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MIKE BALDWIN. *Harp Making in Late-Georgian London*. London: Bright Light, 2020. 428pp., 145 illus., 9 tables. ISBN: 978-1527265110 (hardback). Price: £60

While travelling in Italy a few years ago, I noticed a beautiful nineteenth-century harp adorning the salon of a luxury hotel. To my surprise, although the harp's neckplate inscription clearly read 'J. Erat & Sons, 23 Berners Street London', the golden plaque placed next to the instrument identified it as an '*arpa francese*' ('French harp'). This flagrant negation of the instrument's English origin is but a small manifestation of a broader music-historical amnesia concerning the achievements of English harp makers. Mike Baldwin's book, *Harp Making in Late-Georgian London*, is a major contribution to setting this record straight.

Throughout the eighteenth century the pedal harp was generally understood to be a French creation, despite the fact that it had actually been invented by the Bavarian luthier Jacob Hochbrucker (1673-1763). This francisation of the instrument became more legitimate from the 1760s on, when Paris-based makers such as Holtzman, Louvet, Cousineau and Naderman set a standard for both instrumental innovation and decorative excellence that was admired and imitated throughout Europe.

However, at the end of the eighteenth century, a second centre of harp

innovation took root, this time in London. In 1792 Sébastien Erard (1752–1831) founded a branch of his Paris-based enterprise on Great Marlborough Street in order to begin building harps, and both of his seminal inventions for the harp, the forked discs and the double action, were first patented there. By the time Sébastien's nephew Pierre (1794–1855) took over the direction of his family's London branch in 1814, he faced competition from a growing number of London harp makers, including Alexander Barry, Alexander Blazdell, John Fuce Brown, James Delveau, Edward and Thomas Dodd, Jacob Erat (and sons Jacob and James), Frederick Grosjean, Henry Haarnack and sons, Philip Holcombe, George Holderness, Thomas Martin, John Charles Schwieso, Emanuel Serquet and Johann Andreas Stumpff. In addition to these makers, there were many London-based piano builders and other inventors who also registered patents for harps. Harp manufacturing became such a successful endeavour in London that it continued well into the twentieth century. It is therefore remarkable that, until now, there have been almost no scholarly monographs or exhibition catalogues devoted to English harps.

Baldwin was able to surmount one of the most significant obstacles in researching English harp makers: the inequality of primary sources. On the one hand, the Erard firm has left behind an extraordinarily vast archive of correspondence, ledger books and other business documents. This is due to the size of their business and the fact that they operated branches in both London and Paris, which necessitated regular written correspondence. Other London harp makers, smaller firms with no foreign branches, have left comparatively few documentary traces. As a result, much of what we know about them is necessarily coloured by the biased view of writers such as Pierre Erard, who repeatedly denigrated his competitors in his letters to his uncle Sébastien; for example, haughtily proclaiming that 'Erat and sons are still nothing but cobblers!'. (Adelson et al., eds., *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents, 1785–1959*, vol.2, p.723.) However, not all of Pierre Erard's contemporaries shared his views. The

London piano builder John Broadwood (1732–1812), for example, wrote in 1803 that 'Erard is the most fashionable maker, but [...] Mr Stumpff we think makes the best Harp.' (letter, John Broadwood to John Harrison Esq., 25 April 1803, Broadwood letter copy book (1801–1810), Surrey History Centre, Woking, UK)

Harp Making in Late-Georgian London is, in large part, the story of the Erat firm, founded by the Prussian immigrant Jacob Erat (1768–1821), and continued by his English-born sons Jacob junior (1799–1836) and James (1801–1858). Between the end of the eighteenth century and the demise of the enterprise in 1858, Erat manufactured over 4,000 harps, an output that is second only to Erard. Baldwin has spent many years amassing a collection of documents related to the Erat firm, including valuable sales ledgers, and his new publication makes these precious documents available to the wider organological community. Erat therefore figures prominently in the book, but it is to Baldwin's credit that he chose to broaden his field of study to cover all of the London firms that produced harps during this period. Baldwin compensates for the paucity of sources for these numerous makers by a painstaking analysis of a wide variety of documents, including financial accounts, diaries, inventories, letters, maps, property leases and plans, trade directories, wills, newspapers and extant instruments.

Baldwin's book is an outgrowth of his excellent doctoral dissertation *The Harp in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain: Innovation, Business, and Making in Jacob Erat's Manufactory* (London Metropolitan University, 2017), and follows a similar structure. After a brief introduction, the chapter 'Consuming the harp' explores the role of the harp in English society, particularly among women musicians. 'London harp makers' presents an overview of the various makers and includes a helpful map of where their workshops were situated. In this chapter, Baldwin also explains his methodology for estimating the numbers of harps produced by these firms, since not all makers used serial numbers and few ledgers have survived. The chapter 'A

decorative design history' discusses the pervasive influence of Erard's three principal models, commonly known as the Empire, Grecian and Gothic. Here, Baldwin's detailed nomenclature of the harp capital will be useful to any scholar analysing instruments from this period. In 'A technical design history', Baldwin concentrates on the patent registration process, as well as the mechanical innovations of the various makers.

The Erat firm is the focus of the following two chapters: 'The Erats: a manufacturing family' and 'Jacob Erat's manufactories'. In 'Making the harp' and 'Materials and Suppliers', Baldwin explores the process of building, decorating and finishing harps, and of the purveyors of materials whose work was indispensable to the success of London harp firms. 'Selling the harp' analyses the sales ledgers of the Erat firm to better understand the demographic makeup and musical backgrounds of the customers.

The final chapter is devoted to the fascinating and hitherto unknown diary of harp maker Robert Willis (1800–1875), a document that offers a unique perspective on the relationship between Erat and his employees. The book concludes with a generous assemblage of appendices, constituting a quarter of the volume's pages. Here, one finds a trove of sources that will undoubtedly be studied for years to come: transcriptions of accounts and ledgers, a comprehensive list of harp patents (including their technical drawings) and photographs of Baldwin's collection of rare compo moulds (a composition resin pressed into moulds to produce decorative work) used by London harp makers from the period.

Harp historiography has long placed Sébastien Erard at the centre: according to this interpretation, all makers who preceded him pointed the way to his innovations and all who followed him were mere imitators. Whatever semblance of truth this view may have held, it took on an exaggerated form, in part through propagandistic works like Pierre Erard's own book, *The Harp in its Present Improved State Compared with the Original Pedal Harp* (1821). Correcting an

'Erard centric' view requires a balanced approach, one which Baldwin navigates with finesse. Baldwin does not contest the fact that Erard's double-action model of 1811 was 'highly desired by professionals and amateurs', nor that it 'quickly became the preeminent harp' (p.132). He characterises this invention as 'the most important of harp patents' which 'set the direction of harp manufacture for the remainder of the nineteenth century' and notes that 'the principals of Erard's mechanism remain in use today' (p.132). He observes that even though contemporary makers tried to implement their own inventions, they were forced to acknowledge Erard's supremacy and often ended up producing close imitations of Erard's instruments.

Baldwin observes, however, that Erard's dominance did not only arise from their mechanical ingenuity, but also from 'their capacity to buy or appropriate others' innovations' (p.29), such as a double-action mechanism patented by Charles Gröll (1770–1857), and subsequently bought by Sébastien Erard. Indeed, Erard's many London rivals were often remarkably innovative, even if their innovations proved less influential in the long term. Baldwin identifies no fewer than 23 patents registered by 17 maker-inventors between 1794 and 1845. Thanks to his tenacious research, we learn that on a single day, 24 April 1822, three patents for harp mechanisms were enrolled: by Erard, Dodd and Delveau. Among the many intriguing London harp patents that Baldwin discusses is an 1801 invention by the Bavarian piano builder John Becker, which uses a system of rotating tuning pins to allow the harpist to play quarter tones. As Baldwin astutely observes, this was not a double-action harp but rather a quadruple-action one, capable of sounding four notes per string. Baldwin concludes that 'numerous instrument designs, now lost to all but the most ardent researcher, could have stolen Erard's crown. Some were doomed before they left the drawing board. Others, outclassed by Erard's dominance, never saw the light of day, but a few were made and enjoyed some success' (p.29).

Baldwin's advocacy of London harp makers in late Georgian London does not solely depend on his championing their mechanical innovations or unearthing their neglected patents. As he points out, the sheer number of instruments produced, many of which remain in public and private collections, as well as the undeniable quality of their craftsmanship, also make them worthy of scholarly attention. Of the approximately 20,000 harps made in London in the nineteenth century, an estimated 13,000 can be attributed to the 20 or so makers who competed with Erard. Moreover, several of today's specialists on the single-action harp choose to play on restored examples by Erat and his contemporaries, attesting to those instruments' unique musical qualities.

The most original feature of Baldwin's book is the close attention it gives to the actual workers who manufactured harps. Indeed, the field of organology has long been in the thrall of the 'Great Man' theory of history, even if it is clear that harps that bear the stamp of Erat, Erard or Dizi were no more 'made' by those men than a Pleyel piano was 'made' by Camille Pleyel. Early nineteenth-century London witnessed a shift from an older artisanal paradigm to an industrial model that required a sizeable workforce. Erard's firm, for example, employed 60 workers divided into specialised workshops. Baldwin's revisionist 'history from below' approach follows in the tradition of scholars such as E. P. Thompson in the field of New Labour history and allows us to become acquainted with 'these forgotten wood-and metal workers, turners, finishers, gilders, and porters [who] played a vital role in the development and manufacture of harps, and [whose] stories are just as interesting as those of their masters' (p.74). Not only does Baldwin identify at least 20 Erat workers by name and task, but, by combing through legal proceedings, postal directories and other sources, he has uncovered many details of their lives, such as where they lived in relation to their workplaces, and how they frequently moved between employment in the different harp businesses in London. One can only hope that future scholars will follow Baldwin's lead in researching the lives of the

overlooked artisans who toiled in harp and piano enterprises.

The Harp in Late-Georgian London is a handsomely produced volume that does justice to the 145 illustrations, both black and white and colour. More careful editing might have corrected a number of typographical and spelling errors, but such flaws are few and far between, and do not detract from the overall impression of a serious tome that is the fruit of many years of archival research, thoughtful analysis and engaging writing.

The history of harp making in the British Isles has been unjustly neglected, but along with Nancy Hurrell's recent *The Egan Irish Harps: Traditions, Patrons and Players* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2019), Baldwin's *The Harp in Late-Georgian London* has thrust this tradition to the forefront of harp scholarship. Musicologists, organologists, instrument makers, harpists, historians and music lovers will be grateful to Baldwin for bringing to life a vibrant community of inventors and makers, allowing us to better appreciate their enormous contributions to European musical life.

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