

Plow Productions Presents



# *Note By Note*

## *The Making of Steinway LI037*

A film by Ben Niles



US • 2007 • 81 minutes

**Publicity:**

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## **Synopsis:**

In our age of mass-production and consumption, what is the role of the musician — both an instrument's craftsman and its player? Musically, what have we gained? More importantly, what are we losing?

The most thoroughly handcrafted instruments in the world, Steinway pianos are as unique and full of personality as the world-class musicians who play them. However, their makers are a dying breed: skilled cabinetmakers, gifted tuners, thorough hand-crafters.

NOTE BY NOTE is a feature-length independent documentary that follows the creation of a Steinway concert grand, #L1037— from forest floor to concert hall.

It explores the relationship between musician and instrument, chronicles the manufacturing process, and illustrates what makes each Steinway unique in this age of mass production. From the factory floor in Queens to Steinway Hall in Manhattan, each piano's journey is complex—spanning 12 months, 12,000 parts, 450 craftsmen, and countless hours of fine-tuned labor.

Filmed in key Steinway locations—the factory, Steinway's reserved "Bank," and private auditions—Note By Note is a loving celebration of not just craftsmanship, but of a dying breed of person who is deeply connected to working by hand. In the end, this is an ode to the most unexpected, and perhaps ironic, of unsung heroes. It reminds us how extraordinary the dialogue can be between an artist and an instrument—crafted out of human hands but borne of the materials of nature.

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## **Credits:**

Shot on location at:

The Steinway & Sons factory in Astoria, Queens, NY

Steinway Hall, Manhattan

Sitka, Alaska (Timber Mills)

Featuring

Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Kenny Barron, Bill Charlap, Harry Connick, Jr., Hélène Grimaud,

Hank Jones, Lang Lang and Marcus Roberts

Produced & Directed by

Ben Niles

Edited by

Purcell Carson & Geoff O'Brien

Cinematography

Ben Wolf

with

Luke Geisbuhler

Ben Niles

Geoff O'Brien

Editorial Advisor

Mark Meatto

Assistant Editor

Erik Satre

Associate Producer

Geoff O'Brien

Production Sound

Nara Garber

Valery Lyman

Geoff O'Brien

Supervising Sound Editor

Coll Anderson M.P.S.E.

Legal Representation

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### **Director's Statement:**

Steinway & Sons pianos are the instruments of choice for top musicians around the world—partly because of their uniqueness in the marketplace, mostly because of their quality. Based in Queens, the company continues to employ first-generation immigrants, rely on tools and techniques forged 150 years ago, and build unique, personality-riddled pianos. Simply stated: Steinway is an anomaly in today's digital world.

This story has never been told on film, on either the big screen or small. Film is the natural medium to illustrate the complexity of the process, as well as the stories built into each piano. NOTE BY NOTE covers the process's highlights and touches on the benefits of a hand-crafted instrument. It reconciles the extremes of the piano's personality spectrum—craftsmen to musicians. Ultimately, it pushes the story into new territory, infusing personal stories with the instrument's, treating them as one in the same.

I've been around music all my life. As an art director and filmmaker, music projects and stories have always interested me. Music was an enormous part of my childhood, from my older brother's Frank Zappa records to the Beethoven my mother practiced daily on our Kabel upright (now a defunct brand of piano). Music is emotional; it inspires, it literally resonates through each of us. Understanding it, exploring it, preserving and questioning it—is essential to maintaining that emotional level. It's important for me to explore the depths of sound and the creation of music. The Steinway story most aptly examples the relationship between craft and instrument, musician and audience, music and self.

In the past year, I've visited the Steinway factory dozens of times, both as a fan and a filmmaker. The people I've met—from 88 year-old Henry Steinway to 56 year-old Ante Glavan from Croatia—share my appreciation for and belief in music. No other group—record labels, bands, or musicians themselves—has inspired me like Steinway craftsmen have. Their deep respect for the piano, the pride they take in their work, and their belief in the future of music is refreshing. I aim to bring their stories, articulated by themselves and the musicians who play the instruments they create, before an audience eager to learn more about their creative process.

These days we're starved for "real" contact. As technology moves at an exhausting pace, we seek a greater understanding of the "how" and the "who" behind stories. That's where NOTE BY NOTE fits in. It takes a universal subject, music, and explores its origins and the people whose livelihoods depend on it—craftsmen and musicians alike. I hope this film solicits many conversations about American industry, craftsmanship, quality and music. It's a conversation we've been craving for a long time.

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## Music credits (in order of performance)

Beethoven: Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 7  
Performed by Richard Goode

Bach: Partita No. 1 in B-Flat Major  
Menuet 1  
Performed by Larry Perelman

Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1  
Op. 23 in B-Flat Minor  
Performed by Lang Lang

Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No.2  
in C Minor Op. 18  
Performed by Lang Lang

Improvisation  
Performed by Marcus Roberts

Improvisation  
Performed by Kenny Barron

Gershwin: Prelude No. 2  
Written by George Gershwin  
Performed by Bill Charlap

Franz Liszt: Liebestraum No.3 in A Flat  
Performed by Lang Lang

Messiaen: Vingt Regards Sur L'Enfant-Jesus  
Performed by Pierre-Laurent Aimard

Yesterdays  
Written by Jerome Kern and Otto A. Harbach  
Performed by Bill Charlap

Improvisation  
Performed by The Marcus Roberts Trio

Oh, My Salvador  
Performed by Segundo and Victor Apuango

Bach: Partita No. 3 in A Minor  
Performed by Richard Goode

Franz Liszt: Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2  
Performed by Lang Lang

George Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue  
Performed by Alex Epstein

Improvisation  
Performed by Betsy Hirsch

Dohnanyi Variations on a Nursery Theme  
Twinkle Twinkle Little Star (folksong)  
Performed by Alexandra Mishaan

Schubert: Serenade  
Performed by Raphael Reichel

Jealousy Tango  
Written by Jacob Gade  
Performed by Abram Kanevsky

Mozart Sonata in D Major K. V.7  
Performed by Raphael Reichel

When The Saints Go Marching In (traditional)  
Performed by Harry Connick, Jr.

Improvisation (inspired by Eroll Garner)  
Performed by Harry Connick, Jr.

Charles Ives: Concord Sonata  
Performed by Pierre-Laurent Aimard

It's the Talk of the Town  
Written by Jerry Livingston, Al J. Neiburg,  
Marty Symes  
Performed by Hank Jones

Rachmaninoff: Etude-Tableau in F Minor  
Opus 33 No. 1  
Performed by H el ene Grimaud

Rachmaninoff\_Prelude in G-sharp Minor  
Opus 32 No. 12  
Performed by H el ene Grimaud

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### **Biographies:**

#### **Ben Niles / Producer, Director**

Ben Niles is a documentary filmmaker and award-winning graphic designer. During his fifteen years as a graphic designer, Ben directed and produced photo shoots, videos, commercials, and print campaigns for commercial and entertainment clients including Atlantic Records, The Nantucket Film Festival, and the Jacob Burns Film Center. In his years in the record industry, Ben created album packages for Collective Soul, Jewel, Jon Bryon, celebrated box sets for Shish and George Carlin, and packages and identities for jazz musicians Cyrus Chestnut, James Carter, and Henry Butler. A graduate of the University of Georgia at Athens, Ben attended Urge's prestigious Crotona program, an intensive fine arts study-abroad program located in Crotona, Italy.

#### **Purcell Carson / Editor**

Purcell Carson is a documentary editor based in New York City. *Double Dare*, her latest feature project, was honored for best documentary editing at the Woodstock Film Festival. Prior to *Double Dare*, Purcell assisted on *Local News* (a five-part series for PBS), *American Masters* (PBS) and *New York Justice* (A&E). She associate edited *LoudQuietLoud*, a feature-length project about the Pixies and directed and edited *Ad Lib:Williamsburg Unscripted*, which follows a troupe of actors. She studied literature and history at Brown University. She has a master's degree from Stanford's Department of Communications graduate program in Documentary Film and Video.

#### **Geoff O'Brien / Editor**

Geoff O'Brien is an editor with eight years' experience. Recently, he completed *A Question Of Life Or Meth*, a four-part documentary airing on the A&E network for their classroom series. His work has been seen on E!, ESPN, MSNBC, The Style Network, WNET, and he has produced and edited extensively for The History Channel including the upcoming documentary series, *Our Generation*. His film work includes trailers for The Nantucket Film Festival and The Un-American Film Festival and documentaries, including *Laughing to Keep From Crying* and *Brick By Brick*. Geoff wrote, directed, and produced his own feature documentary, *The Ridges* in 1998. He recently won Best Picture for *Trash: A Time Travel Odyssey*, a film he wrote and directed, at the 2002 48 Hour Film Project in New York. Geoff is a member of the Motion Picture Editors Guild.

#### **Ben Wolf / Cinematographer**

Ben Wolf is a New York City-based cinematographer who has been working in film and video for over a decade. He has worked on a broad range of feature films including *Be My Boy*, *Have I Got a Script for You*, *Show Me The Aliens!* (2nd unit, GenArt Film Festival), *Fat Chance* (San Jose Cinequest Film Festival), *Amour Infinity* (Urban World Film Festival, Best Film Jamerican Film Festival, Audience Choice Award Hollywood Black Film Festival), and *City Alone*. He was also cinematographer for the documentaries *Picture the Homeless*, *Seeing New York*, and *Running Madness*. His list of television productions include: Bravo's *The It Factor*, Columbia Tristar's *Judge Hatchett* and The Independent Film Channel's *DV Theater*. Ben is a graduate of Yale College (B.A. Philosophy, 1991) and Columbia University School of the Arts.