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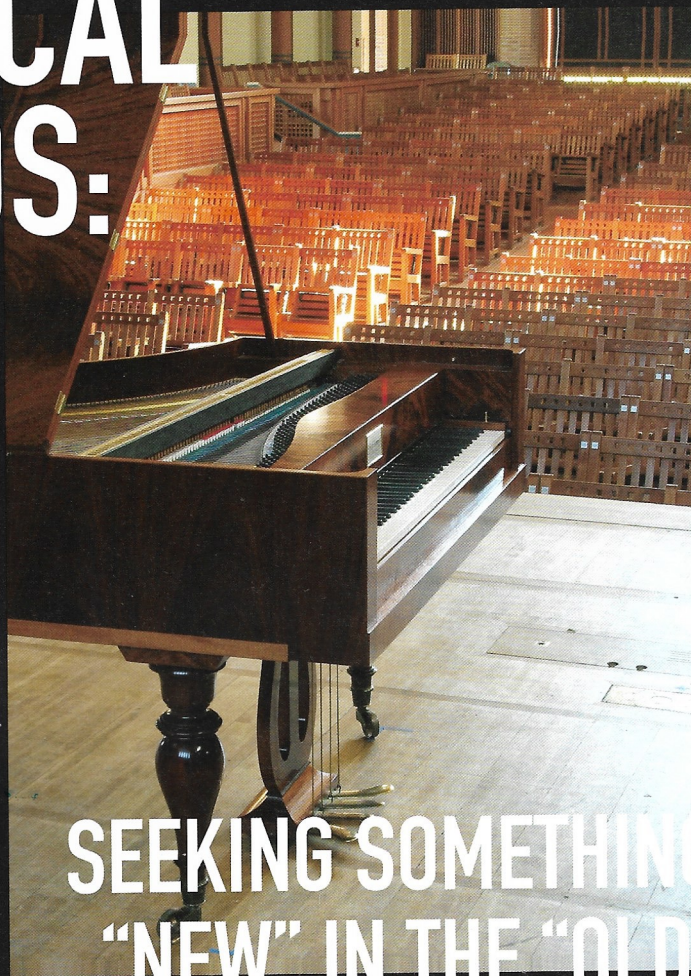
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HISTORICAL PIANOS:



Builders and Restorers Keep Traditions Alive

Clockwise, from top left: A bridge being glued to a 5-octave fortepiano by Rodney Regier; a fortepiano by Rodney Regier onstage; keyboard on an instrument by Paul McNulty

Over the past 30 years, the notion of the “piano” has become progressively less singular than it once was. Today, highly visible artists such as Andras Schiff and Daniel Barenboim regularly perform and record on pianos that pre-date the modern Steinway concert grand—Schiff on his own ca. 1820 Josef Brodmann piano and Barenboim on an instrument newly built by Chris Maene that reimagines the modern concert grand with 19th-century straight-strung technology.

Early-keyboard specialists, such as Kristian Bezuidenhout, on the other hand, appear often on mainstream concert platforms and collaborate with modern orchestras. And perhaps most significantly, there is a growing category of performers—including Alexander Melnikov and Robert Levin, to name but two—who comfortably straddle between the once-separate spheres of historical and modern piano performance. A cursory survey of concert series, commercial recordings, and major piano competitions that now welcome historical pianos points to the public’s interest in seeking something “new” in the “old,” and, perhaps more importantly, an embrace of a diversified culture of the piano. Enabling this remarkable transformation is a core group of builders and restorers working behind the scenes to provide the necessary infrastructure for these new realities.

Yet despite a growing number of universities and music schools acquiring historical pianos—many from the builders featured in this article—to enrich their curriculum, there is little easily available information for the aspiring piano student, teacher, or amateur on how to dip their toes into a field that, although it has grown to become more commonplace, has largely remained opaque and inaccessible to many. This article, in addition to being an introduction to the work of select North American makers and rebuilders of historical pianos, aims to fill this need by serving as a short practical guide for those wishing to explore the field.

What is a “fortepiano”?

The term “fortepiano” has typically been used in our time to denote any piano that pre-dates the modern Steinway type. It is therefore used, necessarily imprecisely, to designate a great variety of pianos ranging from the earliest instruments of Bartolomeo Cristofori’s design from the 1720s to pianos from the mid-19th century. It was adopted in the first instance to differentiate between the then-new revival of “historical” pianos from their more familiar modern counterparts. However, one merely needs to note that the core design features of the modern Steinway have remained essentially unchanged since its crystallization in the late 19th century to appreciate that the “modern” piano is not ahistorical and that the contemporary distinction between “piano” and “fortepiano” is to a great extent arbitrary.

More and more concert programs and recordings, therefore, opt to specify the particular instrument by date and maker(s); in the case of a modern replica of a historical instrument, the names of both historical and modern makers are usually provided. This trend owes to the increasing diversity in the public’s consciousness of the piano and reflects the breakdown in recent years of the former distinction between “pianists” and “fortepianists” mentioned above. A new perception that is increasingly taking hold, especially among younger pianists and students, is that all pianos are situated on a broad historical and geographical continuum and that “pianists” avail themselves of multiple kinds of instruments along this continuum.

It can be roughly said that the 20th-century exploration of historical pianos through the making of replicas started with the pioneering work of Philip Belt (as builder) and Malcolm Bilson (as pianist) in the early 1970s. Bilson commissioned and owned some of the earliest Belt instruments, and a Belt-Walter piano (after Mozart’s personal instrument) was featured in the first complete recording, in the 1980s, of Mozart’s piano concertos on historical instruments with Bilson and the English Baroque Soloists led by John Eliot Gardiner.

Though interest in historical pianos initially lagged behind the modern revival of the harpsichord, the next decades saw a significant rise in the quality, quantity, and variety of instruments being rebuilt and replicated. A crucial technical breakthrough in the field occurred in the 1990s, when several prominent builders extended their model range beyond late 18th-century Viennese pianos to successfully replicate larger six- and six-and-a-half-octave, early-to-mid 19th-century Viennese pianos, which proliferate today. This breakthrough allowed much of the core piano literature from the 19th century to be explored on early instruments. More recently, there have been successful replications of English and French pianos of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, later 19th-century pianos associated with Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms, and earlier 18th-century pianos that predate the rise of the Viennese action.

Types of historical pianos

The aim here is not to give a full history of the piano but to outline briefly the principal types of instruments that are replicated today. By far the most prevalent are Viennese pianos of the late 18th and early 19th centuries by Stein, Walter, Schantz, Streicher, Fritz, Graf, etc. This is in part a result of the concentration of the canonic piano literature and its composers around this time period and the type of keyboard action in use. There are markedly fewer replicas of English grand pianos from the same period (exceptions are the 1798 Longman Clementi & Co. and 1817 Broadwood based on Beethoven’s piano, both made by Chris Maene in Belgium), possibly owing to the greater number of surviving originals that can be acquired in the rebuilt-market.



Photo by Amanda Kowalski



Anne Acker playing a clavichord



A copy of an 1841 Erard piano by Anne Acker

More recently, builders have branched out to replicate pianos from the mid-19th century, including the Chopin-era Pleyel (ca. 1830s and 1840s) and the late-Viennese J. B. Streicher (ca. 1860s), which Brahms praised and one of which he owned. Several makers/researchers—such as Kerstin Schwarz, Thomas and Barbara Wolf, David Sutherland, Keith Hill, and Paul McNulty—have built copies of Cristofori and (the related) Silbermann-type instruments that predate the Viennese action and can be said to relate to the later English action.

Rodney Regier

Rodney Regier has been and remains one of the most productive and visible makers of historical pianos in the United States. His instruments are distinguished by the rare combination of first-rate craftsmanship, solidity, and reliability, and beauty and sophistication of tone. Regier pianos feature prominently in commercial recordings and concert series and are owned by such colleges and universities as Cornell, Yale, Stanford, UC Berkeley, Juilliard, and Indiana University-Bloomington.

Although earlier in his career Regier made both fortepianos and harpsichords—his first formative experience was apprenticing as a college student at William Dowd's shop in Cambridge, MA, which opened up what he thought was possible in the realm of woodworking—he has since devoted his creative efforts entirely to crafting and perfecting three representative models of Viennese pianos: a mid-period Anton Walter five-octave (ca. 1790), a mid-period Conrad Graf six-and-a-half octave (ca. 1824), and a late-period Graf-type instrument (ca. 1835). Regier maintains his workshop in Freeport, ME (owing to his love of the outdoors and the strong tradition of woodworking in the region), connected to his private home and farm. He works with Kris Carr, a master woodworker responsible for much of the casing and decorative elements of the instruments.

A second formative experience was working as an employee of the firm Adlam Burnett in England. During this time, Regier had the opportunity to be

intimately acquainted with original instruments in the company's Finchcocks collection, playing on original Graf pianos for an hour each evening, which provided the aesthetic foundation for what he does today. This experience, combined with his engineering background (Regier trained as a civil engineer at MIT), has led to a working philosophy that doesn't shy away from adapting historical designs to modern methods, technologies, and the different properties of the North American wood species with which he works.

These adaptations are grounded on a firm grasp of the functions of original designs and guided by first-hand immersion in the touch and sound worlds of the two Viennese makers and their pianos. This belief in function at the service of aesthetics informs how Regier responds to the mechanical and acoustical properties of the materials at hand. His aim is less to replicate exact dimensions of original designs than to flexibly recreate their musical properties.

Finally, the third formative element in Regier's work he attributes to his long marriage to the late Shirley Mathews, a giant of the harpsichord and former professor at the Peabody Institute. "Shirley put it all together for me," says Regier. "Through her, I was immersed, as both maker and owner, in her world of the finest performing musicians and artists."

These formative experiences find their culmination in Regier's open-bottom late-Graf-type piano, an amalgamation of insights gained from restoring the Yale collection's Bösendorfer (ca. 1828) and studies of late Graf instruments in the Smithsonian and other private collections. The design, therefore, does not set out to replicate a single existing exemplar; rather, it strives to create an instrument consistent with design language from the era and its traditions. It is a testament to the maker's confidence derived from years of deep immersion and familiarity with not only specific instruments but also an entire historic and regional style.

There is high demand for Regier's instruments, and the shop produces on average two pianos per year. Once the contract and payment are settled, construction time typically takes between 12 to 18 months.

Anne Acker

Builder, restorer, and performing keyboardist Anne Acker holds degrees in piano performance as well as mathematics and computer science; she graduated with Phi Beta Kappa and was a Bell Laboratories and National Science Foundation Fellow at Stanford. But it was her love of keyboard music—and dissatisfaction with the modern piano in providing the expressive resources she searched for—that led to her long-term friendship with the late Margaret Hood, one of the most important women builders of the 20th century.

Acker's activities fill important needs as they cover the spectrum between building new instruments, restoration (including decorative work), rental (including transportation and tuning), repairs and maintenance, and sales (of new and restored instruments). She maintains two **workshops**: one in Montrose, PA, her primary location, and another in Savannah, GA. Having workshops and collections anchored in two places has allowed Acker to service the needs across the entire Eastern seaboard as she pursues her performing activities.

Her Montrose property, the larger of the two, has built-in facilities that offer in-house recording services on instruments

from her collection (as well as a guest suite to accommodate the artist!). Acker's general preferred mode with rentals is that she be engaged as part of the rental agreement so that she may accompany her instrument(s) for the purposes of securing moving, tuning, and regulation.

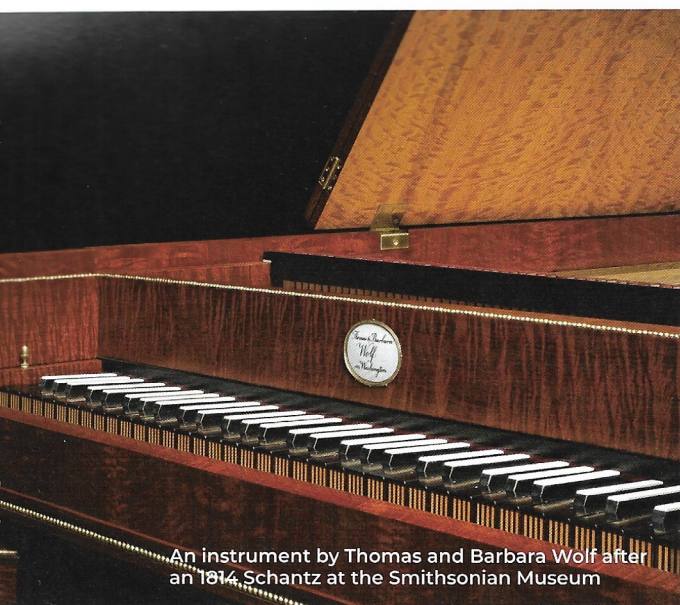
One of Acker's most notable accomplishments as a builder is a copy of a six-and-a-half-octave 1816 Nanette Streicher piano. The project was begun by Hood and left unfinished when she died in 2008; Acker bought the instrument from Hood's husband. As Acker puts it, "A piano researched and begun by a woman, modeled upon a piano designed and built by a woman, ought to be finished by a woman." (Acker is mentioned in "The Woman Who Built Beethoven's Pianos," a story about Streicher by Patricia Morrisroe that appeared in *The New York Times* on Nov. 6, 2020.) Other notable pianos in Acker's collection include a Stein copy (begun by Walter Bishop and finished by Acker), an 1841 Erard, an 1849 Broadwood, and a 1790 Christopher Ganer English square piano.

Thomas and Barbara Wolf

Husband and wife Thomas and Barbara Wolf—he a bassist and she a pianist—began their illustrious and multifaceted



Thomas and Barbara Wolf at the Nanette Streicher model they made for Larry Orkis



An instrument by Thomas and Barbara Wolf after an 1814 Schantz at the Smithsonian Museum

careers training as harpsichord makers with the “Boston School,” apprenticing with (and later working as colleagues of) such giants as Frank Hubbard, Eric Herz, and William Dowd, the last of whom personally saw the Wolfs as carrying forth his approach to harpsichord making and principles into piano making. What distinguishes the Wolfs, who reside in The Plains, VA, from the other makers featured here is their conservation work, which runs parallel to their work as builders. Since the mid-1970s, they have been associated with the Division of Musical Instruments at the Smithsonian Museum, doing research, restoration, and maintenance, as well as creating duplicate keyboard actions.

These experiences, combined with their enterprising spirit, guided them to investigate builders in history who were not already familiar and proven marketable to players and audiences. While others were making instruments after Stein, Walter, and Graf, the Wolfs made pianos after Jean-Louis Dulcken (ca. 1788), Johann Schantz (ca. 1800), and Nanette Streicher (ca. 1815). As they say, “Why make another Walter from the same plans everyone used?”

Among their many contributions to the field is bringing forth a more nuanced appreciation of variations in regional styles, methods, and materials. This was especially significant in the mid-1970s and early '80s, when these regional differences (e.g. between South German and Viennese instruments) tended to be overlooked; at the time, a small number of first-generation makers created pianos that frequently incorporated disparate elements—often out of convenience—into an all-purpose 18th-century “fortepiano.” Moreover, the Wolfs are among the first modern builders to reproduce and document a Cristofori (after a 1722 exemplar to which they had unusual access), and the same curiosity of spirit prompted them to delve into making Silbermann

reproductions more than 20 years ago. Add a Walter to the list and their output is remarkable for its diversity, especially considering the modest scale of their workshop, which, like Regier, currently employs only one other person.

Another outcome of their conservation work is how the Wolfs’ privileged access to original antiques shapes their philosophy in making reproductions. On occasion, they’ve been able to work with the original literally side-by-side with the new product throughout the process, such as when they were commissioned to make a replica action for the Smithsonian’s Dulcken.

“These originals constantly give up information, much like a facsimile of an autograph,” says Thomas. And as they have written elsewhere: “When it was finished, we had some idea what it meant to make a reproduction.” This came after having been professional builders for more than a dozen years.

With research and conservation instincts informing their work, the Wolfs’ instruments convey the musical significance of subtle details of design and construction. Yet with regard to the balance between authenticity and interpretation, Barbara emphasizes that countless decisions need to be made at every step of the process, requiring the builder’s own judgment and good sense. For the Wolfs, any departure from the original, however, must have a rationale. “One need not be a slave to the original, but one ought to have a reason for doing something and be honest about it,” says Barbara.

For these builders, who are in their early 70s, not all projects have equal appeal. When asked what their dream project is at this moment, Thomas replied, without hesitation, “I’d like to make another Cristofori!”

Paul McNulty

Paul McNulty is one of the most significant and prolific makers active today and the only one featured in the limited space here based in continental Europe. A native Texan, McNulty began his musical career as a student of classical guitar at the Peabody Institute. Serendipitous circumstances led him to switch tracks to study piano technology at the New England School of Stringed Keyboard Instrument Technology, which awarded him the coveted guild qualification as a tuning examiner. After apprenticing in various workshops, including those of Robert Smith and David Way, McNulty set up a small workshop in Amsterdam in the mid-1980s.

A desire to source wood species from the Bohemian Forest—the traditional and preferred source of sound-board material for historical Viennese makers—led McNulty to relocate his workshop in the mid-1990s to Divišov, a township about 35 miles southeast of Prague in the Czech Republic. His extraordinary sensitivity to and quest for materiality (extending beyond wood

selection to include leather and other components) manifest themselves in all aspects of his building process. It can be said to be part of McNulty's more intuitive and "expressive" approach to building an instrument and consistent with one of his oft-professed philosophies: He aims for his instruments to be recognizable to their original makers. As he has repeatedly put it, his goal is to achieve a sound so completely recognizable to the original maker that "Walter could walk past my pianos without noticing a difference."

To date, McNulty has produced 266 instruments modeled after all of the representative Viennese makers (Stein, Walter, Fritz, and Graf). In more recent years, McNulty's workshop has grown to employ 8-10 workers who execute various jobs (for instance, there is a designated varnisher). This expansion has freed up time for McNulty to conduct research and broaden his model range to include an 1826 Polish-made Viennese-action instrument by Buchholz, an 1830s Pleyel (both of these associated with Chopin), an 1860s J. B. Streicher (the last manifestation of the Viennese action and an instrument favored by Brahms), and, most recently, a copy of Gottfried Silbermann's 1749 piano, which is famous for having been met with "complete approval" by J. S. Bach, who improvised a three-part rickercar on it at the court of Frederick the Great.

Though McNulty himself is not a trained pianist, this hasn't proved to be a disadvantage: He receives regular feedback from his pianist spouse, Viviana Sofronitsky (daughter of the great Soviet-Russian pianist Vladimir Sofronitsky), who also helps manage the workshop and other business matters. Since McNulty's shop is comparatively larger than those of Regier and Wolf, it has the capacity to produce roughly 15 pianos a year. Orders of core Viennese models, depending on specification, can usually be delivered within a year or sooner.

Of current concern to McNulty—and this echoes similar sentiments from other builders I have spoken with—is whether and how the repository of knowledge that he and other builders of his generation have accumulated can be organized and passed on. "I think finding any historical common practice in the building of pianos has come piecemeal through analysis of artefact, without there being any treatises on the subject," says McNulty.

"To this end, there is an informal and infrequent discussion among restorers and builders, curators, and scholars, gradually adding to one's understanding. The discussion of what to do about the hellfire of bad restorations, and the sense that our generation of builders will take our large informal body of knowledge with us when we go, is an active enterprise."

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Paul McNulty in his workshop in Divišov, Czech Republic