

Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger

Chopin and Pleyel

CHOPIN'S first concert in Paris on 26 February 1832 played a decisive role in his career, establishing his reputation as a composer and performer, securing contacts with publishers, opening the doors of the most influential salons, and bringing work as a teacher, mainly among the aristocracy. Even so, the key name at his début concert was 'Pleyel'. Two indications in the programme, originally intended for 15 January 1832, stand out immediately: 'Mr Frédéric Chopin, from Warsaw' will give a concert 'in the salons of Messrs Pleyel & Co, Rue Cadet, number 9' (illus.1).¹ Totally unknown in Paris, where he had not yet built a reputation, Chopin faced major obstacles in trying to attract an audience. The concert hall where the event took place is still in existence today. It consists of three adjacent but not very spacious salons in Louis XV style on the first floor of a *hôtel particulier*. They were used by the piano manufacturer and music publisher Camille Pleyel primarily as an exhibition hall and as a showroom for his firm's merchandise. Soon they became too small even for chamber concerts, and in 1839 they were replaced by others on the Rue de Rochecouart (no longer extant) which were used on an *ad hoc* basis and could seat some 300 people (illus.2). It is in these premises, known for their elegance, that Chopin would play in 1841, 1842 and 1848.²

The 1832 concert in the Rue Cadet was given under the patronage of the famous Frédéric Kalkbrenner, who lent his help—and his pianos—to the newcomer. Well established in Parisian high society and even at the court of Louis-Philippe, Kalkbrenner reigned supreme as a pianist and teacher and was Pleyel's associate not only in the publication of

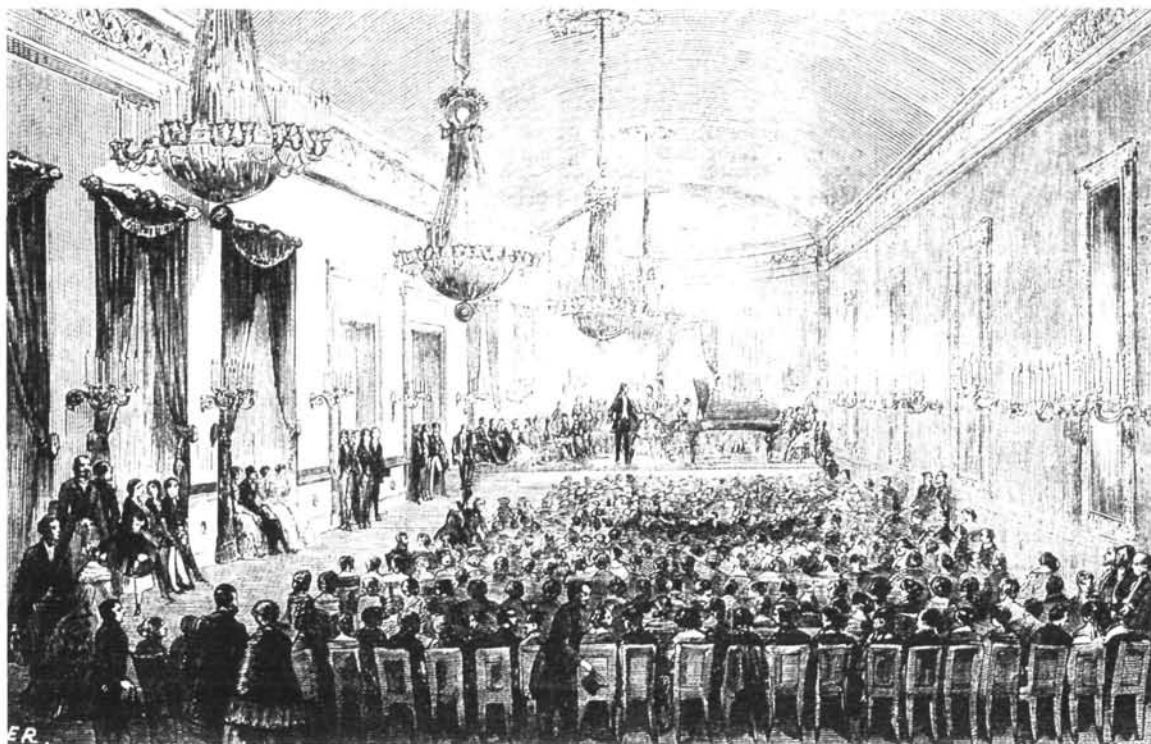
music editions but also, and to an even greater extent, in piano manufacturing and sales. Marie Moke, Kalkbrenner's most brilliant pupil, was married to Camille Pleyel at the time; Chopin's three Nocturnes, op.9, were dedicated to her in 1833. Chopin's correspondence confirms his high, almost unreserved admiration for Kalkbrenner's playing, and from the autumn of 1831 a link was forged between the two musicians.

From Chopin's letters we also learn of Kalkbrenner's attempt to subject the young provincial to his tutelage for three years, but this proposal was quickly and deftly declined. Nevertheless, the two men always maintained a courteous, gentlemanly relationship. In 1833 Chopin shrewdly dedicated his E minor concerto 'à Monsieur Fréd. Kalkbrenner', who had previously shown an interest in this work—a work which happened to be the *pièce de résistance* in the first part of Chopin's début concert, and thus was published before the F minor concerto.³ Kalkbrenner, who assumed the three different functions of pianist-composer, teacher (of sorts) and Pleyel's associate, kept a tight rein over the second part of the concert. Here are Chopin's words in a long letter of 12 December 1831 to his friend Tytus Woyciechowski:

I shall also play on two pianos with Kalkbrenner, accompanied by four other pianos, his *March followed by a Polonaise*. It's a crazy thing. One of our two instruments is an enormous *pantalon* which, of course, Kalkbrenner will have, and the other, which falls to my lot, is a monochord piano which is tiny, but its tone carries, like little bells on a giraffe.⁴

The terminology used for these instruments

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2 Salons Pleyel, Rue de Rochecouart, opened in 1839 and in use until 1927: lithograph by Edouard Renard in *L'illustration*, 9 June 1855, p.365

needs some explanation. First, *pantalion* was an idiomatic and rather general term for a piano in 1820s and 1830s Poland (Chopin used it only in correspondence to Poland)—in this case, most likely a concert grand. Second, in 1825 Pleyel had patented a square monochord instrument, of which some specimens survive. Finally, the word ‘giraffe’ (possibly meant as a joke in the letter) refers to the vertical or ‘giraffe’ piano—as it was known in Warsaw—which sometimes had a register of bells. As for Kalkbrenner’s *Grande Polonaise*, op.92, this existed at the time in a printed version for piano and string quintet,” and Chopin could have performed this himself with Baillot’s quintet, which had played in the first part of the concert. But Kalkbrenner preferred to show off by using not only every available type of piano, but also, on this occasion, Chopin too. The concert was in fact an exhibition of Pleyel & Co’s merchandise at the expense of the ‘beneficiary’. It fell to Chopin to demonstrate the excellence of the monochord piano and to advertise

the lessons he had received from his ‘teacher’ Kalkbrenner (as described by Fétis in his famous review).⁷

All this took place in the intimate setting of the showroom salons of the Rue Cadet. In a sense, Chopin had everything he needed at his disposal: a responsive instrument with a bell-like sound, the exclusive salons of the *ancien régime*, and a small, select audience including the most distinguished musicians of the capital and some renowned members of the Polish aristocracy.

His Variations on ‘La ci darem la mano’, op.2, had been earmarked for the end of the programme on 15 January, but were not mentioned by Fétis as having been performed in February. Fétis simply refers to ‘a selection of his [Chopin’s] early pieces’ in the second edition of his *Biographie universelle*,⁸ and in the event Chopin possibly ended with a number of ‘mazurkas and nocturnes’, as described by Ferdinand Hiller in his later but nonetheless precise recollections.⁹ In other words, he played the very type of work that

would immediately brand him as a quintessential salon composer. This *topos* was confirmed as early as December 1833 in Berlioz's famous article:

In order to appreciate him fully, I believe he has to be heard from close by, in the salons rather than the concert hall, with all preconceived notions put aside as these would be inapplicable to both him and his music ... There are unbelievable details in his Mazurkas; and he has found how to render them doubly interesting by playing them with the utmost degree of softness, *piano* to the extreme, the hammers merely brushing the strings, so much so that one is tempted to go close to the instrument and put one's ear to it as if to a concert of sylphs or elves. Chopin is the *Trilby* of pianists.¹⁰

From the time of the *début* concert, a more or less exclusive verbal contract was drawn up between Pleyel and Chopin:¹¹ the former would lend his instruments and salons to the latter, who would promote them to his pupils because of their distinctive qualities and his own strong preferences. It is therefore surprising that, after the concert, Pleyel seems not to have made any effort to bring out Chopin's first publications, unlike Farrenc, who had attempted to add Chopin to his (smaller) list of composers before eventually being supplanted by the powerful Schlesinger. Preoccupied with the inheritance of his father, Ignace, Camille Pleyel was probably considering abandoning music publishing altogether from 1832. He finally stopped in 1834 after producing Chopin's Rondo, op.16, and Mazurkas, op.17, which he sold to Schlesinger that same year.

'Érard-Pleyel! – Liszt-Chopin!'¹² These two oppositions, in circulation in Paris from the mid-1830s, firmly place the notions of concert and salon at two extremes, along with their different sociomusical connotations in terms of instruments, concert halls, musical genres and audiences. Some instructive comments on these polarities can be found in the short-lived periodical *Le pianiste*:

Give Liszt, Herz, Bertini and Schunke an *Érard*; but to Kalkbrenner, Chopin and Hiller give a *Pleyel*; a *Pleyel* is needed to sing a Field romance, to caress a Chopin *mazourk* [*sic*], to sigh a Kessler Nocturne; for the big concert an *Érard* is necessary. The bright tone of the latter carries no further, but in a clearer, more incisive and distinct fashion than the mellow tone of the Pleyel, which rounds itself and loses a little of its intensity in the corners of a large hall.¹³

Thus, at one extreme, were the lions of the stage led by Liszt, the future inventor of the recital, while at



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the other were the intimate setting of the salon and the figures of Kalkbrenner, Hiller and, finally, Chopin, all with a classical connotation. As for the musical genres mentioned in relation to specific types of instruments, we find the very ones played by Chopin on his arrival in Paris: nocturne, romance and mazurka, at which he particularly excelled.

Before his withdrawal from the concert platform in 1835 Chopin was already singled out in the Parisian press as the representative *par excellence* of the salon in its most noble sense. That does not of course mean that the composer of the Etudes, op.10, and the Concerto, op.11, was content with this restrictive label to the point of suffering as a result, as Liszt purported. This was the very Liszt who, in his notorious review of Chopin's concert in 1841, omitted any reference to the virtuoso pieces (C# minor Scherzo, op.39) or epic works (A major Polonaise, op.40 no.1) played by Chopin in favour of the 'miniatures' on the programme, namely preludes and mazurkas. By these omissions, Liszt 'graciously' assigned to Chopin the role of an aristocratic salon pianist, though claiming, after his death, that this role did him ill justice. Nevertheless, after 1835 Chopin removed himself from the pianistic arena; except for his appearances at Pleyel's salons on the Rue de Rochecouart in 1841, 1842 and 1848 he was out of action well before the 1840s, when his triumphs as a teacher were being celebrated throughout Europe.

DURING lessons at the Square d'Orléans Chopin's pupils invariably played a grand piano while the master taught or accompanied them on a small upright ('cottage piano')—both instruments having been made by Pleyel (illus.3, 4). Lenz maintained that at one time Chopin 'would never give a lesson on any other instrument; one *had* to have a Pleyel!'¹⁴ A young Latvian pianist, Emilie von Gretsck, who had initially been trained according to Hensel's technical regimen, relates the following of her studies in Paris:

Until now I have worked more on heavy keyboards than on light ones: this has greatly strengthened my fingers. However, on this type of piano it is impossible to obtain the subtlest nuances with movements of the wrist and forearm, as well as of each individual finger. These nuances—I've experienced them at Chopin's on his beautiful piano, with its touch so close to that of the Viennese instruments. He himself calls it 'a perfidious traitor' [*un traître perfide*]. Things that came out perfectly on my solid and robust Érard became abrupt and ugly on Chopin's piano. He found it dangerous to work much on an instrument with a beautiful ready-made sound like the Érard. He said these instruments spoil one's touch: 'You can thump it and bash it, it makes no difference: the sound is always beautiful and the ear doesn't ask for anything more since it hears a full, resonant tone.'¹⁵

Would an Érard piano have represented for Chopin something like a counterpart of our modern Steinway? The context in which Emilie's reminiscences are quoted is one of learning to play *cantabile* at the piano, namely in the nocturnes. Chopin suggested as a model for musical declamation the leading practitioners of *bel canto*, and taught that a



3 Pleyel grand piano no.7267 (1839), played by Chopin until 1841 (Paris, Musée de la Musique)

'vocal' respiration could be achieved mainly by the articulation of the wrist. This was the keystone of his playing and his teaching. Therefore, the '*facilement, facilement*' with which he punctuated his lessons seems to have found its full expression in the mechanism of a Pleyel, at once both precise and responsive. It is this responsiveness, this capacity to modulate the sonority, that the following remark, attributed to Chopin, refers to: 'When I feel out of sorts, I play on an Érard piano where I easily find a *ready-made* tone [*un son tout fait*]. But when I feel in good form and strong enough to find my *own individual sound* [*mon propre son à moi*], then I need a Pleyel piano.'¹⁶

Finally, a fundamental element of Chopin's sound aesthetic finds its perfect realization on a Pleyel: namely, the precise mechanism of the pedals and the timbre of the *una corda*, which Chopin constantly exploited but which never appears in his printed music. Marmontel comments that

Chopin used the pedals with marvellous discretion. He often coupled them to obtain a soft and veiled sonority, but more often still he would use them separately for brilliant passages, for sustained harmonies, for deep bass notes, and for loud ringing chords. Or he would use the soft pedal alone for those light murmurings which seem to create a transparent vapour round the arabesque that embellished the melody and envelop it like a fine lace. The timbre produced by the pedals on Pleyel pianos has a perfect sonority, and the dampers work with a precision very useful for chromatic and modulating passages; this quality is precious and absolutely indispensable.¹⁷

Kleczyński also notes that Chopin achieved 'perfection' in combining the two pedals, particularly when playing ornamental figuration, adding that he 'frequently passed, and without transition, from the open to the soft pedal, especially in enharmonic modulation. These passages had an altogether particular charm, especially when played on Pleyel pianofortes.'¹⁸ Of course, it is hard to know whether the timbre of a Pleyel piano from 1840, no matter how well preserved or well restored, gives even the slightest hint of Chopin's sound-world.

At the beginning of the 1970s Pleyel's archives were scattered and some important items sold at auction, not least a number of Chopin's autograph manuscripts. I have nevertheless been able to

consult the almost complete set of registers with the production numbers of Pleyel's pianos. These documents give details of the type of instrument (grand, square, small upright etc.), the date and cost of manufacture, the buyer's name, and the sale price and date. The following information is taken mainly from these registers.¹⁹

Among the 150 people who studied with Chopin,²⁰ more than 50 are mentioned in the registers—often more than once. Most had titles of some sort, and 24 were dedicatees of one of Chopin's published works. Among the professional pupils we find the names of Thomas Tellefsen and Georges Mathias; Pauline Viardot also belongs to this category to an extent. Although prevented by rank from becoming professionals, Princess Marcelina Czartoryska and Countess Delfina Potocka are extensively mentioned in the registers. So too was Jane Stirling, as were Camille O'Meara and Vera de Kologrivoff, both important inheritors of the master's teaching. The names of many well-known families appear, as do the pianist's colleagues Zimmermann, Chaulieu and Hallé, while the Pleyel firm is represented by Kalkbrenner, Osborne and Stamaty. String players appear frequently, among them Franchomme. Chopin expressly asked an expert technician from Pleyel to



4 Pleyel small upright piano (1830s), designed on the basis of Broadwood's 'cottage piano'. Chopin frequently used this type of instrument.

choose a small upright for Franchomme, which at least until recently was owned by his descendants. From the world of music publishers we find the all-powerful Schlesinger, Troupenas and his associate Masset, Escudier of *La France musicale*, Catelin, Probst and, finally, Kistner in Leipzig.

In his letters we read that Chopin personally selected a grand piano for the Thuns and the Wodzińskis. Camille Pleyel, himself an excellent pianist, was asked by the composer to do likewise for Mademoiselle de Kologrivoff. In a note Chopin wrote: 'Would his majesty agree to provide a grand piano for Mme Potocka [Delfina's aunt] for tomorrow evening?—No one except myself will play it.' (See illus.5.) The registers also reveal the hitherto unknown fact that Chopin received a 10 per cent commission from the sale of six pianos (four grands, two small uprights) which were bought by people he knew, among them Countess Potocka and Jane Stirling. In both cases the sale price was increased to secure the commission without diminishing the piano maker's profits. Tellefsen and Camille O'Meara benefited from the same privilege, as students of Chopin. Julian Fontana's name also features in Pleyel's registers, as he sold some of the latter's instruments in New York between 1848 and 1850. Even the priest Aleksander Jelowicki makes an appearance; the last confessor of Chopin, he was often in need of pianos for his church. Rossini too acquired a grand piano. In February 1834 Bellini bought a small upright, as did Delacroix in October 1839. Mme Viardot purchased an upright on behalf of George Sand at Nohant, who longed for music in the spring of 1849; and, finally, Madame de Balzac bought one a few weeks after the death of her husband. Thus the study of Pleyel's registers, with Chopin as the main thread, reveals a sort of back-

ground chronicle of the different *Scènes de la vie musicale* under Louis-Philippe and beyond.

IN 1845 Delphine de Girardin proposed a 'Heptameron' of fashionable pianists with the following characterizations:

At the piano,
Thalberg is a king,
Liszt is a prophet,
Chopin is a poet,
Herz is a lawyer,
Kalkbrenner is a minstrel,
Madam Pleyel is a sibyl,
Dohler is a pianist²¹

Thus, the lions of the stage end up on the side of Érard, whereas 'the poet of the piano', the aged minstrel and the sibyl have Pleyel as their medium.²² This 'Heptameron' shows that the Érard and Pleyel typologies remained in force throughout the reign of Louis-Philippe, dating from as early as 1834, when Chopin the pianist was regarded as a 'sylph' who intoned 'seraphic' strains on a Pleyel instrument.

Soon after his arrival in Paris, Chopin declared: 'Pleyel's pianos are the last word in perfection [*non plus ultra*],'²³ having just shown great enthusiasm in Vienna for the instruments of Graf. During his stay in London, in Dover Street, at the beginning of the summer of 1848, he wrote: 'I have three pianos. In addition to my Pleyel, I have a Broadwood and an Érard, but I have so far only been able to play on my own',²⁴ and he commented several months later that 'Broadwood ... is a real London Pleyel'.²⁵ With its distinctive mechanical and timbral qualities, the Pleyel instrument seems to have been the medium *par excellence* for Chopin pianist, teacher and composer, from his earliest days in Paris until his death in 1849.

I should like to express my gratitude to John Rink for his help with the translation of my article

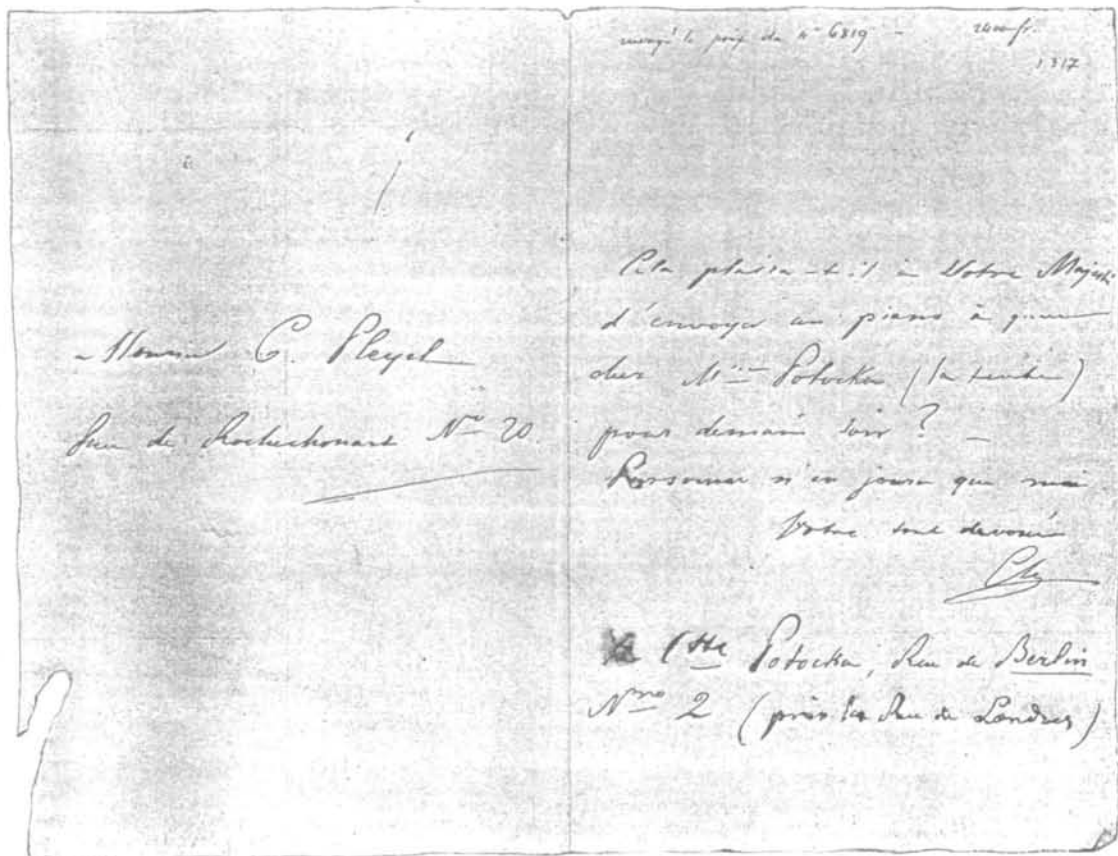
1 Other copies of the programme are reproduced in L. Binental, *Chopin* (Warsaw, 1930), pl 36 (from Binental's former collection); R. Bory, *La vie de Frédéric Chopin par l'image* (Geneva, 1951), p.80 (from the archives of the Maison Pleyel, Paris); and E. Burger,

Frédéric Chopin eine Lebenschronik in Bildern und Dokumenten (Munich, 1990), p.82, pl.162

2 On 11 February 1848 he wrote to his mother and the Barcińskis in Warsaw: 'Pleyel always pokes fun at my silliness, and to encourage me to give a concert he will have the staircase decorated with flowers. I shall feel quite at home and my eyes will alight on practically

none but familiar faces. I already have here the piano on which I shall play.' *Selected correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin*, trans. A. Hedley (London, 1962), p 305.

3 For discussion, see ch.9, 'Les premiers concerts publics de Chopin à Paris (1832–1838)', in J.-J. Eigeldinger, *L'univers musical de Chopin* (Paris, 2000), pp 191–227, esp pp 193–201.



5 Autograph note (undated, but post-1839) from Chopin to Camille Pleyel, asking him to send a grand piano for a soirée at the home of Countess Potocka (Delfina's aunt). A later addition in the margin indicates that no.6819 was provided. (Warsaw, Museum of the Towarzystwo imienia Fryderyka Chopina)

4 *Selected correspondence*, p.99. I have restored the Polish *pantalion* to this translation, versus Hedley's *pantaléon*; see n.6 below regarding the French title of Kalkbrenner's *polonoise*.

5 See B. Vogel, *Fortepian polski* (Warsaw, 1995), pp.117-75, esp. pp.121-8. I should like to express my gratitude to Benjamin Vogel (University of Lund) for his helpful advice on this point.

6 *Grande Polonoise, précédée d'une Introduction et d'une marche*, op.92, published by Ignace Pleyel in Paris in 1827 (pl. no.1979).

7 'Concert de M. Chopin, de Varsovie', *Revue musicale*, 3 Mar 1832, pp.38-9.

8 François-Joseph Fétis, *Biographie universelle des musiciens*, 8 vols. (Paris, 2/1861), ii, p.284.

9 Quoted in F. Hiller, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Briefe und Erinnerungen* (Cologne, 1874), p.22.

10 Hector Berlioz, 'Revue musicale: concerts', *Le rénovateur*, 15 Dec 1833; translation from J.-J. Eigeldinger, *Chopin: pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils*, trans. N. Shohet with K. Osostowicz and R. Howat, ed. R. Howat (Cambridge, 1986), p.71.

11 No formal document has ever been found.

12 See *Le pianiste*, viii (June 1834), p.127; see also Wilhelm von Lenz, 'Die grossen Pianoforte-Virtuosen unserer Zeit aus persönlicher Bekanntschaft. Liszt—Chopin—Tausig', *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung*, xxii/38 (16 Sep 1868), p.300.

13 L. D., 'Les pianos', *Le pianiste*, ix

(Jul 1834), p.130; translation from Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, p.92 n.9.

14 Wilhelm von Lenz, *The great piano virtuosos of our time from personal acquaintance*, trans. M. R. Baker (New York, 1899; r/1973), p.59.

15 Quoted from Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, p.26.

16 Henri Blaze de Bury, *Musiciens contemporains* (Paris, 1856), p.118; translation from Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, p.26 (emphases as in the original).

17 Quoted from Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, p.58.

18 Quoted from Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, p.58.

19 For further discussion, see J.-J. Eigeldinger, *Chopin et Pleyel* (forthcoming).

20. Some students had only a few lessons, while others studied with Chopin for a few months or, more rarely, several years.

21. Letter of 5 May 1845, in Mme Emile de Girardin (Sophie Gay), *Le Vicomte de Launay: Lettres parisiennes*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1857), iv, p.190; my translation.

22. Wilhelm von Lenz, who played an Érard in Paris, provocatively wrote that 'Pleyel pianos are today what Tischner pianos were formerly in St Petersburg: instruments for ladies' (*Beethoven: eine Kunststudie*, 2 vols (Kassel, 1855), ii, p.237; my translation). On more than one occasion, Lenz also suggested that there were feminine aspects to Chopin's style of playing.

23. Letter of 12 December 1831 to Tytus Woyciechowski in Poturzyn; *Selected correspondence*, p.101.

24. Letter of 13 May 1848 to Wojciech Grzymala in Paris; *Selected correspondence*, p.317 (emphases as in the Polish original).

25. Letter of 10-19 August 1848 to his family in Warsaw; *Selected correspondence*, p.335.

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