

# France's Pleyel piano maker plays final note

November 17 2013, by Angela Charlton

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A Pleyel piano is displayed in a piano store, in Paris, Saturday, Nov. 16, 2013. Gone are its glory days, when Chopin composed concertos on its pianos. France's Pleyel piano maker is shutting its doors, unable to keep up with cheaper and more agile competition. (AP Photo/Thibault Camus)

(AP)—Gone are its glory days, when Chopin composed concertos on its pianos. France's Pleyel piano maker is shutting its doors, unable to keep up with cheaper and more agile competition.

Down to just 14 employees after a 206-year history that produced more than 250,000 pianos, the Pleyel [piano](#) factory in Saint Denis, north of Paris, announced this week that it's closing "because of recurrent losses and a very low level of activity."

Like so many industries that Europe once dominated, today the piano market has moved east, grown more democratic, and gone digital. A study by ResearchMoz says China is the world's biggest producer and consumer of pianos, many of them budget or electronic models.

The company was founded in 1807 by Ignaz Pleyel, a composer and music publisher who studied with Franz Joseph Haydn. The factory became a leader in acoustic innovation in its heyday, coming out with new models as technology advanced. Its factory made instruments for music greats Chopin, Lizst, Ravel and Stravinsky.

"When I feel I feel energetic and strong enough to find my own sound, I need a Pleyel piano," said Chopin, who collected commissions from the company for prompting others to buy instruments.

Pleyel pianos graced the court of Josephine, Napoleon's wife, and other European royal residences, and were the centerpieces of salons in Paris.



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The last 100 years have been rockier for Pleyel, as it changed ownership repeatedly and production plunged to about 20 pianos last year. But the name still conjures melodic memories for many with classical music training around Europe and beyond.

After closing its factory, Pleyel is "looking for alternative solutions," said its director, Bernard Roques. That might include hooking up with a prominent figure in the music industry, or finding another space to produce a select few high-end pianos and revive the Pleyel brand.

Competitor Olivier Colin says it's too late. His company, Colmann, is now the only French company still making pianos.

Sort of.

Colmann's main production facilities are in China. "Otherwise it would cost way too much," Colin said. "We use China in an intelligent way, to have pianos on the market that are not too expensive, but that can retain the same quality, the same French technicians."



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Colmann is investing in research in new technology in grand pianos that play themselves and be programmed remotely, such as one placed at the center of a fountain in Dijon. Or acoustic pianos that, like electric pianos, can be hooked into headphones so that only the pianist can hear

the music played.

Across the Atlantic, another famous name in piano-making is facing a time of transition. New York's Steinway Musical Instruments Inc., whose pianos are coveted by concert halls around the U.S., was sold this year to an investment firm as it tries to restore business to pre-recession levels. Paulson & Co. paid approximately \$499 million for the 160-year-old Steinway, founded by a German immigrant.

The hope is that Steinway's fortunes are improving along with the recovering U.S. economy, and amid increased overseas demand for high-end pianos—including from China.

Meanwhile, the Pleyel name lives on in Paris at a major concert hall, the Salle Pleyel, which was separated from the piano business long ago.

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Citation: France's Pleyel piano maker plays final note (2013, November 17) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-france-pleyel-piano-maker.html>

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