

Wayne Stuart: 'The piano has been screaming out for a complete rethink over the past hundred years'



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their tonal horizons to 88 keys again. Vibrations give an unexpected dimension to its sound, adding depth and warmth to the lower registers and brilliance in the high registers.'

Stuart & Sons is Australia's only home-grown piano maker. A player and trained piano technician, Stuart has added 10 notes to the bass and 10 to the treble of his newest model. He is now encouraging composers to come forward to experiment with it. The first to emerge (in 2012) was Brazilian pianist Artur Cimirro with a composition that takes in the full keyboard.

The launch recital included the Gigue from JS Bach's Sonata in A minor BWV 965, transcribed and edited by the pianist-composer Nicholas Young to exploit the instrument's full potential. Melbourne composer Alan Griffiths, another booster of the Big Beleura, has been at work on new compositions for the instrument and adaptations of his existing oeuvre.

The additional notes, made possible in part by technical developments in string manufacture, rarely carry melody but are effective when played together at an adjacent

octave. 'The fast transient response makes crescendos very dramatic and exciting for both player and listener,' says Stuart.

The limits of piano wire performance have been pushed by Stephen Paulello Piano Technologies, near Fontainebleau in France, at the urging of Wayne Stuart. A superstrong wire suitable for extreme treble keys in the new piano was first developed in 2012 and toughened up in 2017 to enable the 108-key range. 'The strength of the latest Paulello wire is critical to achieve length, tension and frequency requirements to produce a top B,' says Stuart. 'The next key would be the beginning of the 10th octave and is very close to the maximum tension safety margin. That is why I chose not to add this key, and only aim for nine full octaves.'

Paulello, also a piano manufacturer, installed the high-tech XM wire in his Opus 102, a model with 102 keys. Stuart's Big Beleura was the first to try the latest wire at 108 notes after further work on it by Paulello. The treble keys still produce a tinkling sound at this register but in combination with lower keys produce surprising effects.

As new repertoire for the instrument is being composed, existing works are being amended and adapted to incorporate the highs and lows. The premiere performance included contemporary pieces by Griffiths, edited for the new keyboard. Griffiths says he was pleased to hear the 'visceral energy' of the deep growling bass with percussive left-hand chord clusters. In his adaptations, he was after an 'unworldly sound – primal even – to do what no other piano can.'

Hribar is also rearranging some of his existing repertoire, including his own *Paganini Variations* and Liszt's first *Mephisto Waltz*. His *Walkabout* duet for piano and didgeridoo, partly composed and partly improvised, uses all nine octaves and combines the rich overtones of both instruments. 'I hope many other composers will continue to write for the expanded keyboard,' says Hribar. **IP**

Ashley Hribar: 'I cannot believe anyone who tries this piano will want to restrict their tonal horizons to 88 keys again'



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