

point, Edward James Olmos and Max von Sydow came forward to present an award together. Before they began, Olmos said, touchingly, that he was hon-

ored to be standing there with this actor. Obviously unexpectedly, Olmos seized von Sydow's hand and kissed it. It seemed appropriate.

Edward Rothstein on Music

Don't Shoot the Piano

The piano, as Max Weber noted, was a fundamental piece of "middle-class furniture." Unlike a simple chest of drawers, the piano in the 19th century served as a means for expanding social possibilities, for displaying material and spiritual accomplishment, for cultivating taste and learning. It was never considered a luxury or an indulgence; it was as omnipresent as television is today. In 1867 the *Atlantic Monthly* pointed out that "almost every couple that sets up housekeeping on a respectable scale considers a piano only less indispensable than a kitchen range." "'Tis wonderful," Emerson noted, "how soon a piano gets into a log-hut on the frontier."

In his classic *Men, Women & Pianos* (now unaccountably out of print), the pianist Arthur Loesser emphasized the piano's role as an anchor for domestic life. Lessons were required of every eligible maid and every aspiring bachelor. Etiquette books explained how a woman should play for an admirer, and how a gentleman should escort her to the keyboard. "In many a humble home throughout our land," said President Cleveland, "the piano has gathered about it the most sacred and tender association." It was the home's second hearth, the locus for play and display. The piano sat in the parlor, silent but ripe with possibility, imposing in its shape and seductive in its sound, admired when quiet, compelling when given voice.

The piano was such a powerful presence partly because of a belief that, as one journal put it in 1909, a "proper study of music" led to a proper "formation of character." Here is a description from a 1926 issue of *The Etude*: "Good principles of morality, integrity, sobriety, truth, honesty, clean living, and patriotism, planted daily in the child mind while that mind is elevated, enthused, and spiritualized by means of inspiring music, means that . . . our crime problem will diminish enormously with oncoming years." The optimism even affected such organized charities as the Music Settle-

ment Schools, which considered the art as important to the poor and disfranchised as basic material needs.

But the piano was not only a sentimental emblem of family life. It also introduced into the home some of the very dangers it was used to guard against. The music of Schumann and Brahms and Beethoven is music of risk and disorder as well as of resolution and aspiration. The piano could arouse fears of seduction as well as hopes of courtship. Etiquette books for social piano playing were needed because of the risks latent in unbounded play. In "The Kreuzer Sonata," for example, Tolstoy inverted the piano's image of domestic propriety, making it the inspiration first for adulterous passion, then for murder.

There was, in fact, no way to separate the piano's darker energies from its edifying influence. The very act of practicing was associated with suffering as well as elevation. The pianist Hans von Bülow spoke of crucifying his fingers in piano practice, "like a good Christ." For every 19th-century rendition of "The Maiden's Prayer," there was a "Mephisto Waltz"; for every concert hall, a cathouse. For every genteel phrase given us by piano culture—"soft pedaling an idea," or using a listener as a "sounding board"—there are others that refer to more punitive matters: the "piano bench" was a convict's worktable, a "Chicago piano" was a gangster's machine gun, to "play the piano" at one time meant to be fingerprinted. This shadowy side of the piano made the instrument's ultimate goal of transcendence all the more forceful: the mastering of body and machine and manners, the overcoming of obstacle and risk for the sake of aesthetic and social accomplishment.

Clearly, piano manufacturers were not just supplying an instrument. They were creating an icon. And they did not create the demand; they fed it. In 1909, 364,545 pianos were made in the United States by 295 manufacturers and 69 equipment supply houses. These instruments included the most subtle along with the

most crass. For every manufacturer as dedicated to creating high-quality instruments as Mason & Hamlin or Steinway & Sons, there were a dozen others that produced pianos for the log cabins and parlors of the middle class. One of the most influential was Joseph P. Hale, who cheapened the production process but knew how important the piano's name and status had become. He offered "vanity" stenciling, custom-labeling instruments or inscribing them suggestively with names like Steinmay, Stan-nay, Shumway, Steinmetz, Stanley and Sons—signs of aspiration if not accomplishment. Hale accounted for an eighth of the American piano industry by the 1880s.

But at the dawn of this century, when the piano was at the peak of its prestige, it also became most vulnerable. First came the player piano, whose automatic mechanism offered, as one advertisement put it, "perfection without practice." By 1923 player pianos represented 56 percent of all pianos made. Then came the phonograph and the radio, permanently undoing the piano culture. There were 295 piano makers in the United States in 1911; there were 81 in 1929. Then the Depression seemed to seal the piano's fate (there are now fewer than ten American manufacturers). Once classic pianos—Mason & Hamlin, Chickering—were sold and resold until they bore no resemblance to their familial origins. The piano was never to have the same importance again.

A recent book, *The Piano in America, 1890-1940* by Craig H. Roell (University of North Carolina Press), focuses on the years of this decline, offering an abundance of original research. It is a flawed work, but it gives serious attention to the transformations of the piano business that went along with the social and musical decline of the instrument: the consolidation of small companies, the development of a managerial class in the piano business, the responses to a new consumer culture.

Roell ends his account on an optimistic note; and indeed, in the 1950s, it appeared that with postwar family life, the piano was going to re-establish itself. But since 1978 sales of pianos in the United States have dropped by a third to levels less than half those at the turn of the century. And within that smaller market, the old American firms are no longer the major participants. Most American manufacturers have gone bankrupt, leaving a handful as shadows of their former selves. Baldwin diversified into clocks and circuit boards and Kimball into furniture. Within the last two decades, Japanese and Korean companies have come

to dominate the world market with mass-produced, rather than hand-crafted, instruments. Meanwhile, the real future of the piano industry seems to be in electronic keyboards, which now represent nearly half of all instrument-related sales in the United States (more than twice the revenue generated by the instrument now sadly reduced to being called "acoustic"). The piano continues to be heard on the concert stage, and is still tirelessly played in the practice rooms of conservatories, but it is no more than just another instrument.

There was, in the midst of this decline, only one American company that remained an anomaly—suffering from the piano's slippage, no doubt, but maintaining its standards and its heritage: Steinway & Sons. Producing about 5,000 pianos a year in its New York and Hamburg factories, Steinway holds almost a monopoly on the artistic use of the piano; it has represented the highest achievement of the piano-making art. The Steinway piano was sold as if it were itself a transcendent object: "the Instrument of the Immortals," intoned the advertisement. It was praised by Lizst, Wagner, Rubinstein (Anton and Arthur). It is still the instrument through which we hear nearly all piano repertory on record and in concert.

This has given Steinway an importance far beyond its size. There are small European makers, such as Grotrian and Bechstein, who claim to produce pianos that can compete with Steinway. But these are companies of lower sales and far lower profiles. They also have different stylistic aspirations; they lean more to gentility than to public proclamation, more to variety of voicings than to focused tone. The Steinway has long since eclipsed other tastes in pianos. Its bright, projective treble and its muscular, resonant bass have defined our notion of the piano's sound.

But now Steinway risks following the rest of the piano industry into decline. If Steinway standards fall further than they already have, the musical costs will be high. There is no other manufacturer currently able to take Steinway's place. The concert artist will have to settle for instruments with less sensitivity and tonal variation. The listener will have to settle for indefinite loss, never knowing what nuances have been left unrevealed by the pianist's compromise.

When Steinway was founded in 1853 by the German immigrant Heinrich Steinweg, the piano represented a sort of merger between business sense and aesthetic taste. The true "fathers" of the Steinway business tradition—the sons of the founding immigrant—evenly divided

those tasks. William Steinway was a brilliant master of commerce and public life—a virtuoso in the marketplace, selling the instrument through exclusive dealers and promoting it through deals with artists. He built a Steinway Hall for concerts, booked artists for American tours in small towns, mining camps, and big cities, and treated the piano as if it could not be dissociated from the society it served. When he died in 1896, New York's mayor ordered the flags flown at half mast.

His brother Theodor, on the other hand, was a pure "piano man"—a Teutonic genius, stern, uncompromising. He was responsible for 41 of the 55 patents granted Steinway by 1889. Theodor summed up his attitude to the piano in a German maxim he hung over his desk, which read: "Who knows his trade is a journeyman; A Master is he that invents the plan; An apprentice, each and every man."

The success of the company was the result of an intricate balance between William's marketing savvy and Theodor's devotion to the craft. The Steinway company correctly treated the piano as the archetypal family instrument—developed by a family dynasty, for family players, representing family ambitions. Every innovation in the instrument was made by craftsmen whose love of the piano was

as great as their love of its manufacture. At its prime, the factory had its own orchestra, along with a set of loyalties that came with a "guild hall" tradition.

Eventually, however, a guild of such skilled craftsmen became more difficult to sustain. This and various other problems, including lack of capital, led to the sale of the family firm to CBS in 1972. At the time, CBS seemed like a powerful and prestigious home—a modern rescuer of the Steinway from the forces of modernity. CBS tried to keep Steinway immune from corporate pressures, to prevent it from becoming a mere institutional appendage. Steinway became the beneficiary of huge capital investments.

But in fact the Steinway's fate under CBS is grimly revealing, for it indicates how fragile the traditional piano manufacturing operation is, when the instrument itself is linked not to a surrounding culture, but only to a surrounding market. Once CBS entered upon its own era of decline, Steinway was plagued by bureaucratic confusion, changing strategies, and parades of efficiency experts. There were four Steinway presidents in just 13 years. "Quality control" slipped. The decline of the Steinway in the 1970s was a replay of the decline that every other great piano suffered decades earlier. There were pianists who began to say that the Steinway was no longer a great

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instrument; the market in half-century-old rebuilt Steinways boomed.

But Steinway had a second chance, largely because of the strength of its tradition. Many now credit Lloyd Meyer, the final president of Steinway under CBS, with a revival of quality in 1982, or at least the stirrings of such a revival. But even that second chance was disrupted when CBS announced that it was going to get out of the instrument business. That announcement alone nearly completed what earlier sloppiness and mismanagement could not. Consider the irresponsibility of the sale, compared with the importance of the company sold. In 1984, the year of the sale, Steinway was earning \$8 million on \$60 million in revenues. The sale, involving at least 18 interested parties, dragged out over a period of ten months. There were rumors that the factory would be sold only for its real estate value. CBS claimed to be concerned over the future of the company, but finally it needed cash to fend off attempts to take it over. And so CBS sold Steinway & Sons in haste, along with three other musical instrument companies, for less than \$50 million—a much smaller sum than was offered earlier by serious devotees of the instrument.

The buyer, Steinway Musical Properties, pledged to continue making the world's greatest instrument. But in reality it seemed to have had no interest in anything but Steinway's investment potential. Like William and Theodor Steinway a century earlier, two brothers are among the owners, John and Robert Birmingham, who possess a large fortune from the sale of their father's fuel company to Texaco. Another investor came in later, Bruce Stevens, who is now the president of Steinway. But unlike William and Theodor and their relatives, none of the three figures now making decisions about the future of the instrument has any background in the piano business, in instrument manufacture, or, except in the most casual way, in music itself. Robert described the purchase to me: "I was looking for a business, and we heard Steinway was for sale. The attraction was a tremendous trade name with a product equal to it, which is a very rare thing."

He said that they began to "smell the flowers" after the purchase, but it is clear the fragrance was less potent than the "product." "It's really different from selling oil; it's black, but that's about it," Robert said, explaining the novelty of his new business. There was no talk about the instrument itself, only a reiteration of its "reputation" and "trade name"—as if they could be exploited without the ob-

sessive dedication to the instrument's inwards. With an eye on production schedules and unit sales, a new head of manufacturing was hired, Daniel Koenig, who had no knowledge of the piano whatsoever when he came to the company after 21 years as an engineer at General Electric working with steam turbines and motors.

Among Robert Birmingham's major goals for the Steinway was not to restore it to its splendid artistic position. Instead, he aimed to increase factory output by at least 50 percent, while looking into Steinway's opportunities in the booming electronic keyboard market. Both goals, experienced piano makers say, could have an extraordinarily harmful impact on the piano itself. Even during the hard times of the Depression, Steinway turned down millions of dollars that were offered for the license to its name for toasters and refrigerators.

For the first time in its history, the company is entirely guided by a philosophy alien to a century of piano invention and craft; for the first time, there is no one in an authoritative position at Steinway & Sons with a musical vision of the instrument or experience in its manufacture. And there are real problems that require precisely such vision and such knowledge. How can a business that has traditionally involved craftsmanship, devotion, and artisanal values continue when those are all so rare in the workplace? How can a factory be run along old apprenticeship lines and guild hall rules when the cultural and economic environment has changed? How can Steinway deal with these issues in an industry that has suffered serious decline in importance? Surely it was just such issues that led to the family sale of Steinway in the first place.

Unburdened by historical precedent or historical knowledge, the management of Steinway & Sons is unambiguously taking the commonplace view of "modernization," jettisoning what seems outmoded. "From my point of view," Koenig told me, "the piano is essentially an engineered and manufactured product." He would like to "debrief" the old hands and teach piano manufacture, as he put it to me, in a "textbook manner." The piano could then be treated as a melodious washing machine. "I get uptight about advertising hand craftsmanship and things like that," he said. "To me, it doesn't indicate quality, but a stubbornness, holding on to the past."

In many industries such radical modernization would be suitable, indeed revolutionary; but the piano is a subtle washing machine indeed. Will the decision to

have the iron plate finished out of house, for example, affect, even slightly, the control that Steinway has always exercised over this crucial contributor to the piano's tone? What about changes in the ways in which the felt is bent onto hammers, or the ways in which the wood is aged? Of course change shouldn't be shunned. But this instrument evolved over 250 years; and when it succeeded in the sorts of musical expression demanded from it, that evolution slowed. Every change became as much a risk as a promise. But Koenig told me: "The design of the piano has been too damn stable. It hasn't changed since 1920 or so, and neither have the manufacturing operations."

He controls a \$75,000 annual budget for research and development. The result of this R&D will depend on the company's vision of the instrument—and how deep an understanding of its tradition it is willing to absorb. My impression is that the new Steinway & Sons would be very happy to marry its inherited reputation with the manufacturing methods and quality of a very different instrument: the Yamaha. Yamaha makes almost 200,000 pianos a year, compared with Steinway's 5,000. But even Yamaha knows that there is a price to such efficiency. Once Yamaha decided to take on Steinway in the high end of the American market, to produce a concert grand and make it available to artists in competition with Steinway, they treated the project in an entirely different fashion. They chose different materials, pace, workers, and procedures, emulating Steinway even as Steinway now seems to want to emulate Yamaha. Yamaha is not about to replace Steinway on the high end—its effort is still at a fledgling stage—nor may it ever be able to reproduce the powers and achievements of Steinway at its prime. But there may soon be little enough to imitate.

The company is already injuring the remnants of the artisan culture upon which the Steinway's virtues depend. There are reports of cut corners from the factory, along with complaints about quality control. The R&D department is now populated with engineers without piano manufacturing background. The most knowledgeable practitioners are leaving the company or being dismissed. Their knowledge will be simply lost—or transferred to competitors such as Falcone, a small piano firm in Massachusetts, most of whose buyers are disenchanted Steinway prospects and some of whose important employees are emigrants from the once imperial Steinway & Sons. The founder of that company, Santi Falcone, has ambitions of rival-

ing Steinway itself, though with fewer than 200 pianos made so far it will be some time before his achievements can offer any consolation.

It will also be years before the attitudes now enshrined at Steinway have an effect on the instrument. But by then it may be too late to restore the unique powers of the instrument of the immortals. The problem is that there is more information in the old-fashioned "guild hall tradition," more knowledge about the building of the instrument and its nuances, than the current management is

ever likely to get from "debriefing" the old-timers. The deep knowledge in a craft often involves gestures and approaches that are not even conscious, but are schooled over long practice. Replacing them with textbook-style instruction is like teaching the playing of the piano by creating a list of principles about muscle movement. "An apprentice, each and every man," read Theodor Steinway's motto. Without that attitude, the piano he helped invent might really become just another piece of middle-class furniture.

A Life at Death's Door

BY WILLIAM H. GASS

**Wittgenstein: A Life
Young Ludwig, 1889-1921
by Brian McGuinness**

(University of California Press, 321 pp., \$22.50)

The Wittgenstein home in Vienna, it was said with some exaggeration, held seven grand pianos, a condition that certainly stamped it as Viennese. It also housed five sons, the first three of whom were suicides: one by drowning, one from a gunshot, one through poison. The two sons who remained often considered taking their own lives, too, but, through some inadvertence, did not. The family's three daughters fared better in this regard because, although just as much was expected of them, it did not include measuring up to quite so many marks or reaching quite such stressful heights.

In those days, if music appeared to be the rosy flush of Vienna's fame, suicide seemed its fever. The newsworthy surface of society was regularly ruffled by someone's dramatically premature demise. There was Otto Weininger, whose crackpot book on *Sex and Character* Wittgenstein, in his early years, admired; Ludwig Boltzmann, important for his work in statistical dynamics, and one with whom, equally early, Wittgenstein wished to study in Vienna; the poet Georg Trakl; notables like the architect of the Imperial Opera House, Eduard van der Null; aristocrats of a rank as elevated as the Baron Franz von Uchatius, including actual imperialities such as the Crown Prince Rudolf himself—each a distinguished suicide.

For the old, dying is dismal and takes the shine from death. One has grown

accustomed to the succession of small disappointments that make up most of life, so the failures that have followed one about like a smelly, undismissible mutt now resemble a faithful, if antic, companion. The young, however—still so near the time when they were not alive that not being alive again exerts a powerful fascination—cannot help but look at the threat of the years to come and expect them to be as marked by loneliness, remorse, and triviality as those that they have so far survived. Success turns down no soothing bed of rest either, since it can seem to supply but the starting place for yet another, more arduous, climb. Life, they have to wonder (since they once had such hopes for it), life comes to . . . is for . . . what? And if life is so precious, why is so much of it—everywhere around them—habitually, extravagantly, wasted? If life is a meaningless chore, it were well one's chores were concluded promptly, and the mess swept. Thus the suicide skips dying and goes to death as through a door—a door he may slam, if he likes, as he leaves.

In households like the Wittgensteins', what is remembered of the mother is often pale as an old print tacked to an out-of-the-way wall: its image gray, stiff, still, ornately ovaled. It is the father who is the moving Figure, the Presence, the Ghost of the Olden Days. It is his chains that will send their rattle through the rooms and bind the occupants to a presence that is past, yet a past that will not release its outlived days to die away in rings of

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