



C. BECHSTEIN

GRAND & UPRIGHT PIANOS

C. Bechstein: The legend lives on

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The birth of a legend comes about under extraordinary conditions. Nearly 160 years after its founding, the C. Bechstein brand still enjoys a vibrant aura. Its vitality comes from the team's dedication and passionate commitment to the company.

The patriarch

Berlin 1853. Friedrich Wilhelm Carl Bechstein, a twenty-seven-year-old instrument maker from Gotha, Thuringia, who is related to the writer Ludwig Bechstein famous for his compilation of traditional tales and legends, decides to live out his dream and make his vision reality: he founds his own business.

Berlin has not yet forgotten the troubles of the 1848 revolution. Frederic William IV, the king of Prussia nicknamed "the romanticist on the throne," has not kept his promise: instead of granting a liberal constitution to his States, he has just introduced a tax-based three-class suffrage. His brother (who is to succeed him as Emperor William I) is nicknamed the "Canon Prince" ever since he had hundreds of people shot to restore law and order during the 1849 Baden uprising. The Frankfurt parliament, which used to gather in the Saint Paul's Church, has been dissolved and the hope of a unified Germany is vanishing: all German States, whether Hesse, Saxony or such Lilliputian principalities as Lippe-Detmold, are stagnating and their trading is slow due to the high customs duties they charge each other.

Such conditions lead many Germans to emigrate to America, either to escape political repression or simply to avoid starvation, and in the hope of finding better living conditions on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Among the celebrities who leave Germany but remain in Europe are Richard Wagner, who lives in exile in Zurich for political reasons, and the poet Heinrich Heine who, from his Parisian "mattress grave," considers Germany as sinking into "A Winter's

Tale" as it becomes an archipelago of retrograde States.

Founding a business in troubled times

Although the period is quite bleak, new ideas still arise and feed on the German spirit of enterprise. Friedrich Krupp runs modern steelworks in Essen, while August Borsig founds smelting works in Berlin. A new age begins, one of heavy industry, blast furnaces and steam railway engines. Nonetheless, the industrial development suffers under a mighty bureaucracy and the privileges of aristocracy that have not yet been abolished.

In 1854, Hanover finally joins the German Customs Union that Prussia initiated three decades earlier. This is real economical progress, but social progress does not keep pace: child labour remains legal as a Prussian law passed the same year merely raises the minimum age to twelve years.

The paintings by Adolph Menzel provide a good overview of the changes that occur in the mid-19th century. A broad-minded artist with a talent for rendering the world around him, Menzel mainly paints landscapes, portraits and genre pictures until the early 1850s. He also gives historic paintings and his favourite subject at that time is Frederic II, as we know from several portraits of that king: riding, playing the flute, together with his Court painter Antoine Pesne. In 1847, Menzel paints his two first works that feature social and contemporary subjects: a view of the Berlin-Potsdam railway and the portrait of two men entitled to suffrage. And in 1854, he gives a famous study that depicts Clara Schumann and the violinist Joseph Joachim. Not until

the 1870s, however, will he devote himself to representing the industrial revolution, then painting one of his masterpieces: *The Rolling Mill*. To a certain extent, the non-representation of particular topics also reveals the spirit of a given time: for example, even though Menzel does not represent the barricades and fires that shook Berlin in 1849, his studies figuring a students' torchlight procession can be understood as a discreet allusion to the riots.

All in all, 1853 is not the ideal year for founding a musical instrument business. We do not know exactly how many brave young craftsmen do the same as Carl Bechstein this year – but must bury their dreams under a mountain of debts shortly thereafter. Nonetheless, Berlin already enjoys a certain aura in the mid-1850s, even though it still is not the prestigious cultural metropolis that it would later become. Several decades ago, Romantic poets and philosophers formulated the visionary concept of "Athens on the Spree" as the cultural aspect of a political project: while Napoleon was remodelling Paris taking the Roman Empire as an example, Berlin was to become a new Athens; a capital city of arts, sciences, poetry and philosophy. As a reaction to the political and military hegemony of the French empire, the famous Prussian scientist Humboldt stated: "Science is power." The idea remains valid in the mid-19th century, and still lives on today.

Moreover, Berlin is an obligatory station for numerous musicians as they travel from one European city to another. The Prussian well-to-do love music for a simple reason: in a period of political troubles, they seek refuge in music as it conveys a reassuring image, that of the Ancient Cythera. Thus it is not



Carl Bechstein, the company founder



Great musicians and composers, such as Debussy and Brahms, favour C. Bechstein.



surprising that the Berlin bourgeoisie favours a musical instrument that is continuously being improved and offers unequalled learning possibilities: the piano.

Carl Bechstein arrives in Berlin in 1846 (or 1848, according to some sources) and starts working with Gottfried Perau, whose workshop is located on Hausvogteiplatz in the very centre of Berlin. Just like Kisting, Perau is famous in Berlin for his traditional pianos, but he is by no way a tinkerer in search of innovative solutions, like Theodor Stöcker, for example, whose pianos with downstriking action and articulated keyboard are still exceptional today.

Although Bechstein is entrusted with the management of the Perau workshop in the autumn of 1848, he resigns shortly thereafter and travels to London the following summer, then to Paris where he improves his knowledge working with two great piano-makers: the ingenious Jean-Henri Pape, born in Sarstedt, Germany, and Jean-Georges Kriegelstein, an Alsatian whose pianos are exceptionally successful. Pape, who patented 120 inventions, impresses Bechstein with his creative potential, while Kriegelstein puts the young German in contact with contemporary business management and practices. Moreover, Kriegelstein's success is based on a sensational innovation that he has marketed boldly since 1842: a compact but powerful upright piano of

only 130 centimetres that offers well-balanced registers and constitutes a good investment.

Of course, the Érard brand is also famous when Carl Bechstein is in Paris. Among the innovations of the legendary company founder, Sébastien Érard, is the double escapement piano action still used – with certain improvements – in today's grands. In the mid-19th century, every music aficionado knows that Franz Liszt favours the Érard pianos. We cannot ascertain whether Bechstein meets Pierre Érard, Sébastien's nephew, but we know that the young German is perfectly aware of the brand's worldwide significance. Until his death in 1855, Pierre Érard, who has been running the family business since 1831, is to strengthen his market position steadily: the Paris and London factories are producing nearly 2500 pianos a year; Paris's Érard Hall is one of the city's most famous concert venues; and the feasts given at the Château de la Muette, acquired by Sébastien in 1820, are attracting the capital's high society. Does Érard's success impress Carl Bechstein so deeply that he decides to become just as successful? We do not know exactly, of course, but the fact is that Bechstein is to supersede Érard as Europe's main piano-maker in the decades to come.

What kind of man is Carl Bechstein, actually? By no means full of himself, he keeps no diary in his youth and

will write no memoirs in his old age. Photos of him picture a self-confident man with an imposing stature. One of them (see page 9) shows him standing with his left elbow leaning on one of his uprights, with a large coat in the Romantic fashion draped over his broad shoulders. Such a fellow could not possibly remain unnoticed in a select Paris salon...

Upon his return to Berlin in 1852, Bechstein becomes manager of the Perau factory but as early as the next year, he departs for Paris again and works there just a few months as manager of the Kriegelstein factory. Why does he leave again? Maybe for the love of a certain Louise Döring, a young woman from Strausberg, Brandenburg, whom he would marry in 1856. Back in Berlin for good now, he again works as the right hand of Perau, who allows him to build his own pianos starting 1 October 1853 in the upper storey of the company's warehouse at Behrenstrasse 56. It is unlikely that Bechstein decides to settle down in Berlin because he knows that Perau would allow him to work on his own while managing the workshop. A better explanation for Bechstein starting his own production could be that his boss refused to implement in his pianos the innovations Bechstein learned of in Paris. Anyway, both men reach a gentlemen's agreement and although Bechstein begins signing his name on pianos as soon as 1853, the official foundation of the company, as stated on official documents, is not until 1856.

A glance at a map of Berlin shows that Bechstein's workshop is located at a strategic location in the Prussian capital. Behrenstrasse, also home to the Metropoltheater (renamed "Komische Oper" in 1846), runs parallel to Unter den Linden Boulevard and crosses both Charlottenstrasse and Friedrichstrasse – three streets where the city's powerful and well-to-do are living. Moreover, Bechstein's workshop is in the vicinity of the Opera, the Brandenburg Gate, Gendarmenmarkt (the square where the Lutter & Wegener pub is located that E.T.A. Hoffmann, the Romantic writer, used to frequently visit) and Leipziger Strasse (where are living the musician Felix Mendelssohn and

rich culture-friendly people). We can therefore be fairly certain that Carl Bechstein did not decide by chance to locate his workshop in Behrenstrasse.

Various publications underscore the fact that some of his ancestors were also wilful and had a practical character. According to an article published in *Gothaisches Tageblatt* in 1926 on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Carl Bechstein's birth, the company founder stems from peasants and craftsmen who had lived for centuries in various villages in Thuringia, in particular Laucha, Langenhain, Waltershausen and Ohrdruf. The article also states that several members of this family were talented musicians, which is not surprising as Thuringia has a long musical tradition. A certain Johann Matthäus Bechstein, who studied first theology, then natural sciences, established a forestry school in Waltershausen and later became director of the Dreissigacker/Meiningen Forest Academy. His nephew, Ludwig Bechstein, published a compilation of Thuringian tales that decisively contributed to popularisation of the German Middle Ages and was one of Richard Wagner's sources of inspiration as he composed *Tannhäuser*. Appointed a librarian by the duke of Saxony-Meiningen and titled "Court Advisor," which was a common form of sponsoring the fine arts in the 19th century, Ludwig Bechstein died in Meiningen in 1860.

Among his cousins were Carl Bechstein's father, a hairdresser living in Laucha who worked hard, ran his own business... and played the spinet during his leisure time. He died in 1831 at the age of forty-six, leaving three children behind including Carl, the youngest at only five years old. Shortly after, his widow married Johann Michael Agthe, the cantor of Dietendorf's church, who was strict with his own daughter and his new wife's three children. Nonetheless, Carl's father-in-law enabled the young boy to study the violin, the cello and the piano, prior to placing him in apprenticeship in Erfurt under the piano-maker Johann Gleitz in 1840. Emilie, Carl's eldest sister, was already engaged to Gleitz and married him in 1844.

Das Fabrikanten-Verzeichnis ist die Zusammenfassung von Bechstein'schen Instrumenten in verschiedenen Gattungen stellen es jeder Zeit zur gefälligen Ansicht.

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DIE PIANOFORTE - FABRIK
von
C. BECHSTEIN.
Concert- & Salon-Flügel. Stutz-Flügel. Pianinos.

Berlin, Johannisstr. 4, Magazin und Lager Behrenstr. 56.

| No. | Bezeichnung | Preis |
|-----|--|-------|
| 1 | Concertflügel, 7 Reihen, von A bis A, Mechanismus mit ununterbrochener Auslösung, Metallener Rahmenhalter und Klapphalter, 4 Eisenplatten, Rollen, Ankerrolle (Fellensender) Holz mit Messingblech-Einlage oder Nüchternverzierungen (1 Lang, 2 1/2 hoch) | 700 |
| 2 | Dieselben in Nüchtern | 515 |
| 3 | Concertflügel, 7 Reihen, von A bis A, Mechanismus mit ununterbrochener Auslösung, Metallener Rahmenhalter und Klapphalter, 4 Eisenplatten, Rollen, Ankerrolle (Fellensender) Holz (7 1/2 Lang, 4 1/2 hoch) | 500 |
| 4 | Dieselben in Nüchtern | 315 |
| 5 | Stutzflügel, 7 Reihen, von A bis A, Mechanismus mit ununterbrochener Auslösung, Metallener Rahmenhalter und Klapphalter, 4 Eisenplatten, Rollen, Ankerrolle (Fellensender) Holz (7 1/2 Lang, 4 1/2 hoch) | 450 |
| 6 | Dieselben in Nüchtern | 265 |
| 7 | Pianino, schön mit schönverzierten Rollen (Piano vertical), 4 Reihen von A bis A, Forte- und Halbton-Pedal, Leuchter, Rollen etc., in Ankerrolle (Fellensender) Holz, Mechanismus mit ununterbrochener Auslösung, Metallener Rahmenhalter, 4 Eisenplatten (7 1/2 hoch, 4 1/2 hoch, 4 1/2 hoch) | 300 |
| 8 | Dieselben in Nüchtern | 215 |
| 9 | Pianino, schön mit schönverzierten Rollen (Piano vertical), 4 Reihen von A bis A, Forte- und Halbton-Pedal, Leuchter, Rollen etc., in Ankerrolle (Fellensender) Holz, Mechanismus mit ununterbrochener Auslösung, Metallener Rahmenhalter, 4 Eisenplatten (7 1/2 hoch, 4 1/2 hoch, 4 1/2 hoch) | 250 |
| 10 | Dieselben in Nüchtern | 165 |
| 11 | Pianino, schön mit schönverzierten Rollen (Piano vertical), 4 Reihen von A bis A, Forte- und Halbton-Pedal, Leuchter, Rollen etc., in Ankerrolle (Fellensender) Holz, Mechanismus mit ununterbrochener Auslösung, Metallener Rahmenhalter, 4 Eisenplatten (7 1/2 hoch, 4 1/2 hoch, 4 1/2 hoch) | 200 |
| 12 | Dieselben in Nüchtern | 115 |

Die Verpackung eines Flügels resp. Pianinos in einer Kiste mit Schrauben etc. Nachher überlassen die Verpackung in Holz und Metall.

Das Fabrikanten-Verzeichnis ist die Zusammenfassung von Bechstein'schen Instrumenten in verschiedenen Gattungen stellen es jeder Zeit zur gefälligen Ansicht.

One of the first C. Bechstein catalogues, with a view of the factory in Johannisstrasse.

Although an alcoholic, Gleitz was not a bad craftsman, but Carl had to cope with his master's bad temper during his four-year apprenticeship. Therefore, the company founder's childhood and adolescence cannot be described as particularly happy. This probably explains why his contemporaries described him as someone particularly

serious, but also amiable and debonair. Moreover, Carl Bechstein was thrifty, according to his own account that, leaving Dresden where he was working with Pleyel for Berlin, he walked all the way barefoot to save his shoes. Moreover, he took advantage of any opportunity to fulfil his education. For example, when he was directing the



Franz Liszt in concert at Berlin's Music Academy, caricature, 1842.

Perau factory he used his rare leisure time to learn French.

7 Provided with strong self-confidence and faith in his physical strength, the young Bechstein continues unwaveringly on the path he has chosen. As mentioned above, this way leads him from Berlin to London to Paris, then back to Berlin again where, in his small workshop on Behrenstrasse, he builds his first two pianos in 1853 within just three months. Although it is purely coincidental that his relative Ludwig Bechstein publishes his masterpiece, *Deutsches Sagenbuch*, in the same year, the fame of the writer is to have positive effects on that of the piano-maker in Berlin's cultivated circles.

As soon as he is running his own business, Bechstein uses the contacts he made with noted artists when he was working with Perau. These include Theodor Kullak, piano teacher of the royal family, who praises Bechstein's first pianos, which boosts their fame. A former pupil of Carl Czerny and a "classical virtuoso", Kullak founded the "Music School for Singing, Piano and Composition" together with violinist Julius Stern and composer Adolf Bernhard Marx in 1850. (The school is to become the famous Stern Conservatory later on.)

From an economical point of view, founding a company in Berlin is also the right decision as Prussia is Germany's largest and most powerful German State in the mid-19th century. This is of crucial importance in a time when every sovereign arbitrarily levies customs duties on goods to be sold on his territory, which severely impairs the exchange of commodities within Germany. Moreover, as Prussia dominates the above-mentioned Customs Union, Berlin-based companies enjoy considerable commercial advantages.

Another favourable factor for founding a new piano business is that division of labour appears in the piano-making industry as early as the mid-19th century: J.C.L. Isermann opened Germany's first action manufacturing plant in Hamburg in 1842; Charles Gehrling and Henry Schwander did the same in Paris nearly at the same time; Morgenstern & Kontrade founded a similar business in Leipzig in 1846; and Lexow is to produce piano actions in Berlin from 1854 onwards, just one year after Bechstein made his first instruments. All these companies have standardised their production and can therefore deliver piano actions at more affordable prices.

Carl Bechstein, who planned his move carefully, now further develops his contacts with artists. After Theodor Kullak, another pianist is to play an even more important role in the piano-maker's success: Hans von Bülow, a young artist from Dresden who studied with Franz Liszt and is just starting his performer career.

While Bechstein is gluing, planing down and varnishing his two first pianos, Bülow is performing in remote provincial manors and, in his best engagement, in the residence of one of the numerous German princes. Although he enjoys a relative local fame, Bülow remains dependent on his mother's financial support. He is a brilliant performer who pays more attention to perfect execution than to sound quality. In order to boost his career, he moves to Berlin in 1855 and succeeds Kullak as piano teacher at the Music School for Singing, Piano and Composition. As he arrives in the Prussian capital, he lives "at Adolf Bernhard Marx's, Behrenstrasse 4, second floor," which is in the direct vicinity of Perau's warehouse and Bechstein's workshop.

In April 1855, Bülow writes in a letter to Liszt, his venerated teacher, that Berlin has "an absolute dearth of passable pianos." Talking about the instruments made by Stöcker, which are highly en vogue and marketed exclusively by Kullak in Berlin, Bülow states that they are "the most detestable in the world" and of very poor quality compared with those made by Perau. Bülow also mentions that as he was hired for a concert by the Gustav Adolph Association, a Protestant charity organisation, he could choose between a Perau and an excellent piano made by Klemm, a Düsseldorf-based piano-maker that Clara Schumann highly praises. This letter does not mention Bechstein for the simple reason that Carl was not yet making concert grand pianos in 1855.

Just like Bechstein, Bülow is on the threshold of his career in 1855. The latter is only twenty-five, the other four years older. The year 1856 is particularly eventful for Bechstein: he marries, considerably enlarges his workshop in Behrenstrasse and hires more personnel as his business henceforth has a

legal form. But the year's major event is a concert given by Liszt in Berlin, during which the strings of the Érard piano break one after the other under the maestro's particularly powerful play – which prompts Bechstein to make a really modern concert grand that can withstand as ardent a pianist as Liszt.

So Bechstein builds his first concert grand piano in 1856. Unverified sources pretend that this piano was the hundredth, which is very improbable since we know that Bechstein is to build only 176 instruments until 1859. Bechstein is likely to choose a round number for his first concert grand and to fill the gap of the serial numbers in the following months.

He entrusts this first concert grand to Bülow and the musician discovers state-of-the-art piano technology, with iron reinforcements that make the instrument extremely sturdy. Performing on Bechstein's piano from early 1857 onwards, Bülow flies from one success to the other. The year before, he had already performed on a Bechstein (probably Carl's second grand, built in 1854, which was not a concert instrument and had nothing revolutionary) and played in private circles on uprights made by his mentor, as such instruments were acceptable in polite society.

Bülow gives a decisive concert on 22 January 1857. On this occasion, he premieres Liszt's *Sonata in B Minor* although Breitkopf & Härtel already



1857

Hans von Bülow, who would later be the first conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, decisively contributes to the promotion of the C. Bechstein pianos. On 22 January 1857, he premieres Liszt's *Sonata in B Minor* – on an instrument made by Carl Bechstein.

1860

Franz Liszt composes a new type of works for piano and Carl Bechstein provides suitable instruments. The great composer acquires his first Bechstein on 8 October 1860. The transaction appears in the company's sales ledger with the buyer listed in a sober Prussian style: "Kapellmeister Liszt, Weimar."

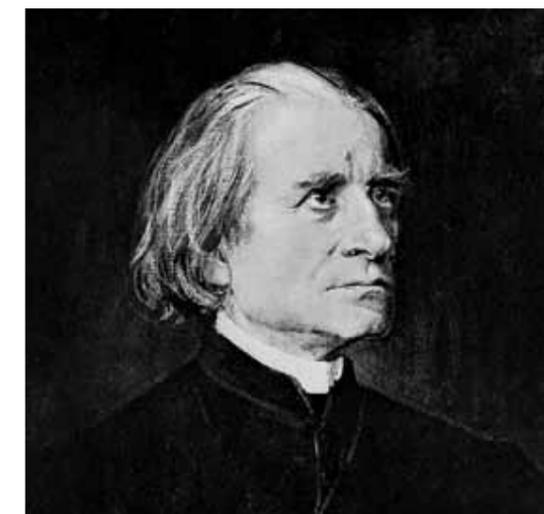
This memorable concert introduces Bechstein to the world of Liszt and Wagner. This is not only to boost sales, but also to play a key role in the development of the company philosophy. Indeed, the *Sonata in B Minor* places very high demands on the pianist... and the piano, especially in the final octaves. An authentic member of the Liszt school, Bülow implements the direct power of his arms and hands, which sets him clearly apart from the great pianists of the early Romantic era, most of whom were famous for their gentle play and the agility of their fingers.

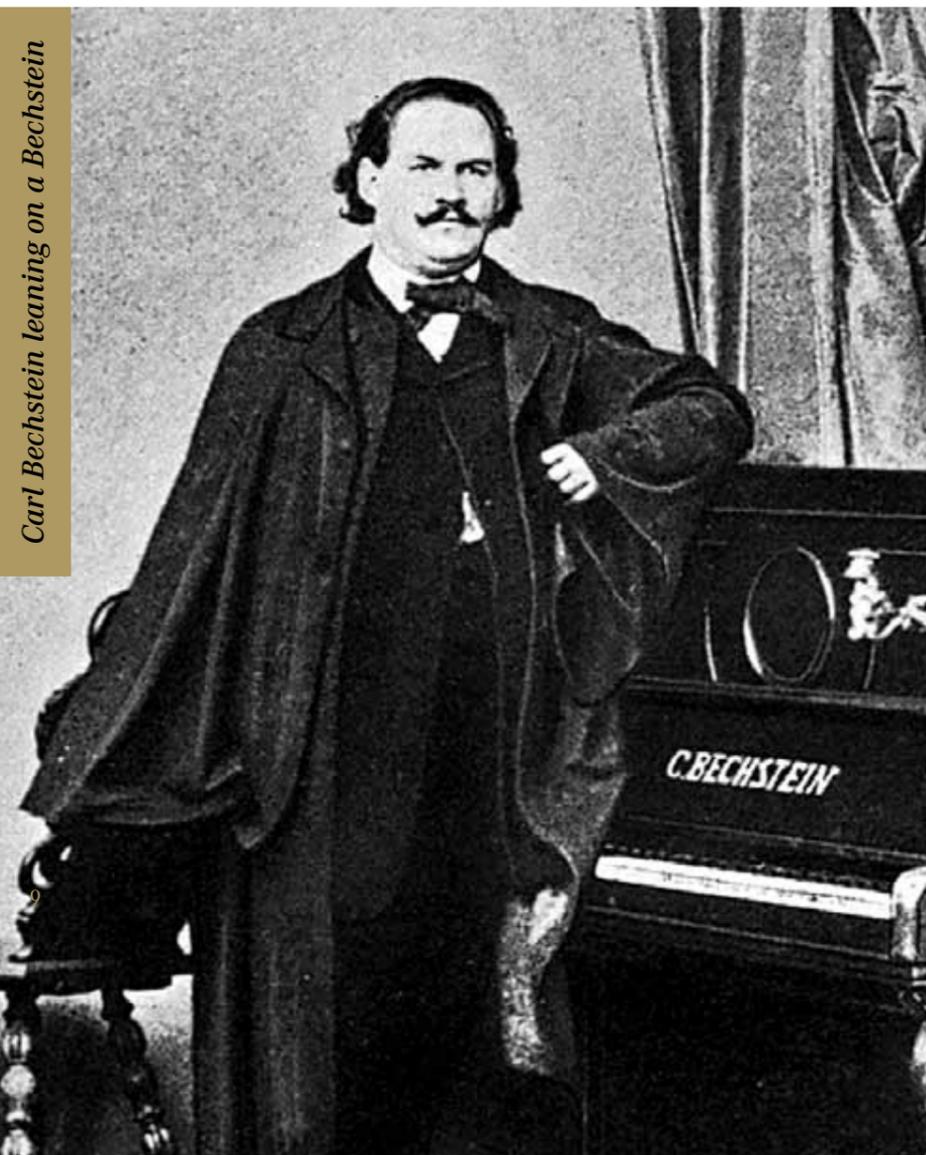
Although Carl Bechstein has caught the spirit of the time and built uprights from the very beginning, he henceforth endeavours to make concert grand pianos that meet the requirements of this new, very emotional approach to music. Anyway, making uprights is radically modern in a time when the public – in particular in a conservative city like

Berlin – still favours virginals, as such instruments are more elegant in living rooms and deliver a very harmonious sound. In "Athens on the Spree," another type of preferred instrument is the stately lyraflügel, which, due to its considerable height, fits only in the homes of the well-to-do. On the contrary, uprights are still considered somewhat "proletarian." But Carl Bechstein, who has understood that the future belongs to such instruments, asserts his avant-garde approach to piano-making as early as 1853, as seen in the above-mentioned picture that depicts him proudly leaning on his first upright with diagonal strings and a height of only 120 centimetres.

Back to the sensational concert given by Bülow in January 1857 on a Bechstein grand piano. On the next day, the pianist writes to Liszt that he played on an instrument made by "a certain Bechstein" that was superior to an Érard piano. Three weeks later, Bülow complains in another letter to the maestro that the Bechstein grand has been sold, so that he must find another one for a concert to be given in Leipzig. This marks the birth of a partnership between Bechstein and Bülow that is to last until their deaths. With this partnership, Bechstein implements a marketing strategy that was developed by Érard in Paris and is sensationally new in Berlin: he caters for the needs of various artists, in particular Bülow, of course.

All this occurs while the musical ideal is undergoing radical changes. In 1849,





Carl Bechstein's vision is "to build sturdy grand and upright pianos."

Liszt had begun to compose audacious and sophisticated "symphonic poetries" for the Weimar Orchestra. And in 1841, while Carl Bechstein was working in Paris, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll had built a new organ for the Saint-Denis basilica near Paris, a remarkable instrument that integrated all registers of the French orchestra and thus was the quintessence of Romantic organ. The fact that Emperor Napoleon III commissioned Cavaillé-Coll to make similar organs for further Paris's churches, including La Madeleine, evidences the role of the organ-maker in the advent of the new musical ideal in the 1850s. Incidentally, the organist of La Madeleine as of 1858 was none other than Camille Saint-Saëns, whose

spectacular improvisations attracted "tout Paris"... and who was to become a Bechstein aficionado.

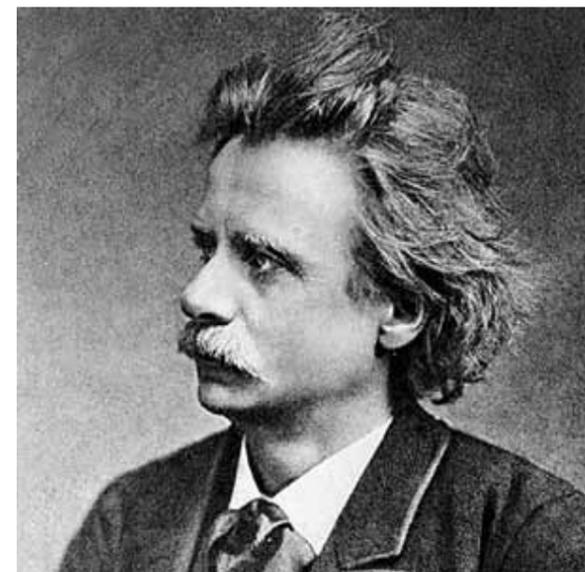
Friedrich Ladegast, Germany's greatest organ-maker of the 19th century, who had been trained by Cavaillé-Coll, refurbished and enlarged the organ of Merseburg's Cathedral in 1855. This impressive instrument with its eighty-one registers prompted Franz Liszt to revisit his fantasy and fugue on the choral *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam* (played for the organ's dedication) and to compose the *Prelude and fugue on B-A-C-H*. Aware of the organ's importance in the advent of the Romantic sound, Liszt had several occasions to

listen to his colleague Saint-Saëns playing in La Madeleine. Moreover, he possessed a special piano that was famous throughout Europe for its three manuals and "foot keyboard," an instrument made in Paris by Alexandre Pèrè et Fils using an harmonium and an Érard grand piano. In a letter sent to the Vienna violinist Joseph Hellmesberger in July 1855, Liszt states that this instrument, "made to his instructions", delivers "effects, nuances and power of remarkable quality and diversity" and achieves an "harmonious synthesis of organ and piano."

Thus, a new musical ideal arises within just a few years and future-oriented instrument makers endeavour to cope with the new taste. Carl Bechstein is not the only one who feels the changes in his bones, of course, but he will be able to implement them and make exactly the instruments that the pianists of his time are longing for – which is to be his key to success. Thanks to his very sensitive ear, he will deliver what his friend Bülow is to call "Bechstein's colourful piano."

Now, Carl Bechstein has to face a logistics problem: how to transport the concert grand pianos to the venues where Hans von Bülow is performing? Once again, the young entrepreneur benefits from the technological progress of his time, as the German railroad network is being constantly expanded. In late November 1857, Bülow writes to his friend Alexander Ritter in Stettin where a concert is planned for 1 December with Liszt's *First Piano Concerto* in the programme: "In my mind, Bechstein is Germany's best piano-maker, even though he has only built three grands to date. As I hurried to him, he had already sent the instrument via the railway, so that it is likely to be already waiting for pick-up at Stettin's station." Compared with Érard, Bechstein is still a nobody in terms of his insignificant production, but he straightaway positions himself as an entrepreneur who is particularly committed to customers' satisfaction and thus implements novel marketing and after-sales strategies.

As Bülow sojourns in Paris in 1860, he sends a letter to his friend on 6 March



Four musicians who composed on Bechstein pianos: Edvard Grieg, Alexander Scriabin, Maurice Ravel, Béla Bartók.

that underscores how tariff barriers impair business between Berlin and Vienna: "Dear Mr Bechstein, my dear friend, My wife asked you to be so kind and deliver a concert grand to Vienna where I am to perform on 25 March with the Philharmonic Orchestra. My intention was not so much the selfish desire to perform more brilliantly than with a Bösendorfer or a Streicher, as the ambition – which you have not yet approved – to increased your fame abroad thanks to the remarkable pianos that bear your name. I would never in the world deny that a piano from your workshop is best suitable to express my humble talent, more so than any other make. But to be

honest with you, you can easily imagine that playing in Vienna with a German piano would increase the number of my enemies, which are already not few down there. In particular, I would have to face the crowd of all piano-makers of the Austrian empire. Anyway, such considerations will not prevent me from implementing an idea that is very pleasant to me: I mean contributing to increase your fame, so that your name becomes as famous throughout Germany as that of Streicher decades ago or that of Érard still today. [...] In your letter, you list the pecuniary drawbacks of my plan and consider that they outweigh the advantages that could result for

your company's fame. As I am not an expert in financial matters, I will give no statement in this respect, even though I would be happy to assume the transport and customs duties as far as I can. [...] I am very upset at all that obstructs my project. Nonetheless, this will by no means prevent me from profoundly admiring your achievements as I always have, with true devotion to this day." This letter shows that Bülow is as committed to Bechstein's pianos as he is to Liszt's or Wagner's compositions – Just because the Bechstein sound and the new musical ideal developed by the two composers are one and the same thing to him.



An event with a decisive impact on the life of the company occurs on 6 October 1860, when Franz Liszt buys his first Bechstein grand piano. The transaction appears in the sales ledger as delivery number 247, with the buyer listed in sober Prussian style as “Kapellmeister Liszt, Weimar”, without additional comment.

By the end of 1860, Carl Bechstein has built three hundred instruments, far fewer than his competitors. Feurig and Blüthner, two Leipzig-based piano-makers, have a considerably more significant level of production, the latter reaching the serial number “2500” as early as 1853; and Steinway, who built his first pianos in Brunswick and began production in New York in 1853 with the serial number “483,” has already delivered nearly three thousand instruments by this time. This illustrates that in the first chapter of the company history, the commercial success remains modest, which is not truly a problem as Carl Bechstein’s goal is rather to create a new sound. A letter that Bülow sends to Liszt in the autumn of 1860 confirms the piano-maker’s artistic and aesthetic success, as the pianist states that he recently played the *Sonata in B Minor* in Leipzig on an “ultrasublime Bechstein.” The Berlin-based piano-maker has thus paved the way, and in the next decades his instruments, with their very special voice, are to play a decisive role in the world of music as numerous noted composers choose them to express themselves.

Another milestone in the company’s history is the Great London Exposition of 1862. Carl Bechstein is awarded several medals although his British competitors have a decisive “home field” advantage. The jury states: “The remarkable features of Bechstein’s instruments are their freshness and freedom of tone, their agreeable playing action and their well-balanced registers. Moreover, these pianos can withstand the most vigorous play.” An official report by the special commission of the German Customs Union further indicates: “C. Bechstein, who is appointed to His Majesty the King [of Prussia], founded his business in August 1853. Within just six years, he encountered such a success that he

now produces nearly three hundred instruments a year – including 140 grand pianos – with a staff of ninety and exports to America, Asia, England and Russia. He has sent two excellent grand piano models to London. [...] We are pleased to report that these instruments fired the London public with enthusiasm, so that we can assume that both models are to sell very well in England.”

The modern piano has found its ultimate form by this time and all piano-makers endeavour to tie noted pianists to their brands. Bülow, for example, enjoys the extremely suave manners of Ludwig Bösendorfer, who is appointed to the imperial Court in Vienna. When he is touring Russia, he plays on a Becker grand piano made in Saint Petersburg and pays tribute to its sound and excellent action – even in front of Carl Bechstein. Theodor Steinway also makes various overtures to Bülow, but the pianist soon understands that the Brunswick manufacturer intends to take him over after he had praised a Steinway grand on the occasion of a concert given in Berlin. As of now, Bülow – who can be disarmingly straightforward – is to publicly affirm his preference for “Bechstein’s colourful piano,” even though he continues to speak respectfully of the Steinway instruments.

The Bechstein pianos and their very special voice are to play a decisive role in the world of music over decades.

Bechstein’s success story really starts in the early 1860s. When Perau dies in 1861, Carl Bechstein acquires his manufacture at Johannisstrasse 4 and even buys two adjoining plots and an old building to extend the production site down to Ziegelstrasse, while the warehouse is to remain at Behrenstrasse 56 until its transfer to Johannisstrasse 5 in 1867. But a few years later, a fire severely damages the factory and endangers the company’s future as Bechstein had borrowed money to finance his investment. With the help of true friends,

including Hans von Bülow, the entrepreneur manages to put the company back on an even keel. In a letter of 24 August 1866, Bülow writes to Bechstein: “I currently do not need these two thousand thalers. For heaven’s sake, keep them and make the best of this money, until the devil leaves.”

A glance at the 1865 Bechstein catalogue shows the dimensions of the sum that Bülow lends to his friend Carl: an eight-foot concert grand with “continuous escapement, string holders and sounding posts” is listed at 700 Prussian thalers, while a short grand piano is invoiced at 450 thalers and an upright, 280. All prices are without packaging in a “sturdy wooden box provided with screws”, for which Bechstein charges seven or eight thalers depending on the piano model.

Meanwhile, the company’s fame continues to grow – in particular thanks to Hans von Bülow – and Carl Bechstein remains generous despite the fire and the resulting damage. On the occasion of Richard Wagner’s birthday, for example, he offers a grand piano to the maestro, who had fallen into disfavour in Vienna and had to flee to Bavaria’s Louis II in May 1864. In a letter of thanks sent from Munich on 25 May, Wagner states: “Three years ago, as I returned to Germany after a first exile and spent a few days in Weimar with my friend Liszt, I discovered by chance a piano whose crystalline and delightful voice pleased and fascinated me so much that I asked my dear friend Bülow to be so kind and alleviate the sadness of the farewell by ensuring that a similar instrument could brighten up my new sojourn.”

The “dear friend Bülow” still ignores the fact that his wife Cosima and Richard Wagner have promised “to belong exclusively to each other” when they met in Berlin in November 1863. Isolde von Bülow, their first child, is born on 10 April 1865 while Hans premieres Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* in Munich on 10 June.

By late 1864, Bechstein sends two pianos to Bülow, a short grand in oak and a “wonderfully beautiful” concert grand that the pianist plays on stage

just before Christmas. After the performance, Bülow writes to Bechstein: “Your grand piano has a splendid voice, equally clear and full. Everybody agrees that such a sound was never heard in Munich before. I hope that the *Augsburger* is to report on this concert. This time, Steinway will not be able to bribe anybody to denigrate you.” Even before the pianos arrive in Munich, Bülow has written to Bechstein: “The king is to come at the beginning of next month. The first thing that Wagner and I intend to do is to grant him a concert with a Bechstein.”

Three years later, when Richard Wagner finally returns to Munich after a months-long involuntary sojourn abroad, Bechstein sends him something special: a “piano-secretary.” This is an upright with a secretary desk that proves to be very convenient for composing. This is not a gift, however, as Bülow states in a letter: “We are very pleased that Wagner’s piano is finished. This is an official order of His Majesty, passed on 22 May through my wife.” Although Cosima gives birth to Wagner’s second daughter, she officially remains his secretary and Bülow writes in another letter to Bechstein: “The maestro was very pleased with your divine piano-secretary. Did you receive the bust sent to express his gratefulness? By the way: has the Royal Office rewarded your masterpiece? Please let me know, so that I may immediately send a reminder note if it is not the case – and it will be successful.”

Bülow, who tirelessly promotes Bechstein’s instrument, is a very nervous person who has been suffering increasingly from headaches. His friend Carl welcomes him into his home anytime he is in Berlin. He often enjoys the piano-maker’s hospitality to recover from exhausting tours, with Bechstein considerably protecting him from importunate visitors – even those with the best of intentions. When Bülow goes back on tour, Bechstein provides him not only with the necessary concert grand piano, but also with newspapers, cigarettes... and even Jewish jokes. Indeed, Bülow cultivates a somewhat snobbish anti-Semitism that his Jewish friends, in particular the cello-player Heinrich Grünfeld and

the pianist Moritz Moszkowski, stoically endure and sometimes answer with sharp-witted comments.

The friendship between the instrument maker and “his” pianist has no ulterior motive. Even when his business increasingly flourishes, Bechstein stays true to his musical ideal and remains warm-hearted and attentive to foster harmony around him. This is the case in particular in July 1869, as Bülow, considering it “a matter of life and death,” asks his friend to find a lawyer who specialises in the Prussian divorce laws: his dear Cosima, née Liszt, the daughter of his venerated master, has been forcing him into a *ménage à trois* for many years, and now wants to divorce him and marry Wagner, whose wife Minna recently died.

Bülow leaves Munich one month later, relinquishing his Bechstein grand piano to his pupils. He henceforth lives incognito in Berlin at the home of his friend Carl at Johannisstrasse 5, where he writes a distraught letter to the composer Joachim Raff that ends with the words: “My personal business will be settled at the beginning of next week and then I shall be free – and exiled.”

Thus, Bülow is not only an influential friend, but also a complicated one. Nonetheless, Bechstein remains exceptionally modest as evidenced by a letter that he writes in late 1868: “I could be proud of my friendship with such an important person, an artist famous the world over. But humility obliges me to declare that I do not deserve such a friendship. I was simply very fortunate that a God of music was standing next to my workbench at the beginning of my career and helped me to become what I am today.”

Their friendship continues even though Bülow sometimes makes cutting remarks to Bechstein. One day, for example, he complains sharply about a sluggish piano action. Another day, when he received an instrument for a concert to be given in Barmen, he describes the piano as “pitiful,” playing on the name of the city and the German word *Erbarmen*, which means “pity.” And as he sojourns in Florence after his divorce, he writes to Bechstein after a concert: “I cursed you and your miser-

able castrato box for good bargain. I could only play one piece, Liszt’s *Ricordanza*, before the bass strings began to rattle just like on a Perau.” The comparison with a competitor most likely upsets Bechstein, but we have no trace of his reaction on Bülow’s unkind comment. However, we can assume that just like any other piano-maker, Bechstein has by now understood that great pianists tend to cope with their emotional ups-and-downs by criticising their instruments.

Nonetheless, Bülow makes sometimes very detailed and useful remarks on piano action, for example when he advises Bechstein to add a spring at a particular place to improve the play. But he often complains about the double escapement “à la Érard” (a standard in modern pianos), as he prefers the traditional single escapement mechanism of the British pianos. Bechstein understands that Bülow expects not only a brilliant and rich sound, but also an action that facilitates the play. Therefore, he enlarges his product range and for a time builds both single-escapement and double-escapement pianos.

Neither insults nor praise alter the relationship between the two men, as evidenced by a letter that Bülow writes in 1872: “My friend Bechstein accommodates me like a prince. I have a personal servant with a white tie who waits on my orders and is instructed to turn back anybody who wants to see me.”

We cannot ascertain whether Bülow would have succeeded in his pianist career without Bechstein’s help. Just like Wagner’s Siegfried sings in *The Ring of the Nibelung*, his friend Carl is father and mother to him. Bechstein, in turn, values Bülow highly for his genius as he premieres such demanding piano works as Brahms’s and Tchaikovsky’s *First Piano Concertos*, and directs the premieres of two operas by Wagner, *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. Moreover, Bechstein knows perfectly well that only an hypersensitive and nervous modern pianist like Bülow is able to fully develop the potential of his instruments.

In comparison, Bechstein’s relationship with Liszt seems to be ideally



Friends of Bechstein: Cosima von Bülow (later Cosima Wagner), Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt, Hans von Bülow, around 1869.

balanced. Every year, the piano-maker sends a grand to the Altenburg, so that the composer thanks him very warmly at the end of his life as he writes: “To judge your instruments means nothing else but to praise them. I have been playing your pianos for twenty-eight years now and they have ever confirmed their superiority. According to the opinion of the highest authorities who have played your instruments, it is no longer necessary to praise them, as this would only be pleonasm, periphrasis and tautology.”

In the late 1860s, Bechstein considerably increases his exports, focusing on England and Russia, so that the Franco-German war of 1870/71 has practically no impact on the company’s turnover. On the contrary: in the first year of the war, Bechstein once again expands his production facilities and makes up to five hundred pianos. But with commercial success comes also the first counterfeits, and Bechstein’s solicitors go to law against clever men who build poor-quality instruments but hope to boost their sales by affixing names such as “Eckstein,” “Bernstein,” “Beckstein” or even “Bechstein” to their

instruments when, by chance, the wife of the counterfeiter bears that name.

After the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871, the war indemnity paid by France following the Franco-Prussian war leads to a construction boom in Germany and particularly in Berlin, where a type of bourgeois apartments copied from Paris’s models appears: a servants’ door complements the main entrance, a maid’s room is laid out near the kitchen, and the living room (also called “Berlin room”) has to contain a grand piano, or at least an upright.

In 1877, a Bechstein upright with a height of 125 centimetres sells for 960 marks. (This new, nation-wide currency has replaced the thaler and the other German currencies.) A concert upright with a height of 136 centimetres, suitable for adornment by a bust of Beethoven or Wagner, is priced at 1275 marks. For just seventy-five marks more, one can buy a short grand, but a real concert grand with a length of 260 centimetres sells for as much as three thousand marks. In that year, Carl Bechstein makes 672 instruments, achieves revenues of more than one

million marks, has a personal income of nearly eighty thousand marks – and can take pride in his success.

A second production site opens in 1880 in Berlin-Köpenick’s Grünauer Strasse and is to be enlarged six years later. By this time, Bechstein presents a golden watch to employees who have been with his company for twenty-five years. Still in 1880 – or during the next year – Carl Bechstein realises his dream as he has a splendid neo-Renaissance villa built on the shore of Lake Dämeritz in Erkner near Berlin. The name of the estate, Tusculum, recalls Virgil’s *Bucolics* and Cicero’s villa, *Tusculanum*. With this reference to the golden age of ancient times, Bechstein also manifests the humanist education that he acquired as an autodidact. A legendarily sociable and hospitable man, he organises brilliant feasts in his villa and *Tusculum* soon becomes a favourite venue of Berlin’s high society. Among the guests are Eugen d’Albert, who spends the summer of 1883 here, composing his *Piano Concerto in B Minor*. Of course, a vast park extends around the villa, while an electric boat is available for tours on the lake, which

underscores Bechstein's interest in technical progress. (The estate housed Erkner's municipal administration as of 1938, then was severely damaged by an air raid in 1944 and partially rebuilt after the war. A street in the neighbourhood is named after Carl Bechstein since German reunification.)

In the meantime, Carl Bechstein enjoys the title of "Court Economic Advisor" and is so famous that he is nicknamed "the Prussian Érard". His career reaches its zenith on 4 October 1892 upon the opening of Bechstein Hall in Linkstrasse. The building was ordered by concert manager Hermann Wolff and built to plans by Franz Schwechten, the architect who had recently remodelled Berlin's Philharmonic Hall. An article published in *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* announces: "A three-day music festival will be held to inaugurate Bechstein Hall. On 4 October, Herr Dr. Hans von Bülow is to play Mozart's *Fantasy in C Minor*, Beethoven's *Les Adieux*, several new piano pieces by Brahms, Schumann's *Carnaval* and Kiel's *Fantasy in C Major, op. 12*. On 5 October, the Joseph Joachim String Quartet is to perform various works by Brahms with the participation of the Vienna maestro himself (*String Quartet, Clarinet and String Quintet, Violin and Piano Sonata*). On 6 October, finally, Anton Rubinstein is to play one of his best works: *Sextet for Winds*."

For six years, Bülow has been conducting an ensemble that now enjoys phenomenal success and will soon be renamed "Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra". Although he is nicknamed "the concert orator" for his long rhetorical introductions, Bülow is a major figure in the German capital's cultural life. However, nobody knows in 1892 that the concert given for the inauguration of Bechstein Hall is also the conductor's last performance. After his death two years later, his widow Marie von Bülow is to write upon publication of his letters: "As the headaches increased, he decided to consult Professor Schweningen, whom he had known personally since the time he had contact with Bismarck. The day before the concert, he stopped the treatment (hot water head baths) as the pain still increased so that he could not properly

Appointed to royal and imperial courts – the Bechstein pianos are famous as far as China.



Bechstein, the epitome of the grand piano



NACH DER ORIGINALRADIERUNG VON BRUNO BIELEFELD.

Haus Bechstein, Erkner bei Berlin.

prepare himself. He was so anxious that he might lose his memory due to the pain that he had no other solution but to play for hours. That day was an agony. As he left home for the concert hall he said: 'Anyone who would shoot me in my head tonight would be my friend.' Hermann Wolf invited Berlin's high society for the inauguration of the new concert hall on 4 October 1892, but nobody knew that it was to be Bülow's swan song, his farewell to the scene. Never again did Hans von Bülow play for a rapt audience. The great piano master, who was able to reveal to those who listened to him their interior treasures of spirituality, fell silent forever after this evening."

An article in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* describes Berlin's Bechstein Hall as follows: "It is not gigantic, as it seats only

five hundred. It is particularly suitable for intimate concerts such as piano recitals, chamber music or lieder, but can also host lectures. It surely satisfies a need of Berlin's musical life. [...] The structure, built to plans by Court architect Schwechten, has not only exquisite decoration, but also excellent acoustics, as evidenced during the three inauguration concerts that we describe in detail below. Schwechten probably took his inspiration from our Sing Academy: as you enter Bechstein Hall, you could believe that you are entering a smaller version of that academy." Bechstein Hall is designed in the style of the Italian Renaissance. Corinthian columns structure the white and golden walls. Rich stucco works adorn the ceiling. In a niche behind the stage is a statue of Polyhymnia, a work by Professor Calandrelli after an ancient

model, to underscore Carl Bechstein's outstanding position in "Athens on the Spree." Electricity is available from the very beginning but the stately staircase is not completed until 1893. (Bechstein Hall was entirely destroyed in an air raid in 1944.)

In the mid-1890s, Carl Bechstein has a yearly income of more than 300,000 marks and a fortune of nearly 4.75 millions. His business flourishes, so that he has a new factory built in Reichenberger Strasse in Berlin-Kreuzberg in 1897. But he dies three years later on 6 March 1900, having survived his wife by only three months, and is buried in the family plot in Sophienfriedhof, the local Protestant graveyard. His exceptional career, typical of an entrepreneur of the second half of the 19th century, was built on self-confidence

and a deep-rooted faith in both German virtues and Western values. A paternalist with an eye to the well-being of his employees, he was not really a "social" boss, as he always regarded pension schemes, health insurances and strikes with some suspicion.

Upon his death, the Berlin Royal Porcelain Manufacture, KPM, produces a coffee service with his portrait and the caption: "Carl Bechstein, 1826-1900." This marks the end of an epoch, and the end of an autocracy: a new era begins with the 20th century, as the company is henceforth run by his sons – the Bechstein Clan.

The Bechstein Clan

In the spring of 1900, the three sons of Carl Bechstein (Edwin, born in 1859, Carl Junior, born in 1860, and Johannes "Hans", born in 1863) are the new heads of an international group that produces 3500 pianos a year with a staff of eight hundred employees.

The three brothers have been members of the board since 1894. Carl Junior is Production Manager; Edwin, Sales Manager. After the death of Johannes in 1906, the family business becomes a general partnership.

Emperor William II's Germany is booming by this time: colonies and metallurgical corporations are being founded and battleships built. Nonetheless, the atmosphere is radically different from that of 1853, as the Kaiser states for example: "Pianos are harmful gymnastics apparatus." The River Spree still flows through Berlin, of course, but the city has given up its dream of being the new Athens. The 20th century that just begins is to drastically alter the country, and with it C. Bechstein.

Yet the new century begins quite auspiciously. In 1903, the year of the company's fiftieth anniversary, Bechstein runs four factories and produces more than 4500 pianos a year. As many as 65,200 upright and grand pianos have been built since 1853. The company expands and can even enter the "lion's den" as it opens premises in London in 1901: the 550-seat Bechstein Hall and the adjoining showroom in Wigmore Street. In the new venue, the walls are covered with mahogany wainscoting, structured by pilasters in Numidian marble and topped with a frieze in red Verona marble. A fresco by Gerald Moira and Frank Lynn Jenkins that depicts the Spirit of Music reaching his hands towards the Genius of Harmony adorns the half-cupola above the semicircular stage. London's Bechstein Hall hosts as many as three hundred concerts in the year following its opening.

In the early 20th century, the British Empire absorbs the major part of the company's exports, and Queen Victoria orders a gilt grand piano that she personally adorns with miniatures. The Bechstein showroom in London is located in a building of thirty-five by sixty-five metres that is lavishly decorated, of course. For example, stained glass windows with coats of arms of German noble families are visible at the first floor.

Everything changes with the First World War. As the British government ordered the confiscation of all subsidiaries of German companies in the UK, Bechstein Hall and its showroom are sold in November 1916. Debenham Ltd organises the auction and Sir James Boyton MP conducts it. Within just four minutes, Sir Howard Frank acquires the estate



View of London's Bechstein Hall with its showroom at the golden age of piano (today's Wigmore Hall).



C. BECHSTEIN

FACTEUR DE PIANOS
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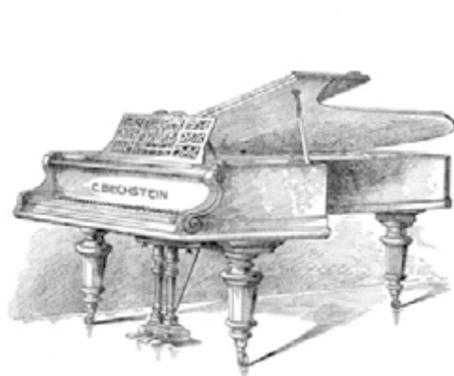
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| S. M. L'IMPERATRICE D'ALLEMAGNE | S. M. LE ROI D'ITALIE |
| S. M. L'EMPEREUR DE RUSSIE | S. M. LE ROI D'ESPAGNE |
| S. M. L'IMPERATRICE FRÉDÉRIC | S. M. LE ROI DE ROUMANIE |
| S. M. LE ROI D'ANGLETERRE | S. M. LE ROI DE WURTEMBERG |

S. A. R. LA PRINCESSE HÉRITIÈRE DE SUÈDE ET NORVÈGE
S. A. R. LE DUC DE SAXE-COBOURG-GOTHA
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Modèle E. Grand modèle de concert
à 7 octaves $\frac{1}{2}$, du la à l'ut
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Longueur 2 m 70 — Largeur 1 m 57



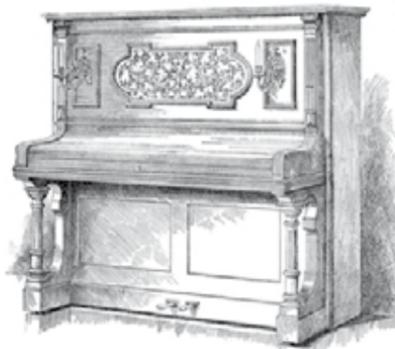
Modèle G. Demi-queue de salon
à 7 octaves $\frac{1}{2}$, du la à l'ut
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Longueur 2 m 21 — Largeur 1 m 33



Modèle A. Miniature $\frac{1}{2}$ de queue
à 7 octaves, du la au la
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Longueur 1 m 84 — Largeur 1 m 44

Modèle D. $\frac{1}{2}$ de queue, de concert
à 7 octaves $\frac{1}{2}$, du la à l'ut
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Longueur 2 m 43 — Largeur 1 m 58

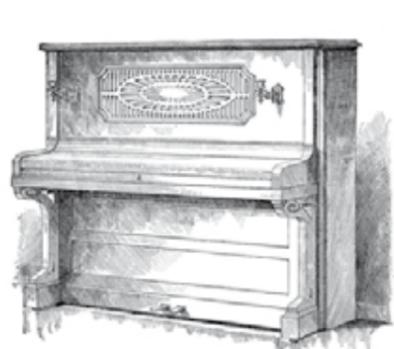
Modèle B. Demi-queue
à 7 octaves $\frac{1}{2}$, du la à l'ut
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Longueur 2 m 03 — Largeur 1 m 50



Modèle 6. PIANO DROIT
à 7 octaves $\frac{1}{2}$, du la à l'ut
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Hauteur 1 m 50 — Largeur 1 m 45 — Profondeur 0 m 60



Modèle 7. PIANO DROIT
à 7 octaves $\frac{1}{2}$, du la à l'ut
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Hauteur 1 m 38 — Largeur 1 m 41 — Profondeur 0 m 66



Modèle 8. PIANO DROIT
à 7 octaves $\frac{1}{2}$, du la à l'ut
à Cordes croisées — Châssis en métal — Sonnetier recouvert de métal —
Mécanique à répétition.
Hauteur 1 m 285 — Largeur 1 m 56 — Profondeur 0 m 63

Tous nos modèles de pianos à queue et de pianos droits se font aussi en frisé, ornés de sculptures, de peintures vernis Martin, de bronzes ciselés et en tout autre genre d'ornementation, à des prix spéciaux.

Stately gilt piano in Louis-Quinze style — a masterpiece ordered by Queen Victoria.



C. BECHSTEIN.

for 56,500 pounds sterling. It is a good deal, especially as the 104 grand pianos and the thirty uprights in the building have a retail value of 350,000 pounds, while the tuning and maintenance contracts are worth more than six thousand pounds a year. The building keeps its emblazoned windows, however, and still functions as a concert venue — today's Wigmore Hall — even though a restaurant is set up in the ground floor and an insurance company moves to the first floor.

piano is priced at 25,000 marks and in the autumn of 1921, a plain model 10 upright costs as much as 30,000 marks. The German currency drops in value so rapidly that Bechstein decides to deliver the instruments "free of charge until revocation."

Nonetheless, the "Bechstein clan" still commands a considerable fortune and Edwin's wife, Helene Bechstein, née Capito, enjoys a particularly lavish lifestyle. Edwin had left the com-

In the early 20th century, the British Empire absorbs the major part of the company's exports, and Queen Victoria orders a gilt grand piano that she personally adorns with miniatures.

The First World War radically alters the company, as the showroom in Paris that has opened in 1903 at 334 rue Saint-Honoré is likewise confiscated. Moreover, the production collapses after the war, while the Weimar Republic has to face various crises and to pay considerable war reparations in dollars, so that inflation increases as of 1919: in May of the next year, a model V grand

pany in 1916 due to conflicts with his brother Carl Junior and was paid off. When C. Bechstein is made a public limited company in 1923, he acquires shares, probably together with his wife, as Helene Bechstein repeatedly speaks in the company's name during the 1920s. But diplomatic tact is not her strength and her deep-rooted anti-Semitism prompts famous musicians

to turn their backs on Bechstein. This applies in particular to the violinist Fritz Kreisler, who appreciated the Bechstein pianos as a composer.

Moreover, Helene Bechstein frequently sojourns at Munich's Vier Jahreszeiten Hotel, an exquisite resort where numerous sycophants gather around her. Occasionally she invites a young Austrian politician named Adolf Hitler. We do not know exactly if she or Elsa Bruckmann, the wife of a rich Munich publisher, nicknames the young man "Wolf", but it is ascertained that Winifred Wagner, the great composer's daughter-in-law, has nothing to do with the nicknaming.

Munich police question Helene Bechstein in 1924 in the aftermath of the Beer Hall Putsch attempted by Hitler. She admits that she gave him money that, together with the sums provided by Elsa Bruckmann and Frau von Seydlitz, the wife of a rich businessman, constituted the bond required by Bremen-based coffee merchant Richard Frank to provide the agitator with a loan so that he could transform the weekly *Völkischer Beobachter* into a daily paper. And while Hitler is jailed in Landsberg,



View of the Bechstein showroom in Wigmore Street.



Delivery of a Bechstein grand piano at Berlin's Reichstag.

Winifred Wagner sends him paper so that he can write *Mein Kampf*.

Due to her contacts with the *Führer*, Helene Bechstein will be sentenced to a 30,000-mark fine by a civilian denazification court after the Second World War. Moreover, she will live at the foot of Obersalzberg, Hitler's favourite location in the German Alps, until her death in 1951. The contacts of this member of the "Bechstein clan" to the dictator and other high-ranking Nazi personalities may have prompted some to assume that C. Bechstein flourished during that period, but a glance at the production figures shows that the company faced the same difficulties as its competitors in the 1930s.

Let us return to the 1920s. Hope is again possible as inflation is brought under control at the end of the decade, even though high customs duties impair exports to the UK, while the Soviets prohibit the import of pianos to Russia. Nonetheless, after several setbacks in the US, Bechstein finally establishes a very promising contact in New York, as stated in an article published on 18 December 1928 in the *New Yorker Herald*, a German-speaking newspaper: "When a famous department store like Wanamaker's publicly announces that it has the honour of being the exclusive dealer for a certain product, it must know what it says – and we can be sure that the product in question is something quite exceptional. We were therefore overjoyed when we discovered that the product was something that we all know and highly value as the companion of delightful

hours: the Bechstein grand piano". The reporter also states that tuning the instrument was not necessary, even after its transport across the ocean. Naturally, Wanamaker's organises a press conference and invites New York's high society to celebrate the event.

In May 1929, a Chippendale grand piano is loaded on board the *Graf Zeppelin* airship, and a gilt instrument with paintings à la Watteau leaves Berlin to represent Bechstein at the Barcelona International Exposition. The times are not hard for everybody despite the crisis, and the Spanish general importer intends to sell the piano to a rich banker as soon as it arrives in the Catalan capital city. By this time, Bechstein converts prices either in dollar or in gold, which is quite complicated (10

dollars to 42 marks or 1/2790 kg of fine gold for one mark according to the rate at the London Stock Exchange on the day of sale).

The 1920s are also the golden age of the transatlantic liners and Bechstein pianos, solidly affixed to the bridge to withstand the ups and downs of the ocean, contribute to the well-being of the passengers. The *Bremen*, for example, thus becomes a travelling festival with musical highlights such as Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* or Mozart's *A Little Night Music*. Although economic troubles overshadow the first and last years of the decade, numerous pianists remain true to "their" Bechstein – including such stars as Ferruccio Busoni, Artur Schnabel, Wilhelm Backhaus, Alfred Cortot and Emil von Sauer, who



Advertising leaflet for the documentary film *Birth of a Piano*.



A pioneering instrument.



The Bechstein-Moor, a visionary instrument.



Professor Nernst, Nobel Prize in Chemistry, develops an electronic system for Bechstein.

performs works by Liszt with the uppermost elegance. An artist whose sensitivity resonates exclusively to the sound of piano, Busoni can only write his *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music* because of the instrument he favours. As for Schnabel, he most likely uses a Bechstein as he composes his wonderful *String Quartet* and his *Sonata for Solo Violin*, a grandiose and extremely modern work from 1919 that is in part inspired by the musician's contacts with Carl Flesch, his chamber music partner. Many other composers of modern classical music also favour Bechstein, some of them using a revolutionary notation method: the twelve-note composition that takes into account all notes of the chromatic scale and uses tone rows, i.e. an ordering of the twelve pitches.

True to the company's tradition, C. Bechstein continues to innovate, although the upright and grand pianos have kept their shapes since the late 1870s. For example, the company produces an instrument that uses the Welte-Mignon technology that pretends to make the pianist superfluous – at least for reproducing the recordings made on paper rolls. The great Eugen d'Albert, who stated that he "owed everything to the marvellous Bechstein grand pianos", records several works on this instrument.

At the same time, Bechstein is interested in a new medium, the cinema, as silent films require a piano to underscore the emotional charge of the images. Moreover, the company commissions an advertising film as

early as 1926, titled *Birth of a Piano*, in order to "heighten the interest of the public for the piano and serve both the world of music and our industry." This forty-minute film is provided with "censorship by the government" and a "projection lamp."

In 1929, Bechstein launches a truly novel instrument developed in collaboration with the Hungarian pianist and inventor Emánuel Moór: the Bechstein-Moor piano. Just like an organ, this "monstrosity" has two keyboards, the second an octave higher than the first. According to Moór, the instrument is ideal for playing Bach. The invention arouses curiosity – and is a commercial disaster.

Another invention could be more successful as it is clearly futuristic. This ancestor of today's digital pianos is developed in collaboration with Walther Nernst, Nobel laureate in chemistry in 1920, who is considered the founder of modern physical chemistry. Nernst is primarily famous for establishing the Third Law of Thermodynamics, which deals with temperatures near absolute zero, and for inventing a bulb that emits white light. Siemens & Halske supplies the electrotechnical components of the novel piano, so that the instrument is called by some the "Siemens-Nernst piano" and by others, the "Neo-Bechstein." On this 1.4-meter grand piano without soundboard, groups of five strings are placed under microphones that convert the vibrations produced by "micro-hammers" hitting the strings into electrical signals. The right pedal controls the volume, while

the left one generates either "cembalo" or "celesta" sound. The instrument is fitted with a radio and a turntable, both of which use the integrated amplifier and loudspeaker. Oskar Vierlin, one of the most inventive piano-makers of the early 20th century, is entrusted with the making of the Neo-Bechstein's conventional components.

C. Bechstein, a company that had cooperated with a great pianist in the mid-19th century, now collaborates with a Nobel laureate, which says a lot about the company's philosophy. In 1931, the technology magazine *Signalen* writes: "On 25 August, Professor Nernst presented the Bechstein-Siemens-Nernst piano before numerous guests who gathered at the Bechstein showroom near Berlin's Zoo Station. The novel instrument is surprisingly versatile, as it is even provided with a radio and a loudspeaker." But despite its sensational features, the new piano model is another commercial disaster. This is quiet surprising as it is suitable for broadcasting and recording without external microphones – and even cheaper than the smallest Bechstein upright of the day. The reason might be that the Neo-Bechstein is too far ahead of its time: the market for electronic pianos, while considerable today, barely occupies a niche in the early 1930s. When Nernst dies in 1941, all his calculations for this ground-breaking instrument are lost forever.

In the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, a severe worldwide depression hits Germany by late 1932, prompting Bechstein to develop new



"Haus am Zoo," the Bechstein showroom located at one of the cities best addresses.

marketing strategies. Some instruments are then described as "made with a considerable, yet provisional, reduction of manpower". This does not help much: Bechstein sells only some 4500 pianos between 1930 and 1935, and production drops as low as 3900 in the next five years. This demonstrates once again that the company does not benefit from Helene Bechstein's admiration of Adolf Hitler.

In the same period, the company's internal situation is particularly uncomfortable. In 1926, new conflicts tear apart the "Bechstein clan", in particular because of the new showroom at the crossroads Kurfürstendamm/Hardenbergstrasse, one of Berlin's most posh and expansive locations, right in front of Emperor William Memorial Church. The building is a work by Hans Poelzig, the architect who modernised the Schauspielhaus theatre on behalf of Max Reinhard, built Berlin's Broadcasting House and the headquarters of IG Farben in Frankfurt, and drew the

plans of a futuristic building for the Salzburg festival, which was never built. Carl Bechstein Junior, who had the idea of the new showroom, has to face the opposition of his brother Edwin, who ultimately leaves the company. Henceforth, the board of directors is composed of Carl Junior and his son Carl III (who joined the board in 1919), Hans Joachim Gravenstein (Grete Bechstein's husband), and Erich Klinkerfuss. Carl Junior dies in 1931, Edwin in 1934.

Of course, the company endeavours to adapt to the structural changes of the market. In 1926, Bechstein launches the Liliput, a grand piano with a length of only 165 centimetres. In the early 1930s, the London subsidiary, which reopened in 1924 as "Bechstein Piano Company Ltd," produces an even shorter grand piano (138 centimetres) to match the small dimensions of British living rooms. But the poor quality disappoints both the dealers and the customers, so that production stops

in 1934. Instead, the Berlin factory produces a 140-centimeter grand that is also tailored to the needs of the British middle-class and sells in London for the equivalent of 630 marks, nearly fifteen times as much as the weekly wages of a Bechstein worker. By this time, Selfridges (Oxford Street) and Harrods (Brompton Road) are selling Bechstein pianos, and the latter department store even markets them in its six subsidiaries in Argentina. Nonetheless, sales in Great Britain suffer from the anti-German sentiment that is to grow after Hitler seizes power in 1933.

That year is a disaster for C. Bechstein, as sales collapse. The company is restructured the next year and Helene Bechstein becomes the main shareholder. In order to increase the capital stock, she decides to sell the real estate on Johannisstrasse to the Prussian state – whose Minister-President is nobody else than Air Field Marshall Hermann Goering. We do not know exactly to what extent Helene Bechstein's

dealings with high-ranking Nazi personalities has a positive influence on the sale of the real estate. We can only repeat that her attitude did not in any way boost the sales of pianos, nor the activity of the company's Propeller department.

On the contrary, Bechstein loses a substantial number of its traditional customers through the persecution and expropriation of the German Jews, followed by their deportation and murder in the Nazi camps, as having a Bechstein in one's living room was a must in well-to-do Jewish families before the war. And what happened to the instruments left in Germany by people who emigrated or were deported? According to the terminology of the Nazi administration, they were considered "Jewish property without proprietor" – and were stolen during the looting of the abandoned apartments. We do not know, for example, what became of Artur Schnabel's two grand pianos, nor the instruments used by the composers Ralph Benatzky and Jean Gilbert. Moreover, after the Second World War, most of the musicians who emigrated permanently turned their backs on what had been their favourite piano brand before the Holocaust.

The New Beginning

The Second World War is a disaster for Germany in general and Bechstein in particular. Berlin is repeatedly the target of large air raids by the Royal Air Force and the US Air Force that destroy not only the factory in Reichenberger Strasse, but also the major part of the company's stocks of wood.

After the end of the war, the ruins of the Bechstein factory are located in the American sector of Berlin. The US military authorities commandeer the remaining production facilities and place the company under trusteeship until 1951. Lieselotte and Edwin Otto Bechstein, Helene's children, inherit their mother's shares after her death, but these remain under US control. In 1963, most of them, as well as shares of the Golddiskontbank, are handed over to the Cincinnati-based piano manufacturer Baldwin. Edwin Otto Bechstein

will sell his twenty-five percent of the company's shares to Baldwin in the 1970s.

Immediately after the German capitulation, the occupation authorities compel Bechstein to use its remaining stocks of wood to make coffins – a decision with a highly symbolic dimension. The policy of the US occupying forces follows various goals at that time: on the one hand "re-educating" the Germans and teaching them democracy, on the other acquiring German patents to be exploited by the civil and military industries while opening the German market for US products.

Two iconic photographs that illustrate "music on the battle field" acquired worldwide fame and now belong to the collective memory. The first picture shows an American soldier nonchalantly leaning on a dirty grand piano, Wagner's instrument in Villa Wahnfried after the seizure of Bayreuth by the US Army. The second photograph pictures happy GIs singing around an upright, the Victory Vertical model specially built by Steinway for the purpose of entertaining the troops. Under such conditions, it is easily understandable that the new beginning will be anything but simple for C. Bechstein.

Piano production does not resume until December 1951, more than six years after the end of the war. Within the framework of the European Recovery Programme, or Marshall Plan, the company was granted credits, could acquire a modern machine park and moved to a new production site of eight thousand square metres. Despite the war damage, it still has a stock of precious raw materials: wood cut in the 1930, including valuable planks from Romanian trees that are excellent for making pinblocks and soundboards.

Two years later, C. Bechstein organises a dazzling event to celebrate its 100th anniversary at the Titaniapalast, the venue that provisionally hosts Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Wilhelm Furtwängler. The hall is overcrowded on 21 November 1953 as Wilhelm Backhaus plays five works by Beethoven, including the profound *Piano Sonata No 32, op. 111*.

Sales remain relatively moderate in the early 1950s, but the pianos integrate the traditional Bechstein quality. In 1954, conductor Sergiu Celibidache buys a short grand piano for his Mexico City residence and is immediately fired with enthusiasm. And in 1957, the third Bechstein exported to Japan is acquired by none other than Yamaha, who uses the instrument in its own concert hall. The economic activity is so favourable that the board decides to build a second factory in October 1954. Just a few months later, the Messina Declaration paves the way to the foundation of the Common Market, so that when the new production site is inaugurated in Karlsruhe-Killisfeld in October 1959, the European Economic Community – the precursor of today's EU – has existed for two years under the Treaty of Rome. The decision to build this new factory with a total area of 1800 square metres is particularly judicious as West Berlin is cut off from the rest of the Federal Republic after the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, which results in a lack of skilled workers in the former German capital city.

In the late 1960s, the Berlin and Karlsruhe factories make nearly one thousand instruments a year with revenues of approximately 4.5 million marks. The commercial results are highly satisfactory, so that the board decides to build a third factory in Eschelbronn, also in Baden-Württemberg. By that time Bechstein is exporting nearly half of its production, but the customers are waiting up to six months for delivery.

The true revival starts in 1971 when Leonard Bernstein tours Germany with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, playing Ravel's *Concerto in G Major* exclusively on a Bechstein, while another virtuoso, Jorge Bolet, also favours the Berlin brand for his concerts.

In 1973, Baldwin changes the legal status of C. Bechstein from a public to a private limited company. Manager Max Matthias withdraws from the board, while Wilhelm Arndt, the former sales manager, remains with the company and becomes a mere managing director as all decisions are henceforth taken by Baldwin in the United States. The advantage of the company reorganisa-



Good times, bad times: Wilhelm Backhaus playing on a Bechstein on the occasion of the company's centennial (top); the ruined Bechstein factories after 1945 (bottom).



Leonard Bernstein, world-famous pianist, composer and director, playing on a Bechstein.

tion, conversely, is that Bechstein gains access to the American market.

With concert halls becoming ever larger, the company develops a new, more powerful concert grand, the model EN. Moreover, this novel instrument takes into account the changes in musical taste since the time of Hans von Bülow, as jazz music has grown increasingly popular in the last decades. As a result, many leading jazz pianists henceforth opt for Bechstein.

In 1978, a brilliant programme celebrates the company's 125th anniversary, with concerts by such noted artists as the young Christian Zacharias, the stupendous Shura Cherkassky and the Alfons/Aloy Kontarsky duo. Meanwhile, the situation has normalised in West Berlin and the "island city" enjoys considerable subsidies from the German federal government.

Bechstein endeavours to gain a foothold in new markets as Wilhelm Arndt retires in 1984. In the UK, the economic boom of the Thatcher era and the rise of a new class of wealthy traders at the London Stock Exchange has practically no impact on sales, however, as having a piano in one's living room is no longer a must for the well-to-do. In short: the prospects are not very good for Bechstein in the mid-1980s. Radical changes are therefore needed. Something like another new beginning. With the difference that the risks are much greater now than in 1853 when Carl Bechstein founded his business.

Then a new personality steps in: Karl Schulze, a thirty-eight-year old master piano-maker, owner of the Piano Sprenger shop in Oldenburg, Lower Saxony. Baldwin has already asked him twice to become Bechstein's managing director, but he refused: his target is to

take over the traditional Berlin brand and run it independently. To that end, he develops a financing plan with a Berlin bank, and becomes Bechstein's new owner in May 1986.

Schulze's concept, which provides for restructuring and repositioning Bechstein in the top-segment market, is rapidly successful. Shortly after the takeover, the new boss clearly presents his goal in a letter sent to all Bechstein dealers: "The Bechstein brand is to become once again what it had been from the very beginning: the epitome of excellence". The company introduces a new grand piano on the occasion of the 1987 Frankfurt Music Fair: the model K with a length of 158 centimetres. In 1987, the turnover increases by four million marks over the previous year to reach fourteen million.

In 1988, Bechstein moves from the old production site in Reichenberger Strasse to a modern building in Prinzenstrasse near Checkpoint Charlie, still in Berlin-Kreuzberg. The international economic situation is favourable, as "perestroika" and "glasnost" are now the keywords in the Soviet Union, giving rise to the hope of opening new markets in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, the changes soon prove to be much more radical than anyone forecasted, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 introduces a new, turbulent era.



Karl Schulze, who bought Bechstein in 1986.

But optimism is still on the agenda in 1990. Bechstein takes over Euterpe, a small business founded in Berlin that moved to Langlau, Franconia, after the Second World War, and took over W.Hoffmann in 1977. Although worldwide piano production drops by forty percent that year, Karl Schulze shows his audacity again in 1992: just two years after German reunification, he also takes over the Zimmermann brand and its production site in Seiffhennersdorf, Saxony. The region is backed by a long tradition in musical instrument manufacturing, and personnel costs are considerably lower there than in Berlin. Moreover, Zimmermann is among Germany's leading piano-makers. Schulze thus took the right decision, even though the economy loses momentum. Eastern European markets are collapsing and, within the framework of German reunification, the federal government prioritises the modernisation of infrastructures in the area that once formed the GDR.

The Langlau production site ceases operation in June 1993 and the redundancy package is such a burden that the company must apply for bankruptcy. The news goes around the world and everybody worries: will this be the end of the Bechstein tradition?

The Berlin Senate, conversely, remains unperturbed, probably because local politicians are not really interested in culture, preferring to focus on the gigantic Potsdamer Platz urban development project, with its high-rises and possible speculation benefits. Selling the production plant at Prinzenstrasse could save the company and prospective buyers are at hand, but the State of Berlin, which has a pre-emption right, first decides... to do nothing. At the last moment, when it is nearly too late, the local authorities finally buy the real estate – at a price that pre-dated the fall of the Wall, of course.

Today more than ever, the brand has a strong emotional charge: Bechstein still embodies the ideal of “Athens on the Spree,” even though local politicians now consider Berlin more a boomtown than a cultural epicentre.

At the same time, various initiatives are launched to support Bechstein, as the brand has a strong emotional charge: Bechstein still embodies the ideal of “Athens on the Spree,” even though local politicians consider Berlin more a boomtown than a cultural epicentre. Particularly noteworthy is an action launched by twelve interna-

tional artists, who transform a concert grand piano into a gesamtkunstwerk.

A tenacious businessman, Karl Schulze finds a solution to secure the company's financial situation: Bechstein goes public again in 1996, whereby forty percent of the capital is made available to private investors. Thus the company can invest fifteen million euros to modernise the Seiffhennersdorf factory in the four last years of the 20th century, while the management offices and the showroom move to an ultramodern building located in Berlin-Charlottenburg's Kantstrasse in 1999. That state-of-the-art structure made

of steel, glass and concrete, called “Stilwerk”, houses exclusively the finest brands, making it a “temple to good taste.” The Bechstein pianos are exhibited there in an environment that corresponds to the daily settings of the brand's customers and mirrors their lifestyle: designer furniture, modern home fabrics, espresso machines, and



The Seiffhennersdorf production plant taken over in 1992.



Ars Nova, an upright model that was awarded several design prizes.

so forth. A kind of museum of modern art where you can touch and buy the exhibited pieces, the Stilwerk is also a place for communication and gatherings, a cultural centre where concerts are regularly held. What a change from the time when Carl Bechstein invited Berlin's high society to recitals in his exclusive villa on the outskirts of the city! Today, music lovers and Bechstein aficionados come to a venue in the very city centre, to a temple of Italian design and German piano-making. As the concept proves to be successful, the Bechstein showroom in Rhineland soon moves to a similar structure: Düsseldorf's Stilwerk.

All Bechstein pianos are now made at the Seiffhennersdorf factory and the product range can satisfy any pianist as it includes the C. Bechstein model D concert grand (top segment), the Zimmermann instruments (middle segment) and the affordable W.Hoffmann pianos. Moreover, Bechstein develops the Vario digital mute for those who want to play as they like without disturbing their neighbours and family members. This device, which provides a traditional instrument with the advantages of an electronic

piano, is in a way the comeback of the Neo-Bechstein. As a result, the company revenues amount to nearly forty million euros by the turn of the millennium.

In the early 2000s, Bechstein sets another milestone in cultural history when it launches the ProBechstein range. These instruments re-invent the upright piano, the product at the origin of the Bechstein tradition 150 years earlier: case of contemporary elegance, proportions inspired by the ancient golden rule, clear and differentiated design that crystallises in the shape of a piano, aesthetics that recall the works of Jean Nouvel or Sir Norman Foster. Once bulky and unsightly, the upright has now taken on sculptural qualities. One of the three models within the ProBechstein range bears the name “Ars Nova”, an expression with a double connotation. First, one thinks of “art nouveau,” of course, that style born in the late 19th century as great designers and architects joined their efforts to provide industrial products with a new aesthetic. But the Latin name “ars nova” also relates to a revolution that introduced isorhythmic motet in French music in the early 14th century. For the

outstanding quality of its design, the new ProBechstein range is awarded a highly coveted international prize, the *Good Design Award*.

In 2003, on the occasion of the company's 150th anniversary, Bechstein celebrates a glorious past while the recent successes promise a bright future. Various concerts and events are organised on this occasion in Berlin, the new capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, a city that attracts the attention of the world with great architectural projects such as the new Chancellery and the Reichstag cupola designed by Sir Norman Foster. In such a context, it is not surprising that the media widely report on the first Bechstein jubilee of the 21st century.

Piano Global

Bechstein wants to be ready for global competition.

However, 2003 is also the year of a change in the company's ownership structure. In September 2002, the South Korean musical instrument manufacturer Samick contacted



View of the closing event of the First C. Bechstein International Piano Competition at Essen's Philharmonic Hall in 2006.

Bechstein and suggested a collaboration between both businesses. This was not surprising as Samick had founded a joint venture with Baldwin in 1983, the Korean-American Musical Instruments Corporation, which produced 66,000 instruments the following year. After a restructuring performed in 2002, Samick has now a staff of three thousand, runs production facilities in Seoul, Djakarta and Shanghai, and manufactures 50,000 upright and grand pianos a year, as well as numerous electronic pianos and half a million guitars. Moreover, the subsidiary Samick America markets the instruments successfully in the US.

According to a contract that takes effect in January 2003, Samick acquires Bechstein shares while Karl Schulze and his wife Berenice Küpper participate in Samick's capital. This co-op-

eration enables the traditional Berlin company to produce the low-segment instruments in Asia and acquire components for the mid-segment pianos at attractive prices, whereby the quality of such components is constantly monitored. Samick, on the other hand, benefits from the prestigious aura of the great German brand. Another asset of the new co-operation is the opening of a showroom in Korea: Seoul's Bechstein Center.

Bechstein's 150th anniversary was an opportunity to celebrate, but the upsets of the world economy made it impossible to perform a detailed review of the company's glorious past. Three years later, in 2006, Bechstein resolutely faces the future as it institutes the C. Bechstein International Piano Competition and decides to repeat the event every fourth year. The first

edition is held at venues in the Ruhr region: Duisburg's Theatre, Dortmund's Konzerthaus, Essen's Philharmonic Hall and Folkwang Conservatory. The competition is placed under the patronage of pianist and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy; its artistic director is Boris Bloch, who teaches piano at the Folkwang Conservatory; among the jury members are the pianists Idil Biret and Kyrill Gerstein, as well as the composer Alexander Tchaikovsky, artistic director with Moscow Philharmonic Society.

The event is immediately well received by the public, as 250 young pianists from fifty-five countries apply – which is quite unusual for a new competition. Berenice Küpper, Bechstein's sales manager and an experienced pianist, who initiated the competition, is satisfied: such a success shows that the name "Bechstein" remains prestigious

the world over. After a pre-selection phase, nearly fifty pianists perform during events scheduled over ten days, giving excellent and exciting concerts. Hans von Bülow, the dear friend of the company founder, would most likely have appreciated the programme, as it includes compulsory works by Bach and Beethoven. Moreover, during the semi-finals the candidates must perform a piano concerto by Mozart together with a string quartet to demonstrate their skills as soloists and chamber musicians – a procedure that Mozart himself planned when composing some of his concertos. The first prize is awarded to Evgeny Bozhanov, a young Bulgarian pianist who wins 15,000 euros, a sum that clearly indicates that this competition intends to rank among the main international events from the outset.

The year 2006 also brings another change in the company's financial structure because in the previous autumn, Karl Schulze and his wife Berenice Küpper re-acquired half of the shares owned by Samick. Thus Bechstein's CEO and Marketing Director together hold nearly thirty percent of the company's capital, so that Samick becomes merely a financial investor with only 19.5 percent of the shares – and without a blocking minority.

The first decade of the 21st century is truly incredible. Future generations will probably consider it the most fast-paced period of human history. The world changes its face every day: Indian magnates take over a European steel group and a traditional British car brand; major Russian energy providers sign delivery contracts with a number of European countries; the media report as much on China as on the US; everybody talks about globalisation, whereby some advocate it while others – in particular NGOs – drastically oppose it. In such a context, running a business requires rapid decision-making to alter the course whenever necessary. A company that invests in a country to take advantage of low personnel costs must sometimes change its mind and withdraw its investment due to political insecurity, general corruption, lack of skills in the workforce or simply increasing transport costs. How can a piano-making company survive under such conditions? How

can it produce instruments that last for decades and fascinate pianists over one century or even more?

In the meantime, C. Bechstein has become Europe's leading manufacturer of upright and grand pianos. The company reaps not only the assets, but also the disadvantages of globalisation. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it co-operates with the best suppliers the world over, selected and continuously monitored by a special team. Moreover, Bechstein organises training sessions for the suppliers to ensure that they are able to meet the company's strict quality specifications. Concerning just the soundboard, for example: the plywood that the supplier delivers for processing by Bechstein must be made of spruce grown in European mountains at a certain altitude; and according to Bechstein's specifications, it must dry in a climatic chamber for six to twelve months (uprights) or even two years (concert grand pianos). As regards the hammerheads, the drying times are three months for uprights and six months for grand pianos. Such examples show that the just-in-time processes used by businesses serving industry, who transfer their warehouses to lorries that deliver at the very last minute, are not possible at the Bechstein factory, where craftsmanship and handwork still play a crucial role in the production processes.

How can a piano-making company survive under such conditions? How can it produce instruments that last for decades and fascinate pianists over one century or even more?

The taste of music aficionados also changes during the first decade of the 21st century. In Central and Western Europe, as well as in Canada and the US, people increasingly appreciate concerts given on "authentic instruments," i.e. historic pianos or replicas, whereby the latter are sometimes better. Most of these instruments are unique pieces made by craftsmen. Another change is the increased size of the concert halls in Europe, Russia, Asia and the US. Such venues have special acoustic properties that require powerful instruments with a rich, colourful voice.

In all cases, the audience expects an exceptional, glamorous event and is prepared to pay for it.

Another novelty is the growing influence of the Russian school. The trend was already discernible before the implosion of the Soviet Union, and has gained importance ever since as many young pianists moved to Central and Western Europe. The Russian school's main characteristic is a vivid and powerful play that strongly contrasts with the "jeu perlé" of the French tradition that still bears the influence of the lute and harpsichord players of the 18th century.

The new C. Bechstein model D concert grand piano takes these developments into account, as illustrated by the following two examples: while the agraffes of the treble strings were a characteristic of the Bechstein instruments for decades, they are replaced on the model D by capo bars integrated into the cast iron frame; moreover, the new concert grand piano is provided with a duplex scale that increases the vibrating length of the strings, thus improving the instrument's voice.

This alone would not be sufficient and just as in Carl Bechstein's day, personal commitment remains paramount. But while the company founder only left Berlin on rare occasions once his business was running, today's CEO



Naoki Yamauchi, a concert technician who has worked with Bechstein for decades.

have practically vanished in Europe by that time, which makes a significant difference to the situation of 1853. Moreover, the downfall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Comecon enable the European Union to acquire new member states in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. In this context, Bechstein does not merely produce one model of grand plus one or two models of uprights like in the mid-19th century, but develops a quite comprehensive range of products. Among the reasons for this development are the increasing differences of incomes within the middle classes. We know that most of the piano buyers belong to this social group but should bear in mind that even as Carl Bechstein was working with Kriegelstein in Paris, "popular pianos" were already being built using rationalised production processes.

The Euterpe instruments are such "popular pianos". The company was founded in Berlin, moved to Langlau after the Second World War and was taken over by C. Bechstein in 1990. Between the mid-1990s and 2003, Bechstein produces the Euterpe upright and grand pianos in co-operation with Petrof, a traditional Czech brand. In a second phase, the instruments are redesigned and produced in Djakarta in co-operation with Samick until 2008. The co-operation with Petrof ends in 2005 because Bechstein has found a new Czech partner the year before: Bohemia, the successor to IFM Piana, a business founded in 1993 – four years after the Velvet Revolution that put an end to Communist dictatorship and led to the split of Czechoslovakia into two independent countries. Bohemia's headquarters are in Jihlava, a city

where a piano factory opened as early as 1871 made instruments in close co-operation with the Vienna brand Hofmann & Czerny until the 1960s. Bohemia rapidly flourishes: it sells nearly three thousand uprights under different brands in the mid-1990s and opens a production site for grand pianos in 1995 in Hradec Králové, one-hundred-twenty kilometres north of Jihlava and some hundred kilometres east of Prague.

C. Bechstein CZ, founded in 2004 with headquarters in Hradec Králové, takes over Bohemia in 2007. During that year, the company rents and modernises new production facilities, restructures its production to adapt it to German quality standards, and becomes a Bechstein subsidiary under the name "C. Bechstein Europe". In the

same period, the W.Hoffmann range is redesigned, enlarged and integrally made at the Czech production site as of late 2008. The target is clear after the Samick intermezzo: the group intends to offer only instruments made in Europe. Thus, the W.Hoffmann range that includes debutant pianos of superior quality as well as good mid-segment instruments enjoys a decisive quality advantage over competitor products made in Asia.

The W.Hoffmann brand "made by Bechstein Europe", henceforth the gateway to the Bechstein world, is rooted in the German and European traditions. W.Hoffmann was founded in Berlin in 1893 and moved to Langlau in 1953. By the mid-1960s, it had already produced 70,000 pianos but was taken over by Euterpe in 1977 and joined the Bechstein group in 1990 as mentioned above. Now, all W.Hoffmann upright and grand pianos are developed by the C. Bechstein R&D centre located in Seifhennersdorf and integrate numerous high-quality components. Particularly noteworthy are the soundboards of all grand pianos, which are exclusively made of spruce grown in European mountains.

The Zimmermann brand, now positioned near the top segment, enjoyed an even more surprising destiny. In the Communist era, all Zimmermann instruments were made in Seifhennersdorf and the brand was famous in West Germany and Western Europe for its affordability. In the meantime, the price/quality ratio has improved: the Zimmermann pianos are still made in Saxony and now integrate the Bechstein quality and sound philosophy as many of their components stem directly from the German manufacturer. A successful brand, Zimmermann is produced by Bechstein in Germany until 2011.

The Bechstein Academy range is something special among the brands of the Bechstein group since it was launched at the beginning of the millennium. It was developed to meet the new requirements of conservatories, music academies and concert halls, as such institutions have to face cuts in government support in all developed countries, while similar institutions are being founded in emerging countries.

The Bechstein Academy range meets their requirements as regards sturdiness and intensive use in a professional context. For example, the model 228, the largest instrument in this range, is of similar dimensions to the eight-foot grand piano frequent in mid-sized concert halls in the early 20th century. Such an instrument is suitable for all piano literature, whether solo or with a chamber music ensemble, as well as for nearly all classical concertos for piano and orchestra. And just like any Bechstein Academy instrument, the model 228 takes into account the international standards as regards the action.

In the early 21st century, the name of Carl Bechstein remains directly linked to the top segment instruments of the C. Bechstein brand, the masterpiece class that embodies the *non plus ultra* of German piano-making. In the years following the launch of the model D concert grand piano, frequent and direct contacts with star pianists enabled Bechstein to test the new company concept. Lazar Berman, for example, gave his last concert at Berlin's Stilwerk using a C. Bechstein model D to perform works that delighted the audience, in particular *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Modest Mussorgsky. The entire C. Bechstein range is progressively redesigned. The new model C, for example, has a length of 234 centimetres that corresponds to the classical

eight-foot grand piano, but delivers a much more powerful sound volume. As a result of the new strategy, star pianists the world over again favour the C. Bechstein concert grand pianos, either for stage performances or CD recordings.

All businesses today face ever more complicated logistics and distribution problems. This is why additional Bechstein Centres have been built, as those in Berlin and Düsseldorf proved to be successful. The concerts organised there with debutant or star pianists attract a large number of music aficionados, so that the Bechstein venues henceforth play a major role in the local cultural life.

Moreover, the company organises "Bechstein Days" together with various dealers, as well as a series of competitions in music conservatories, the first of these events being held in Baden-Württemberg in 2007. Also worth a mention is *Bechstein News*, a magazine highly appreciated by Bechstein aficionados for its company news, portraits and interviews of journalists, and information on scheduled piano competitions.

In recent times, the United States proved again to be a market with particular rules, a country where the piano demand does not correspond to the general economic situation. In



Bechstein production site in Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, where the W.Hoffmann pianos are made.

short: surprises are always possible for a company that exports to America. Nonetheless, there is a considerable number of people that country interested in a brand that embodies tradition and excellence, so that Bechstein decided to personally market its pianos in the US.

As regards Eastern Europe, Ukraine and Russia, however, CEO Karl Schulze repeatedly observed that the name "Bechstein" has maintained its prestigious aura despite the political upheavals of the last century. Thus a "Bechstein salon" opened in the direct vicinity of Moscow's Tchaikovsky Conservatory in 2008.

Although Bechstein pianos are good long-term investments, they sometimes require restoration. This can be done in the company's workshop that specialises in piano refurbishment, works in the great tradition of German piano-making and sometimes handles famous instruments: in the recent past, the Bechstein specialists refurbished three grand pianos that formerly belonged to Franz Liszt, one instrument used by Brahms in Meiningen and one grand delivered to composer Wilhelm Furt-

wängler decades ago that now belongs to the company. The model E that the SFB radio station acquired in 1973 and neglected for years was also refurbished, so that the young pianist and author York Kronenberg could use it recently to record a CD of Beethoven's and Schubert's last sonatas, which met with great success.

The Bechstein workshop refurbishes between twenty and thirty pianos a year. Some of the technicians have been working there for three decades, which represents a particularly valuable wealth of experience. Moreover, the workshop has access to a stock of vintage materials, so that it was able to refurbish soundboards that were made more than seventy years ago, had survived all the air raids over Berlin, and now let the traditional Bechstein sound resonate in the new millennium.

In 2007, Bechstein sells more than four thousand pianos and achieves revenues of more than thirty million euros. When the co-operation with Samick ends in 2008, Berenice Küpper and Karl Schulze take over the shares from the former partner and increase the company capital, while the board de-

cides to directly market the Bechstein pianos in Asia and the US. In the same time a new major shareholder, the Berlin-based company Kuthe GmbH, ensures the future and ongoing growth of the century-old business: despite the serious financial crisis of the new millennium, Bechstein sells nearly five thousand instruments a year – just as many as in the golden age of piano at the beginning of the 20th century.

In 2010, the company opens a distribution office in Shanghai led by Zhou Xianghao, an admirer of the brand who has been collaborating with Bechstein since it first appeared on the Asian market. The next year is also very good, especially in Russia and other European countries: numerous instruments delivered to conservatories and similar institutions underscore the brand's aura of excellence, while the demand for pianos in luxury versions remains high. Still in 2011, great pianists choose Bechstein for their recordings, thus acknowledging the exceptional value of the instruments' voice. And by the end of the year, Bechstein becomes a member of the "Meisterkreis" organisation, the first club of German businesses that specialise in luxury



Liszt's grand piano after its restoration by Bechstein.



Autographs of great artists

The greatest pianists of yesterday and today have signed Bechstein's visitors' book.

goods. Furthermore, Bechstein initiates a co-operation with a Chinese partner for producing – under the supervision of a German team – very affordable instruments to be exclusively sold on the Asian market.

As of 2012, the company focuses on two product lines: the "C. Bechstein" pianos on the one hand, masterpieces with a powerful voice that are made in craftsmanship processes using materials of exceptional quality; and on the other the "Bechstein" instruments that are made in Germany and embody the company's tradition with their noble and singing voice.

A replica of the famous gilt piano delivered to Queen Victoria – three

years in the making – is to be exhibited on the occasion of the company's 160th anniversary in 2013. This exceptional instrument made exclusively after a few historic photographs will demonstrate the exceptional expertise of a company backed with a sound tradition when it comes to remake a prestigious grand piano.

Today, C. Bechstein is the last manufacturer of top-quality pianos to have its capital in the hands of German shareholders, while Asian investors now control all of its competitors. Moreover, the traditional Berlin-based company took measures to ensure its future: Stefan Freymuth, the new main shareholder, promised to preserve the potential that enables Bechstein to

make pianos with a precious voice that have been considered musical jewels for more than one and a half century.

Bechstein thus remains true to itself. The epitome of excellent quality, the company builds on its glorious tradition and courageously faces the future as it pioneers new opportunities. Its intention is to keep alive the European sound, that of the Old World, despite all vicissitudes of history. Such a philosophy perfectly corresponds to the ideas of outstanding personalities such as Carl Bechstein, Hans von Bülow, Franz Liszt, Ferruccio Busoni, Artur Schnabel and Wilhelm Backhaus – visionary ideas that go far beyond any revenue considerations.

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English version: ÜMS Berlin*

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