

GIULIANO MARCO MATTIOLI

The Érard Family

A historical journey
on musical instruments and documents

Preface to the first edition by Mara Galassi



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Preface to the first edition

It is with pleasure that I write this brief preface to my harpist colleague Giuliano Marco Mattioli's rich study on the history of the Alsatian luthiers Érard.

The text is a fruitful result of passionate and exciting research that takes you by the hand and accompanies you through the streets of Paris and London, where amidst the diatribes of famous violin makers, fought with patents for small and large inventions, the Érard's dynasty brought to realisation the prototype of the double-action pedal harp, which we now call the 'modern' harp.

The great merit of this text lies in having brought together and analysed a copious number of documents, many previously unpublished, concerning the Érard family, from the arrival in Paris of the founder Sébastien to the closure of the business in the 1950s by the last directors of the company.

The accurate and detailed analysis of all the patents, filed both in Paris and London, by an experienced harpist such as Giuliano Marco Mattioli is then of great value, and allows us to fully understand and follow both the organological and aesthetic evolution of the Érard harp over more than 180 years. The patents and production modifications of the instruments described here constitute, in fact, the technical and material side of the evolution of musical and instrumental aesthetics between the end of the 18th century and the middle of the 20th century, almost as if they were its incarnation. Their chronological framing historicises the aesthetic datum, which otherwise risks remaining an ambiguous and elusive instrument in the hands of the musician.

The chronology of events is then interspersed with scenes of musical life, both in Paris and London, in which great harp virtuosos such as Krumpholtz, Dizi, Bochsá and many others become protagonists, influencing the fortunes of the Alsatian luthiers' company with their work. What is striking is the great generosity of Sébastien and his nephew Pierre towards talented musicians and performers, expressed in giving harps and pianos to those who, having just arrived in the two great capitals, needed and deserved them! Gestures unimaginable today!

The merit of the book is that it does not overlook the fate of the Érard house, described with a wealth of sometimes curious and captivating details, from the death of the three main protagonists, Sébastien, Jean-Baptiste and Pierre, to the definitive closure of the last remaining active establishment, in Paris. Pages of history often overlooked in previous studies.

The beautiful photographs that complete the text help to follow the steps in the formulation of the patents, while the final chronology, in which the collected data are inserted and alternated with notes on the main historical events, summarises and gives the entire text an additional and valuable didactic value.

This work adds an important contribution to the literature on historical harps. If in fact the Érard Gothic harp is a sort of cliché in the harp world, one that is looked upon as the ancestor of modern instruments, Giuliano Marco Mattioli's work reminds us that this specific model not only possesses mechanical and organological characteristics that are far removed from those of today's instruments, but above all that it is the final product of a long and complex evolutionary history of an entire generation of harps. Knowledge of the construction peculiarities that differentiate the individual models of this family provides today's performer with a valuable aid in the choices of technique and performance practice.

A fine text, therefore, to be read by sipping each page like a good liqueur; a text that tells us, amidst accurate technical descriptions, anecdotes and happy musical considerations, the sound of instruments that can still speak today, recounting their beautiful past and our varied present.

Milan, 9 January 2022

MARA GALASSI

Preface to the second edition

To my great pleasure, given that we are dealing with an increasingly specialised – not to say elitist – subject such as classical music, the first version of this essay received praise even outside the cultural sphere I deal with daily. Such feedback has kept my attention and increased the desire to go further with my research. Since the first publication in 2022, I have therefore continued to gather information about the Érard family. In particular, the search for original instruments, to better define what is recorded in the different registers, which is perhaps the most complex task I have had to face. The vast number of harps made and their difficult availability in various parts of the world is a difficult hurdle to overcome. The help provided by so many enthusiastic colleagues, owners and collectors, has made the history of the Érard family and the production of pianos and harps become clearer, one small detail after another.

From the very beginning of my research, I was aware of the obvious difficulty of gaining truly in-depth knowledge of the history of people belonging to the humble social class. After all, the Érards began their journey as simple craftsmen who made musical instruments. For this very reason, it is easy to see how they did not receive the same attention as their aristocratic and political clients. However, from the end of the 18th century, the bourgeoisie began to have a major influence on the European economy. Thanks to their intellectual and manual skills, the Érard family thus had the opportunity and the merit to distinguish themselves in almost 180 years of business activity. But it is evident that in 19th century culture, it was only the men of the family who received the attention of critics and historians. Today, Western sensibilities have changed and push us further in looking for the merit of those who did not receive the same favourable treatment just because they were women. Camille Février, who became the *veuve* – widow – Érard after the death of her husband Pierre, was able to run two large companies located in two different countries, the United Kingdom and France, for no less than 34 years! She was a businessperson in her own right, although she lacked specific education and training for that role. Nobody in the family ever thought that one day a woman could be leading the whole business. She also demonstrated the ability

to delegate to others what she knew she did not know, a quality that is always rare. Yet, little is known about her because little has been said and even less has been written. With this new, updated, and expanded publication, I have tried to add to her figure as much as I could.

Among the new contributions to this edition are pictures and descriptions of still existing harp specimens that had not yet reached me in the first edition, particularly regarding the more particular models such as the *Louis XVI*, *Empire* and *Renaissance* styles. As well as the different mechanical characteristics and variants that I was able to study during the restoration of other harps. Another substantial amount of data was made by additional sources, articles and studies that I was able to collect and place chronologically and thematically in the essay. Of these additions, if we want to call them that, the most substantial relates to the Salle Érard, or rather the Érard salon built by the family. These were crucial venues for the activities of the Érards, who invested time and money in building these concert halls in which to hear their instruments played and at the same time promote the musical activities of the many illustrious artists who became their friends. I also decided to go through all the registers for the hundredth time (a tedious but essential task) to pick out all the harps bought by theatres, music schools and institution, including the religious ones who served as centres of developing music knowledge. Being Érard the main supplier for music schools and theatres, I believe this new list will help in tracing the teaching of the harp all around the world. Probably many of those harps still exist, though probably in need of restoration. Among the new sources, I would particularly mention the two recent volumes *Erard, a passion for the piano* and *Erard, empire of the harp*, which have revealed some more personal and intimate information about the various members of the family. There are in fact some brief excerpts of correspondence between the two founding brothers, between Jean-Baptiste's sons – Pierre and Céleste – and the *veuve* Érard and her sister. With regard to these two books, I can only hope for the full publication of the cited documents – recently found in the Château de Bourbilly – in the same way as in the two volumes of *The history of the Érard piano and harp in letters and documents 1785-1959*. Such a publication would be an essential element in finding the information from the original and complete sources.

The support shown to me by colleagues over the years and the desire to make my volume more accessible have led me to publish it in English. I conclude this preface in the knowledge that no research is ever really finished, but with the hope of finding more and more confirmations, denials – at the cost of having to revise my theories –, clues, documents, and musical instruments.

GIULIANO MARCO MATTIOLI

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Glossary

Acajou – an Indigenous Tupí term that can be translated as mahogany. It is the timber obtained from trees of the *Swietenia mahagoni* species: valuable, compact, polishable, workable, and reddish in colour.

Base – see Pedal box.

Baseboard – the wooden board of the harp, usually decorated, at the lower end of the Soundboard, located below the Column and above the Pedal box.

Béquilles, à – French term that can be translated as hangers or crutches. It is a type of harp mechanism invented in 1782 by Georges Cousineau, consisting of Béquilles placed outside the front of the Neck in a number of two or four per String. To realise the different semitones, through the action of the Pedal, the corresponding couple of Béquilles rotate and press on the String, reducing its vibrating length.

Body – see Soundbox.

Bridge pin – usually made of wood from *Brya ebenus* or *Diospyros ebenum*, used to close the Eyelets on the Soundboard with the function of locking the String in place. In the most valuable harp models, the Bridge pins are fitted with mother-of-pearl inlays or carved decorations.

Bushings – see Eyelets.

Chévilles – see Tuning pin.

Citronnier – French term that can be translated as Ceylon satinwood. It is the timber obtained from trees of the species *Chloroxylon swietenia*: compact, heavy, and golden-brown in colour with light shades.

Column – part of the harp located between the Pedal box and the Neck. It takes its name from the architectural element and encloses within it the Pedal rods connected to the Pedals. In Érard harps, the upper end of the Column is called the capital because of its appearance; while in Louis XVI harps there is a distinctive scroll-shaped top instead of the capital, similar to that of harps from the second half of the 18th century. Pillar is a synonym.

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Introduction

In the early days of my career as a musician, I only had rare occasions to see instruments created by Érard. Apart from those depicted in harp history books, there were the few harps owned by the Italian Conservatories I visited and the few that I could admire up close during the various stages of restoration when I took my modern harp for regulation to Lucia Bellani, former harp maker at Liuteria Artigiana. I also remember that shortly before I was admitted to the Conservatory in Como, in 1999, I had started a record collection dedicated to the harp, which included, albeit in small numbers, a few albums through which one could hear the distinctive sound of the Érard harps.⁽¹⁾ Since I had never met any other colleagues who had devoted themselves in depth to the history of these harps and their performance practice, I had no stimuli or references to appreciate their value and merits. So as a student, I believed that these instruments were simply old and of little value: obsolete, inaccurate, out of tune and often noisy due to their worn mechanism. In my early years of study, however, I noticed that in the pictures included in biographies and harp methods, the great names of the past were portrayed with their Érard harps. It was one woman who particularly struck me: Henriette Renié (1875-1956), harpist and composer. In the biographical volume *La harpe vivante*, written by her adopted daughter Françoise des Varennes (1919-2004), I had read numerous references to Renié's relationship with the Érard company and the Parisian musical world in general. Henriette's complete dedication to the harp intensely marked her life both musically and humanly, becoming a source of inspiration for me. It was thus that I began to cultivate a passion for her music and for her person, following a path that led me to seek out all her out-of-print scores. Following in her footsteps, I arrived in Paris at the beginning of 2006 and, after buying some old 78 rpm records of her historical recordings, I had a real stroke of luck in front of her home. While I was standing in emotional admiration in front of the main door at 55 rue de Passy, a lady came in. At that point I had to explain to her the reason for my

⁽¹⁾ The duo formed by Lily Laskine and Marielle Nordmann is one of the best-known examples.

equivocal presence in front of her house. I then discovered that she was Madame Lesprit-Maupin, a distant relative of Renié's then living in a portion of the harpist's old house, who, after a hasty introduction and moved by an unusual sense of trust, invited me for a cup of tea. I was thus offered the opportunity to admire the Érard harp used by Henriette Renié when she was a child,⁽²⁾ the garden where she used to give lessons to pupils from all over the world and the few heirlooms left in the house.⁽³⁾ At that time, after a seminar on the Baroque repertoire in Parma Conservatory followed by another meeting in Milan on Jan Křtitel Krumpholtz (1747-1790), I shared my enthusiasm for Renié's music with the speaker and organiser of the meetings Mara Gallassi, a Renaissance and Baroque harp teacher at the 'Claudio Abbado' Civic School of Music in Milan. With great simplicity, Mara suggested I find an original Érard harp, so that I could use it to perform the extensive repertoire I had collected and studied in those years on the type of instrument for which it had been composed. However, I had no opportunity to get down to work, as I was busy preparing my academic diploma in Parma and the repertoire required for the competition in Israel, where, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of her death, two pieces by Renié were included: *Concert en ut mineur* and *Ballade fantastique*.⁽⁴⁾ In addition to the lack of time, another difficulty arose in the search for an original historical pedal harp, namely the small number of instruments in good enough condition to perform music on them. Only later, in the summer of 2008, did I receive a message from my first harp teacher, Silvia Musso: in Turin, Mrs Giovanna Poli was selling the harp that had belonged to her mother, in the hope that after decades of si-

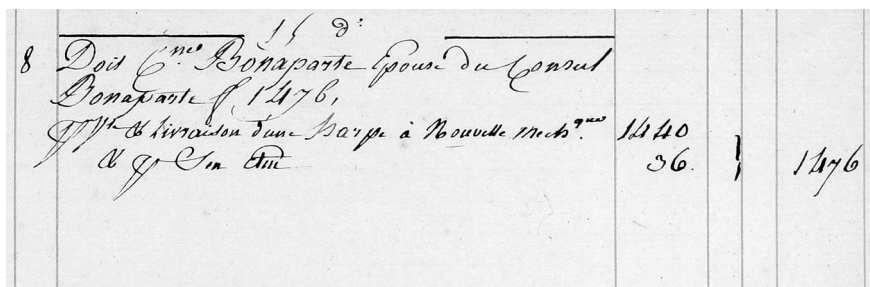
(2) The pedals of this harp were modified by her father, equipping them with upward extensions. Renié was petite as a child, so without this, it would not have been possible for her to move the pedals.

(3) The fruit of that trip was to discover that some of Renié's personal papers, including spiritual diaries, had been donated by des Varennes to the harp department of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, where they are still preserved and available for consultation. Mme Lesprit-Maupin also told me that des Varennes herself, before her death, had given the manuscripts of Renié's music to the harpist Xavier de Maistre, who probably used them to record his 1999 album *Renié: Works for harp*.

(4) I admit to having some responsibility for the inclusion of those pieces, as I had been a constant promoter of Renié's music during my several years of study with Judith Liber (1940-2020), the artistic director of the Israel Competition at the time. Having studied at a young age with Carlos Salzedo, Liber shared with him the idea that all romantic harp music was 'trash music' and therefore advised his students against studying it. Nevertheless, she asked me to play her some recordings of pieces by Renié. The two pieces in question were included as required pieces in the competition and the publisher Leduc resumed publishing both pieces, which had been out of print for decades. I well remember with what joy Judith performed the second movement of the *Concert en ut mineur* at Villa Camozzi in Grandola ed Uniti on Lake Como, finally convinced that it was excellent harp music.

3. Between aristocracy and cliché

In the London registers, particularly those relating to the early years, one frequently finds sales to buyers whose names are preceded by titles such as Countess, Duchess, Marchioness and Viscountess. The same happens in French registers, where various noble titles are frequently mentioned.⁽¹⁾ Among the sales of French Érard harps to representatives of the aristocratic class, one in particular – which took place only a month after the coup d'état of 18 *brumaire* that put an end to the Directoire – is particularly prestigious for the two brothers and historically significant:⁽²⁾ '15 *frimaire* 8. Doit c.ne Bonaparte épouse du Consul Bonaparte ff 1476, p v.te & livraison d'une harpe à nouvelle méch & p. son étui'.⁽³⁾ This is the first evidence of the relationship between Érard and the Napoleonic family, which was to culminate in October 1810 through the help of Ferdinand Paër (1771-1839),⁽⁴⁾ with the awarding of the title of 'manufacturers of pianos and harps of His Royal and Imperial Majesty', the second privilege after that of Louis XVI.



Paris, accounting register, harp no. 6, Mme Bonaparte
(E.2009.5.100. Musée de la musique, Cité de la musique Philharmonie de Paris).

⁽¹⁾ Q.v. *French Érard harps purchased by prominent figures*.

⁽²⁾ This account book entry refers to harp number 6 *grand modèle* of the atelier register, in which the relevant date of sale is absent.

⁽³⁾ 6 December 1799. Due to the citizen Bonaparte wife of Consul Bonaparte francs 1476, for sale and delivery of a harp with new mechanism and for its cover.

⁽⁴⁾ R. ADELSON, *Érard. A passion for the piano*, cit., p. 76. Letter from Paër to Sébastien dated June 1810.

4. London and Paris: the double action

As already mentioned,⁽¹⁾ during the years at the turn of the 18th and 19th century Sébastien found himself alone in managing the new London location. His public relations skills secured him the support of noble and wealthy customers, enabling him to simultaneously increase sales and continue his research activities, while the steadily rising demand for harps in both cities stimulated the two brothers to excel against fierce competition. Purchase enquiries from other European and international regions did not take long to arrive: as early as 1799 the French *grand modèle* harp no. 26 was shipped to St. Petersburg on behalf of the harpist Jean-Baptiste Cardon (1760-1803),⁽²⁾ who had several *grand modèle* harps delivered in the following years; the first sale in the overseas market was recorded in London on 25 September 1801, with harp no. 427 for M. Devillers in Charleston, South Carolina; while the first French harp to cross the Atlantic was harp no. 13 *petit modèle*, sent via M. Delarue on 7 September 1805 to the United States of America.

During the years that followed the invention of the *à fourchettes* system, there was great excitement among manufacturers around the harp string-altering mechanism. The evolution of the musical language of the time was matched by constant technological research aimed at creating an instrument capable of producing the three sounds flat, natural and sharp on each string. The third fruit of Sébastien's ingenuity was the patent registered in London in 1801 no. 2502, containing the description of a mechanism capable of producing all twelve sounds of the chromatic scale, which was followed by an update of the same, filed the following year no. 2595. The mechanism illustrated in both documents, composed of a wheel connected to the tuning pins by means of complex gears, can modify the tension of the strings by means of a pedal that rotates the relative tuning pins. The unfortunate consequence of such a mechanism is to make the strings very susceptible to breakage, particularly at the point where they roll and unroll on the tuning pin. This patent, as well as the following ones, marks one of the many steps towards the develop-

⁽¹⁾ Q.v. *Chapter 2*, pp. 29-31.

⁽²⁾ The sale is in the name of Abbot Nicole.

11. The French Front

Based on the historical and economic setting in which they operated, the Érards are considered to be the greatest harp makers in modern history, both for their inventive ability, the firm longevity and their vast production. The trade in their instruments on a worldwide scale became a veritable hegemony until the end of the 19th century. The two Érard brothers had easily overtaken their first opponents in France, the manufacturers of harps *à crochets*, despite that the latter, thanks to Naderman, had the full support of the Parisian Conservatoire. Nevertheless, the Érards continued mass production of single-action harps for several years, both in rue du Mail and in Great Marlborough Street. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Naderman suffered the posthumous indignity of seeing one of his own instruments restored by his worst competitor and moreover owned by the institution he had so defended against the double-action invaders. In January 1874, curator Adolphe-Gustave Chouquet (1819-1886) praised Érard's skill in restoring the Naderman harp that had just entered the collection of the Paris Conservatoire and was believed to have belonged to Marie-Antoinette herself:

This magnificent instrument has just been made new again. The Érard house took charge of this delicate and difficult restoration and, in entrusting it to the workshop of M. Alphonse Moreau, they could be sure that the process would be undertaken with as much taste as caution. We might now be fooled into thinking that this truly royal piece came straight from its manufacturer's warehouse. The harp's column inspires the utmost admiration by all connoisseurs; it is a real sculptural masterpiece.⁽¹⁾

In the French factory, royal restorations aside, mass production of single-action harps had been discontinued in 1837 and only sporadic traces of them can be found in the records of the following years, indicating that although

⁽¹⁾ L. BARTHEL, *Au coeur de la harpe su XVIIIeme siècle*, cit., p. 104.

Chronology of the historical pedal harp

The news in each year are arranged in the following order: historical news; harp-related news; publications of methods and patent registrations; activities of the two Érard offices, divided between France (FR) and England (UK); activities of other harp manufacturers, described after the name of each manufacturer. Graphic styles have been used to aid reading and consultation: the use of italics for the best-known historical facts and bold type to highlight the years relating to the most relevant facts in the history of the harp in general and of the Érard family.

1697

– **Hochbrücker**: one of Jakob's sons, perhaps Jean Baptiste or Simon, attributes the invention of the pedal harp to his father, a resident of Donauwörth in Germany: this is the first example of a pedal harp, equipped with a hook mechanism. In the preface to the *Recueil d'ariettes choisies avec des accompagnements de harpe op. 2*, published around 1769, we read: 'Having often heard in Paris of someone boasting of being the inventor of the pedal harp, I feel I must state here, to deflate his ego a bit, that it was unknown until 1697. It was invented, at that time, by my father [Jakob Hochbrücker], who was born in 1662 and died in 1763'.⁽¹⁾ A term used to name these harps is *Bret-Harffe*,⁽²⁾ sometimes referred to as *Tret-Harffe*. Other violin makers tried their hand at this type of invention in later years, including Paul Vetter, Theodor Viecker, Johann Hausen and Sebastian Lang.

1720

– Hochbrücker: year of construction of the oldest surviving example of a pedal harp. Of Hochbrücker's production, apart from this instrument, only four survive to date.⁽³⁾

⁽¹⁾ MARIA CH. CLEARY, 'The invention of the 18th century: the harpe organisée and pedals', in *The american harp journal*, 2018, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 23.

⁽²⁾ –, 'Wien', in *Neue Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, 1729, no. 48, p. 892.

⁽³⁾ A 35-string harp from 1720, kept at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, inv. no. SAM 565; a 34-string harp from 1728 owned by the Musée de la Musique in Paris, inv. no. E.2009.1.1; two 33-string harps without a date, one of which is in the collection of the Bellerive Museum in Zurich, inv. no. 1963-60, 25, while the other is owned by the violin maker Rainer M. Thurnau.

Morceaux de concours for pedal and chromatic harp at the Paris Conservatoire

This table shows year by year the different compulsory pieces required for the *concours*. The candidates chosen by the professor for each competition had to play in front of a jury during a public performance consisting of the piece imposed for that year. Candidates who won the various prizes were allowed to leave school based on the skills they had acquired. In the early years, after the opening of the class, the imposed pieces were works taken from the existing harp repertoire, or composed by the harp teacher, Naderman or Prumier. Towards the end of the 19th century, under Hasselmans, pieces began to be commissioned to composers who were not necessarily harpists, thus enriching the harp repertoire with many good-quality, albeit complex, pieces. Many of the compositions from this period are mentioned in the second volume of Henriette Renié's *Méthode*, as she collaborated with the various composers and were consequently dedicated to her. The pieces marked with * refer to the *concours de harpe chromatique*.

- 1825 – Sonate à Dussek op. 26 – Naderman
- 1827 – Morceau de concert op. 89 – Naderman
- 1828 – Sonate no. 2 à Muzio Clementi en fa op. 47 – Naderman
- 1829 – Morceau de concert op. 26 – Naderman
- 1830 – Sonate à Dussek op. 26 – Naderman
- 1831 – Caprice op. 90 bis – Naderman
- 1832 – Solo dramatique op. 90 – Naderman
- 1833 – Sonate à Dussek op. 26 – Naderman
- 1834 – Morceau de concert op. 89 – Naderman
- 1836 – Grande fantaisie sur Michel et Christine op. 49 – A. Prumier
- 1837 – Grandes variations sur Otello op. 323 – Bochsa
- 1838 – Fantaisie sur la marche de Capuletti op. 327 – Bochsa
- 1839 – Solo de concours – A.-C. Prumier
- 1840 – Grande fantaisie sur le Pirate op. 66 – A. Prumier
- 1841 – Variations brillantes sur la valse de Weber op. 302 – Bochsa
- 1842 – Grande fantaisie sur Lucia op. 67 – A. Prumier
- 1843 – Troisième fantaisie – A.-C. Prumier
- 1844 – Fantaisie sur Nabuchodonosor de Verdi op. 64 – A. Prumier
- 1845 – Grande fantaisie sur le Pirate op. 66 – A. Prumier
- 1846 – Grande fantaisie sur des motifs de Moïse de Rossini op. 58 – Parish-Alvars
- 1847 – Variations brillantes sur un thème original de H. Herz op. 38 – A. Prumier

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