

World's most expensive piano is gaining converts

Price tags run to \$409,000 for the 'subtlety, finesse' of a Fazioli

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN
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Paolo Fazioli, creator of one of the world's most expensive pianos, doesn't believe in putting limits on musical artists.

He thinks any professional classical pianist should be able to play one of his Fazioli pianos or a Steinway, Bosendorfer, Yamaha or Bechstein without restrictions.

"We don't have a roster of artists," he said in an interview.

"I always say to all people who like to play our piano: we are not imposing anything. If [they] like our piano, we help them to use our piano. I do not say to them: 'You can't play other pianos.' This is not respectful to the artist. The artist must play what they like.

"Freedom is the most important thing for the artist. Art and freedom are two things that must stay together."

Fazioli was in Vancouver over the weekend to introduce his handmade grand pianos at an hour-long concert at the Sutton Place Hotel featuring pianists Kelly Bao, Tim Zhang and Svetlana Ponomareva.

Fazioli was referring to the practice among the big piano companies of signing a roster of artists to exclusive contracts. Among piano manufacturers, Steinway is the giant with formal associations with an estimated 90 per cent of the 1,400 performing classical pianists.

In the exclusive world of con-

cert grand pianos, Fazioli is the upstart. Since its first piano hit the market in 1981, Fazioli has carved out a market niche as a high-end grand piano loved for the quality of its sound.

Angela Hewitt is a convert. If you go to Hewitt's website, you can see one of the world's leading contemporary interpreters of Bach in front of her Fazioli. She was taken off the Steinway roster in 2002 for buying and playing on a Fazioli.

"The Steinway is beautiful, but it doesn't give you the subtlety or the finesse that you get from a Fazioli," she told the *New York Times*.

Another Canadian pianist who requests a Fazioli wherever he plays is Louis Lortie. He confessed to the *Ottawa Citizen* that both he and "Angela are Fazioli freaks."

Linda Lee Thomas performs on a Steinway with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, but fell in love with Fazioli after playing on one. Comparing it to a Bosendorfer, Thomas described Faziolis as the best pianos being made in the world today.

"It's very exciting to know that someone in the world cares about making an exquisite piano," she said.

Asked why she likes playing on a Fazioli so much, Thomas said: "It's the different sounds that you can get out of it as a pianist. That piano will play softer than any other piano. You can play loud. It



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Paolo Fazioli with a \$171,000 model. "I wanted one piano with sound clear, elegant, powerful . . ."

responds to the touch. It can do anything."

The genial and elegant Fazioli said that when he started thinking about making a piano from scratch in the late 1970s, his initial impulse wasn't to bring the piano home to Italy, where it had been invented.

As an engineer and classically trained pianist himself, he wanted to accomplish something different. He wanted to make a piano that had an "Italian sound and voice." "I wanted one piano with sound clear, elegant, powerful and full of colour. This was my idea."

In 1978 he told his family, who made furniture in a factory in Sacile, northeast of Venice, that he wanted to make a piano. Over the next few years, he assembled a team of acoustic engineers, woodworkers, and piano makers who produced the first prototype in 1981 and unveiled it at an international trade fair in musical instruments in Frankfurt.

The new Fazioli piano created a sensation, he said, because there hadn't been anything new in the world of pianos for several decades.

"Our presence was something that created a shock," he said.

At the trade fair, Fazioli received its first commission from a German client and went on to make seven or eight grand pianos that first year. By 1998, Fazioli was up to 70 handmade pianos annually; in 2008, it expects to make 120.

The entry-level Fazioli grand piano is a five-foot, one-inch that sells for \$86,000.

Fazioli Pianoforti makes the world's largest concert grand piano at 10 feet, two inches. Priced at \$202,000, it is the only piano with a fourth pedal that allows for a pianist to turn down the volume without modifying

the timbre.

Fazioli makes several specialty pianos in different styles and wood finishes. The most expensive is the Brunei, with mother of pearl, semi-precious stones and sequoia burr wood at \$409,000.

In producing the instrument's sound, one of the most important parts of a piano is the sounding board, which in Fazioli pianos is made from red spruce from the Italian Alps. It's the same wood from the forest that was used to make Stradivarius violins.

Fazioli said all his pianos are made from the highest quality wood and materials using the best methods. From the outside, a Fazioli looks like other grand pianos; but on the inside, the inner workings have been redesigned to produce optimum quality sound.

Oddly enough, despite the number of innovations in a Fazioli, most have not been patented.

"There are a lot of things that we invented," he said. "To patent costs a lot of money and it is absolutely not important. People who want to copy, copy."

Last year, Fazioli released what may be the most futuristic looking grand piano ever made: the black and silver M. Liminal designed by NYT Line and Philippe Gendreau.

In October, a Chinese firm started making a knockoff. Fazioli decided it would cost too much to go after the company to stop it.

As far as Fazioli is concerned, the Chinese company might be able to make an imitation Fazioli. But it won't ever be able to make a real one.

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