

## MUSIC VIEW

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# The Great Steinway Debate

ble is that this bushing material can absorb moisture, and that leads to sticking keys.

About 20 years ago Steinway in America introduced Teflon bushings. Teflon, a fluorocarbon developed by Du Pont, is impervious to temperature changes. It is also extremely slippery, so that the key action can freely revolve around the brass pins inserted into the Teflon bushings. But this, too, has built-in problems. If Teflon itself never changes, the wood around the bushings does. If the wood contracts, it squeezes the bushings. Result: a tight or even inoperative key.

Steinway admits that there is a problem. But, says Steinway, the advantages are stronger than the disadvantages. There is greater uniformity, in that identical bushings can be manufactured. This leads to a more even piano action — much more than with the old cloth felt, in which there can be significant variations from roll to roll. As with any new drug, though, there can be side effects, and so it is with Teflon. Piano technicians have resisted the change. "Teflon," says William Steinway, the manager of research and development in New York, "demands different methods and procedures for repair and regulation. Once the pianos get out, a technician — who may or may not be any good to begin with — doesn't know how to handle the problem. So that's another black mark against us."

Poor Steinway. Problems abound. Long gone are the days when Steinway could hire apprentices for very little money and keep them at work at low wages until they became superb technicians. Young people today look elsewhere. Basic materials for piano manufacture are not as good, and certainly not as consistently made, as they used to be. There are fewer good technicians around the country to maintain instruments. In the industry there thus is general agreement that while American Steinway still makes the best piano, it definitely is not as great an instrument as it used to be. The Teflon affair is only one of many that has agitated the piano world about Steinway.

Another involves servicing and maintenance. "Our concert grands," explains William Steinway, "are serviced by technicians employed by dealers. Unfortunately not many of those instruments are properly serviced, especially in universities and music schools. No question about it. But where does the responsibility lie? A university owns the pianos, not Steinway. Or a major orchestra may buy a Steinway for the use of soloists. It's not our piano any more. If the owners get in touch with us, we can send our own technicians — from the nearest locality, or from New York if necessary. True, that can be expensive. It's a world-wide problem. We have seen schools handing out diplomas to so-called technicians after a year's course. It's criminal. It takes about eight years to create a good piano technician."

Steinway, incidentally, never has been a prolific manufacturer. Its pianos are all virtually hand-made, and seldom has production gone over 4,000 a year in the United States. The Hamburg plant produces around 2,000. By way of contrast, Baldwin makes about 45,000 a year and Yamaha, the biggest of all, some 250,000.

The Hamburg Steinway is a more traditionally built instrument than its American counterpart, and it uses the old-fashioned cloth felt bushings. It is the position of American Steinway that the greater extremes of temperature in American homes and concert halls, what with central heat-

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Drawing by Robert Grossman

## "Passions are running high" over the merits of German and American Steinways.

ing and air conditioning, demand a different kind of manufacture than European instruments need. It is a fact that before World War II European pianos (and furniture, too) were not kiln-dried and seasoned as American pianos were. But after the war most European piano manufacturers began to match American specifications. Steinway in America force-dries the wood in kilns to 6 percent of moisture content, and so do most European manufacturers these days. New kilns are being put into the Hamburg plant to match the moisture content of the wood in the American pianos. Steinway says that European pianos do not stand up in America — a fact hotly denied by owners of Hamburg Steinways, Bösendorfers and Bechsteins. Many pianists also take issue with Steinway's claim that there is little difference between the American and Hamburg concert grand.

They maintain that the Hamburg is a more precisely built instrument, with a more even action, with ivory keys (some pianists hate to play on plastic keys, even if there is

every indication that nobody could tell the difference in a blindfold test) and more responsive in its attack. Alexis Weissenberg is one pianist who is convinced that American Steinway has deteriorated.

"The United States Steinway used to be magnificent," he says. "In recent years there has been a change. The piano is uneven. It has become more difficult to sustain a singing line. More and more synthetic materials are being used. About four or five years ago it became literally dangerous to play. I was fighting the instrument. I have complained to Steinway. It was a very difficult emotional decision for me to make. The Steinway people understood."

Other pianists are less vehement on the subject.

"There are good and bad American Steinways and good and bad Hamburg Steinways," Gary Graffman says. "Instruments everywhere vary." Misha Dichter, who has

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played the Hamburg piano in Europe, calls it a great piano. "But," he says, "in the Steinway basement in New York in recent years I have found a much better product than I had previously run across. Five years ago the new pianos were not so good. Now they are. The best Hamburg Steinways are on a par with the best American Steinways." (For what it's worth, this writer agrees with Mr. Dichter. Last season brought some glorious-sounding Hamburg Steinways to the New York concert stage, and also some terrible ones. It also brought some glorious American Steinways to the stage, and some terrible ones. Pianos vary as much as human beings do. And it also

**'It seems Steinway does not want to change its ways.'**

depends on who is playing the Hamburg or the American Steinway. Some pianists could not make a real sound if the instrument were made in heaven.)

Not long ago Vladimir Horowitz, who has played only the American Steinway since he left Russia some 60 years ago, tried out a Hamburg Steinway. He liked it but would not think of using one for a concert. "Much lighter," he says. "Much less volume, especially in the bass. It is a very good piano for light things, but for Schumann, Tchaikovsky, no." Of course Mr. Horowitz does not judge pianos by normal criteria — not Mr. Horowitz, who demands a type of brilliance and who can command a sonority unique in the history of piano playing.

André Watts, who played a Hamburg Steinway the other week in New York, seems to be unhappy with all pianos. "There are very few of any make I like," he says. "The Hamburg I played had a nice, even projection. But I have lost confidence in pianos built by Steinway today. Or by any other maker. A pianist's natural inclination is to keep on looking for something better. It might be an American Steinway, or a Hamburg, or a Bechstein. Whatever it is, I want it."

But since American Steinway has not brought any Hamburg instruments into America, what is a pianist who wants one to do?

Enter Ricard de La Rosa.

He is a piano technician who, with his partner, Danta C. Raso, opened a rental and maintenance establishment in San Francisco about 10 years ago, Mr. de La Rosa well knew of the unhappiness with the American Steinway, and he purchased a Hamburg Model D (the concert grand). The Hamburg D, incidentally, costs around \$40,000 here, as against some \$20,000 for the American D, about the same for the Baldwin

SD and \$45,000 for the Bösendorfer concert grand (the most expensive of all pianos). By now ProPiano, Mr. de La Rosa's company, has five Hamburg D's — two in New York, three in San Francisco. He says that just recently the London branch of Hamburg Steinway has refused to sell concert grands to him, and that he is going to have to get them by devious means,

Mr. de La Rosa sent circulars and ProPiano credit cards to pianists. Vladimir Ashkenazy was the first to respond, and was happy with the instrument rented to him. Previously Claudio Arrau had used one of ProPiano's Hamburgs for a West Coast recital and word got around. Pianists on the order of an Arrau or Ashkenazy do not change instruments idly, and there was a rush to the ProPiano quarters. Suddenly the Hamburg Steinway became the fashionable instrument. For the coming season, Mr. de La Rosa has 75 orders for the Hamburg Steinway. He will send an instrument anywhere in the country, and he promises he will provide proper maintenance.

"We can't fill the demand," he says. "But we're here to stay. We'll pull pianos from the West Coast if necessary."

Then why on earth doesn't Steinway, if only to keep its important artists happy, bring in a dozen or so Hamburg instruments and make them available to any artist who wants them? After all, it's the same company.

But, it seems, a conservative company like Steinway does not want to change its way of doing things. The Hamburg branch was opened in 1880. At that time it was decided that the Hamburg plant, and also its London office, would take care of Europe. The Western Hemisphere was reserved for American Steinway. That is the way it was, and that apparently is the way Steinway & Sons wants it to remain.

"We have two factories with two markets," says Henry Steinway, chairman of the board, "and they shouldn't be mixed up."

There are those who believe that only pride is keeping the Hamburg Steinway out of the American market. "Steinway for years made the world's best piano," said one experienced observer the other week. "Through the years they have become arrogant. Bringing in the Hamburg Steinway would be tantamount to an admission that the American piano was perhaps not as good. So they won't do it."

Steinway officials, however, say they are studying the situation. "It is something new," said Peter Perez, the Steinway president, "and it has never previously arisen. We have no set policy about anything, and we may bring some Hamburg instruments into our New York basement. We are constantly investigating all problems, constantly testing new materials. Yes, even Teflon. We are looking at improved bushings just now."

Nobody is looking at Steinway's position about the Hamburg pianos more intently than Mr. de La Rosa.

"If Steinway brought them in," he said, "we'd be out of business." ■