

# Strong and silent

Bechstein's Vario Duet system takes silent pianos to the next level with innovative technology and streamlined design. **Josephine Miles** reports

As modern life grows busier and noisier, and living spaces ever smaller, the appeal of silent pianos is easy to understand. Manufacturers have been developing silencing technology for acoustic pianos for decades – Yamaha released its first SILENT model in 1993 – and Bechstein's Vario system has proven to be a key player in the market since its launch in 2012.

Oliver Hutz, CEO of Bechstein Digital, is clearly proud of the new Vario Duet when we meet at Jaques Samuel Pianos in London for a walkthrough of the system's updated design and features. "Technology evolves so fast. Myself and my team are constantly looking for new ideas and asking: What can we do to create a better Vario?"

In a nutshell, the Vario system enables an acoustic Bechstein piano to be played 'silently' with headphones:

when silent mode is activated, a mute rail stops the hammers millimetres before they strike the strings. A sensor system translates the movements of the keys and pedals into an electrical signal which, in turn, is converted into digital sound output via headphones. The system can be fitted to any Bechstein instrument, from a basic upright to a concert grand.

So, what's new? A key development is the Vario app. Hutz says he wanted to tap into the 'ecosystem' of iOS music apps, spanning beginner learning programmes to professional tools for composition, recording and sound design. The Vario app is therefore designed to integrate easily with other music applications alongside its primary function of controlling the Vario system. At the tap of a few buttons, for instance, you can make a recording of your playing and send it to a music notation or sound editing app.

Then there's the streamlined hardware design. The Vario controls were formerly housed in a pull-out touchscreen tray beneath the keyboard, but as Hutz remarks, this was unnecessarily complicated and unwieldy: every time you wanted to operate the controls, you had to turn and open the tray. Now, the hardware comprises a simple box with a power button, USB port, two headphone jacks and volume knob. All other controls are accessed via the app on your phone or iPad – placed conveniently on the music stand. You switch from acoustic mode to silent mode with a simple lever.

It's all about reducing the number of steps required to do things, streamlining the user experience. Hutz points out that your device doesn't need to be plugged in to the piano – it can be connected via Bluetooth – and once you've saved your preferences on the app, you can use the silent system without it. Four pre-set sounds can be activated by pressing the power button, so pianists who don't wish to use the app can still enjoy the benefits of Vario.

The app offers a wide range of tools and features, allowing you to create your own Bechstein piano. Simply select from three grand piano sounds – 'Concert', 'Warm' and 'Practice', all sampled from a C Bechstein D282 concert grand – and adjust the reverberation, resonance and volume. Three reverberation algorithms replicate the experience of playing in a small room, salon or concert hall. The sympathetic resonances and dynamic characteristics of the sound can be customised too: under

*Intuitive: Bechstein's new Vario Duet silent piano and Vario app*



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