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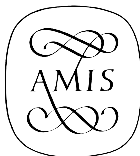

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Chickering, Steinway, and Three Nineteenth-Century European Piano Virtuosos

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IN 1895 THE RESPECTED WRITER ON MUSIC W. S. B. Mathews observed that "the piano maker needs the pianist as fully as the pianist needs the piano maker."[1] This was especially true in nineteenth-century America, when piano manufacturers were vigorously attempting to establish their reputations on a national as well as an international level and when many celebrated European pianists were traveling throughout the United States. The latter, without the cooperation of American piano firms, were likely to find here less than perfect instruments, what Gary Graffman recently dubbed "those ill-tempered beasts west of the Hudson."[2] With their own interests in mind, these performers and manufacturers occasionally forged relationships that were usually good natured, sometimes stormy and filled with intrigue, but always mutually beneficial. The alliance between three of the most significant visiting European pianists of the mid-nineteenth century—Sigismond Thalberg, Anton Rubinstein, and Hans von Bülow—and the two most important American piano firms—Chickering and Steinway—will be examined here. A brief look at two pianists who preceded them, Leopold de Meyer and Henri Herz, will serve as an instructive prelude.

When the first virtuoso pianists began visiting the United States in the 1840s, they usually brought their own instruments with them, since no American firm had yet achieved an international reputation and, more to the point, grand pianos were scarce. Richard Hoffman, an English pianist who immigrated to the United States in 1847, explained that at first he generally "played upon a 'square,' " even in concerts in New

This article is an expanded version of a paper presented on 2 May 1992 at the annual meeting of the American Musical Instrument Society, San Antonio, Texas.

1. W. S. B. Mathews, "Editorial Bric-a-Brac," *Music* 8 (September 1895): 512.

2. Gary Graffman, *I Really Should Be Practicing* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 172.

York's cavernous Tabernacle, because "piano manufacturers did not make a 'grand' except to order."[3]

The first bona fide piano virtuoso to visit America, Leopold de Meyer (1816–1883), arrived in 1845 with several Erard grand pianos, which created almost as much a sensation as the antics of the performer, who liked to bill himself as the "Lion Pianist." The splendid grands, "manufactured purposely for himself" by Erard, were praised as much for their luscious tone as for their endurance under the onslaughts of the flamboyant pianist.[4] Recognizing their promotional value, De Meyer spotlighted them in advertisements for his performances in more than twenty American cities. In Rochester, New York, for example, he announced that he would use "one of his four magnificent Monster Pianos."[5]

During De Meyer's second and final U.S. season of 1846–47, he continued to play on his Erards, but he also performed in his Philadelphia and Baltimore concerts on pianos of the Philadelphia maker Emilius N. Scherr (1794–1874). In the advertisement and program for his performance with the Philharmonic Society in Philadelphia, De Meyer recommended Scherr's instruments, claiming they were equal to those of Erard and surpassed all of the grand pianos he had tried in the United States.[6] Such an endorsement was a distinguished prize for an American instrument, and that honor symbolized the rapidly increasing craftsmanship of American piano manufacturers. But there was a dispute over what prompted De Meyer's judgment.

Two other Philadelphia piano makers, Conrad Meyer and John H. Schomacker, were incensed at De Meyer for championing the instruments of a rival, and their heated exchange of letters with the pianist

3. Richard Hoffman, *Some Musical Recollections of Fifty Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint, Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1976), 97.

4. *The Biography of Leopold de Meyer* (London: Palmer and Clayton, 1845), 17.

5. *Rochester Daily American*, 28 July 1846. The itinerary of De Meyer's American tour, as well as those of Henri Herz and Sigismond Thalberg, appear in the present writer's "The American Concert Tours of Leopold de Meyer, Henri Herz, and Sigismond Thalberg" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1986), 589–689.

6. The advertisement appears in *United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), 10 November 1846; a copy of the program is preserved in the John A. McAllister Scrapbooks (5761.F, vol. 17, p. 91) in the Library Company of Philadelphia. De Meyer later gave a fuller account of his endorsement of Scherr's pianos in the Philadelphia papers, in which he expressed his "unqualified preference" for them and declared that they were the "best pianos made in the United States" (*United States Gazette*, 18 November 1846). The Danish-born Scherr had immigrated to the United States in 1822.

FIGURE 1. Caricature of Leopold de Meyer. Above the opening bars of his signature piece, *Marche marocaine*, De Meyer carries two of his Erard pianos slung over his shoulders. One of De Meyer's hands holds a moneybag inscribed with the names of cities visited by the pianist—New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. Courtesy, Music Division, New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

appeared in the newspapers. Conrad Meyer whined that De Meyer had "never called at my store to try my fine pianos, and when repeatedly requested to call, ha[d] refused." He urged the public not to trust the pianist, for his endorsement of Erards was the result of a "large compensation," and similar testimonies—like the one for Scherr—were doubtless obtained the same way.[7] The pianist claimed that Meyer and his friends had been "imploring and begging" him for a certificate ever since his arrival in America, but he had "invariably evaded the request."[8] Schomacker chastised Scherr, not De Meyer, for courting such a recommendation, "full of arrogance and self-assuming authority," and argued that such certificates should be issued by a panel of impartial judges, such as those of the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia.[9]

Thus, American piano makers immediately recognized the prestige associated with the approval of a leading pianist, particularly a European virtuoso. Although some apparently sought such recommendations eagerly or were jealous of those who did, another decade had to pass before a more far-reaching agreement was made, for De Meyer continued to use only his Erards in other cities.

The better known Henri Herz (1803–1888), who followed closely behind De Meyer, arrived in the U.S. in 1846 but was of little use to American makers because he was a piano manufacturer himself.[10] During his five years in North and South America, including a foray to

7. *United States Gazette*, 21 November 1846.

8. *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 26 November 1846.

9. *United States Gazette*, 21 November 1846. The dispute between the pianist and the Philadelphia makers, which lasted for a full week with rebuttals from all sides, is treated at greater length in Lott, "American Concert Tours," 112–23.

10. Herz's significant role as a manufacturer remains largely undocumented, and details of his firm's early years are sketchy. Some accounts of Herz's American tour suggest that it was undertaken to raise capital for a still-to-be-founded factory or one that was struggling. But if indeed it had been failing, no concerned owner would have abandoned it for five years as Herz did. To the contrary, his enterprise was flourishing. He had already patented a simplification of Erard's double escapement action (now known as the Herz-Erard action), which is still the model for most grand pianos today. In 1844, two years before Herz left for America, his factory employed over a hundred workmen, who produced four hundred pianos a year, and his instruments were awarded a gold medal at the industrial exposition in Paris (see *The Musical World* [London] 19 [5 December 1844]: 399, for employment figures; Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954], 386, for production figures; and *La France musicale* 7 [4 August 1844]: 239–40, for information on the exposition). Herz only called into service American models when he included in his concerts such extravaganzas as the overtures to *William Tell* and *Semiramide* arranged for eight pianos and sixteen pianists.

FIGURE 2. Lithograph of Henri Herz. His refined composure presented a marked contrast to the boisterous De Meyer. Courtesy, Music Division, New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

gold-rush San Francisco in 1850, audiences focused on Herz's immaculate performances and brilliant compositions, while he was intent on promoting his own pianos. They were prominently billed as products of "Mr. Henri Herz's own Factory in Paris" and their gold medal pedigree was touted. More importantly, as Herz traveled throughout the country, he established a network of agents to distribute his instruments, of which he from time to time had a considerable inventory in the U.S.[11] In Pittsburgh, for example, he found two rival dealers, Henry Kleber and John Mellor, to represent his firm. Kleber proudly announced that he had personally selected pianos from Herz's "extensive stock in New York," that the instruments would be "sold lower than can be purchased East," and that "a good performer will be in constant attendance to exhibit the pianos."[12] Herz's pianos ranged from a semi-grand piano of $6\frac{3}{4}$ octaves to a small upright called a pianino.[13] Rumors circulated that plans were underway for Herz to build in New York a music hall and piano factory modeled after his establishments in Paris, and in the fall of 1847 the plans were described in considerable detail.[14] Although neither hall nor factory was built, Herz did establish a sales room in New York, where pianos from his Paris factory were finished to withstand the varied and demanding climates of the United States; buyers were to request a piano for a northern or a southern climate.[15]

The first significant European pianist to establish a working relationship with an American piano firm was Sigismond Thalberg (1812–1871), then considered the only rival of Liszt. Thalberg came to America in 1856 for a two-year tour reportedly with seven Erard grand pianos.[16]

11. In April 1847, for example, Herz was expecting a new shipment from Paris of about fifty instruments (letter to Hiram Fuller, Natchez, Mississippi, 22 April 1847 [Music Division, New York Public Library]; photographic reproduction in Donald Garvelmann, ed., *Variations on "Non più mesta"* by Henri Herz [Bronx, N.Y.: Music Treasure Publications, 1970], 8).

12. *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial Journal*, 9 September 1847.

13. Wholesale prices for Herz's pianos ranged from $250 for a pianino to $500 for a semi-grand; retail prices ranged from around $300 to $850. Wholesale prices appear in Herz's letters to L. F. Newland (an Albany music dealer), dated New York, 1 November 1847 and 6 December 1847 (Gratz Collection, case 13, box 8, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia).

14. The elegant hall was to seat twenty-six hundred people; behind it was to be a piano factory to meet the great demand for his pianos, which would be better suited for the climate of this country by being manufactured here (*New-York Daily Tribune*; quoted in *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, 6 November 1847).

15. *New York Herald*, 14 March 1848.

16. *New-York Musical Review and Gazette* 7 (18 October 1856): 321.

Although the number may seem rather high, it would have allowed pianos to be placed in several cities at once; this would have been convenient in such instances when Thalberg performed on alternate nights in New York and Philadelphia. From the very beginning, exceptions were made in Thalberg's use of the Erards, though these were clearly because of convenience rather than aesthetic choice. From the time of Thalberg's joint appearances with Louis Moreau Gottschalk in late 1856, Chickering pianos began to appear in Thalberg's concerts with some regularity. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Gottschalk had begun performing on Chickerings a year earlier or that in Boston, the home of Chickering, Thalberg played on them regularly (alternating with an Erard). Possibly Thalberg deferred to a recognized manufacturer, in whose own hall he presented solo matinees; thus he calculated on winning the favor of the local audience. The Boston music critic John Sullivan Dwight believed Thalberg seemed "abundantly satisfied" with Chickering and that it was "quite evident that he regards the Chickering instruments as the most formidable rivals" to the Erards.[17] But in New York Thalberg still played solely on his Erard.

Beginning with Thalberg's first excursion through the Midwest (he would make three in two years), a tour which included fifty concerts in more than thirty cities, Chickering sent pianos especially selected for Thalberg's use to the cities on his itinerary. Most of Thalberg's concerts between mid-April 1857 and his last American appearances in June 1858 were supplied with pianos by Chickering with the exception of those in New York.[18] The local concert advertisements mentioned that Chickering pianos were to be used in the concerts, and acknowledgments were made in the programs. Local dealers bore the responsibility of exploiting the Thalberg connection to its fullest possibilities. In many cities the dealers announced that the pianos to be used by Thalberg

17. *Dwight's Journal of Music* 10 (24 January 1857): 133. Dwight believed that the Erards possessed a "purely musical quality" not matched by any other piano. "Forced to loudest effects, they sound a little antique and metallic, particularly in the middle treble octave; yet is the quality still musical, the *altissimo* tones exquisitely so, the bass magnificently rich. The Chickering tones are rounder, mellower throughout the whole compass, but they come upon the ear less distinct."

18. Thalberg gave over 340 concerts in the United States during the 1856–58 seasons. Chickering supplied pianos for over 150 of them in more than twenty-five cities. After Chickering began furnishing pianos for him on a regular basis, Thalberg made over thirty appearances in New York, where he still performed on the Erard.

would be on display before the concert and afterwards would be sold or auctioned.[19]

The approval of an American instrument by a leading European pianist was a source of pride for many Americans and a clear indication that the United States was making great strides in the arts. As one newspaper boasted: "Some years ago it was disdainfully asked abroad, 'Who plays on American pianos?' Proud are we to answer to-day, 'the best artists and connoisseurs of Europe—the great Thalberg at their head.' "[20] Other piano makers did not protest as they had De Meyer's endorsement of Scherr, but they speculated on Thalberg's reasons for playing the Chickering. Thalberg's carefully worded endorsement, which did not claim superiority of the Chickering over European makes, left room for doubt about his true motives in forsaking his Erards: "The instruments are the best I have seen in the United States, and will compare favorably with any I have ever known."[21] An especially lively and protracted debate on the reasons for Thalberg's choice of pianos took place between John H. Mellor, who had been the Pittsburgh Chickering agent for more than twenty years, and Henry Kleber, the Pittsburgh dealer for Erard and Steinway. Kleber charged that Thalberg used Chickerings only because he could not procure Erards in every city in the west.[22] In a lavish advertisement Mellor claimed that he had Thalberg's endorsement of the Chickering "*in his own hand writing*, voluntarily given to [me] during his visit to this city."[23] Kleber countered that he had "the *private* remarks of Mr. Thalberg, as made on the evenings of the concerts to his tuner . . . [which] tell quite a different story."[24]

19. No Chickering piano performed on by Thalberg is known to survive. But in an exhibition presented in 1902 by Chickering & Sons, a piano on display was indicated as having been "used by Thalberg" (see item 1123 in the catalogue *Historical Musical Exhibition under the Auspices of Chickering & Sons, Horticultural Hall, Boston, January 11th to 26th, 1902* [Boston: Chickering & Sons, 1902], 59). A few advertisements mention that Thalberg signed the pianos on which he performed. When the local Chickering agent advertised for sale the two pianos used by Thalberg in his first concerts in Washington, he announced that "Thalberg has placed his autograph in both pianos as a mark of his approval, and also thus certifies to their superiority" (*Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington, D.C.], 23 December 1856).

20. *Daily National Intelligencer*, 7 January 1857.

21. *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, 19 May 1858.

22. Ibid., 1 May 1857.

23. Ibid., 2 May 1857.

24. Ibid., 6 May 1857. Kleber (1816–1897) is best known today for his association with Stephen Foster, who may have been his pupil. For more information on Kleber, see Edward G. Baynham, "Henry Kleber, Early Pittsburgh Musician," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 25 (September–December 1942): 113–20.

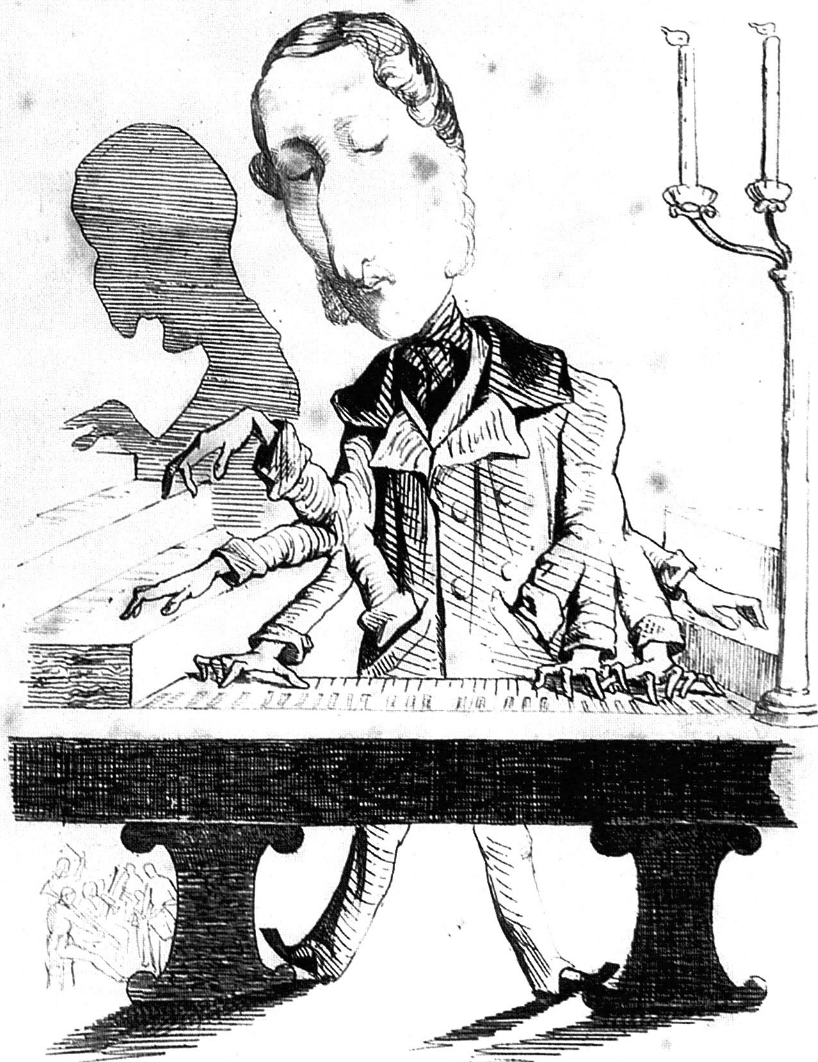


FIGURE 3. Caricature of Sigismond Thalberg. The effects he created on the piano sounded impossible for only two hands. Courtesy, Music Division, New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

One writer doubted the public would believe that Thalberg performed on the Chickering because of musical preference, since he still used his Erards in New York. His reasons could "hardly be attributed to any but pecuniary motives."[25] Bernard Ullman, Thalberg's industrious agent, responded that he had requested Chickering to furnish pianos for Thalberg's use and they had "kindly consented" to do so. He also claimed that no arrangement was ever made with "reference to the expenses" and that Chickering was "under no obligation" to furnish the instruments.[26] Thalberg and Chickering apparently had an informal understanding with neither bound to an exclusive contract and neither making specific claims concerning Thalberg's keyboard preferences. Nonetheless, Thalberg was assured that in each city he would find at no expense to him a brand new instrument, especially selected for his use and in the very finest condition.

By the 1870s the competition among piano makers was intense, making gentlemen's agreements like those between Chickering and Thalberg increasingly rare. Chickering now had an imposing rival in Steinway, which by the mid 1860s had surpassed the Boston firm in sales and in 1866 had opened the main concert hall in New York; Steinway also sponsored a return visit of Leopold de Meyer in 1867–68.[27] The Steinways continued to set the pace in the promotion of their pianos by agreeing to underwrite the American tour of Anton Rubinstein (1829–1894). The impresario Jacob Grau had signed with Rubinstein in 1871 an initial contract in which Grau reserved the right to select Steinway, Chickering, or another reputable American firm to supply instruments for Rubinstein's concerts.[28] After Grau suffered a stroke, his nephew Maurice Grau assumed the role of managing Rubinstein's tour. Possessing little capital, the nephew approached William Steinway, whom he had never met, with the idea that the Steinway firm could receive valuable publicity in exchange for financing the $10,000 guarantee required

25. *New York Musical World* 17 (21 March 1857): 180; also quoted in *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, 29 April 1857.

26. *New York Musical World* 17 (4 April 1857): 212; also quoted in *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, 30 April 1857.

27. The Steinway catalogue of 1867 lists 1866 sales figures for the fifteen "most prominent" American firms. In that year Steinway sold 1,944 pianos and Chickering 1,526.

28. Jacob Grau signed the contract with Rubinstein in Vienna on 24 October 1871; a copy of it is preserved in the Music Division, Library of Congress.

by Rubinstein. Steinway soon consented, and by June 1872 the firm had made the deposit for Rubinstein's fee in a Viennese bank.[29]

A twenty-three-page contract in a meticulous German script specifies precisely the terms of the arrangements between Rubinstein and Grau. Rubinstein was to be paid 200,000 francs for the eight-month tour, the equivalent of $40,000 or about $200 per concert, a respectable amount but not nearly what the pianist was worth. Rubinstein was not obliged to enter places where an epidemic, revolution, or war was raging and was given the right to choose his own repertoire. In the final contract, in which Steinway & Sons joined as witness and as guarantor of Rubinstein's fee, the Steinway piano had been conveniently chosen for the concerts. Rubinstein approved the choice, although he had the right to reject single pianos that did not suit him.[30]

Steinway had the demanding task of supplying pianos for all of the pianist's over two hundred concerts in the United States during the 1872–73 season. The firm ostensibly received nothing from the agreement except a brief notice in advertisements and programs. But the approval of one of the world's leading pianists, especially one who created such a frenzy with his passionate performances, was excellent advertising and worth a considerable sum. The music firm of Blackmar & Co. in New Orleans, an agent for several makes other than Steinway, warned the public that furnishing pianos for a concert artist such as Rubinstein was an expensive means of promotion and that the cost

29. References to Maurice Grau's request to Steinway and to Rubinstein's deposit appear in the William Steinway diary, 26 January 1872, 14 March 1872, and 12 June 1872. Steinway's diary, which he kept from 20 April 1861 to 8 November 1896, is in the private collection of Henry Z. Steinway, to whom I am grateful for providing excerpts from it concerning Rubinstein and Hans von Bülow. For additional information about the diary and its contents, I would like to thank Cynthia Adams Hoover of the Smithsonian Institution and Edwin M. Good, whose transcript of the document has proved invaluable and is my source for all quotations from it. Copies of the diary may be consulted in the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives of LaGuardia Community College, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the New-York Historical Society, and the Smithsonian Institution.

30. The final contract was signed, again in Vienna, on 8 June 1872 by Rubinstein and Jacob Grau as well as by Maurice Grau and C. F. Theodor Steinway, the latter representing Steinway & Sons; a copy is in the Henry Z. Steinway Collection. Forty thousand dollars in 1872 would have been worth almost $450,000 in 1991 (see John J. McCusker, "How Much Is That in Real Money? A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 101 [October 1991]: 297–373).

would surely be passed on to the consumer.[31] Steinway maintained six pianos in transit to cover Rubinstein's nightly appearances, and a Steinway employee, W. A. Haas, traveled with the troupe to supervise the transportation of the pianos and to tune and regulate them periodically.[32]

In some, if not most, of his concerts, Rubinstein played a piano with an improvement called a duplex scale designed by C. F. Theodor (Theodore) Steinway and patented in the year of Rubinstein's arrival. Theodore, who had signed the contract with Rubinstein in Vienna on behalf of the firm, was the Steinway brother most actively dedicated to improving the instrument. In the duplex scale, a result of the influence of Helmholtz's acoustical theories, the portion of the string that had been traditionally viewed as non-vibrating—between the tuning pin and the capo tasto bar or agraffe—was made proportionate to the length of the vibrating string, so that it would vibrate at a frequency of one of the fundamental tone's partials.[33] A Philadelphia critic thought it produced a "clear, bell-like, singing note which is remarkably beautiful" and reported that Rubinstein was pleased with the improvement.[34]

The Steinway piano consistently received good reviews, even in Boston, the home of the Chickering firm. Dwight thought Rubinstein performed on the finest Steinway he had yet heard, and the *Boston Post* praised the "magnificent instrument," which "responded nobly to the call, and proved a faithful and capable servant to the giant who controlled its keys. Certainly never before has an American piano been put to so severe a test."[35]

Before leaving America, Rubinstein gave William Steinway a certificate of endorsement that was used prominently in the firm's publicity: "I

31. *New Orleans Picayune*, 5 February 1873. Steinway's cost to provide pianos for Rubinstein is not known, but in 1863 it had been claimed that Chickering spent $1,000 per month for Gottschalk's piano expenses (*Daily Cleveland Herald*, 1863; clipping in scrapbook number 4, Gottschalk Collection, Music Division, New York Public Library).

32. Communication from W. A. Haas, *New Orleans Picayune*, 9 February 1873.

33. For more information on the Steinway firm and the duplex scale, see Cynthia Adams Hoover, "The Steinways and Their Pianos in the Nineteenth Century," this JOURNAL 7 (1981): 47–89, especially p. 61; and Edwin M. Good, *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos: A Technological History from Cristofori to the Modern Concert Grand* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1982), *passim*, especially p. 197. Some contemporary press accounts incorrectly describe the action as functioning more like a coupler on an organ, causing a key to strike the principal note as well as the note an octave higher.

34. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 29 October 1872.

35. *Dwight's Journal of Music* 32 (2 November 1872): 334; *Boston Post*, 15 October 1872.

wish to express to you my heartfelt thanks for all the kindness and courtesy you have shown to me during my stay in the United States, but first of all for the beautiful instruments which have stood up so wonderfully during the long, difficult journey throughout the country."[36] As his testimony suggests, Rubinstein's relationship with the Steinway firm was more than merely a business arrangement. William Steinway claims to have become "perhaps, his most trusted friend," and Rubinstein looked to him for friendship and counsel.[37]

Steinway had also made preliminary plans with Hans von Bülow (1830–1894) concerning an American tour about the same time as Rubinstein, but it was deferred to avoid a collision between the two pianists.[38] Steinway eventually declined to "pay anything" for Bülow.[39] Fortunately for Chickering, Bernard Ullman, who had managed Thalberg, emerged as the principal catalyst behind Bülow's tour. Rumors circulated that the Chickering, Steinway, and Weber piano companies had bid up to $20,000 to acquire the exclusive privilege of having their instruments used by Bülow in America. According to Ullman, no American firm had made any financial offer. He had once again approached Chickering, "as old friends," wishing to receive a subsidy himself for giving them the right to supply pianos for Bülow's concerts. Chickering

36. Anton Rubinstein, letter to William Steinway, New York, 24 May 1873 (Henry Z. Steinway Collection).

37. William Steinway, "Personal Reminiscences of Anton Rubinstein," *Freund's Musical Weekly* 8 (28 November 1894): 5; reprinted as "William Steinway's Reminiscences of Rubinstein," *Music* 7 (February 1895): 398. Steinway's diary contains more than forty entries relating to Rubinstein, mostly brief references about attending his concerts or the pianist's visits to the Steinway warerooms. When Rubinstein received from Grau his first payment in gold—as specified by his contract to protect him from being swindled—he took the heavy bags to Steinway asking for advice, since he would be receiving twenty-three more installments during the tour. Steinway explained to him the currency system and its relation to gold and volunteered to deposit his money for him. From then on, the gold clause in the contract was ignored, and Rubinstein forwarded his payment to Steinway while on the road, once with the ingenuous admonition, "Please do with it as you think best" (letter to William Steinway, Boston, 14 October 1872 [Henry Z. Steinway Collection]).

38. Hans von Bülow, letter no. 1 to Emil Heckel, Munich, 10 June 1872 (Hans von Bülow, *Briefe und Schriften*, ed. Marie von Bülow, 8 vols. [Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1895–1908], vol. 6). Subsequent references to Bülow's letters refer to vol. 6 of *Briefe und Schriften* unless otherwise specified. Quotations from this edition of Bülow's letters are based on translations suggested by Siegmund Levarie, to whom I am greatly indebted. Entries from Steinway's diary verify the firm's discussions with Bülow: "telegram from Theodore . . . Buelow next year certain" (12 June 1872); "Palmer of Jarrett & Palmer called yesterday in relation to Bülow Ullman contract" (10 September 1873).

39. Steinway, diary, 4 November 1873.

refused this offer but agreed to give Ullman a certain amount of the profits from the New York Chickering Hall, which Bülow would inaugurate.[40] This agreement was subject to the approval of Bülow, who insisted on maintaining his complete independence on pianos; he refused to decide until he auditioned both the Steinway and the Chickering.[41] After practicing on a Chickering sent to him on the Isle of Wight, where he was preparing for his American tour of 1875–76, Bülow wrote to Ullman, "I shall not be able to make so much noise on a Chickering as on a Steinway, but the tone is far more noble and distinguished, like those of Erard's."[42]

Only some of Ullman's story appears to be true. From Bülow's letters to Ullman it is clear that Steinway was never in the running. In late February 1875, Bülow was already complaining to Ullman that he had sacrificed Steinway on Ullman's behalf; he had also refused Ullman's offer to share the piano maker's subvention since it would be entirely inappropriate for an artist to accept it.[43] Further contradictory evidence to Ullman's version of the facts appears in Steinway's diary, where he recorded that the piano maker Albert Weber admitted offering $10,000 in gold to have Bülow perform on his pianos.[44] Maintaining the secrecy of these financial matters was of crucial importance to the music industry, whose exploitation of performers was just beginning to be institutionalized. The piano manufacturers feared that public knowledge of

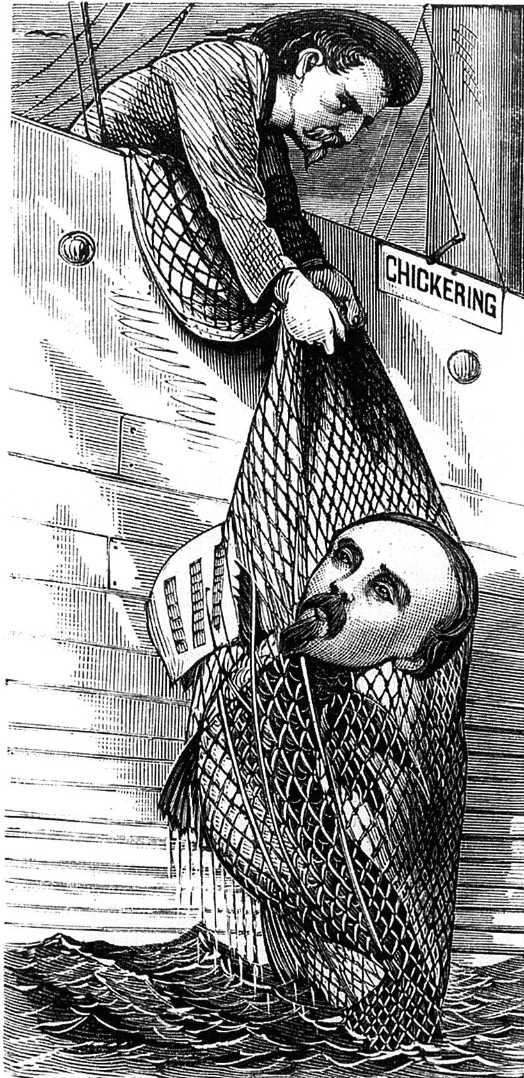
40. Bernard Ullman, Letters to the Editor, *Concordia* 1 (23 October 1875): 422, and 1 (18 December 1875): 550–51; first letter reprinted in the *Music Trade Review* 1 (18 November 1875): 15 and *Dwight's Journal of Music* 35 (13 November 1875): 125. The *Music Trade Review* (1 [3 December 1875]: 39) reported that Frank Chickering in a private interview stated that Ullman's letter was "substantially correct" and the firm had paid no subvention. In the same issue the journal was authorized by Steinway to state: "The only transaction his house ever had with Dr. von Bülow or his agents was to decline an offer made them by Mr. Harry Palmer to get Bülow to use their pianos exclusively for the sum of $20,000 gold. Mr. Steinway denied that any overtures had been made by them in the matter."

41. Bülow, letter no. 141 to Bernard Ullman, London, 2 January 1875.

42. Bernard Ullman, Letter to the Editor, *Concordia* 1 (23 October 1875): 422; reprinted in the *Music Trade Review* 1 (18 November 1875): 15 and *Dwight's Journal of Music* 35 (13 November 1875): 125. Bülow's contract for his American tour does not survive, but it apparently prevented him from endorsing any other piano while in the United States. Bülow was "rather delighted" with this provision for he realized it would protect him from being "pestered" by tiresome piano manufacturers; however, he believed his "obligation to remain silent should be limited to the 8 months in America" (letter no. 167 to Bernard Ullman, London, 19 February 1875).

43. Bülow, letter no. 168 to Bernard Ullman, London, 28 February 1875.

44. Steinway, diary, 6 January 1876.



THE CHICKERING HAUL.

FIGURE 4. "The Chickering Haul." This cartoon depicts Frank Chickering netting a large fish with the head of Hans von Bülow. The caption punningly refers to the new Chickering Hall, which Bülow inaugurated in New York, and the excellent publicity that Chickering was expected to receive from Bülow's tour. *The Arcadian* 4 [27 November 1875]: 1. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

their subsidies to artists and managers would negate their effectiveness. Critics were concerned about the "evil consequences of a system which so mixes up art and trade," in which musicians sold their "skill and *prestige* to makers of instruments."[45]

Although Bülow initially voiced his skepticism about the Chickering, as well as America, in letters to Ullman, those doubts soon gave way to pure delight on both accounts. In fact, Bülow seemed to enjoy his role as a representative of the Chickering firm, and he earnestly declared his loyalty to its instruments through interviews and letters, possibly to convince the public, his friends, and perhaps himself that he had not sold out. After his American debut in Boston he had been overheard to say that the piano was "not only the finest in America, but the finest in the whole world. Who could help playing well on such an instrument?"[46] In an interview with the *New York Sun*, Bülow coined the witty phrases that would later be used as an advertising slogan: On other pianos "I have to play as the piano permits. On the Chickerings I play just as I wish."[47] And after a month in the United States he wrote to a friend:

> I am $66\frac{2}{3}\%$ better than in the Old World, and I grow more enchanted every day with this glorious country, which is almost half a century (minimum) ahead of nearly every part of Europe. I notice the most extraordinary transformation in myself. Whereas, before, I frequently played like a pig, I now occasionally play like a god. Chickering's gorgeous pianofortes—undeniably the best in both worlds—have made me into a first-rate pianist.[48]

The Chickering pianos received acclaim from the critics as well as from the pianist. They commended the instrument that served him "so faithfully, so obediently, and so lovingly,"[49] and praised its capability, in the

45. *Concordia* 1 (11 December 1875): 527.

46. *Boston Post*, 21 October 1875. He voiced a similar opinion in a letter to Eugen Spitzweg: "I have never played better, because never better supported by instruments" (Hartford, 7 November 1875 [Music Division, Library of Congress]).

47. "An Hour with von Bülow," *New York Sun*, 17 November 1875.

48. Hans von Bülow, letter to Karl Klindworth, New York, 24 November 1875, in *Letters of Hans von Bülow*, ed. Richard Count du Moulin Eckart; trans. Hannah Waller; translation edited with a preface and notes by Scott Goddard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), 12–13. See also letters no. 179 to Bernard Ullman, Boston, 18–19 October 1875 ("Chickering . . . a charming man—I am more and more enamored of his pianos, which seem to me the best of both worlds"), and no. 181 to Jessie Laussot, Boston, 24 October 1875, with the sentence referring to Chickering in English ("Very glad that I . . . play on Chickerings who [*sic*] are the best ones in both worlds").

49. *Music Trade Review* 1 (18 November 1875): 16.

hands of Bülow, of an amazing variety of timbres. Dwight thought the pianos surpassed "anything we have ever heard anywhere in power, rich sonority, sweetness, [and] evenness of tone and action."[50]

In an apparent effort to support Chickering, Bülow also enjoyed taking a few jabs at Steinway. While in America Bülow frequently attacked his fellow Germans, and, since the Steinway family was German, they seemed to be fair game.[51] Just before his concerts in New York, Bülow had written to a friend:

> The big three-week battle in New York approaches. Battle, I say—because there houses the lout Steinway, who moves whatever he can against me. . . . Well—I am not afraid—I am prepared and . . . I shall 'tame the lout,' and for the rest of his life he will think of my visit to America.[52]

In the *Sun* interview, Bülow claimed Rubinstein was glad to learn that he would use the Chickering, for Rubinstein thought "the Steinways were not gentlemen, and it would be unpleasant for [Bülow] to have to meet them."[53] This slander created an uproar, for the Steinways were highly respected in the community and their relationship with Rubinstein had been more than honorable.

While friends and family urged William Steinway to retaliate against Bülow, he wisely resisted entering the fray.[54] In a letter to the Steinways, Rubinstein denied having made such statements: "If perhaps I do not approve of *everything* in the Steinway pianos—the personalities I have always found of the very best kind, in every respect." He was skeptical that Bülow had made such a statement, since he was a perfect gentleman, and added:

50. *Dwight's Journal of Music* 35 (30 October 1875): 118.

51. See especially Bülow's comments about Germans and their obsessive beer drinking in "An Hour with von Bülow," *New York Sun*, 17 November 1875, and his tirade against the German press and the detrimental influence on the state of music in America by the German music teacher (the "gigantic ignoramus with the inevitable beer glass") in "A Pleasant Chat with Dr. Hans Guido von Bülow," *Chicago Times*, 6 February 1876. When asked why Bülow attacked the Steinways, his manager replied: "Simply because he was in bad humor, and because they are Germans; for no other reason in the world. He bitterly regretted it . . . but he never denied having said all that was ascribed to him" ("A Great Pianist's Trials," *Music Trade Review* 3 [3 January 1877]: 77).

52. Bülow, letter to Eugen Spitzweg, Hartford, 7 November 1875 (Music Division, Library of Congress).

53. "An Hour with von Bülow," *New York Sun*, 17 November 1875.

54. Steinway recorded that Bülow had made "the most absurd statements" and had said "very unjust things against us"; Theodore wanted him to "fire away" at Bülow (diary, 17 November 1875 and 22 November 1875).

> That is the trouble in America; the newspapers accept and print all sorts of gossip. You should know that better than anyone else (since you have lived so long in America) and it need not surprise you.[55]

There was indeed some doubt whether the interview had been reported accurately, but Bülow never denied or retracted any of the statements. Yet he at least temporarily seemed concerned about the furor he had caused. According to William Mason, a fellow Liszt pupil with Bülow and a Steinway artist, Bülow was "dreadfully excited and irritated" about the matter and promised "to say no more to newspaper reporters."[56]

Although Bülow seemed happy with the Chickering pianos made expressly for him, he soon tired of the role of publicist for a piano manufacturer. His serious and volatile artistic temperament erupted in a famous incident in a Baltimore rehearsal. On the very day he wrote to a friend that "compared with my playing on the ideal Chickerings in America, in Europe I have only tinkled like a suckling pig,"[57] he committed an act of near treason to the Chickering firm and thereby threatened his congenial affiliation with them. Upon arriving at the rehearsal,

> he walked to the piano, on which hung a sign whereon was inscribed the word "Chickering." "I am not," he said with a look of scorn, "a travelling advertisement," and jerking off the sign laid the large gilt letters face downward on the stage, and cast at it a glance of hatred as though it were a loathsome reptile. Calling out to an acquaintance in the auditorium, he said in good idiomatic English: "Mr. —, that jackass has sent a sign-board down with the piano." He then lapsed into German, in which the words "Lump" and "Schweinhund" were audible. After he began the rehearsal, in one of the orchestral interludes, he got up and tipped softly around, picked up the hated sign and carried and stuck it under the tail end of the grand piano; and then in another interval walked around there and kicked it. Thus was he appeased with blood.[58]

This Baltimore incident sparked a renewed debate on the role of pianists as advertising agents and whether piano firms were helping or hindering themselves and the public by sponsoring concert artists. Since most people assumed that a pianist or his manager received a financial consideration, the public could hardly be convinced that one maker's

55. Rubinstein to Theodore Steinway, Peterhof, 9/21 December 1875 (Henry Z. Steinway Collection).

56. Steinway, diary, 19 November 1875.

57. Bülow, letter no. 188 to Jessie Laussot, Baltimore, 6 December 1875.

58. *Baltimore Bulletin*, 11 December 1875; quoted in *Dwight's Journal of Music* 35 (25 December 1875): 147.

pianos were better merely because a certain pianist used them in a concert. More seriously, a contract with a piano firm could limit an artist's performing opportunities. Rubinstein, for instance, made over forty appearances with Theodore Thomas and his orchestra, the best at the time in the United States. But because Bülow was committed to Chickering, he could not perform with Thomas's orchestra, which only used the Steinway and performed in Steinway Hall; Bülow was forced to use pickup orchestras of considerably lesser quality. In addition, the large signs hanging from the instruments and touting the wares of piano manufacturers detracted from the artistic purpose of the concert. The *New York Times* urged the manufacturers to "abandon this pernicious and growing habit of subordinating art to trade" and remove the signboard so the audience could honor an artist "instead of a clever advertising automaton." The *Times* writer speculated what the next logical steps would entail. Why not hang a sign on the pianist himself, saying, "Pianists in this style furnished only by the celebrated manufactory of Smith & Co." And next, signs could be hung on members of the audience, saying, "He listens only to Smith & Co.'s pianos."[59]

While most writers thought the piano manufacturers were using the artists, Theodore Steinway gives us the perspective of the manufacturer. He once wrote to William, "The damned artists consider piano makers a cow to be milked. I wish I could invent a piano that makes you stupid and seasick—I would donate one to each of them."[60]

Bülow obviously had difficulty serving the two masters of commerce and art. Although he made no other public display of his disdain for the promotional angle of his concerts—Bülow's scuffle with the Chickering

59. "Piano Advertising," *New York Times*, 25 December 1875; reprinted in *Music Trade Review* 1 (3 January 1876): 63. See also "Pianists as Advertising Agents," *Atlantic Monthly* 39 (February 1877): 229–30; reprinted in *Music Trade Review* 3 (18 April 1877): 206. Gottschalk defended the practice of pianists performing exclusively on the particular make best suited to their style and claimed that it was not because of a "commercial transaction between the maker and the artist," for "no pecuniary compensation could induce an artist to sacrifice his reputation by playing on an instrument he does not like." He explained that he played the Chickering "not because all others are bad, but because I like their tone, fine and delicate, tender and poetic, because I can obtain, in the modifications of their sound, tints more varied than those of other instruments" (*Notes of a Pianist*, ed. Jeanne Behrend [New York: Da Capo Press, 1979], 244).

60. Theodore Steinway, letter to William Steinway, 3 February 1877, Brunswick, Germany (LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College); translated by Dorothee Schneider; quoted by Cynthia Adams Hoover in "The Great Piano War of the 1870s," in *A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*, ed. Richard Crawford, R. Allen Lott, and Carol J. Oja (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 148.

sign, some suggested, actually provided more publicity than the sign alone could have—he would later privately rescind some of his praise for the Chickering. Perhaps Bülow had some hand in the "conspicuous absence" of the "usual unsightly sign hung on the piano" at a Buffalo concert. At least one critic was pleased: "What does the audience care whether Chickway or Steinring made the inanimate thing?"[61]

Bülow's early appreciation for the Chickering declined as he became weary with his nonstop touring and as the pianos became "quite deteriorated through the uninterrupted transport."[62] According to the editor of the *Music Trade Review*, on more than one occasion Bülow expressed dissatisfaction with "the mechanism and the action" of Chickering pianos and greatly insulted Frank Chickering before his departure.[63] Just as his relations with Chickering began to degenerate, Bülow effected a rapprochement with Steinway and in mid March secretly auditioned their new grand designed for the United States Centennial Exhibition. He seemed "highly pleased with [the piano's] tone and action."[64] Perhaps Bülow's final statement on the Chickering was made during his return to the United States in 1889, when he performed exclusively on Knabe pianos. In writing to his friend Carl Bechstein, the piano maker, he defended his shift in allegiance: "I did not, as you know, pronounce myself satisfied with Chickering."[65] This is clearly evidence of either a brief lapse of memory or that dreaded evil—the pecuniary motive.

61. *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, 24 January 1876.

62. Bülow, letter to Eugen Spitzweg, Columbus, Ohio, 28 April 1876 (Music Division, Library of Congress). Bülow's contract called for him to give 172 concerts in the U.S.; however, in a state of physical and mental exhaustion, he withdrew from it, with a severe financial penalty, after 139 concerts. For more information on Bülow's American season, including his itinerary and repertoire, see the present writer's " 'A Continuous Trance': Hans von Bülow's Tour of America," *Journal of Musicology* 12 (1994): 529–49.

63. "Bülow's Departure," *Music Trade Review* 2 (3 June 1876): 33.

64. Steinway, diary, 21 March 1876. Leopold Damrosch, a friend of Bülow's, conducted his New York appearances with orchestra. He had earlier informed Steinway that Bülow had played a Steinway grand in his home (Steinway, diary, 29 January 1876).

65. Bülow, letter to Carl Bechstein, New York, [April 1889], in *Letters*, 181. Bülow had inaugurated the first Bechstein grand in 1856, beginning what Cyril Ehrlich has called "one of the most significant relationships between instrument maker and virtuoso in the history of music" (*The Piano: A History*, rev. ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], 74). This association was temporarily damaged when Bechstein repeated to another piano manufacturer what Bülow had confided to him concerning his agreement with Chickering. Bülow was at first indignant about the breach in trust but later apologized profusely (letters to Carl Bechstein, London, 12 April 1875, and New York, 1 June 1876, in *Letters*, 158–59).

Regardless of motives, the symbiotic relationship between American manufacturers and European pianists provided benefits for everybody: the piano firms received valuable publicity; Thalberg, Rubinstein, Bülow, and others consistently had first-rate instruments in top condition for their concerts; and thousands of Americans in such cities as Augusta, Georgia, and Zanesville, Ohio, heard some of the greatest pianists of their day performing on the best possible pianos.