

# Pleyel piano used by Chopin discovered

by Alain Kohler<sup>1</sup>

English translation by Allison Zurfluh, February 2016

## Summary

Six Pleyel pianos irrefutably used by Frédéric Chopin exist to this day: pianino n°6668 in the convent of Valldemosa, grand piano n°7267 at the Musée de la Musique in Paris, grand piano n°12480 in the Stiftelsen Musikkulturens Främjande in Stockholm, grand piano n°13819 in the Cobbe Collection in Hatchlands Park (Surrey), grand piano n°13823 in the Jagiellonian University Museum in Krakow and the grand piano n°14180 at the Fryderyk Chopin Museum in Warsaw.

Other pianos are supposed to have been played by the master<sup>2</sup>, most of which we have no trace of today, notably n°11265. We will show here, through a contextual study of the archives and in concordance with the discovery of the pianino that Chopin was playing during that same period, that this **Pleyel grand piano n°11265** is indeed the piano played by Chopin while he resided at Square d'Orléans 9 in Paris, from November 29, 1844 until June 12, 1845.

**The piano was discovered last year.** Meticulously restored in 2009 by Edwin Beunk in Enschede, Netherlands, it is the property of a private German collector. The mechanics have been well preserved, and the sound is magnificent. The serial number marked in various places on the piano attests to its authenticity. To request the piano for artistic projects, please address Mr. Beunk at [www.fortepliano.nl](http://www.fortepliano.nl).

This discovery has been confirmed by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Emeritus Professor of Musicology at the University of Geneva.



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<sup>1</sup> Alain Kohler is a physics professor in a gymnasium (Maturité) in Sion, Switzerland. Long-time Chopin enthusiast, his interest in Pleyel pianos burgeoned when he acquired an 1846 upright Pleyel piano and had it restored. This article is part of a broader study entitled, "Pleyel pianos and Chopin at the time of his relationship with Sand," published in French in February 2015 at [www.musicologie.org](http://www.musicologie.org). The author is grateful to Mrs Allison Zurfluh, Mr Yves Henry, Mr Benjamin Vogel, Mr Tobias Koch, the owner of the piano and particularly to Mrs Marie-Paule Rambeau, Mr Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger and Mr Edwin Beunk for their kind collaboration.

<sup>2</sup> EIGELDINGER, p. 175: "Among the pianos fortunate enough to have been used in the Square d'Orléans parlour, between the fall of 1843 and the winter of 1847-1848, sales records indicate that numbers 10039 (grand patron) and 10113 (upright) - both of which were used to give lessons-, 11265 (?), 12480, and 13214 (all three small patrons)."

## Context

Between the years of 1841 and 1846, the romantic relationship between Frédéric Chopin and George Sand was invariably punctuated by winter sojourns in Paris and summers spent at Sand's house in Nohant. They lived at Square d'Orléans while in Paris, from the fall of 1842, Chopin at n°9 and Sand at n°5. Chopin's apartment was doted with a spacious parlour, which offered sufficient space for intimate concerts with friends.

Chopin returned to Paris from Berry on November 29, 1844; his companion would join him on December 13. They would remain until June 12, 1845.

## Second piano

Several sources confirm that Chopin had a second piano at Square d'Orléans that was used for accompaniment, the grand piano being reserved for his students. This second piano was, at first, a square piano, then a pianino or an oblique upright.

The presence of a square piano in Chopin's apartment is confirmed by Wilhelm von Lenz at the end of 1842, in reference to a private concert at the master's home where Chopin presented the young prodigy, Carl Filtsch:

*"Chopin had the square piano brought from his workroom into the parlour near the grand Pleyel (das Tafelförmige Instrument)<sup>3</sup> ..."*

Karol Mikuli, Chopin's student since 1844, wrote that Chopin had *"a Pleyel pianino which he used to interrupt or correct his students<sup>4</sup> ..."*

A student's writings from March 1846 confirm Mikuli's statement:

*"In the centre of the room were two pianos: a grand piano and an upright, both Pleyels with a beautiful sonority and touch...at times he would sit at the second instrument and play softly, improvising an accompaniment<sup>5</sup>."*

Another student, Emilia Borzecka, writes:

*"I went to his home for only a few lessons. If my memory serves me well, it was toward the end of 1846, or early 1847. Chopin was already so ill at that time that he hardly spoke during the lessons but, seated at a second piano, played certain passages to demonstrate how they should be played<sup>6</sup>."*



*The author's pianino n°13153, August 1846*

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<sup>3</sup> LENZ, p. 158-59.

<sup>4</sup> EIGELDINGER, p. 173, written in 1879 by Mikuli (preface to her book.). Mikuli was a student of Chopin from 1844 until his departure for London in the spring of 1848.

<sup>5</sup> RAMBEAU, p. 732, testimony of an anonymous Scottish student taken from *Chopin*, James Cuthbert Hadden, Dent, (London, 1903).

<sup>6</sup> RAMBEAU, p. 761.

## New Pianos

Chopin had formed a kind of long-term partnership with Camille Pleyel, who loaned pianos to the artist on a regular basis. Chopin was a good advertiser since many of his students would eventually purchase Pleyel pianos. Thus, Chopin had a constant influx of new instruments available to him. Every time he returned to Paris, he had new pianos to work with. There were at least three reasons for this:

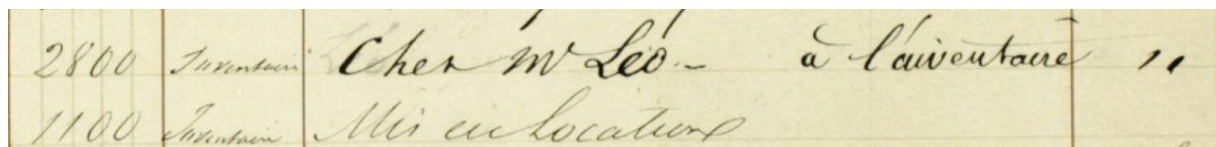
- i) Severe shaking during transport in Berry Province could disturb the fine Pleyel mechanics. As proof, we have Chopin's discontent expressed in the midsummer of 1841 when he asked, from Nohant, that Pleyel send another piano to replace the one in such bad condition. Chopin also complains during the summer of 1845:

*"I haven't been playing a lot, my piano is out of tune<sup>7</sup>."*

Recovering pianos that had to make the return journey!

- ii) Chopin often changed pianos to go to Nohant, and the pianos at Square d'Orléans did not remain in his apartment. Instead, they were quickly sold or leased by Pleyel as part of his business!
- iii) Most importantly, autumn corresponds to a new school year. This was the perfect time for Pleyel to show his new piano models to the aristocrats visiting Chopin's parlour.

Chopin had two pianos during the winter of 1843-44: a grand piano n°10039 and an upright piano n°10113. These pianos went with him to Nohant. Upon his return, the grand piano was made available to Auguste Léo, a banker and friend to Chopin, while the upright was leased. Since Pleyel did not lease pianos to Chopin<sup>8</sup>, it can be concluded that the pianist received new pianos on loan upon his arrival in Paris in November 1844.



*Indications regarding the destinations of pianos n°10039 and n°10113 in the sales records dating 1844-45.*

## Announcement of the arrival of a piano

Chopin writes to George Sand on December 5, 1844:

*"I have not yet started giving lessons. Primo, I have only received one piano so far. Secondo, people are not yet aware that I've arrived<sup>9</sup>."*

This text confirms that the musician received a new piano. Its arrival was very recent, the same or preceding day.

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<sup>7</sup> CFC, t. III, p. 200, letter from Chopin dating July 16, 1845 to his family in Warsaw.

<sup>8</sup> A note from Mr. Herbault, colleague of Pleyel and friend of Chopin, in a letter to the composer dating December 21, 1844, in which he "declares to want nothing in return for the piano, which had been in Berry Province, the lease for which Chopin wanted to pay". KARLOWICZ, p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> CFC, t. III, p. 183.

## The Pleyel archives. Methodology.

There are two logbooks, books listing several sales records each (which we will refer to as SR) with a fiscal year extending from July 1 to June 30, and the manufacture records (which we will refer to as MR).

Each SR contains the following elements on two pages. On the first are noted: serial number / price category / description of the piano / category / number of cords and octaves. On the second are noted: price and date of arrival at store / name and city of the buyer or indication of a lease, or nothing / date of sale or lease / selling price.

If a piano was already at the store as of July 1, it is noted as having arrived in the 'Inventory', inasmuch as it is carried over from the preceding record. Under the heading 'Name of Buyer', if nothing has been noted, or under 'Inventory', this means that the piano was neither sold nor leased during the period of July 1 of said year to June 30 of said year plus one, and is, logically, noted 'Inventory' in the following record as an arrival at store.

The MR lists the serial number of a piano, its characteristics, and the completion dates provided by the different master craftsmen: case makers / soundboard makers / stringers / keyboards / mechanisms / finishers / lids / iron frame makers / varnishers / tuner. It is important to note that all dates were listed from Saturday to Saturday: a piano varnished on June 10 was not necessarily varnished on that day, but would have been varnished between June 5 and 10. For example, a piano said to have been completed on June 2 could easily be on the floor at the end of May.

The method used for locating pianos is systematic and consists not of first identifying barely decipherable inscriptions that could correspond to the name of a pianist. Rather it involves examining the archives of all the pianos in the relevant archives, first taking account of the dates.

In our case, we are looking in SR 1844-45 for all pianos having been completed prior to mid-December 1844 and which have been either sold or leased in June 1845 or later. This narrows down a list of potential candidates.

The next step is to apply other criteria based on a solid argument. The word 'Chopin', if it exists, written in pencil, becomes a determining factor. It was by implementing this method that the author discovered a light notation on a tipped upright piano.

## In pursuit of the second piano

While reading SR from 1844-45, six candidates meet the criteria with regard to dates. Objectively, we can consider three: the square pianos n° 11417 (no date of entry to the store has been noted but the MR indicates that a piano was completed on May 31, 1845), n° 11509 (at the store in December but according to the MR the piano was completed on December 21), and n° 11579 (indication that it was in the store in November 1844 but there is an error; the MR indicates November 8, 1845 and it was on the floor in November 1845 in the SR 1845-46).

There are, then, three remaining candidates:

**Upright piano n°10223:** In the store in October 1843 for Fr. 1,400, it is noted 'Exposition' (likely the National Exposition in Paris in May and June of 1844). It was in the inventory on July 1, 1844 for Fr. 1,400. Moved onto the floor and still in the inventory on July 1, 1845, it was sold at the price of Fr. 1,330 in December 1845.

**Square piano n° 11035:** In rosewood, completed on November 30, 1844, for sale in the store in December for Fr. 1,100, in the inventory on July 1, 1845, and leased in December 1845 for Fr. 700.

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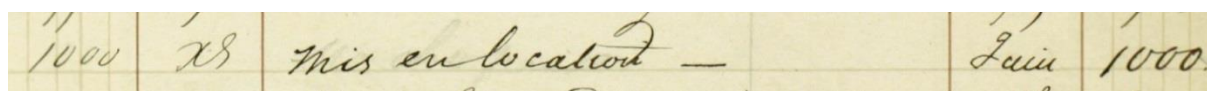
<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that on occasion only serial numbers exist, without any other marking. The MR verifies that these pianos were completed after June 30, 1845. They are listed later in the record.

**Pianino n° 11380:** In rosewood, varnished on November 30, 1844 and completed on December 7, in the store in December for Fr. 1,000, it is leased in June 1845 for Fr. 1,000.

The upright piano was a display piano that was clearly too old, more than one year. All known pianos to have been made available to Chopin were, for advertising purposes, not more than four months old<sup>11</sup>.

Interestingly, the square piano lost much of its value to say that Chopin used it and that its lease came much later. The most important reason for this was its square nature. During the winter of 1842-43, Chopin certainly had one at his disposal, but the same cannot be said for the following year, when he was using an oblique upright. Statements from 1844 strongly suggest an upright piano.

Pianino n° 11380 is situated at the ideal dates. Completed on December 7 at the latest, Chopin writes in his letter of December 5 that he had not yet received it. Its lease in June corresponds exactly with the month he and Sand left for Berry Province. And to top it off, under the text 'Leased' (Mis en location), **pencilled lightly are the words 'Mr. Chopin'!** On occasion, the name of the person who had used the piano would be noted in pencil, which in this case serves as further justification that Pleyel knew of Chopin's departure from Paris prior to July 1 and that the instrument's status would change (either a sale, lease, or inventory).



**The pianino n°11380, in rosewood, is without a doubt the piano used by Chopin** to accompany his students at Square d'Orléans, from early December 1844 to June 12, 1845.

## In pursuit of the grand piano

Reading through the SR for the dates of 1844-1845 leaves us with six candidates (GP stands for grand patron and PP for petit patron):

**Grand piano GP<sub>B</sub> n° 10038**, in rosewood, in the store in June 1843 for Fr. 2,800, it is in inventory until its lease in the fiscal year 1846-47. It resembles n° 10039 used by Chopin the year prior, and thus too old.

**Grand piano GP<sub>A</sub> n°10816**, in rosewood, in the store in June 1844 for Fr. 3,000, it is a special, unique version with double percussion. A display piano having also spent several years in inventory, it is leased in February 1850 for Fr. 1,500.

**Grand piano GP<sub>A</sub> n° 11011**, solid rosewood, in the store in June 1844 for Fr. 3,000, it is marked 'Exposition', still in inventory as of July 1 1845 for Fr. 2,800, and is leased in June 1846 for Fr. 1,500.

This piano was on display, and the lease price is strangely low for a two-year old instrument (manufacturing flaw?). Most importantly, it is a piano marked GP<sub>A</sub> in the MR, or in other words the largest model manufactured by Pleyel: a concert piano. Such a piano could not have corresponded to Chopin's aesthetic (parlour concerts at home), and who employed smaller grand pianos<sup>12</sup>.

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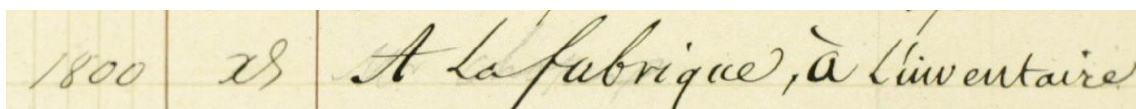
<sup>11</sup> Two weeks for the Pleyel n° 7267, four months for n° 10039, two months for n° 10113, three months for n° 11527, a maximum of two months for n° 13214 and one short month for n° 14810.

<sup>12</sup> Chopin generally used petit patron grand pianos, with the exception of n° 7267 and n° 10039, both GP<sub>B</sub> models, or a cross between the concert piano and a petit patron piano.

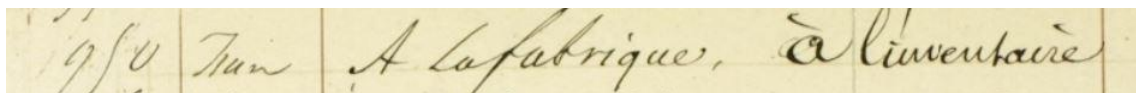
**Grand piano PP n° 11235**, in mahogany ‘chenillé’, in the store in November 1844 for Fr. 1,800, marked ‘In the factory, in inventory’. It was sold to Mr. Lelary in Paris in August 1845 for Fr. 1,800. Lightly pencilled below the text ‘in the factory’ is a word that does not correspond to the word ‘Chopin’ but whose first capital letter ‘G’ probably indicates the pianist Alexandre Gorla.

**Grand piano PP n° 11243**, in mahogany ‘chenillé’, in the store in November 1844 for Fr. 1,800, marked ‘in the branch store, in inventory’. It was sold to Mr. Zwischenbart in Basel in July 1845 for Fr. 1,700. Lightly pencilled below the text ‘in the branch store’ is the beginning of a word whose first letter is a capital C. No trace of a p can be seen, and near the end is a round, upward marking. It is unlikely that the word is ‘Chopin’. The only candidate we cannot rule out is this piano, n° 11243. However, the next piano fills all criteria.

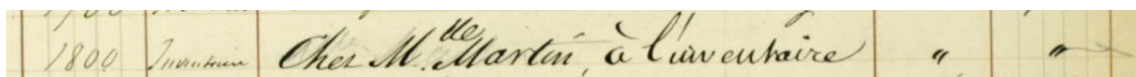
**Grand piano PP n° 11265**, in mahogany ‘chenillé’, is varnished on November 30 and completed on December 7. In the store in December 1844 for Fr. 1,800, marked ‘in the factory, in inventory’, with pencilled below a **relatively clear text that reads ‘Mr. Chopin’**<sup>13</sup>. It is sold for the same price to Mr. Bouvier in September 1845.



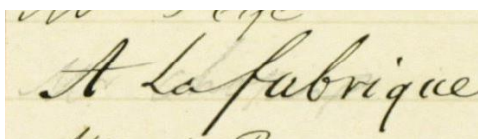
But what does ‘In the factory, in inventory’ mean? We might reason that the piano had to be returned to the factory for repairs prior before Chopin could use it. In fact, the words ‘In the factory, in inventory’ belong solely to the fiscal year 1844-45. It is synonymous with ‘In inventory’. To prove this, we cast back to the heavy use of the term with pianos manufactured in May and June, which is normal since there is no time for many of the pianos to be sold, so they are stocked in inventory until July 1.



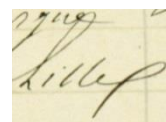
While the piano was loaned beyond July 30, in addition to pencilling in the name of the artist, Pleyel penned a confirmation of the loan beyond that date.



*Grand piano n° 10467, loaned to Joséphine Martin at least until end June 1845*<sup>14</sup>



We might ask ourselves whether the text written under the words ‘In the factory’ really is ‘Mr. Chopin’ since the final letter is directed downward. In fact, quite often words were



terminated with a kind of additional loop-shaped letter, as can be observed here in the word ‘Lille’.

The fact that the words ‘Mr. Chopin’ are covered in no way signifies that it was not loaned to him. Rather it means that the piano had been loaned to him, but as it was returned before the end of June, ‘In the factory, in the inventory’, it is added over the name, in SR 1844-45.

<sup>13</sup> Note that the handwriting of ‘Mr. Chopin’ for this piano as well as pianino n° 11380 are identical, while n° 11243 has no ‘Mr.’ and the ‘C’ is very different. Yet another reason, if necessary, to reject n° 11243.

<sup>14</sup> The following record confirms that Ms Martin still had this piano in her possession.

There remains the problem of dates. First, the piano was sold only three months after being returned, which was not the norm. Typically, pianos returned to Pleyel by Chopin were either sold or leased within the month that followed. In the summer and autumn of 1845, Pleyel rolled out a first series of 6 + ¾ octaves PP (Ut-la), n° 12128 and n° 12137, the keyboards having been completed by September 20. It is then highly probable that the 6 + 2/3 octaves PP n° 11265 (Ut-sol), returned by Chopin in June, was brought up to date with an addition of two keys prior to being sold in September to Mr. Bouvier, which explains the delay<sup>15</sup>!

It was then completed on Saturday, December 7, though Chopin received it on December 5 or the day prior. It is important to keep in mind that progress was logged on Saturdays only. The last operation was to tune it (indicated by the word ‘Egalisseurs’ in the MR), and that was completed between December 2 and 7. This corresponds even better to Chopin’s remark that he had “*only received one piano so far*”, which is to say that one piano had not been installed in his parlour prior to his arrival in Paris.

Finisseurs.		Couvres.		Ferreurs.		Vernisseurs.		Egalisseurs.	
Dates.	Noms.	Dates.	Noms.	Dates.	Noms.	Dates.	Noms.	Dates.	Noms.
9 <sup>th</sup> 30	Moartmus			9 <sup>th</sup> 16	Achilles	9 <sup>th</sup> 30	Delattre	9 <sup>th</sup> 7	Picot
9 <sup>th</sup> 30	Loiseau			9 <sup>th</sup> 9	Stenhamm	9 <sup>th</sup> 30	fritz	9 <sup>th</sup> 7	

*The dates of the final operations in the MR, November 9, 16, 30 and December 7, 1844, are all Saturdays. The first piano indicated is the grand piano n° 11265, the second is the pianino n° 11380.*

It is also important to note that grand pianos in the series n° 11260 to n° 11267 were immediately sold after completion. In other words, piano n° 11265 did not linger in the store but was immediately loaned to Chopin. The next grand piano to be loaned to the artist was without a doubt PP n° 11527. It was, certainly, already in the store in April 1845, but Chopin did not have one in Paris because this piano was not only clearly indicated for Berry Province, it was loaned to the pianist Gorla in April and May. It can be concluded that n° 11265 was in Chopin’s apartment for the duration of his stay in the winter and spring of 1845.

It is, thus, easy to reconstruct the events: Chopin failed to notify Pleyel of his arrival in Paris. He arrived on Friday, November 29. It was snowing. He wouldn’t see Pleyel until Monday, December 2:

*“I saw neither Grzymala nor Pleyel, it was Sunday. I hope to go today (Monday) if the snow lets up<sup>16</sup>.”*

He went to the store and selected two pianos, which had been varnished days earlier. They are n° 11265 and n° 11380. Once tuned, the grand piano was delivered first, since it was the most urgent. The pianino followed soon after.

**The logical elimination of certain candidates and the correlation of dates and the pencilled words ‘Mr. Chopin’ between the upright piano n° 11380 and the grand piano n° 11265 leaves no room for doubt:**

**The petit patron grand piano n° 11265, in mahogany ‘chenillé’, is the same piano used by Chopin in his parlour between December 5, 1844 and June 12, 1845.**

<sup>15</sup> Today, piano n° 11265 has 6 + ¾ octaves. Such is also the case for existing pianos that were made just prior to that series – the last 6 + 2/3 octaves that were found with two additional notes, for example n° 10756, n° 11316, n° 11926, n° 12000 and n° 12099.

<sup>16</sup> CFC, t. III, p. 181, letter from Chopin to George Sand, Monday, December 2, 1844.

## Photos of the grand piano Chopin n° 11265 and its restoration in 2009

This piano, whose history remains to be further researched, was restored in 2009 by Edwin Beunk in the rules of the art. While the woodwork has been damaged (veneer, beams, reattachment of the soundboard, the partially reconstructed bed base), the mechanics have been very well preserved (hammers, even damaged by mites, provide a wonderful sound: they were not changed).



*The cabinet with a poorly preserved veneer.*



*Well-preserved mechanics*



*Serial number on both the mechanics and the cabinet.*



*The piano at the home of its owner in 2015*



## Selective Biography

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