

Steingraeber & Söhne

Bayreuth is a mecca for opera lovers, who flock to the annual Wagner festival that put this small Bavarian town on the map. It is also home to the family-owned piano manufacturer Steingraeber & Söhne, which once produced instruments for Liszt and now makes around 120 handcrafted instruments per year.

Founder Eduard Steingraeber (1823-1906) trained with the celebrated piano maker Nanette Streicher in Vienna. In 1846, Liszt engaged Steingraeber to repair his pianos in Weimar, beginning a close association between the artist and maker that lasted until Liszt's death in 1886. The company moved to Bayreuth in 1852, and since 1871 has occupied a sprawling Baroque palace that houses the Steingraeber workshop, showroom and two small concert halls.

Eduard's son Burkhardt joined the firm in 1892 after studying piano-making in New York with Steinway & Sons. He built the first modern Steingraeber concert grand in 1896 and took over running the company when his father died.

The 10,000th Steingraeber piano was manufactured in 1900, but like all German piano brands, Steingraeber was rocked by the two world wars and intervening depression. Production stopped completely in 1939 and the company's postwar recovery was slow. Their next important milestone came in 1966 with the production of the 30,000th Steingraeber instrument.

The company today is controlled by Udo Schmidt-Steingraeber, who took the helm in

1980 and represents the sixth generation of the family. The lineage is set to continue with his children Alban and Fanny, both of whom work in the company.

Steingraeber has a long history of innovation. In 1885, the company received its first imperial patent for a 'Piano Pedal Function' that reduced the key depth and strike distance for quicker repetition and softer pianissimo playing. Composer Engelbert Humperdinck owned a Steingraeber 200 grand piano that featured this system, which is still available today under the registered name 'Mozart Rail'.

More recently, Steingraeber has collaborated with the University of Bayreuth physics department and Phoenix Pianos in the UK to develop a wide range of new designs and technology. These include the world's first carbon-fibre soundboard, a lightweight lid constructed from aircraft materials, and a patented upright action that uses magnets

for faster repetition. A further innovation that draws on piano designs of the past is Steingraeber's Sordino system, unveiled in 2017, which inserts a thin piece of felt between the hammers and the strings to produce a veiled, vintage sonority.

Steingraeber pianos are increasingly being taken up by leading conservatoires and concert halls around the world. Among the institutions that currently own the company's instruments are Berlin's Philharmonie and Malmö Opera, the Paris Conservatoire, Royal

Swedish Academy, Sibelius Academy and Gnessin School in Moscow. Artists past and present who have been customers of Steingraeber include Wilhelm Kempff, Alfred Brendel, Daniel Barenboim, Cyprien Katsaris, Giuseppe Sinopoli and Kit Armstrong.

CURRENT INSTRUMENTS

Acoustic pianos

Steingraeber grand pianos recall the sonority of Classical era instruments while being powerful enough for modern concert halls and orchestras. As Jeremy Nicholas writes in his book, *The Great Piano Makers*, their 'distinctive, translucent tone' is 'warm and rounded, yet with a bright edge'.



Steingraeber's E-272 concert grand (above) and 138 K upright (opposite)