

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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CHOPIN'S PIANO BUILT ANEW BY CHRIS MAENE

In 2004 the workshop of Chris Maene made a replica of the first-ever Steinway piano and made a new copy of Chopin's piano.

The Steinway No. 1

In 2004, the Maene workshop received permission, the first in the world, to make a replica of the first-ever (oldest extant) Steinway piano: the so-called Steinway No. 1 Kitchen piano from 1836. It was a success story which was not only captured in a documentary by Bram Crols but which also toured the world as the Steinway No. 1 replica was used by Steinway worldwide for concerts.

For Chris Maene and his colleagues / co-workers this project was a fairytale icing on the cake, a result of 70 years of experience and three generations of Maene family instrument making.

With the Chopin year 2010 in sight, Chris Maene decided to carry out his great dream: the making of a real concert grand. For a great time and up to the present day the Maene family has enjoyed international fame for the making of historic keyboard instruments, but these were mainly harpsichords and fortepianos (the predecessors to the modern piano). The making of a true concert grand requires extra care and tooling, something that is not granted to every instrument maker. Through the growth of the workshop and recent investment in personnel and machinery, this became possible for the Chris Maene workshop.

Chris Maene said, "As an instrument maker as well as collector of historic keyboard instruments (he has a collection numbering 170 plus instruments), the Pleyel concert grand is the ideal transition instrument from fortepiano to Steinway concert grand. For 30 years, my workshop has made replicas of early harpsichords from the 1600s to the Steinway Piano no. 1 from 1836. The Chopin year 2010 is the ideal moment to make my dream come true: to make a concert grand piano."

Chopin and Pleyel

Chopin spent 18 years of his life in France (from 1831 until his death in 1849). In fact, Erard was a large piano manufacturer in France. Despite this, Chopin was always outspoken in his preference for Pleyel. From the 14,000 pianos that Pleyel made in these 18 years, Chopin must have played hundreds (instruments that he received during his stay, those that he had delivered for his concerts, and those he knew through his students and friends), the greatest number of which were small upright pianos (such as Pleyel got to know through Wornum in England), after that square pianos

and in fewer numbers, small grand pianos (of which Pleyel and Broadwood made the mechanisms).

Chris Maene notes: "Pleyel's clients were the people in their salons where their cultural life was played out. Nevertheless these salons are not to be compared with concert halls, and the grand pianos were a great deal smaller than a concert grand. Still, every maker tried to make larger instruments. The point of these prestige instruments was to make the best of the best and to gain publicity for one's brand. In 1842-3, Pleyel made his first two 7-octave concert grands. The oldest surviving concert grand by Pleyel is no. 9726 from 1843, which is classed in France as a "monument historique". In my collection I have an identical concert grand no. 9861 from the same period (this is extensively decorated). For me, the replica of this Pleyel is the ideal instrument with which to display Chopin, because the Chopin concerts today have been moved from the salon to the large concert hall."

Transition from the fortepiano to the modern Steinway

This concert grand by Pleyel in 1843 is the ideal transition instrument from the fortepiano to the modern Steinway. Some of its features are:

- The obvious sharing out/division of the piano into three registers: bass, middle and descant. A modern piano has a homogenous sound from bass to descant.
- The wooden body with its strong supports is much tougher/stronger/sturdier than the fortepianos and can be compared to modern pianos.
- In contrast with earlier fortepianos, the Pleyel concert grand has a metal frame assembled with bars and plates. Through this, stronger strings can be used with more tension which results in greater volume (Modern concert grands have a cast-iron frame, even stronger strings, more tension and greater volume),
- In the case of fortepianos the hammers require of different layers of leather. With the Pleyel has smaller hammers than the modern grand, but they are indeed made of felt. Good felted hammers provide, just as with modern pianos, a more dynamic sound variation between soft (piano) and loud (forte) playing.