

Combative vibrations

Venerable Steinway has long been the instrument of choice for serious pianists. But as Italian piano-maker Fazioli lures the likes of Herbie Hancock and Louis Lortie into its fold, it's giving the king of the ivories some stiff competition. **Marsha Lederman** reports

VANCOUVER

When concert pianist Ian Parker tried out one of the Fazioli pianos now available for sale in Vancouver, his hometown, he was impressed. The sound was beautiful and articulate, he says, and he admired the flash of the high-end, handcrafted instrument. But when his positive comments about the experience surfaced as a marketing tool for Fazioli, things got a little complicated.

Parker is a Steinway artist. And just as you wouldn't expect Tiger Woods to sport an Adidas ball cap, or George Foreman to extol the virtues of Weber barbecues, when Steinway & Sons saw Parker's comments employed by the competition, they balked.

You might not know it from polite recital etiquette, but the piano industry is fiercely political. And it's becoming more so as the Italian grand-piano manufacturer Fazioli is perceived by some to be giving Steinway a run for its money producing the piano of choice for the concert stage – and the living room. The race has newly arrived in Canada, where in recent months, Faziolis have become available for sale in the Vancouver and Toronto areas, setting the stage for a cacophonous round of duelling pianos.

"Obviously, pianos like the Fazioli and cars like the Ferrari are something that I want to try," Parker said recently from New York, where he now lives. "But at the end of the day, I want to drive a Steinway."

Parker and Steinway quickly mended their fences, but not all artists have remained so loyal to the concert pianos on which they grew up. Jazz legend Herbie Hancock and famed Canadian pianists Angela Hewitt and Louis Lortie are among those who have jumped ship to Fazioli. That decision comes with a price, say some artists – including being dropped from the prestigious "Steinway artist" list – but they are adamant they choose the instrument with which they make music.

"It's like telling a violinist you're going to play on this instrument, or telling a singer you're going to use this microphone tonight," says Lortie. "It's one's own voice in a way and ... if I want to come in with a Yamaha or a Kawai, I should be allowed to do so."

Fazioli believes speak of the pianos in reverential terms, bordering on cultish.

"This is like the Stradivarius. These are so incredibly rare and so beautiful that when an artist sits down at them, they just melt," says Alan Merriam, whose Oakville, Ont., store began selling Faziolis last year.

"Every well-known pianist in town has been in here to play on these, and there's just such a buzz about them," says Manuel Bernaschek, the enthusiastic Vancouver dealer who used Parker's comments to try to sell his pianos, and who recently staged a media event that involved bringing in a 14-year-old prodigy to play a Fazioli. At his newly opened Showcase Pianos, business is good: Bernaschek had projected he would sell one piano in his first four months. Just over six months



Vancouver's Sherill McCall (with husband, Sam) loves 'the clarity, the tonality' of her new Fazioli. JEFF VINNICK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Musical valley

Fazioli pianos are handcrafted in Italy, using wood from Val di Fiemme, the same valley where Antonio Stradivari collected the spruce for his violins.



TRISH MCALISTER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

later, he has sold five.

As much as pianists might rave about the action, the articulation and the fine craftsmanship – including hinges plated in 18-karat gold – for most players, Faziolis are an inaccessible dream. In Canada, they sell for between \$75,000 and \$400,000. (Steinway grands start at just under \$50,000.)

"I think it's the price to pay for something a little more exclusive," says Lortie, who has a Fazioli at his home in the Laurentians. "Does anybody find it not normal to pay a little bit [more] for a Ferrari?"

Even at that price, Fazioli fans say its rise is reaching a critical stage. "I believe that Fazioli will be the leader within the next three to five years," says Merriam. "It's really a question of follow-the-leader, and as more and more great pianists choose the Fazioli, more and more people that want the very best... will only choose a Fazioli now."

EXCLUSIVITY VS. FLEXIBILITY

Fazioli pianos are handcrafted in Italy, using wood from Val di Fiemme, the same valley where Antonio Stradivari collected the spruce for his violins. The company, established in 1981, is family-run, with about 40 employees. They make 120 pianos annually, each taking about two years to complete.

Established in 1853, Steinway & Sons produces pianos in two locations: New York and Hamburg, Germany. While there has been some criticism of the New York Steinway in recent years (inconsistency is a charge that comes up repeatedly), Steinway is unquestionably the leader for both the high-end home market and the professional circuit, with nearly 1,500 musicians listed as Steinway artists, ranging from Billy Joel to Diana Krall to Lang Lang.

"Steinway artists are pianists who choose to play the Steinway piano exclusively, both personally and professionally,"

according to Peter Goodrich, vice-president, concert and artist activities, with Steinway & Sons. "The affiliation is not a contract, but an agreement through which we will provide the artist with the services of our concert-and-artist program in exchange for using the artist's name in our publicity and promotional activity."

Steinway artists have access to the pianos virtually anywhere they play (there are more than 300 Steinway pianos in North America alone for this purpose). There are also complimentary practice facilities, and sometimes artists can have a piano shipped to their hotel room. All that has to be covered is local shipping and tuning costs, and out-of-pocket expenses.

Anyone choosing to go with a Fazioli, though, has to find one of the rare pianos (if possible), and get it to the concert hall. As a result, pianists spend time establishing relationships with dealers and private owners around the world so that they can arrange to use the piano should they be in town.

Fazioli does not engage in contractual endorsements, according to a company spokesperson.

"For a concert pianist who's engaging in a serious career, there's a trade-off to be made," says Larry Fine, author of *The Piano Book*, the definitive guide for consumers looking to purchase a piano. "Do they want to have the guarantee of at least a reasonably good piano ... available anywhere in the world, plus a little prestige from being named a Steinway artist? Or do they prefer to have the flexibility of playing any piano they want?"

HANCOCK VS. THE PROMOTERS

Hancock insists on playing a Fazioli – even if it's not always what concert promoters want. When he opens the Vancouver International Jazz Festival this June, he will be playing a Fazioli,

even though the festival is co-sponsored by a local Steinway dealership.

He also insisted on playing a Fazioli at last year's Toronto Jazz Festival, which is co-sponsored by Yamaha. For weeks, the festival went back and forth with Hancock's people, negotiating. "We did offer him ... first a Yamaha, then a Bosendorfer [which is owned by Yamaha], then a Steinway and finally we had to source a Fazioli," says the festival's executive director, Patrick Taylor.

"We won't let sponsorship interfere with the programming of the jazz festival. So it was more important to have Herbie Hancock appear, and thank goodness Yamaha's a very understanding sponsor," adds Taylor, who this year has his second request for a Fazioli, from American Geri Allen.

Tom Lee Music, the Vancouver Steinway dealer, says it is not going to cause a fuss over Hancock's piano choice. "It's not a concern," says Richard Howland, spokesperson with Tom Lee. "Artists like Herbie Hancock can ask for any piano they want to play on, and it doesn't affect our sponsorship with the jazz festival." (Tom Lee Music also held a promotional event last month, bringing in its own 14-year-old piano prodigy to play a rare Steinway that had been created to mark the 125th anniversary of the company's Hamburg division.)

Hewitt, the Ottawa-born pianist regarded as one of the leading interpreters of Bach, used to be a Steinway artist – until she bought a Fazioli. "My former German agent had a call a few years ago from the [Steinway] office in Hamburg, saying how distressed they were that I was playing Fazioli in public. When my agent told them I had just purchased a concert grand Fazioli, my name was removed from Steinway's list of artists," Hewitt wrote in an e-mail from Asia, where she was on tour.

"We have never forced a pianist to play the Steinway against his or her will, nor would we ever do that," Steinway's Goodrich responds. "Should an artist feel that another piano can do that for them, and should the artist wish to play and endorse that piano, we do not believe it makes sense for him or her to continue to identify themselves as a Steinway artist." Goodrich adds that Steinway would welcome Hewitt back, should Steinway become her piano of choice.

"Some people criticize Steinway for doing that, being heavy-handed," says author Fine, "but it's a contractual relationship like anything else. No one's having a gun put to their head that they have to become a Steinway artist."

And Parker says Steinway was within its rights to ask him why he was seen to be endorsing a competitor. "I'm a Steinway artist. I've been endorsed by Steinway. So I have to obviously be a little bit careful about what is said about different instruments."

TRADITION VS. THE CONVERTS

With Merriam Pianos in Oakville now selling Fazioli, and Showcase Pianos opening in Vancouver, it's easier for pianists to arrange to have one brought to Roy Thomson Hall or the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts. And the race is on to convince pianists – even non-professionals – to sit down at a Fazioli.

Sherill McCall, a former realtor in West Vancouver, is a convert. "I've played piano for almost 50 years and I've had a number of grand pianos in my lifetime," she said recently from her home. "When I sat down at the Fazioli ... I couldn't believe the articulation and the sound. The clarity, the tonality of the instrument was unlike anything I'd ever heard or played."

After McCall placed her order for a Fazioli, Showcases' Bernaschek travelled to Italy, where he and company founder Paolo Fazioli personally selected her piano. "It's not something that you just go out and buy. It's like the love of your life," McCall says.

While Fazioli devotees (and dealers) say it is poised to be the new market leader, Fine doesn't think so. "It's a great piano. But they make [about] 100 of them a year, and they're never going to exceed what Steinway does just by numbers." Last year, Steinway sold about 3,000 pianos – more than Fazioli has made in its entire history.

Hewitt also believes Steinway will remain the market leader. "Many pianists will continue to play Steinway because it is the 'safe' option. They know it, they have practised on it for years, and they don't want to change.

"I want a piano on which I can get the best musical results and which makes me happy. ... When I play on Steinways, especially the American ones, I see what an unusable instrument it is. So it makes me a little sad that so many pianists work on these instruments and think that it is the best, because there is so much more you can do with a piano."