



Making pianos Wrong tone

STEINWAY & SONS. By Richard Lieberman.
374 pages; Yale University Press; \$35 and
£23.50

HOW distressing it was for snooty Europeans to find that the best pianos on display at the Paris Exposition in 1867 were made in America. New-world businessmen had set about perfecting the instrument with a modern technical flair completely absent in Europe and they marketed it as roguishly as Jefferson Brick, Lafayette Kettle or any of Dickens's other unscrupulous Americans. Not that anyone in America seemed to mind. The wealthy American public was only too eager to buy the 19th-century equivalent of a station wagon and park it prominently in the parlour window. Calvin Coolidge, America's 29th president, was later to say that he never imagined "a model New England home without a family bible on the table and the piano in the corner".

Among American piano-makers none stands out like Steinway, the firm which virtually put the "grand" into "grand piano". The first of the line, Heinrich Steinweg, was an instrument-maker from Brunswick in Germany whose lone bugle call was supposed to have rallied the troops when Blücher and Wellington marched on Napoleon at Waterloo. Arriving in America aged 53 in 1850, Heinrich set up the family firm and anglicised his name.

Heinrich was a skilled craftsman, but the family's technical genius was Henry, one of his sons who was to die of tuberculosis in 1865 aged only 34. Within a few years, through a mixture of judicious borrowing and outright invention, Henry had sorted out how a piano should be strung, how to

match a resonant soundboard with a metal frame, and how to make an action that was more responsive to the pianist's fingers. At the Vienna exhibition 16 years after Paris, more than two-thirds of the pianos on show had the "Steinway system".

Steinway did not rely on quality alone to sell pianos. Competition judges, performers and journalists were all bought off. At its most innocent, the understanding involved nothing more than an endorsement from the artist in exchange for the use of Steinways wherever needed. For Paderewski, Rubinstein, Horowitz and other star pianists, the company organised tours, covering all costs and guaranteeing the pianists a generous income. In extreme cases, such as the centennial exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, the company bribed the judges to try to ensure that its pianos eclipsed the competition.

By the end of the 19th century, Steinway had a hold on the market and the first years of the 20th brought the family incredible wealth. Until the 1970s, if you wanted the best piano, you had a Steinway, just as surely as your chauffeur drove you about in a Rolls-Royce. But after the Depression, even if the pianos never failed, the Steinways' business acumen too often did.

This was partly because the Steinways, always tough and paternalistic, failed to adjust to an age when unions held more power. This mattered little while prosperity lasted. But in harder times, the family managers seemed stuck in their towers of ivory. Two world wars did not help. And not only because it distracted loyal citizens from buying pianos. During the second world war, Steinway, which tried in desperation to make a living building coffins, found itself suspected of being Nazi in America and Jewish in Germany.

But the real blame lies with the family's poor strategic judgment and its dangerously complacent overvaluation of the Steinway tradition. It was a blunder not to grasp the popular appeal of the humble upright until too late. Even when Steinway's "pianinos" were introduced in 1937, they were costly to make and unremarkable.

The family bungled also the restructuring of its factories, concentrating its American production on an old family site in the New York borough of Queens instead of building a modern factory which would have brought down costs and allowed for increased capacity. As a result, when demand for pianos at last picked up in the 1960s the company achieved an unenviable double: not only was there a backlog of unfilled orders, but margins were low. The end of Steinway began in the late 1960s when the firm failed to respond to the cheap, reliable pianos being made by Yamaha, first in Japan and later America. In the absence of radical measures, quality declined and the firm sought tariff protec-

tion from the Nixon administration. When that failed, Steinway in 1972 sold out to the CBS television network.

There is something familiar here. Innovation, dominance, labour unrest, complacency, uncompetitiveness and Japanese brilliance were later to cripple cars, steel and other American industries. Yet the comparison is not examined in this book. Indeed, nowhere does the author really place the Steinways in America's corporate history.

Were the story told more compellingly this might not matter. But Mr Lieberman leaves too many loose ends. Drunkards, unfaithful spouses and family misfits appear intriguingly only to disappear without trace. "Like the keys on a piano, this book was played upon by many people," he writes in a preface. The result sadly lacks the rich tones of a Steinway.

Male fashion Mourning dress

MEN IN BLACK. By John Harvey. Reaktion Books; 280 pages; £19.95

BLACK has been an important colour in men's clothing throughout history, much more so than in women's. At certain periods in European history black even became the prevailing male colour. The symbolic value of black in this connection is both inky and potent, going well beyond the normal expression of grief and common courtesy toward death.

Male authority, male cruelty and malice; male hypocrisy and depravity, but also male self-discipline and surrender to duty; male reserve and male zeal; male judgment and learning, not to mention male beauty, moral excellence, emotional depth and commercial probity have all at one time or another appeared suitably manifest in black clothes on men.

The sartorial mysteries of masculine black are imaginatively discussed by John Harvey, who focuses his story on black's remarkable climax in the 19th century. In France, England and America, the male figure blackened as that century advanced, causing sensitive literary men to shiver at the spectacle of their sex in universal mourning. Gone were the brilliant waistcoats and pale trousers of the early decades of the century, gone the green and blue coats, the stripes and bright buttons of England's Regency and France's Directoire, gone even the cheerful smocks once seen in the countryside. Urban gentlemen, respectable professionals, shop-clerks and waiters all came to wear black, day or night, followed by farm labourers and tradesmen in rural towns and villages. Everywhere men

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were wearing the colour of loss and death, while the vital enterprises of imperial and commercial expansion, along with political and social reform, were churning and booming. What was going on?

Mr Harvey's explanation starts with the blackness of puritanical renunciation, which he believes was commonly linked to clerical and, later, financial acumen, as if God smiled on the accumulation of riches by frowning on their enjoyment. But, if tense and righteous Christian virtue was one prevailing spirit behind the infinitude of black frock coats, there must also have been loving and generous men who mourned that fact, together with morose wretches who suffered from it, all of whom were wearing their black with a difference.

Sure enough, Mr Harvey soon brings to bear Dickens's motley cast of black-clad men (and some women), well explored against the smoke and fog of Victorian London. He has delved here before in a wonderful book published in 1970, "Victorian Novelists and their Illustrators", where he argued that black-and-white illustration confirmed in printer's ink the darker spirit of the age: the widespread dread that lurked behind the precarious wealth, the heady progress and the ferocious decorum.

Now, however, Mr Harvey aims to explain more generally the insistence of black in the bodily imagery of masculine power. He notes, for example, that at crucial periods in history troupes of men with a shared purpose have cloaked the diversity of class and personality behind a uniform refusal of tint. Whether that purpose was brutally physical or spiritual and moral, an impersonal black garb indicated personal submission to the common will.

Deep grief in high places has at times set the fashion and usurped the moral high ground. The sorrowing black assumed by Philip the Good of Burgundy, Philip II of

Spain or Catherine de Médicis of France was copied both as the black of lofty spiritual privilege and as the black of insolent chic. These emotional shades of black survive in contemporary dress for both sexes, with Satanic black present since the beginning. But the balance has shifted. Mr Harvey rightly observes that black has less punch now for men than for women, and it tends to be worn fashionably by the comparatively powerless or less well-off.

The effects of black or white clothes on the black skin of either sex are not much taken up by Mr Harvey, although he deals

with black skin as a garment (Othello) and with blackened skin (actors playing Othello). He gives examples from Japan and China, Greece and Russia, and deals briefly with Jewish and Muslim black clothes, though African or Indian uses for black male clothing are passed over. This book is nevertheless wide-ranging without being long, and is graceful in tone. Mr Harvey acknowledges that his arguments are useful speculations, impossible to prove. His modesty and intelligence are convincing, and his scholarship, despite a minor slip or two, is impressive.

Fiction in France

Here, there, everywhere

THE winter's literary phenomenon in France is Andreï Makine's "Le Testament Français". A bolt from beyond the Urals, this novel by an almost unknown writer who came to France from Siberia eight years ago won both of the most prestigious French fiction prizes at the end of last year, the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Médicis. Although the Médicis was shared with "La Langue Maternelle" (a similar book by an exile from Greece), "doing the double" was until now unheard of.

Mr Makine has ruffled the smooth surface of French publishing in other ways. The big Paris houses expect to get the big literary prizes in rotation, much as the large French banks once each took their agreed ration of the government-bond business. The Goncourt almost invariably goes to one or other of "Galligrasseuil", the collective name for the Paris "Big Three": Gallimard, Grasset and Le Seuil. But this time for once the Goncourt and the Médicis both went not just to an unknown author but to a pippin-sized offshoot of Gallimard: Mercure de France.

The shock of all this to the tight world of French literary prizes should not obscure the fact that Mr Makine has written an agreeable novel, or rather an agreeable book that hovers between fiction and family biography. "Le Testament Français" is the story of the narrator's French grandmother in self-chosen Siberian exile. The background is Russia's civil war, Stalinism and France, an ever-distant promised land imagined as a vivid place of sensuality and revolt, "where the cobbles of the streets had the extraordinary capacity to rise up as ramps". This is an old-fashioned, linear narrative which tells a classic tale of personal growth. Its weeks high on the best-seller list (see box on next page) may be due as much to the story of the book as to the story in the book: a "Goncourt of the



steppes" by a poor, solitary Russian, ignored by the big boys and now loaded with success.

"La Quarantaine" by J.M.G. Le Clézio, one of the dominant figures of contemporary French fiction, is set on Flat Island, a

quarantine station for passengers on the way to Mauritius. The narrator tells of his grandfather Léon's quarantine, his fight for survival, his isolation on this island-cemetery, and also of the young Léon's awakening to love with Suryavati, a young woman born on the island. Léon himself then becomes a narrator, deciding to break with his biological family and join the family he has chosen for himself.

His story frames that of Ananta, Suryavati's mother, who has come down the Ganges to end up on this island in the Indian Ocean. In some way each narrator finds a meaning to life through telling the story of an unknown, a real or imagined ancestor to whom he lends his voice.

Daniel Maximin is one of the new generation of French-speaking authors from the Caribbean, where French writing seems to be finding exciting new resources. In "L'Île et une Nuit" a hurricane makes its way towards the home of a young Caribbean woman, Marie-Gabriel, who must deal with it as she can. Though put together with strict respect for the unities—time, place and action—this novel is poetically

LE TESTAMENT FRANÇAIS. By Andreï Makine. Mercure de France; 309 pages; FF120.

LA QUARANTAINE. By J.M.G. Le Clézio. Gallimard; 467 pages; FF140.

L'ÎLE ET UNE NUIT. By Daniel Maximin. Editions du Seuil; 173 pages; FF89.

ICI. By Nathalie Sarraute. Gallimard; 182 pages; FF98.

L'ENIGME. By Rezvani. Actes Sud; 234 pages; FF100.

