

Austin concert pianist Anton Nel shopped for prized Austin Symphony Steinway



Michael Barnes Austin American-Statesman

So much musical pleasure — for so many people in Austin — depends on one concert grand piano.

Make that two 9-foot Steinway grands: The original German instrument chosen for the Long Center for the Performing Arts when it opened in 2008, and the new American specimen selected last year to replace the German model for most performances, a concert piano owned outright for the first time by the Austin Symphony Orchestra.

One man chose both crucial pianos: International concert star Anton Nel, who has lived in Austin — with a break — since 1986.

In part to celebrate the new grand — but also to redeem a promise given during the pandemic era — Nel will play all five Beethoven piano concertos over the course of just one weekend next season. Variations on season ticket packages are now on sale at my.austinsymphony.org/packages.



This ambitious marathon echoes a feat by another Austin Symphony darling, Olga Kern, who played all four Rachmaninoff concertos, plus the composer's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini", over one weekend earlier this season.

What does a top concert pianist do?

One afternoon in February, Nel rehearsed alone on the Long Center stage. It was kind of spooky watching him work out the intricacies of the rarely played Benjamin Britten piano concerto without the 50-plus members of the Austin Symphony, led by Peter Bay, or the 2,400 members of the audience in the Long Center's Dell Hall.

It is a testament to the warm partnership between Nel and Bay that they have teamed up for at least 18 different concertos over the course of the past 25 years. For the record, Nel had never played the Britten before, so after Bay proposed the concert, Nel learned it from scratch. How many international concert pianists will do that for you?

"It's a highly effective, but very difficult piece," Nel says. "Unfortunately, rarely done. But Peter loves the piece and I was happy to learn it for the occasion."

Before the solo rehearsal, Nel worked on three personal pianos of his own. One is a replica of an 18th-century fortepiano, the kind that Haydn or Mozart would have used. "I adore this instrument," he says.

Another is a French double-manual harpsichord, a replica of an instrument from François Copuerin's time. The third is a 9-foot Steinway grand, made at the company's American factory, which he purchased not long after he helped pick out the Long Center's first Steinway — a German product — selected with fanfare in 2008.

Nel, who teaches at the University of Texas Butler School of Music, has been in demand as a concert pianist for decades, something that the city's cultural establishment — outside the classical music community — has been slow at times to extol.

"Since January, I've played a different city every week," says the native of South Africa. "Seattle, San Francisco, Phoenix, Dallas, Toronto, Chicago and so forth."

His tight schedule of teaching, performing, traveling and whipping up wonders in the kitchen was upended recently by, of all things, a triple fracture in the right pinky due to a pickleball accident, an activity he usually indulges in several times a week.

"I was out for two months," Nel says. "Fortunately I had a great local surgeon, Dr. Harrison Kay, who pinned the finger together. I designed the rehab myself and was lucky enough to play in public again less than two months after the operation."



What do you want in a Steinway?

So why a new concert piano for the Long Center?

"The one I picked all those years ago is still an excellent instrument," Nel says. "But pianos don't necessarily age well, since they have so many parts that can wear out! The time had come for a new companion, and also for artists to have a choice when they come to play with the symphony."

"There's an excitement around having a new one," he continues. "And it's kind of a luxury to have an old one still in relatively great condition. Really, it's in fantastic shape, which makes me happy, since I have a soft spot for that instrument."

Nel explains that the two pianos are made from slightly different material. "Normally, the German pianos have a darker sound" Nel says. "I grew up playing them in South Africa and have always loved their color range. For our new selection, I was looking for something with a different sound that would also suit the hall well."



Like the older Steinway, it had to fit the acoustics at Dell Hall.

"I know the resonance in that hall so well," Nel says. "It needs something bold and brilliant since it has to fill a big space. Not a 'shrinking violet' piano! It must hold up to the hall."

No ordinary shopping day

Last year, when Nel arrived at the Steinway showroom on Avenue of the Americas in New York City, he was presented with five instruments ready for his inspection. Although Nel would not divulge their price tags, the top line usually go for something like \$250,000, according to online valuations.

Nel sat down to play each instrument, but he listened not only to what he heard, but what he might hear in the future after it has been played in concert settings.

"I have a sixth sense about how they will sound once they are played in," he says, "because they don't sound that way yet. The hammers are new. It hasn't been broken in yet. It takes time. It's like buying a house, you know, the house chooses you."

Nel usually plays the same things on every instrument. Three of the offered pianos did not appeal to him. That left two finalists.

"One really attracted me, it had a beautiful sound already and had a lot of character possibilities," Nel says. "The more I played, however, I realized it was an instrument more suited to a smaller space. Too small for the Long Center. What's important is how long the sound is sustained. You need it to sound for a long time."

Testing a new piano, Nel tries out all the registers.



"Your bass is the Rock of Gibraltar," he says. "Most of the melodies are in the middle, so you want the middle to sing as well. All the beautiful melodies are right there. The top register has to have an incredible amount of crystalline brilliance. Romantic and later works will often feature that register and it's important that I can cut through the orchestra."

The second finalist possessed all that.

"Even in its fledgling state, it was already in an impressive condition and will only develop over time," Nel says. "And if it is well cared-for — and there is a special room for the pianos at the Long Center — it should be around for a good while."

The benefits of good musical partners

Nel arrived in Austin a dozen years before the Peter Bay era.

"Peter has elevated this ensemble so much," he says. "In a concerto, for instance, the orchestra part is so difficult. But I arrive and, at the first rehearsal, they know it perfectly. Fifty percent of the battle is done. It's the very best safety net a soloist can have."

"I have seen him do spectacular saves in tricky soloist situations, and he does it all in such an unassuming way. It's great that we've done 18 concertos together. It has really been a long and wonderful journey."