

The Debt We Owe To The Steinways

It's a sad truth that the great innovators of the past are quickly forgotten. How many people today can name the inventor of Penicillin, an individual responsible for saving the lives of millions? Or the inventor of the transistor, the foundation of the digital world we now inhabit? Similarly in the music products industry, the sizable contributions of William and C.F. Theodor Steinway have been consigned to obscurity, remembered by just a handful of historians and piano enthusiasts. Their name lives on in the company they founded and with the pianos that grace concert stages worldwide, but their groundbreaking inventions have become so commonplace over the past century that they're taken for granted, much like the air we breathe. That's why the remarkable Steinway story, presented in this issue, is worth retelling.

The Steinways didn't invent the piano, credit for that goes to Bartolomeo Cristofori. But, just as Steve Jobs brilliantly combined existing technologies to create the smartphone, they blended the design advances of others to create the grand piano as we know it today. Industrialization in the 19th century had expanded the populations of urban centers, which led to larger concert venues, which in turn required more powerful pianos. Responding to the artists who clamored for a piano with enough volume to fill cavernous concert halls, the Steinways took the overstrung scale, which had been used by harpsichord makers for over a century, and the one-piece cast iron plate, developed in the 1830s by Jonas Chickering, and artfully combined them with a one-piece rim of their own design, made from 18 layers of maple veneer. The resulting "Centennial Grand," so named because it was introduced during the nation's centennial year in 1876, was considered a revolution in its day, securing first prizes at trade fairs in the U.S. and Europe, earning rave reviews, and dazzling audiences.

The original Steinway Centennial design has since been refined with better materials and production methods, but after 142 years, its fundamental construction principles have yet to be improved upon. Perhaps the most compelling endorsement of what was referred to at the time as "The Steinway System" came from competing piano makers: They all rushed to copy it. Like any other inspired work of art, this exceptional instrument didn't happen by accident; it was the product of William and Theodor Steinway's effort and ingenuity. Anyone who has enjoyed a chord struck on a piano over the past century owes them a modest debt of gratitude.

Designing and building an instrument that has endured for over a century to the delight of millions would be an accomplishment enough, but the Steinways' contributions didn't stop there. They proved equally creative when it came to marketing, manufacturing, and distribution strategies. Steinway's

second factory, opened in 1860, was one of the first in New York to employ steam power to run its machines. Local papers referred to it as a "marvel of invention."

William Steinway was also building the Steinway brand long before the term "brand" had come into popular usage. Recognizing that self-praise carried little weight, he pioneered the concept of the "artist endorsement," securing glowing testimonials from the likes of Rubinstein and Paderewski. Building on this effort, his cousin Fred Steinway later hired Raymond Rubicam, founder of Young & Rubicam, to create a revolutionary ad campaign that paired elegant portraits of notable pianists with the tagline "Instrument Of The Immortals." As Rubicam later explained, the ads "convinced potential buyers that a Steinway in their home would be suitable for a performance by the likes of Rachmaninoff." You could argue that Nike's star athlete-driven "Just Do It" campaign is just an updated version of the original Steinway playbook.

A national dealer network and formalized dealer agreements? Steinway can take credit for developing those as well. While



most manufacturers in the 19th century were regional, Steinway had bigger ambitions and assembled a network of resellers from coast to coast, complete with contracts specifying inventory levels, promotional requirements, and payment terms. They were also not above pulling the line from anyone who deviated from their terms. They famously cut off D.H. Baldwin as their Cincinnati

dealer in 1870, prompting him to build his own pianos.

The Steinways were also perhaps the first in the industry to take a truly global approach to the market, opening a factory in Hamburg, Germany in 1880. The original rationale for the plant was to evade prohibitive European tariffs and take advantage of lower-cost German labor. Over the years, however, the European base has provided additional dividends, enabling the company to effectively service globe-trotting artists.

These innovations are why the Steinway trademark continues to resonate after 165 years. They have also had a profound impact on the rest of the industry. Any enterprise with an artist program, automated production systems, formal dealer distribution policies, or a global approach has, knowingly or not, borrowed from the original Steinway business model. Issac Newton famously said, "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants." For that reason we pay tribute to the Steinways: Many of the advances that we take for granted today exist because we have stood upon their shoulders.

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