

Playing the Field

A round of *The Piano Dating Game* leads to an instrumental decision for the grand star of the Lensic stage

BY MARK TIARKS | PHOTOS GABRIELA CAMPOS

When Joel Aalberts went to New York to buy a grand piano for the Lensic Performing Arts Center, he believed he would be buying a thing. A very large, beautiful, and expensive thing, to be sure, but a thing nonetheless.

It didn't work out that way.

Don't worry — the Lensic does have its sleek new Steinway, but a process the organization's executive director thought would be transactional instead had the compelling drama of a stage show.

Aalberts was joined on the trip by Laura Acquaviva, the group's managing director; Bailey Ostdiek, its marketing manager; and a distinguished guest artist, Jacquelyn Helin, to audition the pianos.

"I was totally surprised by how emotionally involving it was," Aalberts says, "both in New York and when it arrived here in Santa Fe. We weren't just listening to sounds, we were connecting to the character of each instrument."

It was a process that ended up feeling like the adoption of a child as much as it did making a big purchase, he says.

"We all had no more than four hours of sleep, due to travel delays, but we didn't feel any fatigue," Aalberts adds. "Bailey was walking around getting videos, Laura and I kept moving around the room to hear the

pianos from different places, and soon each of us started picking favorites. One piano sounded great on the first selection [Helin played] but then was a flop after that."

Building the pianos the Lensic would choose from last July started about a year earlier. That's right: It takes at least 11 months for Steinway's 225-member workforce to create a concert grand. They typically finish six pianos per day, with a maximum annual output of around 1,300.

A grand piano has about 12,000 parts and weighs about 1,000 pounds; its strings generate almost 40,000 pounds of pressure. Construction begins with the large wooden case, which is made from maple, pine, and spruce. It's soaked in water, then bent into the familiar shape using a process invented by C. F. Steinway in 1880.

After it dries for several months, construction of the mechanism begins. In the penultimate step, the piano goes to the "Pounding Room." Each key is played — sometimes as much as 3,200 times — and adjusted until it reaches Steinway's quality specifications. Only then is the piano painted.

"I've selected many pianos for people before, but not for an institution," says Helin, Santa Fe's preeminent pianist. "I had never been so systematic, knowing I was picking one for an important organization in my hometown."





As an official Steinway Artist, Helin is intimately familiar with the company's pianos. In addition to the prestige the honor conveys, it has practical benefits as well. "You can be anywhere in the world and if you need a place to practice, they'll find it," she says. "If you need a piano for a performance, they'll charge the presenter a cartage fee but not a rental fee."

The Santa Fe quartet went to the Steinway factory in Queens, New York, to make the choice. "Its new evaluation room is state of the art," Helin says, "because it strains out all extraneous noise. You can hear every nuance of every instrument. They had five beautiful Ds, exquisitely prepared for me to play." (Steinway makes five grand piano models; the Ds are the biggest, at nine feet in length.)

In reference to this piano-testing mission Helin coined the phrase "The Piano Dating Game," and to

keep the playing field as level as possible, she played them in a different order than they were set up.

The first round of testing lasted about two hours, as she played an audition repertory designed to test different characteristics on all five instruments. (See "The Keys to a Quality Piano" for her specific choices.) Unlike five Toyota RAV4s, five Steinway Ds will each have different musical personalities, even though they were all made in the same factory and look identical. That's the reason for her rigorous process.

With the Bach selections, she wanted to hear all the lines in their complex counterpoint. The Mozart and Beethoven were chosen to test fast finger work. The Romantic-era pieces tested the pianos' abilities to create a treble that can sing out over a booming bass line and to play evenly throughout all its 88 keys.

Helin is particularly noted for her interpretations of music by Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland. She was close to both composers, and Copland even praised her interpretation of his Piano Sonata, saying, "Both her technique and grasp of the emotional content of the music are of top quality. I warmly recommend her performance."

She played its first movement at the factory to test the pianos' ability to play beautifully at high

Above: Jacquelyn Helin, the pianist who auditioned five of the pianos in New York at Steinway HQ, plays the Lensic Performing Art Center's new Steinway D grand piano for Joel Aalberts, Lensic executive director, and Danny Cameron, the donor of the funds to buy the piano, at the Lensic. **Opposite:** A grand piano has about 12,000 parts and weighs about 1,000 pounds; its strings generate almost 40,000 pounds of pressure.

The Keys to a Quality Piano

If you'd like to give your potential piano a first-class test drive, here's the music Jacquelyn Helin used to audition Steinway D grand pianos for the Lensic Performing Arts Center:

J.S. Bach

Prelude and Fugue in C Major
Prelude in E-flat Minor from
The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book One

Ludwig van Beethoven

"Für Elise"

Wolfgang Amadé Mozart

Piano Sonata in A Minor, K. 310, first movement

Ottorino Respighi

Notturno

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Prelude in D Major, Op. 23, No. 4

Claude Debussy

"La Puerta del Vino," from *Préludes, Book II*
"Claire de Lune"

Johannes Brahms

Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79, No. 2
Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118, No. 2

Aaron Copland

Piano Sonata, first movement

Frédéric Chopin

"Raindrop" Prelude in D-flat Major, Op. 28, No. 15
Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 48, No. 1

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and low volumes and to create many different tonal colorations. At that point, three of the five pianos were eliminated from the competition. After a short break, the final round began, but it didn't last long. "Pretty soon I turned to Joel and said, 'It's got to be this one,' and Joel immediately agreed.

"I love the bass on this piano," Helin continues. "I thought it was like a sports car bass, just ready to go, but there was such clarity to it, and the treble could hold its own with the bass, which isn't easy to find."

Acquiring a new concert grand was a high priority for the Lensic. The previous piano dated back to the Santa Fe Concert Association (predecessor of

the now-defunct Performance Santa Fe).

"It had lots of issues that needed to be addressed," Aalberts says. "Our mission is to bring premier performing arts to Santa Fe, which this will greatly help. We want the artists and the audience to always have a terrific experience here."

The Lensic was able to trade the old piano back to Steinway. Even with that credit, the cost to buy and ship one to Santa Fe totaled about \$225,000. The new instrument made its debut in distinguished company, accompanying soprano Renée Fleming during her *Voice of Nature* recital in September.

The public performance capped a whirlwind week for the piano, which arrived on a semi-trailer with 71 other pianos. "It was all wrapped in what looked like

silver foil," Aalberts says, "and it looked like a giant baked potato. I was surprised by how quickly they were able to get it off the truck and assembled." A Steinway technician from Denver worked with Helin over the next two days to get it ready for its concert appearance.

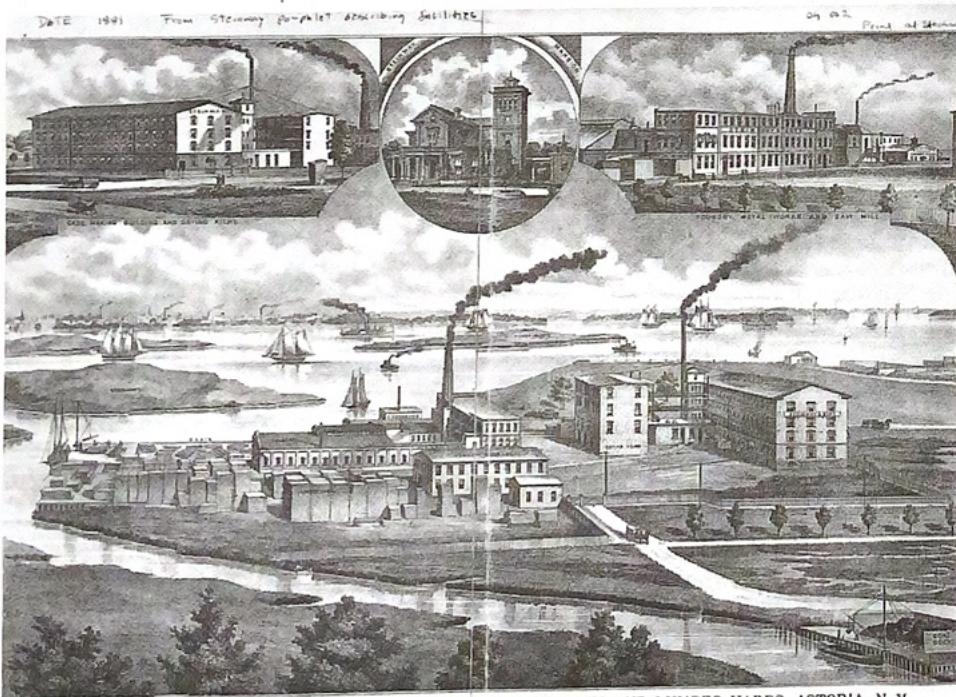
The funds to purchase the new piano came from a single donor.

"We were approached by someone who wanted to make a meaningful, long-term gift of something tangible to the organization," Aalberts says. "His interest was a great match with our need for the piano. Major contributions are very personal, and when you find something that resonates with the donor's intentions, it's so wonderful."

At first, that donor, Danny Cameron, intended to remain anonymous, but he became so excited by the piano's arrival that he agreed to be acknowledged in person, at a recital by Helin for Lensic board members on October 8. Cameron has been a full-time Santa Fe resident for the past five years and lived here part-time for the previous five years. "He has a heritage of support for the Lensic, but this is a very big gift," Aalberts says.

"It's really a wonderful gift for the community," says Helin, "one that will resonate for decades to come."

If you're in a state of high suspense, anxiously awaiting the results of *The Piano Dating Game*, here's the winner: Steinway D #627866. You can hear it in person on Santa Fe Pro Musica's November 9 concert, when Conrad Tao plays Claude Debussy's Sonata in G Minor for Violin and Piano and Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major with the Pro Musica Orchestra. ▶



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■ Above: It takes at least 11 months for Steinway's 225-member workforce to create a concert grand. Top: Construction of a grand piano begins with the large wooden case; it is soaked in water, then bent into the familiar shape using a process invented by C.F. Steinway in 1880. Left: During the 1870s, William Steinway created a company town in Queens, New York. Employees could work and live in Steinway Village, which had its own housing, kindergarten, library, post office, and fire department.