

**IN-DEPTH
REVIEW****KAWAI SHIGERU**

Is this the world's finest musical instrument? John Bates tries out a Kawai Shigeru: an exclusive piano with an almost unbelievable pedigree

IF YOU splash out on a Shigeru piano you can be certain of several things. First, you will have a wooden presentation box containing the keys to your piano. Second, your name is inscribed on a plaque against the serial number and mounted on a wall in the factory. You can also expect a knock on your door. One of the team that built your piano will fly over from Japan to regulate and check over the instrument. Finally, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you own an instrument that has been created with the sole intention of being the world's best piano.

We live in a world of constant change, improvements and near-instant obsolescence. The time in which some everyday products are superseded is often shorter than the shelf life of a can of baked beans. In the world of acoustic musical instruments, though, the march of progress is somewhat slower. It is a world where change is measured in half centuries rather than half years.

Indeed there is a large degree of smug satisfaction to be gained by knowing that despite large amounts of money and time spent, it is still not possible to recreate or better the tone and feel of an original Stradivarius violin.

The acoustic piano is perhaps the most mechanically dependant sound of all non-electric instruments, created from around 8,000 parts of wood, metal, fibre, resin and other materials. It has had relatively few major developments since its inception in the 1720s. Additional strings, metal frame, a third pedal and a variety of cabinets are the major landmarks in its progression. So how does a manufacturer refine such an icon as a grand piano?

The answer, according to Kawai, is simply to get the finest products and the finest craftsmen to design, refine and build it. A seemingly obvious answer, but it didn't do Rolls-Royce any harm.

This range of ultra grand pianos is named after the long-time former company chairman, Shigeru Kawai. His lifetime ambition was to create the best piano possible and, some 20 years after the project was started, the Shigeru piano is now a reality.

Although Kawai produces around 20,000 acoustic pianos each year, less than one per cent will have the Shigeru name. Kawai



has actually created a separate workshop, devoted purely to creating just over 200 Shigeru pianos each year.

The quest for the holy grail of piano perfection is an arduous one and the demands made on both the materials and manufacturing process are quite extraordinary. The wood used in the soundboard could have been felled up to 25 years previously and left to cure in the air. The soundboards are made only from Ezo Spruce, a wood that grows in Japan's northernmost island Hokkaido and is also subject to stringent exportation controls. The island's harsh climate is perfectly suited for curing the wood naturally.

The metal frame across which the strings are tensioned will also be up to ten years old and has spent the intervening period buried in a special pit in order to temper the metal fully. Each of its lower strings has been created and wound by hand; the felts on the hammers are also created by hand and use a selected blend of wools from Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Each hammer is pressed and reinforced without using any artificial hardening agents; a process that translates as 'the highest level of voicing'.

Although many pianos are handcrafted, quite often this is understood to mean that a worker only performs one manufacturing process by hand and has little knowledge of how to do another. A small workforce of around 20 people builds all Shigeru pianos from scratch. Kawai gives them the title of Master Piano Artisans. The

reason for this is that each one has the knowledge and skill to work on any part of the piano-building process. Since the artisan builds each piano individually, his name is also attached to the piano. It can take up to five times the normal construction time to build a Shigeru piano.

But a Shigeru piano also has benefited from technology. The design is created on computer and based on the results of tonal analysis of pianos in Kawai's anechoic (echoless) chamber.

The most advanced technology, though, is used in the piano action. A traditional piano action is mainly wooden parts with leather links and felt pads. Whilst the keys of the Shigeru are made from spruce wood, the mechanism that controls the hammers is the latest evolution of a Kawai action made from ABS Styran, a high-stress polymer composite. Kawai has been using this for several years in its grand pianos but for the Shigeru it returned to the drawing board.

There are two types of force at work when a pianist's fingers play the keys. Firstly there is the static weight, which is the weight required to slowly depress a key. Secondly, there is the dynamic weight, which is the effort required to accelerate a key to normal playing speeds. It is the latter that determines the ease of playing during fast sections.

Kawai canvassed concert pianists around the world and asked them how a piano could be improved. The results centred around three main areas: (1)



exceptional speed of repetition; (2) superb control when playing 'pianissimo' (very soft); (3) as much power as possible.

These requests presented designers with a sticky problem. The action of a piano can be made faster simply by reducing the weight of the moving parts. That, however, would seriously weaken the mechanism and could also result in a lack of tonal control from the key. In order to strengthen the parts, carbon fibre was added. This is a material known for its incredible strength and it is used in many applications, notably Formula 1 car bodies.

ABS-Carbon made the action stronger, lighter and hence faster. But further research revealed that by making one of the contact surfaces of the action slightly grainy, it dramatically improved the level of control in slow quiet passages. Another improvement, made possible by the new material, was to reduce 'backcheck': the distance that the hammer falls away from the keys. Kawai named this new action 'Millenium 3'.

Although I only played a Shigeru for a few hours, the difference in response is immediately noticeable. The action is wonderfully positive and incredibly responsive. It has a strange feeling of being light, fast but firm all at the same time. Passages where I would normally have to work hard to maintain an even tone seemed to sing out easily. The sound, too, is not the harder-edged one that has been a perennial criticism of Japanese pianos in general. It has a softer, rounded tone but one that allows the player to produce superb dynamic changes and expression.

The first Shigeru arrived in the UK earlier this year and although resident at Kawai UK headquarters, it has been making various appearances around the country, small concerts and the like. It has impressed up-and-coming concert pianists like Warren Mailey-Smith and Julian Saphire and been requested for a performance by John Lill. Just recently, it made its debut on BBC Radio 3.

Shigeru grand pianos come in a

range of sizes from a modest model just over 5' long to a full-sized concert grand. The cost? Well, this level of excellence and care does not come cheaply and prices start at around £20,000 going through to just under £80,000. This is comparable to the price one would pay for a top-of-the-range piano from other manufacturers. The advantage with the Shigeru range is the extraordinary degree of finesse in its construction, performance and aftercare.

If you paid the same for a new luxury car that was hand-built and had the mechanic turn up to tune it for you, it would be a bargain. A Shigeru grand piano will certainly outlast the car and retain its value long after the car has been recycled. Like sneaking into the lobby of a luxury hotel, playing a Shigeru is to peek over the horizon into a world of perfection.

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