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Ilya Radaslovov and Dave Horine on IWU's Designation as an All Steinway School

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Charlie Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan University has announced a big change for its School of Music. A 3 and a half million dollar gift will allow Illinois Wesleyan to become an All Steinway school. Joining us to talk about that and about pianos in general, are Ilya Radaslovov, an Associate Professor of Music and keyboard department head at Illinois Wesleyan and Dave Horine, IWU's School of Piano – School of Music piano technician and a university alum. Welcome!

Ilya Radaslovov: Thank you, Charlie!

Dave Horine: Thank you, Charlie!

Charlie: So what does it mean to be an All Steinway school?

Horine: Well, this is an exciting time. Almost every music school has a goal of reaching this prestigious award and it's one that we have been working on for almost 30 years. It's going to have a lot to do with the retention and attraction of prospective students and Ilya you could comment more on that.

Radaslovov: Oh, yes. This is the – definitely – it's kind of a dream come true and Steinway has always been – is and has always been synonymous with quality so I think this will be wonderful way to, you know, to reenergize our recruiting efforts and to actually tell the Illinois community and the Bloomington-Normal community that wonderful things are happening on our campus and we're very excited about this and clearly, we couldn't have done this without the generous donation of the – you know from the Freiberg –

Schlenker: C.B. Freiberg to -

Radaslovov: C.B. Freiberg

Schlenker: -who farmed out to near Stanford and last year had a – a land auction to generate money for his family foundation and charitable foundation after his death. How many pianos are we talking about?

Horine: Well, we're talking about 37 pianos that we'll be purchasing and we're trading in 45. We're going to get it to the ideal number of pianos that we need and that's in the 75 range. Right now we have 99 pianos just in School of Music.

Radaslovov: Most of them are over 50 years old and quite a few of them are over a hundred years old. So it was – it was time that we really needed to replace a lot of dead or dying instruments.

Schlenker: Are you going for all new right now or will you stage it to do – to –

Radaslovov: Oh, no.

Schlenker: -to do a timed replacement later on for the next cycle and the next generation?

Radaslovov: A very good question. It will be – every other year we plan to be able to purchase one more new piano and trade one in. fortunately, we're being very frugal with – with what we are replacing in order to become the Steinway school. And then that gives us money then to replace them and keep turning our inventory so we gradually will have new inventory. So about half of the pianos will be replaced.

Schlenker: More than a decade ago, Illinois Wesleyan University had a piano sale through I believe it was the Yamaha company, in which the company brought in a number of used pianos from other music schools including the ones in Illinois Wesleyan University's practice rooms, and sold them to private buyers. In return, Yamaha sold IWU pianos at a lower cost and shared a portion of the proceeds. How many different ways are there to finance that huge ticket item in any music schools, accounting?

Radaslovo: Well, there are at least programs available but the banks will only do a lease on Steinway pianos, primarily because Steinway Pianos last for a good decade and their good, useful life is a good 75 – 80 years in a college setting. It's a lot different than in a home setting because they get used quite a bit more and that actually was not a Yamaha program. It was a Kawai program.

Schlenker: Kawai, I'm sorry.

Radaslovov: Yeah. And they – they actually trucked in pianos from their factory to do this – do this sale and Wesleyan actually didn't buy one or two of those pianos.

Schlenker: Okay. Why is having single maker a good thing? Whether it's Kawai, or Yamaha, or Steinway...for students?

Radaslovov: Well, that's a good question. I will let David answer the – since he is the piano technician and the person who is taking care of these pianos.

Horine: Okay. Well, 99% of all concert stages only have Steinway pianos on them. They could have Yamahas. They have Kawais. They have Baldwins. They could have anything from China that they wanted to but every musician that's serious about playing only wants to play on a Steinway & Sons piano.

Schlenker: Some people do like Bosendorfers.

Horine: There are two artists that do. The big difference between piano manufacturers is that like with Yamaha, and Kawai and Bosendorfer, they provide free pianos for artists to use. Steinway

doesn't do that. You have to purchase their piano, otherwise it's an implied endorsement that you're endorsing that piano. So any Steinway artist that you see playing anywhere in any venue, either the venue owns the piano or the artist himself owns it.

Schlenker: So what, Ilya, what makes Steinway a Steinway in terms of quality, in terms of feel, in terms of responsiveness in the instrument?

Radaslovov: Well, yes, thank you. That's my personal preference, of course, and my, you know, I always prefer – if I have a choice, I always prefer to use a Steinway. The warmth of the sound, the sound quality, the depth of the sound, the control, the feel of the instrument – it's quite different. It makes – it puts me at ease. It puts me as a performer at ease, and of course we have to instill those abilities into what students will be looking for and ultimately for me it's the warmth of the sound quality, in addition to everything else I listed, but that's my first – that's what I go for.

Schlenker: From a technical standpoint then, Dave, what allows Steinway to make that warmth? Is it the internal design? Is it the components? Is it some mystical elixir that they pour over the frame? [laughter]

Horine: [laughter] It's all magic. I don't know. Yeah. No actually, Steinway pianos are totally handcrafted. It takes a full year just to make one Steinway piano. You're dealing with over 12,000 parts. There are more parts in a piano than there are in a automobile. Steinway has two gentlemen that travel all over the world just to select the woods for their pianos and then those go into the mill that Steinway has at their factory, in Queens, and still, 60% of it's rejected once it gets to the factory, so it's the finest of the finest of the finest materials. No other manufacturer does that or could afford to do it. And it's not saying that there aren't other good pianos out there but the most durable, the most reliable, the most rewarding to a pianist is only the Steinway piano.

Schlenker: This is Sound Ideas. I'm Charlie Schlenker. We're talking with Dave Horine, owner of Horine's piano, plus he's also the School of Music piano technician at Illinois Wesleyan University, and Ilya Radaslovov, and Associate Professor of Music and keyboard department head at Illinois Wesleyan. Illinois Wesleyan has become a Steinway school, thanks to a three and a half million dollar gift. So piano-make quality over time changes even in a single maker, company fortunes, technology, even fashions change, and almost meaningless change. We can't call it tickling the ivories anymore because ivory isn't allowed for keys. I even saw a story years ago that lamented the fall of Steinway after World War II because the sheep skin used to cushion a part of the action inside the piano was different because the proprietary flock of sheep that Steinway had kept in Britain was a casualty of the needful protein in World War II. So could you talk about that? How has piano making changed? How has the sound of pianos changed over the decades?

Radasloviv: I'll again ask David to answer this question because he knows all these technical questions.

Horine: Technical questions – that's my – that's my area. The neat thing about piano manufacturing is that there are always innovations. Every 10 years or so, Steinway has a new patent on this, a new patent on that. So not only have the refinements improved and the design, although it's still originally the – the winning design that they had in 1900 when they designed these pianos, but our glues have gotten so much better. They still have and own quite a few forests where they grow their own hard rock maple and their spruce and their poplar, all the woods that are used in the pianos are primarily grown by Steinway and so all of our latest improvements, our refinements, these are the finest pianos. And I've been associated with Steinway. I trained in the factory starting in late 60s—I was only 3 years old –

[Radaslovov laughs]

Horine: Yeah, you heard that one before. But I have seen these and you're correct, there are some years that we are really pretty bad for all piano manufacturers and it had a lot to do with competition and trying to have the lowest cost piano and that sort of thing. Steinways never subscribe to the thought of being the lowest priced piano. Their philosophy is 'We will build the best piano possible and then we will assign it a price.'

Schlenker: What makes a piano last? You talked about a really wide age range in the pianos at Illinois Wesleyan all the way up to more than a hundred years old and some are 50 and still going well. What allows pianos to maintain quality and when does it falter?

Horine: It's the design of the piano and it's also the quality of the wood that goes into the piano. A lot of manufacturers are now using plastic action parts instead of using spruce, using sugar pine. Instead of using hard rock maple, they're using other softer woods for the rims and they just don't hold up. And anytime that you're in an institutional setting like we are, you have some of the worst conditions possible for a piano. It's always humidity problems. There's always heating, cooling problems and these pianos get a lot of use. They're not like the pianos that little Suzy practices on for half an hour before her piano lesson. These things are going 12, 14, 16, 18 hours a day, 7 days a week, so very few pianos can hold up to that kind of use.

Schlenker: Ilya, how do you – how do you –

Radaslovov: - I also wanna add that you need to have a great piano technician like David Horine in order to be able to maintain all the inventory in any school of music. Sorry –

Schlenker: How do you know, Ilya, when the piano starts to fail, when it's not what it used to be?

Radaslovov: Once again, I will go back to the sound quality; sometimes, you know, in some of the practice rooms now, currently,--even in my office, one of the pianos, the sound is getting not what I wanna hear and that's when I know it needs to – you know – something needs to be done and I immediately talk to, of course, David Horine, he would always give me advice what to do and what not to do. But again, the action, the sound quality first in the travel register when it becomes a little harsher than what I wanted it to be, that's when I know that something needs to be done and that's why I immediately contact David.

Schlenker: Noted pianists often have a technician customize their pianos. Vladimir Horowitz—in older life when his – he wasn't as powerful and he went to more playing the Scriabin miniatures itself, the big, pounding concertos. He favored, a very delicate light action on the keys. How does Steinway differ from other kinds of pianos in that and how does it help students to have consistency across all pianos?

Horine: Ilya?

Radaslovov: It's wonderful that you mentioned one of the Horowitz's instruments. I was privileged, many years ago, to play one of his instruments and through the piano competition in the Netherlands and one of his instruments, I think it was B was there and it's fascinating how they – I mean I've never played such an instrument and I will probably never play. His – in addition to his brilliant travel playing, Horowitz is famous with his very deep bass and very rumbling bass line. And it was fascinating how easy it was to play on the travel register, how light the touch was compared to the bass line which was very – I don't know in terms of the action, it was quite different field but apparently that's what the man wanted and that's what the piano technicians did for him. And I don't know if--how much money it cost or if it's possible to do this, to customize the pianos for everybody's taste and I don't know if it's necessary-

Schlenker: -certainly not in the School of Music

Radaslovov: No—no--it's impossible to do it in the School of Music and I don't know if it's necessary to do this, you know, we're so fortunate to have – to you know – very soon to purchase all these new instruments so I think, a regular maintenance of the instruments will last forever and ultimately will benefit all of our current students. And the most important thing is, of course, not only about our current students but many more students for generations to come and that's also something for us to be thinking about the future of the School of Music, not only the present.

Schlenker: Ilya Radaslovov, an Associate Professor of Music and the keyboard department head at Illinois Wesleyan University and Dave Horine, IWU' School of Music piano technician and also an IWU alum. Thank you both very much for talking pianos today.

Radaslovov: Thank you for having us today.

Horine: Thank you.