

Steinway's Grand: Sylvia Parker's new CD features UVM's fine piano
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When Sylvia Parker, senior lecturer of music, spent a long day in fall 2002 at the Steinway factory in Queens, New York, test driving nine pianos for the Music Department, she didn't know she was also helping choose the piano that would make it possible to record her first album.

Parker and colleagues in the Music Department David Neiweem and Paul Orgel, along with Frederick Johnson Pianos, Inc. co-owner Dale Howe '64 traveled to the historic factory in search of a concert grand piano, a purchase made possible by a generous donation from former Interim President Edwin Colodny. The quality of UVM's new "Colodny Steinway" would, in turn, make possible the recording of Parker's first CD, *Bartok, Griffes, Mozart, D. Scarlatti, Sylvia Parker, piano*, on Centaur Records.

The four played musical chairs for the morning, each taking a turn at the instruments. "It sounded like an orchestra warming up," Parker recalls. "Before lunch we were down to three pianos out of nine...After lunch, it probably took us another half an hour to get down to two, and between those two it took us the rest of the day, playing and listening and playing something different and asking, 'What do you think about this piano? What do you like, and what don't you like?'"

After hours of this "pleasurable torture," as Parker describes it, a consensus was eventually reached, and the piano was shipped from New York to Vermont, where it now resides in the Southwick Recital Hall.

Piano of record

Parker had considered publishing an album from her recordings in the past, only to have discovered that out of 20 years of recorded concerts, not one tape was free of some sort of blemish. "It was just amazing," she exclaims. "This one was just gorgeous until I had that memory slip in the last movement. And this one was wonderful, but I played an F instead of an F sharp there. And somebody in the audience coughed and sniffled, and there was a siren in the background on that one."

So when the carefully selected Steinway concert grand, one of the best instruments in the world, became available to her, Parker seized the opportunity to record a CD. "It was definitely the piano that made it possible. I wouldn't have dreamed of doing it without that piano."

Parker's next step was to contact Charles Eller of Charles Eller Studios in Charlotte, Vermont, a recording company whose client list includes Trey Anastasio, The Indigo Girls, and They Might Be Giants.

Eller traveled to Southwick with an "entire truckload of equipment," says Parker, including microphones, computers, walkie-talkies, and speakers. His highly sensitive microphones had to be precisely placed inside the piano for an optimum recording. The speakers were so sensitive that Parker had to arrange a moratorium on nearby construction noise during their sessions or risk ending up with "very expensive recordings of a truck."

To Parker's surprise, her quest for silence was successful. A phone call to Kenneth Bean, administrative services manager for architectural and engineering services, resulted in three days mostly free from dynamite blasts and truck rumbling. "I fully expected to have them tell me, 'Sorry lady, you go mind your business. We've got work to do,' but they were extremely cooperative."

Measure by measure

And after a long editing process during which Parker selected the best measures from the many takes, Eller created the master disc. "He could join two takes at the peak of a sine wave...I had no concept of what editing was like," says Parker, "and I was just astounded that that could be done and sound seamless."

While her original intention was to self-publish, Parker was so pleased with the final version, she sent it out to a handful of labels she thought might be a good match. Right away, she heard from several companies that were interested in her album and signed on with Centaur Records.

Now, at the end of this two-year process, Parker feels grateful that Edwin Colodny chose the gift that he did.

“His donation was incredible. What a gift that was to the whole university, not just to my project, which never could have happened without it, but to the Lane Series, to all the artists we bring in, to our Music Department programs, to the reputation of UVM as a place where high-quality music events can occur because we have this wonderful instrument.”