Ignaz Pleyel was a highly talented composer – as well as publisher and piano-maker – of the second half of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th Centuries. He was born in Ruppersthal on 18 June 1757 and was thus a child of the Maria Theresian – Josephinian – Leopoldinian epoch of history with all of its political complications, a true contemporary of Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714 – 1787), Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809), and Wolfgang Amadé Mozart (1756 – 1791). His many compositions, particularly in the domain of chamber music, are notable for their charm, pleasant musical nobility and richness of thematic inventiveness. Pleyel’s complete ability as a composer finally brought him international recognition.

Mozart’s letter of 24 April 1784 to his father Leopold really says it all: “Then have appeared quartets by a certain Pleyel; he is a student of Joseph Haydn. If you do not know them yet try to obtain them; it is worth the effort. They are very well written and very pleasant. You will immediately hear who is teacher is. It will be a good and happy thing for music, if Pleyel will be able to replace Haydn for us when the time comes”.

Pleyel dedicated these, his string quartets Opus 2 (Ben. 307 – 312) of 1784, to his teacher Haydn as a sign of eternal gratitude with the following words: “Sei quartetti composti e dedicate al celeberrimo e stimatissimo fu suo Maestro il signor Gius. Haydn in segno di perpetua gratitudine”.

In his lifetime Pleyel’s music pleased audiences from St. Petersburg to New York. In those days there was no musician who did not feel inspired by his work; there was no country where his compositions were unknown, and there was no publisher whose wealth was not increased by Pleyel.

That he was beloved is proved just by the many newspaper and magazine articles from Pleyel’s era. In Rita Benton’s thematic catalogue one may read that in Pleyel’s lifetime his compositions were circulated in some 2,000 editions by 250 publishing houses in some fifty cities of Europe and North America. Some of the best-known publishers were: Artaria, Clementi, Forster, Hoffmeister, Hummel, Longman, Naderman, and Schott. Without any doubt he was the most frequently performed composer around 1800, as can be noted from the programs of the best-known concert halls of Europe.

In 1776, when Pleyel was studying under Haydn, Christoph Willibald Gluck gave him the following advice: “Young friend, now that you have learnt how to put notes on paper, all you need to learn is how to erase some of them again”.1

Adolf Ehrentraud is the President of the Int. Ignaz Joseph Pleyel Society in Ruppersthal, the author and director of the Pleyel documentary play The forgotten son of our homeland for 60 participants, chorus and orchestra.
Roots in Lower Austria

Fate decreed that on the very day that the Empress, in a letter of congratulation to Field Marshal Daun, referred to as the “birthday of the Monarchy” because of the victory in which 54,000 Austrians commanded by Daun vanquished 33,000 Prussians under Frederick the Great, Ignaz Joseph Pleyel saw the light of day. In the Ruppersthal registry of births is found an entry for 18 June 1757 that Ignatius Josephus Pleyl, the son of the village schoolmaster, sacristan and chorus master Martin Pleyl and his wife Anna Theresia was born; he was baptized on the very same day with the name Ignatius Josephus Pleyl in the Ruppersthal parish church by Father Jankenberger.

The later composer grew up in conditions of poverty. However, the pedagogically ambitious father already recognized the unusual musical talent of his son in the course of the latter's childhood. The help of a patron, the Hungarian count Ladislau Erdödy (1746 – 1786), enabled the boy to be initially trained under Johann Baptist Wanhal (1739 – 1813) and from 1772 to 1777 to obtain a rigorous education under Franz Joseph Haydn. During the years of his apprenticeship Pleyel lived with Haydn at the Count’s expense, who was in the service of Prince Esterhazy in Eisenstadt and Esterháza (Fertőd).
During this period Pleyel wrote the marionette opera Die Fee Urgèle, oder Was den Damen gefällt (The Fairy Urgèle, or What Pleases the Ladies). This charming work of his youth, a small “Magic Flute”, smoothed Pleyel’s path into the musical world. Following the premiere in November of 1776 in the splendid marionette theatre in Esterháza, this work was also a success in the National Theatre in Vienna.

Soon afterward Pleyel showed his early talent with a symphony in c minor (Ben. 121) for strings, 2 oboes, 2 horns, 2 trumpets and timpani, a symphony in A major (Ben. 122) for strings, oboes and horns, and the cello concert in C major (Ben. 108). Shortly before, the arts-loving Count Erdödy had made his 20 year-old protégé the conductor of his virtuoso orchestra in Pressburg (present-day Bratislava in Slovakia), as well as enabling him to undertake several musical education trips to Italy.

Educational travel to Italy

In the promised land of music important contacts were established with great artists, such as the leading figures of Neapolitan opera of the late 18th Century, Giovanni Paisiello (1740 – 1816) and Domenico Cimarosa (1749 – 1804); he was friends with the composers and violin students of Tartini, Pietro Nardini (1722 – 1793) and Gaetano Pugnani (1731 – 1798). He met and came to appreciate the famous male sopranos Gasparo Pacchierotti (1740 – 1821), Gaetano Gudagni (1725 – 1792), and Luigi Marchesi (1755 – 1829). Pleyel was fortunate to make the acquaintance of Ferdinand IV, the King of Naples (1751 – 1825), who was married to a daughter of the Empress Maria Theresia, Maria Karolina (1752 – 1814). Pleyel’s commissioned work, the opera Ifigenia in Aulide, was a great success, being performed 19 times. The première took place on King Ferdinand’s name day on 30 May in the Teatro San Carlo. The composition is proof of the many facets of Pleyel’s talent. Despite the success this work reposed for 220 years in the archives of Naples. The International Ignaz Joseph Pleyel Society recovered this “dramma per musica” for the musical world, transcribed and translated it, and performed it six times in August of 2005 as a contribution to the Lower Austria Provincial Exposition; Die Fee Urgèle had already been performed on stage in a similar fashion in 2001.

Italy was not merely a catalyst for Pleyel’s musical development; it was also a testing ground for his talent. His compositions were very much liked by the Italians. The
following newspaper report provides us with a valuable hint: “A while ago we have had the pleasure of seeing here and meeting Haydn’s excellent student, Herr Pleyel [...] He is a young, fiery and very able composer; yet full of modesty and very pleasant in demeanour [...] He performed for us some of his quartets and trios, which are quite excellent and original. Nothing, however, exceeds his quintets for two violins, two violas and the bass. One of them, in f minor, is truly a masterpiece. What song, what harmony is present in it”.

Cathedral conductor in Strasburg

By 1783 Pleyel was named assistant Kapellmeister on the recommendation of Prince Louis de Rohan (1734 – 1804); on 13 September 1789, at the death of his predecessor Franz Xaver Richter (1709 – 1789), he rose to be Cathedral Conductor. Pleyel wrote an impressive number of compositions of sacred music, which were unfortunately destroyed during a fire in the cathedral. Pleyel's Strasburg years of 1785 to 1789 were his most fruitful ones. Haydn’s student became the driving force behind the “Concerts des amateurs à la Salle du Miroir”: his colleague from the Strasburg Temple Neuf, Johann Philipp Schönfel (1742 – 1790) conducted the “Moresse Concerts”, Pleyel on the other hand conducted his concerts in the Hall of Mirrors. These activities required the multifaceted talent of an exceptional musician, which Pleyel doubtlessly possessed.

On 22 January 1788 he married Françoise Gabrielle Ignacia Lefevbre, the daughter of a tapestry weaver and cloth-maker. Joseph Etienne Camille was born on 18 December 1788 as their first child. Ever since the revolutionary year 1789 things had become unpleasant in Strasburg. In September of 1791 Pleyel composed the Hymne à la Liberté for the ceremonial proclamation of a new Strasburg constitution. One can hardly imagine its musical effects: by the next day this Gallic-Germanic hymn had crossed the Rhine. The text was provided by Pleyel's friend Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle, who seven months later, following the declaration of war on Austria, composed the music and wrote the text of the hymn later called the Marseillaise.

Concert successes in London

On 15 January 1791 Pleyel lost his position as Cathedral Conductor, when the caps of the Jacobins fluttered on the church spires. While the political situation in France cast a long shadow over Pleyel's musical activities, concert life was flourishing in London, where Pleyel’s teacher Haydn had made his way to. When Prince Nicholas Joseph Esterhazy, called the Splendour-loving (1714 – 1790), who had turned his summer palace of Esterhàza into the “Hungarian Versailles”, died, his son Anton pensioned off Haydn with the sum of 1000 plus 400 florins. Doubtlessly Haydn could have made do with this income, given that the schoolmaster in Ruppersthal was obliged to survive with a meagre 196 florins along with some items supplied to him in kind. The impresario Salomon, born in Bonn in 1745, heard of the death of the prince, hurried to Vienna, hired Haydn for an entire season, and accompanied him on 2 January 1791 to London.
Although Mozart warned Haydn prior to his departure: “You do not speak the English language”, Haydn responded with: “Oh, the entire world understands my language”. By this time Haydn’s favourite student Pleyel was not unknown anymore: at the concerts in Oxford in July 1791 which accompanied the granting to Haydn of the “Doctor in musica honoris causa” degree, which had been arranged by Charles Burney, the programme included two *concertanti* and a quartet by Pleyel. Pleyel also gladly accepted an invitation extended by Wilhelm Cramer for his “Professional Concerts”: he travelled to London on 15 December 1791 with his student Jacob Philipp Pfeffinger. There he was to be presented as a competitor of his teacher Haydn (who was conducting the “Salomon Concerts”), and in the course of these society concerts performed twelve of his own symphonies.

Unpleasant newspaper articles, such as the one of 5 February 1792 printed in the “Gazetteer”, were to be encountered in London: “The former master is already too weak and unable to produce anything new. He has exhausted himself long ago and must repeat himself for lack of mental capacity. We are thus obliged to bring his student Ignaz J. Pleyel to London. Haydn is failing. In reality this wonderful composer is but a weak performer. He may be capable of conducting from a piano, but we have never heard of him being praised as a concert leader. His student Pleyel may have less knowledge, but his works are more elegant and pleasing, and offer melodies more often. He is therefore a far more popular composer”.

Thanks to the good relationship between the two musicians this plan failed. The musical activities of both in London proceeded smoothly in all ways. Haydn’s letters provide evidence of how highly he esteemed Pleyel and how worried he was to be overtaken by his former student: “[...] However, I believe it will soon be an alliance, as my credit is too solidly built. Pleyel upon his arrival proved himself to be so modest, that he regained my love; we are often together, and this honours him, since he knows how to honour his father. We will split the glory evenly and each shall return home happy”. (Letter **)
Mozart on Pleyel: The quartets are very well written and very pleasant. You will immediately hear who his teacher [Haydn] is”.

On 15 February 1792 one could read in the “Times”: “Pleyel's symphony at the end of his first act confirmed the opinion of the general public concerning his great talents as a composer”. Haydn’s student opened the concert series on 13 February 1792 with a work by his teacher, and he gave his last concert on 14 May 1792, setting off for his home in Alsace two days later.

Between the fronts of political interests

With the fees from his London income Pleyel was able to purchase the Ittenweiler estate north-west of Strasbourg, on the eastern foothills of the Vosges range near Dorlisheim in St. Pierre. Haydn, with his London income, bought his house in Mariahilf / Gumpendorf, which today contains a beautiful Haydn Museum and before which Napoleon, during the occupation of Vienna in 1809, placed a guard of honour out of respect for the Master.

During Pleyel’s stay in London the quality of musical life in Strasbourg decreased. The concert halls in which the famous concerts with Pleyel's music had been performed had become arenas for political meetings. With Pleyel's return to his family new fears arose. Due to his foreign origin and his prior association with the clergy he was suspected of being a “dangerous aristocrat”. He was arrested, and under close military guard he composed the eight-hour long cantata La Révolution du 10 août ou le Tocsin allégorique, which presumably saved him from being guillotined in France, but led to a refusal of permission to enter his homeland of Austria, where he was soon forgotten, having become a “persona non grata”. In 1796 his name was included in a list of honour of those composers who has spread the glory of the French Revolution through their compositions.

As early as the 1780s (while in Pressburg) Pleyel had toyed with the idea that it would be a good idea to become “[...] publisher and distributor” of his own future works. The
newspaper *Pressburger Zeitung* wrote: “Unconscionable piracy and corrupt editions of my works have thus far entirely robbed me of the fruits of my labours. Manuscripts of diverse origins have been assembled and combined, and [...] have been printed [...] without my knowledge. [...] These deplorable circumstances have driven me to become active in the future as my own publisher and distributor”.

**Publisher in Paris…**

With the encouragement of his family Pleyel finally decided to become his own publisher. He sold his country estate and moved to Paris with his family in the spring of 1795. Now Viennese classical music was performed in the heart of Paris. Once again the master from Ruppersthal laid a foundation stone, this time for the later so popular “Concerts olympiques”. In 1797 he founded the publishing house “Chez Pleyel” in the Rue Neuve des Petits-Champs, together with his brother-in-law Jean Daniel Schäffer. During the time of its existence this company edited some 4000 pieces of music. Pleyel printed not only works of his teacher Haydn but also those of his contemporaries, such as Beethoven, Mozart, Hummel, and Onslow; above all he strove to make the work of Boccherini known.

In 1801 Pleyel published the “Collection complète [sic!] des quatuors d’Haydn, dédiée au Premier Consul Bonaparte”. The first edition included 80 string quartets, then a supplement with two others, and finally one more. Among the pioneering feats of the Pleyel publishing company was the invention of the pocket score within the series entitled “Bibliothèque musicale”, which began in 1802 with the edition of four symphonies by Haydn, followed by ten editions with the latter’s string quartets. Haydn thereupon wrote to Pleyel, including the following statement: “I am very grateful to you for the unusually beautiful edition of the quartets, which you have sent me through Herr Pichl: because of their beautiful engraving, the paper – and the fact that they are so exact – as well as their general appearance, you will be forever remembered for this”. The year 1797 is also considered the date of the founding of the piano-teaching system entitled “Nouvelle Méthode de Pianoforte, contenant les principes du doigté” (New Pianoforte Method, containing the Principles of Fingering), which he published together with the pianist Jan Ladislaus Dussek (1760 – 1812), famous in his day.

In 1805 the 48 year-old composer was finally permitted to travel to his native country of Austria; he was accompanied by his 16 ½ year-old son Camille, who described his impressions of Vienna in a letter to his mother. Camille was permitted to see his father’s teacher Haydn and had the opportunity to hear Beethoven at the piano. The description of Beethoven’s piano-playing is particularly interesting. Camille considered Beethoven’s playing as “[…] not free of errors […]”; further on he wrote that “one cannot be composer and performer at the same time”.

*New on CD / DVD*
In 1807 Pleyel expanded his business with the piano manufactory “La Maison Pleyel”. With the help of Etienne-Nicholas Méhul and Jean Henri Pape the business of the founder flourished rapidly. Pleyel's pianos with their English action were particularly highly appreciated by the composers of the Romantic period, as for instance Chopin, and later Rubinstein, Grieg or Cortot. From a letter of Pleyel to his son Camille it appears that in 1808 he had already produced fifty pianos; in 1834 a thousand pianos left the manufactory. Pleyel's eldest son first learnt the piano-building trade in London, then in his father's business; he joined the company in 1815 and took it over in 1824.

Camille Pleyel was succeeded by Auguste Wolff (1821 – 1887), a piano virtuoso and professor at the Paris conservatoire, and then by Gustave Lyon (1857 – 1936), who managed the company until 1930. At that time 1,500 families were supported by the “Pleyel” piano company. The piano manufactory was acquired in 2000 by Hubert Martigny.

In January of 1830 Pleyel, who had retired to a country estate near Paris upon handing over the company to Camille, travelled to his son in Paris to give a benefit concert for
the family of a needy musician. The concert was attended by the crème of Paris society and one of the most beautiful that had been heard to date; it became the ground for institutionalising the “Salle Pleyel” in the rue Cadet. Chopin had his début in the Pleyel halls on 20 March 1832; the attraction of the programme was a composition requiring six pianos by Frédéric Kalkbrenner. In December of 1839 the move to a larger concert facility in the rue Rochechouart was undertaken, at the opening of which a piece using eight pianos was given. Since 18 October 1927 the famous Paris musical landmark is located in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré 252. Since 13 September 2006, the concert hall named for the Ruppersthal composer radiates with renewed brilliance and improved acoustics.

When the Englishman Sir Arthur Faulkner visited Pleyel in his country estate – by which time Pleyel was an old man with snow-white hair – and the subject of conversation led to Haydn, Pleyel’s eyes sparkled and, becoming fiery, he cried out: “Haydn was the father of us all. He and Mozart ruled the entire genius of their era. They were the last masters to sense, and to let others sense, that the purpose of music is none other than to touch the heart”.

In 1830 the aging Pleyel was shaken by the short but turbulent revolution of July 1830. On 5 April 1831 he was still able to attend the wedding of Camille and Marie Félicité Denise (née Moke), the former fiancée of Berlioz and one of the most famous pianists of her day. His health worsened rapidly, however, and after a three-month illness he died at the age of 74 in Paris on 14 November 1831. Ignaz Joseph Pleyel found his final resting place in the famous Père-Lachaise cemetery of Paris, alongside other prominent personalities such as Chopin, in a grave of honour. For the past few years an inscription on the base of the memorial column of the grave announces that Ignace Pleyel was born in “Ruppersthal / Autriche”. He left a considerable œuvre behind him: 41 symphonies, six concertante symphonies, eight solo concerts, a nonet, octets, one septet, sextets, 17 quintets, 85 quartets, 64 trios, 64
duos, solo pieces, two operas, *lieder*, cantatas and sacred music.

“*Salle Pleyel*” concert hall in Paris, 2006

References:

1 François-Joseph Fétis, *Notice, La Revue*, XI, p. 345

2 Nachrichten, Auszüge aus Briefen (Aus Italien, im April 1786) [News, Excerpts from Letters (from Italy in April 1786)], *Magazin der Musik*, publ. by C.F. Cramer, II (21 November 1786), p. 968

3 Cited in Marianne Pandi and Fritz Schmidt, *Die Musik zur Zeit Haydns und Beethovens, von der Pressburger Zeitung berichtet* [Music in the times of Haydn and Beethoven, as reported by the Pressburger Zeitung], Haydn-Jahrbuch, Vienna, 1971, VIII, p. 275

4 Arthur Faulkner on Pleyel in 1826, Rambling Notes, p. 28 f.