

BOOK REVIEWS

The American Piano Industry: Episodes in the History of a Great Enterprise

By William E. Hettrick. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2020.

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The history of American industry may be told as a succession of manufacturers who each managed to turn a luxury product for the rich into a necessity for the masses. Fifty years before Henry Ford achieved this goal with the automobile, and a century before Steve Jobs and Bill Gates achieved it with the personal computer, Joseph P. Hale accomplished this with the upright piano in the late nineteenth century. Hale and his fellow manufacturers based their business model on the principle of interchangeable parts, thus establishing a practice that would be embraced by the automobile industry but not the personal computer industry. William E. Hettrick's new book on the American piano industry in the nineteenth century chronicles in extensive detail the inner workings of an industry that was transformed by the technological and marketing innovations of Hale and his contemporaries.

Hettrick's study builds on a solid foundation of previous studies of the piano as a technological and marketing achievement. Daniel Spillane's and Alfred Dolge's books (1890 and 1911–13, respectively) covered the topic of manufacturing during the same period chronicled by Hettrick.¹ Arthur Loesser's 1954 book used a lively narrative style to make an otherwise dry topic humorous and engaging, while Edwin M. Good took an evolutionary approach to the subject in 1982.² James Parakilas's more recent co-authored volume expanded on these earlier studies to provide an accessible and lavishly illustrated book, encompassing technology, education, and portrayals of the piano in popular media.³ Each of these foundational studies is cited repeatedly throughout Hettrick's book, and their emphasis on methods of social history is reflected in his narrative.

The book's title is indicative of the author's goals. His focus is not so much on the piano as a musical instrument, but rather as a case study in manufacturing history. As his subtitle explains, the history Hettrick covers is not comprehensive, but instead deals with a few key episodes from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the piano became central to middle-class life in the U.S. Each of the selected episodes is explored in profuse (and at times excruciating) detail. The minutiae, chronological precision, and exhaustive documentation are the result of Hettrick's diligent mining of contemporary trade journals, making the scholarly *Sitzfleisch* required to compile this book a wonder to behold.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the piano supply industry in the nineteenth century; a topic previously addressed thoroughly by only Spillane and Dolge. Hettrick's attention to detail surpasses that of any previous researcher in explaining the extent to which mid-priced pianos were assembled from interchangeable parts. He posits four different business models, ranging from the traditional methods of manufacturing all parts in-house and on site—as illustrated by the Chickering and Steinway

¹Daniel Spillane, *History of the American Pianoforte, its Technical Development, and the Trade* (New York, 1890; repr., New York: Da Capo, 1969); Alfred Dolge, *Pianos and their Makers*, 2 vols. (Covina, CA: Covina Publishing, 1911–13).

²Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954); Edwin M. Good, *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos: A Technological History from Cristofori to the Modern Concert Grand* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982).

³James Parakilas with E. Douglas Bomberger et al., *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

companies—to contracting both the manufacturing and assembling of parts to outside companies (as illustrated by Joseph P. Hale) (30). He then proceeds to describe the relative challenges of wood, felt, leather, and metal parts, coordinating the chapter's narrative account with a seventy-two-page appendix that lists the nineteenth-century manufacturers of the various component parts that went into upright pianos.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the career of “Joseph P. Hale, Legendary Piano Manufacturer,” whose image, drawn in a contemporary caricature, also graces the cover of the book. Hale was among the most successful mass producers of inexpensive pianos, and his name became synonymous with stencil pianos. This practice involved manufacturing cheap instruments with no maker's mark and subsequently stenciling them with names that resembled those of reputable manufacturers but that could not be traced. Hettrick gives a more nuanced overview of Hale's contributions to the industry by detailing the obstacles he surmounted to achieve success, his innovations in assembly line manufacturing, and his heroic perseverance in the face of attacks by the press and rival manufacturers.

Chapter 3, titled “Pitching the Goods: Piano Advertising during the Golden Years,” examines various innovations that piano companies brought to advertising. Here, Hettrick describes and provides illustrations of catalogs, magazine advertisements, slogans, and color lithographs. The chapter also includes information about the Chicago manufacturer George Bent, who specialized in poems about pianos, forty-five of which are reprinted in Appendix 3.1. Among the more informative sections of this chapter are Hettrick's discussions of prizes awarded to piano manufacturers at World's Fairs (118–19), celebrity endorsements of piano brands (124–30), and the cutthroat tactics that were necessary to secure them.

Chapter 4, titled “Gilding the Lily: The Mandolin Attachment,” devotes thirty-eight pages to novelty attachments designed to add tonal variety to pianos. In addition to practice mutes that muffled the piano's sound for practicing in apartment buildings, there were a panoply of innovations that purportedly made the instrument more interesting. Chief among these was the mandolin attachment, which used flexible strips to create a vibrating sound when struck. Other popular effects were the harp, plectrhone, dulciphone, and ukulele attachments. The variety and ubiquity of these attachments illustrate the lengths to which manufacturers went to expand their down-market appeal.

Chapter 5 explores the life and career of “John J. Swick, Obscure Piano Manufacturer.” This intriguing exercise in social history traces the checkered career of one of the lesser-known American piano makers of the era. His minor successes and repeated failures are encapsulated by Hettrick's mid-chapter comment, “John Swick kept plugging away, trying to make a buck or two” (202). However, his perseverance resulted not in financial reward, but rather bankruptcy, family tragedy, and death in the New Jersey State Lunatic Asylum. The chapter includes an impressive wealth of details, but as Hettrick acknowledges, there is no clear sense of Swick's significance: “While Joseph P. Hale's posthumous reputation eventually proved positive and became legend, that of John J. Swick did not enjoy the same outcome. He was merely forgotten, and his life's history—a tale of diligence and desperation, fortune and failure—passed into oblivion” (208).

The final chapter is devoted to a curious incident that may or may not actually have taken place. Starting in late 1903, journalist Harry E. Freund, editor of the trade journal *Musical Age*, spent half a year calling on piano dealers to ship their old square grand pianos to Atlantic City for a giant bonfire to coincide with the May 1904 convention of the National Association of Piano Dealers of America. His goal was to enhance the sale of new upright pianos by demonstrating the worthlessness of the obsolete square grand model that had been so beloved by previous generations of amateur pianists in the U.S. The response ranged from lukewarm to hostile, as dealers objected to the waste and expense involved in this publicity stunt. To minimize the potential fire risk, Atlantic City officials moved the site to a remote location that was poorly publicized, reducing Freund's dreams of a thousand flaming pianos to perhaps a dozen. In the course of nearly fifty pages, Hettrick uses this incident to chronicle Freund's career, discuss changing tastes in piano manufacture, illustrate the power of the trade press, and examine the growing influence of professional associations.

Taken as a whole, the book offers new information and extensive detail on a few representative topics. Much like test pits in an archaeological site, the individual chapters give us many artifacts but few

comprehensive insights. Consequently, scholars of keyboard history will find much valuable information here to supplement their knowledge and support future studies, but general readers will perhaps have a more difficult time finding a narrative through line. Nonetheless, Hettrick's book is a worthy addition to the literature on piano manufacturing and deserves a place in music libraries and on pianists' bookshelves.

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George Frederick Bristow

By Katherine K. Preston. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020.

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I have long considered George Bristow (1825–98) nineteenth-century United States' most unjustly forgotten musician. Anthony Philip Heinrich and William Henry Fry (author of the *Santa Claus: Christmas Symphony* in 1853) were eccentrics and good for the occasional anecdote, whereas Moreau Gottschalk carved out his own permanent half-vernacular/half-classical niche, and the European-trained John Knowles Paine and George Chadwick remain at least academically respectable. However Bristow, who for many years was a violinist in the fledgling New York Philharmonic and absorbed European culture without visiting Europe, treated American subject matter in his symphonies, piano pieces, and opera, thus combining high Continental standards with topics of local appeal. In my view, he is the best we had at the time. His posthumous reputation, though, is neither amusing, exotic, nor academic, and the international respect he earned in his lifetime is now so faded away that I rarely find a musical scholar who has even heard his name.

All the more cause for joy, then, that Katherine K. Preston has written an exhaustively researched biography, *George Frederick Bristow*, for the University of Illinois Press's *American Composers* series. Professor emerita at the College of William and Mary and a prolific writer on U.S. musical history, she was the editor of the scholarly edition of Bristow's Second, "Jullien" Symphony (1853), making her closeness to the music especially appreciated with such an obscure composer. Apparently little remains of Bristow's interior life to make his personality vivid: Around 1867 he wrote a memoir, still unpublished, whimsically referring to himself (as "Apollo") in third person. There are also a handful of late letters, along with some funereal accolades in which he is eulogized as "modest and unassuming to a fault," and someone who despised "the usual methods of gaining fame and popularity" (153). Lacking abundant personal cues, Preston has thus filled her book with a bird's-eye picture of musical activity in mid-nineteenth-century New York City, so much so that the book would also be of interest even to those with no specific curiosity about its main subject. Along the way she demonstrates the innumerable segments of that musical life in which Bristow was actively and often centrally involved. Conductor, choir-master, educator of adults and children, organizer of performing societies, engager in musical polemics, as well as a composer of five symphonies and several grand works for chorus and orchestra, Bristow is positioned by Preston as the central figure of musical New York from the 1850s to at least the 1870s, making his presence so ubiquitous that we find him on every traceable path. How such a titan could vanish from our collective memory is a problem that music historians—and performers—ought to ponder.