



March 2009

## President's Remarks

We sincerely thank those members who have responded to our December fundraising request. To date we have received over \$8,500 in donations, which unfortunately is somewhat behind what was raised last year. Again, we heard from active members as well as from some inactive members. To the latter in particular, we realize that many members eventually relocate out of the area, or for health or other reasons become less active, but we hope you will continue to hold interest in MCMA and to recognize that you are *always* a member. For all, we will continue to provide information on our activities, history, and charitable work so we all have a fuller understanding of MCMA and a better appreciation for why our efforts on behalf of this organization are well warranted.

Marty Joyce

## Recent Happenings

Our Annual Meeting was held in January at Montvale Plaza in Stoneham. Elections were held, Chairmen or spokesmen from our various Committees reported on the Year 2008, and recommendations for appropriations were acted upon. President Joyce gave a brief address during which he thanked the Trustees, the Executive Director, and the chairmen and members of our several committees for their efforts and their support throughout the past year. He particularly acknowledged the service of the Board of Government and the Finance Committee in one of the most difficult years our economy and our organization have ever suffered, and concluded that our motto "Be Just and Fear Not" was made for times like this.

## Planning Committee

January 4, 2009 marked the bicentennial of the birth of Louis Braille, the inventor who enabled blind people around the world to enjoy the gift of literacy. Locally, the National Braille Press (NBP) has done much to bring that gift to blind people, and MCMA has been privileged to support that effort.



Founded in 1927, NBP's mission has been to promote the literacy of blind children through braille, and to provide access to information that empowers blind people to function more independently and actively engage in work, family and community affairs.

NBP's publishing program includes original books and periodicals, plus braille editions of popular titles, self-help books (on topics ranging from Cooking to Baby and Child Care to Computer and Telecommunications Access), miscellaneous items such as restaurant menus, and a Children's Braille Literacy Series that takes popular children's books, transcribes the exact text into braille and embosses it onto transparent plastic sheets, then interleaves the plastic braille sheets with the print pages so children and parents or teachers can read together.

Braille production is a complex process that starts with transcription of the written words into braille code, followed with proofreading by blind proofreaders. The electronic version of the document then directs a plate embossing device (PED) to emboss braille dots onto zinc plates, followed by a second proofreading. The plates are used to produce braille copies in high volume on one of three Heidelberg sheet-



fed presses modified for braille production. (For fewer copies, documents are embossed on a braille embosser, which is similar in operation to a computer printer.) Tactile graphics involve different materials and techniques and the use of vacuum presses that melt plastic pages around the template to form the image.

Much specialized equipment is involved in the process, and since we were first approached by NBP in 1972, MCMA has helped to provide, upgrade or repair equipment in virtually every stage of that process. From providing computer software, a 2.5ton stamping machine, a semi-automatic speed punch, a digital ink press and many, many other pieces of equipment, to renovating a PED and supplying repair parts for the high-volume presses, our assistance has helped NBP both

to keep up with demand for their own publications, and to compete successfully for contract braille transcription and pressing projects that have long been a major source of income for them. We were pleased in 2008 to continue our long tradition of support to this fine organization with the purchase of BrailleNotePk equipment used for proofreading braille publications.

One third of NBP's staff has a disability, predominantly blindness, and they fill positions at all levels of the organization. MCMA has supported these particular employees through grants for equipment such as screen readers, braille notebooks, and computers that accommodate adaptive devices. As to the significance of our overall support, in NBP's own words: "Every braille book that we emboss, collate and bind is marked by the generosity of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association."

### **MCMA History**

Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, pianos were imported into this country from Europe or made of European components. But Boston soon thereafter developed into a noted center for the manufacture of pianos. In part, this was enabled by the number of gifted craftsmen in the area, but innovation played a key role as well. In 1825, Milton resident Alpheus Babcock patented a single-piece iron frame for the square piano. This improvement allowed pianos to be made larger, with longer and tighter strings that produced a bigger tone and prevented changes to the sound due to humidity and dampness. Although Babcock met with limited success, he had opened the door for others to improve upon his idea. Small-scale piano shops opened in and around Boston, where cabinetmakers crafted each piano from start to finish before moving on to make the next instrument. Many of the individuals involved were MCMA men, and this article will focus on one of the most successful of them. (*All names of MCMA members are in bold font.*)

**Jonas Chickering**, who was to become America's first renowned piano maker (*called by some the father of American piano making*), was born in Mason Village, NH in 1798. Although his father was a blacksmith, Jonas chose the trade of cabinetmaker, but at age 17 an experience with the restoration of a piano left him "discontented" with simple cabinetmaking, and in 1818 he moved to Boston to apprentice in the craft of pianomaking. In 1823, he partnered with James Stewart to build pianos out of a small shop on Tremont Street.



Stewart soon gave up the business, but Chickering persevered. In 1830 he formed a new partnership to make uprights, this time with **John Mackay**, a former sea captain. [*In 1841, Mackay was lost at sea together with a cargo of rare South American woods destined for the Chickering factory.*] Chickering's operation grew substantially from its modest beginnings. By 1837 he had built a piano factory at 300 Washington Street. When that building burned down in 1852, he set about building an even larger factory at 791 Tremont Street, on the new landfill of Boston's South End. This enormous piano factory, five stories high and 262 feet long, was said to be the largest building in the country, save for the Capitol in Washington. At the center of the building was a large steam engine that powered the sawing and planing machines for the whole factory. Jonas Chickering died in 1853 before the new building was completed. The business (renamed Chickering & Sons) was taken over and very ably run by his three sons, **Thomas, C. Frank** and **George**, each of whom had received under their father a practical training of the highest order. It was one of the largest piano manufacturers in the nation, producing over two thousand pianos a year by the mid-1860s.



Jonas Chickering was an innovator in piano technology with numerous patents, including in 1843 his improved one-piece cast-iron frame for grand pianos which allowed the use of heavier piano wire and improved the stability and tone of his pianos. Chickering began building grand pianos with eighty-five keys rather than the sixty previously used in smaller instruments, invented a new deflection of the strings, and in 1845 devised the first practical method for over-stringing the square piano by setting the strings in two rows rather than one. This method not only saved space but also improved the sound by bringing the bass strings directly over the most resonant section of the sound board, a principle which obtains today in construction of all pianos, both grands and uprights. [*Innovation was to continue under his sons as well, particularly owing to the genius of Frank Chickering, whose research*

*and work led to further improvements in the renowned beauty of the Chickering tone. Frank Chickering was known and acknowledged internationally, and in 1867 was presented France's Imperial Cross of the Legion of Honor, then one of the world's most prestigious non-military awards, by Emperor Napoleon III for services to the art of music.*]

Jonas Chickering influenced other advances as well. He urged Worcester wire-manufacturer **Ichabod Washburn** to improve upon the quality and availability of piano wires then in use. (All musical wire at the time was imported from Europe.) These wires must be exquisitely tempered and thoroughly wrought in order to remain in tune, subjected as they are to a steady pull of many tons. Washburn's

genius was in the invention of machinery, and he experimented for years in perfecting his process until he was able to produce a wire which he could honestly claim to be the best in the world. *[Washburn had amazing success in his business, and accumulated a substantial estate. But he had made it a principle not to accumulate money for the sake of money, and he gave away in his lifetime a large portion of his revenue every year. One of his endowments led to the founding in 1865 of the school that was to become Worcester Polytechnic Institute. Another saved Lincoln College from closing its doors, and led this Topeka school to change its name to Washburn University...even today, the name used by the school's men's athletic teams is "the Ichabods".]*

The excellence of his workmanship and the growing affluence of Bostonians greatly increased the demand for Chickering's pianos, but the popularity of these instruments was much more widespread. A Chickering piano won highest honors at the 1851 World's Fair at London's Crystal Palace, ushering in several decades of American predominance in piano manufacture, and a full iron-frame Chickering concert grand caused a sensation and was awarded the gold medal at the 1867 World Exposition in Paris. Some of the greatest pianists preferred them, including Franz Liszt, who owned two (*his 1867 Chickering grand is on display at the Liszt Museum in Budapest*), and Chickering's became the instrument of choice at concert halls throughout the United States. Presidents Lincoln, Pierce, Buchanan and Theodore Roosevelt kept Chickering pianos in the White House.



Chickering and New York's Steinway were rivals and often dominated the world market, but Chickering had notable competitors closer to home as well. Hallett, Davis & Co. (**Russell Hallett** and **George H. Davis**) produced very fine instruments *[President Garfield kept one in the White House, and they were well-regarded internationally]*, as did Vose & Sons (**James Whiting Vose** and sons **Irving, Willard**, and **Julien**), Wilkins & Newhall (**Levi Wilkins** and **Daniel B. Newhall**), T. Gilbert & Co. (**Timothy Gilbert**) and the McPhail Piano Company (**Andrew M. McPhail**) among others. After the death of the last of the Chickering brothers, the company faced financial problems, and joined with other piano makers in 1908 to form the American Piano Company. The Chickering *name* has survived subsequent mergers and acquisitions, however, and "Chickering" is today a division of Gibson Musical Instruments.

While many of our MCMA predecessors have been notable for their ingenuity and others for their craftsmanship, this was a man who combined those attributes both to create a very successful business and to produce award-winning instruments of superb quality and design. He is one of the many *Mechanics* who have made and continue to make this organization special. Jonas Chickering joined MCMA in 1829, and served as our President from 1851-1853.

[Much of the information in this article was drawn from the book *Goods for Sale: Products and Advertising in the Massachusetts Industrial Age* by Chaim M. Rosenberg.]