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A newly-invented keyboard instrument that will not go out of tune (28 Dec 1790)

David Black

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, *Chronik*, no. 104, 28 December 1790

[886]

Tonkunst.

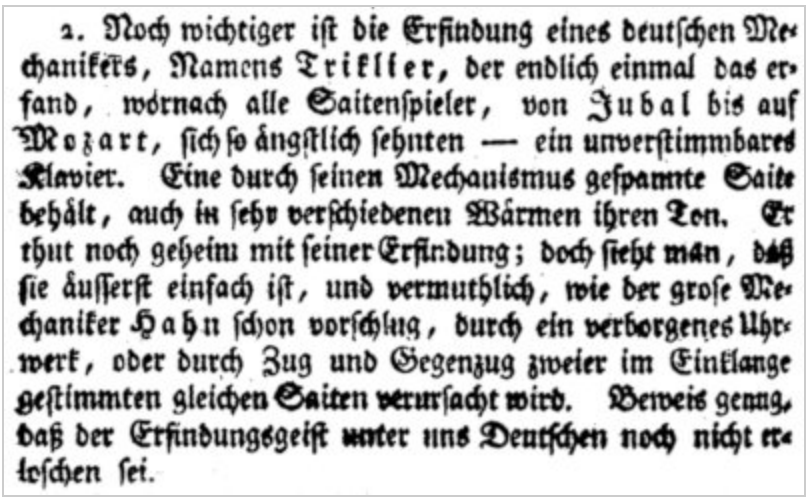
[...]


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Commentary

Jean Balthasar Triklir (1750-1813) was a celebrated cellist at the electoral Saxon court in Dresden, and the author of several concertos featuring innovative writing for his instrument. Triklir was interested in theoretical matters, and was the author of a manuscript treatise, *Le Microscôme [or Microcosme] musical: Ouvrage Phylosogéometrimusical fondé sur l’indiscordabilité, invention concourant avec le present Système à la perfection de la musique* (D-Dl, MB.8.371-72). This described a device one could attach to a string instrument that allegedly prevented atmospheric change from affecting the instrument’s tuning. The treatise remained unpublished, and apparently remains so today, but Triklir had a letter published in Cramer’s *Magazin der Musik* publicising his invention in 1785, with a co-credit to an otherwise unknown M. Hennequin. Triklir was not willing to reveal how the device actually worked, but promised a full description would be published in Paris the following spring — a promise that remained unfulfilled.

The following year a long anonymous article appeared in the same journal describing a visit to Dresden in October 1785, during which the author observed some of Triklir’s inventions. Among them was a five-octave double-strung harpsichord ("zweychörigtes Clavecin") which remained in the “purest possible tuning” despite changes in temperature, although the author considered that its tone was somewhat muted, short and not “silvery” enough. Triklir was said to be charging 50 carolins for a harpsichord with this feature. In May 1787 the Prague *Mode-Fabriken- und Gewerbszeitung* and the Ofen (Buda) *Ungarische Staats- und Gelehrte Nachrichten* reported that Triklir had exposed a cello and a small keyboard instrument to various kinds of weather over 14 days to test the effectiveness of the device, which worked with brass, steel and gut strings.

The source for Schubart’s report was probably a notice of Triklir’s invention in the *Intelligenzblatt der Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (8 Dec 1790), although the references to Mozart and the pastor and inventor Philipp Matthäus Hahn (1739-90) are Schubart’s own. Mozart was a competent violinist, but Schubart is unlikely to have been referring to him literally

as a “string player.” Rather, he seems to have used the term in a figurative sense as referring to a musician, as the reference to the legendary Jubal implies. It is also possible that Schubart was referring to Leopold Mozart, who was now iconic as a violinist through the fame of the *Versuch*. However, if Schubart did mean Leopold, it is unclear why Leopold would have been anxiously awaiting the invention of a keyboard instrument and not a violin that did not mistune.

Although Triklir lived another two decades, little further was heard of the *microcosme musical*. In 1802 the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* reported on a similar invention by the English watchmaker Peter Litherland (1756-1805). It noted that Triklir had devised his “excellent and entirely reliable” device about twenty years ago, but due to the lack of appropriate rewards for the effort and skill of German inventors, the public was not informed of the invention.

For a list of Mozart references in Schubart's *Chronik*, see the Source Notes to the entry for 23 Dec 1791.

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