

THE STORY OF A CHOPIN PIANO

by Stephen Tanner



On January 18th 2007, the preeminent Chopin scholar, Professor Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger of Switzerland, informed me that the original owner of my Pleyel piano above was a "Madame Raymond" (or Remond) from Jassy, Moldavia who bought the instrument from Pleyel on March 31, 1848 for 1100 francs, which included a 10% commission for Chopin. She was one of Chopin's pupils and had the piano shipped to Jassy. Professor Eigeldinger found this information via painstaking research in Pleyel's logs and ledgers and from a letter written by Franz Liszt's mother. Research is underway in Rumania to find out more about Madame Raymond. According to a previous owner of Pleyel #13555, she must have been a member of the reigning princely family of Moldavia.

Without lucky coincidences and friendships, I would never have owned this piano, played and signed by Chopin. Now, at 84 and in deteriorating health, I am looking for a good next home for this noble little instrument which is still the crown jewel of my dwindling music memorabilia collection. I fervently wish it might find a home in a place dedicated to the memory of Chopin, for example a museum, a collection or perhaps the concert hall on the Zelazowa Wola estate where he was born.

Oddly, finding the piano and acquiring it grew out of an early love for opera and Italian literature. At the beginning of the 1940's at Yale, my very favorite accompaniments to homework were some exhilarating arias and duets sung by Titta Ruffo (1877-1953), "the Caruso of the baritones."

Then in the middle of World War II in Italy along came the next accidental event: in Piazza Santa Trinita two days after the liberation of Florence, I overheard a horse and buggy cab driver say Titta Ruffo had been his passenger the day before. I hopped in that fiacre and minutes later stood knocking at Ruffo's door in via Campidoglio 4. A thin woman with a un-Italian accent opened the door and ceremoniously ushered me into the small sitting room plastered with artworks. She said I was the first American to call on "il Maestro" and went to summon him. This was none other than Olga Isacescu, Ruffo's life companion and secretary. Little could I foresee that thirty-three years later I would own Pleyel #13555, thanks to Olga.

During that frigid winter of 1944-45, I spent many pleasant hours in that apartment. Ruffo became like a father to me. He had many entertaining stories about opera and opera people - and so did I. After the war I stayed in touch with Ruffo and Olga and in spring 1948, I brought my new bride, Nancy Swift, to Florence where Ruffo entertained us royally, even arranging a tour of the Uffizi Galleries, which were closed for repairs, led by Ruffo's friend, the Director, who escorted us on a private top-to-bottom tour. Here is a photo of Ruffo, Olga and myself, snapped by Nancy just after that Uffizi visit.



Now we skip to 1967 and Milan, Italy for the next surprise step forward. I had been assigned there as American Consul. Sadly, Ruffo had died in 1953 of uremia and heart trouble. Olga Isacescu, however, was living in Milan to be near the sumptuous Monumentale cemetery where Ruffo and many leading artists such as Toscanini chose to be buried. Her two elderly sisters from Rumania -- Elena, a concert pianist, and Carmen -- had joined Olga as stateless refugees. Like Olga they were dear, frail, penniless, aristocratic old ladies. For income, the three depended largely on the sale of Ruffo's belongings left to Olga and gifts from his fans. I eagerly helped them and bought many items for my opera memorabilia and artifacts collection.

One day in spring 1970, out of the clear blue sky, Olga asked if I would accompany her younger sister Carmen and help to get through Italian Customs a family heirloom piano which had just arrived from Rumania. (Carmen was the youngest and strongest of the three and did all the shopping and other outside errands. The piano from Rumania was addressed to her.) Olga reasoned that if an American Consul went with Carmen, the piano would pass easily through Customs with no bureaucratic fuss or duty to pay. She was right. A smiling customs officer became even more jovial and helpful after I showed him my diplomatic identity card and handed him a small tip. I paid to have the crated piano carted on a little three-wheeler truck from Customs to the workshop of Milan's noted antique piano expert, Commendatore Giuseppe Pallotti, known also for writing self-published doggerel verses and jingles in Milanese dialect. He opened both the crate and the piano, noted that two bass strings were broken and some moth-eaten red damper felt also needed replacement. He warned that fixing anything more than these items would lower the piano's value. He expressed mild surprise that an 1847 piano was still in such excellent, original condition with no evidence of restoration..

A day or so later, the piano was duly delivered to Olga's third floor apartment in via Sarpi and I was invited over to see it. After thanks and some sherry, she dropped a bomb: this was a piano played and autographed by Frederic Chopin himself. She raised the lid and showed me the "F Chopin" signature plus a letter from Pleyel describing Chopin's connection and mentioning that he had signed it in Pleyel's Paris showroom. Naturally, she felt it wise to avoid public knowledge of the Chopin details. She said she and her sisters had brought the piano to Milan for one reason only: to sell it for sorely needed cash. She asked if I would help find a buyer and I gladly wrote several letters on her behalf. One was to Paul Getty, the oil tycoon in London. She said he had visited and admired Ruffo, however, Getty's secretary replied flatly that Getty had never heard of Ruffo. After a bit of head scratching, it was clear that Paul's opera-buff son Gordon in San Francisco had been the Getty visitor. Unfortunately, that and other letters Olga and I wrote over several months produced no results.

In 1976 my family moved from Italy to Vermont, but in 1977 I returned on a visit to Italy and found the piano still unsold. I chatted with Olga about the piano and its history. She said it had been in her family for three generations. Her great-aunt, Elisa Sion nee Marculescu, a noble woman had been lady-in-waiting to a Rumanian princess living in Paris. According to Isacescu family lore, the princess gave the piano to the great-aunt who eventually bequeathed it to Olga's mother.

According to Olga's research, as of 1939 there were only twelve authenticated Chopin pianos, of which only three bore his signature. Half jokingly, I offered to buy Pleyel #13555, "if the price is not too steep." To my delight, the three sisters conferred and the next morning offered a price within my means. So, I bought it on December 3rd 1977.

Our old stone house in Fairfax, Vermont dating from the 1830's became the piano's next home. An elegant bird's eye mahogany period piece in a period piece home. For protection, I confided its background to only a few skilled pianist friends and several eagerly played it.

In 1981 we and the piano moved to my grandfather's home in Austin, Texas to care for my ninety-year-old mother. Among the few informed pianists who played on it in Austin were two internationally famous Chopin specialists: Paul Badura-Skoda and Pavlina Dokovska. He was presenting master classes at the University of Texas while our close friend Pavlina came as soloist with the Austin Symphony. Badura-Skoda seemed mesmerized, played it for over an hour and even offered to buy it, but at that time we very much wanted to keep it.

Immediately in 1978, I began research about Chopin pianos in general and about Pleyel #13555 in particular, partly to double-check the many provenance details Olga had given me. None of those details I succeeded in researching over the years seemed questionable or doubtful. Quite helpful were books about Chopin, the Chopin Society of Poland, the Director of the Chopin Museum in Warsaw, Hanna Wroblewska-Straus, and Rumanian Professor and author Radu Florescu.

Chopin preferred Pleyel pianos and this model was one of his favorites. It was the same model he bought to compose on and play during his stay on Majorca with Georges Sand. Moreover, he reportedly used this model of Pleyel often when teaching. He would seat the pupil at the grand piano while he sat at the smaller Pleyel demonstrating to the pupil how certain passages should be played.

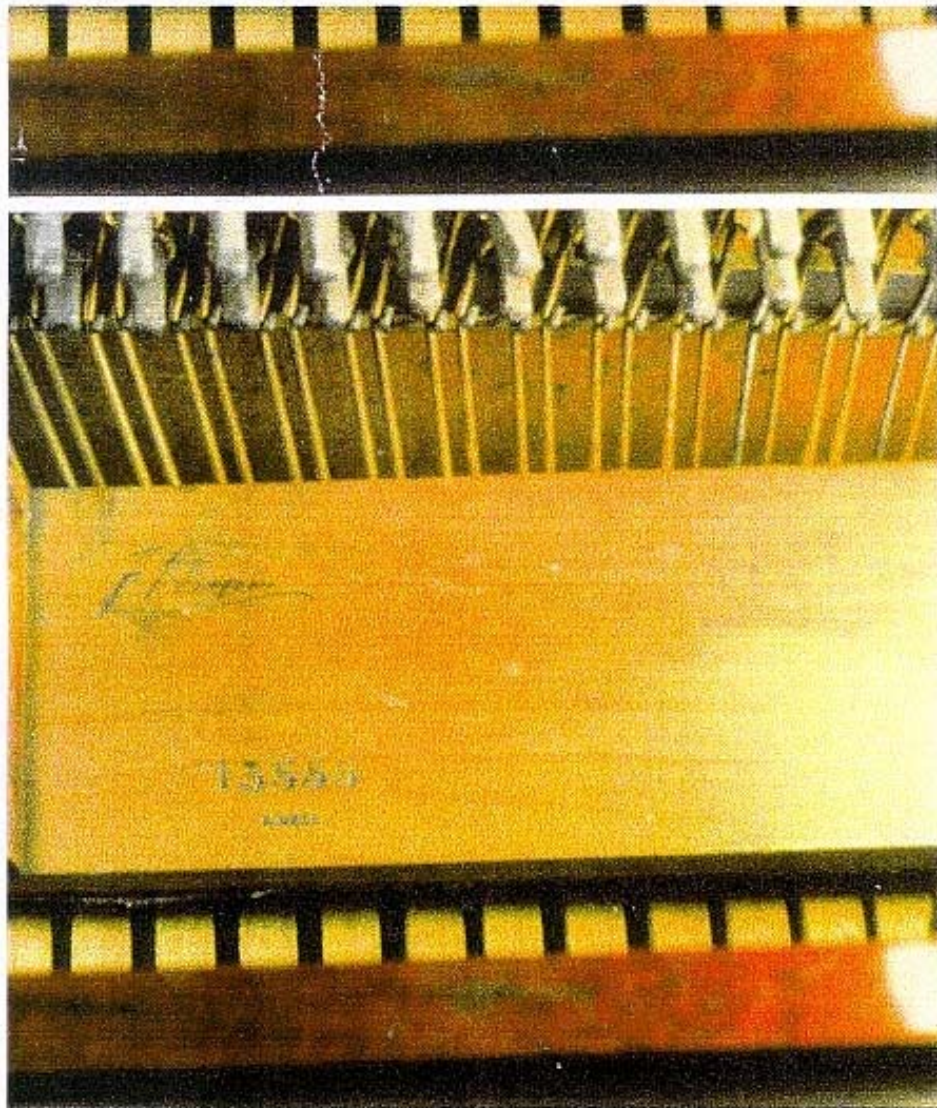
According to the Chopin Society of Poland in 1981, aside from Pleyel #13555, there was only one other known and still existing instrument bearing Chopin's autograph. This was namely Chopin's last piano, Pleyel #13716, given to him by his patroness, Jane Stirling. It now belongs to the Jagiellonian University Museum in Cracow, Poland. That would make my Pleyel #13555 the only privately owned, autographed Chopin piano.

In 1999 I wrote to the Otto Haas firm in London to request an expertise on Chopin's signature. The impeccable authority, Albi Rosenthal, sent me the certification below. His sterling qualifications are described in his obituary on Internet.

(see last page)

Once the piano is properly sold, I plan to make a generous gift to the Chopin Foundation.

To comment or learn more about Pleyel #13555, please use my e-mail address: FChopinpiano@aol.com.



This is to certify that the signature
"F. Chopin" reproduced above is the authentic
autograph signature of the composer Frederic
Chopin (1810 - 1849).

Albi Rosenka!

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