

Hamburg Steinway Inauguration Concert

Sunday, at 8 pm

September 9, 1990

Convocation Hall, Arts Building

University of Alberta

featuring performances by:

Stéphane Lemelin
Kuniko Furuhata
Alexandra Munn
Michael Redshaw
Joachim Segger
Helmut Brauss
Norman Nelson
Nicholas Pulos
John Thompson
John Kadz
Sheila Garret

Program



Programme:

Sonata Op. posth. A Major (1828)

Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

Allegro
Andantino
Scherzo - Allegro vivace
Rondo - Allegretto

Stéphane Lemelin, pianist

Seven Gypsy Songs Op. 55 (1880)

Antonin Dvorák
(1841-1904)

I chant my lay
Hark, how my triangle
Silent and lone the woods
Songs my mother taught me
Tune thy strings on gipsy
In his wide and ample, airy linen vesture
Cloudy hights of Tatra

(on texts by Adolf Heyduk)

Kuniko Furuhata, mezzo soprano
Alexandra Munn, pianist

Intermission

Ma mère l'Oye (1908)

Maurice Ravel
(1875-1937)

1. *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant*
2. *Petit poucet*
3. *Laideronnette impérative des pagodes*
4. *Les Entretiens de la Belle et la Bête*
5. *Le Jardin féérique*

Michael Redshaw and Joachim Segger, pianists

Sextet Op. 110, D Major (1824)

Felix Mendelssohn-
Bartholdy
(1809-1847)

Allegro vivace
Adagio
Minuetto - Agitato
Allegro vivace

Helmut Brauss, pianist; Norman Nelson, violinist;
Nicholas Pulos & John Thompson, violists;
John Kadz, cellist; Sheila Garret, bassist

ONE-WAY, STEINWAY OR NO-WAY (How to select a concert grand)

"Let's try again: It seems to me, this one is more percussive in the bass, than that one, although...just listen to that beautiful colour spectrum".

"No, no - the other one over there, number 3, is much more balanced in all registers. I don't understand why you always seem to ignore it".

"It has less personality, somehow it speaks with a more neutral non-committal voice".

"If we continue to argue that way, we will never get anywhere, let alone come to a unanimous agreement on which piano we should select".

This half-fictitious conversation will sound familiar to anyone who has ever tried to select a concert grand for a concert hall with very lively acoustics in a storage room with a low ceiling and a reverberation time of less than a second.

To acquire a Hamburg Steinway Concert Grand is the dream of most music departments on this continent, Such dreams might encounter quite a number roadblocks before they can be transformed into reality, not the least of which are the prohibitive costs of acquiring such a first class instrument.

By a stroke of luck and the sympathetic ear of the financial hierarchies of the University, the music department was finally allotted some funds which had been requested over and over again in the budgets of the last ten or more years.

The enthusiasm in the Department in general and in the piano faculty in particular was considerable and immediately plans were made to send a selection committee to all important piano manufacturers on this continent and in Europe.

The problem always encountered when selecting a concert grand is the fact that, unless one is Rubinstein or Horowitz, one very seldom has the opportunity of a choice among a good number of instruments. Some piano manufacturers also will hide the better specimens of their production when potential customers come from a place which by comparison with - lets say - New York, London or Berlin is considered less prestigious in the music world.

We were still in the process of studying the best ways of acquiring a world class instrument, when all of a sudden last December an opportunity to choose from among five Hamburg Steinway Concert Grands--already pre-selected out of twelve from the floor of the factory--presented itself through a dealer in Switzerland. In addition, this unique possibility included a considerable discount from the "regular" price. The decision had to be made fast: Either one-way or no-way!

ONE-WAY, STEINWAY OR NO-WAY *continued*

Since the Steinway factory in Hamburg had already committed all their concert grands until June 1990, the Department decided to take the bull by the horns, accepting the risk that among those five instruments none might be satisfactory. Arrangements with the dealer were made immediately to hold the instruments until the faculty member charged with the risky task of selecting an instrument without the usual possibility of consulting his or her colleagues could hop in a plane as fast as possible and fly abroad.

Largely-hand made instruments like pianos are like children of a family - all the same "tree" but nevertheless rather individual and often surprisingly different. Thus no instrument is alike or has exactly the same characteristics. There are real choices to be made and it is usually impossible to select one which finds unanimous approval. The selection is to a large extent based on the experience and personal preference of the one who is bold enough to accept the job, in which one can be skidding dangerously close to the guillotines of collegial opinion.

My knowledge of the German language contributed to the fact, that I was asked to take the job and put my head on the block. I accepted the risk and am so far still alive.

There are of course some objective criteria that one can apply in order to make the selection of an instrument easier. Among them is the measuring of the down-bearing of the strings on the bridge. A healthy downward pressure is necessary to enhance the resonating quality of the soundboard, which counteracts this pressure through its upward curved design. The maximum effectiveness of this relationship can change when an instrument is suddenly exposed to a dry climate, which might diminish the moisture content in the wood and subsequently the elasticity of the soundboard. The Department therefore decided to build a humidified storage box on Convocation Hall stage, before the instrument arrived.

I had great help from our piano technician Bruce Hettinger in preparing myself for the selection process. He provided me with a sophisticated measuring instrument that made a considerable impression on the dealer in Switzerland, enhancing my aura of expertise. However, when I arrived in Bern, only four pianos were left and the dealer assured me that they already had takers.

Armored with all sorts of practical advice I began my task with the help of an extremely knowledgeable friend from Winterthur and the dealer, who is a trained Steinway technician. I had prepared excerpts from various pieces covering most of the demands that a concert grand might be exposed to during its life time. The excerpts were very short in order to allow me to move quickly from instrument to instrument, mainly testing the various registers and mentioning the results and ratings to my friend who noted them down for each instrument on separate pieces of paper. After two hours of non-stop testing it became clear that one instrument could be eliminated, since its overall sound spectrum was rather dull by comparison.

ONE-WAY, STEINWAY OR NO-WAY *continued*

With our ears now sharpened we could discern that the remaining three instruments had quite distinct characteristics:

#1 Full and round sonorous tone, the overtone spectrum rather oriented towards the fundamentals; a somewhat heavier, but nevertheless responsive touch; the registers quite well balanced. The subsequent measurement of the downbearing showed a rather equal reading. All in all ideal for Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto.

#2 The perfect chamber music instrument; lots of colour and easy to handle; a "speaking, expressive quality"-- my favourite. However, the downbearing readings were very uneven and weak in some areas.

#3 A well balanced instrument; not as colourful as #2 and not as sonorous as #1, but with a very transparent sound spectrum equally balanced in all registers, and a clear, incisive tone. The downbearing measurements were very equal with the exception of the last five tones in the treble.

We had arrived at this intermediate result after another three hours. Now the final elimination had to take place. This took an additional two hours. Meanwhile we had detected a "wolf-tone" in the treble of #1, exactly the pitch "g" which I had encountered as being shrill (probably caused by a non-harmonious overtone pattern) in quite a number of Steinway Concert Grands before. In discussion with the dealer I found out that the only remedy is continuous control through voicing. Since a bad tone might get worse, in particular when the instrument is exposed to continuous normal (ab-) use, we decided to eliminate an otherwise fine instrument at that point.

After aurally re-checking all the low down-bearing areas in #2 we detected distinctly shorter tone durations in the upper middle range of the piano as well as "muddiness" in five consecutive pitches in the bass. Since the middle range is the carrier of most of the melodic activity and therefore one of the most essential areas of the overall sound spectrum, we argued that the downbearing might suffer even more under prairie conditions and major problems might arise in the future. The nature of the acoustics in Convocation Hall also favour an instrument with a clear, sharp sound. Thus my favorite instrument was eliminated. I was contemplating buying it myself, since I have a humidified environment for my own pianos. But somehow I could not readily find the \$65,000 required. Pity! I am sure the dealer did not mind, since all the leftover pianos were already sold the next day anyway.

Thus this decision was made by way of elimination. Thanks to the superb administrative work of Rick Williams, APO, the piano has safely arrived and is now stored properly. It will take about a year to arrive at its maximum beauty, since any piano of that type needs some time to "grow" through playing and subsequent adjustments in voicing and regulation.

I hope that my choice was right and that this grand will fulfil the expectations associated with a Hamburg Steinway Concert Grand.

(Helmut Brauss)