

EMPAC

MUSIC / SOUND

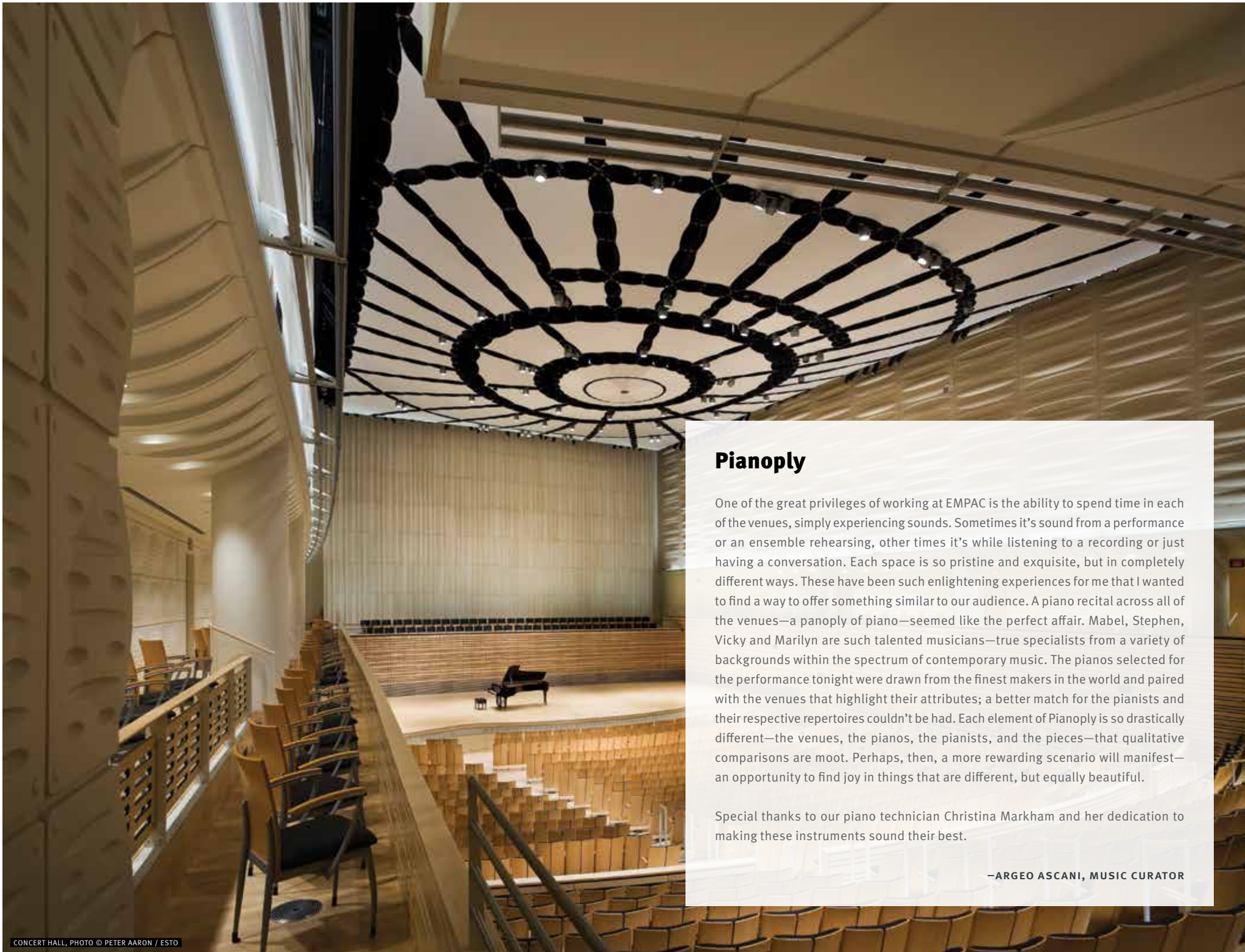
Pianoply

Vicky Chow
Stephen Drury
Marilyn Nonken
Mabel Kwan

SAT / APR 11TH

7:30 PM





Pianoply

One of the great privileges of working at EMPAC is the ability to spend time in each of the venues, simply experiencing sounds. Sometimes it's sound from a performance or an ensemble rehearsing, other times it's while listening to a recording or just having a conversation. Each space is so pristine and exquisite, but in completely different ways. These have been such enlightening experiences for me that I wanted to find a way to offer something similar to our audience. A piano recital across all of the venues—a panoply of piano—seemed like the perfect affair. Mabel, Stephen, Vicky and Marilyn are such talented musicians—true specialists from a variety of backgrounds within the spectrum of contemporary music. The pianos selected for the performance tonight were drawn from the finest makers in the world and paired with the venues that highlight their attributes; a better match for the pianists and their respective repertoires couldn't be had. Each element of Pianoply is so drastically different—the venues, the pianos, the pianists, and the pieces—that qualitative comparisons are moot. Perhaps, then, a more rewarding scenario will manifest—an opportunity to find joy in things that are different, but equally beautiful.

Special thanks to our piano technician Christina Markham and her dedication to making these instruments sound their best.

—ARGEO ASCANI, MUSIC CURATOR

Program

STUDIO 2

Yamaha C7

Vicky Chow

Sonatra (2004)

Michael Gordon

STUDIO 1 – GOODMAN

New York Steinway D

Stephen Drury

Etudes Australes, Book I (1974-75)

John Cage

— interval —

THEATER

Hamburg Steinway D

Marilyn Nonken

Tremors (1996)

La Mandragore (1993)

Shiraz (1977)

Joshua Fineberg

Tristan Murail

Claude Vivier

CONCERT HALL

Bösendorfer 200 CS

Mabel Kwan

*three reversed movements, to bring
destroyed objects back to life* (2014)

Between Clouds (2012)

Shadow (2013)

Eusebius, Four Nocturnes for One Piano (1984)

Evan Johnson

Eliza Brown

Rebecca Saunders

Gerardo Gandini

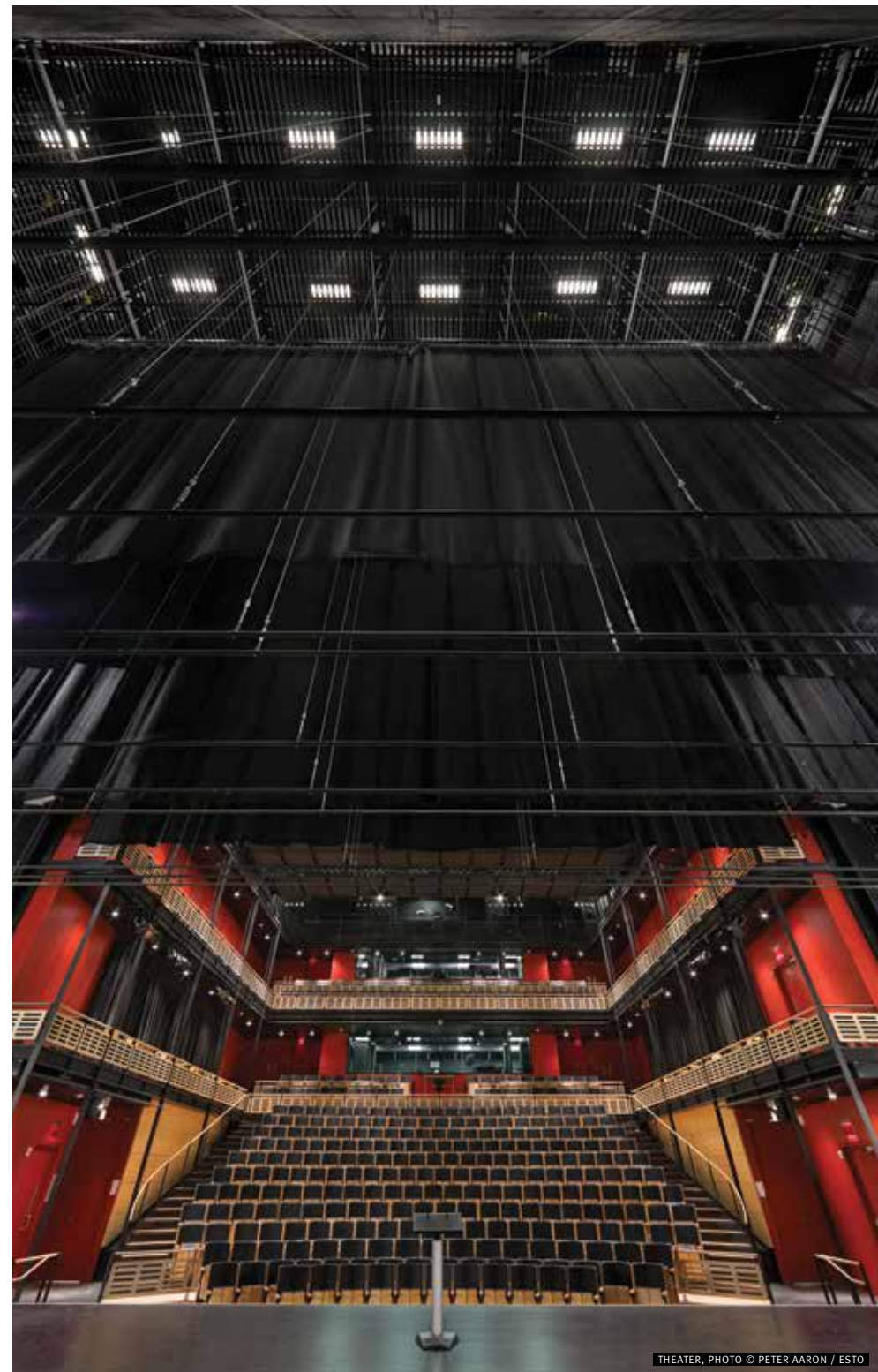
STUDIO 2

Fazioli F212

Vicky Chow

Sonatra (2004)

Michael Gordon



About the Pieces

Sonatra (2004)

I grew up playing, or mis-playing, the piano. My fear of writing for instruments I can't play is minute in comparison to the fear I have of writing for the piano. But I did finally write this piano piece and I called it *Sonatra*—less as a tribute to Frank than as an acknowledgment that what I am aiming for is somewhere between sonata and Sinatra. When I started writing *Sonatra*, I decided that since I would probably only ever write one piano piece in my entire life, I wanted to use all of the keys on the piano and use them often. I constructed long chains or links of major and minor thirds that ceaselessly wind their way up and down the piano. Eventually they start cascading and intersperse with glissandos half the length of the keyboard, sounding to me like the performer has at least four hands.

—MICHAEL GORDON

Sonatra will be performed twice: first in a “standard” equal-temperament scale, and second in a “Just” temperament, based on the Wendy Carlos Super Just Intonation.

Etudes Australes (1974-75)

The composition of *Etudes Australes* in 1974 was the first in a series of virtuoso studies marking John Cage's renewed interest in traditional notation. The complex work consists of 32 etudes divided into four books, which Cage based on star maps of the southern night sky (Antonín Bečvář's *Atlas Australis*). Using these maps, locations of planets were selected via chance operations and translated into pitches. These were then notated on two lines, each of which encompasses the entire range of the keyboard for the right and left hands. There are no marked dynamics, nor tempi, nor pedaling (all choices are left to the performer). There is no direction, nor narrative—it is simply the music of the stars.

Shiraz (1977)

Shiraz, a city in Iran—a pearl of a city, a diamond vigorously cut—inspired me to write a work for piano, which also would be carved out of an idea: the hands' movements on the piano.

The work is dedicated to the wonderful pianist Louis-Philippe Pelletier, and is indirectly dedicated to two blind singers whom I followed for hours in the marketplace of *Shiraz*.

—CLAUDE VIVIER

La Mandragore (1993)

La Mandragore (“The Mandrake”):

“Under the gallows grows the mandrake. At midnight, when the moon is full, it is picked beneath the hanged man who swings...”

The mandrake: a Mediterranean plant used in witchcraft. Due to its root in the shape of a homunculus, it is believed to have magic powers.

The music: a spiral centered on several ostinati of rhythm, color and timbre. Five “spectral” chords of variable appearance turn in the arms of the spiral.

This piece was commissioned by pianist Tomoko Yazawa and the French Ministry of Culture.

—TRISTAN MURAIL

***Tremors* (1995)**

Although most composers in this century have focused on the percussive and melodic aspects of the piano, for me, the real magic of the piano is its resonance. The shock that is delivered by the hammers, when notes are struck, produces a continuous vibration. Small impacts can color this vibration, pushing it in one direction or another. Large shocks, on the other hand, are capable of completely eradicating the previous color, or leaving only the faintest trace of what had been. Very delicate interventions can even shift the evolution of the resonance without being truly perceptible as independent events. All of this activity can be seen as a series of surface tremors on the underlying resonance (color), where the heart of the music lies. The interaction between the punctuated surface and the continuous undercurrent makes up the form and movement of the piece.

Tremors was written as the compulsory piece to be played by the 12 semifinalists in the American Pianists Association's 1997 National Fellowship Auditions.

—JOSHUA FINEBERG

[This set explores quiet extremes of the piano (pppp to ppppp), negative space (the sounds between notes), and piano resonance (through extensive use of the sostenuto pedal).]

—MABEL KWAN

***three reversed movements, to bring destroyed objects back to life* (2014)**

A small set of motions—extremely, painfully private, miniature rituals, by Evan Johnson.

***Between Clouds* (2012)**

Between Clouds is a simple meditation by Eliza Brown on time, space, and silence, gently exploring harmony, resonance, and sonic decay in an increasingly sparse landscape of pitches. This language emerges from the limitation the piece places on the instrument: block chords, or simultaneously struck groups of pitches, are (almost) entirely absent.

***Shadow* (2013)**

“Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is . . . In spite of its function as a reservoir for human darkness—or perhaps because of this—the shadow is the seat of creativity . . . The dark side of his being, his sinister shadow . . . represents the true spirit of life as against the arid scholar.”

—C. G. JUNG, 1938

This solo, composed by Rebecca Saunders, explores the play of shadow with vertical, harmonic clouds of differing density and complexity. Clouds of color are projected into the acoustic resonance, or “shadow,” of the preceding gesture. As a study, it is a detailed exploration of the sostenuto and sustaining pedals.

***Eusebius, Four Nocturnes for One Piano* (1984)**

Each nocturne contains a different “memory” of Robert Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze no. 14*. The composer Gerardo Gandini writes, “There is in the composition a kind of evolution leading to clarity, to a more tonal situation, exactly what I had rejected at the beginning of the composition. The tones remain there where Schumann put them, but I have made them longer or furnished them with diverse dynamics, or they are to be played in a different way . . . When the piece is played by all four pianos together, then you can hear Schumann's piece.”

About the Venues

All of the venues at EMPAC are extremely quiet spaces; great efforts were undertaken during the building's construction to make sure any background noise in the rooms was minimized. All venues are structurally decoupled from each other—so, you're basically sitting in a separate building when inside a venue—and all noise-making elements (anything that "hums": fans, electricity transformers, computers, etc.) are isolated from the performance space by an air gap surrounding the venue.

STUDIO 2

The white box. Covering the walls are 612 diffusive panels, designed specifically for EMPAC. They randomly scatter sound waves throughout the room with the goal of creating as "equivalent sounding" of a room as possible. The panels are cast with a glass-fiber-reinforced gypsum (GFRG) material and are dampened with a mass-loaded vinyl backing. With the exceptions of the black fabric banners at the top of the panels (which can be lowered to change the reverberation of the room), and some absorption under the ceiling, the room is primarily made of reflective and diffusive surfaces.

STUDIO 1—GOODMAN

The black box. Similar to Studio 2, there are 606 diffusive panels, which are joined by 810 absorptive panels designed to reduce reverberation in the room. Hidden behind them is another feature: covering the walls are large bass-cancelling boxes tuned to nine particular frequencies, which remove the boominess a space of this size would normally have. Again, present are the movable banners in front of the panels that can be deployed to absorb sounds across the audible spectrum. If Studio 2 is the "live" room, then Studio 1 is the "dry" room. Worth noticing is how "full and reverberant" the room feels as sound is being made, but how quickly it falls off when sound stops.

THEATER

Featuring 400 seats in raked configuration. Most importantly, but least noticeable from an audience perspective, is the full-sized stage (nearly the same size as Studio 1) with a height of over 70 feet, mostly built of reflective concrete. Underneath the seats are individual air vents (air conditioning is one of the noisiest elements in a room). As opposed to moving a lot of air from above through big vents, the quieter solution is to move air whisper-slow from many small vents in the floor.

CONCERT HALL

The largest space with over 1200 seats. Above you, a unique acoustical ceiling made out of fabric reflects high- and middle-range frequencies, but allows low ones to pass through and fill the empty volume above the fabric. Around the space are three acoustically distinct zones: a straight and angular wood zone enveloping the main floor seating, a GFRG diffusive-panel zone (like Studio 2, but with lesser detail) in the back of the side galleries, and the top zone featuring four different elliptical shapes made out of cast stone. Behind the stage is the towering curved concrete wall, which looks like a frozen curtain. The walls of the space are also curved, which allows sound to diffuse evenly across the hall, in an effort to make every seat sound just as good as another. One of the hallmarks of the Concert Hall is the ability to focus in on the most minute of sounds with incredible detail, but still be surrounded by the warm reverberation.

About the Instruments

YAMAHA c7 with Disklavier Pro

Origin: Hamamatsu, Shizuoka, Japan

Length: 7' 6"

Width: 5' 1"

Weight: 913 lbs.

Leading the first company to manufacture pianos in Japan, Torakusu Yamaha first endeavored to build reed organs (a kind of small pump organ) in 1887. By 1900, his company—then called Nippon Gakki Co., Ltd.—moved into the piano market. It wasn't until after World War II that Yamaha began to move towards their signature motorcycles. By 1991, Yamaha had produced five million pianos (!).

The Disklavier model is a modern version of the player piano, with the ability to acoustically playback and record material. While the playback feature will not be used in tonight's performance, Vicky Chow's performance will be recorded into the instrument itself (with over a thousand key stroke parameters and hundreds of pedal parameters per note).

NEW YORK STEINWAY MODEL D

Origin: Astoria, NY, USA

Length: 8' 11 3/4"

Width: 5' 1 1/4"

Weight: 990 Pounds

HAMBURG STEINWAY MODEL D

Origin: Hamburg, Germany

Length: 9'

Width: 5' 2"

Weight: 1058 Pounds

Steinway & Sons was founded in 1853 by German immigrant Heinrich Engelhard Steinweg (later Henry Steinway) in a Manhattan loft on Varick Street. As the reputation of the brand increased, along with it the need to supply worldwide demand, two new factories were built, one in Astoria, NY, and the other in Germany. The eldest son, C. F. Theodore, opened the Hamburg production facility in 1880. Still today, Astoria and Hamburg remain the only Steinway production facilities. By the year 2000, Steinway had made its 550,000th piano.

The differences between the two factories remain a point of intense professional discussion. Werner Husmann, a vice president who has worked for Steinway in Hamburg for 35 years, said, "Under the reign of CBS (who owned the company in the '70s and '80s), we had to say we're the same. [Now] at least it's allowed that we sound different."

One difference between a New York Steinway and a Hamburg Steinway is recognizable from the outside: the shape of the arms—the part of the case at either end of the keyboard. On a New York Steinway, the curve of the arm ends in a sharp corner—a Sheraton arm, named for Thomas Sheraton, the 18th-century furniture designer. On a Hamburg Steinway, the edge is rounded.

The Hamburg factory uses much of the same wood as the Queens factory—maple from the Pacific Northwest for the rims, and spruce from Alaska for the sounding boards. The strips that will be glued together in Hamburg are cut, packed, and shipped in Queens. Until the 1990s, Hamburg used European beech in the rims and Bavarian spruce in the sounding boards. The Hamburg used in tonight's performance dates from 2004. However, the Hamburg factory still uses reddish African mahogany for one layer of the rim, the layer that ends up next to the piano's sounding board

and the cast iron plate that holds the strings. In New York Steinways, that last layer has long been made of maple and spray-painted black with the rest of the case.

Most significantly, the difference is heard in the hammers that strike the strings. In Hamburg, Steinway uses hammers with hard felt, and the workers make them softer with needles and sandpaper. In New York, Steinway uses hammers with softer felt, and the workers make them harder by painting a gooey solution onto the head of each hammer. The solution, lacquer, and lacquer thinners add strength, and that increases the volume and brightness of the sound, whereas the needles and sandpaper are thought to produce a darker, fuller sound.

BÖSENDORFER 200 CS

Origin: Vienna, Austria

Length: 6' 7"

Width: 4' 11"

Weight: 753 lbs.

Founded in 1828 by Ignaz Bösendorfer with the intention of “retaining the character of the Viennese instrument, which is oriented toward a mellow string sound, while increasing its volume of sound,” the Bösendorfer company is one of the world’s oldest piano manufacturers. The great pianist and composer Franz Liszt (1811–1886) encountered one of the instruments and wrote in a letter, “The perfection of a Bösendorfer exceeds my most ideal expectations...”

The sound of a Bösendorfer is usually described as darker, richer, and mellower than other brands. This is possibly due to their unique production method. Instead of veneers bent around a form, the rim is made in solid sections of spruce and jointed together.

In 2008, the company was purchased by Yamaha.

FAZIOLI MODEL F212

Origin: Sacile, Italy

Length: 7'

Width: 5' 1"

Weight: 859 lbs.

A relative newcomer in the piano world, the Fazioli company was founded in 1981 by pianist and engineer Paolo Fazioli. The factory is located in Sacile, Italy (about 35 miles north of Venice) in an area renowned for an ancient and prestigious tradition in woodworking. The wood for the soundboard of the instrument is taken from the legendary Val di Fiemme, situated in the heart of the Western Italian Alps. This wood is highly prized for instruments, as, in the 1800s, celebrated violin maker Antonio Stradivari used this red spruce forest for his violins.

One of the core missions of the company is “to produce grand and concert grand pianos exclusively, aiming for the highest quality with no concern for large production,” which results in the company’s extremely limited production numbers—between 120 and 130 units per year. The Fazioli sound is usually described as bright, shimmering, and clear. “Fast” and “responsive” key action is also one of their hallmarks.

About the Performers

Vicky Chow

Canadian pianist Vicky Chow has been described as “brilliant” (*New York Times*), and “one of the new stars of new music” (*Los Angeles Times*). She is the pianist for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, Grand Band, the Virgil Moorefield Pocket Orchestra, and New Music Detroit, and has collaborated with other ensembles such as ICE, Wet Ink Ensemble, and the Wordless Music Orchestra. Most recently she gave the North American premiere of Steve Reich’s work “Piano Counterpoint” and the world premiere of John Zorn’s new piano trio titled “The Aristos.” She also recently performed Michael Gordon’s “Ode to La Bruja, Hanon, Czerny, Van Cliburn and little gold stars,” written for Grand Band, and an evening-length work by artist/composer Tristan Perich for solo piano and 40-channel 1-bit electronics titled *Surface Image*, and written for her. The piece was also released in the fall of 2014 on the New Amsterdam label to much success and was included in the top albums of the year lists from *Rolling Stone* and *Rhapsody*. Her other recorded work can be found on the Tzadik, Cantaloupe, Innova, Hinterzimmer, and AltaVoz labels. In addition to performing, Ms. Chow produces and curates “Contagious Sounds,” a new music series focusing on adventurous contemporary artists and composers in New York City. Originally from Vancouver, Canada, she studied at the Juilliard School with Yoheved Kaplinsky and Julian Martin before continuing studies at Manhattan School of Music with Christopher Oldfather. She made her orchestral debut at the age of 10 with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra made her New York orchestral debut appearance at Alice Tully Hall with the Juilliard Symphony performing Bartok’s *Piano Concerto No. 1*.



PHOTO BY KAITLIN MORENO



Stephen Drury

Pianist and conductor Stephen Drury has performed throughout the world with a repertoire that stretches from Bach to Liszt to the music of today. He has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, the Barbican Centre and Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, the Cité de la Musique in Paris, and the Leipzig Gewandhaus, and from Arkansas to Seoul. A champion of contemporary music, he has taken the sound of dissonance into remote corners of Pakistan, Greenland, and Montana. His performances of music written in the last hundred years, ranging from the piano sonatas of Charles Ives to works by György Ligeti, Frederic Rzewski, and John Cage have received the highest critical acclaim. Drury has worked closely with many of the leading composers of our time, including Cage, Ligeti, Rzewski, Steve Reich, Olivier Messiaen, John Zorn, Luciano Berio, Helmut Lachenmann, Christian Wolff, Jonathan Harvey, Michael Finnissy, Lee Hyla and John Luther Adams. He teaches at New England Conservatory, where he has directed festivals of the music of Cage, Reich, and Wolff.



Marilyn Nonken

Marilyn Nonken is one of the most celebrated champions of the modern repertoire of her generation, known for performances that explore transcendent virtuosity and extremes of musical expression. Upon her 1993 New York debut, she was heralded as “a determined protector of important music” (*New York Times*). Recognized a “one of the greatest interpreters of new music” (*American Record Guide*), her performances have been presented at such venues as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Miller Theatre, the Guggenheim Museum, (Le) Poisson Rouge, IRCAM and the Théâtre Bouffe du Nord (Paris), as well as conservatories and universities around the world. Composers who have written for her include Milton Babbitt, Drew Baker, Pascal Dusapin, Jason Eckardt, Michael Finnissy, Joshua Fineberg, Liza Lim, and Tristan Murail. She has recorded for New World Records, Mode, Lovely Music, Albany, Metier, Divine Art, Innova, CRI, BMOP Sound, New Focus, Cairos, Tzadik, and Bridge. Nonken received a Ph.D. in musicology from Columbia University and is director of piano studies at New York University’s Steinhardt School.



Mabel Kwan

Pianist Mabel Kwan champions the music of living composers and performs a diverse range of repertoire for piano and clavichord. She has been a featured soloist at the MATA Interval 7.1 in Brooklyn, Experimental Piano Series at PianoForte in Chicago, Boston New Music Initiative’s inaugural concert, and Sonic Fusion Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland. As a member of Ensemble Dal Niente, she has performed at Ravinia, Ecstatic Music Festival, UNRULY Music Festival, MusicArte Panama, SALT Festival, UNBOUND Festival, Fromm Concert Series, and the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt, Germany. Born and raised in Austin, Texas, she received performance degrees from Rice University and Northern Illinois University.

EMPAC

The Curtis R Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) is where the arts, sciences, and technology interact with and influence each other by using the same facilities and technologies, and by breathing the same air.

EMPAC hosts artists and researchers to produce and present new work in a building designed with a sophisticated architectural and technical infrastructure. Four exceptional venues and studios enable audiences, artists, and researchers to inquire, experiment, develop, and experience the ever changing relationship between ourselves, technology, and the worlds we create around us.



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EMPAC 2014-2015 presentations, residencies, and commissions are supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and The MAP Fund, a program of Creative Capital, primarily supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; additional funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Community Connections Fund of the MetLife Foundation, Boeing Company Charitable Trust, and the New York State Council for the Arts. Special thanks to the Jaffe Fund for Experimental Media and Performing Arts for support of artist commissions.

EMPAC

Upcoming Events

An updated schedule for the 2015 Spring season is available online at empac.rpi.edu. Check back often for more information.



TALK

EMPAC FROM THE INSIDE

Behind the Scenes of Production and Research

Wednesday, April 22 / 7:00 PM

FREE



TALK

CHARLES ATLAS

Screening and Artist Talk

Thursday, April 23 / 7:00 PM

FREE



MUSIC / SOUND

ARCHITEUTHIS WALKS ON LAND + MIRANDA CUCKSON

Saturday, April 25 / 8:00 PM

\$18 / \$13 / RPI STUDENTS \$6