

TOP STORIES IN Life & Culture
Want to Buy Shares in the Green Bay Packers?
First Signs of Battle at Alvin Ailey
The Sneaky, Cagey Side of the Holidays

When Two Makes Perfect

Article Comments (1) MORE IN ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Email Print Save Like +1 1 Tweet 12 A A

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.

"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."

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.

"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.

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.



SUBSCRIBE AND GET 8 WEEKS FREE!

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.

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.

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.)

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

JOIN THE DISCUSSION 1 Comment, add yours MORE IN Arts & Entertainment

Like Send Be the first of your friends to like this. Tweet 12 Share +1 1 Email Print Order Reprints

SUBSCRIBE AND GET 8 WEEKS FREE!

IS NATURE CALLING AND CALLING? Ask your doctor if JALYN is right for you. Important Safety Information

Available to WSJ.com Subscribers

Russia Faces New Air-Safety Crisis Commander Seeks Delay in Troop Pullout

House Panel to Vote on Insider Trading

War Over the Digital Wallet

Get your 8 week risk free trial SUBSCRIBE NOW

Most Popular Video

Obama: 'Make or Break Moment' for Middle Class Samsung Notches U.S. Legal Victory Versus Apple The Good Life for Refugee Greek Donkeys

More in Arts & Entertainment

- Defending the Integrity of an Artist's Life's Work
When Two Makes Perfect
First Signs of Battle at Alvin Ailey
A 5-Borough Dance Floor
Rocking the Body, Shaking the Soul

Most Popular

- The Health Risks of Being Left-Handed
War Over the Digital Wallet
NFL Looks to Extend TV Deals
Private Properties -- Photos
Facebook Flaw Exposes Its CEO

Most Read Articles Feed