

**REVIEW** by *Mike Baldwin*

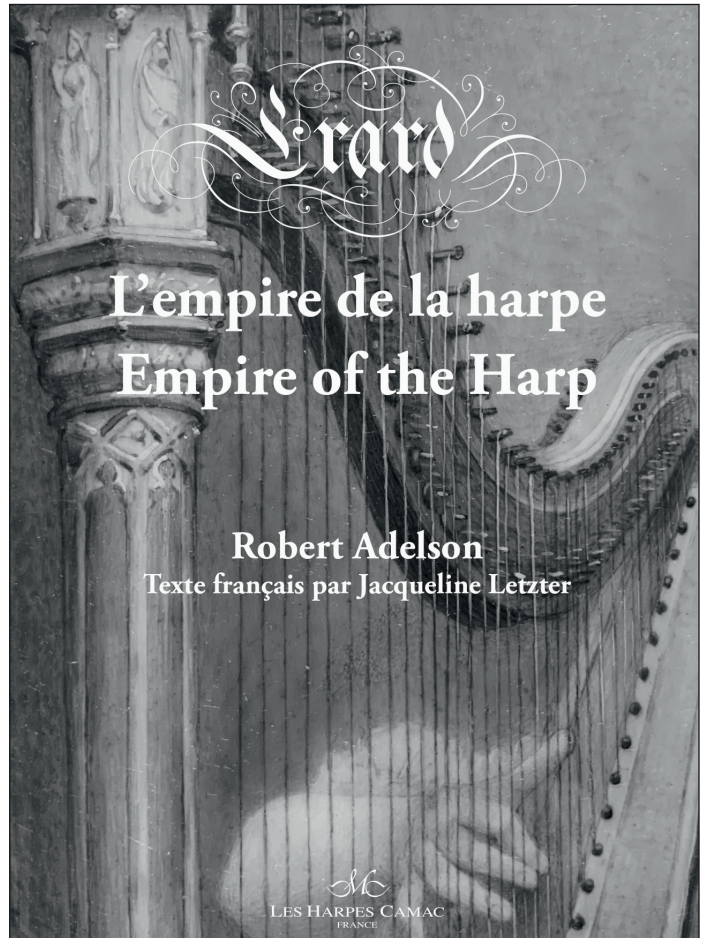
# **Erard: Empire of the Harp** **by Robert Adelson**

Robert Adelson. *Erard: L'empire de la harpe / Empire of the Harp*. French translation by Jacqueline Letzter. Mouzeil: Camac Harps, 2022. 238 pp., 88 illustrations. ISBN: 9782958396701. Paperback. £45.

Available solely from Camac Harps.

In recent years we have been spoilt by the publication of numerous books on the history of the harp: Hurrell's *The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, patrons and players* (Four Courts, 2019), Baldwin's *Harp Making in Late-Georgian London* (Bright Light, 2020), and Mattioli's *La Famiglia Erard: Un percorso storico fra documenti e strumenti musicali* (Zechini, 2022), to name a few. Publications on Erard have also arrived at regular intervals, and Robert Adelson is partly or wholly responsible for most of these. With Alan Roudier and Laure Bartel, *Mon bien cher oncle: correspondance de Pierre Erard à Sébastien Erard* (Editions Minkoff. 2006, Editions Ad Libitum 2009, 2010) made the Erard letters widely accessible to researchers for the first time. With Alain Roudier, Jenny Nex, Laure Bartel, and Michel Foussard, *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents 1785-1959* (Cambridge, 2015) broadened and deepened research into the Erards and their place in harp and piano making and provided English translations of the Erard letters. Adelson's *Erard: A Passion for the Piano* (Oxford, 2021) does for the piano what his new book, *Erard: Empire of the Harp*, does for the harp.

Robert Adelson is a musicologist, organologist, and Professor of Music History and Organology at the Conservatoire de Nice. He curates the Camac Collection of historical harps at the Château d'Ancenis (Loire-Atlantique) and, between 2005 and 2016, was curator of France's second largest collection of historical musical instruments at the Musée du Palais Lascaris in Nice. Adelson is also on the Board of Governors of the American Musical Instrument Society (AMIS) and has served on the supervisory committee of the Gaveau-Erard-Pleyel



archives.

*Erard: Empire of the Harp*, a dual-language book (French and English), is arranged chronologically in seventeen chapters, beginning with Sébastien Erard's birth in 1752 and tracing his harp-making company through highs and lows, mergers and name changes, to its closure in the early 1970s. It is the story of a business trading across three centuries in two countries. It is also the tale of two important men, Sébastien and Pierre Erard, uncle and nephew.

The breadth of historical sources used in the writing of the

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book, many newly discovered in relation to the Erards, is staggering. The Erard letters form the backbone of the book. Adelson mines this rich seam for new information about the Erards and their harp making efforts. During the research phase Adelson located a forgotten archive of materials in the possession of the Erard's descendants. Letters from Jean-Baptiste Erard, Sébastien's brother and manager of the Paris business, and between Pierre and his sister Céleste, restore these lost voices to the story, enriching our understanding of not only the day-to-day business, but also of their private lives.

Chapter one covers the early years, from Sébastien's birth in 1752, through his move from Strasbourg to Paris, and his receipt of a Royal Privilege in 1785. Chapter two discusses how Erard came to invent the forked disc, a feature of harps to this day. The merits of instruments with multiple-ranks of strings are discussed in relation to Hochbrucker's single-action and later crochet and bequille actions. So far, this is a recapitulation that sets the context for what is to come. We learn that Sébastien began work on the harp in 1788 but was initially reticent to market it. Adelson, analysing sources anew, addresses long-held misconceptions: first, the claim that Krumpholtz convinced Sébastien to abandon plans for a new harp for fear of ruining Naderman; second, that Sébastien fled Paris to escape the revolutionary forces. The third chapter is a fresh look at the development of the double-action harp. Stages towards its invention are analysed, notably Cousineau's 14-pedal harp (which Adelson was instrumental in rediscovering), Erard's harp with rotating tuning pins, and Erard's innovative single-action with fourchettes, which would ultimately give rise to the double-action harp we know today. Adelson explains how each works more fully than other authors have hitherto done, giving the reader a deeper understanding not only of these instruments, but also of Sébastien Erard's genius. It is also here that competition, a theme that runs through the book, first appears. Adelson deftly unpicks interactions between Sébastien and other inventors. We learn that he acquired and studied Cousineau's 14-pedal harp — the instrument would reappear in discussions between Sébastien and Pierre over the next 20 years— and that, as happens today, Sébastien warded off threats from other inventors by buying their patents.

Sébastien sold his first double-action harp in 1811. Chapter four examines how Erard marketed his new instrument by courting notable figures who would present it at salons, parties, balls, and concerts before the great and good of London. If competition is the first theme of the book, then marketing is the second.

In establishing their businesses, the Erards had borrowed heavily and expanded quickly. Chapter five details their financial strife. A perfect storm of indebtedness and the French Revolution thwarted international trade and curtailed French sales, bringing the company close to ruin. Adelson assesses the struggles leading to the bankruptcy of the French branch in 1813. Salvage came from unexpected quarters. Pierre Erard, son to Jean Baptiste and nephew to Sébastien, joined the business aged twenty. Where Sébastien brought invention and innovation, Pierre brought a natural flair for marketing and management. Chapter six sees Pierre take his place in the family firm. His apprenticeship is rapid. Adelson traces Pierre's rise from supervising the French business to his relocation to London, where uncle and nephew devise an audacious plan to save the French branch. In London, competition raises its head again. Pierre, not beyond espionage, visits competitors to assess their instruments and developments. Letters show that the young man was a fierce defender of the Erard name who took every opportunity to promote the business and denigrate competitors.

Within months Sébastien returned to Paris, leaving Pierre to manage the London business. Chapter seven documents his early years as "Master of Great Marlborough Street." Primary sources reveal Pierre's personality, energy and ambition. The younger Erard missed few opportunities to promote the newly invented double-action harp, and his hostility towards competitors leads to some amusing anecdotes, particularly between Pierre and Jean-François Dizi, the harpist, composer and inventor.

Chapter eight traces the expansion of the English business and sees its master touring the regions to promote the harp. He used his skills as a harpist to demonstrate the company's instruments at every opportunity but lamented that he was often too busy with the business to practice. By 1818 the Great Marlborough Street premises were in a parlous state. Pierre oversaw complicated repairs, adding to his already heavy workload. The business was doing well but encumbered by problems typical of quick expansion. Meanwhile, Robert Nicholas Charles Bochsa (1789—1856), the renowned harpist, fled his French creditors, arriving in London in 1817. Although reticent, Pierre engaged Bochsa to demonstrate the Erards' harps. Adelson uses the Erards' letters to show how relationships between makers and players were important for both parties. Despite the breaking scandal of French charges against Bochsa, Pierre was careful to maintain support; "He has a volcanic head but a good heart [...] he has such a tremendous talent that when listening to him one forgets his flaws" (p.102).

## **Erard: Empire of the Harp** *(continued)*

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The first quarter of the nineteenth century saw competing makers register numerous patents, often in vain attempts to protect their intellectual property. In chapter ten Adelson shows how Pierre monitored and reported new registrations to Sébastien in Paris. Pierre's litigious nature comes to the fore as he attempted to thwart competitors from stealing the Erards' ideas, but also to stop protection of new innovations. Patent litigation was rarely successful, however, the threat was sometimes enough to tame competitors.

By this stage, Pierre was clearly eating, sleeping and breathing the business. Chapter eleven is therefore aptly named, "I dreamt I was a harp," a comment Pierre made to his sister, Céleste. The business was thriving, and sales were good. Despite this, the French branch continued to struggle financially; Sébastien and Jean-Baptiste lacked Pierre's energy to turn the business around. Pierre was keen to develop a new, more sonorous, harp, but Sébastien was reluctant. However, we see some flexibility to explore new forms. An unusual but beautiful double action with a curvaceous forepillar was made for Thomas Hamilton of Glasgow; the harp is beautifully photographed in the book.

In chapter twelve Adelson reveals the "Battle of the pamphlets," in which various interested parties published documents in praise of their harps. The Erards' French branch finally solvent, Prony, a mathematician, published a paper proposing lessons at the Conservatoire de Paris on their double action. Henri Naderman, brother of the French maker, countered that the Erards' instruments were heavy and clumsy. François-Joseph Fétis retaliated with a pamphlet in support of the Erards. The argument continued for three years. Winning such arguments was important to the successful marketing of the business.

Chapter thirteen sees succession planning, the beginnings of Sébastien handing over the business to Pierre. Jean-Baptiste died suddenly in 1826 and Sébastien was aging and suffering from ill-health. On a visit to Paris, Pierre found the company's accounts in a poor state but declined his uncle's request to take on the day-to-day running of both branches. Sébastien initially decided to close the French business before relenting, continuing as its director. His death in 1831 perhaps saved the French business. In chapter fourteen Pierre finally takes control of both branches, liquidating his uncle's remarkable (and little researched) collection of great master paintings to clear debts. Free to make decisions, he returned to a new

instrument he'd been working on for some years, the Gothic harp. Adelson's detective work comes to the fore again here. It is known that the Gothic harp was patented in 1835. However, Adelson's discovery of one dating from and sold in 1829 shows that not only was this instrument in existence earlier than thought, but it also indicates why many surviving Erard string gauges are dated to that year. Where there was little difference in string lengths between the Erards' single- and double-actions, the Gothic utilised a new scaling. The Gothic harp was presented at the 1834 Exposition Nationale in Paris and became the standard model by 1837.

In chapter fifteen we learn of Pierre's Secret. It won't, however, be revealed in this review—it is mentioned here only to highlight Adelson's exhaustive attention to detail, his ability to find references to the Erards in places others have never looked (Pierre's secret was uncovered in a police ledger). Having contemplated marriage for many years, in 1838 Pierre finally married Camille Février, his first cousin once removed. Chapter sixteen, "The Industrial Era," follows the expansion of the business but the decline of harps and Pierre's death. The piano had come to dominate in London and Paris. Fewer harps were made each year. Age and decades of intense work were catching up with Pierre. Camille noted that "he does not always recognise people he is accustomed to see" (p.141). The company was now being managed by trusted employees. Adelson documents Pierre's death, the successful change in management spearheaded by his widow, and the continued industrialisation of the business. Pierre had established a large London factory in 1851, and by 1864 Camille had done the same in Paris. She continued to direct the business until her death in 1889.

The final chapter details the last eighty years of the business. Although for a time it grew in reputation, the absence of Sébastien's and Pierre's mechanical and business genius eventually saw it fall behind new competitors, finally closing its doors in the early 1970s.

The book concludes with three appendices. The first details harp sales (presented graphically), comparing the single- and double-action, and Paris versus London. The second reveals Pierre's monthly budgeting for the London firm in 1821, and the third, an 1822 year-end financial overview, will enable future researchers to understand the minutia of how the business operated.

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For harp and pianoforte, the Erards were second to none. Several authors have written about their work, but Adelson's book is the first to encompass their harp business from beginning to end. His exhaustive research and ability to convey a story make the book both fascinating and pleasurable to read—I read it from cover to cover in one sitting. *Erard: Empire of the Harp* sets a standard for organologists and biographers of business alike. It will become the standard tome on Erard for generations to come, and, as such, it belongs on the shelves of all harpists, musicologists, organologists, and researchers of musical instrument history.

Mike Baldwin, London, January 2023

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Baldwin balances a passion for the harp and folklore with writing and teaching children with

learning difficulties.

He completed a degree in musical instrument making in 1995 before working for Pilgrim Harps, the U.K.'s leading harp maker. Mike wrote an MA scoping newly discovered documents from the Erard harp-making company in 2010 and finished an AHRC funded PhD which examined the early nineteenth-century London-made harp, with particular regard to its mechanical and decorative development, in 2017.

Mike has lectured on the harp at conferences in Europe, the U.S.A. and Canada, and has published articles in leading organological and harp journals. He was awarded the Terence Pamplin Award for Organology from The Worshipful Company of Musicians in 2019. Mike is the author of *Harp Making in Late-Georgian London* (2020), *Mizen: Rescued Folklore from Ireland's Southwest*, 2nd edition (2022) and *Skibbereen: Rescued Folklore from Ireland's Southwest* (2022). His forthcoming book, *The Irish Harp in Folklore*, is due in 2024.

## FROM ROBERT ADELSON:

Dear fellow members of the Historical Harp Society,

I am delighted to announce the publication of my new book, *Erard: Empire of the Harp*. This is the second of my two monographs on the history of the Erard firm, a companion volume to my book *Erard: A Passion for the Piano* (Oxford UP) released last year. This new book on the harp is different from its predecessor in that it is a bilingual (French–English) edition, containing 132 colour images.

Members of the Historical Harp Society will find much new information in this book, including photos and analyses of numerous rare instruments, including:

- Sébastien Erard's first harp (Paris, c. 1786)
- Georges Cousineau (1733–1800), Double-action harp with fourteen pedals (1782)
- Erard (Paris), Double-action harp with rotating tuning pins (1800)
- Erard (London), harp n° 1387 (1811), the earliest extant Erard double-action harp
- Naderman frères, single-action harp with forked discs (Paris, after 1820)
- Two different Erard (London) child-size harps with partial double action
- Dizi/Dodd, Perpendicular harp (London, c. 1820)
- Two counterfeit Erard harps made in London c. 1820
- Erard (Paris), Harp n° 1141 (1829), prototype for the first gothic harp
- Other harps from public and private collections around the world, as well as rare archival documents, many published for the first time

The book can be purchased from the website of the publisher, Camac Harps:  
<https://shop.camac-harps.com/en/product/adelson-robert-erard-the-empire-of-the-harp/>

Kind regards,

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