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Sébastien Érard, born in 1752 in Strasbourg, Germany, was a mechanical genius and paramount to the development of the modern piano. He moved to Paris when he was sixteen and began an apprenticeship with a harpsichord maker. He was soon dismissed for being too inquisitive. It did not take long before he set up shop for himself and made his first small square piano in 1777. Erard pianos quickly became more and more well known for quality and beauty. His instruments were some of the best in France and caught the attention of King Louis XVI who licensed Erard to build pianos for the French Court.

The French Revolution in 1789 made piano manufacture in France near impossible, forcing Erard to look elsewhere. He obtained a new factory in London and continued building pianos. He returned to Paris in 1796, while still maintaining his London factory, and began producing pianos made in France once again. Erard can be credited with the creation of a double escapement piano action, very similar to the modern grand piano action. He also was the first piano maker in Paris to fit foot pedals to the piano, adding additional features to the instrument like sustaining of notes, a bassoon sound, and two shift pedals. During this time, he was also building and improving upon the harp. He is credited for the invention of the single and double action for the pedal harp, allowing it to play chromatically in any key.



Sébastien Érard passed away in 1831, leaving the business to his nephew, Pierre. There was much improvement in marketing under the new leadership. Pierre made sure the most renowned musicians of the time such as Franz Liszt, Felix Mendelssohn, Maurice Ravel, Frederick Chopin, and Gabriel Fauré owned and performed on Erard pianos. There was always a backup Erard at a Liszt concert, for he was known to break a piano during a concert by playing too vigorously. Erard's success lasted until the end of World War I when society began to move toward a more robust and modern piano sound. Erard pianos were known for their antiquated sound, much like an American square grand of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and not the newer sound, causing the company financial decline. Schimmel acquired the Erard name in 1971 and discontinued production of Erard pianos in 1990.

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I was lucky enough to see and play an Erard grand piano at a PTG Convention a few years ago. It truly is a different instrument than any modern piano. It had a distinct tone for each register and the action felt different than a modern piano. The key to playing it was gentleness for if one were to start being too forceful, the sound quality would quickly deteriorate into a muddy mess. This Erard was also a great display for what historians call "Erard Pinblock Disease". Erard pianos were not built with the same laminated Pinblocks of today and tended to crack, rendering them untunable and in need of replacement.

A few months ago, I was gifted an Erard upright piano from 1882. What a treat! Not only was the condition almost original, but it was in need of significant repair. I took it on as an historical study and did what I could to bring some life back into it. I got the keyboard working again as it had completely seized up. I got to make an attempt at treating Erard Pinblock Disease using large bolts. I polished the solid brass hardware, something you do not see often on modern pianos. Unfortunately, the 139 year old piano was only repairable to a point as almost all the structural glue joints have failed. It is more of a museum piece than anything practical at this point, but I cannot be more grateful to have had such an amazing opportunity!

Written By Kestrel Curro RPT, BM

