

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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VOL. CCXXX NO. 59 FEBRUARY ***

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1997

INTERNET ADDRESS: <http://wsj.com>

Ms. Reimann Wants To Make World Safe For Small Pianists

But Quest for Narrower Keys Proves More of a Stretch Than Even Rachmaninoff

By AMY STEVENS

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. When it comes to the idiosyncrasies of certain performers, the classical-music world has been famously tolerant.

Think of Vladimir Horowitz, who insisted on taking his lucky Steinway wherever he traveled, or Artur Rodzinski, who conducted the New York Philharmonic in the 1940s with a loaded gun in his back pocket. At the renowned Van Cliburn International piano competition in Fort Worth, Texas, judges have allowed contestants to bring their own benches, while a Cliburn concert performer who sweats profusely was recently permitted to place his own rug beneath the piano.

But what of the petite pianist who wants to play on a slightly narrower keyboard?

"It would be a very odd thing," says Richard Rodzinski, executive director of the Van Cliburn Foundation and son of the late gun-toting conductor.

Ergonomically Unfriendly

Five-foot-tall Hannah Reimann is a musician on a mission: The New York piano teacher and occasional performer wants to persuade concert-piano makers that musicians need an instrument with smaller keys. She is determined to get her way, writing dozens of letters to manufacturers and even commissioning a prototype from a German company that supplies keyboard parts to no less an authority than Steinway.

After all, Ms. Reimann reasons, cellos are available in fractional sizes, alto saxophones are smaller than baritone saxes, and there is even a new ergonomic viola shaped sort of like an amoeba. But, as any nine-year-old who has struggled to play "Für Elise" knows, the piano keyboard comes in one size, and it most certainly doesn't fit all.

"It's just unfair," says the 32-year-old Ms. Reimann. "I think people with small hands are entitled to be comfortable too." It hardly seems an unreasonable request. Back when Mozart was composing, piano keys were actually narrower than the 15/16 of an inch they are today. Passages that were probably a breeze for the boy genius are a stretch for Ms. Reimann, who at 98 pounds is so tiny that her publicity photos show her posing quite comfortably under the lid of her Steinway grand.



Hannah Reimann

Keyboards got wider about a century-and-a-half ago, a mere grace note of time in the annals of music. That is when Henry E. Steinway, founder of the New York company, designed an instrument that had a louder sound than its predecessors but also a heavier internal mechanism that needed to be balanced by fatter keys.

Unfortunately for Ms. Reimann, it isn't just the piano keys that have gotten bigger, but also the piano companies. Steinway & Sons, a unit of Steinway Musical Instruments Inc., Waltham, Mass., makes 5,000 pianos a year, all with the standard, 48-inch-wide keyboard. The company's executives say a second size would benefit only a few people and would require costly factory retooling. The idea that someone would try to tinker with tradition also strikes a dissonant chord.

"We wouldn't ever consider it," says David E. White, a retail salesman at Manhattan's famed Steinway Hall showroom. "I don't have time to waste on this inconsequential, ridiculous thought."

Laurence Libin, curator of musical instruments at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, says pianists such as Alicia de Larrocha, who is under five feet tall, have overcome the apparent limits of hand size by stretching their muscles and adapting their fingering of wide chords. Some performers, he says, simply don't attempt works by such big-handed composers as Sergei Rachmaninoff. Ms. Reimann's problem, Mr. Libin says, "is an imaginary problem."

But the problem isn't Ms. Reimann's alone. Yoshinao Nakada, one of Japan's most popular modern composers, recently wrote that he is "overstraining" when playing Chopin waltzes and that a narrower keyboard would "bring untold happiness to vast numbers of people." He derides Japanese piano teachers who oppose small keyboards as "a true bunch of idiots." The celebrated Viennese pianist Paul Badura-Skoda has publicly sounded a similar refrain. And Emil Pascarelli, a Columbia University medical professor who redesigned clarinets for musicians with carpal-tunnel syndrome, says a slimmer piano keyboard would "definitely be ergonomically helpful."

Ms. Reimann says the current octave width — at 7½ inches, it is at least a quarter-inch wider than it was in the early 1800s — disproportionately frustrates women, children and people of small stature.

It's a Stretch

"My teachers promised I would grow into it," she says. "I never did." Today, after years of stretching exercises, she can just reach a "ninth," or the eight-key octave plus one. She was taught to stay away from the Rachmaninoff piano concertos she loves.

Then eight years ago, Ms. Reimann learned that during the 1920s, a Steinway with narrower keys had been designed by the well-known pianist Josef Hofmann, who is also credited with inventing the windshield wiper. She desperately tried to track down a Hofmann piano, even visiting 82-year-old Henry Z. Steinway, great-grandson of the founder.

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But the Steinway heir informed her he had burned the Hofmann keyboards a half-century ago per orders of his father, who was running the business at the time. "He didn't want people to get into, 'Oh, I want this big a keyboard,' or 'I want that big a keyboard,'" Mr. Steinway says.

Another Steinway executive suggested she try the actor Efrem Zimbalist Jr., whose late father, a noted concert violinist, had received a Hofmann piano as a gift. But Mr. Zimbalist told her he no longer owned it and that it was now at a Los Angeles piano showroom. "I wished her well on her project. I guess it's a lifelong passion," the actor says. When she finally found the piano, it turned out to have a normal-size keyboard after all.

Made in Japan

Later, Ms. Reimann heard that Japan's Yamaha Corp. and Kawai Instrument Manufacturing Co. listed narrow-keyboard pianos in their catalogs. But it turned out they were only available on a limited, special-order basis in Japan. She wrote letters to all the major piano makers, asking them to make narrow keyboards for the U.S. market and offering her help. They turned her down. Then last year, Ms. Reimann tracked down a Canadian musician who was making a smaller-scale keyboard, but when she tried it she decided it wasn't ready for professional use. (Christopher Donison, the inventor, says his keyboard is most certainly concert-quality.)

Finally, after spending several months and thousands of dollars, Ms. Reimann persuaded a German firm that makes keyboard parts for Steinway to make her a narrower prototype.

Now the plucky keyboardist hopes to get a patent on her design, which allows a pianist to slide out an existing keyboard and pop in the slimmer one. It is made so that the felt hammer at the end of each of the 88 keys strikes the strings at the same spot that a full-size key would. At roughly 44 inches from the lowest A to the highest C, Ms. Reimann's new keyboard is a far cry from the dinky toy used by Schroeder in the "Peanuts" comic strip. In fact, resting on the dining table of her Manhattan apartment, it doesn't look much different from the 48-inch standard version.

But then Ms. Reimann unscrews two bolts under the keyboard of her 97-year-old Steinway and replaces it with the new one. Taking a seat and flipping her long auburn hair behind her, she pauses a moment, her tiny hands with their unvarnished fingernails poised above the keys. Suddenly, they explode in a complicated crescendo of octaves.

"Now I can play anything," she says. "Even Rachmaninoff."