



The Schumann/Brahms Conrad Graf Piano

Pianos made by the distinguished Viennese maker Conrad Graf (1792–1851) were used by Beethoven, Czerny, Schubert, Schumann, Kalkbrenner, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms, and owned by such dignitaries and notables as the Archduke Franz II and Archduchess Maria Louisa of Austria, the Empress of Russia, the Queen of Saxony, and the poet Goethe. Thus, Graf pianos are closely associated with keyboard music composed and performed during the late Classical and early Romantic periods, making those that survive extremely valuable historical resources. About sixty of these pianos are known (just five in the United States), and most are preserved in European museums. Graf's chief Viennese competitors were the firm headed by Nannette and Johann Streicher and that of André Stein.

Conrad Graf was born in 1782 in Riedlingen, Bavaria. He apprenticed briefly in cabinetmaking and in 1796 found employment with Jacob Schelke, a fortepiano maker working in the outskirts of Vienna. Schelke died in 1804, and Graf married his widow and took over the firm. In 1811 he was granted a license to manufacture and sell pianos in Vienna. This license specified that he was a *Landklaviermacher*, meaning that he worked outside the city limits of Vienna, likely at Schelke's old establishment in Währing. In 1821, Graf became a *Burger*, that is, a professional citizen of Vienna, and in 1824 he was appointed Imperial Court piano maker, which is noted on the printed labels mounted on the nameboards of his instruments: *CONRAD GRAF/kaisertl. kön. Hof-Fortepianomacher/in WIEN*. In 1835 he was the recipient of a gold medal at the Austrian Industrial Products Exhibition, which is alluded to in printed labels placed on his pianos' soundboards: *Goldene Medaille/FERDINAND I. KAISER VON OESTERREICH/Conrad Graf/in Wien*. In 1825 Graf purchased an old dance hall named the Mondscheinhaus, which had been known for having the most highly polished dance floor in Vienna, and converted it into a workshop. He worked at that facility until 1841, when he sold it to the piano maker Carl Stein and then retired (Deborah Wythe, "Conrad Graf: Imperial Royal Court Fortepiano Maker in Vienna," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, pp. 8–28).



Johannes Brahms, photographed by
Bertha Wehnert-Beckermann (Leipzig, end of 1853)

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It is generally believed that Graf's opus 2616 was a wedding present from Robert Schumann to his wife, Clara Wieck (they were married 12 September 1840), though a letter by Robert Schumann dated 16 September 1839 suggests that it may have been a gift from the maker to Clara: "Clara received an answer yesterday from Graf in Vienna. He expressly acknowledged that the grand piano in question was a "reverential souvenir" for Clara. Thus everything
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appears to be turning out favorably” (Robert Schumann, *Robert Schumanns Briefe: Neue Folge*, 2nd ed., F. Gustav Jansen, ed. [Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1904], 172). Clara is known to have visited Graf’s place of business during her 1837–38 concert tour in Vienna (Berthold Litzmann, ed., *Clara Schumann: Ein Künstlerleben nach Tagebüchern und Briefen* [Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1906], 1:417); perhaps it was on this occasion that Graf decided to present her with one of his instruments. A letter dated 27 October 1841 from Clara to a family friend provides further evidence that this instrument was not a present from her husband but a gift from Graf, as she asks the friend to arrange for reimbursing Graf for the freight costs involved in shipping the piano from Vienna (Litzmann, ed., *Clara Schumann*, 1:512).

In September 1853, Brahms visited the Schumanns in Düsseldorf and was a house guest of theirs the following month. During this visit and stay, he had the opportunity to play the Schumanns’ Graf piano and to regale his hosts with some of his early piano compositions, which included the Scherzo, Op. 4; Sonata No. 1, Op. 1; Sonata No. 2, Op. 2; and the andantes from Sonata No. 3, Op. 5.

Clara Schumann is believed to have given the Graf piano to Brahms sometime after her husband’s death on 29 July 1856, but the precise date for the transfer of the instrument is not known. Two months after Robert Schumann’s death, Brahms returned to his parental family home in Hamburg, but there is no record that he brought the instrument with him or had it shipped to Hamburg at that time. We know that shortly before Robert died, the Erard firm had supplied Clara with a piano that she evidently preferred for home use through 1867. When she moved from Düsseldorf to Berlin late in 1857, this might have been an opportune time to ship the Graf to Brahms, but his family was then living in cramped quarters, and it was not until 1858 that they moved to a larger apartment and prepared a room for him that was reportedly spacious enough for his library, writing table, and piano (Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* [New York, 1999], 178). Despite the new arrangement, Brahms moved out of his family’s apartment in July of 1861 and took up residence in a sunny studio set aside for him in a house in Hamm, a suburb of Hamburg. In a letter written to Clara in 1868, Brahms indicates that the lady who owned this house, and who was about to move, had been storing the Graf for a considerable length of time:

Frau Rösing [Brahms’s landlady] is now moving from Hamm to Hanover. Please tell me what to do with Robert’s grand piano, which the good lady has kept for us so long. I cannot, of course, have it here because space is money. But you have no room in Baden for this precious but bulky memento, either, and as Heins [presumably one of the principals of the Hamburg piano-making firm Baumgardten & Heins] was telling me, it would be impossible to hope to sell it here, nor would we want to (Berthold Litzmann, ed., *Letters of Clara Schumann & Johannes Brahms, 1853-1896*, unknown translator, 2 vols. [New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1927], 1:219).

In this letter, Brahms is evidently under the impression that the piano had been Robert Schumann’s—not Clara’s,

and it would appear that he did not consider himself the sole owner of the instrument but merely that he was storing it for Clara. It is clear that he had not been using it; indeed, between 1854 and 1859 Brahms had expressed a preference for the *Tafelklaviers* (square pianos) and grands made by Baumgardten & Heins. Somewhat later he used pianos by Erard and Streicher and finally moved on to those of Bösendorfer, Ehrbar, Bechstein, and Steinway (George S. Bozarth and Stephen Brady, “Johannes Brahms and His Pianos,” *Piano Technicians Journal* 42 [July 2000], 42–55).

Though the Graf piano did retain sentimental value and historical significance for Brahms, a letter written to his stepmother in 1873 again suggests that it had been something of a burden to him, as well as to his family: “My old grand piano will be called for shortly. And you’ll laugh: it’s going to the International Exposition!! For, you see, it had been Schumann’s and others, of Mozart, Beethoven, etc. are also there” (*Johannes Brahms, Life and Letters*, ed. Styravins [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 447).

After the Exposition, Brahms donated his “old grand piano” to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde of Vienna, which retains ownership (the piano was “nationalized” during World War II, but was subsequently reclaimed by the Gesellschaft). The instrument is now on loan to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Description of the Schumann/Brahms Graf Piano

The Schumanns’ six-and-one-half-octave (CC-g⁴) Graf piano was equipped with the so-called “Viennese action,” which was used in most grand pianos made by Austrian and South German makers from about 1790 through the 1850s (notable exceptions were the Streicher pianos fitted with down-striking actions, which did not work on the principle of the Viennese action). The Viennese action is derived from the earlier German action, which employed a slightly different action geometry. The standard German or Viennese action had essentially one moving part, the hammer, which pivoted on a fork that projected from the back of the key lever. The hammer, which faced towards the player, was tripped by a spring-loaded escapement lever hinged on the back of the key frame. In its early form, the German or Viennese action provided a light, shallow touch that enabled the player to execute runs and ornaments with great speed and articulation. However, by the 1830s Viennese actions were being fitted with much heavier hammers and the touch became uncomfortable and lacked responsiveness. The leathered, wedge-shaped dampers typically found in pianos with Viennese actions were especially effective and snuffed out the sound as quickly as the keys were released (unlike the dampers of English pianos, which allowed the sound to linger).

Though Graf’s early instruments were fitted with foot pedals that controlled Janissary effects (these effects included jingles, bassoon stop, and a drum mallet), by the time opus 2616 was made Janissary effects had gone out of



The 1839 Grand Piano by Conrad Graf owned by Clara and Robert Schumann
(Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

fashion and Graf omitted them. The Schumann/Brahms Graf has four pedals; one raises the dampers, two engage the double moderator, and the fourth controls *una corda*.

Compared to the essentially modern Bösendorfer, Bechstein, and Steinway pianos that Brahms used in his mature years, Graf's instruments had a brighter, somewhat "woody" timbre. Though they were not capable of the thunderous volumes that the later pianos could produce, they were nonetheless aggressive instruments that could hold their own in chamber music, when accompanying the voice, and when used with orchestra.

Because of the comparatively low tensile strength of the iron wire manufactured through the early 1830s, pianos by Graf and his contemporaries employed rather short scaling. In opus 2616, which is typical of Graf's production at that time, c^2 is 28.4 cm. The relatively slack strings of these instruments produce (to this writer's ears) an unpleasant inharmonicity and poor sustaining power, particularly in

the treble. Around 1835, Graf and other Viennese makers switched to English steel wire produced by the newly invented Bessemer process, which had somewhat greater tensile strength than the wire they had been using. The availability of stronger wire made it technically possible to increase string length, though Graf retained his old scaling until he ceased production in 1841. More progressive piano makers began to rescale their instruments (by the 1860s, c^2 was extended to 30 cm and up) to take advantage of the new, stronger wire; by the 1880s, Bechstein grands had c^2 lengths in excess of 32 cm.

Longer string lengths and greater string tension improved the piano's tone (particularly in the treble) but also increased stress on the case structure. To withstand the added tension, piano makers gradually switched from wood bracing to metal, first in the form of iron bars screwed to the case (a system employed by firms such as Broadwood and

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Erard in the 1820s and used by Streicher through the 1860s), and followed by the full cast-iron frame (invented by the American Alpheus Babcock around 1820 but not generally adopted by Continental firms until the 1860s). Graf's instruments were firmly rooted in the past (they represent the last throes of the "fortepiano"), and he continued to make the cases of his pianos entirely of wood (except for a single iron gap spacer) until the day he ceased production. A very great problem with wood-braced pianos was tuning instability. Wood-framed instruments, such as Graf's, went out of tune much more quickly than those with cast-iron frames. In the 1830s, a number of Viennese makers began fitting some of their instruments with Erard's newly invented double-repetition action, which had the advantage of allowing the player to re-strike a note before the key had completely lifted. By the 1860s, this type of mechanism had overshadowed the Viennese action. Thus, when Brahms came into possession of the Schumanns' Graf piano, its mechanism and case structure were essentially outmoded.

Most of Graf's pianos had squared-off key cheeks (much like those of a traditional harpsichord.). The Schumann/Brahms Graf is unusual in that the cheeks are cut-down to expose the keyboard (only one other Graf piano, opus 2787, has this feature). This case design, which is found in most modern grand pianos, exposes the player's hands, and its presence in opus 2616 suggests that this piano was specially designed for use before an audience.

History of Restorations

Shortly after her husband's death, Clara Schumann engaged the Düsseldorf piano dealer J.B. Klems to do some repair work on the Graf piano. He inscribed and dated the lowest key 30/9.56/J.B. Klems. It is not known why she had this work done, because, as previously mentioned, she had just been given a new Erard grand. Perhaps she wanted repairs made prior to sending the piano off to Brahms or to ready it for her move to Berlin the following year. It is assumed that Klems was responsible for alterations made to the hammers. The hammers in Graf pianos were originally covered with multiple layers of leather, but in the Schumann/Brahms piano this leather has been replaced with a heavy layer of hard felt (very much like that used in modern pianos) topped with a single layer of soft leather. Such an arrangement of felt with an outer covering of "intonation" leather is found in many Viennese pianos made in the 1850s. Bösendorfer and other makers continued to use this type of hammer in smaller grand pianos (fitted with Viennese actions) through the early decades of the twentieth century. The Renner firm, an Austrian supplier of piano actions parts, tools, and supplies, listed Viennese-action parts and hammer leather in their catalog until fairly recently. Thus, it is possible that the hammers were re-covered with leather-trimmed felt at a date much later than the Klemms repair. In fact, there is another inscription found on the key frame—"Klavatur rpt. 12/6.31 Leop. Knapp,"—and thus it is not inconceivable that Leopold Knapp installed the felt

hammer coverings in 1931. Knapp was most likely responsible for the replacement of some of the hammer beak leathers (about two-thirds are not original) and the felt strips used as padding in the action. (Wool flannel—not felt—was originally used for padding under the keys, escapement levers, and hammers.) Records preserved in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (where the piano is on loan and is exhibited) indicate that Jörg Demus removed the leather layer from the hammers prior to making a recording on the instrument in 1966.

From the appearance of the hitchpin loops, much of the wire in opus 2616 appears to be original. When the author measured the string diameters in 1978, the top two gauges of strings were about .71 and .66 mm in diameter, which is about one gauge heavier than gauges 11 and 10 found in opus 1594 and 2627 and those given in a table of string gauge number/metric diameter equivalences published in 1866 (H. Thomée, "Untersuchungen über Draht- und Blechlehren," *Zeitschrift des Vereines Deutscher Ingenieure* 10 [1866]: 659–660). If the treble strings are replacements, they may have been installed by Klems in 1856. Other replacement strings are found sporadically, but these have the short hitchpin loops that are often used with modern steel piano wire. Knapp, and others, may have installed these strings.

In the 1990s, there was growing public interest in having the Schumann/Brahms Graf restored, and in 1995 a conference was organized at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna to consider the matter. A number of problems had to be addressed: should the non-original felt hammer head coverings be retained or replaced with copies of the original leather layers? Should the instrument be restrung? The problem of the deteriorated case structure proved the most daunting. Not only was the wrestplank cracked, but much of the internal wooden bracing, which is built up in brickwork fashion, had also become delaminated as a result of humidity, rendering the instrument structurally unsound. In the final analysis, the problems with the case structure were deemed so extensive that the museum's conservation staff felt it was unwise to attempt to restore the instrument.

In conclusion, Conrad Graf's opus 2616 is of great historical importance. It was the house piano of Robert Schumann and his wife, Clara, and was used extensively by Brahms during his first visit and subsequent stay with them. It is thus the piano most closely associated with his three Sonatas and Scherzo. However, by the time of Schumann's death (just seventeen years after the Graf piano was constructed), piano making had evolved sufficiently to render it less desirable than more up-to-date instruments. Though felt hammer coverings were installed in an effort to "modernize" the sound, the Graf just could not compete with pianos equipped with heavier stringing, iron frames, and the more responsive double-repetition action. The fact that Brahms had had the instrument in storage for some time prior to 1868 indicates that he had moved on to more technologically advanced pianos, a point to keep in mind when performing his later piano works.

Stewart Pollens

