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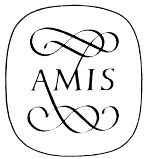

Inside an Eighteenth-Century Instrument Builder's Workshop: Erard's Letter Copy Book (1791–1797)*

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The day-to-day existence of an instrument builder of past centuries has long been shrouded in mystery. Although their instruments may survive, few other traces of the men and women who toiled in the workshops remain to attest to how they organized their work; procured supplies; hired workers; took and processed orders; set prices; accepted payment; tried to collect on overdue bills; packed, shipped, and repaired instruments, and dealt with the countless problems of their profession. Many instrument builders of the Ancien Régime, like other artisans, may have even been partially illiterate, which can help to explain the paucity of documentation concerning their lives.[1]

Until recently, the most notable exception to this dearth of primary source material from the preindustrial age of instrument manufacture has been the archives of John Broadwood and Sons, divided between the Surrey History Centre (Woking, Surrey) and the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.[2] These extensive archives, including sales ledgers, porter books, and other documents, date mostly from the nineteenth

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1. Many eighteenth-century instrument builders, however, were not only artisans but also merchants, often running shops that sold instruments, accessories, and printed music. As historian Natacha Coquery has shown, shopkeepers at the time enjoyed greatly varying degrees of literacy. See her book *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIème siècle: luxe et demi-luxe* (Paris: Editions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2011), 181–190, and her article "Les écritures boutiquières au XVIIIe siècle: culture savante, encadrement légal et pratiques marchandes," in *Écrire, compter, mesurer. Vers une histoire des rationalités pratiques*, eds. F. Menant and F. Weber (Paris: ENS Ulm, 2006), 163–180.

2. Many of these documents are discussed in David Wainwright, *Broadwood by Appointment* (London: Quiller Press, 1982). Charles Mould analyzed the contents of three extant Broadwood account books held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, in "The Broadwood Books I," *The Harpsichord Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October, 1973), 19–23, and "The Broadwood Books II," *The English Harpsichord Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April, 1974), 47–53.

century, but a set of account books cover the period 1769–1813, and a letter copy book contains correspondence from between 1801 and 1810.

This article presents another document that has recently come to light, and which, like the Broadwood copy book, allows a rare and intimate view of the life of an instrument builder at the end of the eighteenth century: a volume containing the copies that piano and harp makers Sébastien (1752–1831) and Jean-Baptiste Erard (1749–1826) transcribed of their outgoing correspondence with customers and suppliers throughout Europe during the period 1791 to 1797. This precious document is part of the Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel archives, today property of the AXA insurance group. At least comparable in scope and size to the Broadwood archives, the Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel archives comprises instruments, correspondence, ledgers and account books, patents, royal privileges, engravings, paintings, photographs, drawings, tools, and films that tell the story of harp and piano making from the end of the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century in France and all over the world.[3]

The copying of outgoing correspondence was recommended as good business practice for French shopkeepers since the seventeenth century, but few eighteenth-century letter copy books have survived.[4] The Erard and Broadwood examples are therefore extraordinary documents in the history of instrument building, and in the history of eighteenth-century artisanal life in general.[5]

3. The Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel archives are currently on long-term loan to the Association Ad Libitum, Centre International du Pianoforte, Etobon, France. Most of the letter copy book has been published in *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents, 1785–1959*, eds. Robert Adelson, Alain Roudier, Jenny Nex, Laure Barthel and Michel Foussard, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), vol. 1, pp. 51–221, abbreviated hereafter as *HEPH*. All citations in this article are taken from the English translations given in *HEPH*. Since the original French texts are included in an appendix in *HEPH*, they have not been included in the present article. The original manuscript letter copy book, containing some letters not included in *HEPH*, is abbreviated hereafter as *LCB*. Twenty letters were first published by Alain Roudier in his "La Production Erard dans les années 1791/1792 racontée par ses acheteurs," in *Le pianoforte en France, ses descendants jusqu'aux années trente* (Paris: Agence Culturelle de Paris, 1995), 74–81. For an overview of the Erard family, firm and archives, see *HEPH*, 1–36 and 523–40.

4. See Coquery, "Les écritures boutiquières au XVIIIe siècle," 13.

5. Ledger and account books from some firms (including Erard) have survived, and although these sources are extremely valuable, they yield mostly summary information on sales and purchasers. The harp ledgers of Erard's London firm contain workshop accounts for the period February 1807–June 1809, which provide interesting information on the functioning of the firm (Museum of Music, Royal College of Music,

The Erard letter copy book contains a total of 818 letters, sent to 394 different correspondents between January 6, 1791 and November 23, 1797. Like the "Sent Mail" folder of an e-mail application today, this book was an important tool for the Erard brothers to keep track of orders. Although the letters from their correspondents have not survived, one can in most cases reconstruct the dialogue from Erard's letters.[6] The details of workshop life are so vividly described that in reading the letters one can almost smell the sawdust on the floor in the Erard workshop at 37, rue du Mail in Paris.

The bound volume itself is 365mm high and 240mm wide, and counts 295 pages (240 pages of letters, followed by an index of names). Its rather plain cover attests to its function as a utilitarian office tool, bearing the simple inscription: "Enregistrement des lettres année 1791, 1792, 1793, 1794–95, [17]96, 1797." Although mechanical tools for letter copying were in use from as early as 1780, the texts in the Erard copy book were not produced in this manner. Instead, the Erards hastily recopied each original letter using many abbreviations (for example, "h." for "harpe" and "p. o." for "piano ordinaire") for words and phrases that were of course written in full in the original. Moreover, they sometimes copied in the third person (for example, "Replied to his letter of 2 October that we would let him have the ordinary square pianos at 17 Louis, if he were to take two of them") rather than in the second person present in the original. Most of the entries were written by Jean-Baptiste

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London, RCM 497). Sylvette Milliot analyzed a great many archival sources on eighteenth-century Paris luthiers in several publications, notably her *Documents inédits sur les luthiers parisiens du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Heugel, 1970), and *Histoire de la lutherie parisienne du XVIIIe siècle à 1960, Tome II: Les luthiers du XVIIIe siècle* (Spa, Les Amis de la musique, 1997). These sources include birth, baptism, marriage and death records, which have also been the subject of various other studies, such as Tula Giannini, "The Raoux Family of Master Horn Makers in France: New Documents and Perspectives," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* XL (2014): 112–162. Outside the field of music, the most complete extant business archives from the eighteenth century are those of the Swiss publisher and bookseller the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, analyzed in extraordinary detail in the works of historian Robert Darnton, for example *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995). The only other extant example of a similar eighteenth-century small business correspondence is that of the Paris watchmaker Noël Héroy, which contains a letter copy book of 168 pages from the period 1778–81. See Marie-Agnès Dequidt, "Importation, transport et finances: l'expérience d'un négociant horloger parisien en 1780 vue au travers de sa correspondence," *Histoire urbaine* 2008, vol. 3, no. 23, 169–184.

6. The Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel archives contain 477 letters from customers and dealers from a later period, 1816–42.

Erard, with some in the hand of Sébastien Erard. Although there are occasional references in the first person ("As my brother is absent for some time, I have the honour to reply to your letter" (*HEPH*, 80)), the majority of letters were written on behalf of the young firm of "Erard frères." For this reason, in the present article the catch-all term "Erard" is used when it is not relevant whether the letter in question was penned by Jean-Baptiste or Sébastien.

The period of 1791 to 1797 was one of the most turbulent in French history, stretching from the beginning of Mirabeau's presidency of the Assembly to the third year of the Directory, and including the entire Reign of Terror. In this context of social upheaval, war and terror was one reason so few documents of this type have survived. These years were also decisive ones for the Erard firm, for it was at this time that it positioned itself as the preeminent builder of pianos in France. In these letters, we note the omnipresence of square pianos of different sizes (which the Erards referred to as "pianos ordinaires"), but we also see that the Erards write a great deal about their new grand pianos ("pianos en forme de clavecin"), trying to sell them all over France and even abroad.[7] The letter copy book also bears witness to a pivotal moment in the development of the harp. It was at this time that Erard began selling harps with his system of forked discs, still used in today's pedal harps.

In this study, the information gleaned from the letters is organized in three sections. The first presents a demographic analysis of Erard's customers and discusses his relationship with suppliers and workers. The second deals primarily with the order process. The third section concerns issues that arose after orders were shipped, including repair and maintenance of instruments.

Erard's Customers, Suppliers, and Workers

The vast majority of the letters in the copy book are addressed to either prospective or actual customers and dealers. A minority of letters are addressed to suppliers of wood or strings. It is difficult to make a firm distinction between customers and suppliers as most of Erard's suppliers were also sent instruments, sometimes in exchange for goods.

7. An early ledger book is in the Erard archives containing a list of first purchasers of Erard harpsichord-shaped pianos from the period 1797–1810. This list does not coincide exactly with all of the purchases mentioned in the letter copy book, omitting some of the earliest instruments, which Erard may have considered prototypes. See *HEPH*, 269–73.

Garnier, Erard's long-time dealer in Lyon, is the most represented correspondent (thirty-three letters).[8] Erard's correspondence with Garnier allows a glimpse of an instrument builder's relationship with his dealers, a relationship that alternated between trust and suspicion. Other dealers with whom Erard corresponded included Francesco in Toulouse (seventeen letters) and Ferdinand Staes (1748–1809) in Brussels (eleven letters). Many letters were also exchanged with a number of teachers who acted as resellers for their students, including Frédéric Thiémé in Rouen (twenty-two letters), Parin in Dijon (twenty-one letters), Estoriac in Bordeaux (eighteen letters), Berlencourt in Amiens (sixteen letters), Brehan in Bayeux (thirteen letters), and Le Pin in Bordeaux (eleven letters).

Erard's relationships with dealers were an important way to extend his instrument-building empire across Europe, as he explained to one of his principal resellers in Bordeaux: "If we were less interested in keeping the relationships with our dealers, we could often sell here for cash what we ship, because we can barely meet all of our orders. But we prefer to deal honestly with our regular business partners." (*HEPH*, 193) When too much time passed without news from a particular dealer, Erard did not hesitate to write in order to maintain an active relationship: "Our correspondence with you, Monsieur, has slowed down quite a bit lately. The supplies that we have sent you should be depleted and we think that you are about ready to place orders with us." (*HEPH*, 213–14)

Erard's continual efforts to expand his network of dealers may seem innocuous by today's standards, but it was unusual in eighteenth-century France where strict regulations controlled what merchants were allowed to sell. Until the Revolution, the only guild permitted to sell goods they did not themselves produce was that of the haberdashers (*merciers*), as in Diderot's formulation "merciers, sellers of everything, makers of nothing."[9] This restriction was lifted in 1791 by the Le Chapelier Law, banning guilds. Prior to 1791, it was therefore technically illegal in

8. The Erard archives contain a bill for pianos sold to Garnier, dated August 12, 1788, attesting to the early date of their business relationship. As early as 1802, Garnier advertised his firm as the sole authorized dealers of Erard instruments in Lyon. See *Almanach historique et politique de la ville de Lyon et du département du Rhône, pour l'an XI de la République* (Lyon: Ballanche, 1803), 263–64; and *Bulletin de Lyon*, 69 (August 30, 1809), 274–75.

9. "Marchands de tout faiseurs de rien." Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, 35 vols. (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton and Durand, 1751–80), vol. 10, 369.

France for shops to sell instruments by various makers. Although this restriction was circumvented in various ways during the Ancien Régime, Erard clearly took advantage of this new liberalism from 1791 on, rapidly enlarging his base of dealers around France in order to sell his instruments to a provincial clientele that would never come to the rue du Mail in Paris.[10]

In order to identify potential dealers abroad, Erard would write to his customers and contacts in those regions. For example, in 1797, he wrote to a contact near Basel about finding dealers to sell his harps and pianos:

> Since our harps are already at the court in St Petersburg, and at present we are trying to sell our large harpsichord-shaped pianos, which are enjoying an extraordinary success, and are even decorated so that they can be put in the most beautiful palaces, we ask you to look for good dealers, to whom we can provide a detailed list of our products, superior in both quality and beauty to anything that has been made until now. You would not believe the degree of perfection [. . .][11] we have arrived at in all respects. (*HEPH*, 191)

Erard would propose to his individual customers, especially if they lived in a distant city or foreign country, to become commercial agents or dealers. For example, he wrote to one client in Bern: "If afterwards you were to want to have our instruments in order to resell them, we would establish a business arrangement and in that case we would give you a discount as we usually do with our agents all over the country." (*HEPH*, 190–91) In turn, some customers wrote to Erard to offer their services as dealers. (*HEPH*, 210, 212–13, 214–15 and 220)

Erard was constantly trying to ascertain how many unsold instruments remained with his teachers and dealers, and how many they had sold, in order to collect the money due. If a dealer held a piano for too long without selling it, Erard would ask the dealer to pay off the account if he wished to keep the piano. For example, in March 1793, he wrote to Gresnick in Lyon to ask him to send the money earned on a piano that was sold and also to return the pianos shipped in December 1791 that Gresnick was not able to sell. (*HEPH*, 165, 168)

Erard's agreements with dealers were governed by explicit contracts. At one point, Erard wrote to Garnier to inform him that "soon our previous agreement will have expired," encouraging him to renew the agree-

10. See Gerard Gayot and Jean-Pierre Hirsch, *La Révolution Française et le Développement du Capitalisme*, (Lille: Revue du Nord, 1989).

11. Illegible word crossed out.

ment. (*HEPH*, 175) A key element of Erard contracts with his dealers was an exclusive partnership for the sale of his instruments in a given city or region. When his dealer in Brussels complained of others in Belgium claiming to sell Erard instruments, Erard reassured him of his loyalty:

> We are very surprised to learn that others, but not you, either in Antwerp or all over Belgium, dare to announce that they sell our pianos on deposit in their stores. We declare to you that you are the only one who can say this, in private or in public, and those who boast of this are lying. We authorise you, Citizens, to use this information as you like in your publicity, even to have it inserted in public newspapers as you see fit. Please tell us what you end up doing about this. (*HEPH*, 171–72)

He sent a similar letter to Garnier in Lyon:

> Your reproaches have no basis in fact. If we had agreed not to have any other dealer in Lyon than your own, in order to provide our products so that they could be resold, we have kept our word. If an individual came in our stores to buy some instruments, we did not know that he was from your city. [. . .] At any rate, the Lyonnais, like anyone else, should be free to come to us as they can come to you. Moreover, we have had no transactions with other firms in your city, only with your own. (*LCB*, 239; *HEPH*, 221)

Some of the unauthorized sales of Erard instruments that his dealers deplored were probably counterfeit instruments, a problem referred to in the letter copy book and one of which today's collectors and museums should be aware. To his dealer in Bordeaux, Erard complained that "some individuals offer, in our name, [pianos] that were not made by us and on which they added our name. Circumstances do not allow us to take the proper measures to prevent this, but the facts are real." (*HEPH*, 183–84) Erard also warned his dealer in Madrid of the problem:

> There is at the moment in Paris a person from Madrid named Krasa. He orders pianos from us and we have sold him some, but only two have left for that city. He has asked us to deal with him exclusively, but we are sure that he himself has bought instruments from all kinds of makers in Paris. As we see every day how our name is used on poorly made instruments and since we have no way to prevent this fraud, we prefer to deal with people we know. Since we have full confidence in you, we will also trust the person you mention, and if during your travels you can find good clients for us, we will do our utmost to satisfy them and meet the expectations you have of us and of our work. We cannot tell you enough to be wary of all the Erard labels stuck on pianos in Paris by numerous newly established instrument dealers who are trying to profit from our name in order to deceive the public with counterfeit instruments. (*HEPH*, 175–77)

Erard was also keen on establishing and maintaining close relationships with musicians and teachers, some of whom could be credited with as many instruments sales as certain dealers. Although the vast majority of correspondents are relatively obscure today, a number of notable musicians and composers are represented in the letter copy book, including Ignaz Pleyel (1757–1831), Antoine-Frédéric Gresnick (1752–99), Johann Georg Heinrich Backofen (1768–1839), Henri Jean Rigel (1770–1852), François Devienne (1759–1803), and Charles Bochsa (1760–1820). Erard also replied to letters from two different directors of the Paris Opéra: Anne-Pierre-Jacques Devismes du Valgay (1745–1819) and Denis Pierre Jean Papillon de la Ferté (1727–94). As Erard wrote to one piano teacher: "we would be pleased to establish a business relationship with you as your art and ours go hand in hand." (*HEPH*, 213) In a letter to the music teacher de Charly in Douai, he even invited de Charly to lodge with him when the latter visited Paris. (*HEPH*, 51–52) Erard encouraged teachers to order the best instruments for themselves, noting that "a master should own the most beautiful and the highest-quality instruments." (*HEPH*, 112)

In the letter copy book, Erard identified only about half of his customers by their profession. For the remaining unidentified correspondents, it is often difficult to determine their profession or social standing. Because of the Revolution, Erard addressed virtually all of his correspondents as "Citoyen" or "Citoyenne" rather than any aristocratic titles they might have previously held. Among the identified correspondents, the most represented professions were musician and music teacher (table 1). In general, Erard's designations of musical professions in the letter copy book are inconsistent; the same person might have been designated as musician in one letter and as luthier or music teacher in another, as it was common for individuals to be active in several of these fields simultaneously. After musician and music teacher, the next most significant category of correspondent was merchant, as these were generally the people who had disposable income for purchasing a harp or a piano in post-aristocratic France.

A large proportion of Erard's customers were women: over 22 percent of the total number of correspondents. This includes seventy-three named female correspondents as well as fourteen additional correspondents whose letters clearly indicated that the instruments were intended for use by women. As for the rest of the instrument orders, it is frequently difficult to know with any degree of certainty for whom the instruments

TABLE 1. Professions of Erard's correspondents

Profession	Number of correspondents
Music teacher	37
Musician	28
Merchant	26
Instrument maker	12
Military officer	11
Music and instrument dealer	7
Theatre manager/employee	7
Wood merchant	5
Banker	3
Commissioner	3
Composer	3
Solicitor	3
Artist	2
Box maker	2
Doctor	2
Police official	2
Political figure	2
Schoolteacher	2
Printer and bookseller	2
Actor	1
Architect	1
Civil engineer	1
Concierge of the Royal Stables	1
Deputy	1
Merchant	1
Manager of fortress	1
Physician	1
Postmaster	1
Priest	1
Ship owner	1
Watchmaker	1

were ordered, even if the name of the correspondent is a man. In most cases, one can assume that the harp or piano in question was intended for the women of the household.[12] Sometimes this is evident from the

12. For more on the the feminzation of the harp and the piano, see Robert Adelson and Jacqueline Letzter, "'For a Woman when She is Young and Beautiful': The Harp in Eighteenth-Century France" in Annette Kreutziger-Herr and Katrin Losleben (eds.), *History/Herstory. Andere Musikgeschichte(n)* (Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2008), 314–35.

letters, for example when Erard responded to a letter from Monsieur Senegré in Bordeaux, "We are pleased that Madame Senegré is happy with her piano" or when Erard wrote to Mademoiselle de la Brochandière, "I am honoured to inform you that M. de la Brochandière has asked me to send you a fortepiano." (*HEPH*, 49–51; *LCB*, 86) One of the earliest purchasers of a *piano en forme de clavecin* was a "Madame de St Victor" in Le Mans, and the correspondence reveals that she bought the instrument for her daughter, which counters any assumption that purchasers of grand pianos at this period must have been established composers and performers.[13] (*HEPH*, 203)

Many instruments sent to music teachers were intended for their women students, as seen in a letter to Berlencourt in Amiens:

> I am very upset, Monsieur, not to have been able to keep the promise I made to you; I graciously ask you to remain patient for a little while longer, you and the young ladies that you honour me to speak of in your letter. I hope that you will be rewarded for your wait by the beauty and the perfection of the instrument that you will own. Please convey my excuses to these young ladies and to your daughter and know that I remain, Monsieur, your sincerely and devoted, etc. (*HEPH, 55*)

In a subsequent letter, Erard specifies that a piano he was sending to Berlencourt was intended for his daughter. (*HEPH*, 92)

The Erard correspondence affords a glimpse into the gender relations operating within a family, showing that in certain cases the husband or father was not necessarily consulted on all purchases. When trying to collect overdue payment for a piano sold to Mademoiselle Migieu, Erard wrote to her music teacher, Panseron: "Erard has the honour of wishing a good evening to M. Panseron and requests that he informs him if the piano that he was asked to select for Mademoiselle Migieu has been bought with her father's consent or not, and to whom he should write to collect the 380 livres remaining to be paid on the account." (*HEPH*, 83) Panseron replied to Erard that he had pleaded with

13. Thierry Maniguet has identified the purchaser of this early Erard *piano en forme de clavecin* as Jacques-Benjamin-Maximilien Bins, comte de Saint-Victor (1772–1858). However, the list of first purchasers of these pianos clearly identifies the client as *Madame* de Saint-Victor, which is confirmed by the correspondence in the Erard letter copy book. Moreover, Jacques Bins does not seem to have had a connection to Le Mans, where Madame de Saint-Victor and her daughter resided, and where their traces survive in numerous archives from the period. See Thierry Maniguet, "Le piano en forme de clavecin Erard," in *Le Pianoforte en France 1780–1820, Musique, Images, Instruments* 11 (2009), 89.

Mademoiselle Migieu's elder sister to pay Erard for the piano, and that "she promised to speak to her mother about it." (*HEPH*, 83–84)

Erard's letter copy book also offers a fresh perspective on the geography of instrument purchases, in France and in Europe in general (table 2) It is noteworthy that only approximately 10 percent of the total number of letters were sent to correspondents in Paris. The number of actual sales to Paris customers would have been higher, as many Parisians conducted their business in person, and not by correspondence.[14] Nevertheless, some of the letters in the copy book were addressed to Parisian customers who had ordered instruments in person, for example when these customers failed to pay for their purchases. After Paris, the most important city for Erard's business was Bordeaux. (*HEPH*, 146) Most of Erard's customers in Bordeaux came from the merchant community; there is a striking absence of aristocrats.

Erard's ambition was to sell instruments in all parts of France, and across Europe. For example, Erard's first few grand pianos were not sold in Paris: two were sold in Lyon, two in Dijon, and one in Le Mans. (*HEPH*, 52, 80–81, 87 and 168) In addition to these actual sales, Erard also informed numerous potential clients of the new grand pianos he had recently perfected. These potential clients were located all over France: in Bourges, Dijon, Huningue, Moulins, Bordeaux, Verdun, Lille, Lyon, Beaumont-de-Lomagne (Haut-Garonne), Clermont-Ferrand and Rouen. Erard also informed his clients abroad of the availability of this new piano model, with letters sent to Tournai, Bilbao, Madrid, Amsterdam, Zurich, Hamburg and Yverdon.

Erard's pan-European ambitions were extremely dangerous at a time when, because of the Revolution, France was at war with many neighboring countries. The Erards were staunch royalists, perhaps in part because they owed so much to Louis XVI, who had acted as protector in 1785 when jealous Paris luthiers objected to the young Strasbourg builders settling in the capital. (*HEPH*, 49) Indeed, in a letter from 1815, Pierre Erard wrote to his uncle Sébastien that he needed to postpone the annual party he gave for his workers so that it would not fall on January 21, "the anniversary of the execution of the virtuous Louis XVI." (*HEPH*,

14. This fact is confirmed when comparing the names in the letter copy book with the extant ledgers for the period. The relevant ledgers are held in the Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel archives (ledger from 1788 and later, D.2009.1.72) and in the Musée de la Musique Paris (from 1790–92 [E.2009.5.98], from 1797–99 [E.2009.5.99] and from 1788–1802 [E.2009.5.40]).

TABLE 2. Geographical distribution of Erard's correspondents and delivery times for shipping instruments from Paris (when indicated)

Place	Number of letters	Number of days
Paris	85	0
Bordeaux	74	20–26
Lyon	62	12–20
Rouen	56	4–8
Dijon	34	12–15
Amiens	27	5–7
Toulouse	25	28–35
Arras	21	8–9
Brussels	18	12–15
Abbeville	15	6–7
Le Mans	15	10–12
Rennes	15	15–17
Bayeux	14	8–12
Amsterdam	13	
Strasbourg	13	18–22
Auxerre	12	
Bourges	11	12–15
Metz	10	12–18
Moulins	9	12
Verdun	9	12
Liège	8	22
Orléans	8	5–6
Calais	7	9–12
Nancy	7	12
Caen	6	10
Marcigny	6	20
Montauban	6	28–30
Nantes	6	16–22
Bilbao	5	
Blois	5	6–8
Castres	5	
Douai	5	
Lisieux	5	6
Marseille	5	
Tours	5	12–14
Angoulême	4	18
Beaune	4	15
Chalon sur Saone	4	12
Le Havre	4	6–12
Lille	4	8
Sedan	4	
Semur	4	8–10
Sens	4	

TABLE 2 *continued*

Place	Number of letters	Number of days
St Malo	4	20
Angers	3	12
Avalon	3	
Clermont-Ferrand	3	18
Nuremberg	3	
Poitiers	3	12
St. Germain en Laye	3	
Tarbes	3	32–35
Valognes	3	18
unknown	3	
Antwerp	2	
Autun	2	16
Bayonne	2	35
Beauvais	2	
Boulogne	2	
Bourbourg	2	
Brest	2	
Cambrai	2	8
Carentan	2	
Dunkerque	2	12
Geneva	2	24
Hamburg	2	
Hennebont	2	
Huningue	2	
Illiers	2	
Issoudun	2	12
La Ferté-sous-Jouarre	2	
La Flèche	2	
La Rochelle	2	
Laon	2	
London	2	
Madrid	2	
Mirande	2	
Reims	2	6
Rodez	2	
Rotterdam	2	
Saint-Lazare	2	
Soissons	2	
St Marc, island of St. Domingue	2	
Tournai	2	10
Vannes	2	18–20
Vevey	2	24
Agen	1	
Argentan	1	

TABLE 2 *continued*

Place	Number of letters	Number of days
Aubin	1	
Auch	1	30
Barbisieux	1	
Bar-le-Duc	1	
Beaumont-de-Lomagne	1	
Belleville	1	
Bern	1	
Besançon	1	
Blois	1	
Bourbonne les bains	1	
Chantilly	1	
Clichy-la-Garenne	1	
Cognac	1	
Compiègne	1	2
Etampes	1	2
Ghent	1	
Igoville	1	
Jullenay (Burgundy)	1	
Kandel	1	
La Pointe à Pitre, Guadeloupe	1	
La Sacodière	1	
Lausanne	1	
Laval	1	
Lignes	1	
Luçon	1	
Meaux	1	2
Mettranvilliers	1	
Mons	1	10
Montereau-Fault-Yonne	1	
Montreuil-sur-mer	1	
Morlaix	1	
Nanteuil	1	
Nargis	1	
Navarre	1	
Nevers	1	
Nice	1	
Nîmes	1	
Noyon	1	6
Nyon, Switzerland	1	24
Orange	1	28
Perpignan	1	
Puy	1	
Quimper	1	

TABLE 2 *continued*

Place	Number of letters	Number of days
Realmont	1	
Roanne	1	18
Roye	1	
Saint-Hippolyte	1	
Saulieu	1	
Senlis	1	
St Germain en Laye	1	
St Juste	1	
St. Quentin	1	
Thionville	1	
Tournus	1	
Valenciennes	1	
Versailles	1	
Vesoul	1	15
Villefranche-de-Rouergue	1	30
Vire	1	
Wertheim	1	
Yverdon	1	
Zurich	1	
Bois-d'Amont	1	

583)[15] So many aspects of the Erards' personal life and business would have been considered suspect that it seems miraculous that they were able to survive the Revolution. They were considered by many Parisians to be German because of their strong Strasbourg accents. Sébastien Erard was wealthy and had a large and valuable collection of paintings. They built harps and pianos, instruments that were also considered luxury objects meant for an aristocratic clientele.

Most damning was the fact that Erard had established a branch of their business in London, the enemy capital. Sébastien Erard travelled frequently between London and Paris since at least 1786 and perhaps even as early as the 1770s.[16] As will be discussed below, Erard sent harps and supplies such as wood back and forth between his Paris and London workshops. These ties with England were exceedingly risky, for as of February 1, 1793, France was officially at war with England. On October 9, 1793 the National Convention voted a law ordering the immediate arrest

15. For more on The Erards during the Revolution, see *HEPH*, 8–9.
16. *HEPH*, 7–8.

of any English citizens found on French soil, the outlawing all commerce with England and the seizure of all English goods in France. On January 30, 1794, Robespierre declared to the Club des Jacobins: "As a Frenchman representing the French people, I declare that I hate the English people."[17]

On or around September 6, 1793, at almost precisely the outset of the Reign of Terror, the Erards were denounced to the Revolutionary authorities. The author of the denunciation, "Citizen Laurent" accused Sébastien Erard of having left fifteen months earlier for London "to go and find the other emigrants."[18] On September 9, 1793, as a direct response to this denunciation, two members of the Revolutionary comité de surveillance conducted an unannounced search of the Erard firm, reporting to the police: "We the commissioners Pierre Boudier and Nicolas Thabourin went to the Citizens Erard [in the margin: brothers] rue du Mail n° 37, musical instrument dealers, in an apartment at the rear of the courtyard on the ground floor. We apprehended him to learn what was his country of origin and he replied to us that he was from Strasbourg." The letter copy book itself played a role in this search, as the police report continues: "We asked him to see his correspondence, and he showed us a daily letter copy book that we have examined."[19] The commissioners noted in their police report that Erard had sold a piano to a customer in Amsterdam, that other letters revealed Sébastien's presence in London, Brussels, and Liège, and that a number of the letters they found were in German. After their search of the premises, the two commissioners signed the letter copy book on its first and last pages to show that they had inspected it, ordering Jean-Baptiste Erard to present the document to any future police search.

This police search, which in so many similar instances resulted in the accused party being led away to the guillotine, must have scared the Erard brothers, because following the perquisition of September 9, 1793 is a gap of more than two years in the letter copy book. The last letter copied prior to the police search is dated August 9, 1793, and apart from a few letters copied throughout 1796, it was not until December 1796 that the Erards returned to using the letter copy book in earnest. The

17. Quoted in Sophie Wahnich and Marc Belissa, "Les Crimes des Anglais: trahir le droit," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 300 (April 1995), 233.

18. *HEPH*, 49–50.

19. This document, as well as another submitted by Boudier and Thabourin to the Revolutionary authorities are reprinted in *HEPH*, 49–51.

Erards must have considered it too risky to keep copies of their outgoing correspondence at a time when their international ties threatened their very lives. This did not mean that the Erards ceased business activity during the Terror; on the contrary, an extant sales ledger from the period confirms that they continued to sell instruments throughout France during that difficult period.[20]

Many letters in the copy book are addressed to suppliers of raw materials. Whether it was lambskins imported from England, mahogany from the Antilles or strings from Germany, the need to maintain a steady stream of these materials was vital to the success of his workshop. (*HEPH*, 204 and 215) Erard often mentioned that one of the reasons he had to set his prices so high was because of "the rarity and the high cost of materials that I use in my instruments." (*HEPH*, 117) Almost every time Erard apologized to his customers about price increases, he cited the cost of these raw materials as being the primary reason: "I have delayed raising my prices for a long while, but being obliged to borrow (almost all the materials that I use for my pianos) from abroad and to pay for them in cash, I was forced to do so." (*HEPH*, 129 and 140)

To any piano and harp builder, the most important raw material is of course wood, and Erard was particularly concerned about the quality of the wood he imported to build his instruments. (*HEPH*, 116) Here is just one example of an urgent letter Erard sent to one of his wood suppliers in Paris:

> We request that you send us immediately, as we are in a great hurry, a coach full of planks of Champagne wood, very dry.[21]
>
> Thickness 18 lines
>
> Length 12 or 6 feet
>
> If you do not have any that is very dry, let us know this, because before using it straight away, for this time we would take other precautions. We need it for today. Send us what you can of gravel wood[22] and new wood; that is four or five sticks of the first and three or four of the second. (*HEPH*, 216–17)

20. Sales ledger for the period 1788–1802, held by the Musée de la Musique, Paris (E.2009.5.40).

21. Erard is referring to wood from the Champagne region, which was floated into Paris via the Marne and Seine rivers.

22. *Bois de gravier* refers to a wood that grows in stony soil and is floated from the Nivernois and Burgundy (the best quality being from Montargis). See Diderot and D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton and Durand, 1751), vol. 2, 306.

Mahogany had become one of the most fashionable woods in late-eighteenth-century furnishings, including pianos, and the continually rising price of this wood was most worrisome to Erard. (*HEPH*, 162–63)[23] As he wrote to one of his prospective customers: "This instrument is decorated with a superb wood which is currently very difficult to acquire considering the disasters in the colonies."[24] In 1792 Sébastien Erard sent mahogany wood from London to one of his contacts in Rouen, the organist Charles François Broche (1752–1803), in order to have it sent on to the Erard workshop in Paris. (*HEPH*, 115 and 118–19) In 1797 Erard wrote to one of his clients, a music teacher in Brussels: "We ask you to do us the favour of asking in Brussels or in the surrounding region if there is some mahogany wood for sale, what is the quality, the quantity, the price, the manner of payment, and the transport costs to send it here. We hope that you will be able to provide this detailed and exact information." (*HEPH*, 182–83) In similar fashion, he wrote to a client in Bordeaux:

> We thank you for your good advice, particularly concerning the mahogany wood. We do wish to buy it, but the distance would greatly increase the transport costs, because it costs from Bordeaux to here from 18 to 22 livres per hundred pounds of weight. [. . .] The qualities are paramount, aside from the width and length of the beams. We still would need to know how we could pay them; money is too scarce to risk an overdraft for a large sum in cash. You see from all of this that there will be some matters to discuss, before reaching a conclusion. If there were to be a way to pay for all or part of it in instruments, or for someone to make a speculation on this, we could make arrangements and leave a profit on the instruments. (*HEPH*, 183–84)

As it turned out, the mahogany offered in Bordeaux was too expensive for Erard, four times what he had paid earlier. (*HEPH*, 193–94) He renounced his purchase of the wood, explaining "We are very grateful for the care you have taken to inform us of the mahogany that is for sale in your city and elsewhere. The prices given far exceed what we can pay after having added the hidden fees. We will make do with what we still have, until there is an improvement in the markets." (*HEPH*, 194)

23. See Chaela Pastore, "Mahogany as Status Symbol: Race and Luxury in Saint-Domingue at the End of the Eighteenth Century," in *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the European and American Past*, eds. Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg (New York: Routledge, 2007), 37–47.

24. Erard is referring to the slave revolts in Saint-Domingue which disrupted the mahogany trade.

Erard valued flame or tiger maple with pronounced stripes, to be used as veneers. When a client in Switzerland wrote to Erard to propose selling him some wood. Erard replied with detailed instructions on selecting the material, at least some of which would be used for veneer:

> We thank you for having proposed your merchandise. At the present, we have lots of resonant wood, and we do not need any more of it. However, if you have some that is very beautiful, you could send us some for the price of a piano that you wish to have. Nevertheless, we would be infinitely grateful if you could put half of the maple wood in a sheet of a small line thick, one French foot wide and no less than 4½ feet long; but it must be very wavy and with flames. Also to include in your bill, a 50m sheet of holly, which is a white wood. In exchange, you will choose from the following list the piano that you would like, and we will work out the difference and its price is marked with your bill. (*HEPH*, 190–91)

Although there were some 240 wood merchants in 1790s Paris, Erard preferred to order wood directly from more distant suppliers, avoiding middlemen if at all possible. He received maple wood from a supplier in Huningue, a village near Basel. From this supplier, Erard was very exacting, requesting thin sheets with lots of flames:

> I wrote in my last letter that I had received the wood for my harps. That which I bought cannot be used. As you have written that you have found some I ask you to have shipped to our address 200 sheets of maple wood of a little line thick, 1 foot wide, 6 feet long, and at the same time a piece of the same wood, of the same length and 1 foot wide or more if possible. One must choose what is the finest and with the most waves. If we like it, we will order more in a greater quantity. For the wood to arrive as fast as possible, put it on the postal coach. We prefer paying a bit more so that it can arrive soon. (*HEPH*, 191)

In 1791, Erard wrote to a client in the Caribbean colony of St Domingue (present-day Haiti), who also supplied Erard with mahogany:

> As for the mahogany wood, I would be most grateful if you could send to me the most beautiful, according to the enclosed measurements, that is: 26 inches wide and 10½ feet long. I will not give you the thickness. If you were to be able to send me at 15 feet long you would make me very happy. If it is not possible to find any of the aforementioned dimensions, choose the most beautiful in shorter lengths. (*HEPH*, 83)

One of the more interesting revelations in the letter copy book is that Erard ordered his piano soundboards already made, from Lucas Schaff in Strasbourg:

> Would you send me as soon as possible a hundred piano soundboards of the best quality, informing me by letter the date of shipment, as well as the cost, so that I will be able to pay the debt as soon as the goods are delivered to me. Please put them on the wagon, and not on the cart, so that they will not remain on the road for too long. I hope to order a great many of these soundboards shortly. (*HEPH*, 121–22)

Sébastien Erard was born in Strasbourg, where he began his career working in the keyboard workshops of the Silbermann brothers. It is therefore possible that he retained trusted contacts in Strasbourg for certain supplies, such as soundboard blanks. The fact that Erard used these unfinished Strasbourg soundboards for his piano production is yet another element that underscores an important piano building lineage stretching back to Cristofori, via the Silbermann family.

Erard sometimes ordered wood from a Paris wood merchant, Ermet de L'Isle, but requested that this supplier order "the rest of the wood from the Vosges or from Holland, at 1½ feet and 3 quarters at 1 foot: he also requests that he sends the most beautiful [wood], completely trusting de M. L'Isle for the quality of his wood." (*HEPH*, 53)[25] Wood purchased locally was transported by floating it by cartload on the rivers and canals of Paris. (*HEPH*, 60)[26]

Strings, for both pianos and for harps, were another vitally important material. The workshop had a continual need for them, and when supplies were late in arriving this in turn caused delays in sending instruments to customers: "Do not think that the delay in sending the two pianos I promised you in my letter of 27 April is due to having forgotten about them. The reason is that I have been out of good piano strings for some time." (*HEPH*, 82) Erard not only needed strings for use in instruments they were building, but also to sell as replacement strings. Erard frequently complained of not having enough strings to send to customers who ordered more of them. "We cannot at present send you piano strings, as we do not have enough for our own use. We are awaiting more in the next few days and at that point we will satisfy your request." (*HEPH*, 116, 192 and 206) He sometimes needed to ration his string supply, sending partial orders to his customers: "We have added to them

25. Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 83; n15.

26. For more on the practice of floating wood to Paris, see Dominique Antoine Telles d'Acosta, *Instructions sur les bois de Marine et autres (. . .) suivi d'un apperçu des bois et des consommation dans le royaume* (Paris: Duchesne, 1782), 194.

several strings, but not as many as we would have liked, because we do not have them. As soon as they have arrived, we will be able to fill your order." (*HEPH*, 181–82) To Garnier, his most important dealer in Lyon, Erard wrote: "We were not able to include the strings that you had ordered because we do not have enough of them. In the next shipment of four pianos that we owe you, we will enclose some for your personal use and as soon as our shipment from Germany arrives we will provide you with even more of them." (*HEPH*, 175)

Erard ordered his strings from Nuremberg and had them shipped to a middleman in Strasbourg. (*HEPH*, 110 and 114) Erard was demanding as to the quality of the strings, not hesitating to tell his string supplier Fuchs in Nuremburg: "In the most recent shipment, more than half of the n° 3 [strings] were very poor." (*HEPH*, 167)[27] Although most letters concern harp and piano strings, there is one in which Erard informs a customer that he has sent the violin strings the customer had ordered. (*LCB*, 162)

Other accessories that Erard supplied to his customers were tuning hammers, which were often included, together with an assortment of replacement strings, with shipments of new pianos. (*HEPH*, 52, 60 and 8) In 1792, Erard sent Thiemé, music teacher in Rouen, what amounted to several maintenance kits for pianos: four tuning hammers, four tuning forks, a set of iron pegs, a box of strings for three pianos, and leather for dampers of a piano. (*HEPH*, 94) In another shipment, he sent Thiemé six tuning hammers and a set of strings. (*HEPH*, 110)[28]

Erard was frequently short on these accessories, as he wrote to one of his dealers in Toulouse: "We have finally given, Monsieur, to M. Fabre messenger from Toulouse, the strings and hammers that we should have sent you long ago. Know that if it had been possible to give them to you earlier we would have done so, but we did not have enough of them for ourselves." (*HEPH*, 206)

In several letters, Erard mentions the inclusion of printed music at the request of his customers. When shipping to one of his more important dealers, Francesco in Toulouse, Erard noted that several of the leading Parisian music publishers, Sieber, Cousineau, and Imbaut, gave him music to include in the shipment. (*HEPH*, 64 and 96) Other scores that

27. Strings were cited by number; when replying to a client in Arras, Erard mentioned that he had included a set of strings in the crate containing the piano, but noted, "I have not sent you the strings number 4, because I never use them." (*HEPH*, 61)

28. A complete set of strings cost 15 livres with a teacher's discount. (*HEPH*, 79)

are mentioned in the letters as having been provided to customers include a method for *solfège* imported from Italy, the first harp concerto by Boieldieu, and subscriptions to two different music journals, including one published by Pleyel. (*HEPH*, 169, 173–74 and 183–84) Erard took advantage of shipments of instruments to musicians to include other instruments and objects. For example, Thevenin, organist in Moulins, requested that Erard pack in the same crate as a piano he had ordered a clarinet made by the Paris builder Michel Amlingue (1744–1816). (*HEPH*, 196, 197 and 202) Erard also sent a crate containing "a fortepiano and two dolls" to a woman in Dijon. (*LCB*, 114)

Since the letters in the copy book are addressed primarily to customers, they reveal little about the workers in Erard's Paris workshops. One letter, however, is particularly informative, providing information about recruitment methods, salaries, and workshop organization. In the letter, sent to a customer at the French embassy in the border town of Huningue, Erard discusses the possibility of a worker named Nagelen returning to Paris:

> You have also mentioned Nagelen's wish to return to our workshops in Paris. This would suit us, but we have an observation to make to him that you will find accurate. At present, our workshops are in a perfect state, each workshop has its head and all is going well, but if Nagelen wants to commit himself to stay for a while then we will give him a workshop to lead for all of the small pianos, with the [. . .][29] necessary workers to complete his workshop. Please inform him of our intentions, and if this is acceptable to him to make arrangements with us for 4 or 6 years. He can come back with the same salary that he had when he left us, which is to say that we paid him then in *assignats* 4 livres, 10 sous; we will pay him the same price in money but for our security he will receive only 3 livres, 10 sous per day and 20 [sous] will remain in our hands, out of which we will pay him the interest at the end of each year, until he finishes his contract with us, at which time the interest with the capital will be paid to him together, which will give him a small fortune, and for us the security that we need in our business. Please inform him of this and send us his reply. Excuse us for the trouble we give you and know that we remain always your friends.
>
> Our family sends their warmest greetings.
>
> Note. If Nagelen wants to come under these conditions he could bring some calm workers to be with him, if he knows some that are good. (*HEPH*, 188)

29. Illegible word crossed out.

Several details in this passage merit comment. First, we note that Erard paid his workers well. 4 livres, 10 sous per day was a high salary toward the beginning of the Revolution. In 1790, a normal worker would have made one quarter of that salary (25 sous), and a journeyman mason one-half the amount (50 sous). The salary Erard proposed to Nagelen was equivalent to that paid to the higher class of skilled artisans working at the time in Paris, such as sculptors, goldsmiths, and stonemasons.[30] Moreover, Erard offered to pay Nagelen in cash, as opposed to *assignats*, which was generous as it would have protected Nagelen from inflation. Erard's proposition to withhold more than 22 percent of Nagelen's daily wages, to be reimbursed at the end of his tenure, would have provided Erard with an assurance that Nagelen would not leave before the term of his contract.

Erard imported workers from German-speaking Europe, enticing them by offering a good salary and a stable contract. This preference may be in part due to Erard's own origins, as he was born in Strasbourg to a family from the region around Basel, but also strong traditions of woodworking and instrument building in that area. It calls to mind the great number of German-speaking piano and harp builders who settled in Paris in the eighteenth century, such as Johannes Kilianus Mercken (1743–1819), Jean-Henri Naderman (1734–99), and Godefroy Holtzman (c. 1736–c. 1799). In a later correspondence between Pierre and Sébastien Erard, we learn that such a talented German-speaking worker named Wilhelm was sent back and forth between the Erard firms in Paris and London. At that time, Pierre Erard remarked that even in London "all the cabinet makers speak German or French." (*HEPH*, 616 and 669) Moreover, this letter makes it clear that Erard trusted his best employees to recruit other skilled workers. We can imagine such small cells of skilled artisans moving from one workshop to another across Europe, depending on economic opportunities and working conditions made available to them.

Erard's Paris firm was divided into separate workshops, each with its own head, and each devoted to a particular task or specialty, such as building small square pianos. This organization is clear from reading the later ledger books of the Erard firm, where a separate column is used to

30. The above figures are from 1790, assembled for a study ordered by the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety. See George E. Rudé, "Wages and Popular Movements in Paris during the French Revolution," *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 6, no. 3 (1954), 248 and 259.

indicate the workshop in which each instrument was built, but thanks to the letter copy book we know that this was also the way Erard organized production in the nascent years of the firm.

Finally, it is interesting that the one adjective Erard used to describe the ideal worker is "calm." This is perhaps understandable when considering that Erard needed to maintain discipline in a growing firm, with a continual need to keep up with orders in the face of great financial pressures.

The Order Process

The order process usually began by the customer sending a letter inquiring about the different kinds of instruments available and their prices. These letters have not survived, but one can infer much of their content by reading the replies sent by Erard. At this early point in the history of the Erard firm, customers were often not aware of the fact that Erard was a builder and not just a merchant. For example, in 1792, Erard replied to a prospective customer who had apparently ordered an English piano: "Not having any English pianos, I will send you one made by me, which, without boasting, will surpass in quality and in beauty the English pianos, seeing as how one often exchanges them for mine."[31] (*HEPH*, 115) When responding to an inquiry from someone located outside of Paris, Erard would sometimes refer to a similar instrument owned by someone in the city in which the person lived, so that the prospective customer could see and hear it before placing an order: "[My harps] are very beautiful, quite decorated and gilt and especially of very high quality and solid, with an excellent sound, similar to that of Mlle de Berlamont, which you have undoubtedly seen." (*HEPH*, 174) Indeed, "word of mouth" was important to Erard's early commercial success, and he encouraged his customers to tell others of their satisfaction with Erard instruments:

> We will be quite flattered, Monsieur, to have the occasion to confirm the high opinion that you have of us and of our products, and we await your future orders. If you have acquaintances who also wish to have one of our instruments, for which the details we give you are needed, we dare flatter ourselves by assuming that you will transmit this information. (*HEPH*, 178–79)

31. For more on the vogue for English imports in the consumer culture of eighteenth-century Paris, see Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIème siècle*, 93–107.

In Erard's replies to initial customer queries, which make up a large part of the letter copy book, Erard would send the requested details and prices, asking that the customer write back to accept the terms and to indicate by what date he needed the instrument. For example, here is a typical reply sent to a customer named Garnier, identified as an American residing in Marseille:

> Monsieur, I was honoured to receive your letter of the 14th, in which you ask about the price of my pianos. As I make them in different sizes, the price varies. Ordinary square pianos are 25 Louis, a fixed price; the larger ones with 4 pedals and which have more sound than the former ones are 35 and those that are triple strung but the same size 38 Louis. As for the beauty and the quality of these instruments I would not put you in the position of making the slightest reproach. If you find my proposition suitable, Monsieur, please inform me of this and know that I will fulfil entirely your request.[32] (*HEPH*, 135)

Sometimes the customers would then ask for further information, and Erard would send a second letter: "As for the piano about which you ask for more details, it is bigger than the ordinary square ones, and has more sound; of the four pedals, two are for the dampers, the third for the grand jeu and the fourth to lift the little lid in order to reinforce the sound." (*HEPH*, 140)

When the customer did not specify the type of piano, Erard would sometimes choose himself, for example:

> As you do not clearly state the form of the two pianos you wish to have I am shipping you two, of which one is an ordinary square, the other a larger size (long square) decorated with friezes in a select wood, with four pedals and a rich sound. A similar instrument I made has often been played in concert and for the spectacles at the rue de Feydeau, to great effect. This kind of piano is still unknown in your city, you will have the first of its kind. (*HEPH*, 113)

When responding to customers, especially to his dealers, Erard would often try to expand his market by informing them of other types of instruments of which they might not be aware. For example, when writing to Garnier in Lyon about an order of pianos, Erard wrote: "If you were to need harpsichords, Monsieur, I could provide you with some at a good price, as well as some harps. I have just completed some, for which I have

32. This customer is not to be confused with the instrument dealer in Lyon named Garnier, present in many letters from Erard during this period.

greatly simplified the mechanism." (*HEPH*, 54) Similarly, when writing to a customer to confirm a piano order, Erard added a pitch for his new harps:

> PS. I also have the honour of informing you that I have begun making harps; I will finish a certain number of them simultaneously. If you know of anyone who needs them, I ask you to be so kind as to let me know. You are undoubtedly aware of the fact that the mechanism of this instrument is overly complicated; I have changed it, and greatly simplified it. In this way, one does not break as many strings as with the older one. As soon as I have obtained the right to profit from my invention I will show my harps to the public. (*HEPH*, 58)

Erard did not hesitate to make a hard sell for certain instruments when writing to potential customers, for example, when describing his piano-organ, he boasted "I dare say that you will never have heard a better sonic effect." (*HEPH*, 96) As for his harps, he claimed "Harps used to have the problem of staying in tune, but we have made them solid and have made all difficulties disappear." (*HEPH*, 198–99) A common phrase used by Erard when trying to convince customers to place an order was "I promise you, Monsieur, that the beauty of the instrument will equal its quality and I have no doubt that you will be very happy with it." (*HEPH*, 99) When writing about his new grand pianos, he wrote:

> This latter has been perfected to such a point that it is enjoying a complete success. We can assure you that nothing has been made that approaches its merit, the most famous artists agree about this and shower it with the greatest compliments. The exterior beauty leaves nothing to be desired, it is in mahogany and can be placed in the most beautiful drawing room.[...]" (*HEPH*, 189–90)

This commercial discourse is representative of a new kind of consumer culture that developed in late eighteenth-century Paris. As historian Natacha Coquery has noted, merchants did all they could to attract customers, including setting up pleasant boutiques and attention-grabbing advertisements.[33] In Enlightenment Paris and London, boutiques that displayed new inventions were particularly popular.[34]

33. Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIème siècle*, 273–77.

34. See Liliane Hilaire-Pérez, "Les boutiques d'inventeurs à Londres et à Paris au XVIIIe siècle: jeux de l'enchantement de la raison citoyenne," in *La Boutique et la ville, commerces, commerçants, espaces et clientèles*, ed. Natacha Coquery (Tours, CEHVI, 2000), 171–89.

Eventually, Erard's replies to customer queries evolved into a sort of mini-catalogue of all the instruments they manufactured, which Erard copied almost word for word in many of letters:

> As you are not fully informed on the various types of instruments of our workshops, we provide you with this list to help you to decide [. . .] which suits you best.
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | 1. Ordinary square piano with 2 pedals | 26 Louis |
> | 2. With 4 pedals, bichord | 36 Louis |
> | 3. With 4 pedals, trichord | 42 Louis |
> | 4. With 4 pedals, bichord to c | 42 Louis |
> | 5. With 4 pedals, trichord to c | 48 Louis |
> | 6. Piano-organ with flute, double bass and a bourdon in F | 55 Louis |
> | 7. Idem in C | 65 Louis |
> | 8. With double flute & principal in F | 80 Louis |
> | 9. Idem in C, without principal, since it is unnecessary as the keyboard is extended to c. | 85 Louis |
> | 10. Large harpsichord-shaped piano in c. | 70 Louis |
> | 11. Harp with a new mechanism | 70 Louis |
>
> We also make instruments to special order, as richly decorated as one would like, and whose prices vary according to the decoration.
>
> We do not hesitate to say, Monsieur, that all of these instruments are at such a degree of perfection that we know of no others that are superior. The proof is in the complete success that they have had in all countries, judging by their preferred status. They clearly unite an excellent sonority with solidity and beauty. The harp with the new mechanism, for which we were accorded an inventor's patent from the King of England, is so popular in that country were we also have workshops, that we cannot respond to all of the orders and we sell them regularly for 70 guineas. The only problem is the continual increase in prices of the raw materials we need, especially in France. (*HEPH*, 178–79)

For pianos, customers needed to specify whether they wanted their instruments to be double or triple strung, the latter being more expensive. (*HEPH*, 134–35) Moreover, the price of the instrument included neither the packaging nor the shipping fee, both of which were to be paid by the customer to the transporter upon delivery: "These prices do not include the cost of packaging, which for regular pianos amounts to 15 livres and for the large pianos 22 livres." (*HEPH*, 154 and 185)[35]

35. Erard occasionally made an exception and included the price of packaging in the overall price. (*LCB, 155*)

Some customers placed orders for instruments that differed from the descriptions given by Erard. A piano ordered by the stage manager for the Grand Théâtre in Bordeaux was made according to a specific request from the customer: "the keyboard will be soft, the upper part in a beautiful wood." (*HEPH*, 91) In particular, Erard was always willing to add decorations as elaborate as the customer wished, for an additional price. (*HEPH*, 201) Erard liked to point out to prospective customers that his pianos were "decorated in the latest style." (*HEPH*, 75) Adding decorations to a plain square piano cost an additional 7 Louis, which amounted to a twenty-five percent increase in the overall price:

> As for the large piano that you wish to have, I will not be able to give it to you for less than 28 Louis, seeing as how I sell these instruments at the firm price of 35 Louis, and that which I will give to you for 28 will not be decorated, nor made from choice wood, but nonetheless well made and in a wood like that used in the ordinary square pianos. (*HEPH*, 134)

The decorations could be calibrated to the customer's budget. For example, it was not necessary to decorate the back of a piano if the customer intended to position it against a wall: "A piano like the one you request, in choice mahogany, the feet of the same wood, with inlays wider than usual, will cost you 25 Louis, and if you want the back of this instrument similar to the front it will cost you 26 Louis." (*HEPH*, 79)

Often, however, the special orders had more to do with the number of pedals or the range of the keyboard. For example, in 1791, Erard responded to the pianist and teacher Frédéric Thiémé: "As for the piano with 5 pedals that you would like to have in the next few months, I will make sure that it is ready for the time when you come to Paris." (*HEPH*, 70) Such instruments were different enough from standard pianos that Erard sometimes sent an explanatory note to his customers: "You will find enclosed, Monsieur, the explanation of the pedals that you asked me for. They are numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4. Be aware that the first lifts the little cover on the right, the other for the *jeu de buffle*, which makes a very pleasant sound. The other two are the mute, and to diminish or augment the sound." (*HEPH*, 115–16)

Pianos with a six-octave range became increasingly sought after during this period. (*HEPH*, 216) Interestingly, these requests for extended-range pianos did not always come from professional musicians; among the customers who inquired about or purchased six-octave pianos were a bookseller in Metz, a music-lover in Nice, and a woman in Le Mans seeking a piano for her young daughter. (*HEPH*, 170 and 173–74)

In many of the special orders, one can detect an increasing desire on the part of musicians for square pianos with stronger tone. For example, Erard wrote to a client about an instrument she had ordered:

> A piano like the one you are requesting will cost you 20 Louis. It will have a five-octave range, made in nicely finished mahogany, and will be only 3 feet long. As for the quality of this instrument, I will reply for the 4 octaves: there will be a lot of sound; the 5th octave will not have much, considering the small size of this instrument. I will do my best to give it as much sound as I can, to satisfy your demand, and to respond to the trust that you have been so good as to place in me. (*HEPH*, 133)

During this period, the larger and more sonorous square pianos became more common all over France. In 1797, Erard wrote to a client in Amiens: "As for the four-pedal trichord piano that you ordered from us, we will try to send you one in a few days, the price of which is 42 Louis. They are a great success everywhere and we sell them quite easily." (*HEPH*, 155–56 and 178) He also made similar comments about the same model piano to a customer in Brussels: "The trichord pianos that you are interested in have a much stronger sound and better respond to the nuances that one can give when playing. There are four pedals, as there are on those that are double strung. The instrument is slightly bigger than those that are double strung with four pedals. We sell many of them in Paris; all over France and abroad." (*HEPH*, 182–83)

Erard was concerned with assuring their customers that the new grand piano, a largely-unknown model in France and much larger than the common square pianos, would be a desirable fixture in their elegant salons. This is apparent in the wording of Erard's descriptions of this model, which is often similar from letter to letter. For example, to one client, they wrote: "we have taken our harpsichord-shaped pianos to a hitherto-unknown level of perfection; their solidity, tone, and beauty astonish the most famous artists. This instrument adds to its distinguished merit the argument that it can be placed in even the most magnificent salon." (*HEPH*, 198–99) Erard would frequently write to customers about both the visual and musical quality of an instrument, noting "its sound is equal to its beauty." (*HEPH*, 65)

In at least one case, Erard tried to convince a customer against proceeding with a special order. In 1797, he received a request from a customer in Cognac to build a special piano with a small-sized keyboard to be used for children to learn the instrument. Erard replied:

> The pianos you mention to us to use for children beginning to learn are no different than ordinary square pianos, on which we had thought of

> mounting a small keyboard proportionate to a child's hand. We can tell you that we do not make these keyboards to special order because nobody uses them. We have completely abandoned them. The reason is obvious; one would have to make these keyboards that grow with the child's hand, which is more than difficult and everything that one has been able to imagine in this way has been a failure. Anyway, you agree that these keyboards would have the very great disadvantage of tightening up the child's hand, by letting him control that habit. Instead one should try to help him gain facility on a big keyboard as early as possible. In this way, Monsieur, we believe that you should use the normal means, which will give you the most certain and most useful success. (*HEPH*, 180)

In two instances, Erard's customers asked him to modify existing instruments, and on both of these occasions Erard replied with reluctance. In 1793, a client asked if it would be possible to convert a piano into a piano-organ, to which Erard replied:

> I received the letter you wrote on 3 January. I have indicated below the best way to go about acquiring the piano-organ you desire. To add an organ mechanism to your piano will cost you almost as much as if you bought a ready-made piano-organ. Here are the prices for which I could let you have these kinds of instruments. A piano-organ with both a flute and a fife stop would come to 70 Louis. A larger organ, let us say with two flute stops and a clarinet stop and a mechanism to increase or decrease the sound, will cost you 5000 livres. Please note that it is only through long research and in-depth study that I have managed to find this new mechanism, which is not yet known by many musicians. As far as the strength, beauty, and quality of this instrument go, I hope it will meet with your expectation. (*HEPH*, 155)

In 1797, a harp teacher in Amiens ordered a harp with pedals placed lower than normal, to which Erard replied: "It is very easy to place the pedals lower; in this way when one leans the harp backwards they will touch the floor and they will not be able to be used; however, I will do as you wish." (*HEPH*, 193)

Pianos were expensive instruments, especially during the hard times of Revolutionary era. Erard often tried to convince potentially reticent customers by explaining that the high prices were due to the high manufacturing costs. "You would be surprised by our mediocre profits" he explained to a customer in 1797. (*HEPH*, 175) To Garnier in Lyon, Erard argued that purchasing his instruments was not only a wise financial investment for a dealer, but also a good deed for stimulating the French economy: "The high cost of the raw materials, the scarcity of workers in our country, all of this obliges us to raise the price and you would be surprised to know how little profit remains for us. But one must support

an establishment that is useful for your own and to industry in general." (*HEPH*, 175)

Erard's official policy, "as is the practice in all areas of business," was to give discounts to three categories of customers, by whom he hoped he would be compensated in the form of additional sales: teachers, musicians (usually these first two roles were inseparable, then as now), and instrument dealers. (*HEPH*, 198–99)

Discounts for teachers and musicians usually ranged between twelve and twenty percent. (*HEPH*, 187–88) Baland in Bourges received a proposition for a piano-organ for 64 instead of 76 Louis, or for a more elaborate model at 70 instead of 80 Louis. (*HEPH*, 55) Sometimes the discount would be greater, if Erard were interested in inspiring loyalty on the part of a particular teacher. Erard wrote to Brehan, a music teacher in Bayeux, that his pianos were normally sold for 25 Louis to individuals, and 20 to teachers, but that he would let him have one for 16, in the hope that Brehan would bring him more customers from among his students. (*HEPH*, 72)[36] Similarly, Erard often extended unusually favorable discounts to young teachers and dealers: "Noting that we are giving you a reduction of one Louis on each more than for other dealers and teachers because we must help you get started and we wish that you will be pleased." (*HEPH*, 207–08)

Discounts for instrument dealers were even more substantial. Erard sent Garnier in Lyon decorated pianos that normally sold for 30 Louis at 20 Louis. (*HEPH*, 54) In a 1797 letter to one of his dealers in Madrid, Erard gave a small table showing the normal prices of his instruments compared to the discounted prices offered to dealers (table 3).

Erard begged his customers not to mention their discounted prices to others, for fear of receiving too many requests to lower his prices.

> I take very seriously the reproaches you make in your letter of the 14th of this month, that I have made you pay more than others for the pianos that I have sold to you. Make no mistake, I dare anyone to prove to me that they have been sold new pianos made by me for 15 Louis (as you have written). It is possible that they were sold in my name or that they are used pianos, otherwise, I give you my word of honour and I give up all that I own if anyone can prove to me what you allege. I beg you to find out where this comes

36. Two months earlier, when M. Blondin, music teacher in Abbeville, asked Erard to sell him a new piano for the exact same price, Erard responded "I am sorry not to be able to fulfil your request; I have never sold new pianos for 16 Louis, especially not to strangers." (*HEPH*, 61)

TABLE 3. Normal prices compared with discount prices (*HEPH*, 175–77)

	Public at large	Dealers
Ordinary square piano with 2 pedals	26 Louis	21
Piano with 4 pedals, bichord	36	30
Piano with 4 pedals, trichord	42	35
Piano with 4 pedals, bichord to c	42	35
Piano with 4 pedals, trichord to c	48	40
Harpsichord-shaped piano	70	58

> from. Here is the price at which I sell to amateurs 25 Louis, to professors 20 Louis, and to you I ask 18. If I wanted this price I could sell them by the dozen to merchants in Paris. For these reasons, Monsieur, I do not believe that I deserve these reproaches. I also ask you not to communicate this price, seeing as how everyone pays me 25 Louis and I would be obliged to increase it to 30 Louis, considering the loss of *assignats*, the rarity and the high cost of materials that I use in my instruments. (*HEPH*, 117)

Erard was always careful to give his clients a list of his normal prices, then to add a list of discounted prices on a separate sheet of paper, so that the teacher, musician, or dealer in question could show the letter with the normal prices to others, without spreading word of the discounts, which Erard preferred to keep discrete. (*HEPH*, 201)

Customers sometimes took the initiative of writing to Erard to ask him to lower the price, but these spontaneous requests for discounts were rarely granted: "The price you proposed to me is unacceptable seeing as I am not accustomed to sell inferior instruments and for the price you proposed I could do nothing but sell you a poor quality piano. The public has accorded me a good reputation and my goal is to live up to it." (*HEPH*, 54–55, 141–42) If the reasons given for the request were the lower prices of Erard's competitors, Erard was swift to reply, as is the case of the order for a piano-organ:

> You mention that you have been offered such an instrument at this price. I have no difficulty in believing it, since I have been given one to fix at this very moment, which is so bad that is not worth 15 Louis. I do not want to praise to you the quality or beauty of the instrument I will send you. Playing the instrument will tell you everything and if that is not your experience, do not accept it. (*HEPH*, 101)

When one of his clients tried to invoke the financial hardship during the French Revolution as an argument to convince Erard to lower his prices, the reply was: "I beg you to believe, Monsieur, that the Circumstances in no way have reduced the price of my instruments, nor will they

diminish the price in the future. The fact that I still need to pay my rent and my workers, like everyone in this Revolution, is one more reason to not mark down the price." (*HEPH*, 73–74) "Do not think Monsieur that the price of my pianos has diminished since this revolution; on the contrary, I have no problem selling them. As soon as they are finished they are sold and I am even obliged to delay several shipments for this reason." (*HEPH*, 78, 79 and 97–98)

Occasionally clients unable to afford new instruments asked for used ones, but Erard did not always have them in stock: "As for the used one, please wait until I find one to satisfy your order, seeing as how good used pianos are very rare." (*HEPH*, 95) When Erard did sell used pianos, he did so at a reduced price, for example for 12 or 15 Louis instead of 18 Louis. (*HEPH*, 57, 66–67 and 116) This price was not fixed, however, as he explained to one customer: "as for used pianos I cannot set a price because they are sometimes good and sometimes bad, and the price changes." (*HEPH*, 76–77)

Erard sometimes accepted used pianos made by himself or by other builders in exchange or as partial payment for a new one: "I wrote them to ask to include in the crate of this piano the old one that is at their home and to have it brought to our address, seeing as how they are supposed to give it to us in exchange." (*LCB*, 157) Nevertheless, Erard insisted on first seeing the used piano in order to determine its value. (*HEPH*, 109) At any rate, Erard was not alone in buying and selling used objects, which was an established practice in eighteenth-century mercantile circles, even for luxury goods.[37]

Erard's customers paid or proposed to pay in a great variety of ways, and the advantages and disadvantages of these various methods are a recurring subject in the letter copy book. The precarious economy during the Revolution made it all the more important for Erard to be sure that he would be able to collect payment in a secure and rapid manner, and he was wary of selling without clear payment arrangements:

> [W]e received your two letters of 14 and 15 December, in which you inform us that you have chosen piano no. 5 from our note. However, it seems that the person for whom you intend it must pay for it with the payment of his income. On your side, you guarantee the exactitude of his commitments. Even though we have not had the honour of meeting you, we would like to believe this, but several days will not be an obstacle to this matter, but if it is you could perhaps give us the name of someone in Paris who could conclude the transaction in your name. We would be honoured if you were to find this

37. Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIème siècle*, 277–82.

> little agreement suitable to you. Please inform us of your decision, and know that we remain respectfully etc. (*LCB*, 163)

Erard's preferred payment method was cash (sometimes specified as "gold money" or "silver money" [*HEPH*, 163]), and he often gave discounts to customers who paid in cash:

> We mention that we could give a more advantageous discount to our dealer in Madrid in order to facilitate his sales, and in consideration of our desire to make our instruments known, but this will also depend on the time he will take to pay us. For example, if he pays us cash for each delivery, we would give him a discount of a quarter of the price charged to individuals. (*HEPH*, 72 and 175–77)

There was even at least one instance when Erard had reserved a piano to ship to a customer but in the meantime needed to sell it to someone else who arrived at his workshop to pay for it in cash. (*HEPH*, 146–47) In December 1792 Erard informed a customer that he could only accept cash, because of the "Circumstances," Erard's code name for the Revolution. (*HEPH*, 143) This statement was, however, probably a strategic tactic for this particular customer as Erard continued to accept non-cash payment from other customers.

Sometimes Erard's decision to accept a particular method of payment depended on the instrument in question. In 1793, when shipping an ordinary square piano to a customer, he noted that the same customer asked for a large piano but that an instrument of such value could only be paid for in cash. (*HEPH*, 166)

Customers outside of Paris could pay in cash by appointing an intermediary in the capital to pay Erard in person: "Wrote to Citizen Lapujade in Lyon to inform him that the two large pianos will be ready on Friday the 17th of this month. I requested that he instruct his agent so that he may come here to pay for the amount due on these instruments." (*HEPH*, 168) This was a common business practice, also used by one of Erard's contemporaries, the Paris watchmaker Héroy.[38]

A great variety of monetary instruments are mentioned in the letter copy book, including *assignats*, *billets*, *lettres de change*, *mandats*, various types of credit, and promissory notes, for specified periods up to four months. Erard sometimes accepted payment in installments or partial payment as a deposit, collecting the remainder due only after delivery as a sign of trust in his customers. (*HEPH*, 117) Erard tried his best to avoid

38. Dequidt, "Importation, transport et finances," 180.

payment by credit, informing a customer: "As for the promissory note that you propose to me, I must confess to you that I do not like them." (*HEPH*, 141–42) To another customer, he explained: "It is not that I worry about the promissory notes you would write me, but if you only knew how many I have that have not been paid." (*HEPH*, 164)

During the turbulent Revolutionary period, the choice of payment method was more than a merely practical subject. From the beginning of the Terror in 1793, it became a capital crime to refuse payment in *assignats* (whose value was in a continual decline). On November 13, 1793, it became illegal to pay with precious metals. On May 10, 1794, a new law to save the *assignat* was passed declaring that any person who asks in what currency a transaction would be conducted could be condemned to death by guillotine.[39]

Sometimes Erard would try to simplify transactions by having his creditors and debtors in the same city pay each other. For example, in 1793, Erard sold a piano to Ignaz Pleyel in Strasbourg, and asked Pleyel to send the payment to Rheinhard Storck, one of Erard's wood suppliers in Strasbourg, to whom Erard owed money. (*HEPH*, 166)[40] Erard then wrote to Storck to inform him of this plan, noting that as he was going to ship more pianos to Pleyel, Storck would be able to collect the remainder due for the wood orders directly from Pleyel. (*HEPH*, 166)

Erard avoided risky and unstable monetary transactions by bartering, for example with his suppliers of raw materials. In a letter to one of his wood suppliers, Erard mentioned that he was considering the wood shipment as payment for a piano he had sent him earlier.[41] (*HEPH*, 53 and 123) One of Erard's most frequently bartered items was wine, particularly from his clients in Burgundy. Erard wrote to Parin, organist and music teacher in Dijon: "Although you have been so very kind as to send me samples of wine to choose, I put my entire trust in you to

39. Andrew Dickson White, *Fiat Money: Inflation in France* (New York: Foundation of Economic Education, 1959), 75–89. For more on the role of money, and especially *assignats*, during this period, see Rebecca L. Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

40. Storck could be from the same family as Dietrich Stork, an instrument maker in Strasbourg.

41. For more on bartering practices of Parisian merchants in the eighteenth century, see Coquery, "Mode, commerce, innovation: la boutique parisienne au XVIIIe siècle: Aperçu sur les stratégies de séduction des marchands parisiens de luxe et de demi-luxe," in *Les chemins de la nouveauté. Innover, inventer au regard de l'histoire*, eds. L. Hilaire-Pérez and A.-F.Garçon (Paris: Editions du CTHS, 2003), 187–206.

make the choice yourself and to send me about 600 livres of good ordinary wine, which is not expensive considering that I drink a lot of it."[42] (*HEPH*, 84) Of course, not all wine was of equal quality and Erard had to inquire about the price of the wine he received in order to calculate its monetary equivalent. To one prospective customer, Erard wrote, "Before telling you if we would accept wine in payment for part of your bill, we would like to know 1st what quality of wine; 2nd from what year it is; 3rd how many bottles a half contains; 4th and finally, exactly what price it would cost us to have it delivered to our doorstep." (*HEPH*, 219) To another customer, in the Burgundian wine center of Beaune, Erard wrote:

> I was honoured to receive the two casks of wine that you sent me as a deposit on the fortepiano that I sold you. I would, however, like to know if this instrument arrived in good condition, and how much you estimate the wine you sent me is worth. I find it good; please Monsieur, be so kind as to send the price and to send me more for the remainder due on your account; for that I would be much obliged. (*HEPH*, 121)

When this customer informed Erard of the price of the wine, Erard complained that the wine was too expensive. (*HEPH*, 124) This happened again with Parin in Dijon: "As for the wine, it is too expensive. I am sorry that you cannot get it at a lower price." (*HEPH*, 160) In one case, Erard requested that the customer pay in *assignats* rather than wine, because of the exorbitant price of the latter. (*HEPH*, 165)

It was common enough for Erard to receive payment in wine that when he received a shipment of four casks of wine, via coach from Auxerre with no accompanying invoice, he was obliged to write to inquire which of his customers sent it and what the cost of the wine was so that he could note it in his ledgers. (*HEPH*, 100) However, bartering for a product as variable and difficult to control as wine was risky, as seen in this letter to one of his principal wine-paying customers in Burgundy:

> Madame, Having agreed with you for a long time now that you would send me wine as payment for the piano that I sold you, I was under the impression that I would receive the best quality wine. I am very sorry to have to confess to you that it is not good; in the first place, it is too young and has a sweetness that many people dislike. This is merchandise that is quite difficult to entrust to others and to transport, seeing as how often those who take it on are not very loyal and take it for themselves, refilling the cask with an-

42. In a letter of September 5, 1791, Erard thanked Parin for the six casks of wine, as payment of 797 livres, saying that the wine improved after having been put in bottles. (*HEPH*, 89)

> other wine. I have decided to ask you to send me some for the 260 livres that remain on your account, but I beg you, Madame, to please send me some that is higher quality and know that I will be very grateful to you for it. Perhaps if this wine were to remain for some time in the bottles it could improve. Please write to let me know at what time you think you will send it to me and be assured of the respect that I have for you and know, Madame, that I have the honour to be yours. (*HEPH*, 104)

Erard did not accept payment in wine from his numerous customers in or near Bordeaux, probably because of the much greater shipping distance to Paris than from the Burgundy region. In the letter copy book, Erard notes receipt of gifts of cheese (from a customer in Douai), pâté (from a customer in Amiens), and Brussels sprouts seeds (from a customer in Brussels), but there is no evidence to suggest that these were sent as payment for instruments. (*HEPH*, 104)

Once the customer sent payment for the instrument, Erard considered the order a firm commitment and sent the instrument as soon as it was ready. However, if a customer did not send payment within a reasonable period of time, the instrument might be sold to another customer. (*HEPH*, 184–85)

Erard was frequently struggling to keep up with the orders. In 1792, he made substantial improvements and enlargements to his workshop, but these renovations slowed down his production. (*HEPH*, 152–53) In March 1792, Erard informed his most important dealer, Garnier in Lyon, that he had a waiting list of over fifty pianos: "Please do not be surprised by the delay in the shipments that I have promised to make to you. I dare say that you are richer in pianos than I; there are at least fifty on order and I have not even finished six of them." (*HEPH*, 109) Three months later, Erard wrote again to Garnier to say that he still had fifty pianos on order, and was struggling to keep up, so the size of this waiting list must have been relatively constant during this period. (*HEPH*, 122–23) The same held true for harps, as Erard informed a prospective customer: "We have no finished harp at the moment; they are sold as they are made, and we even have a waiting list." (*HEPH*, 193)

The typical waiting period for the shipment of a piano, once the payment had been sent, was about a month. (*HEPH*, 170) On July 23, 1793 Erard wrote to Brehan, music teacher in Bayeux, to say that he could "provide two pianos in the next three weeks and that it was impossible any sooner." (*LCB*, 159) Two days later, he wrote to another customer, "We will not be able to provide any pianos for another three weeks or a

month." (*LCB,* 159) At the end of July that year he wrote to another music teacher, "We will only be able to provide them with a piano at the end of next August." (*LCB,* 160) If there were a substantial delay for filling an order, Erard would sometimes try to win the goodwill of his customers by sending a temporary instrument, even a used one, while waiting for the new one. (*HEPH,* 58) Even as late as 1797 Erard was still selling so quickly that he had no stock of unsold pianos in his Paris workshops: "We cannot tell you how many of our instruments are finished, because as soon as they are they are sold. But you can always count on receiving everything you order." (*HEPH,* 195–96)

Most frequently, it was Erard himself who selected the instruments for his customers. (*HEPH,* 52) Otherwise, as customers selected their own instruments when in Paris, Erard tried, sometimes unsuccessfully, to have a certain number of finished pianos ready at any given time. (*HEPH,* 71) Often instruments were selected by musicians in Paris who received commissions for this service. A frequent "selector" was Jean Louis Adam (1758–1848), pianist, pedagogue, and composer, and father of the composer Adolphe Charles Adam (1803–56). (*HEPH,* 66) The practice of having respected musicians select instruments was also used as an insurance against complaints. When one of Erard's clients wrote that he was dissatisfied with a piano, the reply was, "Your dissatisfaction with the last piano I sent you is unfounded. For M. Adam himself chose it and found it excellent." (*HEPH,* 71) It seems that Adam's taste in pianos was not always shared by customers, for twelve days later, Erard wrote to a different client, "I did not expect to receive complaints about the piano that I sent you, since it had been chosen by M. Adam, who you had charged with this responsibility. As you do not find your instrument satisfactory, I will send you another one chosen and even signed by M. Adam." (*HEPH,* 74)

Signing the instrument, usually on the soundboard, was therefore a way for Erard to prove that a musician chose an instrument. For example, Erard wrote to a client who had ordered a piano-organ: "This instrument was played by M. Charpentier, one of the premier organists in the capital, and he found it to be perfect. That is why he wrote his name on the soundboard." (*HEPH,* 119) This practice has created confusion for later generations of collectors, who are often all too eager to assert that such a signature is proof that the piano was actually owned by the musician who signed it.

Even though many customers requested that their instruments be personally selected, Erard tried to emphasize the consistent quality of his

production. For example, when sending two pianos to a client in 1791, Erard wrote, "As for the difference between these two instruments; there really is almost none, it depends on one's taste." (*HEPH*, 52)

Because of shipping distances and poor roads, proper packaging was vitally important to Erard's business. In some letters, Erard points out that he has respected the customers' special requests for packaging that they made when placing their order. (*HEPH*, 58) Erard often wrote when shipping an instrument: "I hope that by the care I have taken in packing it, it will arrive without accidents," which of course implies that accidents were common. (*HEPH*, 59–60) The care he took in packing is evident when he writes to customers about other items enclosed in the crate, such as a box of strings, for he indicated in his letter the specific location in the crate, which meant that there was a great deal of cloth and straw packaging around the instrument: "You will find the tuning hammer and the tuning fork in one of the corners to the right between the straw and the canvas."[43] (*HEPH*, 99 and 130) Erard noted that the packaging necessary for his piano-organs (probably for the protection of the metal pipes) was so costly that it reduced significantly his profit margin. (*HEPH*, 101) To his customers who needed to ship him instruments to repair, Erard gave the following instructions for packing: "You can confidently place the instrument you mention in a crate and pack it with cloth and straw; weigh it, put it in a crate and send it to me, either by private coach, or by postal coach from your home. If you pack it carefully, you will not need to fear an accident on the road, and I will do any necessary repairs." (*HEPH*, 87)

High humidity was a constant concern, and Erard was wary of packing his instruments in cases made with young wood, as he noted that the humidity in the wood could ruin the pianos that he shipped in them. (*HEPH*, 114) This was also a concern with a piano shipped to a client in Auxerre in May 1792 "that you asked me to repair and to pack so that it would resist the humidity." (*HEPH*, 119) Erard informed a customer in Madrid that he had the crates reinforced in oil cloth, and in several letters we learn that the crates were wrapped or tied with rope. (*HEPH*, 209; *LCB*, 157 and 184) When shipping a piano by sea to a customer in Guadeloupe, Erard asked his forwarding agent in Nantes: "Please, Monsieur, be so kind as to put an oiled canvas on this [crate] so that the humidity does not ruin this instrument." (*HEPH*, 121 and 149–50) Even

43. Straw was a common protective material used in eighteenth-century packing. See Denis Woronoff, *Histoire de l'emballage en France du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours* (Valenciennes: Presses universitaires de Valenciennes), 2015.

printed music sent with instruments was protected against moisture: "There is a small roll of music wrapped in the oilcloth." (*HEPH*, 165)

Erard was defensive when his customers suggested that improper packaging was the cause of accidents, as in this letter to Garnier, his dealer in Lyon:

> The accidents that occurred with some of your pianos can only be explained by the change of seasons or of the temperature of the apartment where they were placed, or perhaps of the quality of the wood, about which one can make mistakes. But we assure you that we took the same care with the instruments we delivered to you as with all of our other ones. We took every measure so that this problem would not take place, and so that you will have no reason to complain. (*LCB*, 239)

Sometimes, however, Erard's packers made mistakes, as we see in this letter to a customer in 1797: "The music that you found enclosed in the crate with your piano was intended for someone else; the packers made a mistake. We ask you to please return it to us as soon as possible by postal coach, we would be ever so grateful." (*HEPH*, 197)

Erard had each instrument packed in a separate crate, which was then weighed and marked with two initials taken from the customer's last name (for example, 'D.R.' for Darrance,). He would generally inform the purchaser of this fact in a letter that would presumably arrive in advance of the instruments and also give the name of the transporter, the expected delivery time, and the agreed-upon rate for the shipping, which was to be paid by the client upon delivery. This rate was typically calculated as a certain amount per hundred pounds of weight. A typical example of this kind of letter was sent to Berlencourt in Amiens: "I have the honour to notify you that the two pianos that you instructed me to send to you left on 29 May to be delivered within 5 days at 2 livres 10 sous per hundred pounds of weight. The packed crates together weigh 360 pounds and are marked B.L. The carrier who is responsible is named Duhamel; he is from Boulogne." (*HEPH*, 76)

With the Revolution came the abolition of the monopoly on transportation by postal coach service (*messageries*).[44] The choice of shipping method was usually left to the client, who presumably knew the most

44. For more on transportation during this period, see two articles by Anne Conchon: "Les transports intérieurs sous la Révolution: une politique de l'espace," *Annales Historique de la Révolution Française* 352 (April–June 2008): 5–28, and "Privilèges et concurrence: le transport routier de marchandises en France au XVIIIe siècle," in *Die Ökonomie des Privilegs, Westeuropa 16.–19. Jahrhundert. L'économie du privilège, Europe occidentale XIXe siécles*, ed. Guillaume Garner (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2016), 397–418.

reliable options in that region: "When we ship to you, please give us the best way to address it to you so that it arrives without delays and without risk of losing the crate." (*HEPH*, 179–80) The main options mentioned in the letter copy book, in order of slowest and least expensive to fastest and most expensive, were private coach, postal coach, and courier or messenger. Postal coach was expensive but fast and was considered secure for sending both instruments and payments. When Erard was in urgent need of materials, he sometimes asked his suppliers to abandon the private coach transport that was planned, and use postal coach: "[A]s the coach transport is too long and since we have the most pressing need for lambskins, we ask you to take out a dozen of them, to wrap them in a cloth and to put them on the first postal coach. If the messenger were to leave before the postal coach, please give him the dozen skins." (*HEPH*, 217–18)[45] Erard ended up receiving the lambskins seven days after sending this letter, which means they arrived more quickly than the normal delivery time from Paris to Calais, which took between nine and twelve days. (*HEPH*, 220) Erard was careful when shipping with private coach: "We have been waiting to reply until the moment when we could assure you of the shipment of the 6 pianos that you ordered from us. They are all ready to leave however they will only be taken in eight days because we have preferred a more secure coach than normal for this kind of merchandise." (*HEPH*, 188–89)

Poor meteorological conditions could delay a delivery, as seen in this letter to a customer in Le Mans:

> We are as impatient as you, Madame, that this instrument arrives in your hands, and we assure you that we will put it on the coach in 5 or 6 days at the latest. The delay is only because we [. . .] wanted to be sure there was nothing left to improve, and also because of the bad weather that has not let up since the beginning of this month. You will understand these reasons. (*HEPH*, 195)

Rain was a great enemy, particularly for shipments in the autumn, as was the case when trying to ship a piano to a dealer in Bilbao:

> We have no doubt that you will be very satisfied with this instrument; considering all of the precautions that we took, it should reach you in good condition. We only regret the lack of coaches that delayed us longer than we would have thought. This is due to continual and abundant rainfall that we have had for over a month, but we thought you would approve of our prudence and reasonable approach. (*HEPH*, 218–19)

45. For more on the advantages of postal coach, see *HEPH*, 140.

Not all coaches were equally reliable, as Erard frequently observed in writing to his customers: "The care we wanted to give to this instrument & waiting for a suitable coach have somewhat delayed the shipment. It was your wish, and for us a satisfaction, to prevent all hazards." (*LCB*, 172)

Transporters tried to load the coach full of objects to deliver to the same city or region, as Erard wrote to a customer in Bordeaux: "I also shipped four ordinary square pianos to Citizen Le Pin. It is likely that he received them, since the transporter had a full load for your city." (*HEPH*, 156) The practice of consolidating shipments to a given geographical region sometimes resulted in delays and occasionally confusion, as was the case when pianos destined for one Bordeaux dealer were accidentally delivered to another. (*HEPH*, 156 and 180–81)

Another obstacle in the shipping process, particularly during the early 1790s, was Revolutionary unrest and the real possibility of war. In February 1793 Erard had to inform a customer in Amsterdam, "It is impossible to send the two pianos [you] ordered because of the war with the Dutch." (*HEPH*, 162) Similarly, Erard wrote to a client in Brussels:

> I have been wanting to satisfy your request by sending you one or two pianos, the kind that you asked for, according to your indications. If it were not for my concerns about the war, I would have already sent them. I believe, however, that this can be done if you know a merchant on your side of the border who would agree to receive them and to pass them along to you, in the certainty that there would be no trouble. (*HEPH*, 118)

During the September massacres in 1792, all public roads were blocked, which seriously interrupted Erard's shipments. (*HEPH*, 134) Indeed, one notes that the delivery times for a given city increased as time passed during the period 1791–94, a sign of decreasing fluidity in road circulation.

For foreign or overseas customers, Erard used forwarding agents, contacts (usually merchants) located in port or border cities, to whom he would send his instruments and request that they be forwarded on to his customer. (*HEPH*, 121, 136, 188–89, 209, 212; *LCB*, 82) For example, to ship a piano to the island of St Domingue, Erard first sent it to his forwarding agent in Le Havre, who then sent it to its final destination by boat. (*HEPH*, 83) Erard also shipped instruments and supplies such as wood between his own workshops in London and Paris, usually through a forwarding agent in Calais. For example, in December 1792 and in January 1793, he sent eight harps from his Paris firm to his London firm,

and in 1797 he sent three harps from his London firm to his Paris firm. (*HEPH*, 147, 153, 215–16 and 220–21)

Erard assured his customers that instruments were never damaged in the shipping process: "It would indeed be a true shame if the instrument arrived broken, considering the great quantity that we ship during the year, without any of them being damaged." (*HEPH*, 131) However, Erard might not have been telling the entire truth, as only seventeen days earlier he had written to the Garnier, who had complained about the delivery of damaged pianos to his shop in Lyon. In this situation, Erard required written attestations in order to collect insurance from his shippers:

> Monsieur, I was quite surprised to receive your last letter in which you say that the pianos were damaged; not only will you need the testimony of the transporters, but a statement attesting to the damages signed in their presence by the people that you requested to witness the opening of the crates. You must sign this attestation and send it to us; our agents will take responsibility. If such a thing were to ever happen again I would ask that you do this. (*HEPH*, 129)

On another occasion, Erard recommended that the unpacking of the instrument be carried out in a particular way so as to verify the condition of the instrument after transport:

> I hope that, considering the care that was taken with the packing and the transport of this instrument, you will receive it in good condition. In order to respect the terms of the transporter who will deliver it to you, I advise you to have him open the crate and to inspect the instrument, in case it is missing something. Have two or three witnesses present and draft up a written report, seeing as how the directors of the coach service are responsible. (*HEPH*, 142)

If Erard learned from a customer that a shipment did not arrive at its destination, he went to the delivery company to inquire about the problem, which was often the result of poor road conditions. (*HEPH*, 100 and 151)

Rapid delivery was important to Erard's business, and Erard often worried that a prolonged transport period could risk damaging instruments. (*HEPH*, 215–16) Often delivery was surprisingly efficient. Parin, music teacher and dealer in Dijon, sent Erard a letter to order a piano on January 27, 1791 and on February 4, Erard replied to him informing him that he would receive his piano ten days later. A compilation of the delivery times mentioned in the letter copy book allows us to understand the time it took for a shipment of instruments to reach a particular destination (table 2). Erard was able to send instruments to customers in

Ile-de-France in only two days, while deliveries to cities in Northern France such as Amiens and Lille required approximately one week. In two weeks, Erard could ship to much of Central and Eastern France, as well as Brussels. Bordeaux, one of his most frequent destinations, took three weeks or more. The longest domestic shipments were those to cities in the extreme Southwest France, such as Toulouse and Bayonne, where customers generally waited up to thirty-five days for their pianos and harps to arrive from Paris.[46]

Post-shipment Concerns

Erard attempted to explain to his customers problems that could arise with newly-made instruments. On June 16, 1791, he wrote to the composer Gresnick in Lyon: "Is it possible, Monsieur that the sound that you find a little weak becomes stronger after the instrument is played for some time. Many people prefer a sweeter to a stronger sound. However, if you find among the pianos that I will send you, one that has a stronger sound than yours, it will be easily exchanged." (*HEPH*, 77; *LCB*, 37) Concerning a new grand piano, Erard informed a customer: "We have no doubt that it will become better with age. When it will have been tuned two or three times it will stay in tune better and all the parts will hold in place." (*HEPH*, 202–03) Erard offered advice on measures customers could take to counteract the effects of the shipping process on new instruments:

> Please note that Citizen Erard is upset that you found the piano with four pedals which he just sent you unsatisfactory; he chose it for you. The weakness of the sound is probably due to the humidity to which it was exposed during the shipment. He advises to put it in a room where it is warm; that is the way to get the piano to have the sound it had. (*HEPH*, 156–57)

Erard even pointed out to his customers that the appearance of the wood could change with time. For example, he wrote to a client in 1791:

> Monsieur, I am very flattered that you have received the two pianos that I sent you after having well regulated them. The one that is decorated is for you. The other, even though it seems that the wood is inferior to others – is no less good, and is of the same quality, but it is a bit younger. In one or two

46. The delivery times noted in the Erard letter copy book are significantly longer than those mentioned by historian Guy Arbellot in his article "La grande mutation des routes de France au XVIIIe siècle," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 28ᵉ année, 3 (1973), 765–791. It is possible that these discrepancies are due to the differences between passenger travel and freight shipments.

> months it will be the same colour as the others. In this way, Monsieur, you can confidently deliver it to the person for whom you asked me to make it. (*HEPH*, 51–52)

Customers sometimes wrote to Erard to ask for advice with problems encountered with their instruments. Extraneous noises were a common complaint, in particular the buzzing that results from adjacent strings touching each other:

> I suggest, Monsieur, that you not worry about the noise that your pianos make; this often happens with instruments. The reason comes from the two strings that touch each other; that is, between the bridge and the tuning pins. To fix this, push the scarlet band between the bridge and the tuning pins with a strong hairpin as close as you can to the tuning pins. That will stop the noise, which is always extremely disagreeable. (*HEPH*, 56–57)

Erard gave similar advice to Nairac in Bordeaux:

> I am very sorry that you are unhappy with the piano that I sent you. Please understand that the little fault that you have found is not at all dangerous seeing as how it is easy to fix, and if this cannot be done I will send you another one. You can take my word for it, I promise you by the present letter to do it, if necessary. This whistling noise, which you mention, Monsieur, comes from the fact that the red felt that is between the tuning pins and the bridges, threaded between the strings, has been displaced; I ask you to have a piano builder push these felts all the way against the tuning pins so that they are halfway into the pins. This is very easy to do with a knife (rather thick). Then you must see if the last string f.a. at the bottom touches the bar; if so, you must take off a bit of wood where the string touches and this will prevent it from sounding like pots and pans. (*HEPH*, 90–91)

To another customer, Erard addressed the same problem, and also explained how to adjust the damper covering:

> As for the hissing sound of the piano you mention, Monsieur, you should try to position the red cloth that is between the tuning pins and the bridge in a little more forward or backward because the strings are touching it at times. Or if it is more of a thud, you should use a little knife to scrape the skin on the dampers, because sometimes it hardens with moisture; so it needs to be lifted up a little. (*HEPH*, 79)

When one customer complained about a noisy action, Erard suggested applying a small amount of oil with a feather, adding, "With that, it will be fine if done properly." (*HEPH*, 200)

Piano owners were expected to be able to replace strings and tune instruments themselves, and Erard tried to help his customers understand

the best approach to use. To one customer he wrote "You will find in this crate, Monsieur, a variety of strings, tuning hammers and a tuning fork as well as a note explaining the way to change the strings." (*HEPH*, 125) These explanatory notes have not survived, but in another letter Erard gives a bit more detail: "You will find enclosed, Monsieur, the way the strings need to be placed. The little circles signify the pegs of the piano; the letters that are on the soundboard are repeated here with the numbers of the strings." (*HEPH*, 79)

Sometimes Erard's customers asked questions about maintenance and tuning. For example, when a piano owner in Cognac seemed to find the unison tuning of two strings per note cumbersome, Erard replied:

> As for the method for tuning two strings with the same tuning pin, this was rejected long ago, as the unisons were never identical and the instrument was never in tune. At any rate, when one string breaks, both go together; nothing proves that this method is flawed as much as the fact that it has been abandoned. I do not advise you either to have a single-strung piano made, as it stays less in tune, seeing as how two strings better resist the tuning hammer. (*HEPH*, 179–80)

In order to help demystify the tuning process, Erard sent Garnier instructions for tuning pianos, intended for the dealer's customers. (*HEPH*, 170)

The repairs mentioned in the letter copy book are a precious record of actual problems encountered by eighteenth-century musicians with their instruments. Cracked soundboards seemed to have been a common problem, as Erard wrote to Garnier in Lyon:

> We are sorry for the accident that occurred with the soundboards on your pianos, but reassure the people that we will repair them at our cost, seeing as how one of us must soon travel. Anyway, the crack in the soundboard is nothing, considering that it happens on very old instruments without it causing the slightest problem and normally comes from temperature changes; that is, going from humidity to a high degree of dryness. (*HEPH*, 221)

To another client, Erard was quick to quote the price of fixing or replacing a soundboard: "Repairing the soundboard of the piano that you mentioned, Monsieur, will cost 30 livres. And if it requires a new soundboard, 96 livres, considering the work there will be to do. But since you say that it is only a crack, I will only charge 30 livres." (*HEPH*, 122)

Erard was cautious about estimating the cost of a given repair before actually seeing the instrument. (*HEPH*, 52–53) When one of his clients wrote about his desire to improve the sound of a piano, he replied, "To give it a better sound, we would have to change the soundboard and re-

place it with a new one, which would cost 120 livres. Otherwise, it is hardly possible to improve this instrument!" (*HEPH*, 52–53)

A cracked soundboard was not the only reason Erard's customers sent instruments back for repair. In one letter, we learn that Erard repaired a piano "in very bad condition, needing to have a soundboard replaced and new legs." (*HEPH*, 86) In another, we learn that Erard sent replacement piano keys to a client. (*HEPH*, 80) Occasionally, instruments with unresponsive touch needed to be adjusted: "I have just learned from M. Ponsignon that you have only one piano remaining, which has a heavy touch. We can easily repair this problem which is supposedly hampering its sale. Send it back to me if it truly has this defect." (*HEPH*, 137)

Erard was often able to diagnose the cause of the problem necessitating the repair. For example, in 1797 he informed a customer in Tours that her tuning habits were dangerous for the piano:

> When it arrived here, we found that your piano had been tuned a semitone too high, so it was not surprising that the strings were breaking. The English pianos you mentioned, Madame, are even less sturdy than ours. All our artists attest to this fact; they even judge them to be far superior in all ways. The proof is that we cannot build enough of them in London, where we have a firm and workshops, as we have in Paris. We have enclosed in the crate the pitch at which your piano should be tuned, and by showing this to you and tuning it, you will no longer have the same problem. Otherwise, your piano is very good and we have forgotten nothing in putting it in a better condition. (*HEPH*, 194–95)

Other problems were caused by the instrument being subject to extreme temperatures:

> In reply to your letter of the 10th of this month, we ask you to send us straight away your piano and we will send you another one of the same kind in replacement. The problem you have does not stem from its construction; the hot temperatures that we have just experienced can be the cause of it. In any case, we wish you to have an instrument with which you are completely satisfied. (*HEPH*, 205–06)

Some instruments were simply of poor quality to begin with. When one of Erard's customers sent a piano made by another (unnamed) builder to be repaired, he confessed, "We did all that was possible, but the quality of the work is so poor that it is impossible to make a perfect instrument from it. All the [. . .][47] parts are so weak that the instrument destroys itself by the pull of the strings. We have checked the soundboard

47. Illegible word struck through.

but we cannot give solidity to an instrument that is fundamentally lacking it." (*HEPH*, 181)

In one letter Erard seemed to abandon hope of improving unsatisfactory instruments, even those he himself had made. When a customer wrote about two pianos that "instead of having gained in sound, have diminished," he instructed him to try to sell them for the highest price possible but not to rent them out, "seeing as how there is no way to improve them." (*HEPH*, 124) There is one instance in which Erard agreed to exchange an unsatisfactory piano for a better one: "As for the piano that you say has caused problems for you, we ask you to send it back to us immediately and accept one that we will ship you in exchange. We want you to be happy, but we cannot believe that the accident that befell it stems from its construction." (*HEPH*, 182–83)

Keeping track of these past sales while simultaneously running the workshop and building instruments was a complicated affair. Some letters bear witness to difficulties in determining if customers had actually paid for instruments or not. In 1792, one of Erard's employees wrote the following to a customer in Rodez: "In the absence of M. Erard, I am in charge of collecting his bills. I just found out that in August of the year 1790 you were sold a piano, it is possible that you paid for it, but it is equally possible that you did not. In either case I would be greatly obliged if you could let me know and send me a copy of the receipt so I can correct the books." (*HEPH*, 101) Erard was obliged to send a similarly embarrassing letter to another customer: "While reading through my ledgers I find an entry for 600 livres for one of your instruments sold on 13 December 1790 that has not been erased from the ledgers of concluded transactions. I do not know if it was overlooked by my employee who is responsible for this or if this amount was not paid. In either case, Monsieur, I ask you to write to inform me if you have paid me; I would be ever so grateful." (*LCB*, 85)

Erard also found it complicated to keep track of sales made by teachers and dealers to whom he sent instruments: "Please be so kind as to send me a list of instruments sold to you and the payments made, seeing as how I need to put this information in my ledgers [. . .] Since we misplaced the note from this one, I would be very grateful to send me the necessary information to compare with your accounting." (*LCB*, 63)

Erard's letters in which he tries to collect overdue payment are often grouped together at the end of the year, or written at moments when he desperately needed to have an infusion of cash: "I would be happy to

extend the term of your payment, but at the moment it is difficult for me since everyone around me delays payment. I am therefore forced to write to all the people who owe me money." (*HEPH*, 63) The letter copy book reveals some extreme cases of overdue payment. For example, on 1 February 1792 a customer at the Théâtre Feydeau had still not paid the 600 livres due for a piano sold on December 1, 1789, and on March 8, 1792 another customer in Paris had still not paid for a piano purchased on March 18, 1789. (*HEPH*, 102 and 109)

Recovering payment for rental instruments was particularly problematic.[48] Frequently, instruments rented for a specific period of time were never paid for, and in some cases the instruments were never returned. Erard was therefore obliged to write to the customer to ask for the return of the instrument along with the overdue rent (including for the intervening late period), or for full payment on the purchase of the instrument, along with the overdue rental fee. For example, when Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (née Spencer, 1757–1806) visited Paris between May and August 1790, Erard rented two pianos to the Marquis de Boulainvilliers, the Duchess' host in Passy. Erard wrote several times to Boulainvilliers to reclaim the pianos and the rental fee, and when he received no reply, he wrote to the banker Perregaux, from whom he tried to claim the payment due from the Duchess of Devonshire: "As long as she has not returned the instruments she will continue to pay the rent, even if she is not using them." (*HEPH*, 67–68, 73 and 87) In another example, Erard stresses the financial loss he has suffered in being unable to sell the rented piano:

> M. Erard is honoured to send his greetings to Madame St Sire and to ask her to give to the messenger of this letter the sum of 132 livres for 11 months of rent for the piano that she returned last December. Since Madame St Sire had informed M. Erard that she intended to buy this piano he had set a price for her which she accepted. But since Madame St Sire, after being informed that the piano was ready to be taken to her, did not reply and I have had more than twenty opportunities to sell this instrument since that time, M. Erard believes he can sell it and it is for this reason that he has the honour to ask Madame de St Sire to either pay the rent for it or to purchase the instrument. (*HEPH*, 107)

Erard also regularly encountered difficulties in his relations with music teachers, who would order multiple instruments to resell to their

48. For similar letters sent by the Paris watchmaker Héroy in order to reclaim overdue payment from customers, see Dequidt, "Importation, transport et finances," 181.

students but would delay selling them (and thus repaying Erard). (*HEPH*, 53)

Before sending a letter of complaint, Erard often sent an agent to try to collect the payment in person: "Monsieur, as the date by which you promised to pay for the piano I sold you has passed, and after having sent someone several times to try to find you, in vain, I have the honour of writing you the present letter to request that you set a time for us to meet or that you come to me to end this business." (*HEPH*, 60) Sometimes Erard was unable to locate his debtors, and attempted to contact their friends or relatives. For example, when a young man never paid for his fortepiano, Erard wrote to the young man's father:

> When Monsieur your son was brought to see me by someone I know who is currently in Spain, he was introduced to me as a very honest young man, son of a banker. Your son bought a fortepiano from me for the price of 600 livres. He wrote me two promissory notes that have expired since 10 December last. Because of my respect for you I have not wanted to go to court. However, these notes have been presented to you upon maturity. At that time you replied that your son was absent. Since that time I have not heard a word from him. I therefore ask you to tell me how I need to proceed to get paid by him; I would be much obliged to you. (*HEPH*, 62)

Erard was also constantly trying to find out when his provincial customers would be visiting the capital, so that he could more easily send someone to try to collect payment in person. (*HEPH*, 82)

Summer was a particularly difficult period to try to collect on debts as formerly aristocratic Parisians often retired to the countryside. In these cases, Erard would try to get information through the music teacher employed by the family. (*HEPH*, 85) This difficult situation is reminiscent of Mozart's experiences attempting to collect on payment for lessons (and for the composition of the Concerto for Flute and Harp, K. 299) from the Duc de Guines in Paris in 1778.[49]

Erard would allude to the dishonor of non-payment in order to put pressure on his debtors, such as when he wrote to a customer: "I counted on the word of a man who inspired confidence in me; I am sorry to tell you, Monsieur, that for a man of your rank you are not as punctual as you should be to honour your commitments." (*HEPH*, 62–63) To another, Erard appealed to her sense of justice:

49. Letter of 31 July 1778 from Mozart to his father, in *Mozart Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Wilhelm A. Bauer and Otto Erich Deutsch, *Gesamtausgabe II: 1777–1779* (Kassel-Basel-London-New York: Bärenreiter, 1962), 426.

> I have the honour of informing you that I am forced to use means that will be disagreeable to you and for me, if you do not pay your bills. It seems to me that you have no reason to complain about me, seeing as how I have given you enough time to pay. It is impossible for me to wait any longer, as I myself have taken on obligations that I need to fulfil. (*HEPH*, 57)

His thinly veiled threats of legal action were frequent: "so please respect my procedures for payment and do not force me to use other methods, which would be disagreeable for you and me." (*HEPH*, 63) Erard would then often give a firm final deadline before taking legal action. (*HEPH*, 127)

Erard always remained polite, and even his direct threats of legal action were veiled in his habitual courteous language: "I have the honour to inform you that if you do not make the effort to come and see me as soon as possible, that I will be compelled to take court action against you, because you do not fulfil your commitments." (*HEPH*, 63) Or, another example:

> Monsieur, I had the honour to write to you on 12 March last about the promissory note for 380 livres you had made me and which expired a year ago. Since you did not deign to answer my letter and to avoid disputes that are always unpleasant between respectable people, I advise you to pay the said note, Monsieur. I have no doubt that you will avoid the inconvenience of my taking you to trial. It is with this conviction that I have the honour, Monsieur, to be yours humbly. (*HEPH*, 77)

Occasionally Erard's clients would try to cheat him, and when Erard learned of this behavior, his replies were uncompromising. In 1791, he learned that Micalef, actor at the Théâtre Montansier, had sold a piano that he had been renting from Erard, without paying Erard or even informing him of the fact. Since Micalef was a public figure, Erard threatened to make his misdeed known to all if Micalef did not pay:

> I am finally obliged, Monsieur, to have recourse to means that I use in spite of myself, to obtain justice with respect to the piano that I rented to you and which you have sold without my participation. I have been informed of your actions and am angry that you have not replied to the proposition that I have made to you. You should find it just that I use all legal means to receive my payment. My intention is to treat this affair amicably, and discretely. This is why I notify you, Monsieur, to take the trouble to come to me within the next few days; otherwise I will be forced to make your conduct known to all, which I think will not do you honour. (*HEPH*, 84–85)

Micalef did not reply to Erard's letter, and fifteen days later Erard wrote to the administrators of the theatre to try to collect the money. (*HEPH*, 86)

Conclusion: the Musical Instrument Maker as Merchant

Historian Michael Sonenscher has described the artisan's workshop in Revolutionary France as "an environment which was [. . .] diverse and dynamic, a place of noise ebbing and flowing; of words, exclamations, curses and exhortations punctuating actions and gestures: an oral engine in a world without machines."[50] The noise and words produced by this "oral engine" have unfortunately disappeared; the vast majority of these artisans—butchers, cheese makers, candle makers, tailors, carpenters—would have catered to a mostly local clientele, thus obviating much of the need for extensive written correspondence.[51] Thanks to Broadwood and Erard's pan-European ambitions and enormous success, they have left to posterity a highly extensive documentary trail, of which their letter copy books are some of the most notable examples.

Erard's letter copy book reveals a surprisingly modern approach to selling instruments; numerous contemporary business concepts are already present. Erard was keen to inspire brand loyalty among his customers, through the wooing of successful musicians, teachers and dealers, and by offering substantial volume discounts. Erard sought out highly-skilled workers from abroad, enticing them with attractive salaries. The withholding of part of each paycheck so as to give an employee an incentive to remain with the firm is similar to the modern practice of investiture in a company pension plan after sufficient years of employment. Erard also displays a clear notion of customer service, providing his customers with a sort of mail-order catalog and reassuring his clients on every detail, from the efficiency of the packing and transport to the quality of his products. Virtually all of his letters, even those containing reproaches and threats of legal retaliation, are cloaked in the most ingratiating terms, often beginning with the phrase "I have the honour to inform you that...." Erard even seemed to subscribe to today's "the customer is always right" attitude; for example, in the abovementioned letter in which he agreed to comply with the request from a musician for

50. Michael Sonenscher, "The Sans-culottes of the Year II: Rethinking the Language of Labour in Revolutionary France," *Social History* 9/3 (Oct., 1984): 301–328, at 311.

51. Michael Sonenscher, writing about eighteenth-century French trades, notes that "many of the papers of the guilds and corporations have been destroyed or lost." See his article "Journeymen, the Courts and the French Trades 1781–1791," *Past & Present* 114 (February 1987): 77–109, at 83.

a harp with pedals placed so low that, according to Erard, they could not possibly be used.

The notion of the instrument maker as solitary artisan, toiling alone in his workshop oblivious to commercial concerns, is undoubtedly a romantic image born in the nineteenth century. It would be more accurate to consider the instrument maker as part artisan and part merchant, particularly in late eighteenth-century Paris, when a new consumer culture coalesced around the hundreds of boutiques of the capital. In the words of Natacha Coquery, "The shop was at the same time the site for selling, for buying and for manufacturing, but it is also a place of credit, of sociability, of conflict, of spectacle, of tourism, of leisure, of fantasy, etc. a place where a consumer culture was born."[52]

Much of the international success of the Erard firm, therefore, can be ascribed to keen business acumen. Clearly, Sébastien Erard was also one of the most notable geniuses in the field of musical instrument manufacture, as is evidenced by his numerous inventions still used today: the forked discs and the double action on the harp, and the double-escapement action on the piano. The letter copy book demonstrates his intent, from early on in his career, to promote these inventions on a massive scale, effectively dominating the European instrument market for decades.

52. "La boutique est à la fois lieu de vente, d'achat et de fabrication, mais c'est aussi un lieu de crédit, de sociabilité, de conflit, de spectacle, de tourisme, de loisir, de fantaisie, etc., un lieu où se construit une culture de consommation." Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIème siècle*, 24. Translation by Robert Adelson.