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Pride of the Pioneer's Parlor

Pianos in Early Minnesota

DONALD C. HOLMQUIST

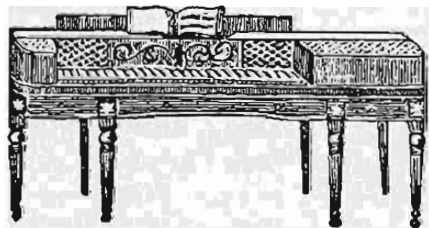
FORT SNELLING, situated high on a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, was responsible for many of Minnesota's cultural "firsts," including the area's first known piano. At this outpost of the white man's culture in what was otherwise a vast expanse of wilderness, the wife of Captain Joseph Plympton arrived as a newlywed in 1824. The source of the Mississippi River would be unknown for another eight years and only the scattered posts of trappers and traders represented the economy of what was to become Minnesota Territory twenty-five years later. Nonetheless, to the newly completed fort, then the northwesternmost army post in the United States, Mrs. Plympton brought her piano.¹

Man's means of making music has long

been among his most valued possessions. The English diarist Samuel Pepys noted this in 1666 when he described the flight of people from the London fire and remarked that one out of every three boats had in it a virginal (one of the many keyboard precursors of the piano). Similarly, in the 1820s when Mrs. Plympton brought the first piano to Minnesota, we can assume that she did so because it was one of her most cherished belongings.²

In the 1820s the piano was unlike the instrument we know today. Although it had been invented in Italy in 1709 by Bartolomeo Cristofori, it did not become popular for over fifty years. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century composers like Mozart and Beethoven adopted the piano and publicized it with their works, bringing it to the attention of European audiences. At that

AN early nineteenth-century pianoforte



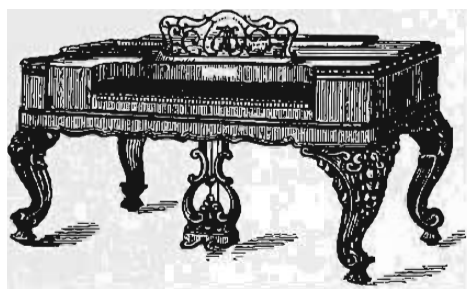
¹ Ann Adams, "Early Days at Red River Settlement, and Fort Snelling," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:99 (St. Paul, 1894). Fort Snelling was also responsible for the area's first school, Protestant congregation, hospital, circulating library, brass band, and theatrical production. See June Drenning Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites: A Guide*, 4, 136 (St. Paul, 1963).

² *Diary and Correspondence of Samuel Pepys*, 2:442 (London, 1854).

time the instrument had two forms, usually called "square" and "grand." The "upright" piano was largely unknown, although piano makers were occasionally experimenting with this type of instrument. The square piano, which followed the lines of the virginal, was the popular home instrument during the early days of piano manufacture. Its strings were at right angles to the keys, and they were housed in a rectangular box. The grand piano evolved from the shape of the harpsichord, the strings being in line with the keys, the instrument long from front to back rather than crosswise as in the square piano. The case was more expensive to manufacture, but the grand had better tone and keyboard action and was preferred for serious music making.³

Europeans had known stringed keyboard instruments for centuries. These took various forms — virginals, spinets, clavichords, and harpsichords. The piano evolved from these forerunners, and as its early name, pianoforte — "piano" meaning "soft" in Italian and "forte" meaning "loud" or "strong" — denoted, it was an improvement because it permitted more variation in tonal quality and gave the player greater control. During American colonial days, the harpsichord was the more widely used instrument, but the piano superseded it in popularity just before 1800.⁴

We have no description of Mrs. Plympton's piano, but it was probably a square



A square grand of the Victorian era

instrument of five and a half octaves. The chances are strong that it was imported, probably from England, as most pianos were in those days.⁵ Imported pianos were sold by John Jacob Astor in his New York store as early as 1786, for this first American businessman to attain "colossal wealth" began his career in the United States as a music merchant. Later, as founder and president of the American Fur Company, his expanding interest in the fur trade of the Northwest was one of the main factors in the establishment of Fort Snelling.⁶

If Mrs. Plympton's piano resembled those imported by Astor it was a small instrument, perhaps thirty-two inches high, five and a half feet long, and two feet deep. Its case was probably made of a variety of woods, some inlaid and perhaps painted with scenes designed to inspire the pianist. The legs were simple and not carved, and the keys were less than six octaves. At least one such Astor and Company square piano eventually reached Minnesota and may now be seen in Kugler's Musical Instrument Museum in Roseville. It was made in England by Astor's brother George in whose factory John Jacob may have worked before he embarked for America.

So far as is known, Mrs. Plympton's instrument does not exist today. Many such early pianos became dressing tables with the insides, nameboards, and any other parts of historical significance removed. If they do exist they are of little value as musical instruments, for the pianos of this period were poor — indeed, by today's standards, im-

³ A good, brief history of the instrument and its forerunners is found in Ernest Closson, *History of the Piano* (London, 1947).

⁴ On the basis of sheet music listed in Harry Dichter, *Early American Sheet Music, Its Lure and Lore, 1768-1889* (New York, 1941), the word "piano" was not used before the 1840s, while "pianoforte" persisted into the 1880s. See also Closson, *History of the Piano*, 9-66; Edward F. Rimbault, *The Pianoforte; Its Origin, Progress, and Construction* (London, 1860).

⁵ Paran Stevens, *Report Upon Musical Instruments*, 9 (Paris Exposition, United States Commissioners, Reports, 1867 — Washington, 1869).

⁶ Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *John Jacob Astor*, xvii, 26 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931); Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota, A History of the State*, 98 (Minneapolis, 1963).



NAMEBOARD of the Astor piano in Kugler's Musical Instrument Museum

possible. In 1824, the same year that Mrs. Plympton married, the young Franz Liszt, performing for the first time in Paris, "had to stop playing several times so that a broken string might be removed or another retuned." The framing of pianos of that day was entirely of wood, for the metal harp which resists the tremendous pull of the strings (twenty tons in a modern piano) had not yet been invented.⁷

IN SPITE of what we would regard as deficiencies, these early pianos were treasured by their owners and were often the focal point of the social life of the period. In the late 1830s, Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent stationed at Fort Snelling, and his wife entertained Joseph N. Nicollet, the distinguished French scientist. Nicollet spent two "long and dreary winters" with the Taliaferros while he worked at surveying and mapping the region between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. He was an accomplished musician, having earned his keep in his early years by playing the flute in France, and he had brought his violin with him to the northwestern wilderness. While at the Taliaferros he played "for hours each night" accompanied by Mrs. Taliaferro at her

piano. Minnesota's nights are long in the winter, and no doubt they would have been even drearier had not a piano been among the Taliaferros' possessions.⁸

We do not know exactly what type of instrument they owned, but it was an important part of their household. Taliaferro made a list of his "House Hold furniture" in the late 1830s when he was packing to return to Bedford, Pennsylvania. In it he gave the value of the various articles, and although he added wrong and was really worth thirteen dollars more than he thought, his piano represented over 40 per cent of the value of his furniture.⁹ It was undoubtedly a square piano, but unlike Mrs. Plympton's it could very well have been a product of American

⁷ Philip James, *Early Keyboard Instruments from Their Beginnings to the Year 1820*, 53 (London, 1930); Closson, *History of the Piano*, 101.

⁸ Lawrence Taliaferro, "Auto-Biography," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:243; Newton H. Winchell, "Jean N. Nicollet," in *American Geologist*, 8:344 (December, 1891).

⁹ A memorandum, written after 1838, in the front of the Lawrence Taliaferro Journal for 1836, Taliaferro Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society. The author attempted unsuccessfully to locate this instrument in Bedford, Pennsylvania, in December, 1964. It may have been destroyed by a fire that ravaged Taliaferro's home and was reported in the *Bedford Inquirer*, March 17, 1865.

craftsmen, for in 1829, 2,500 pianos were made in the United States. Piano makers were immigrating to American shores and setting up shop, albeit at this date their business was not extensive.¹⁰

In the early 1840s, Fort Snelling was still on the edge of the frontier. During that period, Seth Eastman, one of its commanders, was busy painting the Indian life around him while his wife Mary wrote about the people her husband sketched. An interesting account of the area's contrasting cultures is preserved in Mrs. Eastman's book: "I wished to learn correctly the Indian songs which they sing in celebrating their dances," she wrote. "I sent for a chief, Little Hill, who is a famous singer but with little perseverance as a teacher of music. He soon lost all patience with me, refused to continue the lesson, declaring that he could never make

me sing like a Sioux squaw. The low guttural notes created the difficulty. He very quickly became tired of my piano and singing."¹¹

The two types of music were never to merge. The low guttural notes that accompanied the Indian drum were being stilled. In the 1840s new settlements were springing up around Fort Snelling. Across the river Mendota was flourishing, and St. Paul and nearby St. Anthony were emerging. Up the St. Croix River at Marine Mills and Stillwater, sawmills were turning the huge white pine into lumber. Land that had known only the trapper and trader was yielding to the axe and plow.

ONE OF the early traders who saw this change was Henry Hastings Sibley. He had arrived at Mendota in 1834 and had stayed to become "the regional lord of the American Fur Company's empire." By the 1840s that empire was faltering; in 1842, the company founded by piano merchant Astor went into receivership.¹² Sibley, who had prospered in the fur trade and built a stone

¹⁰ John Leander Bishop, *A History of American Manufactures from 1608 to 1860*, 2:339 (Philadelphia, 1866).

¹¹ Mary Eastman, *Dahcotah; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling*, xii (New York, 1849).

¹² Blegen, *Minnesota*, 133, 139.

AN early advertising cut used by music dealers



mansion at Mendota to prove it, must have had faith in the future of axes and plows. He married the year after the American Fur Company failed, and in 1844 he asked Ramsay Crooks, former president of the now defunct firm, to select a piano for him in New York. It was to be "shipped . . . for St. Peters in the spring."¹³ Sibley's faith was obviously justified because he continued to prosper in both business and politics. When Minnesota became the thirty-second state in the Union in 1858, he was elected governor. His mansion in Mendota still stands, restored by the Daughters of the American Revolution. The piano he purchased in the 1840s is not, however, among the furnishings.

Others, too, had faith in the region's future; in May, 1849, Minnesota became a territory. When Alexander Ramsey, the new governor appointed by President Zachary Taylor, first surveyed the capital city of St. Paul, he saw only a dozen frame houses and a few log buildings with bark roofs. Little more could be said of the other settlements in the territory.¹⁴ Nevertheless, to these crude homes the settlers who soon flocked west brought their pianos, even though other comforts of domesticity were lacking.

One such pioneer was Mrs. John W. North, who arrived with her husband in the fall of 1849. Although they later moved and were instrumental in founding the town of Northfield, the Norths began their Minnesota sojourn in a log house on Nicollet Island in the Mississippi River overlooking the sawmills which were beginning to flourish at the Falls of St. Anthony.¹⁵

Mrs. North corresponded regularly with her parents and her brothers in upstate New York. From her letters we get a picture of her home in the new territory. Although the lady had a piano, she was without many ordinary household items. "Mr. North made a real nice rolling pin, and a pudding stick, and would make, probably some sort of a ladle, but as there is not a turning lathe, nor an instrument with which he could make the insides of a bowl smooth, in all Minne-

sota, I see no other way, but to do without," she wrote, adding "But 'it's a new country,' and we are as well off as most of our neighbors."¹⁶

To reach Minnesota the Norths had traveled across Lake Erie to Detroit, overland by railroad to Lake Michigan, and by steamer again to Chicago. From that city they had gone west twenty-seven miles by railroad, then jolted by coach the remainder of the way to Galena, Illinois, where they once more boarded a steamboat for the trip up the Mississippi to St. Paul, the head of navigation. The final twelve miles overland to the Falls of St. Anthony were traversed in a horse-drawn cart. One can only marvel at settlers like Mrs. North who brought along a possession as bulky as a piano.¹⁷

Hazardous as the trip seems by present-day standards, it was routine for the time. Even as late as 1870 most pianos reached Minnesota by river boat; in the following year, however, railroads carried all but twenty-seven of the 274 pianos and organs shipped to the state. The era of river transportation was coming to a close — but not before a sizeable number of musical instruments had reached an unplanned destination in the muddy waters.¹⁸

Again we do not know what Mrs. North's piano was like, but the chances are good that it was not as bulky as most present-day instruments. Perhaps it resembled the piano preserved in the Minnesota Territorial Pio-

¹³ Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *The Unfinished Autobiography of Henry Hastings Sibley*, 74 (Minneapolis, 1932); George Ehninger to Sibley, October 26, 1844 (copy), American Fur Company Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society, original in the New-York Historical Society.

¹⁴ Blegen, *Minnesota*, 165.

¹⁵ See Merlin Stonehouse, *John Wesley North and the Reform Frontier*, 22-114 (Minneapolis, 1965).

¹⁶ Anna Loomis North to her parents, December 23, 1849 (copy), North Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society. The originals of the North Papers are in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, and are here quoted with permission.

¹⁷ Stonehouse, *North*, 28.

¹⁸ St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, *Report*, 1869, p. 37; 1870, p. 39; 1871, p. 38. See also Willis H. Miller, "The Biography of a Piano," in *Minnesota History*, 19:318-321 (September, 1938).

neers' Museum on the Minnesota state fair grounds. This one was produced by A. H. Gale and Company of New York in the late 1840s, has a six-octave keyboard, and was the first piano used at Hamline University.¹⁹ It is typical of the instruments of the period both in looks and construction: a square piano, referred to in that day as a "box of stretched strings,"²⁰ it is supported by four stout uncarved legs. Its framing is largely of wood, but a partial metal plate and an iron brace have been added which help resist the pull of the strings and keep it in better tune than the earlier instruments made entirely of wood.

Even before Mrs. North unpacked all her possessions she expressed a hope that she would find piano students to teach once her household was in order. And she did. One of them was Rebecca Marshall, later Mrs. Alexander H. Cathcart, the sister of future Minnesota governor William R. Marshall. As an elderly lady, Mrs. Cathcart recalled that one "especially interesting event of the summer" of 1851 "was the visit of the Swedish authoress, Fredrika Bremer; she was the guest of Governor and Mrs. Ramsey, and they brought her to St. Anthony Falls to enjoy its beauty . . . I accompanied them on a visit to Mrs. North, who lived on Nicollet Island."²¹

At the time, Mrs. Cathcart continued, "There was no bridge" connecting the island "with the main land; the crossing had to be made on the pine logs lying in the mill dam above the sawmills." She added, "Mrs. North was a fine musician, and I had taken music lessons from her, and so I

¹⁹ Interview with Mr. Wilfred Anfang, September 11, 1965. The date is based on serial number comparisons found in N. E. Michel, *Michel's Piano Atlas*, 86 (Pico Rivera, California, 1961).

²⁰ Rimbault, *The Pianoforte*, 161.

²¹ Ann North to her parents, December 3, 1849 (copy), North Papers; Rebecca Marshall Cathcart, "A Sheaf of Remembrances," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:532 (St. Paul, 1915).

²² Ann North to her parents, December 9, 1849 (copy), North Papers.

²³ See, for example, J. Murray Barbour, *Tuning and Temperament, A Historical Survey* (East Lansing, Michigan, 1953).

had become quite accomplished in making this dangerous passage every day. But naturally Miss Bremer was terrified at the prospect, and Governor Ramsey and my brother had to use their best persuasive powers to get her started on the perilous journey."

The group arrived safely, and Mrs. Cathcart said that "Mrs. North entertained us with some of the finest selections of music, both vocal and instrumental, and at the conclusion of our visit we returned to the main shore over the same log jam."

MRS. NORTH had another student who is worthy of mention even though his name is unknown. This man tuned her piano in return for the lessons she gave him. Apparently he was sufficiently familiar with the process to do a satisfactory job, for no complaint was recorded in Mrs. North's letters.²²

The piano is not an easy instrument to tune. Unlike guitars or violins, which have only a few strings, the modern piano has some 230 strings. In the violin only some of the fourth and fifth intervals of the octave must be in tune; in a piano, tuning fourth and fifth intervals does not work unless a "sleight-of-hearing" technique is used which borrows a little from one note and gives a little to another. This gives the piano a musical scale called the "equal temperament," which was popularized by Bach and has an interesting scientific background about which volumes could be, and have been, written.²³

Piano tuning is a specialized art, and it is of interest that Mrs. North found in Minnesota Territory in 1849 someone with the knowledge and tools equal to the task. Mrs. North's is the first mention the author has found of piano tuning in Minnesota, and one wonders how the early instruments at Fort Snelling were kept in playable condition. Perhaps those first pianos did not fare too well until the population and the accumulation of instruments could support a professional tuner.

At least one piano which deserves a place in this story had to be taken downriver to St.

Louis for reconditioning. That instrument began its travels in London, where it was in the possession of a Mrs. Lowman. In 1833 she took leave of England and with her piano moved to the Selkirk Colony to teach school there. Although the colony was a British endeavor to colonize the Red River Valley near what is now the city of Winnipeg, it had ties with Minnesota and provided some of the area's first settlers.²⁴

When Mrs. Lowman emigrated to the Red River, she and her piano went by sailing ship to Hudson Bay and thence by bateau to her new home near the southern shore of Lake Winnipeg. There her piano — said to be the first in that far northern settlement — got a new owner and did service until 1849, when it was packed into a creaking Red River oxcart and trundled across Minnesota. It was undoubtedly the first piano to traverse the entire length of the state.

From St. Paul it went to St. Louis, where it was "put in perfect order" before being packed for shipment to Oregon. Its owners were to meet the piano after they crossed the continent by land during the summer of 1850. The piano went by sailing ship, and the vessel on which it traveled was lost after rounding Cape Horn. So somewhere at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean lies an early English piano that made music in the Selkirk Colony, was carted over Minnesota's earliest roads — the Red River trails — and almost made history in Oregon Territory.²⁵

BY THE TIME Mrs. Lowman's piano made its fateful journey in 1850 the United States had over two hundred organ builders and more than eighteen hundred pianoforte and musical instrument makers, who were largely concentrated in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. In 1852 about nine thousand instruments were turned out in the United States.²⁶ Although most firms produced only an occasional instrument, a few were becoming large-scale manufacturers, filling the demand which began to mushroom in the 1850s. Among them were such well-known names as Chickering, which began business in Boston in 1823; Knabe, which started to turn out pianos in Baltimore in 1837; Hallet and Davis of Boston, which had been operating under various names since 1835; and Haines Brothers, which started production in New York City in 1851.²⁷

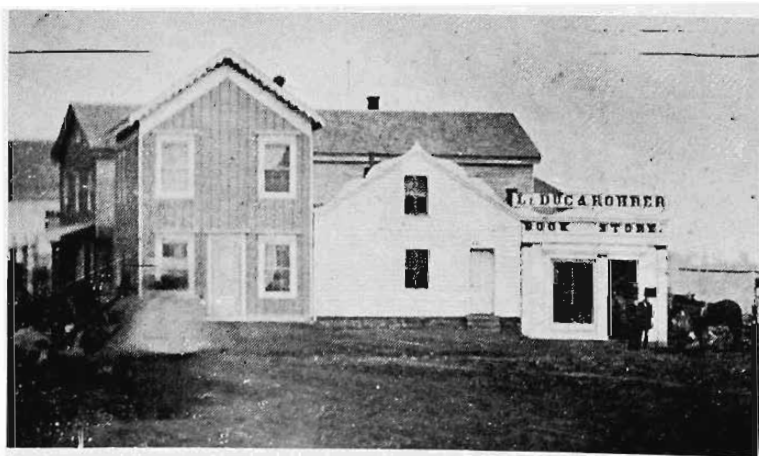
Book and stationery stores had been the traditional outlets for both music and musical instruments. However, the huge demand

²⁴ William J. Healy, *Women of Red River*, 15–28 (Winnipeg, 1923); Blegen, *Minnesota*, 154.

²⁵ Healy, *Women of Red River*, 15–28.

²⁶ *United States Census*, 1850, lxxiv; Daniel Spillane, *History of the American Pianoforte: Its Technical Development, and the Trade*, 196 (New York, 1890). The census of 1850 lists seven instrument makers in Minnesota, but if they existed the author has been unable to identify them. The 1860 census does not list any, although several are known to have been in the state at that time.

²⁷ Michel, *Piano Atlas*, 53, 99, 100, 131.



THE book store
of William G. Le Duc,
St. Paul's first
piano dealer

for pianos led to the setting up of "Piano Warerooms" to accommodate buyers and dealers. Such specialization had not yet reached Minnesota Territory when the area's first piano dealer appeared. He was William G. Le Duc, a lawyer who in 1853 added pianos to the stock of books and stationery which he sold in a two-story frame building with a lean-to at Third and Bench streets in St. Paul. Le Duc later recalled, "My bookstore was prosperous. . . . In the year 1853, I brought some pianos to St. Paul. The first one sold was to a Mrs. Presley, who was ambitious to own a piano although she was entirely ignorant of music."²⁸ Apparently the piano had become something more than a musical instrument by 1853. It was now a symbol that Vance Packard would have noticed had he been describing status seekers of that period.

Le Duc did not long have the field to himself. By 1855 E. Howitz and Company of St. Paul were selling sheet music, and N. P. Ingalls promised to "give satisfaction as a tuner." No piano warerooms were as yet visible in the territorial capital, but its newspaper carried an advertisement for such an outlet in Galena, showing pianos manufactured by Brown and Allen of Boston.²⁹

A year later St. Paul had six music teachers — all of them men — and at least four dealers. The latter were John Getz and Company, Third Street, which sold not only musical instruments but also toys, perfumery, cutlery, confectionery, and fruits; Frederick Luhrsén (or Lurksen), who had a similar line of merchandise and who also advertised "Musical Instruments neatly repaired"; F. Somers, who announced that he was the "agent for Grow & Christopher's Celebrated Pianos," made by a New York firm which went out of business the following year; and Wheeler and Company, which also sold pianos.³⁰

²⁸ Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue*, 93 (St. Paul, 1948); William G. Le Duc, *Recollections of a Civil War Quartermaster*, 36 (St. Paul, 1963).

²⁹ *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), May 29, 1855.

³⁰ *St. Paul City Directory*, 1856-57.

MUNGER BROS.,

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SOLE AGENTS FOR

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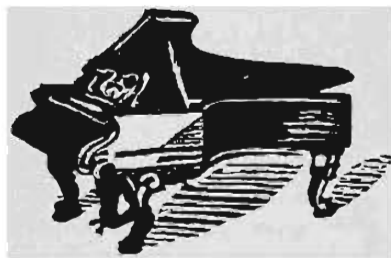
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AN advertisement appearing in the
St. Paul Pioneer of April 1, 1866

By 1858 Luhrsen was listed in the city directory as operating a music store, having apparently dropped his other lines, and at least three additional dealers were selling pianos in St. Paul. F. H. Pike and Company, "Dealers in Piano Fortes, Melodeons, and musical instruments of all kinds," also offered instruction and sold sheet music; Von Hamm's Bookstore featured Stoddard pianos "at New York prices" as well as those made by George H. Gelb of New York; and W. A. Munger had opened a music store which was to become a St. Paul institution, selling "organs, melodeons, pianos, and smaller instruments . . . throughout the whole Northwest."³¹

Contemporary accounts testify to the success of these dealers in selling their wares. In 1855 a resident of St. Anthony commented: "It sounds like civilization to take a walk through the streets of this city in a cool evening. As you get out of the sound of one piano, another is heard; a person fancies that he is in some broad parlor where music reigns supreme. It is a good calling for young ladies where they have no flax or wool to spin."³² A year later the *Saint Croix Union* reported, "Stillwater is becoming musical. We know of five pianos; besides, flutes, guitars and violins without number." In 1856, according to the *Pioneer and Democrat*, a single St. Paul dealer sold "twenty-five pianos varying in price from \$350 to \$600" between May 1 and August 7, and in 1858 fifteen pianos were assessed in St. Anthony and ten in Minneapolis.³³

Not everyone had a piano, however. Ellery Cory wrote from St. Paul in November, 1856: "Last Thursday was . . . Thanksgiving. . . . Went over to Louis to a grand Dinner . . . after Desert we adjourned to the parlor for an evenings merry making . . . we thought of Dancing but as we had no music, we got up some of our own. Mrs. Forbes performed on a coarse comb covered with paper, Fannie had a Tin pan, and I made music with a dinner Bell. Altogether we made an excelent Band for dancing."³⁴

In such a musical void the piano of the

1850s established itself as a desirable parlor piece around which much of the home entertainment of the period revolved. In some remarks drawn up for the judges at an international exhibition of pianos in London in 1851, a writer observed that "The social importance of the piano is, beyond all question, far greater than that of any other instrument of music. One of the most marked changes in the habits of society, as civilization advances, is with respect to the character of its amusements. Formerly, nearly all such amusements were away from home, and in public; now, with the more educated portion of society, the greatest part is at home, and within the family circle — music on the piano contributing the greatest portion of it. In the more fashionable circles of cities, private concerts increase year by year, and in them the piano is the principal feature. Many a man, engaged in commercial and other active pursuits, finds the chief charm of his drawing-room in the intellectual enjoyment afforded by the piano." Although written for a European audience, these statements were equally applicable to Minnesota Territory.³⁵

The pioneer community also found that the piano was unexcelled as an accompaniment for the human voice and other instruments. In the nineteenth century singing was an extremely popular form of entertainment; everyone, it seems, either sang or wanted to sing. Singing schools and singing societies were common, and people of all ages enrolled in them. The first such school in St. Anthony was organized in 1851 by a Professor Bennett, and three more were flourishing

³¹ *St. Paul City Directory*, 1858–59; *St. Paul Pioneer*, June 9, 1872.

³² Quoted in Evadene A. Burris, "Furnishing the Frontier Home," in *Minnesota History*, 15:187 (June, 1934).

³³ *Saint Croix Union* (Stillwater), September 12, 1856; *St. Paul Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, August 7, 1856; Burris, in *Minnesota History*, 15:187.

³⁴ Ellery Cory to his parents, November 23, 1856, Cory-Forbes Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁵ Rimbault, *The Pianoforte*, 160.

within a year.³⁶ In 1853 a St. Paul woman wrote, "Amanda is over to Mrs. [Jacob] Bass' singing. She has a piano and some of the young people have met there to practice."³⁷

The "center and inspiration" of an active musical group in St. Paul was Dr. Charles W. W. Borup, a former fur trader who became one of the town's first bankers. "Mrs. Ignatius Donnelly, wife of Minnesota's lieutenant governor, and Dr. Borup's niece, Mrs. Isaac Van Etten, both with very lovely flexible voices trained by the best vocal teachers the East then afforded, and Mrs. Henry M. Knox, the most charming of ballad singers, were the bright particular stars," recalled Governor Ramsey's daughter. "Dr. Borup's fine large house was the scene of many delightful musicals."³⁸

MUSIC was in demand. When a small group of German Benedictine sisters—the nucleus of the future Convent of St. Benedict at St. Joseph—reached St. Cloud in the summer of 1857, they rented a house and began teaching the daughters of the local townspeople. The nuns had brought with them only a few clothes and books, some treasured religious articles, and sheet music. Despite their poverty, they sent for a piano, which "had to be purchased because the Yankees are especially set on taking up music." It cost \$330 with freight and shipping charges and bore the name of a Pittsburgh firm, Charlotte Blum.³⁹

Another school, the Washington Seminary in Stillwater, announced its first term in

January, 1855, and stated "that the course of instruction shall be such as will tend to the right development and greatest improvement of the mind of each student." Fees were "Payable in Advance," and three courses were offered. "Common English" studies cost six dollars a quarter; languages and higher mathematics, eight dollars; and music, twelve dollars.⁴⁰

It was in the 1850s, too, that the piano made its first recorded appearance in Minnesota as the accompaniment for a performer of international fame. He was Ole Bull, the noted Norwegian violinist, who in 1856 played for overflow audiences at concerts in St. Paul, St. Anthony, Minneapolis, and Stillwater. In general, Bull was enthusiastically received, but not all his listeners were equally impressed with the formal concert form or with the piano selections provided by his accompanist, Franz Roth.⁴¹

"The pianist plays well; but the piano forte, never having been a favorite instrument with us, he did not entrance us beyond recall," wrote the reporter for the *Saint Croix Union* on July 25, 1856. Equivocally, he continued: "Anything we can say will neither add to, nor detract from, Ole Bull's reputation as a man or musician. We simply say, therefore, that he answered fully all our expectations. That he is without a rival as a violinist, is very clear to us; and so it would be to all who hear him everywhere, if he would give less of foreign, and more of common music at his Concerts. For example: If he should play 'Home, sweet home,' or any other well known and popular air—divested of all, or nearly all, variations, preludes, fantasias, &c. . . . he would excite to the very highest pitch, the enthusiasm and delight of his audience. But we suppose if he should adopt this suggestion, he would lose caste with the starched-up musical snobs of the great cities of the United States and Europe." As for the youthful soprano Adelina Patti, who appeared with Bull, the disgruntled reporter remarked, "We verily believe we could pick up a dozen ladies

³⁶ John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks*, 356 (Pittsburgh, 1961); *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, January 20, 1935, sec. 3, p. 7.

³⁷ Quoted by Burris, in *Minnesota History*, 15:187.

³⁸ Marion Ramsey Furness, "Childhood Recollections of Old St. Paul," in *Minnesota History*, 29:119 (June, 1948).

³⁹ Sister Grace McDonald, "Pioneer Teachers: The Benedictine Sisters at St. Cloud," in *Minnesota History*, 35:266 (June, 1957).

⁴⁰ Advertisement in the *Saint Croix Union*, January 9, 1855.

⁴¹ *Daily Minnesotian* (St. Paul), July 12, 1856.

round town who could sing 'Home' better than she did."

About two months later, the reporter apparently heard homespun music more to his liking, for he remarked in the *Union* of October 10, 1856: "A few evenings since we had the pleasure of hearing Miss Gorman, a daughter of Gov. [Willis A.] Gorman, perform upon the piano. Though she is quite young, we consider her the best we ever heard." Local pride or political considerations seem to have triumphed over the capabilities of Bull's accompanist, Franz Roth.

Roth, however, was generous in his praise of the man who may have been the area's first concert tuner. Because the quality of tuning and the capability of tuners varied considerably, many early concert performers traveled with a tuner in their troupe. Ole Bull apparently did not have such a man, for after the St. Anthony performance pianist Roth commended "our Swedish Friend" for the fine job he had done in tuning the piano.⁴²

This friend was C. A. Widstrand, a Swedish immigrant who gave music lessons and tuned pianos in growing Minneapolis. Roth's praise reflected not only satisfaction but possibly surprise at finding in the new territory on the edge of the frontier a man with the ability needed for concert tuning. Widstrand was well educated, having attended school in Sweden with Gunnar Wennerberg, one of that country's great composers for male voices. Little more is known of this tuner's background, but he lived on in Minneapolis for many years and later operated a music store there.⁴³

In 1858 the piano again made its appearance on a Minnesota stage, this time to accompany the singing voice of Philip Rohr, a musician of German birth. Rohr arranged two concerts in St. Paul during the summer of 1858, and it is probable that his assisting artist was Elizabeth Muller, the wife of a Swiss physician who settled at Stillwater in 1856. Regrettably, nothing more is known of the lady who may well have been one of Minnesota's earliest concert pianists.⁴⁴

DURING the years from 1849 to 1858, the piano industry was changing almost as rapidly as the territory of Minnesota. The one-piece metal harp had been invented, and by 1855 these castings were in extensive use. Not everyone considered the invention an improvement, and at first pianos could be purchased with or without a metal harp. The device gave the instrument far greater stability than was possible with a wood frame. Heavier stringing and greater tension on the strings were now possible, and the instrument acquired more resonance. Pianos became larger in size, and manufacturer vied with manufacturer to place his name before the public in the best possible light.⁴⁵

This was the beginning of the period when the giant names of the industry were emerging and small builders were disappearing or going to work in existing piano factories. One such small builder who is important in Minnesota's piano history is Charles Hazelhurst. He was born in Prussia and apparently settled in St. Paul with his wife Doris about 1858. He was then forty years of age, and the city directory of that year listed him as a musician. From 1859 through 1863 he was shown as "piano maker," and in 1864 as "piano manufacturer."⁴⁶

On June 4, 1864, the *St. Paul Pioneer* took note of his activities. "We called upon Mr. C. Hazelhurst, piano maker of this city, on Washington Street, yesterday," the account ran, "and had the pleasure of examining and hearing the first piano ever made in Minnesota. The instrument possesses several new features which appear to us to be improvements, which will result in making the piano

⁴² *Minnesota Republican* (St. Anthony), July 24, 1856.

⁴³ *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, January 20, 1935, sec. 3, p. 7; John K. Sherman, *Music and Theater in Minnesota History*, 9 (Minneapolis, 1958).

⁴⁴ Lynwood G. Downs, trans. and ed., "Music Moves West," in *Minnesota History*, 32:240 (December, 1951).

⁴⁵ *Industrial America, or Manufacturers and Inventors of the United States*, 344 (Atlantic Publishing and Engraving Company, n.p., 1876).

⁴⁶ Ramsey County Manuscript Census, 1860; *St. Paul City Directories*, 1858-64.

PIANO exhibit
at the Minnesota
State Fair, 1886



a more musical if not a more popular instrument. It will not be finished for public examination for several weeks to come, but when it is finished we hope that some of the experienced pianists of our city will examine Mr. Hazellhurst's instrument and improvements, believing they will pronounce it a grand success. In the manufacture of musical instruments, our city is making rapid progress," the article boasted. "Organs, melodeons, cabinet organs, and now pianos are produced here, by the musical instrument makers of this city, who will soon relieve us of dependence upon the Eastern makers." No further trace of Hazellhurst or his piano has been found. Where did he go, and what happened to the instrument he had so nearly completed?

In 1860 the nation had 110 establishments

⁴⁷ *United States Census, 1860, Manufactures, 738; Duluth Herald, December 30, 1939, sec. 2, p. 31.* Three pianos of the 1860s and 1870s are preserved in Duluth museums. Two of them, owned by the Hunter and Merritt families, are in the St. Louis County Historical Society. The third is on loan to the Chisholm Museum from Miss Agnes Macfarlane. The Hunter and Macfarlane instruments were made by Allison of London and are superior examples of the cabinetmaker's art in the upright piano. The Merritt piano was made by Mathushek of New Haven, Connecticut, and is representative of the American square piano of that period.

manufacturing pianos. They employed 3,482 people and produced some 22,000 instruments. The piano in the home was now so common it was considered a "friend of the family." It was also appearing in ever-increasing numbers in public places where concerts were held. Such entertainments were the rage, and even the newer towns had caught the fever. In 1869 Duluth held its first concert "in the upstairs of an unfinished store building, with wood planks as seats." Although piano music was not included in the program, Duluth could then boast of four pianos and a music teacher.⁴⁷ In the larger cities the opera house (any city worthy of its name had one) installed a piano, and local musicians played at intermission.

The grand piano was the principal type used for such concerts, and manufacturers sought to associate their names with these instruments in the public mind. One piano maker and a local dealer must have been proud when on April 27, 1867, a Minneapolis newspaper reported: "Everybody is supposed to try and pronounce judgment on the new 'Knabe Grand' just received by the Musical Union — so we tried it . . . as we are informed it required eleven men and a small dog to set it up, we conclude that it is a 'big thing.'" The Musical Union

which got the "big thing" was a choral group with an instrumental complement that made musical history in early Minneapolis.⁴⁸

To capitalize on the prestige that the larger grand piano held in the public eye, manufacturers began to produce what was known as a "square grand." Mrs. Ignatius Donnelly bought such a piano about 1867 shortly before her congressman husband was defeated and the family moved back to Minnesota. The piano, which was acquired for the Donnellys' daughter, was made by Hallet, Davis and Company of Boston and has the words "SQUARE GRAND" boldly lettered on the nameboard. It has seven and a third octaves, a full iron frame, and a fine case with all the carved embellishments of the cabinetmaker's art. In a word, the Donnelly piano, now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Ole Forside of St. Paul, is representative of the finest development of the square piano.⁴⁹

IT HAS BEEN estimated that in 1869 the United States produced thirty thousand pianos. The square was still the most widely sold instrument, although American builders had already introduced the upright piano, which eventually was to replace it. One American company, however, which later achieved fame through the grand piano started its business in this country by manufacturing square instruments. That company was Steinway and Sons, founded in New York in 1853 by a family of German piano makers who had immigrated three years before. They very early adopted and improved upon the iron frame, developed more responsive actions, and entered their pianos in expositions where they won high praise.⁵⁰

As early as May 28, 1858—as if to celebrate Minnesota's admission to the Union as a full-fledged state—the following Steinway advertisement appeared in the *St. Paul Daily Pioneer and Democrat*: "First Premium Gold Medal Piano-Forte; Steinway & Sons, Manufacturers, 84 Walker Street, near Broadway, New York, invites public attention to their newly improved Piano Fortes,

with and without Iron Frames, pronounced superior to any other instruments now before the public by the most competent judges. . . . Every instrument warranted for three years to give entire satisfaction, or the purchase money will be refunded."

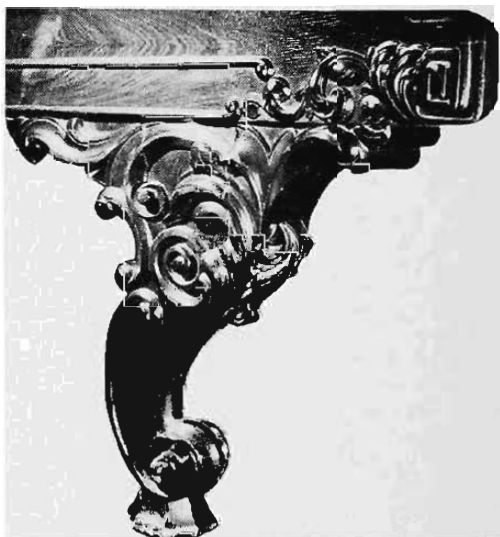
The following year Steinway research produced improvements in the grand piano, and the instrument began to find favor among the concert soloists appearing in the United States. Heretofore these soloists, who were primarily Europeans, had brought with them grand pianos of European manufacture, instruments considered superior to those available in this country. Henry Steinway, Jr., writing to his brother Theodore in 1859, soon after the firm's grand pianos had been improved, said: "We are now anxious to make our name well known in Europe; this is absolutely necessary in order to interest those piano virtuosi who come here, so

⁴⁸ *Minneapolis Daily Chronicle*, April 27, 1867; *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, January 20, 1935, sec. 3, p. 7.

⁴⁹ Interview with Philip C. Donnelly, September 11, 1965; personal property tax form, June 18, 1867, Donnelly Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁰ *People and Pianos, A Century of Service to Music*, 11, 12 (New York, 1953). Piano production figures were only estimates. For a discussion of them, see *Industrial America*, 346.

CARVED leg of the Ramsey piano



THE piano
purchased by
Alexander Ramsey
in 1872



we'll get our hands on them." And "get their hands on them" they did. Steinway was soon building grands to please the most fastidious piano artists of the day.⁵¹

In 1872 the firm began to sponsor concert artists of international reputation. The first of these was Anton Rubinstein, who for the next two years toured the United States under the auspices of Steinway and played a concert grand manufactured by his sponsor. While such endorsement campaigns aided the artist, they also made the Steinway name known in all corners of the nation, including Minnesota.⁵²

In the year that Rubinstein was electrify-

ing audiences, Alexander Ramsey, who was then in his second term as United States senator, purchased a Steinway concert grand for his newly built home on the corner of Exchange and Walnut streets in St. Paul. Ramsey's piano, the largest of the three sizes of grands made by Steinway in 1872, was the forerunner of the concert instrument we know today. Purchased at a cost of \$1,400, it is well preserved in the Alexander Ramsey House and is an excellent illustration of the extent to which the art of making pianos had advanced by that time. It has a full cast-iron harp, with overstrung base strings. The case is finished in rosewood, which was popular at the time, and looks much like a present-day concert grand except for the carved legs and music rack, the latter being a piece of scroll-saw workmanship.⁵³

⁵¹ *People and Pianos*, 21.

⁵² *People and Pianos*, 34.

⁵³ Receipt from Steinway and Sons, June 4, 1872, Ramsey Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

Although great improvements have been made since 1872 in both tonal quality and action, the Ramsey piano is representative of the instrument that during this period made Steinway famous the world over. In the 1820s when Mrs. Plympton brought the first piano to Minnesota, the United States imported most of its instruments. But by the 1870s American piano manufacturers were noted throughout the world, and Steinway provided seven out of ten of the exported instruments. In the very month that Ramsey bought his piano, Steinway exported a similar one to Grand Duke Alexander (later Alexander III of Russia). Thus, in 1872, when Minnesota was nearing the end of its first fifty years of piano music, and Marion Ramsey played Chopin's "Valse Brillante" at a benefit concert held in the "grand drawing room" of the Ramsey house, she performed on an American instrument with an international reputation.⁵⁴

Looking back over this half century one might well ask: why was the piano so popular, even during the earliest frontier days, when the effort of transporting so large an instrument was enormous? The answer lies in the piano itself. The pioneer Minnesotan loved to sing. The piano — which more than covered the range of the human voice — was a most pleasing accompaniment to vocal music. Other instruments blended well with the piano, and because it encompassed both the melody and harmony, it was also eminently suited for solo performances. Its range

and versatility won for the piano a place in the pioneer's parlor and on the concert stage, for as its early name, pianoforte ("soft-loud") implied, it had the capacity for nuance of tone, providing the sensuous beauty and lyricism sought after in music by the romantics of the nineteenth century.⁵⁵

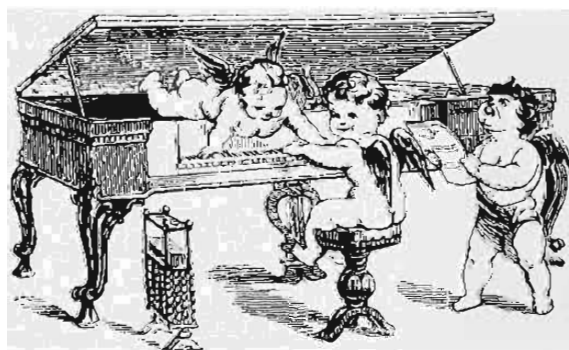
In the 1860s a good horse was important to the Minnesota pioneer, yet at that time a piano was worth twice as much.⁵⁶ Unlike the horse and buggy, the wood stove, and the kerosene lamp, the piano has retained its popularity. It has been called the "household orchestra" — an apt name indeed. Physically, culturally, and socially the piano achieved a central place in the home. It is still the pride of the parlor, as it was in pioneer times.

⁵⁴ John H. Steinway to the author, August 17, 1965; *St. Paul Pioneer*, December 21, 1872. In 1872 Steinway took out a patent on a "duplex scale," developed in collaboration with Herman L. F. Helmholtz, a German physicist; this innovation produced a revolution in piano sound.

⁵⁵ On the gradual shift from vocal to instrumental music during the mid-nineteenth century, see John H. Mueller, *The American Symphony Orchestra: A Social History of Musical Taste*, 22–31 (Bloomington, Indiana, 1951).

⁵⁶ *St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, Report*, 1869, p. 10. This report lists the assessment value of horses in 1869 as \$72.82, of pianos as \$144.93.

THE SKETCHES on pages 312, 313, 315, and 326 are from Clarence P. Hornung, *A Handbook of Early Advertising Art* (1956). The photograph on page 314 is by Eugene D. Becker; those on pages 324 and 325 are by Alan Ominsky. Other pictures are from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.





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