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New Biographical Data about Piano Makers John Conrad Becker (London) and Yakob Davidovich Becker (St. Petersburg)

Maxim V. Sergeev

*Piano Museum-Workshop by Alexei Stavitsky,
Rybinsk, Russian Federation,
conservatory-tuner@yandex.ru[✉], <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8830-3940>*

Abstract. The biographies, the professional activities, and inventions of John Conrad Becker and Yakob Davidovich (Jacob) Becker — German piano builders who were considered to be relatives, who worked in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Empire in the late 18th and the middle of the 19th century — were virtually never researched until recent times, while the materials published in authoritative referential publications contain erroneous information. On the basis of analysis of archival sources and referential materials, as well as publications in periodical press, in the article the myth is shattered regarding the Beckers' relatedness to each other, and specification is provided of their origins, the years of their respective lives, the circumstances of emigration, as well as the technical and organizational aspects of the contributions of the two makers to the developments of the British, German, and Russian schools of piano manufacturing. The conclusion is arrived at about the significance of the Beckers as figures who were conducive to the transfer of Western European technologies and artisanal practices into the musical industries of various European countries. The obtained results make it possible to view in new light the processes of cultural and technological integration of the sphere of musical instrument building in the 19th century.

Keywords: John Conrad Becker, Yakob Davydovich (Jacob) Becker, piano manufacturing, piano makers, musical instrument building

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Новые биографические данные о фортепианных мастерах Джоне Конраде Беккере (Лондон) и Якобе Давидовиче Беккере (Санкт-Петербург)

Максим Владимирович Сергеев

*Музей-мастерская фортепиано Алексея Ставицкого,
г. Рыбинск, Российская Федерация,
conservatory-tuner@yandex.ru[✉], <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8830-3940>*

Аннотация. Биографии, профессиональная и изобретательская деятельность Джона Конрада Беккера и Якоба Давидовича Беккера — считающихся родственниками немецких фортепианных мастеров, работавших в Германии, Англии и Российской империи в конце XVIII – в середине XIX века, — до недавнего времени оставались практически не исследованными, а посвящённые им материалы в авторитетных справочных изданиях содержат ошибочную информацию. На основе анализа архивных источников и справочных материалов, публикаций в периодической печати в статье развенчивается миф о родстве Беккеров, уточняется их происхождение и годы жизни, обстоятельства эмиграции, а также технические и организационные аспекты вклада мастеров в развитие английской, немецкой и российской школ фортепианостроения. Сделан вывод о значимости Беккеров как фигур, способствовавших трансферу западноевропейских технологий и ремесленных практик в музыкальную индустрию разных европейских стран. Полученные результаты позволяют по-новому взглянуть на процессы культурной и технологической интеграции в сфере музыкального инструментостроения в XIX веке.

Ключевые слова: Джон Конрад Беккер, Якоб Давидович Беккер, фортепианостроение, фортепианные мастера, музыкальное инструментостроение

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Introduction

Despite the significant contribution of the London-based maker John Conrad Becker to the development of the constructions of the piano and the harp, as well as the international renown of Yakob Davidovich (Jacob) Becker, the founder of the Russian piano company “J. Becker” (1841–1918), the history of these outstanding representatives of piano manufacturing has remained insufficiently studied up to the present day. The present-day stage of the factual basis presented in authoritative referential publications outside of Russia is characterized by fragmentary, and contradictory qualities, as well as an

incompleteness of information: the biographical data about the Beckers contain inaccuracies, which complicates to a considerable degree any possible assessment of their contribution to the development of musical instrument studies and shatters the credibility in the historiographic tradition in the this sphere. [1; 2; 3]

Most of the English-speaking researchers consider that the “native of Bavaria” John Conrad Becker worked in London from 1801 to 1841. Further on, the researchers’ opinions diverge: some scholars presume that in 1841 he moved back to his native Germany, while “his son Jacob” moved to St. Petersburg, where during that same year he opened a small manufactory. [1, p. 44] At the same time, other

musicologists are convinced that it was in 1841 in St. Petersburg, “where together they founded the renowned pianomaking business that bore their name.” [3, p. 45]

The question about the possible connection between makers John Becker and Jacob Becker without any confirming testimonies cannot be considered to be in any way solved. The only veraciously established coincidence between them was their common last name, while the assertions about the Bavarian origins of John Becker widespread in a set of referential editions, as well as information about the birth and, generally speaking, about the residence of Jacob Becker in England, are not confirmed by any written documents. With the absence of any archival sources capable of verifying any relational or professional connections between these two figures, such hypotheses are better to be examined with the necessary amount of scholarly caution.

John Conrad Becker

The first mention of the piano manufacturer Becker, who worked in England, appeared as far back as 1782 in the *Musical Almanac for Germany*. In the *Directory of the Best Instrumental Manufacturers* it was written about Becker with a certain amount of pride that this native of Germany became famous in London as “a particularly good manufacturer of fortepianos.” [4, p. 197]

The appearance in London of the keyboard with the surname of Becker during the last quarter of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century seems to be quite logical. The fact is well documented that the German manufacturers of musical instruments emigrated to all the European countries. In Russia keyboard musical instruments

began to be manufactured by Johann Christian Förster, Heinrich Konrad Dammat, and others, and professional manufacturing of pianos in Russia appeared before it did in England or France. [5, p. 74] Towards the late 18th century, the presence of German makers in London was so conspicuous that their contemporaries noted: “the fact that each piano maker [in London. — M.S.] was a German. Germany was always an ‘isle’ of musicians, artists, and instrumental manufacturers of all hues. <...> Their work cannot be called German; neither can it be called English: they form their own school. They export wood out of Germany, just as they do their own workers.” [6, p. 222] Another piece of information about manufacturer Becker refers to 1801: he lived on Princess Street in Soho, and he received a British patent with the number 2551 “for Improvements in Musical Instruments, chiefly applicable to Harps and Piano Fortes.” [7, p. 457]

Despite the coincidence of the last names and the spheres of activity, there are ample reasons to presume that the manufacturer Becker mentioned in 1782 and John Conrad Becker were merely namesakes who worked in London during different time periods. This is testified, in particular, by the publications in the German press appearing after the news of John Conrad Becker having received a patent. The first of them said that “instrumental manufacturer Becker in London” was a native of Hessen, and not of Bavaria. [8] The second mentioned that manufacturer Becker lived in London for only 16 years, during the period of 1795–1811. [9]

Documents from the State Archive of Hanau confirm that Johann Konrad Becker¹ was born on September 11, 1766 in the city of Ensheim, so it follows that in 1782 he was still too young to achieve the reputation

¹ After having moved to England, Becker changed the name Johann to the conventional English form of John.

of a famous manufacturer. It is noteworthy that at a quite close proximity, in Schwanheim another manufacturer of musical instruments and mechanic was born, namely, Johann Christian Dietz (1773–1849). It is possible that Becker and Dietz studied at a workshop of a very talented manufacturer-mechanic, who at that time was still unknown, since they both learned to make pianos and harps.

Additional information about John Conrad Becker is contained in an article published in a Frankfurt newspaper which extols the maker's merits. It turned the attention of the lovers of art and music to "the modest, but quite able manufacturer-mechanic (J. C. Becker is his name)," who even in England, celebrated for its achievements, knew how to succeed." [Ibid.] Mentioning Becker's patent from the year 1801, the author of the article informed that the maker returned to Germany in 1812.

Of special interest is John Conrad Becker's contribution to the development of the mechanical devices that made it possible to regulate the pitches of the tunings in the harps and pianos. His inventions, directed at dynamic changes of the tension of the strings with the help of pedal operation reflect the aspiration towards the expansion of the instruments' performing possibilities. When offering musicians his invention, patented in 1801, John Conrad Becker entertained the following hope: "The inventor therefore is induced to flatter himself, that he shall experience the kind patronage of the professors and lovers of music in general; particularly as, by his peculiar methods and machineries for manufacturing the said instruments, he is enabled to make them more durable in their mechanical parts, and at an expense not exceeding that of the common kind." [10, p. 150–151]

The innovation presented a technical solution reminding Georges Cousineau's invention from 1799, which made use of the pedal for the turn of the wrest-pin, as the result of which,

the performer was able to alter the tension of the strings and the pitch of the instrument's tuning. John Conrad Becker made use of the same idea, but the result was achieved by a *triple shift of the pedal*, which made it possible to raise the pitch a quarter, half and three quarters of a tone. A similar patent of Sebastien Érard, registered at the same time in Paris and London, described the raising of the pitch a half tone up with only *a single shift of the pedal*. [11, p. 7] Becker wrote of his invention: "The Patentee desires to inform the public, that by the above simple contrivances, the pedal harp is rendered the most perfect of any musical instrument whatever; for on it the skilfull musician has it in his power to raise and depress each note at pleasure, and thereby modulate and introduce graces beyond the limits of composition; an object which has long been anxiously desired by the first professors of that instrument; but all former attempts have failed of success." [10, p. 150]

In Becker's invented device meant for the piano, the pedal activated the system of clamps, or rollers located in the non-functional part of the instrument — "above or below the strings," — which made it possible when necessary to decrease or increase the tension of the strings and, hence, to change the pitch correspondingly. Despite the simplicity of the description and the presented diagrams, Becker's invention was incorrectly interpreted by a number of Western researchers, who presumed that Becker proposed dispensing with the traditional piano hammers, replacing them with rollers and thereby disposing of the strike on the strings, which does not correspond to the essence of the patent. [3, p. 45]

Having returned in 1812 to Germany, Becker specialized at first in manufacturing upright pianos, which were "completely satisfactory in all respects." [9] But a special fascination was aroused in him by the "new work of art" — a concert piano with the range of 6½ octaves

(E_1-f^{\sharp}). This instrument, already produced and demonstrated to musicians, was distinct for its twice as large strength of sound, compared to a customary Viennese grand piano, and was capable of reproducing the subtlest dynamic tints — up to a *piano-pianissimo*, and also imitate the sounds of a bassoon, flute or drum. At the same time, the cost of such a piano was considerably lower than that of a Viennese concert piano.

Despite the conciseness of the description, it is possible to reconstruct the crucial features of the grand pianos manufactured by Becker. First, the reported immense strength of sound was connected not as much with the acoustic construction of the body of the instrument as with the utilization of a heavy pushing “English” mechanism, which corresponded to the British tradition of piano building, in contrast to the lighter tossing “Viennese” mechanism. Second, the presence of the appliances for imitation of the flute and the bassoon (*Flötenzug* and *Fagottzug*), as well as a mention of “Janissary music,” indicates at the influence of the model of the piano used for “Turkish” music patented by John Broadwood in 1797, which received broad dissemination in Vienna and St. Petersburg. Third, the range of the instrument (E_1-f^{\sharp}) testifies of Becker’s aspiration to bring together the achievements of various national schools: while the Viennese and French pianos had the ranges of F_1-f^{\sharp} or F_1-g^{\sharp} , and the British pianos ranged C_1-c^{\sharp} , the extension of the keyboard to E_1 indicates at the active implementing into German piano building of the most advanced technical solutions derived from the British school and adapted to the local conditions and demands.

Having lived in Hanau since 1812, John Conrad Becker, in addition to manufacturing pianos, engaged in the building and sales of lathes, and also demonstrated himself as a translator and journalist. In 1815 the second edition of his translation of the English Guide

for Drawing and Perspective was published. [12] At that time, an overly critical review of this work came out, [13] which, nonetheless, did not hamper Becker from continuing his activities as a journalist: in 1816 he wrote an article about the steam engine, in 1818 — about the perpetual motion device, and in 1821, — a text criticizing the idea of utilizing platinum strings in the piano.

The final piece of information about Becker’s professional activities dates to 1828: there was a publication in a newspaper communicating that the maker was able to construct a piano which was proof against the outside environment. The instrument, according to the assertion of the published item, preserved its tuning during transportation and exploitation in conditions of the irregularities of temperature, draughts and high humidity. In order to implement this invention for broad use, Becker offered other makers to join his enterprise “on modest conditions.” [14] Obviously, by that time, the manufacturer did not possess sufficient financial resources or have at his disposal any assistants capable of rendering help to him.

John Conrad Becker died on December 20, 1834 in Hanau. [15, p. 129] This fact evidenced by the documents makes it possible to disclaim with certainty the version about his possible relocation to St. Petersburg, and any attempts to connect John Conrad Becker with Jacob Becker, — who opened a manufactory in the Russian capital, — are baseless and contradict the biographical data discovered by the author of this article.

Jacob Becker

In its turn, the biography of Yakob Davidovich Becker remains an object of scholarly interest, among other things, in connection with a set of ambiguities and hypotheses regarding the maker’s origins. From the late 19th century, American and British researchers of musical

instruments have indicated the precise place of the manufacturer's birth — the Bavarian town of Neustadt an der Haardt. [2; 16, p. 135; 17, p. 265; 18, p. 21] In the Russian official documents, Jacob Bekker was also listed as a subject of Bavaria, however, in Russian musicology, there has existed for around a hundred years a theory of the St. Petersburg roots of Jacob Becker, which was first put forth by the St. Petersburg-based historian Pyotr Stolpyansky (1872–1938) and later embraced by Soviet historian Pyotr Zimin. According to Stolpyansky, in 1800 there lived in St. Petersburg a maker of building musical instruments with the surname of Becker, who competed with his namesakes. [19, p. 169] But the source to which Stolpyansky refers mentions a manufacturer of musical instruments with the surname of *Backer*, and not Becker. [20] During the period Stolpyansky was preparing his work for publication, the surname of Becker had already been very well-known to the Russian musical community of the early 20th century, and the historian interpreted the spelling of Backer as an spelling mistake typical for the early 20th century periodical press, due to which manufacturer Backer was identified with Jacob Becker and the “J. Becker” company. [21, pp. 331–332]

Although Stolpyansky did not develop his presumptions further and did not cite any other proofs, his hypothesis about the St. Petersburg roots of Jacob Becker was not entirely baseless. The preserved materials and information from the periodical press make it possible to assert the existence in St. Petersburg in the first half of the 19th century of certain manufacturers whose activities hypothetically may have been connected with the “J. Becker” company. It has been established precisely that during the years 1814–1845 at the Educative Society for Noble Girls (at the Smolny Institute) there lived the piano manufacturer and tuner S. Becker, who was active at that time.

By the year 1828, the surname Becker had already been mentioned among the best instrumental manufacturers of St. Petersburg, along with such authoritative figures as Johann August Tischner and Christian Schultz, the father of the famous Schultz harpists. However, the lack of any direct biographical connections between this maker and Jacob Becker called for caution in the conclusions drawn by subsequent researchers.

It was obvious that the presumed Bavarian origins of Jacob Becker and his professional activities prior to his relocation to St. Petersburg were bound to have found reflection in the regional German press. An analysis of the sources carried out by the method of *de visu* has made it possible to reveal four piano manufacturers with the surname of Becker working simultaneously during the 1830s. One of them was active in Pomerania, and the three others — in Bavaria, the land of Pfalz, at a relatively close geographical proximity from each other. All three of the natives of Pfalz possessed the initial and surname of J. Becker and almost simultaneously demonstrated themselves as inventors who received patents for perfecting the construction of the piano, but none of them had worked in the town Neustadt an der Haardt.

Only one piano manufacturer bore the name Jacob (namely, Jacob Becker, to whom we are referring here), and he lived in Frankentheil, located only 31 kilometers from Neustadt an der Haardt. In 1839 he received a patent in Bavaria for a new construction of a frame for grand and square pianos. The preserved diagram makes it possible not only to reconstruct the peculiarities of its invention, but also to characterize the national piano building company of the manufacturer, as well as the degree of novelty of the technical solution suggested by him. Above the wrest-pin block there was

a metallic frame-plate to which the bars were fastened connected with five horizontal bars inside the grand piano and four within a square piano, which provided additional sturdiness and prevented the deformation of the wrest-pin block. The three-layer wrest-pin block raised its durability, increased the density of the fitting of the wrest pins and, as a consequence to that, heightened the stability of the instrument's tuning. Becker also applied a nonstandard position for the strings, placing them under the wrest-pin block, with a fastening on the lower ends of the wrest-pins going through the entire wrest-pin block. Although such a solution had previously been implemented in Bartolomeo Cristofori's and Gottfried Silbermann's instruments, in Becker's construction it was perfected by means of utilization of a conical form of wrest-pins and placing the strings under the sounding board, rather than over it.

Special attention is merited by the type of the keyboard mechanism used by Becker. This variety of the so-called "Anglo-German" mechanism presents a synthesis of the "Viennese" mechanism with elements of the spillers, auslesers, fengers, and the lower damper equipped with a lever. The present system, widely known since 1770, received broad circulation in the constructions of Southern German grand and square pianos.

In December 1848, the patent for almost an identical construction of grand pianos was received in Russia by "Bavarian subject Yakob David's son Becker." According to Becker, this invention took him a lot of work and experiments, but the maker himself indicated that previously he had already obtained a ten-year-long privilege from the King of Bavaria. [22, p. 250] The sole difference was that the St. Petersburg-based Becker began placing British mechanisms into his grand pianos, similar to the other manufacturers of the Viennese school who had relocated

to St. Petersburg, [23, p. 25; 24, pp. 256–257] which makes it possible to identify the St. Petersburg-based Yakob Becker and Jacob Becker from Frankenthal as one and the same person.

Towards the moment of Becker's relocation to St. Petersburg in 1841, a situation has developed in the market that was favorable for the entry of a new actor: the previous leaders in this sphere had lost their positions, or had temporarily dropped out of the competitive struggle. Towards that time, there began an apparent decline in the activities of one of the leading St. Petersburg-based piano manufacturers — Johann August Tischner (1874–1852), who was growing old, which created favorable conditions for the appearance of new competitors. [25] Second, that same time marked the beginning of the popularity of another manufacturer of Bavarian origins — Karl Joseph Friedrich Wirth (1800–1882); however, in 1839 a fire erupted at his factory, as a result of which the piano production was temporarily halted, and Wirth turned out to be incapable of satisfying the growing demand for pianos. [26, pp. 24–25] It was possible that these circumstances, along with the immense demand for quality pianos in the capital of the Russian Empire, played a decisive role in the choice of the venue for Becker's activities.

Jacob Becker's relocation to St. Petersburg was stipulated not only by his aspiration towards an expansion of his professional activities and objective conditions of the market, which opened up significant prospects for him, but also a means of distancing himself from his politically compromised relatives. It was all the fault of the sphere of action of his cousin Johann Philipp Becker (1809–1886), a well-known revolutionary, a participant of the democratic movement in Germany and an active participant of the revolution of 1848–1849, the piano manufacturer's relation to whom is not mentioned in any musicological

research work. Johann Becker's radical political views and his participation in the revolutionary struggle inflicted serious damage to the reputation of the Becker family in their native region. In small towns, such as Frankentheil, in the conditions of increased pressure from the government and social censure, Jacob Becker had the chance of ending up in a difficult position as an entrepreneur, who depended on the trust of his clients and a stable business environment. It is characteristic that for the same reason, his younger brothers Franz, Clemens and Friedrich Beckers also moved to St. Petersburg, along with him.

One of the questions present in Jacob Becker's biography that has remained unanswered and has evoked diversions of opinions among both Russian researchers and those in other countries is the establishment of the precise dates of the manufacturer's life. In the publications in the English language, the year of Becker's birth is not indicated at all, while at the same time, the year of his death is varied: in one set of sources it is listed as 1879, [18, p. 21] while in an earlier research work it is listed as 1884. [16, p. 135]

Until recent times, in Russian research works the most convincing year of birth was perceived to be 1811, [21, p. 333] later confirmed to be 1810. [22, p. 249] But the records of the birth of Jacob, the son of David Becker and Rosina Katherine Gerhardt indicate the date to be November 15, 1809, which has been noted in one of the recent works devoted to Jacob Becker's grand pianos. [27, p. 47]

The question of the date of Jacob Becker's death likewise remains a topic of discussion. The first fixed mention indicating the maker's death appeared in the *Peterburgskaya gazeta* [St. Petersburg Gazette] on December 31, 1888. [28] The article mentioned that the "previous owner" died 18 years ago, which logically indicates his death to be in the early 1870s

— the time when the company passed into the ownership of Mikhail Bitepazh and Pavel Petersen. However, according to V. Berezin's dictionary, in 1873 Jacob Becker and his brother were alive and lived in Bavaria. [29, p. 410] In 1874 and 1877 Jacob Becker received in Russia two patents for bringing grand pianos and tuning key to a state of perfection. Still another publication indicated the year of the maker's death as 1884. [30, p. 66] At the same time, in the letter correspondence of Russian composers in the 1870s and 1880s, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Alexander Borodin, Anton Rubinstein, etc. Becker is mentioned not as a company, but as a living person. And in October, 1887 Jacob Becker publicly repudiated in the press the story about the incident with Anton Rubinstein that supposedly occurred in the summer of that year, which bears witness to the fact that Becker's communication with the outstanding pianist continued. As a consequence, it may be asserted that the years of Jacob Becker's life coincide with the period of 1809 — no earlier than the end of 1887.

Conclusion

The specification of the biographic information of John Conrad and Jacob Becker, the circumstances of their labor migration and the peculiarities of their profession activities have an important meaning both for administrating historical justice with regard to their names and the correction of the information about them in authoritative referential editions. These makers, who have developed in a single tradition of piano building, were able to integrate themselves into a cultural milieu that was new to them, adapt to the demands of the local market and actively influence it, promoting their inventions. The Beckers considered the tastes and needs of the musical community contemporary to them, which revealed itself in the choice

of the models of instruments, the types of mechanisms and the marketing strategies.

Research of the destinies and the contributions of the Beckers makes it possible to understand deeper the mechanisms of the formation of various schools of piano building,

the role of piano manufacturers from other countries in the development of the Russian musical industry and the process of transferring technologies, knowledge, and craft practices between Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Empire in the 19th century.

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Information about the author:

Maxim V. Sergeev — Cand.Sci. (Philology), piano tuner and restorer, Senior Researcher, Piano Museum-Workshop by Alexey Stavitsky, Rybinsk, Russian Federation.

Информация об авторе:

М.В. Сергеев — кандидат филологических наук, реставратор и настройщик фортепиано, старший научный сотрудник, Музей-мастерская фортепиано Алексея Ставицкого, г. Рыбинск, Российская Федерация.

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