



COMMUNICATION: REPORT

Beethoven on an Original Fortepiano in the 1930s: Arnold Dolmetsch, Ruth Eyre and a Stodart Instrument of 1790

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Arnold Dolmetsch (1858–1940) is well acknowledged in the historiography of the early-music movement for his contributions to the revival of instruments such as the recorder, viola da gamba, clavichord, harpsichord and numerous others. From the 1890s until his death, based variously in London, Boston, Paris and Haslemere (Surrey, United Kingdom), he engaged in reconstructing them, rediscovering their playing techniques, and unearthing and editing early repertoire to perform with his family and circle. His diverse range of activities has been the focus of a wide range of literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as I have discussed in a recent reappraisal of his life and work ('Rediscovering Arnold Dolmetsch: Going Back to the Sources of the Early Music Revival', *Early Music* 51/2 (2023), 275–291). Prominent studies include a detailed biography by Margaret Campbell (1917–2015), *Dolmetsch: The Man and His Work* (London: Hamilton, 1975), Harry Haskell's portrayal of Dolmetsch in *The Early Music Revival: A History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) as an 'apostle of retrogression' (26–43) and Peter Holman's study of his creation of a viol consort in 1890s London (*Life after Death: The Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 332–336). Arnold and his wife Mabel (née Johnston, 1874–1963) themselves left first-hand accounts: Arnold's seldom-cited autobiographical essay 'The Evolution of the Dolmetsch Instruments' (dated 18 December 1929 and published in *Dolmetsch and His Instruments* (Haslemere: author, c1930), 1–6) and Mabel's intimate memoir of family life and public activities, *Personal Recollections of Arnold Dolmetsch* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).

The question of whether Arnold was the true pioneer in various aspects of the early-music revival has been raised by a number of scholars. Holman has observed, for instance, that although 'the narrative of the British harpsichord revival normally starts with Arnold Dolmetsch', evidence for earlier performances in the United Kingdom can be dated back to the 1830s ('The Harpsichord in 19th-Century Britain', *Harpsichord and Fortepiano* 24/2 (2020), 10). Yet what remains relatively little known – besides brief mentions by Campbell, Haskell, the Dolmetsches themselves and others – is that Arnold played a prominent role in the resuscitation of the fortepiano. This fact was highlighted last year by Peter Bavington. In discussing Arnold's making of diverse keyboards and other instruments in Boston from 1906 to 1910, and referring also to his earlier work in London, Bavington noted that Arnold 'has a good claim to be regarded as the father of the fortepiano revival' ('The Chickering Early-Instrument Log-Book: An Introduction', *The Consort* 79 (2023), 73).

Arnold's work in this respect took place in two phases. First, between 1898 and 1901 he made three 'Beethoven' pianos for specific patrons and exhibited them to the public (Campbell, *Dolmetsch*, 131 and 138; 143, note 3, and 144, note 19); he also made a fourth instrument of this type in Boston in 1907 or 1908, and possibly two more (see Mabel Dolmetsch, *Personal Recollections*, 78, and Bavington, 'The Chickering Early-Instrument Log-Book', 74, 83–84 and 94). The second phase was in the 1930s, when he programmed and presented music by Joseph Haydn

and Ludwig van Beethoven – including the latter’s first concerto – on an original fortepiano that he advertised as dating from 1799, and on which he also recorded the first movement of Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata, Op. 27 No. 2. The concerto performance took place in 1934 at the tenth Haslemere Festival, an annual summer event established by Arnold in 1925 to present ‘ancient music’ of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not only according to what he considered performance styles of their period but also on the kinds of instruments for which the music was written.

Dolmetsch’s endeavours to reconstruct or restore historical keyboard instruments did not start from scratch; he came from a family with a generations-strong background in making pianos and organs. As he related: ‘On leaving school I entered my father’s workshop, where I learned wood working and pianoforte making. I also studied organ making [which would have included harmoniums] with my grandfather, whose workshop was next to ours’ (A. Dolmetsch, ‘Evolution’, 2). He was only one generation removed from the everyday use of earlier kinds of instruments, and was well aware of them; he noted that his Zurich-born father Rudolf Arnold Dolmetsch (1827–1874) ‘had been taught by his father to play Bach’s Fugues *on the clavichord*’ (A. Dolmetsch, ‘Evolution’, 1; original italics). As a practising musician, Arnold studied at the Brussels Conservatoire and also at the Royal College of Music, where he was part of the very first intake of students (Campbell, *Dolmetsch*, 9–12, 15; see also Irving, ‘Rediscovering Arnold Dolmetsch’, 279). In the 1880s and 1890s he collected old instruments, and it was in 1894 that he began making clavichords, followed by harpsichords two years later. For information on this activity see Jenny Nex and Lance Whitehead, ‘The Six Early Clavichords of Arnold Dolmetsch: Their Construction and Inspiration’, *The Galpin Society Journal* 53 (2000), 274–300; Peter Bavington, ‘Arnold Dolmetsch’s Clavichord-Making in the Years before 1914’, updated version, www.peter-bavington.co.uk/Bavington-Dolmetsch.pdf (12 August 2022); Edmond Johnson, ‘Arnold Dolmetsch’s Green Harpsichord and the Musical Arts & Crafts’, *Keyboard Perspectives* 10 (2017), 145–167; and Holman, ‘The Harpsichord in 19th-Century Britain’, 10–11.

I am gradually gathering information about the four reproduction ‘Beethoven’ pianos, of which the present locations of only two are known. What prompts the present communication, however, is a sense of mystery surrounding the original fortepiano of 1799. What was this instrument, I wondered, and does it still exist? My research in the Jeanne-Marie Dolmetsch Collection (JMDC) at the Cambridge University Library (Ms. Add. 10371), bequeathed to that institution in 2019, coupled with investigation of other sources, including instruments and archives held at the Horniman Museum, has thrown new light on this mystery, but additional questions arise. In what follows I set out what is known and speculate on the identity of the instrument.

Arnold first publicly announced the existence of the 1799 piano in an advertisement for the Haslemere Festival of 1934, in which he wrote:

As I cannot consider the music apart from its proper medium, I have had to revive many kinds of instruments in keeping with the period represented. The list is a formidable one, since to the Lutes, Recorders, families of Viols and Violins I have now added two different kinds of Harps, the Crwth and Rebecs of three sizes, Treble, Tenor and Bass. *I have also completed the family of Keyboard Instruments by the addition of a beautiful “Grand” Piano made in 1799.* (Pamphlet ‘The 10th Haslemere Festival / A Cycle of Music from the Bards to Beethoven / Under the Direction of / Arnold Dolmetsch / July 16th to July 28th, 1934’, in JMDC, Ms. Add. 10371/I: Concert Programmes, Haslemere Festival Programmes: 1925–1939; my italics)

Reflecting the insight of someone who grew up in a family of piano makers, he goes on to assert:

The Music of Beethoven, now oppressed by the heavy tone of modern pianos, regains its pristine freshness upon the instrument of his time. The full chords in the bass sound clear instead of groaning: the treble has the string quality instead of being glassy: the ‘*una corda*’ effect (a

physical impossibility upon the modern instrument) brings in its subtle and elusive charm; and, above all, the tone of this pianoforte blends perfectly with the instruments of the orchestra, thus reinstating the conditions which inspired the birth of this music. ('The 10th Haslemere Festival')

The programme of the ninth concert (25 July 1934) was entitled 'Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven' and gave – like other festival programmes – a detailed listing of works, although without catalogue numbers. It included a 'Sonata in D major for Pianoforte and Violin' by Beethoven (clearly his first, the only one in that key, Op. 12 No. 1), Mozart's 'Concerto No. 13 in C Major for Harpsichord and Orchestra' (K415), and 'Sonata No. 2 in E Minor for Harpsichord' by Haydn (probably HXVI:34, which was, coincidentally, published in 1799). There were also two songs by Haydn, for soprano and contralto respectively, listed as 'My Mother bids me Bind my Hair' (HXVIA:27) and 'The Anguish of my Bursting Heart' (usually known as 'Despair'; HXXVIA:28). The finale was Beethoven's first piano concerto (Op. 15), and its presentation here may constitute the earliest example of the work's interpretation on a period instrument in the twentieth century.

Who were the performers? The name of the solo pianist for the Beethoven piano concerto is not specifically indicated anywhere in the published programme of the festival. However, the booklet offers in its opening pages a complete list of 'The Players' for all twelve concerts in the two-week festival, giving names without mentioning their instruments (with the exception of musicians under the heading 'Wind Instrument Players'). One of 'The Players' was Ruth Eyre (1880–1960), a British pianist who had studied in Germany and was well known for her performances of solo and chamber music. She came from a musical family and played with her sisters in a group known as the Eyre Trio, the repertoire of which included Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 70 No. 1 ('Misses Eyre's Concert', *The Norwood News* (5 October 1901), 5; 'Music in the Provinces', *The Musical Times* 64/961 (March 1923), 207; and 'London Concerts', *The Musical Times* 71/1054 (December 1930), 1126 (F. H., 'The Eyre Trio')). Her father was Alfred James Eyre (1853–1919), a prominent organist at institutions including the Crystal Palace and St John's Norwood; Arnold Dolmetsch, who was also a composer, dedicated a set of organ works to him (*Suite in F (Preludio, Andante, Minuetto, Alla Marcia) for the Organ* (London: Schott, no date)). More remains to be discovered about the musical life and legacy of Ruth Eyre. Certainly, a Bechstein piano belonging to her is today in St John's Norwood, in South London; she donated it to this church before her death (see 'St John's Upper Norwood – The Early Years' www.sjun.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/The-Early-Years.pdf (12 December 2023)).

This naming alone, coupled with evidence of her career as a pianist, suggests Eyre as a potential candidate for being the soloist in this premiere of Beethoven's concerto on an original instrument. Two other sources from the JMDC appear to corroborate this hypothesis. Arnold noted in his diary for the day of 20 April 1934, 'Ruth Eyre est venue essayer le Concerto. C'est satisfaisant' (Ruth Eyre came to try the concerto. It's satisfactory) (JMDC, Ms. Add. 10371/F: Diaries (Arnold Dolmetsch), 1917–1939, Diary for 1934 (hereafter 'Diary' followed by date)). He entered another appointment with her two weeks later, which she did not attend, and one the following day that she did (Diary, 4 and 5 May 1934). That is the last written evidence of rehearsals; his diary pages (one per day) for the period of 12 May to 30 July 1934, covering the time of the festival (16–28 July), are all blank. Yet a second, altogether convincing clue is a score that appears to have been used in rehearsals, which survives within a group of modern published items from the Dolmetsch library that came with the JMDC to Cambridge University Library (it is classed as IV D 1). This is Max Pauer's edition of Beethoven's *Konzert Opus 15: C dur – Ut majeur – C major* (Leipzig: Peters, no date). On the top right-hand corner of the cover is clearly inscribed the name 'Ruth Eyre'. As is usual in concerto rehearsal scores, the orchestral part is reduced for an accompanying keyboard. What is distinctive about it, though, is that in many parts of the accompanying staves it contains further reductions, mostly in the orchestral ritornellos, notated by hand on small pieces of manuscript paper pasted

over the printed music. The notation closely resembles that of Arnold himself. It reduces the texture of the orchestral reduction even further, presumably for the purposes of pre-orchestral rehearsal; it may have also had to do with the range of the keyboard on which Arnold (or another musician) played the accompaniment.

How did the concerto sound in context? In a review of the 1934 festival, Gerald Hayes wrote in general terms as follows, although without mentioning the solo instrument:

It is perhaps a little disturbing to think that Beethoven is now included among those whose works must be restored, in performance, to contemporary purity: the orchestra in the concertos, however, certainly brought out the clarity of the parts in a way that astonished after familiarity with the volume of sound of an ordinary performance. Mr. Dolmetsch proved himself a masterly conductor. The true beauties of the contemporary piano were, however, more fully revealed when Mr. Dolmetsch played it himself in the Haydn pieces: he has a lot to teach us about Haydn's music. ('The Haslemere Festival', *The Monthly Musical Record* (September 1934), 158)

This last comment conflicts with the printed programme of the 1934 festival, which describes the Haydn sonata as being 'for Harpsichord'. The other two Haydn works were the two songs mentioned above, which may have been accompanied by Arnold on the fortepiano. They are perhaps the works to which Hayes referred, although there is also the possibility that the fortepiano was used for the sonata, despite the designation in the programme. It is curious to note that Ruth Eyre's name does not seem to be mentioned in this review, nor in any others of the festival that I have yet been able to locate. Further research may shed more light on this issue.

Arnold made at least one recording on the piano of '1799'. On 21 May 1937 he noted in his diary: 'Fait les essais de records du Piano 1799. Seul et avec la voix. Succès remarquable' (Made the recording tests for the 1799 piano. By itself and with the voice. Remarkable success). There is no indication of what this vocal music may have been, unless it was the same Haydn songs performed in the 1934 festival. However, as noted earlier, a recording by Arnold of the first movement of Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata survives; the track is described as being 'played according to the composer's original instructions on a pianoforte of Beethoven's time (of 1799)' (*The Dolmetsch Family with Diana Poulton: Pioneer Early Music Recordings*, volume 1 (The Dolmetsch Foundation and The Lute Society [c2005], LSDOL001), track 16). Regarding these 'original instructions', Dolmetsch had already pointed them out in his famous book on performance practice: 'In the original edition of Beethoven's so-called "Moonlight Sonata", the indication *senza sordini* at the beginning of the first movement means that the dampers are to be lifted, and thus remain until the end of the piece' (*The Interpretation of the Music of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries Revealed by Contemporary Evidence* (London: Novello, 1915), 432).

Haskell describes Arnold Dolmetsch's recording of Beethoven's work as 'probably the earliest version on fortepiano' (*The Early Music Revival*, 115). However, it is not listed by Ann P. Basart in her extensive catalogue *The Sound of the Fortepiano: A Discography of Recordings on Early Pianos* (Berkeley: Fallen Leaf Press, 1985). According to the label on the disc itself (D. R. 8 (Dolmetsch Recording No. 8)), Arnold's performance was 'recorded by Leslie Ward and Hugh Gough', although the year is not given (see a photo of the disc reproduced at 'Arnold Dolmetsch – Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata' www.discogs.com/release/13404336-Arnold-Dolmetsch-Beethovens-Moonlight-Sonata (9 February 2024)). In speculating on a possible year, one should note that in 1937 Hugh Gough (1916–1997), who would have then been aged twenty-one, wrote about projects to make recordings at Jesses, the Dolmetsches' house in Haslemere ('Sound Recording at Jesses', *The Consort* 4 (1937), 18–19). The diary note by Arnold that I mentioned above about recording tests involving the piano (on 21 May 1937) adds further weight to the possibility of it being that year.

The recording of the 'Moonlight' Sonata's first movement also gives us some hints about the pitch used on this instrument. Formal analysis awaits, but it sounds higher than recent recordings

on fortepiano that use the pitch $a^1 = 430$ Hz, and lower than those on modern instruments, although the precise level depends on the speed of the equipment for sound recording and for playback. It seems likely, then, that it was tuned at $a^1 = 435$ Hz. If that is the case, it would be inversely supported by a sentence in a letter of 28 October 1937 from Dolmetsch to Marius de Zayas (1880–1961), which states that ‘for the last fifty years I’ve used a semitone below *diapason normal* 435 [Hz] for the pitch of all my instruments’ (‘Depuis 50 ans j’ai adapté pour le diapason de tous mes instruments un demi-ton au dessous du diapason normal A 435’) (Zayas Archive, Seville: Arnold Dolmetsch, Correspondence, Haslemere 1930–1939). This implies a pitch of $a^1 = 410$ Hz for his earlier instruments, but Dolmetsch may have been inclined to use something more pragmatic for the fortepiano such as *diapason normal*, perhaps to allow for ‘modern’ wind instruments (which generally played at that pitch in the 1930s) to accompany the strings for the concerto.

Besides the year ‘1799’, no other details about the identity of this instrument are given in sources of the 1930s. Within the programme for the 1964 Haslemere Festival, however, Chalmers Burns (1906–1993) contributed a retrospective essay entitled ‘The First 20 Years, 1925–45’, and gives a further piece of information. He writes that ‘in 1934, Beethoven found himself sharing the platform with the mediæval crwth which uttered strange Welsh Bardic music. His first pianoforte concerto was played on a Stoddart [*sic*] piano of 1799’ (JMDC, Haslemere Festival programme 1964, 5). I cannot trace an instrument of that description related to the Dolmetsches, but a Stodart piano of 1790 was in the Dolmetsch collection, as described and valued by Sotheby’s in 1979:

A Grand pianoforte by Robert Stodart inscribed Robertus Stodart et Co., Londini fecerunt 1790 on the satinwood facia board, with fruitwood stringing and mahogany cross banding, the case of mahogany with boxwood stringing, the five octave keyboard, FF – f^3 , with ivory naturals and ebony accidentals, two foot pedal controlling forte and una corda stops, on trestle stand[.] (JMDC, Ms. Add. 10371/B: Sotheby[.], Parke[.], Bernet & Co., ‘Inventory and Valuation of Musical Instruments: The Property of Dr. Carl Dolmetsch’, February 1979, 17)

This instrument (Figure 1) was bought in 1982 by the Horniman Museum and remains there today (Museum No. M47-1982), although it is currently in storage. (I am grateful to Mimi Waitzman for providing details and images of this piano.)

There are two clues that suggest that the Stodart instrument of 1790 is the same as the ‘1799’ piano. The first is the 1931 diary of Arnold Dolmetsch. He noted his purchase of it on 19 August (I use forward slashes to indicate line breaks): ‘Voyage à Cirencester. Parti 8.24 / rentré à 7h. voir Mr Legg. / Acheté un piano Stoddart 1790 / 5 octaves, excellente condition pour £21. Délivré ici’ (Trip to Cirencester. / left 8.24 [a. m.] / returned at 7 [p. m.] to see Mr Legg. Bought a 1790 Stoddart [*sic*] piano / five octaves, excellent condition for £21. [To be] delivered here). The entry for 22 August then reads: ‘Mr Legg apporte le piano de Cirencester / Aussi un épinette à lui à régler’ (Mr Legg brings the piano from Cirencester / also a spinet to repair for him). Two weeks later, on 5 September, Dolmetsch writes: ‘Griffin vient voir le piano de 1799 [*sic*] et il est tenté, mais ne décide rien’ (Griffin comes to see the 1799 piano and he is tempted, but doesn’t make a decision). What is interesting to note in this entry is that the mention of the date ‘1799’ is a correction; as shown in Figure 2, Dolmetsch had originally written 1790 but subsequently overwrote the final digit as ‘9’. At around this time – perhaps on that very day, and potentially even in the act of writing – he apparently decided that the date must be 1799.

A photograph of the piano’s nameplate (Figure 3a) suggests how Dolmetsch may have been led to believe this. As shown in Figure 3b (a detail showing the year), there appears to be a ghostly tail of a ‘9’ underneath the final digit, which is otherwise clearly written as a ‘0’. This faint line under the ‘0’ parallels the tail of the ‘9’ to its left. It seems, then, that his diary entry for 5 September 1931 refers to this instrument, and that he attempted to sell it on only weeks after purchasing it. However, no sale was made, and it was apparently still in his possession several years later. As



Figure 1. Pianoforte by Robert Stodart (London, 1790) in the Horniman Museum (M47-1982). © Horniman Museum and Gardens

suggested by Chalmers's essay quoted above, it is quite feasible that this Stodart piano of '1799' was used for the 1934 festival. Incidentally, Beethoven worked on his first piano concerto between 1795 and 1800, and one cannot help speculating whether this may have been an additional factor in Arnold's decision to settle on 1799 as a possible date for the instrument.

However, an account by one of Dolmetsch's students, Jean Sinclair Buchanan (died 1962), throws another piano maker's name into the mix. In one of her notebooks, as reported by Campbell, she wrote:

Today [no date is given], after my lesson I was introduced to the 'Beethoven' piano, recently acquired and restored in the Dolmetsch Workshop. This is a Clementi Grand made in 1799. AD [Arnold Dolmetsch], to show off some of its good points, played part of the 'Moonlight' sonata. 'Very few people know the real Beethoven,' he said: 'The lightness and quickness of the action of the pianoforte of his time, make for right effect [*sic*] in certain passages in his music – better even than the modern piano.['] (In Campbell, 'Archive: Jean Sinclair Buchanan – Memoirs', *The Consort* 37 (1981), 415)

Buchanan's quotation of Dolmetsch goes on to include his musings on the tonal and timbral qualities of the early piano. It is unclear whether her mention of Clementi – implying either Muzio Clementi or his firm – refers to another instrument altogether, or whether it was a memory slip. This presents a further mystery to untangle.

Certainly, original pianos were on the minds of other members of the Dolmetsch family in the 1930s. When on 21 March 1939 Thomas Fielden (1883–1974) gave a lecture entitled 'The Influence of the Pianoforte on Musical Progress' for the Royal Musical Association, with renowned

SEPTEMBER, 1931.

Saturday 5
(248-117)

Mrs Whithall apporte les
2 Records en 2 voies -
Le Serpent -
Mon Violon avec la boîte et
l'archet - Le tout à vendre

Guiffin vient voir le piano
de 1799 et il est tenté, mais
ne décide rien -
Clavier 181 -

Bob fait les collets sur les chevilles
où le 16 pied fixait -
on baisse la barre d'attache de
4 pied -

Reeby remet les cordes et
travaille jusqu'à 5^h30 -
Après cela j'y travaille
moi-même

Bonne soirée avec Mab -

Figure 2. Arnold Dolmetsch's diary entry for 5 September 1931. Cambridge University Library, Jeanne-Marie Dolmetsch Collection, Ms. Add. 10371/F: Diaries (Arnold Dolmetsch), 1917–1939. Photograph by Amélie Deblauwe. Reproduced by kind permission of the Dolmetsch family and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library

organologist Francis W. Galpin (1858–1945) in the chair, Carl Dolmetsch (1911–1997), Arnold's younger son, was present. In the published form of the lecture (*Proceedings of the Musical Association* 65 (1938–1939), 91–107) he is quoted in the transcription of the discussion that followed (106, 107). Arnold was very ill at the time (and died the following February), but Carl very likely represented his elderly father's views, as well as articulating his own. He stated:

The blending of piano tone with string tone still seems to be an unsolved problem, at least with the piano as we know it now. Many people judge the pianos of Beethoven's time by the ill-restored examples, if restored at all, that have survived. They acquire an old piano, *perhaps dating from 1799 or 1806*, and they say: 'Oh, let us see what Beethoven composed for.' They take it to a modern piano manufacturer whose first idea is to bring it 'up to date' as much as the poor thing can stand. Naturally, their strengthening of the frame, heavy felting, thickening of the wires, result, not in an early nineteenth-century piano, but a very poor modern one. *To play either a Beethoven concerto or a violin sonata with such a piano, restored carefully to its original condition, is not a battle between the violin and the piano but true balance of tone and perfect blending.* That may be the instrument which Bach in his later life said he liked. (Quoted in Fielden, 'The Influence of the Pianoforte on Musical Progress', 107; my italics)



Figure 3a. Nameboard of Stodart pianoforte shown in Figure 1. (The white mark appears on the archival photograph, not on the instrument.) © Horniman Museum and Gardens

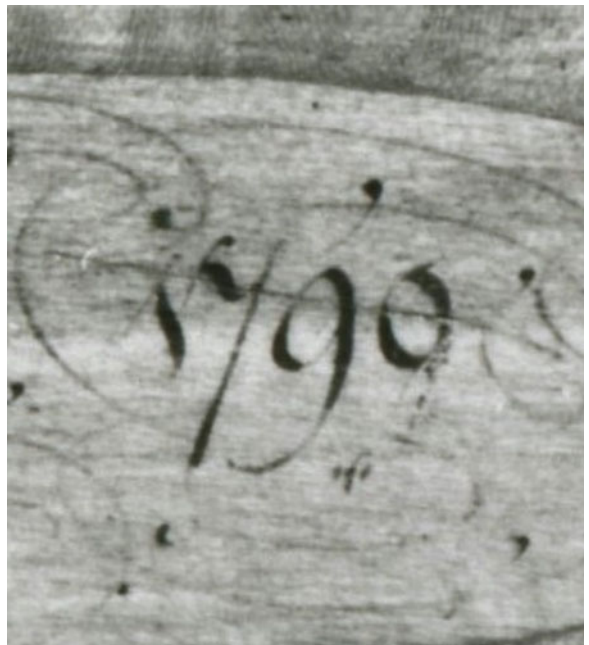


Figure 3b. Detail of Figure 3a. © Horniman Museum and Gardens

The reference to ‘a Beethoven concerto or a violin sonata with such a piano’ may indicate Carl’s memory of the 1934 festival; the example of the year 1799 is unlikely to be random, given the prominent presence of an instrument believed to be of that date in his father’s collection. Yet the main point of both father and son in discussing old pianos was not about age, nor about period, but rather a question of timbre, the potential for a good blend with other instruments or the voice, and the clarity of independent parts within contrapuntal textures.

If further evidence can be found to add weight to the hypothesis of the 1790 Stodart piano in the Horniman Museum being the ‘1799’ instrument that Arnold Dolmetsch wrote about, and on which Ruth Eyre performed Beethoven’s first concerto in 1934, then new pieces of the puzzle may fall into place and in this way contribute to the bigger picture of Arnold Dolmetsch as – to quote Bavington – ‘the father of the fortepiano revival’.

I am grateful to Peter Bavington, Brian Blood, Katherine Hawnt, Peter Holman, Anna Pensaert and Mimi Waitzman for advice and feedback as this research has progressed, and W. Dean Sutcliffe and Austin Glatthorn for their helpful comments on and editing of the draft. I thank the Dolmetsch family and Rodrigo de Zayas for permission to cite and quote archival material, and the Horniman Museum and Gardens and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library for permission to reproduce images.

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