

# Piano Grandeur

For centuries, a Baby Grand has been the epitome of a fine musical instrument. You may have thought it was beyond your reach to afford one. If so, meet the Piano Man — Sonny Stancarone — who restores and ships vintage pianos worldwide at a surprisingly affordable price.

**T**HE PIANO IS THE MOST popular musical instrument in the world, used in concerts and also found in many homes. The piano enjoys a long and colorful history as an important source of inspiration and pleasure for both professional and amateur musicians. Its history reflects the evolution of culture.

Although digital keyboards abound, nothing can truly reproduce the sound of an acoustic piano. That's why countless of today's artists from Bruce Hornsby to Michael Feinstein, Diana Krall to Elton John still play them.

Perhaps you've never heard the term "art case" piano. The piano has always been a musical instrument first and foremost, but at the same time the need to win acceptance has meant its appearance has had to take account of its surroundings. So pianos have always reflected the furniture styles of their day. Once the internal layout of the piano, whether square, upright or grand, had become firmly established, the casework could be used to make an aesthetic statement. The true art case piano is an art form in its own right — many with ornate decoration of astonishing elegance and beauty.

One of the foremost enthusiasts of older — and, especially art case — pianos is Sonny Stancarone of Sonny's Pianos in Bohema, New York. *But who in their right mind in the Midwest would buy a piano from this man, sight unseen?* Plenty of people. Because Stancarone's longstanding reputation for integrity and piano expertise have won him legions of customers worldwide, and his prices run the gamut from a few thousand bucks to \$1,000,000, meaning he offers something for nearly every budget.

Stan has also pioneered something very



A 1914 Vose with art case, only \$8500

unique — a system for quickly learning how to play, that utilizes his "Piano Yoga" methods. Forget those tedious, mind-numbing piano lessons you had as a kid, and that you probably dreaded. With Stan's approach, you can be playing in minutes.

"People don't have to spend years studying time signatures and learning how to read, they can just immediately start playing piano in a fun, intuitive, relaxed way," Stancarone insists. Sonny says that through using breathing and relaxation techniques he has developed, combined with learning some of the basic principles of piano play-

ing, children and adults of all ages can enjoy playing the piano and also reduce stress, increase energy levels, improve their moods and enhance their sense of well being.

Sonny has created a website called [www.PianoYogaTV.com](http://www.PianoYogaTV.com), which features free videos that discuss the healing and therapeutic benefits playing piano can bring about and how to play the piano using his techniques. Sonny developed "Piano Yoga" from years of experience studying, playing and teaching the piano. He also credits the years he spent teaching yoga, and stress management to athletes, coaches, teachers, students, corporate and government employees. Using "Piano Yoga" "you can connect to your musician within and start playing songs, improvising and creating your own music." According to Sonny "everyone can play the piano, it's fun, easy to do, healing and therapeutic. As soon as you stop worrying about playing perfectly and focus on breathing, relaxing, getting into the flow, the music will come streaming out of you. It's not about how perfectly you play but how much joy and happiness you derive from playing that counts."

## Interesting origins

**P**IANOS HAVE A COLORFUL HISTORY, tracing back to Padua, Italy in 1709, to the shop of a harpsichord maker named Bartolomeo di Francesco Cristo-fori (1655-1731). Many other stringed and keyboard instruments preceded the piano and led to the development of the instrument as we know it today.

Mankind's knowledge that a taut, vibrating string can produce sound goes back to prehistoric times. In the ancient world,



Sonny Stancarone

strings were attached and stretched over bows, gourds, and boxes to amplify the sound; they were fastened by ties, pegs and pins; they were plucked, bowed or struck to produce sounds.

Eventually, a family of stringed instruments with a keyboard evolved in Europe in the 14th century. The earliest of these was a dulcimer, a closed, shallow box over which stretched wires were struck with two wooden hammers. The dulcimer led to the development of the clavichord, which also appeared in the 14th century. These were followed by the spinet, virginal, clavecin, gravicembalo, and finally, the harpsichord in the 15th century.

The harpsichord, however, was limited to one, unvarying volume. Its softness and loudness could not be controlled while playing. Therefore, performing artists could not convey the same degree of musical expression as that of most other instruments. The artistic desire for more control led directly to the invention of the piano, on which the artist could alter the loudness and tone with the force of one's fingers.

It was the Bach sons Philipp Emanuel and Christian, as well as Mozart and Clementi, who learned to exploit and appreciate the advantages of the piano, and helped its acceptance around the world.

The piano was first popularized in the U.S. during the industrial revolution, which had facilitated the production of pianos in large numbers. A successful campaign was held in the 1920s and '30s to introduce music lessons into the nation's schools. The piano found its way into the homes of the up-and-coming bourgeoisie and was no longer the domain of the aristocracy. The biggest-ticket item on every household budget besides the home itself was its piano. Everybody had to have one. It was an essential part of life, sold in the millions.

There were over 300 piano manufacturers in the U.S., especially in New York, Boston, and Chicago. There was the great Chickering piano made by a company founded in 1823 and which later led the world in beauty and sound. There was Hallet and Davis in Boston, J. and C. Fischer in New York, as well as Strich and Ziedler, Hazelton, William Knabe, Baldwin, Weber, Mason and Hamlin, Decker and Sons,

Wurlizer, Steck, Kimball in Chicago, and, finally, Steinway.

Like most Boston makers, Vose & Sons built truly exceptional pianos. The firm was originally established in 1851 by James Whiting Vose. In the 19th Century, Boston was home to a large population of Old World craftsmen who had immigrated to the United States. These craftsmen possessed amazing skill in woodworking and piano building, and Vose was in a position to take advantage of this skilled workforce.

The American piano industry was the greatest in the world, not because we came up with any new and great manufacturing techniques, though there were some innovations, but because the economic conditions made it most favorable to be manufactured here.

Then came the Great Depression and for awhile piano manufacturing halted.

In 1960, we began to see the first major international challenge to the American piano market. Japan was already making half as many pianos as the U.S. By 1970, a revolution occurred as Japan's production outstripped our country, and it has been down hill ever since. By 1980, Japan made twice as many as the United States. Then production shifted to Korea. Today China is the center of world piano production.

They may be cheaper, but are they better? In many cases, *no!*

A lot of today's piano manufacturers use medium density fiberboard (MDF) instead of fine hardwoods, vacuum mold plate in place of the traditional wet sand cast plate, plastic action parts rather than traditional hand crafted wood parts, plastic (polyester) finishes in place of hand-rubbed lacquer.

Well-made older pianos are instruments that can last for generations and provide a much higher level of playing experience as well as sound quality.

And what happened to the once-beloved and irreplaceable American piano industry? Steinway survives to make luxury instruments that few can afford. Baldwin is still around too. But both appeal to the high-end market.

Happily, a lot of the "used" pianos made by America's top manufacturers survive, and are being lovingly restored and resold at surprisingly affordable prices.

About one-quarter of all pianos bought by Americans are grands, whereas around the turn of the century only 3% were. As homes have gotten larger, people now have more space for a piano.

While grands are perceived by many as being for the more serious player — hence families, (especially those on a tight budget), may opt for spinets, consoles or other vertical pianos — studies have shown that having a grand often motivates students to be more serious about their practicing.

The main drawback to the vertical, or upright (as the older ones are called) piano, is its action, which is pretty basic, consisting of only about 5,000 to 6,000 moving parts as compared to, say, an average of

10,000 for the grand. In the vertical action, also, because the strings run vertically, it is necessary to place the tone-producing parts (such as keys, hammers and dampers) in a less than ideal location that does not always allow for the best sound or feel.

#### Amazing new player technology

**B**UT EVEN IF YOU DON'T WANT TO learn to play, and only enjoy listening to live piano music, there's an instrument for you. Taking things one quantum leap further, pianos can now be outfitted with high tech equipment that represents a modern update on the paper-roll player pianos you remember from old movies.

These are not digital instruments — they're real, acoustic pianos with hammers and strings that can be played normally — but they can also "play themselves" using sophisticated electronic technology. Instead of punched paper, they take their cues from specially formatted CDs or WiFi systems.

You can, for instance, watch a live concert given by Elton John in London on a high-def device, and hear him via speakers installed on the underside of the piano. Every time he depresses a key on his keyboard, the corresponding key is pressed on yours — so it's as if Elton is in your home performing!

Several manufacturers offer vast libraries of pre-recorded titles for their systems — music in every genre from pop to the clas-



Steinway M "THE "GREEN CHI" STEINWAY, with Chinese hand painted (Chinoiserie Style) Gardens and Landscape Scenes. Completely Restored 2016 \$125,000

sics — recorded by some of the world's top pianists. These sophisticated systems capture every nuance of the original performances and play them back with startling accuracy — providing something that's actually much better than CD fidelity, because the performances are live.

*Best of all, these player systems can be installed on existing pianos, even antique ones.*

Thanks to these new systems, many people who don't play the piano are enjoying live piano music any time of the day or night. Whether they're accompanying dinners for two or entertaining a houseful of partygoers, these high tech pianos take center stage. For people who do play the piano, these systems can be used to record their own performances, interface with computers, aid in music education, or assist with composing and many other uses.

They feature no-contact optical sensors that won't affect the touch or playability of your piano; sympathetic string and damper resonance; trills from the top or bottom of the key; auto and manual key depth management; adjust- ment key trill positions and much more.

Everybody has heard of Baldwin and Steinway, but during the golden age of piano manufacturing, there were a number of smaller companies that made some outstanding pianos. They were often characterized by ornate carvings and unique woods which are not even available today.

Sonny has such restored pianos listed for as little as \$5500 — sometimes even less.

But the granddaddy of all his pianos is a million dollar instrument. Nicknamed "A Prince's Love Piano," the Steinway grand piano was built in 1900 by craftsmen at the Steinway factory in Hamburg, Germany. The piano is believed to have been sold to a Prussian Prince living in La Tour de Peliz, Switzerland.

As if straight out of a fairy tale, the Prince apparently commissioned an artist to immortalize his love for his princess through a series of pastoral love scenes painted on the piano. Sonny Stancarone, owner of Sonny's Pianos, explains: "This isn't just a one in a million Steinway; this is the only Steinway of this nature in the world."

When Sonny acquired this piano in 2015, the years had taken their toll on the instrument and the artwork. Sonny's team of expert technicians went to work and rebuilt the piano using the highest quality materials and parts available. A team of two artists completed the restoration of the paintings with great attention to detail.

When he first saw the piano, Sonny knew



## THE MILLION DOLLAR PIANO



immediately that this was no ordinary hand painted piano. Sonny said, "It was as if the piano spoke to me and told me that the paintings on the piano represented real people in history and were painted to immortalize a love story."

When Sonny says he ships pianos worldwide, he means it. "We just sent five Steinways to a dealer in Beijing," he notes. "Over the next couple of weeks we will be sending pianos to a church in Ohio, a dentist in Houston, an attorney in Michigan, a doctor here in the Hamptons, a mom in San Francisco, a music student in Boston, and a business man in Connecticut.

"Our pianos of course are gone over and over again before they leave — several tunings — and we generally go over the finish again. All three pedals have to be working correctly and adjusted, each and every note has to be played to make sure the action is smooth and nothing is sticking or making odd sounds — either in the keys or the dampers. Pianos have thousands of moving parts, lots of wood and screws and things that can be adjusted.

"Bass strings must be played and some of the bass strings might have to be twisted to bring them up to full capability; we actually have a 30 item punch list that my workers and I have to check before each piano goes out."

Stancarone says, "the piano is placed on its side on a specially padded pine board called a skid, legs and pedals are removed, everything gets wrapped in thick piano blankets, then strapped down and onto a dolly and then strapped to the side of the truck.

"We only use insured experienced piano movers that we know and have used before.

Our main national mover is a large company that has a fleet of 18 wheelers running pianos around the country at any given time

"Then the piano is delivered to a local piano mover in your vicinity — again, someone we know or that [our mover] recommends and they call you to make an appointment, bring the piano into your home and put it back together. We then hire a technician to come out and tune and check over the piano about two weeks after the piano arrives so it has time to adapt to its new surroundings and decompress from the move. On the very, very rare occasion the pianos gets scratched or dinged in transit, we find a local piano touch up guy to come out and fix whatever is the issue. Pianos for the most part are built extremely well and hold together as they are moved around the globe." Pianos are warranted.

Sonny's passion for pianos and in particular art case pianos goes back to his childhood when he became enamored with his father's decorative German upright piano and his uncle's Steinway grand piano. Sonny first started playing the piano at seven years old when his father, a professional pianist, gave him lessons.

As a child he suffered from a crippling case of asthma until he learned yoga type stretching, breathing and relaxation exercises which virtually cured him. Using these techniques, he went from being a frail asthmatic to a champion baseball and track athlete, earning a full tuition athletic track scholarship to a university.

"When it comes to pianos coming and going I always say leave it up to the piano angels...they will find the right piano for you," Sonny concludes. ■