

Stunning Blonde

Enraptures the Piano World

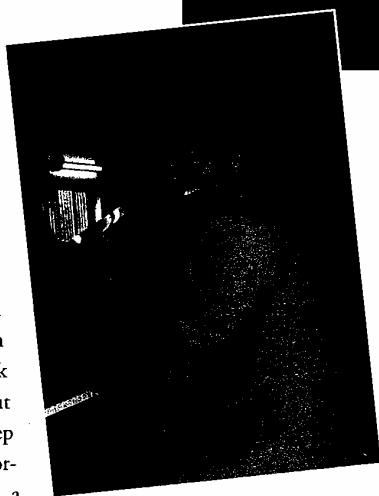
Judith Monk enthuses

On July 29 Stephen Hough played an inaugural recital on a Steingraeber Phoenix concert grand at Hurstwood Farm to a capacity audience of over 200. Four days before a Phoenix piano was displayed to some 80 delegates at the Steingraeber Dealer's Conference in Bayreuth where Richard Dain delivered a speech about it.

Hurstwood Farm has been in Richard Dain's family ownership for about sixty years: it is a working farm with extras. The other components are a concert hall and recording spaces, along with an enormous piano showroom containing around 30 grand and upright pianos from all the top makers. Hurstwood Farm Piano Studios prides itself on being a place where pianists and piano music lovers can find the ultimate in piano quality and excellence.

On a recent visit I had a chance to see and hear the new Steingraeber Phoenix while American pianist Eric Himy recorded his latest CD. It is breathtakingly, stunning to look at: made from unstained pale Santos Rosewood from Brazilian forests it has rich, dark highlights chased throughout and it is burnished to a deep gleam. I loved it. Next to its gorgeous black relatives it is a stunning blonde of a piano.

Eric told us: "It's beautiful to see, but just hear it." He played us Schumann's *Etude Symphonique* which he'd just finished recording. This piano truly sounds wonderful too. There was a definite difference in sound, a clarity that was noticeable. I asked Richard to explain why: "There are now two new makes of piano which employ special bridge devices called agraffes to transmit sound energy from string to soundboard without need for downbearing, eliminating the need for the soundboard to carry load. These are Stuart and Sons and Steingraeber Phoenix. Both are in production



Eric Himy plays the Steingraeber Phoenix

and have already earned great acclaim amongst leading artists who have played them. Bridge agraffes offer firmer and greater area of contact with the bridge. Transfer of energy is thereby improved. Tests

suggest the larger and firmer the contact the greater the sound power, and sustain. The risk is that high sometimes unpleasant harmonics can be too efficiently conserved. These pianos employ more resilient hammers to generate more of the energy as lower harmonics. In such pianos the soundboard can be optimised for acoustic performance without the restraint of

also serving as a load-bearing member. The boards can be made thinner, lighter and be differently mounted to retain the sound energy where it is best used: in the board itself."

There you have it! I didn't really understand it either but I do know that important changes are being made to pianos which affect how they sound and how much easier they are to play. Eric Himy loved playing the Steingraeber Phoenix. To test audience satisfaction Richard had a pianist record Balakirev's *The Lark* on seven different grand pianos. In a blind test he asked audiences to rate the sound of each piano and 90% of listeners chose the Steingraeber Phoenix. If you contact him through the website he may even let you have a go! And if you understand Richard's technical answer I'm sure he'll be happy to go deeper into the science too. This piano is a treat for both eyes and ears. ■

www.hurstwoodfarmpianos.co.uk

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