

# Elements of Style

## THE STEINWAY MYSTIQUE

**Some  
pianos  
are like  
members  
of the  
family**



**I**n what my 4-year-old daughter has grandly dubbed the music room of our house stands our proudest possession, a 1906 Steinway S. It's a baby grand, baby, and it's a beaut. With its heavy, fluted legs, gaily carved music stand and funereally black lacquered finish, it seems so fully to embody the Victorian spirit that I sometimes imagine that Queen Victoria herself has taken up residence there by the window. (We Bostonians, I should explain, tend to anthropomorphize our pianos; well through the nineteenth century my ancestors modestly draped a cloth over their pianos to cover up the "naked" piano legs.)

Nothing else in our house seems quite so weighty—even aside from the 550 pounds at which the baby grand tips the scales (and you should have seen the piano movers try to get the little monster in there). But no, I'm talking about metaphysical weight. You know: solidity, grandeur, power. Steinway has packed so much musicality under its lid, with its rock-solid bass and lyrical, singing treble. I'm talking, in short, about the way Beetho-

ven's *Waldstein* Sonata just doesn't sound right on anything else. I'm talking about the Steinway mystique.

Now, if only I could play the thing. No, let me be more precise. If only I could play the thing the way I imagine Heinrich Engelhard Steinweg, the original Steinway, would want me to play the thing. See, I don't play Beethoven on my Steinway. I leave that to my wife. I don't play Mozart, Bach or Brahms, either. I play "The Varsity Drag" on my Steinway. I play Beatles songs, Scott Joplin rags and show tunes from *My Fair Lady*, *Oklahoma!* and *Pajama Game*. Sometimes, I burst into song—though no one wants to be around to hear that.

I can't imagine getting so worked up about a Baldwin or a Yamaha. I mean—come on. The Steinway is about the only major piece of American craftsmanship that is so good, people naturally assume that it is European. But the main Steinway factory has always been in New York and is now located in Archie Bunker territory, in Queens. Steinway's Hamburg, Germany, plant is an offshoot of the American one, a rare case of Europe imitating an American original. Nearly all the major concert pianists play

**Made in the U.S.A.: After 135 years of performance, the Steinway piano this month takes a well-deserved bow.**

Steinways, although Yamaha recently succeeded in luring André Watts away from the Steinway fold for his twenty-fifth anniversary concert. (Steinway got its revenge, though, when *The New York Times* praised Watts's playing but panned his piano.)

Steinway runs what it calls piano banks in major cities around the world, where performers can pick out an instrument to use for free during their concert. New York City is home to the Steinway World Bank—about sixty prime Steinway grands, including Artur Schnabel's longtime favorite, No. 237—located in the basement of the company's fancy showroom on West 57th Street. Artists speak about their Steinways with such rapture, their intimates must get jealous. Vladimir Horowitz calls his Steinway his "faithful and inseparable friend." And Misha Dichter exults: "I thank the heavens for the existence of the wonderful Steinway!"

As splendidly as these fellows perform on their Steinways, Steinway plays *them* pretty well, too. The luster of these pianists gives the Steinway image (continued on page 55)

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(continued from page 47) much of its shine, and Steinway understandably loves to bask in their glow. This year, the company is busy celebrating the latest milestone piano to roll out of the plant, No. 500,000. The case, crafted by the furniture designer Wendell Castle, will have the names of all the so-called Steinway artists laser-carved into the wood, assuming they will all fit. While piano No. 100,000 ended up in the Smithsonian and No. 300,000 in the White House, No. 500,000 will debut at Carnegie Hall at a concert this month and then go on a world tour for two years. After this global junket, the piano will be sold at auction to benefit the nonprofit Steinway Foundation for pianists and composers.

But besides a sure touch for publicity, the company has a first-rate product. While standards dipped slightly when the company was bought by CBS in 1972, the longtime emphasis on the highest quality regardless of price has been resumed by the current owners, Steinway Musical Properties, who acquired the business in 1985. It takes nearly two years to make each piano, which may explain why, after 135 years of operation, the company has only produced 500,000 of them. And also why they can cost up to \$48,000. Each piano requires a lot of wood—Sitka spruce from the Pacific Northwest, mahogany from South America, walnut from Indiana—so much wood altogether that the Queens locale looks more like a lumberyard than a piano factory. Although the firm employs a wood technician to scour the world for the best trees, more than half the lumber fails to measure up when it arrives. The rejected wood used to go to make cuckoo clocks, then to make harps; now it's burned for heat to dry out the wood that does make the grade. Twelve thousand parts go into each piano, ranging from the one-inch strips of maple used in the action of each key to the 340-pound plate of cast iron that forms the piano's backbone. And nearly 400 people work on each piano, many of them second- and third-generation Steinway artisans. More than a hundred patents go into the Steinway, including the technique of "overstringing" the bass strings to move them closer to the middle of the case, where they will reverberate loudest, and the trick of thinning the soundboard down toward the edges to force the sound into the room. These innovations have been widely imitated.

One of the curiosities of Steinway production is that no two Steinways ever sound exactly alike. That's intentional. In fact, the last and most critical phase of the process is to "voice" each piano—to bring out its

unique tonal characteristics, its personality. If the piano is inherently bright, the "voicer" hardens the felt of the hammers to draw out the instrument's brilliance; if the piano is mellow, he softens the felt to develop its serenity.

And this suggests the essence of the Steinway's distinction. These Steinways aren't just pianos. They are practically living beings—each one unique, alert, responsive. And that may explain how they can insinuate themselves into the owner's life. To the world's leading pianists, they are loyal friends. To me, Steinways are family.

Take my Steinway—I mean, our Steinway. (Sorry, dear.) My wife's great-grandfather George Marshall bought the black beauty for his wife in 1906 for \$1,000 as a Christmas present in the palmy days of their life together in Concordia, Kansas. He made his purchase by telegram to J. W. Jenkins' Sons Music Co. of Kansas City, Missouri, then the largest music store in the Midwest. A clerk chose Steinway No. 119,960 from the three baby grands the store had on hand, giving Mr. Marshall "the benefit of our personal liking in the matter," as he explained.

I suspect that Steinway families must be destined to intermarry, for I grew up playing a Steinway myself. It was a Steinway B, No. 135,602. My grandmother had obtained it in 1908 for a concert career that never materialized. Nevertheless, she drove wine corks between her fingers to stretch her hands, succeeding only in giving herself acute arthritis in her later years. When it was finally clear that she had failed in her ambition, she never played her Steinway again, except to trace an occasional arpeggio. My mother acquired the piano, and she sat me down for lessons.

When I left home, I moved on to other pianos. For a while, when my wife and I lived in a small apartment, we owned a bastard upright whose hammers seemed to be tipped with cotton balls, they produced so little sound. My wife, who plays wonderfully, was nonetheless able to pass it off on a buyer by playing a Bach prelude and fugue



A Steinway craftsman installing pegs, some of the 12,000 parts that go into each piano—the assembly of which requires nearly two years of work.



with such a lilt that the woman shelled out the full exorbitant asking price.

So we were grateful when my wife inherited the Steinway. It took a month for the piano to get here from California, and when I sat down at it, I imagined I was meeting a long-lost Marshall relative. I touched the keyboard tentatively. I tried out a scale—C major, the only one I'm sure of. Sounded okay. Then I launched into "The Varsity Drag," and I knew we were family. The bass boomed, the treble soared. I went through my repertoire, then branched out to Gershwin and Cole Porter and played until my fingers ached. What bliss. Home is where the Steinway is.

—JOHN SEDGWICK

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