



A Short History of Two Pianos

The Nashville Symphony's new Steinways boast an impressive pedigree dating back generations

Stories By ERIC STARR

The early life of Heinrich Engelhardt Steinweg wasn't easy. When the obscure German craftsman-in-training was just 15, most of his family was dead. A few years later, as a bugler in the Prussian army, he fought the French Grand Armée at The Battle of Waterloo. But in 1825, the recently married Steinweg, by then a humble cabinetmaker and fledgling inventor, decided to build a piano. He meticulously handcrafted the instrument and assembled it piece by piece in the kitchen of his home in Lower Saxony. At one stroke, this marked a major advance over the traditional guitars and zithers Steinweg had fashioned during his youth. It also marked the beginning of a new era in piano making.

About 25 years later, Steinweg emigrated to the United States, changed his name to Steinway, and started making pianos with his sons in a loft in lower Manhattan. Steinway had no way of knowing that his pianos would become the gold standard in piano making. Nor could he have known that his family would someday be compared to such master craftsmen as Stradivarius and Guarneri.

Schermerhorn Symphony Center's Laura Turner Concert Hall is now the proud home

of two spectacular Steinway concert grand pianos. One is an American-made Steinway; the other, a newly purchased German Steinway personally selected by French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, who inaugurated the piano's arrival here with three September performances of Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Nashville Symphony.

The nine-foot-long, 990-pound pianos – which officially carry the label of "Model D" – are very much in action this month with two classical series triples featuring leading international pianists Yakov Kasman and returning Nashville favorite Awadagin Pratt. The first series (Nov. 2-4) features Kasman in Prokofiev's Concerto for Piano No. 2 in G minor, while the second (Nov. 16-18) highlights Pratt in Beethoven's Concerto for Piano No. 1 in C major.

Steinway's popularity today among performers is, to say the least, widespread. It's estimated that about 97% of all concert pianists play Steinway instruments, and the company has well over 1,000 official endorsers. Bill Metcalf, president of the Steinway Piano Gallery in Nashville, explains that Steinway pianos "are the only piano that's extremely consistent to a very high level



LEFT: Our German "Hamburg" Steinway

RIGHT: Our American-made Steinway

of expectations. Because Steinway pianos embody musical perfection, artists gravitate towards them."

What makes the Steinway brand so special? Steinway & Sons claims it's all in the manufacturing - or rather, the "anti-manufacturing." These pianos are made slowly by hand using time-honored techniques. Over 100 patents also protect the company's design innovations. According to Metcalf, "We only produce about 2,500 grand pianos a year in New York and 1,500 grand pianos a year in Germany. They're made one piece at a time, and the inner and outer rims are bent together simultaneously. No other company does this. This is one of the secrets to Steinway's perfection."

By the 1860s, Steinway had already sold more pianos than any other American company including Chickering & Sons, Steinway's toughest competitor. This was due to Steinway's breakthroughs in construction and assembly. For example, Steinway's "overstringing" patent allowed for greater resonance and clarity in the bass register, and their pianoforte-action patents allowed for greater musical expression and dynamic range.

According to Metcalf, Steinways are still improving. "The Steinways made today are, without question, the best Steinways ever

made. That's because we keep building on top of our patents. For instance, the accelerated action we now have in the piano was not in the pianos of old. We are dedicated to reinventing the piano based on artist demand."

Still, the supremacy of Steinway – and of traditional pianos generally – isn't entirely unchallenged in the early 21st century. The piano currently faces competition outside the concert hall from digital media.

For example, the makers of the Ultimate Piano Collection from East-West (AKAI) have created a highly sophisticated electronic simulation of the Steinway D through an extensive and rigorous sampling process. The result is a digital piano sound that comes eerily close to the way a real Steinway grand sounds.

Pianists Kasman and Pratt, in interviews with InConcert prior to their Nashville dates, said they aren't concerned about the trend.

A WELL-EARNED THANK YOU

In 2004, in observance of Genesco's 80th anniversary, Genesco, on behalf of its employees, made a generous gift to the Nashville Symphony for the purchase of a fine concert piano. The Hamburg Steinway is fittingly named for the Genesco employees. The purchase of the American Steinway was made possible by generous support from Michael W. Smith and is named for him.



“There are those who enjoy playing with—not on—those instruments,” Kasman said of the digital piano format. “However, our souls remain analogue, not digital, and our souls ask for real sounds and real instruments. It’s like natural food. We might be interested in fast foods, but we will always come back to what is natural.”

Pratt echoed those remarks: “I would never put a limit on what technology is capable of. However, nothing today can reproduce the timbral qualities of the soundboard on a piano. The tactile aspects of the keyboard have also not been duplicated yet. I really don’t

think the piano is in any danger of imminent demise.”

What makes the piano so enduring?

Kasman: “The piano is the orchestra at your fingertips. Piano is a multivitamin compared to a single vitamin. It can be a solo instrument, a concert instrument, or a symphony instrument. It can basically do anything you want.” Pratt adds, “The piano also has a great variety of repertoire written for it. The great composers wrote more for the piano than any other instrument. For this reason alone, the piano will always remain vital.”

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Some historical context: Bartolomeo Cristofori invented the piano around 1700, and while his prototypes borrowed heavily from harpsichord and clavichord technology, there was one central difference: the use of hammers. Harpsichords had used quills to pluck the strings and clavichords featured tangents, or metal tips, to create sound.

Cristofori’s pianos used hammers composed of coiled paper and leather. These hammers struck the strings, and then rebounded, allowing for a rapid succession of notes. The hammers also allowed for greater dynamics. That’s why his invention became known as a pianoforte. (In musical parlance, “piano” means soft and “forte” means loud.)

Some thirty years later, Gottfried Silbermann added a

AMERICAN vs. GERMAN

WHAT’S THE difference between American- and German-made Steinways?

Heinrich Steinway’s eldest son, Theodore, remained in Germany to look after family assets when his father and younger brothers moved



to the United States. Heinrich Sr., William, Henry Jr., and Charles set up shop in New York City. Soon, the demand for Steinway pianos overwhelmed the New York factory, requiring that a second facility be built back in Germany in 1880.

Today, Steinway pianos are made in both Astoria, Queens—a borough of New York City—and Hamburg, Germany. According to Bill Metcalf, president of Nashville’s Steinway Piano Gallery, American and German Steinways are very similar in design and make.

“Mostly,” he said, “they look a little different. For example, the end of the rim of the American piano is squared off and the European piano is rounded off. Traditionally, American Steinways also have a satin finish while the European Steinways have a shiny finish. The finish is just cosmetic, though; it doesn’t affect the sound of the piano.”

The soundboard is arguably the most important part of any piano. Metcalf said that both the American and German soundboards are made from the same material - close-grained, quarter-sawn spruce. As for a sound comparison, Metcalf said, “the American piano is made more to the taste of the American listener, and the German piano is made more to the taste of the European listener. It just depends on what you like.”

Pianists such as Van Cliburn and Vladimir Horowitz preferred the American concert grands claiming that the middle and upper registers were brighter and the bass notes were more pronounced. Edwin Fisher and his disciple, Alfred Brendel, among others, have enjoyed the rounder, less pointed tone of the Hamburg models. Most laypeople would likely not be able to distinguish between the American and German Steinways. In Metcalf’s words, “They are just too similar.”

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damper (sustain) pedal to Cristofori's design. This impressed none other than J.S. Bach who, in the 1740s, publicly endorsed Silbermann's instrument. By the 1760s, the pianoforte had become less of an exotic specimen. It was being featured by a number of composers including Mozart, who wrote sonatas and concertos for the pianoforte.

By the time Beethoven arrived, the piano was a fixture in classical music. However, the modern piano would not appear until long after Beethoven's death. In his day, the range of the piano was about six octaves; this was up from five octaves during Mozart's lifetime. Today, a typical piano has seven full octaves plus two extra notes on top called B8 and C8. Also during Beethoven's era, pedals were far from standardized, and the sostenuto pedal wasn't invented yet. The mechanism on the soft pedal was more sensitive.

"Pianos in Beethoven's day were about half as resonant as the modern grand piano," said Pratt, who is performing Beethoven here. "This affects the way you interpret Beethoven's pedal markings.

For instance, he often wrote extended pedaling, asking the performer to leave the pedal down for a long period of time. You can't read these markings literally because it would create a muddy sound."

In general, the sound of the early 19th-century piano was lighter and more delicate than its modern-day equivalent. Much of this was due to the lightweight case and frame, and the number of strings struck by the hammers. However, given Beethoven's penchant for powerful music, he probably would have enjoyed the extra intensity and volume provided by a modern piano.

But this isn't to say that all modern pianos are alike. On the contrary, pianos can vary greatly. Some have a brighter tone; others, darker. Some project to the back of the hall; others are more subdued. "One of the joys of being a pianist is going into a hall and meeting a new instrument," Pratt said. "Whether it's an American or German Steinway, it's all about discovering the distinctive sound and feel of each piano." 🎹

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PROKOFIEV AND THE PIANO

BY THE TIME SERGEI PROKOFIEV was born in 1891, the modern piano was more or less fully developed. Much of this was due to innovations by Steinway & Sons, who proved at the 1867 Paris Exposition that their instruments were not only more durable than those of their competitors, but also superior in sound quality.

Heavy-hitting pianists, such as Franz Liszt, constantly left pianos in tatters. Liszt often broke strings and severed hammer shanks during performances. Prokofiev was the product of a new, more technologically advanced time. Without a doubt, he had access to sturdier pianos, and this was reflected in the robust nature of his compositions.

"Prokofiev was a great innovator on the piano," said Kasman, who performs Prokofiev here this month. "Even at a young age, he was an accomplished pianist."

Prokofiev proved his talent for piano in 1914 when he won the Anton Rubinstein prize for best student pianist at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Even more impressive, he completed his first and second concertos by the age of 22.

"He wrote piano music primarily for himself," Kasman

said. "He loved to play, and he always premiered his work until he became too old to play."

The second concerto is particularly renowned for its technical challenges as well as its unique mixture of melody and ferocity. "Out of his five piano concertos, this one is the most difficult," Kasman said. "In fact, it is one of the most difficult pieces in all of piano literature! Half of the first movement is an intense piano cadenza. Most cadenzas take up a couple of pages. But in the first movement of this piece, there is a 14-page cadenza. The second movement also features non-stop 16th notes with both hands in parallel motion. Yes, it's very technically demanding."



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