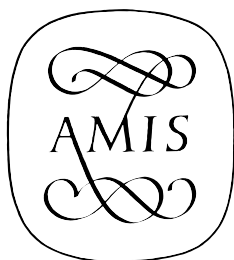


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William E. Hettrick. *The American Piano Industry: Episodes in the History of a Great Enterprise*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2020. American Music and Musicians Series 8. v-xii + 427 pp.: 5 color, 23 black-and-white illus. ISBN 2020910304. \$48.00 (soft cover).

Longtime AMIS members will remember past president (1995–1999) Dr. William Hettrick regaling attendees at annual meetings with tales of the piano industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This book shares its origins with those talks, plus articles in the AMIS *Newsletter* under his editorship (1999–2003). The print music-trade journals of that period fueled Hettrick's extensive research into the American piano industry. This volume revises and expands upon several of those talks and articles, bringing to life some of that period's character and characters.

The six chapters can stand alone, though several share the personalities. The first three chapters discuss the piano supply industry, advertising, and the mandolin attachment. The energetic, controversial, and verbose entrepreneur Joseph P. Hale's exploits and words fill a chapter, several appendices, and additional references. The story of ill-fated John J. Swick likewise fills a chapter plus several appendices. The pugnacious trade journal owner/editor Harry Edward Freund lurks alongside Hale, additionally filling his own chapter that includes the legendary Great Square Piano Bonfire. Along the way, the book reveals much about the business practices, advertising, finances, labor, and family issues of the piano industry. The importance of the press and trade journals is a constant theme.

The first chapter demonstrates Hettrick's ability to adeptly present potentially awkward, yawn-inducing material. The first half covers the diversity of manufacturing outsourcing and suppliers, while the second half takes the readers inside large firms that made most of their own components. It opens with an amusing and illustrative anecdote quoted from a speech to the 1899 New York Piano Manufacturers' Association. The piano component industry was nearly invisible to the public, due to the industry-fed perception that superior instruments and their components were made wholly in-house, a "practice that harked back to the storied time when pianos were hand-crafted to order, piece by piece, in shops." I would have liked to see a clearer indication that this description was essentially never true, wire and hardware being the most obvious examples. The potentially tedious lists of component categories, makers, and

consuming firms wisely reside in Appendices 1.1 and 1.2. The chapter summarizes each category, then illuminates and humanizes the data with stories about select firms, their owners, and interrelationships. My second quibble is overlooking any discussion about the wire-making American company Washburn & Moen. Still, given the oceans of information available, Hettrick completed a herculean effort at collation and selection. The second part examines firms that made and assembled nearly all components in-house. Hettrick considers four models of manufacturing—ranging from the everything-made-in-house model to the contract systems exemplified by Joseph P. Hale—and the effect of increasing specialization in all trades. Obviously, it is impossible to completely cover the history of the piano supply industry in one chapter, but this is more than a light introduction.

Chapter 2 introduces the colorful and controversial Joseph P. Hale as the earliest and most productive client of the piano-supply industry. Quibble three: while certainly not the earliest client of piano-supply houses, Hale likely was the most productive and a major buyer. A brief biography outlines his diverse business pursuits. Uniquely and controversially, having no prior experience making pianos, Hale applied his prior successful business methods to become prolific, famous, and wealthy. Hettrick smoothly presents the man, the times, the growing business, properties purchased, ever larger buildings going up (or up in flames), and the controversy over his methods, labor practices, and scale of production. Fires being a recurrent issue for piano firms, an enlightening and detailed discussion of the building construction, workmen, tasks, materials, and methods related to the tremendous fire of 1877 is included.

No discussion of Hale would be complete without introducing his nemesis: the trade unions, the newspaper *The New York Sun*, and most notably John Christian Freund, publisher and editor of *Music Trade Review*. Freund instigated a long-lived vendetta against Hale, accusing him of fraud in the form of manufacturing so-called “stencil” pianos that could mislead the buyer as to maker and quality. Hale entered into the feud, publishing favorable articles and letters elsewhere. The colorful exaggerated language, satire, and cartoons used in the press by the combatants is highly entertaining. It is worthwhile to remember the violent strikes in the early days of trade unions through the lens of piano manufacture. While Hale was deliberately scorned, ignored, or otherwise forgotten, it is fitting that Hettrick ends the chapter with a quote by Henry Z. Steinway that Hale was “the founder of the present-day piano business.”

Chapter 3 brings the reader into the world of piano advertising and marketing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Advertisements reveal much about the techniques, society, business practices, and the lives of the writers, readers, and consumers. Hettrick presents many examples of the wild range of style, drama, art, and character of advertising by piano manufacturers. Poetry, historically questionable imagery, and essays praising the brand (sometimes hidden in the guise of historical pamphlets) were rampant. Notable is the selection of poetry by the maker George P. Bent. The chapter includes quick discussion of the role of corruption regarding World's Fair prizes. Hettrick does not mention that what we see today as deceptive was the norm for much advertising of any product during this period, leading to the establishment of the Federal Trade Commission in 1914.

In Chapter 4, the author traces the invention, manufacture, and advertising of the family of tone-modifying devices for upright pianos, now grouped under the generalized term "mandolin attachment." Hettrick once again humanizes this fad, primarily via the colorful and poetic advertiser George P. Bent, who claimed that his "Orchestral Attachment" could achieve hundreds of different tones by different combinations of the four pedals—a combinatorial impossibility. A few other interesting tone modifiers are included, along with descriptions of various installations and patents, along with the expected patent infringement cases and licensing. I was pleased to see noted the vestigial remains of this fad via cheap kit versions, as well as putting thumbtacks into the piano hammers, in a poor imitation. Appendix 4.1 lists the American and European makers and dealers who included mandolin attachments in their upright player pianos and Orchestrions.

Interestingly, the mandolin attachments were touted not only by makers, but also by some contemporary performers and professors as a means towards understanding baroque and early classical music by "reproducing" the sound of harpsichords, early pianos, clavichords, and the lute (via Everett's *Plectraphone*). I suspect few have recognized that mandolin attachments might have played a part in maintaining interest in the importance of the sound characteristics of early keyboards for the performance of the music of their times.

Chapter 5 tells of John J. Swick and his business practices, personal life, and problems. To quote Hettrick, "He was merely forgotten, and his life's history—a tale of diligence and desperation, fortune and failure—passed into oblivion." Appendices 5.1–5.11 colorfully illustrate Swick's story with

relevant period letters and articles, including suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of his wife, a co-conspirator in his business deceptions.

The final chapter dives deep into the life, work, and family of Harry Edward Freund and explores the hoopla and myth of the famed Great Square-Piano Bonfire he instigated. Freund's *Musical Age* contained advertising and news, promoted causes and makers, and condemned various practices within the industry. In 1903, Freund proposed a great bonfire of old square pianos, in order to reduce their number and thus help promote new sales. The chapter, full of quotes, newspaper article excerpts, and imagery from before and after the event, shows how the generally accepted account was far from reality. The author examines those both in favor of and against the proposed conflagration and the actual effect of the event; he also includes various entertaining topical cartoons.

Included are an impressive 153 pages of appendices—approximately three-eighths of the entire book—which serve as useful supplements. We find reproduced the full text of self-aggrandizing, decoratively verbose newspaper articles by Hale; an article in the *New York Sun* published after Hale's great factory fire of 1877; an article singing the praises of Hale after that same fire; and Hale's letter responding to the *New York Sun*. Also included are Hale's response to Freund in the *Music Trade Review*, a favorable report on Hale's new post-fire factory by Freund, revealing his changed attitude, and a published interview with the aging Hale. Appendix 3.1 is devoted to advertising poetry by the inimitable George P. Bent.

All in all, Hettrick has created a readable, well organized, and entertaining work that is also a great aid in preserving some of the overlooked history of the American piano manufacturing industry in the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries. It draws the reader into that world, its people, and its practices. An excellent source for further research, it contains copious footnotes, source references, photographs and print images, and selective bibliography. While primarily of interest to technicians, scholars, and amateur fans of the history of pianos, it is also of value regarding advertising and business practices in general during this time.

ANNE ACKER

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