

Henry Steinway And Industry Commitment

When school closed down each year, Henry Steinway's wife Polly would take their five kids up to their house in Vermont for the summer, leaving him behind to tend to business at Steinway & Sons. Alone in New York, Henry was a regular summer dinner guest at my parents' house. As a ten-year-old boy, I had a tough time grasping whatever it was Henry and my father went on about at such length: Both were indefatigable talkers who brought a lot of energy to their conversations. Yet I found myself foregoing evening activities with friends and lingering at the table because of Henry's personal magnetism.

At the end of a long and rich life, Henry has been aptly eulogized as a wonderful husband and father, a capable businessman, and a gentleman in every sense of the word. Yet from my vantage point, his defining characteristic was a special brand of charisma. People of all types enjoyed being in his company, and his presence had a way of inspiring confidence. In his early years at Steinway, he drew on these traits to rally the troops around a painful but necessary restructuring program that ultimately saved the company. They also came in handy in defusing tense union negotiations and earning the trust of the workforce. Later on, as the piano industry's most prominent ambassador, he managed by force of personality to fan enthusiasm for the keyboard. And in all his personal dealings, his easy manner earned him friendship and regard wherever he went.

Much of Henry's charm was easy to understand. He was witty. He was modest to a fault and thoroughly unassuming, despite a background of privilege. He was sincere and generous. He was a tireless correspondent, typing out pithy letters on his battered old Smith Corona typewriter. But his personal appeal also speaks to the core of our industry.

Musicians put themselves on the line with every performance. When something goes wrong, they pay the price. And in an industry composed largely of performers, ex-performers, or those who wished they had become performers, Henry's deep personal engage-



ment with the piano industry and the company his great-great-grandfather founded struck a responsive chord. He would be the first to tell you that he had no musical aptitude at all—"I could never tell Beethoven's this from Beethoven's that," he liked to say. Yet unlike some of the more corporate types who have viewed stints in the industry as just a notch on their résumé, Henry saw his role at Steinway as a defining part of his identity. Since the day he joined the family firm in 1937 he never had any contingency plans, fallback positions, or career alternatives. Throughout his adult life he was wedded to the piano business, heart and soul, and that pure attachment resonated with anyone else who made a similar commitment to the industry. Last year Henry was honored at the White House with a National Medal of the Arts. Afterwards, he sent me a photo of the ceremony with President Bush, along with a brief note that ended, "Hard to imagine why they would want to honor someone like me, but it was a nice plug for the piano." It was typical Henry—modest to a fault, and yet always concerned about the fortunes of an industry he loved. He will be missed.

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