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Inspiration, Influence, Imitation? The Example of the Parisian Harp and Piano Maker Georges Blaicher, 'Distinguished Pupil of the Erard Brothers'

Over the last years numerous publications have focused on the history of the Erard firm and its significant impact on the development of the harp and piano.¹ Apart from providing new information on the organisation, management and operation of the Erard firm, some of these publications have additionally revealed the important influence of the Erards on a generation of instrument makers who trained and worked at the firm's branches in Paris and London in the decades either side of 1800. After all, the Erard firm was not only a leading manufacturer of musical instruments, but also a hub for aspiring young craftsmen, many of whom subsequently opened their own businesses using the experience and skills they had gained while working under the supervision of Sébastien Erard (1752–1831) or his older brother Jean-Baptiste (1749–1826).

One example is the harp and piano maker Georges Blaicher, about whom virtually nothing was known until now. This article sheds new light on Blaicher's training and work, based on the discovery of a previously unnoticed advertisement

that connects him to the Erard brothers. In addition, the article investigates Blaicher's career and business profile by studying several trade directories and other documents in which he was listed, as well as by inspecting the inscriptions found on his instruments. Furthermore, the article examines the features of surviving harps by Blaicher, comparing their construction, decoration and branding with instruments produced by Erard and other makers, and explores their value and reception within the Parisian harp market. Finally, the article discusses Blaicher in the context of knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship in instrument making during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

TRAINING, CAREER AND BUSINESS PROFILE OF GEORGES BLAICHER

Very little has been written in organological literature about Georges Blaicher and his instruments. So far, the main information about him was provided by entries detected in the *Almanach du Commerce de Paris*, a contemporary trade directory, in which Blaicher was listed as a harp and piano maker

¹ See, for instance, Robert Adelson, Alain Roudier, Jenny Nex, Laure Barthel, and Michel Foussard eds., *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents, 1785–1959* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Fanny Guillaume-Castel, 'Erard: study of a firm based in Paris and London between the 1790s and 1810s through the manufacturing and sales of the harps', Masters Dissertation, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2017; Robert Adelson, *Erard: A Passion for the Piano* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Robert Adelson, *Erard: Empire of the Harp* (Ancenis: Les Harpes Camac, 2022); Giuliano Marco Mattioli, *La famiglia Érard: Un percorso storico fra documenti e strumenti musicali* (Varese: Zechini Editore, 2022); and Panagiotis Pouloupoulos, *The Erard Grecian Harp in Regency England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2023).

working at various addresses in Paris between 1824 and 1846.²

However, the earliest reference to him is found in a hitherto overlooked advertisement, placed in 1819 by a harp teacher and dealer in Lyon, which states: 'Deposit of harps of all models of Mr. George Blaicher, of Paris, distinguished pupil of the Erard brothers; his instruments, of excellent craftsmanship, are at moderate prices: at *Mademoiselle Desombrages, harp teacher, rue du Pérat, N.º 16, in Lyon.*'³ This advertisement is quite important as it provides new evidence about Blaicher's training and early career as a harp maker, linking him directly to the Erard brothers and the Erard workshop in Paris. Regardless of the rather promotional scope of such announcements, this advertisement indicates that Blaicher not only had been trained at the Erard firm, one of the finest Parisian harp and piano manufacturers, but also that he had been an outstanding apprentice (as the word 'distinguished' suggests), a fact that is reflected in the quality of his own harps, as will be discussed later. The mention of 'all models' may refer to harps of various sizes and with different mechanisms, which were also offered around this time by Erard, as confirmed by a surviving harp catalogue.⁴ As for 'Mademoiselle Desombrages', who retailed harps by Blaicher, she was most likely the same person as 'Demoiselle Desombrage', who as early as 1810, and later again

in 1813, was listed as musician and music instructor who 'teaches to pluck the harp' in the *Indicateur de Lyon*, a local directory.⁵

Blaicher's address in Paris before 1824 is unknown. According to the *Almanach du Commerce de Paris* mentioned above, between 1824 and 1834 Blaicher worked at Nº 31 Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle. Blaicher is mentioned in other Parisian trade directories from the 1820s and 1830s as a harp and piano maker. For instance, the entry for Blaicher in the *Bazar parisien*, published in 1826, translates as: 'BLAICHER (Georges), boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, n. 31. Maker of harps with different mechanisms and pianos. He also keeps some for hire.'⁶ Two years later, in 1828, he is similarly recorded in the *Répertoire du commerce de Paris* under piano makers as a maker of harps with pedal mechanisms as well as of pianos at Nº 31 Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle.⁷ Likewise, in 1835 he is listed with the same address in the *Almanach des commerçans de Paris* under harp makers.⁸ Except for Blaicher, the list of harp makers in this publication contains nine names, including, in alphabetical order, Beckers, Bressler, Brown, Challiot, Collin, Domény, Erard, Naderman and Pleyel. The same year a piano by Blaicher, with a compass of six and a half octaves, having an escapement action and three strings per key, was included in a Parisian auction catalogue.⁹

Apart from the aforementioned written sources, Blaicher's address at Nº 31 Boulevard Bonne

² Blaicher's various addresses are included in Sébastien Bottin, *Almanach du Commerce de Paris* (Paris), in the volumes spanning 1824 to 1846, as cited in Bettina Wackernagel, *Europäische Zupf- und Streichinstrumente, Hackbretter und Aolsharfen. Deutsches Museum München. Musikinstrumentensammlung Katalog* (Frankfurt am Main: Bochinsky, 1997), p.344.

³ 'Dépôt de Harpes de tous les modèles de M. George Blaicher, de Paris, élève distingué des frères Erard; ses instruments, d'une confection excellente, sont à des prix modérés: chez mademoiselle Desombrages, professeur de harpe, rue du Pérat, N.º 16, à Lyon.' See 'Affiches, Annonces et Avis Dinvers de la Ville de Lyon', Nº 41, 22 May 1819, p.9, in *Le Moniteur judiciaire de Lyon: organe des tribunaux et des annonces légales, Volume 14* (Lyon, 1819). The same advertisement was published in 'Affiches, Annonces et Avis Dinvers de la Ville de Lyon', Nº 43, 29 May 1819, p.15; Nº 46, 9 June 1819, p.19; Nº 48, 16 June 1819, p.16, and Nº 53, 3 July 1819, p.16. This and all following translations of original texts are by the author.

⁴ Erard Harp Catalogue (London: Erard, c1819–1821). University of Glasgow, Special Collection, A.x.24.

⁵ 'Desombrage, (Dlle.) enseigne à pincer de la harpe, port du temple, n. 49'. *Indicateur de Lyon* (Lyon: Perisse frères, 1810), pp.93 and 131, and 'Desombrage (D.^{lle}) enseigne à pincer de la harpe, rue du pérat, n. 16'. *Indicateur de Lyon* (Lyon: Perisse frères, 1813), pp.86 and 144.

⁶ 'BLAICHER (Georges), boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, n. 31. Facteur de harpes à différentes mécaniques et de pianos. Il en tient aussi pour location.' Charles Malo, *Bazar parisien, ou Annuaire raisonné de l'industrie des premiers artistes et fabricans de Paris* (Paris, 1826), p.437.

⁷ 'Blaicher (G.), boul. Bonne-Nouvelle, 31. Facteur de harpes à mécaniques.' and 'Blaicher (George), musiq., fact.-pianos, boul. Bonne-Nouvelle, 31'. M.-A. Deflandre, *Répertoire du commerce de Paris, ou Almanach des commerçans, banquiers, négocians, manufacturiers, fabricans et artistes de la capitale* (Paris, 1828), pp.566 and 737, respectively.

⁸ 'Facteurs de harpes [...] Blaicher (G.), et pianos, boul. Bonne-Nouvelle, 31.' M. Cambon, *Almanach des commerçans de Paris, et des départemens* (Paris: Bureau de l'Almanach des commerçans, 1835), p.543.

⁹ 'Un piano à 6 octaves ½, de George Blaicher, échapement 3 cordes.' *Catalogue de la vente aux enchères publiques d'un très-beau choix de tableaux et gravures, pendules, candélabres, montres, meubles, piano, instrumens de musique, articles de chasse. Cette vente aura lieu Lundi 28 Décembre 1835 et jour suivans, de onze heures à une heure, et de cinq à huit heures du soir* (Paris, 1835), p.15.

Nouvelle is confirmed by inscriptions found on at least nine extant single-action harps by Blaicher, which bear this address, and which can thus be dated between 1824 and 1834 (see Appendix). After this ten-year term, Blaicher changed his address at least four times in relatively quick succession; the motives behind this decision are unknown, but they may have been due to personal circumstances, such as family issues, or due to professional reasons, such as, for example, financial difficulties or the need for different premises because of business downsizing or expansion. In 1835, Blaicher's address was at N° 6 rue Neuve-St. Marc, while between 1836 and 1838 he was operating from N° 25 Faubourg Montmartre, as confirmed by his entry as harp and piano maker at the latter address in the *Almanach du Commerce de Paris* from 1837 and 1838.¹⁰

From 1839 to 1840, Blaicher allegedly traded from a new address at N° 59 Petites-Écuries. This address is corroborated by an extant double-action harp (described later), which is inscribed 'George Blaicher, Rue de Petites Ecuries N°. 59' and which apparently dates from this time. By 1841 Blaicher had moved to N° 24 Bellefond, where he is reported working until 1846. There is no further evidence concerning his address or professional activities after this date. Interestingly, a female member of Blaicher's family, probably his wife or daughter, was registered as a harp teacher working at N° 24 Bellefond in a directory from 1845, which included a list of female music teachers in Paris, and in which Blaicher himself is mentioned under 'harp makers'.¹¹

It is also important to note that an extant single-action harp is signed 'George Blaicher / Rue des Vieux Augustins N° 38 / à Paris'.¹² This address is not included in any of the sources mentioned earlier, and

given the fact that the harp has a pedal mechanism with crochets, which by the 1840s had become outdated, it most likely refers to Blaicher's address before 1824 rather than after 1846.

FEATURES OF EXTANT HARPS BY BLAICHER

Only 14 pedal harps and no pianos signed by Blaicher are presently known to have survived (see Appendix). Four harps with features similar to those by Blaicher have also been identified, although they cannot be attributed with certainty to Blaicher's workshop.¹³ The harps bearing Blaicher's signature include 13 single-action harps whose mechanisms consists of either crochets or fourchettes that can be activated by seven pedals enclosed in a pedalbox at the bottom of the harp; there is also one extant double-action harp by Blaicher equipped with fourchettes. Harp mechanisms with crochets (essentially L-shaped metal hooks) were common on French harps made in the late eighteenth century, whereas those with fourchettes (forked discs) were introduced by the Erard firm in the 1790s, progressively superseding all earlier string-shortening systems on harps.

The soundboards of Blaicher harps are flat and have no soundholes, while the backs of the semi-conical soundboxes usually have five oval, lance-shaped soundholes. However, at least one Blaicher harp, in the Nydahl Collection – Stiftelsen Musikkulturens Främjande, Stockholm (Inv. No. KN011), is equipped with a swell mechanism, which can be operated with an additional eighth pedal that opens five rectangular shutters on the back of the soundbox; this feature was abandoned on harps built from the second quarter of the nineteenth century onwards.¹⁴ Regarding the string number, Blaicher harps have 41 or 43 strings, largely corresponding to the stringing

¹⁰ 'FACTEURS DE HARPEs. Voyez aussi PIANOS. [...] Blaicher (Georges) et pianos, r. du faub. Montmartre, 25.' Sébastien Bottin, *Almanach du commerce de Paris, de la France et de pays étrangers* (Paris, 1837), p.172, and 'FACTEURS DE HARPEs. Voyez aussi PIANOS. [...] Blaicher (Georges) et pianos, faub. Montmartre, 25.' Sébastien Bottin, *Almanach du commerce de Paris, de la France et de pays étrangers* (Paris, 1838), p.178.

¹¹ 'DAMES PROFESSEURS. (Piano, guitare, harpe, solfège, chant, harmonie.) Mesdames [...] Blaicher, harpe, rue Bellefond, 24' and 'HARPEs. Blaicher, rue Bellefond, 24.', *Annuaire Musical 1845 contenant les noms et adresses des amateurs, artistes et commerçants en musique de Paris, des départemens et de l'étranger, par une société de musiciens* (Paris, 1845), pp.253 and 277, respectively.

¹² This harp was offered for sale at Crait & Müller auction, Paris, 14 May 2019, lot 263. For more details see <<https://www.crait-muller.com/lot/98519/10280080>>, accessed 9 June 2023.

¹³ See '213-214 Blaicher & -Typ', in Beat Wolf, *Harp Archives* (Schaffhausen: Wolf, 2016). I am grateful to Beat Wolf for providing access to his archives, which include unpublished restoration reports and other information concerning about 380 historical harps. Three harps labelled by Wolf as 'Type Blaicher' are unsigned (BW 32 / 213 / 400, 401, and 405, respectively), while a fourth harp is signed 'Bénigne Henry / Ru[e] de la Bucherie N[o.9] ... / A PARIS', with the number '4' being written in pencil on various areas (BW 32 / 213 / 500). In his report Wolf questions whether Bénigne was a dealer rather than the maker of the harp.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Elise Kolle, who had examined the Blaicher harp in 2018 during her research project at the Nydahl Collection, Stockholm, for sending me information and photographs of this instrument.

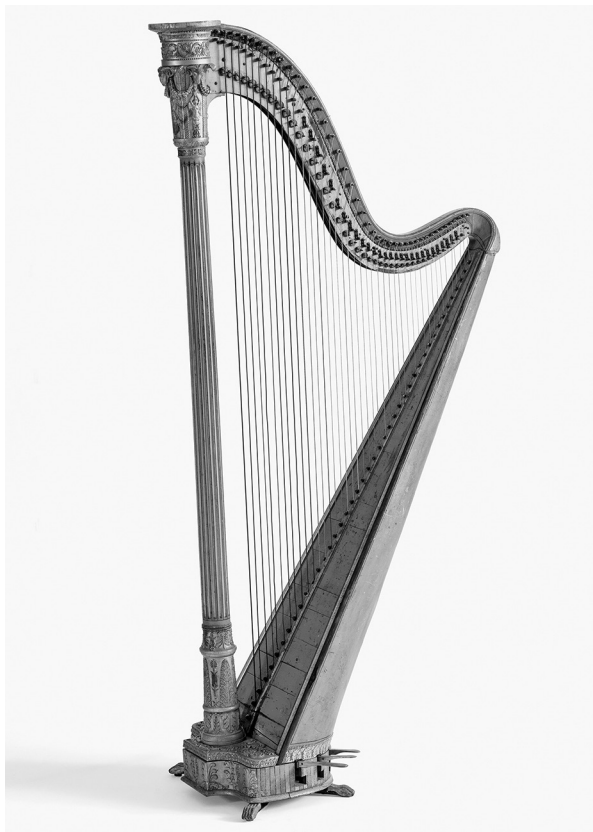


Figure 1. *Single-action harp with a fourchettes mechanism signed 'N.º 139 // Georges Blaicher Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle N.º 31 à Paris'. Deutsches Museum, Munich (Inv. No. 70695). Photograph: Konrad Rainer, © Deutsches Museum.*

arrangement used by Erard and other harp makers in the early nineteenth century.

The above-mentioned features can be observed on a single-action harp having 43 strings and a fourchettes mechanism, housed in the Deutsches Museum, Munich (Inv. No. 70695). Signed 'N.º 139 // Georges Blaicher Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle N.º 31 à Paris', this instrument is a typical example of Blaicher's work from the late 1820s and early 1830s, and one of only five Blaicher harps surviving in a public institution (see Figure 1, also in the colour section).¹⁵

Concerning its dimensions and weight, this harp has a maximum height of about 1,720mm, a

maximum width of about 380mm at the pedalbox (about 630mm with the pedals in open position), a maximum depth of about 990mm from capital to shoulder, and weighs about 23kg; these figures are common for single-action harps of that era. Like most harps by Blaicher, this instrument is adorned with elaborate gilded composition ornaments on the capital and pedalbox in the so-called 'Empire' style, evoking the decorative patterns of Erard harps from that time. The ornaments on the capital include three ram's heads under which are three winged female figures, resembling caryatids, holding baskets of fruits. The ram's heads are separated by vertical palm leaves, while garlands consisting of double rows of silver pearls are hanging between the ram's heads. There are also smaller ornaments with floral patterns, such as leaves and flowers (see Figure 2 in the colour section). The soundbox and neck of this and other harps by Blaicher are finished in a transparent orange-yellow varnish, although some Blaicher harps are finished in a glossy black coating, which was the standard finish used by Erard and is distinctive for harps of this period.

Even though Blaicher's instruments may seem to imitate closely the models established by the Erard firm, there are some deviations. This is apparent, for instance, on the only extant double-action harp by Blaicher, which according to its inscription 'George Blaicher, Rue de Petites Ecuries N.º. 59', dates from around 1840 (Figure 3).¹⁶ It is worth noting that this harp is decorated with Gothic composition ornaments resembling Erard's Gothic model, which had been introduced in London only a few years earlier, in 1836. Yet the decorative motives of Blaicher's instrument are quite different from those used by Erard, while the harp also has 43 strings, a number typical of Erard's older Grecian model, rather than the 46 strings of Erard's Gothic harp.¹⁷ A further notable difference is that the characteristic 'zig-zag' notches for the pedals on the Blaicher harp are cut into a pedalbox attached to the soundbox, as on Erard Grecian harps, whereas on Erard Gothic harps the pedal notches were usually cut into the lower part of the soundbox

¹⁵ For a detailed description of this harp see Wackernagel (1997), p.191. According to museum records, the instrument was donated by Helene Linde (Munich) and was acquired by the museum on 24 June 1948. I am grateful to Silke Berdux, Curator of Musical Instruments at the Deutsches Museum, for providing me with archival information on this harp.

¹⁶ This harp was sold at Bonhams auction, San Francisco, 27 October 2008, lot 3293. For more details of this instrument see <<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/16119/lot/3293/>>, accessed 9 June 2023; see also Wolf, BW 41 / 214 / 750. I am thankful to Karen Keane and Sheri Middleton at Bonhams Skinner for providing me with a photograph of this harp.

¹⁷ The main features of Erard's Empire, Grecian and Gothic models have been discussed in Pouloupoulos (2023), pp.23–36.



Figure 3. *Double-action harp inscribed 'George Blaicher, Rue de Petites Ecuries No. 59'. Photograph © Bonhams Skinner.*

rather than into a separate pedalbox. It can thus be argued that Blaicher's double-action harp combined features of the Grecian and the Gothic model, both of which were produced by Erard throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s.

Another noteworthy attribute of Blaicher harps concerns their branding and serial numbering. On Blaicher harps equipped with a crochets mechanism, Blaicher's name and address is usually inscribed on the wooden cover of the mechanism at the right side

of the neck (from the player's position); these harps do not bear any visible numbers. In contrast, Blaicher harps with a fourchettes mechanism are numbered; the four Blaicher harps with confirmed numbers are N° 108, N° 113, N° 139, and N° 167, respectively. These numbers are engraved close to Blaicher's name and address on the right brass plate covering the mechanism that is screwed on the neck. It is not certain if these numbers specified the production of a particular harp model (e.g. single-action, double-action, etc.), or if they showed the total production of harps at Blaicher's workshop and were thus similar to the single sequence numbering that the Erard firm continuously used on harps regardless of the different models.¹⁸ However, it is likely that Blaicher started numbering his harps when he began implementing the more advanced fourchettes mechanism in their design. The presence of serial numbers and the new method of signing the harps with engravings on the brass plate, a practice widely used by Erard and other harp manufacturers, may denote the launching of a new harp model whose manufacturing features and branding were distinctly different to the harps with crochets that Blaicher was producing until then.

The only exception is harp N° 504; curiously, this harp, which bears the highest serial number detected on a Blaicher harp, is a single-action harp equipped with the older crochets mechanism, rather than with the newer fourchettes mechanism, as would be expected. One explanation for this could be that the instrument was at some point returned for maintenance or repair and was subsequently given a new number to reflect the whole production of Blaicher up to that date. If this is the case, and the number was not added during later restoration or faking, then Blaicher must have produced more than 500 harps, with the 14 extant harps indicating a quite low survival rate of less than 3%. This in turn suggests a rather limited production in comparison to Erard, especially considering that about 300 Erard harps of the Grecian model produced in the London branch alone have survived, providing some hints of the scale and scope of Blaicher's business.¹⁹

As there are no extant harps by Blaicher with

¹⁸ For more details on the serial numbering system used on Erard harps see Panagiotis Poulopoulos and Julin Lee, 'A Synergy of Form, Function and Fashion in the Manufacture of the Erard Harp', in Marco A. Pérez and Emanuele Marconi eds., *Wooden Musical Instruments: Different Forms of Knowledge* (Paris: Cité de la Musique - Philharmonie de Paris, 2018), pp.367–398, at pp.389–390. For information on the serial numbering used by Erard and other manufacturers see also Poulopoulos (2023), pp.51–60.

¹⁹ See Poulopoulos (2023), pp.203–207 and 231–267. Since about 3500 Grecian harps were built by Erard in London between 1811 and c1845, the 300 extant harps indicate a survival rate of 8.5%. It should, however, be noted that there are also numerous Erard Grecian harps made in Paris, as well as single-action Empire harps and double-action Gothic harps produced by Erard in both Paris and London, which survive in public and private collections around the world.

numbers below 100, it is possible that he started numbering his harps not at one but at 100, taking into account the number of harps he had already produced in the previous years. This practice was not uncommon among instrument manufacturers. For example, the first harp lutes (hybrid plucked instruments that combined features of the harp, lute, cittern and guitar) that were introduced around 1807 in London by Edward Light (c1747/8–c1832) were unnumbered. However, from around 1813, when the design of harp lutes was standardised, Light began numbering his instruments, starting at around 450, presumably to represent the unnumbered instruments built during the early experimental phase.²⁰ Likewise, when Louis Panormo (1784–1862), a leading maker of guitars in London, started numbering his instruments around 1823, he seems to have begun with the number 401. Panormo's numbering pattern was not sequential, since 'with a couple of exceptions, each year the first digit changed by one, for example 1823 was in the 400 range, 1824 in the 500s and so on, until sometime in 1828 when another system was introduced'.²¹ As in the cases of Light and Panormo, the identification of more Blaicher harps bearing serial numbers could help to elucidate the motivation and goal of his numbering system.²²

The details presented and analysed so far show that from a mechanical, acoustic, aesthetic, and commercial viewpoint, Blaicher's harps demonstrate the various changes that occurred in harp design in the beginning of the nineteenth century, many of which were introduced by the Erards and were later adopted by most of their contemporaries. These include, for example, the shift from the crochets to the fourchettes mechanism and from the single-

the double- action harp; the increase of the string number; several alterations to the soundbox and neck construction to provide more stability and strength; the decoration with gilded composition ornaments and coloured finishes; as well as the conspicuous branding and numbering with inscriptions or engravings that informed the public about the maker's name, address, and output.

PRICES AND RECEPTION OF HARPS BY BLAICHER

Although details about the popularity and sales of Blaicher's instruments are scarce, there is sufficient information about the prices of his harps. For example, archival sources reveal that a single-action harp by Blaicher equipped with a fourchettes mechanism, housed in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (Inv. No. U18e4), cost 1000 francs in 1825 (Figure 4). According to the museum's provenance record, the harp was 'Purchased by George Peabody (1804–1892) in 1825 in Paris for 1,000 francs for his sister Catharine Elizabeth Peabody (1808–1883) later Mrs. John Lowell Gardner, Sr.'²³

Further evidence regarding the prices of Blaicher harps is found in a newspaper advertisement from 1826 announcing the sale of a second-hand harp by Blaicher: 'To be Sold, a capital rich-toned HARP, made by Georges Blaicher, only in use a twelvemonth; cost 1300fr. and to be disposed of for 1100fr.– Apply to the Porter, No. 50, rue Ste. Anne.'²⁴ Judging from this advertisement, we can assume that a new harp by Blaicher would cost about 1300 francs in 1825, a price that corresponds approximately with the amount of 1000 francs paid by the above-mentioned George Peabody that year. Considering that during this period the price of a double-action harp of the

²⁰ For more details see Hayato Sugimoto, 'Harp Lutes in Britain, 1800–1830: A Study of the Inventor, Edward Light and His Instruments', PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2015, pp.231–232.

²¹ James Westbrook, 'Louis Panormo: "The only Maker of Guitars in the Spanish style"', *Early Music* 41/4 (November 2013), pp.571–584, at p.574.

²² Comparable examples regarding the numbering of instruments have been documented in the work of other makers, such as the brasswind instrument maker John Augustus Kohler (1805–1878). An agreement from 1833 between Kohler and Thomas Harper states that both Harper's 'Improved Chromatic Trumpet' and 'Newly Invented Walking Stick Trumpet' would both commence at number 28, rather than at number one. For more details see Lance Whitehead and Arnold Myers, 'The Kohler Family of Brasswind Instrument Makers', *Historic Brass Society Journal* 16 (2004), pp.89–123, at pp.114–116. I am grateful to Lance Whitehead for bringing this source to my attention.

²³ 'George Blaicher - Harp, 1800–1825', <<https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/collection/14194>>, accessed 9 June 2023. The description provided by the museum states that the instrument 'entered the collection of Isabella Stewart Gardner and her husband John L. Gardner, Jr. (1837–1898) in 1883 by inheritance from John's mother.' I am grateful to Alex Eliopoulos and Maggie Goldstein, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, for providing me with information and photographs of this harp.

²⁴ *Galignani's Messenger* (Paris), 2, 4, 7, and 10 March 1826 (Nos 3414, 3416, 3418, and 3421, respectively; the advertisements are included in the fourth unnumbered page of each issue).



Figure 4. Single-action harp with fourchettes signed 'GEORGE BLAICHER A PARIS'. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (Inv. No. U18e4). Photograph © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

Grecian model by Erard was 1300 francs and that of a grand piano about 1200 to 1500 francs, Blaicher harps were quite expensive.²⁵ The fact that harps by Blaicher cost as much as those by Erard is another indication of their fine quality and of Blaicher's reputation in the market of musical instruments.

²⁵ For more details on the prices of harps, pianos and guitars in Paris during the 1820s and 1830s see Panagiotis Poulopoulos, 'The Impact of François Chanot's Experimental Violins on the Development of the Earliest Guitar with an Arched Soundboard by Francesco Molino in the 1820s', *Early Music* 46/1 (February 2018), pp.67–86, at pp.80–81.

Whereas large firms such as Erard relied on specialisation of workforce and division of labour, Blaicher most likely had a relatively small workshop and personnel building harps by order rather than for stockpiling, which meant that the increased manufacturing costs were reflected in the price of his instruments.

In the early nineteenth century, harps were not only fashionable musical instruments but also symbols of wealth, luxury and taste. Therefore, like Erard's customers, Blaicher's clientele must have included persons of elevated financial and social status. For instance, a harp by Blaicher 'in lemon wood with ornaments' was reportedly acquired by Jules Philippe Joachim Fontenilliat (1790–1827), the son of a French industrialist.²⁶ It is worth noting that the sum of 350 francs for this Blaicher harp is much lower than the prices listed in the above-mentioned advertisements, suggesting that it might have been an earlier model with crochets and probably bought second-hand. Another second-hand harp by Blaicher was offered for sale in 1829, as evidenced in the following announcement: 'FOR SALE A modern HARP by *Georges Blaicher*, with a collection of elementary and performance music. Contact rue Chantereine, n. 6.'²⁷ The harp's description as 'modern' possibly refers either to a single-action harp with a fourchettes mechanism or to a double-action harp, whose acceptance in France was slower than in England. Even as late as 1882, the price of a Blaicher harp 'with seven pedals' (most likely a second-hand item) was estimated at 70 francs, whereas those of harps by Lambert and Louvet at 48 and 45 francs respectively, mirroring the high monetary and artistic value of Blaicher's instruments.²⁸

ASPECTS OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Georges Blaicher was one of the many talented artisans who learned and practiced their skills at the Erard firm during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From this perspective, Blaicher was similar to other former Erard employees, who decided to leave the Erard firm once they had obtained the knowledge, confidence and financial means to set up their own business and in some cases compete against their former masters.

One characteristic example is John Zacharias Siegling (1791–1867), originating from Erfurt in Thuringia. According to Pierre-Orphée Erard (1794–1855), Sébastien's nephew and head of the Erard London branch from 1814, Siegling was a 'very smart young German who has worked for a long time in our Paris firm and more recently in London'.²⁹ Siegling, who in 1818 was put by Pierre 'in charge of the *Cabinet makers*', was apparently causing some trouble, since he was being described as 'someone a cut above the working class, thanks to his education and his knowledge', but also as someone who 'has ambitions', 'is not easy to lead and is not short of vanity'.³⁰ Having worked for Erard as a foreman until 1819, Siegling eventually immigrated to America, settling in Charleston, North Carolina, where he ran a thriving music business.³¹

A further example worth mentioning is James Delveaux (or Delveau) (fl. 1815–1841), a skilled worker from Belgium, who worked for Erard as an assembler and finisher. Interestingly, like Siegling, Delveaux worked in both the Paris and London branches of the firm, since in 1815 Pierre wrote 'Would you do me a great favour, my dear uncle, to send us back

²⁶ 'Chez Destillières, on mentionne un «fortepiano» du nom de Léonard Pisterman, et un pièce entière reste dévolue à cet art: le salon de musique renferme un jeu d'orgue et un piano à queue de Smith couvert en acajou, tandis que Fontenilliat a aquis une harpe en bois de citron avec ornements du nom du Georges Blaicher (350 francs).' Jean-Yves Mollier, Martine Reid, and Jean-Claude Yon, *Repenser la Restauration* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2005), p.227.

²⁷ 'A VENDRE Une HARPE moderne de *Georges Blaicher*, avec une collectionne musique élémentaire et d'exécution. S'adresser rue Chantereine, n. 6.' *Messageur Des Chambres* (Paris), Wednesday, 14 October 1829 (N° 287, third unnumbered page). An identical announcement appeared about two weeks later in the same newspaper on Sunday, 1 November (N° 305, third unnumbered page).

²⁸ 'Les harpes, une débâcle! — Une harpe française du temps de Louis XVI, de Lambert, et signée comme un tableau, sur le décor; Pollet, rue de Chartres, 340. Peintures en vernis Martin; paysages, fleurs et ornements, 48 francs; une autre, de Georges Blaicher, à sept pédales, 70 francs; une troisième, marquée à feu, de Louvet, à Paris, 45 francs.' Paul Edel, *L'Hôtel Drouot et la curiosité en 1882. 2me année* (Paris: C. Charpentier et Co, 1883), p.6.

²⁹ Letter 185, 3 December 1816, in Adelson et al (2015), pp.639–640, at p.639.

³⁰ Letter 262, 2 July 1819, in Adelson et al (2015), pp.720–722, at pp.721–722.

³¹ For more details see Candace Bailey, *Charleston Belles Abroad: The Music Collections of Harriet Lowndes, Henrietta Aiken, and Louisa Rebecca McCord* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), pp.15–16.

Delveaux if he is still in Paris, because I am wasting a great deal of time trying to replace him so that no harp leaves the workshop unless it is the way it should be.³² Pierre regarded Delveaux so highly as to suggest in 1817 that this ‘very honest man’ could become the firm’s representative in Brussels, as well as in America, Brazil or Russia.³³ Nevertheless, in 1821 Delveaux quit the firm, and Pierre’s opinion of him changed drastically. This was not only because Delveaux went to work for the firm of Erat, Erard’s main rival in London,³⁴ but also due to Pierre’s suspicion that his uncle’s latest ideas were secretly communicated to Delveaux by Heinrich Johannes Kessels (1781–1849), a maker of clocks and scientific instruments who undertook various tasks for the Erard firm in both London and Paris.³⁵ In February 1822, Pierre asked Sébastien: ‘Would you by chance have revealed something of your new ideas for the harp to Kessell. He was always writing to Delveaux! I think it wise to watch out for him. He is devious.’³⁶ A few days later, Pierre argued that ‘Delveaux benefited from what he saw in the workshop.’³⁷ Pierre’s fears were not exaggerated, since that year Delveaux registered a patent for ‘an improvement on harps’.³⁸

Therefore, the gradual transition from apprentice or worker to foreman, and sometimes to master, was not uncommon in the harp industry, with all the consequences that this had concerning the knowledge transfer between different workshops, inevitably leading to industrial espionage, unauthorized imitation, and legal dispute. The Erards were aware of this issue and tried to protect their trade secrets by preventing the diffusion of their latest ideas and inventions until they could be patented. The

measures imposed by the Erards to minimise the risk of intellectual property theft even extended to forbidding workers from moving from one workshop to another. For instance, when the Viennese piano maker Johann Baptist Streicher (1796–1871) visited the Erard establishment in Paris in January 1822 he noted: ‘*Erard* indeed has over 100 workers, of which currently only 12 are harp makers. The journeymen of a workshop are not allowed to go into another; Erard himself often only comes around every 6 weeks.’³⁹

As already mentioned, the features of Blaicher harps are quite similar to those produced by the Erard firm, reflecting the lasting influence of the Erards on other instrument makers. Yet, Blaicher did not only follow Erard’s designs, but also the firm’s business concept that focused on the manufacture of both harps and pianos, two instruments connected by the engineering complexity required for the building of their mechanisms. Unlike other stringed instruments, such as violins or guitars, harps and pianos were highly mechanised instruments, whose manufacture demanded precision work with wood and metal by specialised staff that only few manufacturers were able to employ and supervise as effectively as the Erard firm. Of course, one question that arises is whether Blaicher was making both the wooden frame of the harp as well as the metal parts of the harp mechanisms in his own workshop, or if he was producing only the woodworking and purchased the mechanisms from a specialist, such as a clockmaker, or even from another harp manufacturer, such as the Erard firm. But whatever the case may be, in commercial terms Blaicher is analogous to a handful of ambitious entrepreneurs, whose businesses also

³² Letter 156, 18 September 1815, in Adelson et al (2015), pp.612–613, at p.613.

³³ Letter 212, 29 September 1817, in Adelson et al (2015), p.670.

³⁴ For more details on the Erat firm see Mike Baldwin, ‘The Harp in Early Nineteenth-century Britain: Innovation, Business, and Making in Jacob Erat’s Manufactory’, PhD Thesis, London Metropolitan University, 2017.

³⁵ Kessels is mentioned several times from 1814 to 1822 in the correspondence between Pierre and Sébastien Erard, included in Adelson et al (2015). Interestingly, between 1815 and 1821 Kessels worked in Paris for the prominent clock- and watch-maker Abraham-Louis Breguet (1747–1823), who was a friend of Sébastien Erard, before opening his own workshop in Altona, northern Germany, in the early 1820s. For more details on Kessels, see Günther Oestmann, *Heinrich Johann Kessels: Ein bedeutender Verfertiger von Chronometern und Präzisionspendeluhren. Biographische Skizze und Werkverzeichnis* [Acta Historicae Astronomomiae 44] (Frankfurt am Main: Harri Deutsch, 2011).

³⁶ Letter 323, 8 February 1822, in Adelson et al (2015), p.788.

³⁷ Letter 326, 19 February 1822, in Adelson et al (2015), p.791.

³⁸ Patent No 4672, 24 April 1822. For more details of this patent, see Bennett Woodcroft, *Patents for Inventions, Abridgements of Specifications relating to Music and Musical Instruments, AD. 1694–1866* (facsimile of the original 1871 edn; London: Bingham, 1984), p.91. Delveaux’s patent has also been discussed in Baldwin (2017), pp.217–221.

³⁹ ‘*Dienstag 29t Jänner*. [...] *Erard* soll doch über 100 Arbeiter haben, worunter gegenwärtig nur 12 Harfenmacher sind. Die Gesellen einer Werkstätte dürfen in keine andere gehen; *Erard* selbst kommt oft nur alle 6 Wochen überall herum.’ Uta Goebel-Streicher, *Das Reisetagebuch des Klavierbauers Johann Baptist Streicher 1821–1822: Text und Kommentar* (Tutzing: Schneider, 2009), pp.107–108, at p.108.

combined the manufacture of both harps and pianos, being most likely inspired by the Erard brothers or simply imitating their innovative workshop practices and entrepreneurial ideas. The two most notable examples are Ignaz Joseph Pleyel (1757–1831) in Paris⁴⁰ and Johann Andreas Stumpff (1769–1846) in London.⁴¹ Interestingly, both men were familiar with the Erards and their instruments: for example, in 1793 Pleyel was sent pianos by the Erard firm, possibly to sell them to his own customers,⁴² whereas Stumpff must have been a former employee of Sébastien Erard, since the piano maker James Shudi Broadwood (1772–1851) stated in a letter that Stumpff ‘long worked with Old Erard’.⁴³ It is thus no coincidence that like Blaicher, Pleyel and Stumpff built both harps and pianos, taking advantage of their contacts with the Erards or, in the case of Stumpff, his working experience at the Erard firm. This is further confirmed by the fact that Stumpff’s harps closely resembled – and according to James Shudi’s father John Broadwood (1732–1812) even surpassed – those of Erard.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Although Georges Blaicher may have not achieved the success or fame of the Erard brothers, his work is representative of the exceptional quality and standards set by his former instructors and employers. The study of his extant harps has shown that Blaicher was largely copying the models established by the Erard firm, but occasionally added his own individual traits, as illustrated, for instance, in the choice of the string number, in the use of alternative decorative elements, or in the application of a distinct serial numbering system for his harps. Above all, his instruments epitomize the rapid development in the technical, visual and

sonic features of the pedal harp at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Blaicher is among the very few known instrument makers who produced both harps and pianos, a business concept pioneered by the Erard firm, operating in the very demanding and competitive markets of Paris or London. On the one hand, the relatively small number of surviving instruments suggests that Blaicher was not a large-scale manufacturer and exporter of instruments like Erard, but one that was building instruments mainly for clients in the French capital and the provinces. On the other hand, the high prices demanded by Blaicher for his harps, even in the second-hand market, speak for their maker’s prominence and respectability. Future research of instruments and archival sources will hopefully help to find out new details about Blaicher and other less known makers of the harp and piano, who have for a long time stood in the dominant shadows of the Erards. This will consequently provide us with a more complete picture of the instrument-making business at a time when these two instruments were at the forefront of technical and artistic innovation.

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⁴⁰ For more details on Pleyel as harp and piano manufacturer see Margaret Cranmer and Martin Elste, ‘Pleyel, firm’, in Laurence Libin ed., *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (2nd edn, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol.4, pp.139–140. The harps built by Pleyel have been discussed in Sylvain Blassel, ‘The Pleyel Harps’ (article published in the journal of the French Harp Association (AIH), n°45, AH/2007; revised and expanded in March 2020; available at <<https://www.sylvain-blassel.com/en/pleyel-harps-1>>, accessed 9 June 2023).

⁴¹ For more details on Stumpff’s biography and work see Pamela J. Willetts, ‘Johann Andreas Stumpff, 1769–1846’, *The Musical Times* 118/1607 (1977), pp.29, 31 and 32. Information on the harps made by Stumpff is included in Gunther Joppig, ‘Die Stumpffharfe im Kunstgewerbemuseum Dresden’, in Wolfram Steude and Hans-Günter Ottenberg eds., *Theatrum instrumentorum Dresdense – Bericht über die Tagungen zu Historischen Musikinstrumenten, Dresden, 1996, 1998 und 1999* (Schneverdingen: Verlag der Musikalienhandlung Wagner, 2003), pp.99–107.

⁴² Blassel (2007), p.1.

⁴³ Cited in David Wainwright, *Broadwood, by Appointment: A History* (London: Quiller Press, 1982), p.143.

⁴⁴ Dorothy Jean Deval, ‘Gradus ad Parnassum: The Pianoforte in London, 1770–1820’, PhD Thesis, University of London, 1991, p.45.

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The Parisian Harp and Piano Maker Georges Blaicher



Figure 1. *Single-action harp with a fourchettes mechanism signed 'N.º 139 // Georges Blaicher Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle N.º 31 à Paris'. Deutches Museum Munich (Inv. No. 70695). Photograph: Konrad Rainer, © Deutches Museum.*



Figure 2. Detail of the decoration with composition ornaments on the capital of Blaicher harp N° 139. Deutsches Museum, Munich (Inv. No. 70695). Photograph: Konrad Rainer, © Deutsches Museum.