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### The reprise of a 19th Century classic

By William Mullen/TRIBUNE REPORTER

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CALEDONIA, Minn.—When pianist Garrick Ohlsson sits down at Ravinia on Monday night to interpret the melodic lyricism of Russian composers Sergei Rachmaninoff and Alexander Scriabin, it will be a continuation of a resurrection story that began seven years ago in a farm shed outside this tiny town.

The instrument Ohlsson will be playing is a 125-year-old Steinway concert grand piano, a sleek instrument whose chocolate-brown Brazilian rosewood case almost glows with a rich hand-rubbed luster.

In 2001, however, when Joel Lidstrom first saw the piano, "it was unplayable."

"It was covered with storage boxes piled atop the lid, which had warped and split under the weight, sinking down inside the case," he said. "The finish had turned so opaque, I was not able to see the grain of the wood. The legs had large chunks gashed out of them. Some strings were missing; the [keys] no longer functioned."

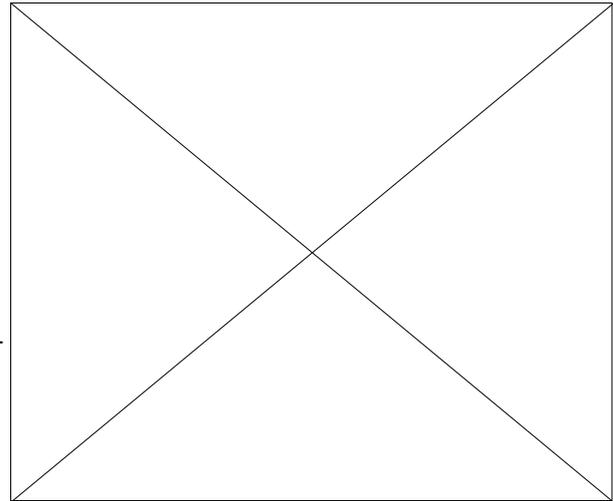
That the grand old Steinway, a star of the stage in 19th Century New York, has been returned to concert use and praised by such prominent artists as Emanuel Ax is solely thanks to Lidstrom—a largely self-taught restorer widely known for his craft despite working far from the world's centers of culture.

He first saw the instrument when the Dominican nuns at their headquarters in Sinsinawa, Wis., led him to a dusty storage area to check out a piano the sisters said was "not worth looking at."

But as Lidstrom began to disassemble the battered old piano in his workshop, he started to realize what a treasure it was, "perhaps the oldest fully modern 9-foot Steinway in existence" and one of the first designed to send clean, crisp sound to every seat in the house in giant concert halls.

Lean, gray-haired and professorial, Lidstrom got into the restoration business after graduating as a performance major in classical guitar from the University of Minnesota. He needed a job and found one as an apprentice piano restorer in Minneapolis.

A few months later, he and his wife decided to live a more bucolic life and bought a rundown farm a few miles from Caledonia in southeastern Minnesota, a region of spectacularly scenic bluffs and valleys. She taught piano in nearby La Crosse, Wis., where he found work in a music store rebuilding pianos.



"It wasn't long before I was sick of rebuilding people's old upright pianos," he said. "I only wanted to work on grand pianos, and once I was working on those, pretty soon I only wanted to work on the best, the Steinways."

After four years he launched his own business out of the shed on his farm.

"The first Steinway I rebuilt here was a 7-foot model that I charged \$3,650 for," he said, noting it takes at least 800 hours to restore a piano. "To do the same job now, I would have to charge \$40,000, but at the time I wasn't trying to make money so much as I was trying to do the kind of good work that would establish my reputation."

Gradually, music departments of Midwestern universities and colleges began sending him old Steinways for rebuilding, as did private owners. He began beating out Steinway's own restoration service when he won a commission to rebuild nine Steinways for the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music in Milwaukee.

The Dominican order hired Lidstrom to restore two pianos, an 1898 model and one built in 1941. But before he left, they took him to see a piano they had no hope for, one donated in the 1920s by a nameless benefactor.

## **'It seemed impossible'**

"It was in the worst repair," said Dominican Sister Mary Ellen Winston. "It seemed impossible that he could do anything with it but take it apart and use it for spare parts."

The nuns had no plans for it, so they let Lidstrom have it as partial payment for his work.

In a piano the most important components are the ones that actually produce sound: the strings, the bridges and, especially, the soundboard, the largest single piece of wood in the piano. The soundboard is the amplifier that captures and resonates with the relatively weak vibrations of the piano strings.

"All this energy created by the key strokes, hammers and strings can only produce a beautiful sound if the soundboard has the right structure and pressure of strings," Lidstrom said.

He was elated, he said, when he found the original spruce soundboard in the 1883 piano was still intact.

"Many rebuilders think it's best to rip out the soundboard from an old piano and simply replace it," he said. "That is just a travesty."

Restoring the piano proceeded on two tracks.

"You have to view the cabinet, which has nothing to do with the sound the piano makes, as a piece of furniture," he said. "You want to restore every edge in it to be as sharp as it was when it was first put together."

"Second, you work on the mechanisms, the mechanical machine parts of the piano, largely the keyboard action and a series of levers propelling the hammers to the strings, which were so worn out they had to be replaced."

When Lidstrom called Steinway with his old piano's serial number, a company official confirmed this was a very early "Model D"—a grand introduced in the early 1880s that was a marvel of physics, geometry and ingenious pre-electronic technology that amplified sound better than any

piano before.

## A reliable design

The design made Steinways the premier concert instruments. To this day, almost all major musicians and concert halls use Steinways, and the company's new concert pianos still closely resemble the Model D.

The secret to the amplification, Lidstrom said, was that Steinway "increased the size of the instruments and increased string tension. They increased the mass of the piano soundboard, made the size of the hammers striking the strings larger and increased the speed of the hammers."

This particular piano left the factory on June 12, 1883, and was placed in New York's Steinway Hall, then America's premier concert venue.

Lidstrom is a stickler for replacing worn parts with new ones as close as possible to the originals. Steinway's New York factory decades ago redesigned many components, like wooden hammer shanks, but its other facility, in Germany, stayed with the 19th Century designs.

"I prefer the German parts because they match the specifications of 1880s parts," said Lidstrom. "Steinway [New York] wants me to change to their parts, but I am not willing to do that on a 125-year-old piano."

With some things, however, he has to find adequate substitutes. Trade in ivory now being illegal, Lidstrom uses camel bone to replace missing piano keys.

By the time he finished the 1883 piano, he had put in 1,200 hours of work and said it was worth in the neighborhood of \$200,000. Lidstrom still owns the piano and lends it out for special occasions.

## Rave reviews

The restored instrument already has been played at Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall and the St. Paul Chopin Society, and prominent artists have sung its praises. Canadian pianist Angela Hewitt called it a "wonderful surprise . . . a great piano [with] a superb action, a huge range of color, remarkable clarity and a beautiful, lyrical tone."

Ax pronounced it "incredibly gorgeous . . . a great piano."

Ohlsson first played it nearly two years ago at the St. Paul home of a friend of Lidstrom's.

"He played but 30 seconds, stopped and exclaimed: 'Glorious! Absolutely glorious!' and resumed playing," Lidstrom recalled.

Interviewed by phone, Ohlsson said the piano's sound reminded him of the great pianists of the early 20th Century that he listens to on old 78-rpm records.

"I always thought that the pianos they used had a much warmer tone than pianos today," he said. "When I sat down to this piano, that's what it had, that warm, old-fashioned tonal quality. I fell in love with it."

To play it, he wanted just the right occasion and found it in the Ravinia concert.

"It had to be a recital, like this one, because performing it with an orchestra, you would not capture

the remarkable tone qualities this instrument has," Ohlsson said. "It is rare to hear a very old instrument that is in first-class condition such as this."

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