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Living Pianos of Ashburnham: The Frederick Collection

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Antique pianos are usually to look at and dream about the old days. Not so with the collection of historic grand pianos in the Frederick collection. These are living, functioning pianos from the 18th and the 19th centuries.

Starting with a grand piano shipped 45 years ago from England to the Fredericks' first house in the middle of corn fields in Ohio, the collection grew to almost thirty pianos, renovated, brought to life and preserved lovingly by Patricia and Edmund Michael Frederick. The Fredericks and their collection now reside in the town of Ashburnham, Massachusetts.

Blessed with many lakes and wetlands, source of a number of rivers flowing in many directions, the small town of Ashburnham is nestled in an area of hardwood forests, large open spaces, and an impressive landscape. A few mountains and isolated hills called monadnocks add to the rugged outline of the place. Only 60 miles north west of Boston, near the New Hampshire border, it is a small town with a population of about 7,000.

The town is in the middle of transition hardwood forests, which consist of mainly oak-pines and also home to sugar maple, yellow birch, American beech, and white ash. In the 19th century it was famous for the production of chairs. It ranked at the very top.



Ashburnham, is a town of about 7,000 people close to the New Hampshire border, 60 miles from Boston, Massachusetts

Today Ashburnham's claim to fame is arguably the amazing collection of antique pianos that constitute *The Frederick Collection of Historic Pianos* and the *Historical Piano Study Center*. This is not a museum of pianos, as the instruments are kept in working order. They are not there just to see, but also to hear. As a public utilisation of the collection, the town also hosts the series of *Historical Piano Concerts*, where artists are able to play on these instruments, as perhaps the composers intended them to be played. Each season the town hosts many such recitals.

The pianos in the Frederick collection are kept alive and functioning with the loving care and attention of Edmund Michael Frederick and his wife Patricia. They have been doing this for over forty years.

Michael Frederick graduated from the Phillips Exeter Academy, and then he was trained at Harvard in East Asian History and Philosophy. Patricia is a 16th generation Bostonian. Her father was director of public relations, publicity, and the press agent for the Boston Symphony and her mother was an artist who also worked for the Boston Symphony. Patricia majored in



The Frederick Piano Collection in the old library building and the Ashburnham Community Church

music at Boston University College of Music to be a teacher, worked in Waltham and an experimental school in Newton as a music teacher.

In 1972 they met in Boston and got married and subsequently moved to central Ohio where Michael was originally from. They lived there until 1984 at which time they moved back to Massachusetts and settled in Ashburnham.

The Frederick Collection of grand pianos is kept in the old library building of



Michael Frederick and Patricia Frederick, Ashburnham, September 2019

the town, right on the main street. Right next to it is the Ashburnham Community Church where the Historical Piano Concerts can be heard.

In the Autumn of 2019 I talked to Patricia and Michael Frederick about their interest in historical pianos in Ashburnham. I asked about their admirable passion and energy in maintaining this amazing collection, their memories related to its history and their thoughts on its future.

Ömer Eğecioglu: *Your collection seems like a fantastic opportunity to give music lovers something that they have not seen before. First I would like to learn how you put this collection together and the administrative details.*

Michael (Mike): For one thing, I was about to leave Boston for a teaching job, which, most peculiarly, was only three miles from where I was born in Ohio. At that time I was also interested in harpsicords and baroque music.

Patricia (Pat): A big book on harpsicord building was put together by Frank Hubbard. Mike hung out with him and built two harpsicords from scratch.

Can we say that you had your initial training from him?

Mike: Well I spent my weekends out at his shop. In Waltham, Massachusetts, within reasonable riding distance of Cambridge.

So he had a shop, he would build harpsicords and repair them?

Pat: Mr. Hubbard invited Mike to finish building his second harpsicord in his shop. Or rather Mike begged him to let him work there on that.

Mike: He was a very generous man, and he had the room, and so he let me work there.

That sounds like a story all by itself.

Mike: So I did have a background in that, and then when I decided to get out of academia, at first I was going to go into harpsicord building. Then I realised nobody knew that much about the actual pianos that most of the piano repertoire



Three grand pianos from The Frederick Collection of Historic Pianos. From left to right: 1893 Erard, the same model as Ravel's piano; 1871 Streicher; 1868 Streicher, the same model as Brahms' piano

was written for. They were starting to get interested in the late 18th century pianos, but the people thought the 19th century pianos were pretty much like the modern ones. But they weren't. I learned this because I could find original instruments that had survived in reasonable condition and there was lots of written material that nobody was looking at. Some of it in places that were totally obvious, but places you would not look if you did not think of it. For example the first edition of Grove's Musical Dictionary. Well, there you have people who were talking about Brahms playing the piano or about how Alkan has gone back to performing in public at the Salle Erard. The man who wrote the article on piano tuning had tuned Chopin's piano when he was in London for the last time. So as I say, there were all sorts of written things if you did a bit of research.

Pat: We happened to have a first edition of the Grove's Dictionary before it was even bound, these were being issued around 1880. My father had bought it at a second-hand bookstore.

For a project like this to start, you need some funds. How did you manage that?

Mike: Two things: one is my wife was teaching part of the time, and the other thing was I picked my parents carefully.

I see. Very good.

Mike: That's really the only reason we can afford to do it this way. We live, on the whole, very simply but we do have the money behind us.

So you started this in Ohio?

Pat: Mike had been teaching at the college in Ohio – he taught there for three years – at the end of three years he knew that he would not be continuing on, and that last year of his teaching, we bought a house that was in the middle of nowhere. It was corn fields all around us and a few neighboring houses. We were about 50 miles from the nearest big city. Suffice it to say, it was nice to be in the place that we were for nine years because it meant that he could experiment with what worked, for example, with the stringing on the pianos without having some authority looking over his shoulder and saying that's not the way I would do it.

So when you started this, it was not just a matter of collecting the pianos, you were also interested in the mechanics of the instruments?

Mike: More basically what they had to do with the music. Of course if they don't play, I really can't tell at the end that they had to do with the music.

What did you do about, say strings for the old instruments?

Mike: A number of things. Today there are specialists who do supply what they hope is more or less historical music wire. You notice how I am phrasing that. Without going into all the questions that you get into in that subject, it is more of a mess than you might imagine. But be that as it may, back then the wire companies drew all kinds of wire, for every purpose under the sun, and some you can't imagine. So sometimes what you can do is obtain wire originally drawn by the company. I think in one case tying things together for welding. It is very close in its mechanical characteristics to old iron music wire.

Did you use these?

Mike: Yes, and another wire originally designed for catching fish, trolling. It had about the right tensile strength characteristics and flexibility. The characterisation of piano wire is rather complicated actually. It is not just the chemical form. That's just the beginning. Starting with wire of that composition, depending on the heat used, you can turn that stock in to almost anything. It is quite remarkable. From very hard high tensile strength wire – so hard if you try to cut it with cheap wire cutters it will notch the wire cutter – to soft and flexible if you heat treat it differently. So there were some experiments. Also my master in harpsicord building was experimenting with heat treating modern piano wire to see if you can get back that way. The answer is, yes, sort of, but with problems.

Do you remember the first pianos you acquired?

Pat: The first ones we got were square pianos.

Mike: Shortly after we had moved out to Ohio we acquired a late 18th century Irish square piano from an antique shop. I thought that I could probably make it play. It was a nice enough piece of furniture and the price wasn't out of the question for our finances at that point. So anyway, that was the first piano we got. Then we got some other Irish and English square pianos. The first grand piano was in 1975. I saw it at an English musicology magazine

advert, by a guy who was offering his services as a finder for such things. So I wrote to him and said here is what I am looking for: I want a grand piano of the Chopin era. After a while he came up with one. Again, the price wasn't that out of sight for us. It was probably higher than I would pay if I had known what I know now.

So your first grand piano came from England.

Mike: Yes. They didn't import many grand pianos to the United State until after the World War II. There was an American piano industry that was doing very well. It used to be the world's biggest. Also there were protective tariffs.

Let me jump ahead a bit. What is the status of the collection, as far as the state of Massachusetts is concerned?

Pat: It belongs to us. It is a private collection.

And you choose to store it here.

Pat: Yes, in the former library of the town of Ashburnham. After the library was moved to a bigger place it was decided that the old building could be used by a non-profit for historical, cultural, educational, artistic, or scientific focus. We were pretty much all of these things.

Do you then own the building?

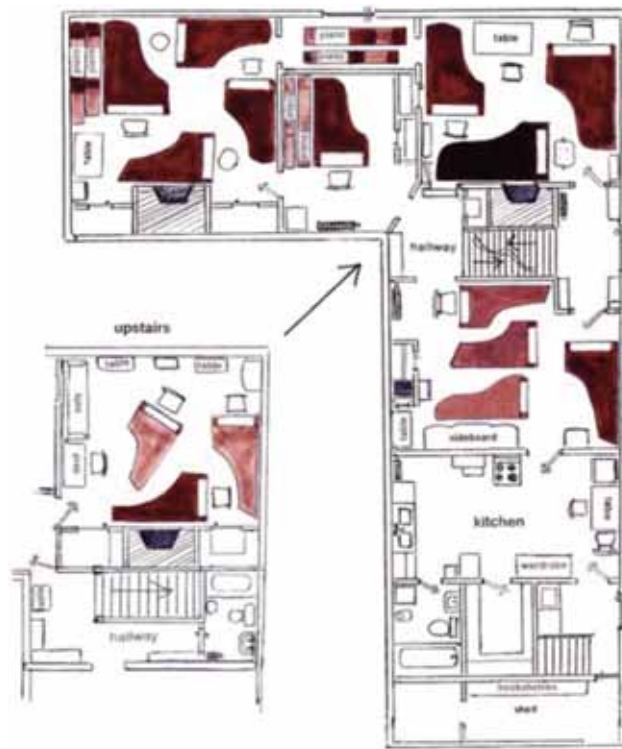
Pat: No, we rent it from the town.

Before you moved the pianos to the library, where did you store them?

Pat: They were in our house.

How big a house did you have?

Pat: I have a diagram of how they fitted in our house. We had a house that was packed solid with pianos.



The way the grand pianos were kept in the Frederick household before moving them to the old library building in Ashburnham.

Hmm. Do people think you are a bit eccentric?

Mike: Well, some of them might. But we like to say that people who came to visit were usually skinny! After a while in something like this, you come to a point where you look at a building and automatically think how many grand pianos could we put in that space. It's really much more than people think.

How would you compare the sound of your pianos to the modern ones?

Pat: When we were in Ohio, one day I came home and Mike was playing the piano, and I said you're banging, that's too heavy, that too loud for Mozart. He said I am not banging, I have a very light touch from playing the harpsicord and the little square piano. He was playing my Steinway, and it was the Steinway that was too heavy. I had been too busy outside the house to practice very much, and I had gotten away from listening to my Steinway, and all of a sudden I thought that that little piano I had thought was sort of cute and quaint but I hadn't taken all that seriously, was more appropriate for Mozart and Haydn and Beethoven than my Steinway was. Then when we got this first grand piano from England, that he fixed

up and got playing, from the Mendelssohn and Chopin generation, I thought that that was more appropriate than my Steinway for Mendelssohn and Schubert and Chopin.

I see.

Pat: So we sold the Steinway, and used the money to get an Erard piano. And we went on from there.

I have the list of the pianos you own. Most of them now are grand pianos aren't they? (right)

Pat: Yes, we got rid of all the square pianos we had. We decided to concentrate on what people had been playing either in say a serious music studio, or on stage.

Mike: Also as time went on, I got on better and better grapevines, so I was able to get access to better and better quality instruments.

Pat: So then we'd sell the respectable one to someone who wanted a nice piano and use the money to buy the best one.

Mike: So we upgraded this way. The collection was always very much focused. In other words, if the piano is not some-

Category	Manufacturer	Year	Location
I. Overstrung pianos	Erard	1928	Paris
	Blüthner	1907	Leipzig
	Erard	1895	Paris
	Bechstein	1892	Berlin
	Steinway	1866	New York
II.	Erard	1909	Paris
	Erard	1893	Paris
	Erard	1877	Paris
	Streicher	1871	Vienna
	Streicher	1868	Vienna
III.	Bösendorfer	1877	Vienna
	Chickering	1862	Boston
	Erard	1859	Paris
	Bösendorfer	1845	Vienna
	Streicher	1846	Vienna
IV.	Pleyel	1845	Paris
	Erard	1840	Paris
	Erard	1836	Paris
	Tröndlin	c. 1830	Leipzig
	Stodart	c. 1830	London
V.	Bösendorfer	c. 1830	Vienna
	Graf	c. 1828-1829	Vienna
	Katholnig	c. 1805	Vienna
	Clementi	1805	London
	Brodmann	c. 1800-1805	Vienna
Unsigned Piano	c. 1790-1795	Viennese type	



From The Frederick Collection of Historic Pianos, an Erard 1877 "Extra-grand modèle de concert" with 90 keys to low G and G#, used by Ravel.

The list of grand pianos on display at the Historical Piano Study Center in Ashburnham from the collection of Patricia and Michael Frederick.

thing that a serious pianist or composer would willingly have played – of course they played all sorts of things when they were stuck, they had to – but we concentrated on the sort of piano they would have been thinking of for listening to their music. Also, late on the change from LPs to CDs came. One thing that this meant was, well, what do you put on the CDs now? One thing is reissuing old recordings. So they started reissuing old 78s and what

not. If you think of ordinary human longevity, people who were born in the 1860s could and did live long enough to make recordings. There are quite a few recordings by Liszt pupils, Clara Schumann pupils, Brahms pupils, and people who were at least in those same circles.

There are some excellent reissues of piano rolls of Scriabin playing his own music.

Pat: There is a fundamental problem with piano rolls, though. It gives an accurate reproduction of the music played only if it is played back on the same piano it was made on, immediately thereafter.

Mike: Suppose somebody is recording, say Rachmaninov, he made a few piano rolls on a 6' Mason & Hamlin with soft hammers. Ok, now you hitched it up to a 9'7" Bösendorfer with rock hard hammers. What the machinery does is to try to match the speed of the hammer. Some of them, in that register, you just give a nudge and some of them not. The machine does not adjust according to the piano it is hooked up to.

You have quite a few Erards in your collection.



Erard logo

Mike: One reason we have so many Erards is, well, Haydn had one, Beethoven had one, it was Mendelssohn's favorite instrument, it's what Chopin used a good part of the time, Liszt used most of the time during his active concert career, Clara Schumann had one, Brahms used them, it was Ravel's piano also Faure's piano.

Of course what you have is not exactly a museum, it is a living organic entity.

Pat: There is another thing about museum pianos, we kind of joke that there are four categories of pianos that museums often interested in that we are not. We have funny names for them. One is the *eye candy* piano, where they are amazing looking, maybe angels holding it up, a landscape inside the lid, or something like that. We don't do that. We have some very nice looking pianos which probably survived because they were beautiful. But we got them for their musical value and their relationship to the composer. We don't do what we call the *holy relic*, say somebody's fingernail. In this case it would be a piano that would have belonged to some very famous or very wealthy person, a great pianist. We don't do that. We have been offered pianos like that, don't you want this piano,



1877 Bösendorfer Grand from The Frederick Collection of Historic Pianos.

it belonged to so and so? No, we don't. We don't do what we call the *two-headed calf at the country fair*, weird pianos that they have in a museum, you look at and say who would ever image doing something like that with a piano? The fourth one is *potluck*. Whenever somebody says I have this wonderful old piano that belonged to my great grandfather, do you want it? Unless it is tightly related to a particular composer or a generation of composers, the answer is no, we don't want it.

Do you feel that you have covered to your satisfaction the whole spectrum of pianos that you had in mind?

Pat: It would be nice to have from between the earliest ones and the next. For instance we have a piano from that generation but it isn't restored.

What period are we talking about?

Pat: Between about 1810 and 1825. Time of Schubert and late Beethoven.

Mike: In the case of Beethoven, there is the problem that he did not hear the pianos in any subtle way after about 1810. So the sound he was composing for was all in his head. What he imagined the piano sounded like, we don't have access to that.

When did you start the concert series?

Pat: A year after we moved to Ashburnham. It was 1985. We had thought that we were going to have big events at the college Mike had taught in Ohio, and there were people on the campus, some of the music faculty and others who thought that this would be a wonderful summer use of the campus. But the college president shot down the whole idea. In the end we decided that the place was hopeless.

Mike: There was a line by Mark Twain who said that whenever he felt that he was in danger of dying, he would go to Cincinnati, because everything happens there fifty years later! That tends to be the attitude about an awful lot of things. Ohio at one point had one of the most important organ builders in the country. He had an international reputation. But Ohio State University didn't want one of his organs, and he then moved to the West Coast.

Pat: We were getting more visitors flying in from Boston, New York and California to see our piano collection than we were getting from Ohio universities. So we decided to move.

May I ask you then what was involved in your move? How did you move the whole collection?

Pat: The head of the moving company was from Massachusetts. He said, I tell you what, if you take the legs off the pianos and tip them over, then we won't

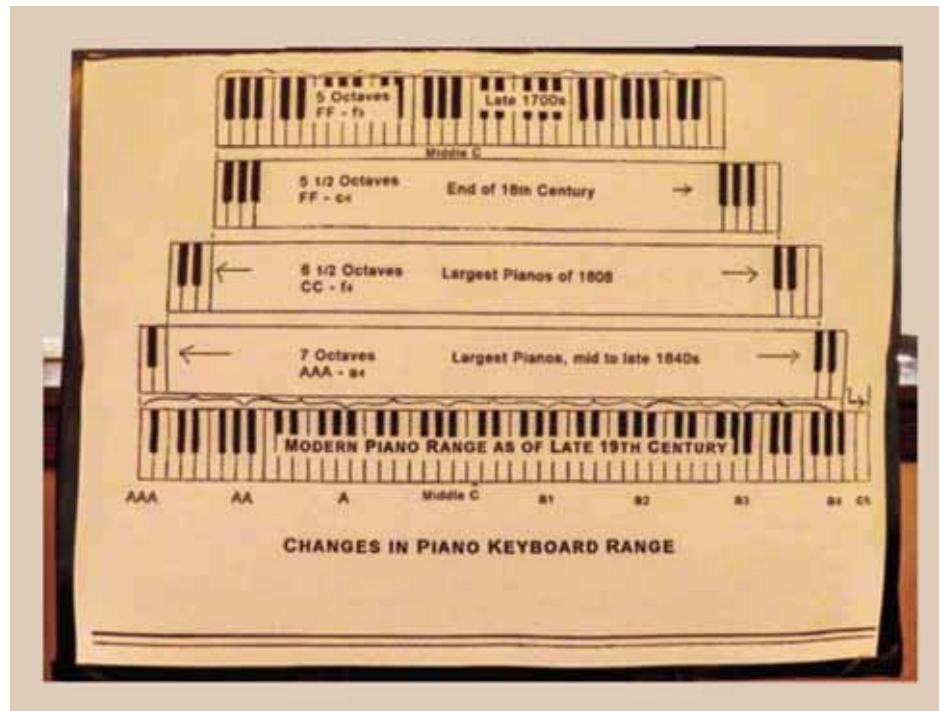
charge you for moving a piano, we'll charge you for moving a big lump of furniture. So we got a bunch of the farm men from our community, who were used to carrying bales of hay and picking up baby cows and so on, and they came, two or three at a time. They would hold up the corners of the pianos and someone would unscrew the legs and tip it over on its side, and we would label the legs, saying these legs go with this piano, then they'd do the next one and so on.

Mike: So what we found is what I think everybody else found about moving. Usually it is not moving the heavy things, all the furniture and the appliances, that kind of stuff – all right 28 grand pianos, that's a little more than most – but what usually drives you nuts is the miscellaneous stuff.

Pat: During that first move we made, when the movers got the pianos to our house, we found out that there was no way of getting the pianos into the house because there was a wall right in front of the door.

Mike: And pianos don't bend very well.

Pat: So we had to modify the shed in the back, which opened into the kitchen, and moved the pianos into the house through that.



A diagram showing the changes in the range of the keyboard in The Frederick Collection of Historic Pianos.

Mike: Pat and I then spent days setting up grand pianos, and contrary to what you might expect – at some point I ought to give a course in geriatric piano moving – there are ways you can do things without enormous amount of physical strength. We eventually got them set up.

Various artists seem to like recording on your pianos.

Pat: That came later. When we moved here I liked the music programme of the

local church and immediately joined the choir. After a few months I asked the church governing body about having piano concerts in the church. They agreed. This was in 1985. Our first concert had over a hundred people. We ended up doing it regularly.

Now you have a tradition of concerts here.

Pat: This is our 35th year. Now we have seven concerts a year in our series.

Are you a non-profit organisation?

Pat: Yes we are. We own the pianos, but the operation itself makes no money. We certainly don't make any money out of this.

You had told me that your children are not interested in the collection. What happens in the event that you two cannot do this anymore?

Pat: We'd like to keep the collection together as much as possible. All we are looking for is just a billionaire of the right sort.

Is the state interested?

Pat: As you know, in the United States as a whole, the national interest is more sports than the arts.



Experimenting on a historic grand piano in The Frederick Collection of Historic Pianos.

So you don't have a plan.

Pat: We are trying. We would like to have the building where it is housed to be temperature and humidity controlled for the sake of the pianos, we would like to have its own concert space, restoration workspace, its own library and listening space. We have a large library of books and recordings.

Are there other collections like yours?

Mike: Well, it is rather strange the way this sort of thing works. I have seen too many examples of what goes on with piano collections. For example, there is one private collection of importance left in England. There used to be three, two of them have been liquidated, in part because they couldn't figure out what to do with them after a certain point. But the one that was still around until recently was the Colt collection and it had lots of instruments that I would love to steal,

Do they sound good?

Mike: Well, that collection was mostly to look at. I can say that it took me a long time to make our pianos here sound good. It doesn't happen overnight in ten easy lessons.

Do you have any advice for the future collectors and restorers?

Mike: The problem is, with the whole business of old instruments and reviving them, the last people who really knew all about it died a long time ago. So you are trying to recover something, including a whole set of aesthetic values. You can do it to some extent, but it doesn't come overnight, and it's not a simple process. A modern piano technician has a neatly focused, precise job. He works on one kind of instrument, and so it's manageable. We have to deal with two centuries' accumulation, plus with very different standards and very different instruments.

Pat: There are some people renovating older pianos to get them in playing condition, but in most cases all the pianos after they have been renovated sound the same because people have some pre-conceived idea of what they are supposed



An Erard (Paris, 1840) from The Frederick Collection of Historic Pianos.

to sound like. Whereas our collection has a sense of – well, it's like Mike asking the piano what it wants to say, and getting each one to sound the way it probably sounded when it was new.

Mike: We are trying to preserve history and the keep heritage of classical piano alive. Call it musical ecology if you like.

Thank you for sharing the details of your amazing collection of pianos. ■

You may be interested in hearing the sound of some of the historic pianos in the Frederick Piano Collection.

Pianist Zeynep Ucbasaran played on the Erard 1840 in her recital in Ashburnham in September 2019. Her encore presentation was *Melodie d'Orfeo* from *Orfeo and Euridice* by Gluck, as arranged by Abram Chasins. An mp3 file of this live recording can be heard through the link below.

www.cs.ucsb.edu/~omer/Melodie_de_Orfeo_Zeynep_Ucbasaran.mp3