. With the Pleyel has smaller hammers than the modern grand, but they are indeed made of felt. Good felted hammers provide, just as with modern pianos, a more dynamic sound variation between soft (piano) and loud (forte) playing.

# WHO'S MAKING/RESTORING WHAT?

A List From Contributors

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**Peter Barnes Harpsichords (near Bath, Somerset)**

has a John Barnes, 1962 Kirkman copy harpsichord available for a six month or more hire. He also has a Zuckermann Flemish double for sale for £5495, a Delin copy for £4750, a Gregori copy for £2500, spinet after Keene and Brackley by Ian Willey 2001 for £2800. He is looking for Zuckermann Flemish singles to refurbish. His website lists used instruments at [www.peterbarnesharpsichords.com](http://www.peterbarnesharpsichords.com).

**Colin Booth (Wells, Somerset, UK)** is making a German double for a German customer, and a single after Vater for an English one.

**Lucy Coad Square Pianos (Bristol, UK)**

is restoring a square pianoforte by Clementi and Co. c1813 and a grand pianoforte by Broadwood and Son, 1801.

**Robert Deegan Harpsichords (Lancaster UK)**

is making a Flemish single (private client Indiana USA); a Muselar Virginals (private client, Lincolnshire); and an anonymous Spanish single (Coll. Luckett), unallocated.

**Michael Johnson (Dorset, UK)** has just completed and delivered to a pupil of Mitzi Meyerson, Berlin, a 3-ranked Flemish single manual GG-d<sup>3</sup> and has started a large Flemish double FF-f<sup>3</sup> with a soundboard to be decorated by Kyle Turner for Jean Douglas-Tutt.

**Chris Maene (Ruselede, BE)** has completed a Steinway no. 1 replica.

**Paul McNulty (Divisov, Czech Republic)** is making two copies of the Boisselot 1846, two 1819 Graf copies, two 1788 Stein copies, two 1805 Walter & Sohn copies. In August he had a 3-week tour with Stein, Walter, Graf, and Pleyel in the VW, for concerts and presentations in Touquet (FR), Oslo, Irsee (DE), and soon after in Lausanne, the Baltic republics and Japan.

**Jack Peters (Seattle, WA, USA)** has finished a clavichord based on Gellinge, has restored a 1963 5-octave bent-side spinet by Christopher Bannister, and is halfway done with his third dulcemelos after the Arnaut de Zwolle diagrams. He also has finished the first harpsichord made all from Paulownia wood (it looks like balsa wood but it is about twice as strong and is used for kotos); his design is a small continuo harpsichord with a strange short octave in the bass, 65" long and with a lid weighing only 20lbs (movable by one person). The wrestplank is hollow, increasing the resonance. The bar holding the tuning pins is Chinese Elm and the bridges are walnut. Everything else is Paulownia (in Japanese "kiriwood"). See photo on cover, top left.

**Huw Saunders (London, UK)** is finishing a clavichord after Schiedmaier 1795 for a customer in Oxford and a harpsichord based on Bello, as well as refurbishing instruments by Andrew Garlick, Zuckerman, and himself.

**M. Vogel & M. Scheer (Jestetten, DE)**

are restoring a Theo de Haas, Dulcken copy from 1992. Scheer is also making a new copy of "Stelin 1760".

**Thomas and Barbara Wolf (The Plains, Virginia)**

are currently restoring a Kirckman harpsichord from 1779, completing a French double-manual harpsichord after Germain, and preparing to start two Silbermann fortepianos. An 18th-century 5-string Viennese double bass replica is also underway.

**Andrew Wooderson (Bexley, UK)**

is making several Italian harpsichords and a Flemish ravelment double. He will be starting a new "Hamburg school" German double later in the autumn.

*(If you would like your work listed here, please contact the Editor. We reserve the right to shorten entries.)*