

WHICH PIANO SHOULD I BUY?

It might sound like a dream scenario, but choosing a piano can be overwhelming: **John Evans** speaks to three concert pianists to find out how they go about it



I'm considering buying a new piano. I've bought a few pianos in my time and have worked up a range of tests to help separate good from bad. So here I am in a showroom, surrounded by lots of new ones, ranging from budget uprights to super-expensive grands. I am welcome to try as many as I like, says the sales person. I sit at a likely looking instrument and play a few pieces to get some initial impressions.

Showpieces over, I rattle off a few scales, each becoming louder to hear how much dynamic variety the instrument can supply. Next, I strike and hold down random notes, listening to the length of their decay, an indicator of a piano's ability to 'sing'. I play some bass notes, listening for my favourite full-bodied sound; some mid-range ones, listening for a pleasing tonal colour and consistency of sound; and treble ones for a singing, bell-like tone (well, as bell-like as you can expect from a modest upright piano).

I then play a selection of notes very softly to test the piano's ability to generate a sound with the merest touch and then others very loudly, checking for the sound becoming thin and metallic or even 'bending'. Others I play rapidly to check the instrument's mechanical responses and consistency of action. I also confirm to myself that the keys aren't too light – the enemy of tonal control – and that they are capable of

translating varying weights of touch into corresponding levels of sound. Turning to the pedals, I check that when pressing the sustain pedal, the dampers lift off and return quietly and simultaneously.

And then I do the same on a few more pianos because you can't beat back-to-back testing when evaluating instruments. As I know only too well, however, having chosen what you believe is the instrument of your dreams, you can never be certain how it will sound when you eventually get it home.

Whispers and negotiations

At the end of the exercise I wasn't sure I'd found my ideal piano. As I left the showroom I began to wonder how professional pianists asked, perhaps, to advise on a new piano for a venue – or confronted with an unfamiliar instrument on which they must perform or record, establish its capabilities and shortcomings under much greater pressure.

I could leave and find my perfect piano another day. Not so the professional concert pianist who must make do with what they are given to play on the day, or, if they're lucky, choose from maybe a couple of instruments. How





difficult must that be and might there be anything we lesser mortals can learn from their approach to piano selection and familiarisation?

To find out, I discussed the topic with three established concert pianists used to performing and recording on pianos all over the world, beginning with Gabriela Montero. I caught up with the pianist, known for her classical improvisations, with just hours to go before she performed Mozart at the Harris Theatre in Chicago. In fact, after our conversation she was dashing off to get better acquainted with the piano she'd be playing. What is she hoping to find, I asked her?

'It must have the capacity to change, to be flexible,' she replied. 'It must be able to react to every nuance in my touch and create the sound I hear in my imagination. Also, I'm quite a percussive player – it's my background – but I'm becoming very aware of the need for pianissimo and cantabile in music by, for example, Mozart and Rachmaninov. The piano needs to be able to roar but whisper, too.'

For some instruments that's a big ask and to find out whether a piano can oblige, Montero requests a couple of hours alone with it before a concert. It's a precious time during which she probes its musical chops, improvising as well as playing pieces that will reveal its dynamic and expressive potential; pieces such as a Chopin mazurka and the Liszt Sonata.

Inevitably, not all pianos pass the test. 'I'm fortunate

enough that many of the instruments I play are excellent, but ultimately, it comes down to musical taste and not every hall can provide precisely what a pianist likes. If I find a bad piano, I have to go into a kind of negotiation with it, testing it and perhaps making compromises in my playing approach.'

On that point, Montero said she might have to adapt her technique to the instrument. 'I have a large sound and so with some pianos I have to rein myself in to avoid the tone becoming wooden and percussive.'

Her use of the term 'negotiation' suggests Montero is willing to compromise with an instrument. In fact, she describes pianos as being like people. 'Each is so different. You have to coax out the instrument; persuade it to come to you.' However, she does have some straightforward demands, too. 'I don't like too light an action. I prefer a heavy action for the control it affords me. I also don't like an action that is uneven and inconsistent.' What Montero does like is a singing tone but even on this crucial point she told me she is prepared to cede ground. 'I love a singing tone but if the piano is struggling to deliver it, I realise it's up to me to create it.'

Easy (action) does it

For Rustem Hayroudinoff, the second concert pianist I turned to, excessive key weight is his biggest gripe. 'Pianos have undergone a huge revolution in their design and quality but not always for the best,' he said. 'For example, playing a modern grand piano with its heavy action is like driving a car without power steering. It can cripple a pianist especially when, in the stress of a concert, you begin using strength rather than free weight to create your sound. However, too light an action leaves one vulnerable to believing you are great! I am aware, though, that Horowitz's personal Steinway had a very light action and when he was asked about it he replied, "Playing the piano is so difficult, why make it harder?"'

'I have had many disagreements with manufacturers about the weight of their piano actions but on one occasion, when presented with a piano whose action was far too heavy, my complaint was dismissed and they refused to adjust it.'

It should come as no surprise, then, that the first aspect of an unfamiliar piano that Hayroudinoff investigates, is the weight of its keys. The second, is how well regulated the ▶





action is. A particular bugbear, he told me, is loose key pins that can cause the keys to wobble, although overly tight and they can be too resistant.

'A piano has to be properly regulated but some pianists take matters into their own hands. For example, Brendel would delve into the instrument to make adjustments himself. Michelangeli would travel with his own technician, a man who could make a Ferrari out of a Lada.'

Having explored the weight of the keys and the quality of the action, Hayroudinoff, like Montero, next subjects the piano to a series of contrasting pieces calculated to expose the instrument's technical and musical capabilities, as well as its resonance. They include Chopin's *Grande valse brillante*, Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and selected passages from Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 3. Schubert is a good test of a piano's singing quality, he finds, and Scarlatti its clarity and response.

As he plays, Hayroudinoff keeps an ear out for the piano's voicing – how the density of the hammer felts has been adjusted to make the tone warmer or brighter – and in particular, whether the technician has also voiced the hammers in the *una corda* position when the action moves sideways slightly, causing a different area of the hammer head to strike the string.

How to evaluate a piano

In summary, leading concert pianists Gabriela Montero, Rustem Hayroudinoff and Beatrice Rana advise that when evaluating or testing a piano you should:

- Put it through its paces with a range of familiar pieces
- Check its performance at a variety of dynamics
- Beware if you have to adapt your technique to it
- Check the duration or decay of individual notes
- Listen for it having a singing quality
- Check the weight and precision of the action
- Listen for pleasant bass, mid-range and treble registers
- Listen for a pleasant and consistent tone
- Give yourself time and try as many pianos as possible

He also listens to how long notes take to fade away. 'The rate of decay is important to me. On a good, middle of the range Steinway, for example, the decay is impressively long, creating a singing tone. This ability of a piano to "sing" was very important to Horowitz and with his technician he would go to any lengths to make the sound longer. One of their "tricks" was to disturb the tuning a little, a technique Horowitz found made the sound last longer. I don't go that far!'

Other aspects of an unfamiliar piano that Hayroudinoff explores are its tonal colours and ability to project different timbres. 'The treble should be silvery and resonant and not shrill or glassy. I recall playing a piano with a very bright top end. There'd been no time to voice it so I had to use far less weight in the performance.' Elsewhere in the piano's register, he prefers a middle section that is mellow, singing and long-toned and, lower down, a bass that is powerful without being harsh or metallic.

The artist's voice

Concert pianist Beatrice Rana, my third pianist whose fine recording of piano concertos by Robert and Clara Schumann has just been released by Warner Classics, told me she is equally keen to establish the quality of any piano she is about to play for the first time, a desire borne of experience.

'I had entered the Van Cliburn in 2013 [she won the Silver Medal] and was given just 20 minutes to select one piano out of four that I was to play, which was nothing!'

'Schubert is a good test of a piano's singing quality, and Scarlatti for its clarity and response'

Rustem Hayroudinoff





'The environment matters just as much as the piano'
Beatrice Rana

It was very frustrating. Fortunately, although today I usually have a more restricted selection of pianos from which to choose before a concert, experience has taught me what I like and what to listen for so that I know very quickly which piano I want. I have a lot longer to familiarise myself with the instrument, too.'

As part of the selection process she may play the same piece multiple times on each instrument, testing its responses and tone. 'The piano must communicate my idea of sound. It is my voice which, when I play in a concert, allows me to tell what I want to say.'

Like Hayroutdinoff, key weight is also a consideration. 'A light action is hard to control while others are perfect and encourage you to play. However, many actions are too heavy and so are difficult to play. Also, many of the modern pianos I play are powerful enough to fill a large concert hall but I often find myself asking if such an instrument is appropriate for the smaller recital hall I may be playing it in. The environment matters just as much as the piano.'

It appears, then, that evaluating an unfamiliar piano is as challenging a business for professionals as it is for us. I'll draw comfort from that the next time I find myself in a piano showroom. ■



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