

THE SHIGERU GRAND - A TECHNICIANS VIEWPOINT

My first introduction to the Shigeru piano was the opportunity to play one of the mid-sized models at the Frankfurt Musikmesse. To describe the experience, I must digress for a moment. My early background was as a pianist, and I can remember the first time I encountered a top quality grand, at Trinity College of Music in London. The experience was both disorienting and formative. The piano was so even, and gave such a wonderful sound whatever I played on it, that it seemed somehow like cheating, making the playing experience too easy.

To sit down before the Shigeru and caress the keys is, for me, to re-live this experience. At the first few bars of music, the 'rightness' of the touch and tone was immediately apparent to me. A gentle touch created whispering zephyrs of melody, a forceful address gave the perfect degree of harmonic thunder. Immediately, I appreciated that the top rank of the very few fine musicians' instruments made today had grown by one! Honesty demands that I assert that the K Kawai range of grand pianos is very worthy; the Shigeru is well beyond this class, and into the realms of dream pianos.

With many years of technician experience behind me, I now know that if one is playing a piano, then there is probably something wrong with it; one should be playing the music, not the piano! By this, admittedly overstated, mantra, I mean that an indifferent piano gets in the way of the music making process if it is in any way uneven, poor in tone or in touch. Working with international concert artists, the technician learns that the piano must be sufficiently perfect that the pianist can concentrate on the fine details of expression and lyrical line so as to put across their concept of how the music should sound. Any awareness of shortcomings in the instrument they are required to play destroys the concentration needed to live in and for the music alone. (The term 'beginners piano', too often used to sell an inferior piano in poor condition barely justifying even its low price, is too me a source of constant irritation. I always counter with the assertion that the perfect beginners piano is a brand new concert grand. Too many budding musicians are irrevocably put off by the heavy, uneven, squeaking, obsolete action with the tonally collapsed break notes and an apology for a bottom bass octave. This digression is to point up the mistaken notion that a piano can be *too easy* to play, and will spoil the technique.)

When I was asked to write about the Shigeru by Mark Crossland, the Leeds Shigeru Kawai agent, (The Pianoman, 168-170 Easterley Road, Leeds 8), naturally I wanted to find out how the K. Kawai had been developed to produce this superior new range. The key to perfect tone lies through the touch. The expectation of an advanced pianist is to find that a particular finger pressure will give a predicted dynamic result, and that increase and decrease of finger pressure from that starting level will similarly give a predicted change of dynamic to an unfaltering pianissimo, or to a fortissimo which does not 'go through the tone', i.e. becoming louder than the instrument can safely project without distortion. The balance between a piano which has a light touch with a loud tone, and one with a heavy touch and a soft tone is not easy to achieve. The Shigeru slots into the spectrum with near perfection in this balance. The evenness of the final result is down to the knowledge and skill of the technicians optimising a superb basic conception.

Using the touch weights to assess the parameters chosen by the designers, gave no answers to the question of how the results have been achieved. Certainly the problem with inertia difference between the notes has been carefully dealt with, and the only factor left to point to, is the action itself. The "Millennium III" action will probably prove to be the breakthrough product which tells the international artist and teacher, and through them the rest of the piano playing public, that the time of the carbon fibre mechanism has come at

last. The amazingly even feel which this action achieves can only come from the identical weights of levers and damper bodies and the consistency which is achievable in their centres. This combines with the consistency of the artificial leather, which incidentally has already proved its superior wearing characteristics in the wooden action. The variation of density of the wooden parts in a traditional action, and their subtly different reactions to humidity are overcome once and for all. The reservations of the traditionalist as to the longevity of these actions will, I confidently expect, be overcome as they prove their worth over long periods of use. At the 'coal-face' - the concert platform in our world, instruments prepared for the greatest artists are only expected to do service for 8 to 12 years, before replacement with brand new pianos straight from the factory. There is no question of these actions not being up to this use. The smaller models in teaching and professional practise situations, or minor halls, will be the test-beds for the long term reliability which will win over those traditionalists. The Shigeru is a pleasant experience to tune, the tuning pins a good but not excessive tightness, and with good breaks and no weak spots in the compass - the scaling must have been designed by a tuner.

The touch weights produced more questions than answers. The strings are not more pure than those on other top makes. The only answers as to how the Shigeru achieves its magic, lie in the specific optimisation of the soundboard, stringing scale, hammers and action design, and in the quality of the technicians who build, set-up and finish the final result.

The care and attention needed to present such an instrument to the market is of course costly. All of the top flight makes are expensive, and the Shigeru is no exception. The only way to judge whether the piano can justify such a top quality price is to seek out examples and simply play them - (play music through them?) I would be surprised if many, or any, sensitive musicians would not remember the experience with pleasure. In my opinion, the Shigeru has become one of the aspirational marques. However, no written appraisal can convey the experience of playing the Shigeru. The serious pianist owes it to himself to find out whether I am right in my enthusiasm. The one drawback in the entry of this piano to the dream team is the complex matter of the multiplication of choice. If one marque is accepted as the best, all is well. If there are two, then one can prefer this one or that one for their different qualities. When the choice is up to perhaps 5 or 6 contenders, there is a lot of leg work to do, and indecision can become a serious obstacle. I would not lightly put any additional strain on the smooth acquisition of a fine piano by any enthusiastic pianist who has been saving for what seems like ages to get 'the very best' instrument to enhance their playing experience. But I feel that to overlook the Shigeru in an attempt to simplify the choice might be unwise.

I have not yet had the opportunity to look at, let alone work on, many of these instruments. We have to trust Kawai to maintain a consistency in manufacture and finishing, to allow the professional musician to build up a sense of reliable expectation in the Shigeru piano. This will build on, and consolidate, the excellent start which the first contact with the pianos has given.

To try out a Shigeru grand, phone Mark Crossland at 'The Pianoman', 0113 240 8030
Ken Forrest 18th March 2013