

Gilding the Grand

By Roger Grody

Transforming the already luxurious grand piano into a genuine work of art requires both imagination and respect for centuries-old traditions.

Few possessions are as classic and exquisite as a grand piano, an accessory that complements an elegant residence as naturally as a tuxedo suits James Bond. Even if rarely played, that timeless piece of functional art makes a profound statement about the homeowner's style and sophistication. And like yachts or haute couture, a grand piano can be customized to indulge the most extravagant tastes.

Meticulously handcrafted in Queens, New York or Hamburg, Germany, every **Steinway & Sons** piano is a masterpiece. The company's defiant adherence to Old World craftsmanship — each grand piano takes up to a year to build — is rare in an era when manufacturers are rewarded for automation, cost-control and uniformity. Even a standard-issue Steinway grand is impressive, but the company's collaboration with renowned artists and designers elevates the product to another level altogether.

In addition to accommodating an exclusive clientele seeking something completely unique and willing to pay a premium for it, Steinway appreciates the excitement its exclusive art case pianos generate among a broader audience. "A very cool and unique limited edition that garners some press also brings attention to Steinway & Sons as a whole," explains Director of Product Management Robert Polan, who oversees the company's custom piano program worldwide.

"A lot of care is taken to find partners that are compatible with Steinway's mission and principles," says Polan, citing frequent musical associations like the "Imagine" John Lennon limited edition. "In other cases, the connection is more along the lines of a company with a similar dedication to craftsmanship and quality — a great example being what we've done with Lalique," he says. Polan reports some partnerships are forged to commemorate a Steinway milestone, such

as a collaboration with designer Frank Pollaro for "The Fibonacci," which celebrated the company's 600,000th piano in 2015, priced at \$2.4 million.

Most whimsical of Steinway's limited editions is a \$2.5 million piano created by pianist/painter Paul Wyse based on "Pictures at an Exhibition," a masterwork by Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky inspired by the paintings of fellow countryman Viktor Hartmann. "In this case, 'Pictures at an Exhibition' was this unique and momentous occasion in history where visual art and music converged in a perfect way," says Polan.

Like Steinway, **Baldi Home Jewels** has been creating luxury goods for more than 150 years, and the company's use of semiprecious gems and 24-karat gold redefines home furnishings like bath

COURTESY OF FAZIOLI/ROBERTO ZAVIA-STUDIO STEP

GOLD LEAF by Fazioli
24-carat gold leaf completely covers this F228 piano model, giving it a touch of royal prestige. The transparent polyester that protects the gold leaf gives the surface a precious luminosity of iridescent shades.



COURTESY OF STEINWAY & SONS



THE HELICONIA Designed by Lalique

Originally designed in 1992 by Marie-Claude Lalique — the granddaughter of René Lalique — the heliconia flower forms the perfect decor for these fine instruments. Lovingly crafted at the Lalique manufactory in Alsace, 75 crystals make the instrument shine, while silver-colored inlays are decoratively arranged into the design, creating interesting reflections as well as a sense of clarity.



PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION
painted by Paul Wyse for
Steinway & Sons

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEINWAY & SONS



fixtures or tableware. The Florence, Italy-based firm partnered with Steinway to create “Armonia Limited Edition by Baldi,” in which the cases, lids, music stands and legs of glossy ebonized pianos are embellished with Italian Renaissance ornamentation. Decorative bronze elements are hand-chiseled to perfection — an exacting process consistent with Steinway’s own commitment to craftsmanship — and plated in precious metals with a choice of nine different patinas.

Steinway’s “Heliconia,” the product of a partnership with **Lalique**, is a black or white grand piano adorned with 75 jewel-like pieces of the renowned French glassmaker’s signature frosted crystal. Created from a design by Marie-Claude Lalique (granddaughter of founder René Lalique), the result is a stunning, understated marriage of two great artisanal legacies. “Lalique is a com-

pany with a very similar history and tradition of craftsmanship, so as ‘kindred spirit’ companies, this partnership made sense on many levels,” says Steinway’s Polan.

Gene Korolev, who learned the art of piano refurbishment in Russia’s cultured city of Saint Petersburg, reimagines Steinway grand pianos with his daughter, Katherine Banyasz. With his 40-plus years of piano experience and her background in interior and graphic design, their **Piano Solutions XXI** creates glamorous, over-the-top instruments from a studio in suburban Los Angeles.

The Piano Solutions principals are quick to distance themselves from the ostentatious rhinestone-clad showpieces Liberace made famous. “I like to tell a story, not just slap some patterns onto a piano case,” explains Banyasz, who reports her father’s craftsmanship is an appealing antidote to the prevailing culture of mass production. An early work

paid tribute to French fashion designer Coco Chanel, an Art Deco design in which nearly 50,000 cubic zirconia crystals tell Madame Chanel’s story, with her silhouette appearing inside the lid.

When the Chanel piano sold for \$250,000, the father-and-daughter entrepreneurs recognized the demand for elaborate, finely crafted art case pianos. “Anybody who appreciates art, wants something unique to pass from generation to generation, or who finds meaning in the themes,” is how Banyasz characterizes the company’s exclusive clientele.

Piano Solutions XXI’s “New York Serenade” is a Steinway grand enveloped with images of Manhattan landmarks created through the application of about 165,000 cubic zirconia crystals. Its music rack features a couple seated on a park bench viewing the skyline and the entire composition represents a love letter to the Big Apple. A total of 2,880 crystals were affixed to the



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PIANO SOLUTIONS XXI

NEW YORK SERENADE
by PIANO SOLUTIONS XXI



NEAR PHOTO COURTESY OF STEINWAY & SONS
FAR PHOTO COURTESY OF FAZIOLI/ROBERTO ZAVIA-STUDIO STEP



THE HELICONIA
Designed by Lalique



MARCO POLO
by Fazioli

sides of the piano’s 36 black keys, which Korolev remembers consuming many of the 3,000 hours of labor invested in this project. New York Serenade is on the market for \$1.5 million and Banyasz believes a luxury Manhattan hotel would be a natural buyer.

Fazioli was founded in Italy 130 years after Steinway, but produces among the most coveted instruments in the world, and serious musicians dominate its clientele. Only about 100 are handcrafted annually at its factory near Venice, and admirers suggest playing a Fazioli is the musical equivalent of racing a Ferrari. Founder Paolo Fazioli insists that the drive to explore new

techniques and aesthetics is embedded in his company’s DNA. “This is our life, experiments. You can increase quality and do a good job, but only if you continually experiment,” he says.

Among Fazioli’s experimental art case models are a grand piano entirely clad in 24-karat gold leaf, the ethereal “Butterfly” designed by architect Bing Thom, and the high-gloss red “Marco Polo,” originally commissioned by a client from China. The crimson instrument’s inside lid features a reproduction of an ornate Canaletto painting that celebrates the ancient connection between Venice and China. [THE](#)

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Fazioli

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Piano Solutions XXI

www.pianosxxi.com

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Collaborators

Baldi Home Jewels

www.baldihomejewels.com

Lalique

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