Further Reading


PIANO, THE

In the nineteenth century, the piano achieved a technological maturity essentially unchanged to the present day, winning in the process an unprecedented significance to the public, private, and commercial spheres of everyday life. Its development ran parallel to, and most often in tandem with, the growing dominance of cultural life by the middle class, newly discovered systems of manufacturing and merchandising, and with the phenomenon of nineteenth-century instrumental virtuosity in major centers of Western musical activity such as London, Paris, Vienna, and New York. Its unique capabilities as both a solo and a collaborative instrument had been exploited in the eighteenth century, but the innovations of the British were quickly appropriated and reconceived, first by the French in the decades following the Revolution, then by the Americans. Upright, vertically-strung instruments replaced horizontally strung square pianos and the larger grand pianos, already prominent in eighteenth-century public venues, acquired prestige. A number of other changes, such as the color reversal of white and black keys, and the reduction of pedals and devices to alter sound, unfolded as well.

England’s Industrial Revolution had spawned a rich urban musical culture in London. A native entrepreneur, John Broadwood, and a transplanted genius, Muzio Clementi, best divined the dimensions of change afoot. Clementi, keenly aware of new parameters of public consumption before the turn of the century, lent his name to the building and merchandise of new pianos and wrote challenging and idiomatic works for them. Since publishing titles often indicated one or another instrument (probably for sales purposes) between the time of Johann Christian Bach’s London sonatas and concertos (c. 1770) and Clementi’s works written exclusively for the new instrument (closer to the turn of the new century), a certain interchangeability in much of the active repertory may be presumed between the early nineteenth-century piano and its predecessors (the clavichord and the harpsichord). By the turn of the century there were some forty piano manufacturers in London, and Broadwood alone had brought to market at least a thousand grands and probably five or six times as many square instruments. Broadwood quickly gained the lead worldwide in manufacturing and held it well into the nineteenth century.

Sebastien Érard, having started to build square pianos in Paris just as Clementi glimpsed the future in London, fled the revolution for England. When the political situation in France had calmed, he returned to resume production there with the very best of British models and practice in mind. Érard discovered a performing-practice loophole intended to by the British: by the 1820s, Broadwood had patents on iron sheeting and braces to reinforce his increasingly powerful instruments, but their ability to sustain better, thicker strings and greater tensions required heavier hammers and coverings, making their key actions more difficult, in effect, “slower” to negotiate. Érard refined a “double-escapement” action that allowed for the more rapid and efficient repetition of individual keystrokes, thereby making his instruments easier to play.

The Viennese builders competed too, but their instruments were far different, manifesting a warmer, crisper sound, their builders having eschewed iron braces and case reinforcements. The Viennese continued building along these lines until roughly midcentury, producing lighter instruments with actions that were fleet, if not especially fast. The future of piano manufacture, however, was dictated in an important sense: the inevitable drift toward larger volumes of sound demanded by the public both in concert halls and in larger salons at home, which could not be satisfied by designing ever-stronger wooden frames and casings. The expanding lyric homophony and the increasingly complex, virtuosic, even orchestral textures and passage work of nineteenth-century music were better served, and to some extent inspired by, the evolving dynamic capabilities of competing instruments.

Heftier, more powerful pianos meant heavier actions, and with time virtuosos everywhere came to prefer some kind of “escapement” in their instrument actions. Érard’s great contribution, then, had been to mark a compromise of sorts between the graceful speed of Viennese actions and the unavoidable weight engendered by the more powerful English Broadwoods.

By 1830 the center of virtuoso piano playing had shifted from London to Paris, and by the 1840s the market everywhere for smaller domestic instruments began to increase exponentially. Until this time upright pianos tended to be essentially rearranged grand or square models, suspended or tipped upright with different keyboard mechanisms to adjust for gravity. Early in the century Robert Wornum in London invented a reliable action for upright instruments, and Henri Pape in Paris patented a system of cross stringing to enhance the resonance of smaller instruments for the home, and more reliable and resonant models began to appear on the market. In the wake of Niccolò Paganini’s spectacular successes (programatic as much as musical), Franz Liszt and other pianist/composers began to furnish similar repertories for a public increasingly captivated by individual displays of virtuosity. Moreover, the reification and retransmission of contemporary operatic spectacle outside of large concert halls could proceed more fully by way of newer instruments in greater numbers, whether modestly vertical in bourgeois households, or grandly horizontal in the salons and concert halls of the nouveau-riche and influential.
The Europeans made the great piano advances up until mid-century, at which point they were overtaken by the Americans. The American manufacturers moved quickly; Broadwood had experimented with a single-piece iron frame for his instruments, but it was Alpheus Babcock in the United States who, in 1825, took out a patent and tinkered long enough to transfer the appropriate technology from square instruments (longer preferred in America than elsewhere) to the newer grands. By 1843, Jonas Chickering of Boston was producing grands with Babcock’s powerful iron frame, which (especially important in the severe climates of the United States) was far less prone to warp and wreak havoc with tuning.

Heinrich Steinweg (who called his company Steinway) emigrated to New York around 1850 and set up a company that grew rapidly over the course of a few years. Steinway’s genius lay in incorporating the European innovations (such as cross-stringing, conceived by Pape in Paris), with those of the United States (single-piece iron frames, greater power, expanded ranges)—all while adapting to the new paradigms of mass production, which meant that his factories, from 1860 on, could simultaneously produce large powerful grands and solid, reliable upright instruments in consistently large quantities. The piano’s role in the second half of the nineteenth century was transformed: it became ubiquitous in public and private life, a vital part of the economic landscape.

Only the Germans were able to keep pace, though on a smaller scale. French manufacturers, Érard and (chiefly) Pleyel (Chopin’s preferred instrument), were wary of the new technologies of mass production and of selling abroad; they retreated, their sales stagnating considerably as a result. The English, too, found it difficult to compete after midcentury. By the 1860s, then, the American instrument and its system of production dominated, but the foundations for its phenomenal success, both sociomusical and socioeconomic, had long been prepared in Europe. Again, Clementi, very early on, had foreseen the dense social and economic matrix of the instrument’s future, its unique ability to express a single player’s (Romantic) sensibilities, to accompany or to share in those of others, to transmit myriad musics. The nineteenth-century piano became a glorious, indispensable machine, mass-produced, desired in one form or another virtually everywhere.

Further Reading


PICTURESQUE

The term picturesque (perhaps since John Ruskin’s definition of it as “parasitical sublimity”) tends often to be used in derogatory fashion. Even for some students of the late eighteenth century it signifies that which is pre-Romantic, mannered, and concerned with landscape rather than nature. According to a popular teleology, the picturesque is the necessary precursor of Romanticism, superficial in relation to the sublime transcendence of the latter. However, original usage of the word does not place it in opposition to the sublime. Indeed, much of the psychological language of the picturesque is also that of the Burkean sublime. If anything, the picturesque is pitched against neoclassical concepts of beauty, and what Richard Payne Knight, called the “dull, rapid, smooth and tranquil scene”.

Theorists of the eighteenth century introduced the picturesque as an extra aesthetic category to those of the sublime and the beautiful (although some twentieth-century commentators see the picturesque as a synthesis of the sublime and the beautiful). It is a new experiment in taste that for Christopher Hussey (1927) was the first step toward a pure aesthetic. Certainly it has a defiantly antifunctional dimension, and radically distances itself from the pleasing pastoral and the association of beauty with usefulness. As the Reverend William Gilpin, the picturesque’s first theoretician, observed, “the picturesque eye looks at scenes of cultivation with disgust” and “[m]oral, and picturesque ideas do not always coincide.”

From about the 1770s onward, the picturesque eye learns to appreciate that which is “shaggy,” “irregular,” “tafted,” “rugged,” “interesting,” “fring’d,” “rough,” “varied.” For many, the seventeenth-century Salvador Rosa was the picturesque artist par excellence. The picturesque eye is not interested in the generalities of ideal nature, noted Gilpin, but relishes “endless varieties” and “elegant particularities,” and “ever delights in the bold, free, negligent strokes, and roughnesses of nature.” In terms of available technology, watercolor pigment was now to be had in portable ready-made cakes, making the moment right for the capturing of the irregular landscape in all its moods, and topographical prints and reproductions of landscape art in guidebooks were becoming available to a wider public with the invention of aquatint. There was, according to Gilpin, growing interest in the effects of perspective and of light on perception: “Nay we sometimes see (in a mountainous country especially) a variation of light alter the whole disposition of a landscape.” Gilpin particularly favored “haziness”; in British mist the picturesque artist could celebrate obscurity, lack of clarity, indistinctness—that which is veiled.