Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society

VOLUME XLVI • 2020

Michael Latcham. *Towards a New History of the Piano: A Context for the Work of Johann Andreas Stein as a Piano Maker.* Munich and Salzburg: Musikverlag Bernd Katzbichler, 2019. Musikwissenschaftliche Schriften 53. 383 pp.: 173 black-and-white illus. ISBN 978-3—87397—270-4. €48 (paperback).

What was considered the essence of the piano in the first few generations after its invention? Was it to produce a variety of sounds through various mutation or imitative stops, or was it to allow control over nuances of volume through touch? This recently published history of the piano by Michael Latcham answers those questions from the perspective of people in that era. Through the notebooks and letters of makers and their clients, patents and period reports of innovations, marketing and regional preferences, and the movements of makers through a wide landscape of experimentation and varied musical sensibilities, all finally manifest in the instruments themselves, the author gives a sense of the aesthetic values of a century different from our own. Today's tendency by some to consider timbre stops as artless gimmickry in pianos and harpsichords underestimates the fascinating diversity of the eighteenth-century keyboard soundscape. This *New History* will surprise many readers with its description of that world.

Those two modes of expression—stops to create a variety of timbres, versus nuance of volume through touch—are introduced as contemporaneous but separate starting points for the piano; throughout the period, they remained intertwining strands of nearly equal importance. The first was inspired by the performances of Panteleon Hebenstreit on his outsized dulcimer, called a *Pantalon*, and the second by Bartolomeo Cristofori. As inventor of the piano, Cristofori gets due attention, but while nearly all histories of the piano from the last century make brief mention of Hebenstreit at the beginning, Latcham continues tracing Hebenstreit's influence from Foreword to Epilogue, mentioning his name 148 times throughout the text. In the section on the pianos of Taskin, for example, Latcham writes, "the idea of having a means of disengaging all the dampers at once and the idea of a moderator both belong to the strand of piano making inspired by the performances of Hebenstreit on his *Pantalon*" (p.289).

The subtitle of Latcham's book "A Context for the Work of Johann Andreas Stein as a Piano Maker" is left off the cover, relegated instead to

the title page. The author's long devotion to the study of J. A. Stein above all others comes through occasionally in the text (p. 177), but as the cover conveys, this book is a broad history of the piano in the eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. Latcham's foreword is clear about his intentions, and they are worthy, ambitious, and consistently well-followed. He promises a treatment "that respects the work of each maker, not as a step in a development but as a creative contribution" (p.7). Latcham delivers magnificently on this bold claim, showing how each maker of the eighteenth century contributed to a rich diversity of form and timbre that the piano would largely lose in the nineteenth century.

The book prompts few complaints, but the lack of action diagrams is a weakness. Technical drawings are offered only from period sources, while clear new diagrams of mechanisms are conspicuously absent. This requires sometimes tedious descriptions of mechanical devices that are somewhat difficult to visualize, as when comparing the mechanical actions of the Silbermans with those of J.A. Stein (pp. 173–77), sending this reviewer to other books to find diagrams. Illustrations are frequent, although they are all black and white, and modest in size.

The author takes a "systems" approach based on the truism that nothing happens in a vacuum. No instrument can be fully understood without placing it and its maker in a broad context: With whom had the maker been trained, and what other instruments had they seen? What performers and composers might have influenced them, and what was the inspiration behind each new idea? What was going on in harpsichord design at the time? These ingredients came together in a maker's mind like genetic strands, the origins of which can be traced. Occasionally the stimuli for various ideas are recorded, as in the notebook Andreas Stein kept for about thirty years. Other times, understanding the innovation requires virtually sequencing its DNA to work out the sources of each element, as Latcham does with Erard's *clavecin mécanique* (a harpsichord) of 1779 and 1783 (pp. 296–305). The author is relentless in his analysis of the web of influences and the artistic objectives behind every invention and innovation, an approach that brings to life the first formative century of piano history.

In following those lines of influence across time and place, Latcham attempts a thematic, rather than strictly chronological or geographical progression, which is rather more challenging to write. Discussing an innovation inspired by the maker's travels, which occurred years earlier,

means revisiting the earlier history, and a certain amount of repetition. Latcham's approach accommodates readers who will spot-read this as a reference book and not cover-to-cover. For others, like this reviewer, the repetition is noticeable but appreciated as an aid to retention.

Latcham has a useful solution to the problem of nomenclature for historic keyboard instruments. Period terms, such as *Clavecin Roïal, Cembalo d'amour, Tangentenflügel*, and *Cembalo Angelico*, were often born of marketing strategies and were sometimes overlapping and inconsistently applied in the period. Latcham uses these terms to discuss the specific instruments where the names were first used, but he otherwise reverts to generic terms. If it strikes the string with a hammer, it is a piano, not fortepiano. This avoids the conundrum of describing at what point the fortepiano became a piano. Similarly, an instrument with uncovered wood hammers and no dampers is also a piano, avoiding the argument-inducing question of when the pantalon became a piano.

The book's strength with contextualizing and conceptualizing broad themes is supported by the author's command of massive amounts of historical detail. For example, he traces Mercken's evolution of changes for action, hand stops, dampers, knee levers, and pedals with dates for each development (p. 294). A thorough analysis of Antonio Bruni's list of keyboard instruments seized during the *Terreur* in Paris (pp. 290–92) gives details and implications about trends in expressive capabilities, the relative popularity of instrument types, their origins and related shifts in trade patterns and manufacturing.

This book offers a significant re-assessment of the fundamental revolution in eighteenth-century stringed keyboard instruments—a revolution often mis-characterized as a transition from harpsichord to piano. Instead, Latcham's treatment reassesses the century as a gradual shift from a delight in a variety of timbres (through the use of various stops) to a delight in dynamic nuance (through touch alone). These two aesthetics transcend whether the instruments pluck or strike: Pianos in the early part of the century were often equipped with hand-stop-controlled mutation stops (inspired by Hebenstreit), and harpsichords late in the period were equipped with touch-sensitive leather plectra, pedals, swells, and knee levers or pedals for changing stops while playing, all serving the same aesthetic language of the piano. The reviewer's own article "A 1793 Longman & Broderip Harpsichord and its Replication: New Light on the Harpsichord-Piano Transition" in *Galpin Society Journal* (2020), pp.

153–72, independently posited the same view about the latter phase of the transition, while Latcham's book covers its beginning as well.

The author characterizes the eighteenth century as a time of "plenitude" (p. 8), when there was appreciation for tonal variety in keyboard instruments, a characteristic he attributes to the influence of Hebenstreit's performances. Over the course of the century, Hebenstreit's influence diminished only gradually, as the taste for dynamic nuance began to dominate. Latcham ends with a wistful look back on the rich diversity of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century pianos. After the widely hailed perfection reached by Erard in his *méchanique a double échappement* (p. 337), the piano ultimately ossified into a uniformity. This, Latcham argues, "meant letting go the delight in the best of all possible worlds, the world that had contained the greatest variety" (p. 349).

John R. Watson
Williamsburg, Virginia

Francesco Carreras. *I brevetti italiani sugli strumenti musicali, elenco sintetico dal 1855 al 2018 con il testo integrale dei brevetti sugli strumenti a fiato.* Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2019. 292 pp.: illus. ISBN: 978-88-5543-000-5; €35 ($40) (soft cover).

Francesco Carreras is an Italian scientist, scholar, and musical instrument collector specializing in the flute, and in Italian woodwind makers. His writings include a biography of the important woodwind maker Giovanni Maria Anciuti; a study of combination-clarinet patents in Italy; a harmonic description of musical signals using schema-based chord decomposition; two essays in the monumental collection *Il flauto in Italia* (Rome, 2005); and the 2009 catalog of the Carreras Collection exhibition at the Museum of Musical Instruments of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia.

Carreras's latest book is a printed listing of 3,598 patents issued in Italy from 1855 to the end of 2018. It is well-produced on quarto-size thick paper with a clear type font. Even for non-readers of Italian, it is a valuable source for research. It includes "patents of musical instruments, accessories, teaching aids, technologies and processes for producing in-