

WEST MEETS

Borrowing its name from a great maker of the past, the Joseph Brodmann Piano Company is manufacturing high-quality, attractively priced grands and uprights in China, using some key European components. **Inge Kjemtrup** looks under the lid of this brand-new piano maker

pianos, Bösendorfer took over. In the process of building one of the world's greatest piano firms, Ignaz Bösendorfer took Brodmann's ideas and expanded on them, while always acknowledging what he had learned from his master.

Fast forward to 2004, when two former employees of Bösendorfer are planning the launch of a brand-new piano company and trying to come up with a good name. In retrospect, the choice of Brodmann seems almost inevitable. 'It made sense to us,' says Brodmann's UK-based President, Colin Taylor. 'We'd worked over 20 years for Bösendorfer and this name showed the link.'

Taylor was the manager of the Bösendorfer London showroom until it closed in 1996 (he's still the UK distributor for the make) and thereafter he was in charge of Bösendorfer's Far East and UK sales



Joseph Brodmann is a name to reckon with in the history of piano-making. Born in 1763 in Prussia, Brodmann moved to Vienna, the world's music capital, when he was a young man. There he established himself as one of the best piano builders of his age, an accomplished craftsman whose instruments were highly prized. It wasn't just the handsome design and fancy cabinetwork of Brodmann's instruments that attracted attention (though those elements, too, was well regarded), but rather his innovations to the inner workings of the instrument. These brought him praise from the likes of composer Carl Maria von Weber.

Foremost among Brodmann's innovations was a stiffer soundboard – a vital development, because soundboards of the period had a tendency to split under tension from the increasingly stronger strings. Possibly because of this, some of Joseph Brodmann's instruments survive – still in working order – in museums in Vienna and Berlin.

Yet Brodmann is probably most famous as the teacher of Ignaz Bösendorfer. Such was the close relationship between the two men that, in 1828, when Brodmann gave up making

division. Brodmann's CEO, Christian Höferl, is an Austrian with a marketing background who'd also been general manager of an American piano chain. He joined Bösendorfer in 1996 as Director in VP Sales and Marketing.

Location, location

In 1999, the two men were asked by their then-employer to research the possibility of Bösendorfer manufacturing a second, competitively priced, range of pianos. Recalls Taylor, 'I visited factories in China and identified a partner there. On paper, the project made sense.' While Taylor and Höferl were convinced of the potential of building instruments in China, their findings proved to be of little interest to Bösendorfer's then-owners, Kimball, who were then in the process of selling the company. In 2000, Bösendorfer was sold to BAWAG-ESK, an Austrian bank. The new owners were equally uninterested in the proposal. In the ensuing management changes, both Taylor and Höferl lost their jobs.

The time was ripe for the two men to strike out on their own and bring their long-held ideas to fruition.

EAST



If he were alive today, old Joseph Brodmann would be very pleased by the offerings of the Joseph Brodmann Piano Group, but puzzled about one major factor: the modern Brodmanns are all made in China.

'The concept was a European-designed piano with European parts but made in China,' explains Taylor. Many made-in-China pianos, often meant for a domestic market, have entirely Chinese-sourced components. The Brodmann grands, however, have spruce Strunz soundboards (the Strunz firm was around in the first Brodmann's day, as it was founded in 1820), Abel hammers, Röslau strings and pinblocks from European and US suppliers.

Though the uprights use more Chinese-sourced materials, they do have the Röslau strings and, as the range expands, will also begin to feature the Strunz soundboards, according to Taylor. The actions on Brodmann pianos are designed in partnership with Langer UK, a leading maker of actions.

that introducing export culture and quality control required something of a culture shift. In the end, however, the project has 'exceeded our expectations in how we thought it would work,' says Taylor.

'Real personality'

Given the relative youth of the Brodmann firm, it was a little difficult to find someone who's been playing one of their pianos. Taylor pointed me to John York, a leading British pianist, who teaches at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and who also has an active performing career.

York happened to be looking at pianos with one of his Guildhall School students when the name Brodmann came up. At the time, says York, 'I wasn't really seriously thinking of upgrading or even of selling my two grands.'

From opposite page: Ca. 1815 pedal hammer grand by Joseph Brodmann; the Brodmann BU 132 upright (top); Bösendorfer label (below); the historic 'Weber' Brodmann; logo for the new Brodmann make; the soon-to-be-released BG 275 grand



The pianos are manufactured in Yichang, a city of almost four million people that's famous for being next to the Three Gorges Dam. Taylor believes that the quality control that Brodmann has put in place in their Chinese factory also sets them apart from many other Chinese-made instruments. All the grands and the higher-end uprights are 'completely handcrafted.'

In the last 12 months, just under 500 grands and about 650 uprights have left the Yichang factory. Brodmann is building a new factory just for grand production, which should up that annual grand count to 850. The vast majority of the instruments, some 60 to 70 per cent, go to the United States, with the remainder to the UK and the Continent. 'The Chinese workers do excellent work,' Taylor asserts, though he adds

York and his student visited Colin Taylor's Sudbury offices to try the instruments and were very impressed. What was so impressive? 'Tone, look, feel, balance – price!' replies York. The Bösendorfer pedigree was a factor to him, but it was the instruments' 'remarkably good tone and their real personality' along with the price that made the decision to purchase – and both York and his student bought Brodmanns.

York purchased the Model BG 187, the most popular model in Brodmann's growing grand range. At 6ft 2in, the BG 187 is in the middle, size-wise, of the range. The BG 150, at 4ft 11 in, is the smallest, followed by the BG 162 (5 ft 4in) and the BG 228 (7ft 5in). A 7-foot model, the BG 212, will be introduced in 2007, while the 9-foot BG 275, is scheduled to make its debut sometime in the next two years. The line-up will be complete when the BG 176 (5ft 9in) makes its appearance.

Prices start at around £6,000 for the BG 150, increasing to £15,000 for the BG 228. The BG 187, which was the first grand launched by the company, can be yours for about £8,000. Clearly the Chinese labour costs play a role in Brodmann's ability to make instruments at these prices. 'Dealers know it's a good-quality instrument at a good price,' says Taylor. ▶



'We think we're in a niche of our own, trying to create a super Chinese piano'

COLIN TAYLOR

MAKERS & MAKING

Top of the range for uprights is the BU 132, the Brodmann concert upright piano, which costs about £4,000. This is a full size (52 inches), 'professional model' that boasts a Strunz soundboard. The BU 132 will soon have a baby brother, the slightly shorter BU 128.

There are three starter uprights – the 'everyday pianos', in Taylor's words – a BU 116, 121 and 125, with prices hovering around £2,500. German hammers provide the European element for these uprights. Finally, for the American market, there are two spinet instruments.

The spinets, with their brown veneers, are the exception to Brodmann's otherwise monotone, black colour look. Rather like the Model T Ford, the Brodmanns are only available with an ebony polish, however, the young company plans to expand this palette in the next year or so.

At Taylor's offices in Sudbury, Suffolk, I have a look at the BG 187 grand and the BU 121 upright, and indeed, the finish and detail work on the instruments is of very high standard. 'Good clean casework and a smooth finish,' says Taylor proudly. 'It looks like someone's taken some time.'

Taylor is certain that pianists will be equally impressed by the tone. 'It's a European sound, it's not bright and harsh.' York concurs, saying of his 187

Some have wondered if the modern Brodmann company is trying to downplay the fact that its instruments are made in China. Taylor is quick to respond to such a suggestion: 'We don't shy away from saying that the piano is made in China.' And, at any rate, he feels the quality of the instruments speaks for itself. 'We think we're in a niche of our own, trying to create a super Chinese piano,' he says. 'We are also in a niche of our own because of quality.'

York demonstrates equal confidence in his new Brodmann: 'The design is truly classic and beautiful to look at – the feel is classy, the finish remarkably good considering the price. I recommend them to anyone, really!' ■

'My Brodmann grand sounds glorious, rich, full, singing and warm, loud and positively calorific'

JOHN YORK



Detail from inside a modern Brodmann (left); the BG 187 grand (right)



grand, 'It sounds glorious, rich, full, singing and warm, loud and positively calorific. It has improved with constant playing – without that jangling metallic colour that offends with cheap pianos.'

On the uprights, teachers will like the fact that they're not 'too easy to play, so that the back of the hand muscles will develop,' comments Taylor. Also, every Brodmann upright includes a practice pedal.

Missing link

So with a full order book and even a waiting list, things look bright for the new company. Yet there is admittedly a certain risk of confusion in creating a modern firm based on a venerable history. Brodmann's logo, for instance, is a letter 'B' entwined with a lyre – the lyre coming from the Apollo figure in the middle of a frieze on some of the 19th-century Joseph Brodmann instruments.

The strong link with Bösendorfer also makes it harder for Brodmann to establish its own identity. Consider that Höferl works out of the company's official headquarters in Vienna, just a few streets away from the Bösendorfer offices.

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