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When Two Makes Perfect

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By BYRON JANIS

'This is not a Beethoven B flat," announced the renowned pianist Artur Schnabel. It was 1947, and he was in the basement of the Steinway building in New York, where concert pianists come to choose the instrument they'll use in performance. "I will take care of that B flat, sir," replied Bill Hupfer, Steinway's expert technician. Schnabel returned the next day and, after testing the note briefly, smilingly avowed, "Now that's a Beethoven B flat!" Afterward, Hupfer gleefully informed me that he had done absolutely nothing to that note.

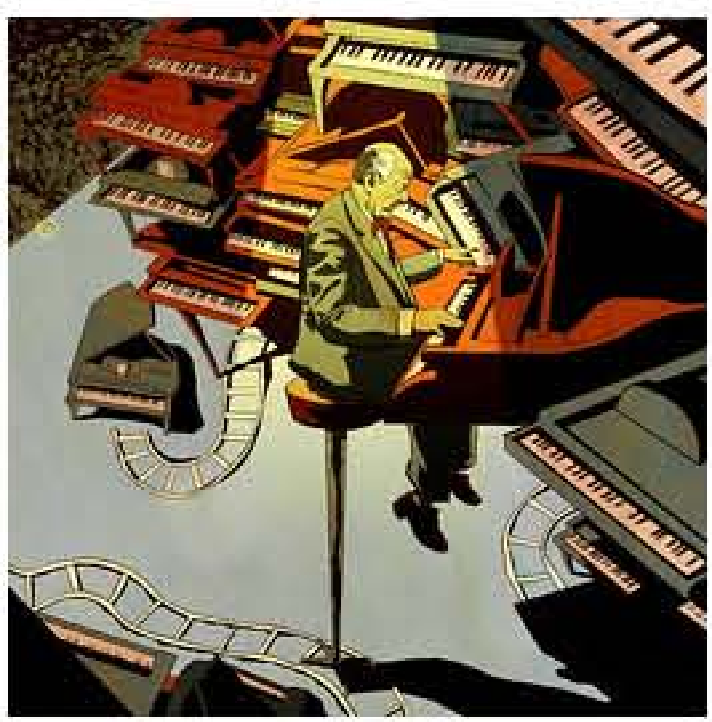
"Come on, Bill," I argued. "You of all people know how differently pianos can sound on different days, and it's not just our perception. You know the slightest change of weather or temperature affects them—that could be the explanation." Hupfer seemed impervious to my argument.

Several weeks later, I was having difficulty deciding between two of the 10 available pianos to take on a South American tour; I had already visited the Steinway basement several times, and was there again. "You pianists are all nuts," Hupfer said. "There's not that much difference between these pianos."

"If I cover the identifying numbers on five pianos," he continued, "and you can tell me three of the five, you win."

I gladly took the challenge. Hopping from one piano to the other, I tried each one several times. Bill did not seem too happy when I identified all five. "Well, Bill, we may be nutsy, but we're not 'nuts,'" I quipped.

No relationship could be more important to a concert pianist than the one with his piano. Finding that right instrument is vital, like finding that right person with whom you feel free to communicate all your deepest feelings.



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Indeed, pianos are not unlike people. Each one has a different temperament. Some are more passive, some more dynamic. Some have a mellow voice, others a more brilliant one. And, like people, some of their actions—their inner workings—are more difficult to handle than others. As a result, no single piano can do complete justice to the music of every composer. All we can do is find the one that is mostly right for the music we're playing. How wonderful it would be if we could use more than one instrument in a recital—a dream not easily fulfilled.

But in 1962, during a seven-week tour of the Soviet Union, an ingenious piano tuner gave me the chance to experience what having more than one piano at one's disposal might be like. And yet this required only one piano.

Piano keys each have three strings that, when struck by a felt-covered hammer, make a musical sound. (The exceptions are the bass keys, which have either two strings or one.) Pressing the soft pedal shifts the hammers so only two of the three strings are touched, giving the piano a much softer tone.

My opening concert of that tour, in Moscow, consisted of three concertos: Prokofiev's Third, Rachmaninoff's First and the only one Schumann ever wrote. The piano that, in its normal state, was fine for the brilliant Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev concertos did not suit the Schumann. Prior to my first rehearsal, the hall's official piano tuner placed a small lever under the keyboard that, when pushed, shifted the hammers a shorter distance than if the soft pedal were pressed, playing on 2½ strings instead of two. That extra half string did the trick. The Schumann was now well served by means of that little lever—neither overly soft nor overly brilliant. Could this become that ideal piano?

The legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz always took two pianos on tour, but not for use on the same program. One was for solo recitals, the other much more brilliant one for playing concertos. No orchestra could ever drown out *that* piano. But generally, such a luxury is impossible due to the huge costs of shipping and the potential for damage. (How fortunate violinists are, who can carry their instruments with them.) But as most pianists have only one piano to work with, we must adapt it to our needs. (Rachmaninoff, for example, used to tune the basses of his piano himself to get the more "growling" sound he wanted.)

Throughout history, the advice of leading pianists has led to many important improvements to the instrument. Frédéric Chopin wanted one with a silvery sound and a light action—keys that pushed down easily and returned quickly. The French Pleyel piano offered just that. For Chopin, a piano was a piano. For Franz Liszt, the piano was an orchestra. He chose the Erard, a French piano with greater power and tone, but still far from the sound he sought. So he invariably asked to have a second piano onstage, because midway through a recital Liszt's powerful playing would result in broken strings and an instrument that was hopelessly out of tune and quite unplayable. Fortunately, he had a backup!

In 1853, Heinrich Engelhard Steinweg came to America, changed his name to Henry Steinway and founded Steinway & Sons, destined to be recognized as the maker of one of the world's great pianos. Its beautiful round tone and sonorous volume had not been heard before. But to achieve that sound required a heavier action, resulting in keys that were harder to push down. That in turn started the long search for a lighter and faster action.

When Henry's successor, C.F. Theodore Steinway, was in Europe in 1873, Liszt asked him for a piano that had the greater volume and sound quality he wanted. The result was Steinway's crowning achievement, the 1876 Centennial, which became the prototype for all future Steinway concert grands. Later, Liszt wrote, "The new Steinway grand is a glorious masterpiece in power, sonority, singing quality and perfect harmonic effects, affording delight even to my old piano-weary fingers."

In 1932, the eminent pianist Josef Hofmann came to America and chose the Steinway as his piano. He decided he wanted an even more responsive action. Dissatisfied with the piano maker's efforts, and being an inventor as well as a musician, in 1940 he designed and patented an "accelerated action," in which the keys are lighter to the touch and return even more quickly than on a standard piano. Aspects of that action were later incorporated by Steinway into their new instruments.

But Horowitz went still further. On his instructions, Steinway's chief technician shaved the piano's hammers so they would be even lighter, and rearranged some parts so that a single note could be repeated in an almost machine-gun-like fashion. When playing octaves and difficult technical passages in big virtuoso works like those of Liszt, Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff, Horowitz could sound almost superhuman.

However, these pyrotechnical feats came at a price. The piano's action was so light it was hard to control. When I was studying with Horowitz in the late 1940s, he told me that it had taken him five years to get used to that action. Still, he reaped its benefits. No one could match his technical feats.

None of these advances, however, could match those of a certain Mr. Milward, who in 1866 was in the furniture business in London. He designed and patented a piano that actually could turn into a couch on rollers, on which "to retire from fatigue of playing the instrument." It had closets for bedclothes and washing up. The stool turned into a workbox, looking glass, desk and small set of drawers. What a pity it was never produced.

Who knows what it would have sounded like, but the pleasure of sleeping in your own bed would have made touring so much more pleasant!

Mr. Janis is a world-renowned concert pianist particularly known for his interpretations of Chopin. His autobiography, "Chopin and Beyond: My Extraordinary Life in Music and the Paranormal," was published last year.

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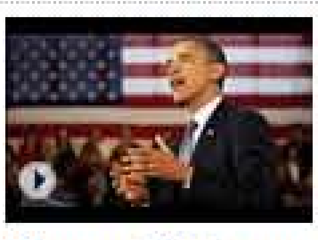

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