

ARTISTS & their INSTRUMENTS

Jean-François Heisser on the Pleyel vis-à-vis piano



“The idea of a double-keyboard piano was not new when Pleyel first built one in 1897 (and they built 74 of them, in two models - one model a grand piano, the other model more like a semi-grand). The famous maker Johann Andreas Stein had built piano-harpsichord clavessins at the end of the 18th century, and afterwards Sébastien Érard too.

The original conception, in the beginning in the 18th and 19th centuries, was for convenience at home - that you had the possibility to have two pianos within the same furniture, making it more convenient for playing transcriptions of string quartets or classical symphonies, and also for playing works for four hands.

The conception of Pleyel was very different, however. It was to create a sound

which had the best sense of homogeneity. It was invented to better fit the new repertoire then being written for two pianos, including by Liszt, who wrote music for two pianos, and of course Brahms, and Saint-Saëns.

It is very interesting to play, because when we play in concerts it is always with two Steinways, and then you have to choose between two pianos that generally wouldn't have the same qualities - one might be more soft, the other more brilliant, and it can be a difficult choice. With this Pleyel (the name 'vis-à-vis' means face to face), you've the same box; the sound and the resonance is really mixed together.

Each piano mechanism is independent, but there is a system whereby you can put the pedal on at the same time for the two instruments, to have the same general

resonance. But we did not really choose to do that, because you have to be very careful for the sound not to mix, and to be clear enough for the music.

This particular piano, which was built in 1928, is held in Paris's Cité de la musique. The museum there has a very rich collection of instruments, and they are making a lot of efforts to promote them. There is the museum concert hall, which is small with space for 300 people, but the instruments have to stay at the museum, they can't be transported - and so they wanted to give the public a chance to listen to it through making recordings.”

Jean-François Heisser's recording of his transcription of Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique, played on the Pleyel vis-à-vis, is released by Harmonia Mundi on January 18

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