



AN ENLIGHTENED
INSTRUMENT

the Design, Education, and Sociability
of the Single Action Pedal Harp
in *Ancien Régime* Paris, 1760-1789

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ABSTRACT

The harp has been in use in Western Europe since antiquity. In the eighteenth century, this ancient design was mechanised by German makers with the addition of pedals to alter string pitch, allowing for continuous playing with the hands while the feet operated the pedals. After this new instrument debuted in the Paris salons in the 1760s, the single action pedal harp became a fashionable instrument for wealthy Parisians at the same time that it became an instrument associated with ladies, much like the harpsichord. It featured prominently in the *Encyclopédie* as an example of the benefits of mechanisation, taking advantage of engineering to improve the ability of centuries-old design. The majority of histories on the single action harp have focused on the technological developments in the second half of the century that resulted in Sébastien Erard's double action—the ancestor of the modern concert harp—patented in 1810 in London.

This dissertation focuses on the social history of the single action pedal harp in Paris from 1760 to 1789, including its place in the larger discourse on mechanisation and innovation, how music education defied social conventions of gendered knowledge, and how the pedal harp operated in a similar way to other domestic furniture in regards to sociability and entertainment. By looking at existing pedal harps, archival material on instrument makers, harp method books, and the wealth of secondary literature on science, music, and sociability in Enlightenment Paris, I will examine the pedal harp's supposed role as an 'enlightened' instrument, and its role as a gendered, socialising object among the aristocracy in Paris and the end of the *ancien régime*.