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A History of the BBN Piano

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A History of the BBN Piano

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Abstract

BBN Corporation purchased a Steinert grand piano in 1980. This essay tells the story of the piano and the author's personal relationship with it.

BBN Buys a Piano

The '70s were the glory days of BBN. In the late '60s and '70s, BBN was one of the inventors of the ARPANET, the precursor to the Internet. BBN was a less hurried place, more academic and less industrial. It was the sort of place that couldn't do enough to ensure the happiness of its staff. In 1979 and 1980, two events shaped and changed BBN which had a negative effect on staff retention.

- Steve Levy, the CEO at the time, implemented a vision of spinning out small commercial companies to make a go of productizing BBN's innovations. A hiring frenzy ensued. Commercialization was too early—the market wasn't ready for what BBN had to offer at the prices being asked. In addition, BBN historically was a research and consulting firm, and the skills needed for commercialization are quite different from those needed for research. There was discontent over this vision, and some left for other research organizations such as Xerox PARC.
- In 1980, BBN was accused of conspiring to overcharge the government and altering timesheets to conceal the overcharges. Two high-ranking financial officers were given suspended sentences and were fined \$20,000 each. BBN paid a \$700,000 fine. Some employees left for ethical reasons.

In an effort to retain the employees that BBN had, as well as attract new talent, BBN created a new gym and library on the top (7th) floor of 10 Moulton Street, Cambridge. Mario Grignetti, a senior scientist, approached Ray Nickerson, a high-level manager involved in these changes, and asked for a piano. This would enable BBN pianists to practice here at their convenience, and also to perform in recitals and concerts on occasion. BBN had a chorus at the time, and they would also benefit from a piano. And, Xerox PARC had a piano...

Steve Levy approved the purchase, and a piano committee was formed to select a piano.. Three senior scientists who played piano—Mario Grignetti, Don Allen, and Wally Feurzeig—were on the committee. Mario thinks the committee was given a budget of \$1500 or \$3000 for the purchase.

Mario, Don, and Wally wanted a grand piano, and given their budget, that meant a used piano. Mario found a Steinert model B 5'6" grand piano at a used piano dealer, possibly Boston Piano Works. The committee decided it was a good choice for the money based on its tone quality, action, and physical condition. In 1980, BBN purchased a Steinert grand.

M. Steinert & Sons

M. Steinert & Sons, founded by Morris Steinert in 1869, started as a Steinway piano dealer in New Haven, Connecticut. Throughout the rest of the 1800s, he opened stores in most major New England cities. Steinert Hall was built on December 16, 1896, at 162 Boylston Street in Boston. Steinert Hall became the headquarters for M. Steinert & Sons, and still exists today.

In 1901, Morris Steinert began manufacturing pianos primarily to prove the efficacy of the Steinertone piano, a piano he had designed. In 1903, he purchased two piano factories in Leominster, Massachusetts—the Woodbury Piano Company and the Jewett Piano Factory—and began manufacturing his own line of pianos. Because he was still a Steinway dealer, Steinway forbade him to use his own name on his pianos for fear of branding confusion. Thus the pianos he manufactured were named A. M. Hume after Archibald Hume, Steinert's general manager. The Jewett and Woodbury names were also used, as well as some others.

After a surprise audit in 1916, it was discovered that Hume was embezzling money from M. Steinert & Sons, and Hume was promptly fired. Not wanting to name his pianos after a thief, Steinert requested and was granted permission from Steinway to use the Steinert name on his pianos. Pianos with the Steinert name were manufactured in Leominster from 1916 until 1932, when the factories were closed for financial reasons.

The serial number on BBN's piano is no longer visible, so its exact date of manufacture cannot be determined with certainty. However, the piano gives some clues as to its origin.

- The tuning pins in the bass sections are aligned in two parallel lines. Steinert discovered this design weakened the pin block and caused it to crack. The design was changed so the pins would be staggered. 1925 was the last year the parallel line design was used.
- On the back of the piano are two stickers from the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM). This organization rated American-made instruments. High-quality instruments got two stickers; everything else got one. This organization began in 1901 as The National Association of Piano Dealers of America. In 1919, with most piano merchants handling a variety of instruments, the organization was renamed the National Association of Music Merchants.
- The number 576 is incised in the front of the keyboard.
- The keyboard was made by Wood & Brooks.
- The action—the internal guts of the piano—was made by Wessell, Nichols, and Gross.

Based on these clues, Paul E. Murphy, Jr., the president of M. Steinert & Sons, believes BBN's piano may be a piano which was finished on March 11, 1920, and delivered to Famous & Barr Piano Co. in St. Louis on April 4th of that year. How the piano traveled from St. Louis to BBN is a mystery only the piano knows.

The Piano Comes to BBN

The piano was first placed in the library's reading room on the 7th floor of 10 Moulton, and people often came in to eat lunch and listen to whoever was playing. One BBNer reports that he adored listening to Mario practice Schubert.

This being BBN, filled with very smart people with strong opinions, the choice of piano generated some controversy. There were some folks who felt a better quality instrument could have been

purchased if the piano committee hadn't restricted themselves to a grand piano.

After a couple of years, the piano and a ping-pong table were moved to the BBN "multi-purpose room," a kind of rec room, also on the 7th floor of 10 Moulton. There was a signup for timeslots for the piano. The BBN chorus used it during their rehearsals. It was used by individual pianists as well as by duos and other small groups.

By the end of 1980, the piano was featured in BBN's recruiting literature as one of BBN's perks.

BBN Talent Night

May 19, 1984, BBN hosted a talent night in Newman Auditorium at 70 Fawcett St. The piano was moved from the multi-purpose room, across the BBN campus to Newman. It was spruced up and looked quite spiffy for the event.

So that Newman's capacity wouldn't be exceeded, free tickets were given out. All tickets were taken two months before the event. Unfortunately, it was a beautiful sunny Saturday that day, and a number of tickets holders chose not to show up. The auditorium was only 2/3 - 3/4 full.

Ray Nickerson was the host of the event and, during his introduction, started with this joke on BBN culture and government contracts. "The time it's [the performance] going to take has been estimated, and it's been estimated by programmers." Someone from the audience responded, "It's off by a factor of 2!" Ray replied, "We're anticipating applying for a no-cost time extension."

The concert was a couple of hours long. The first half was 4 classical performances: renaissance duets on period instruments; Mario played a couple of Debussy Preludes; violin and piano duets; and Don Allen played Evocation and El Puerto from Albeniz's Iberia, and the first movement, Danse Russe, from Stravinsky's Three Movements from Petrouchka.

The second half was lighter fare, with Carousel, a female barbershop quartet; Bill Levison playing folk songs on his guitar with some sing-along opportunities; and the Shawsheen River Rats, a male a capella close-harmony quartet.

The Piano Falls On Hard Times

Shortly after the piano was purchased some problems developed. The B flat one octave below middle C nudged the adjacent B string. A fix was made by Larry Fine, the piano's technician, which worked for a time. There were several cycles of fixing it and having the problem reemerge.

After a few years, the pins started loosening up and tuning became more frequently necessary. It wasn't long before the piano could no longer hold its tune.

The soft pedal also made some noise and was annoying to those who used it.

By 1988, Larry stopped tuning pianos, and Mario had been moved to another building and no longer used the piano. The piano was generally neglected.

In December 1992, the 7th floor of 10 Moulton was rearranged again, and the multi-purpose room was overtaken by the library. The piano was moved to an ignominious corner of the exercise room. It was in pretty sorry shape.

The Piano Is Rebuilt

In 1997, Josh Seeger, a department manager and a musician, was sick of the piano's condition, so he decided to bring in his own tuner, Yury Livshetz, to tune it. Yury reported that the piano needed a *lot* more help than just a tuning. Among other things, one of the strings was broken and the pieces were tied together in a square knot! Yury said the piano needed to be rebuilt, and it would cost around \$4500, plus the cost of moving it to and from his shop.

Yury is a big fan of Steinerts, Humes, and Jewetts, the pianos from M. Steinert and Sons. Although these pianos cost about half as much as a Steinway, Yury's opinion is their quality is

95-100% of a Steinway. Much of his business is finding old pianos, rebuilding and reselling them, and these pianos are often the best buy for the money.

Yury was willing to trade a fully refurbished upright for the Steinert in its then current condition. Josh took this offer to David Campbell, BBN's president in 1997. David had just gone through the process of purchasing a grand piano for his son, so had an appreciation for pianos. His preference, as well as Josh's, was to rebuild the piano.

Yury put in a new pin block, pins, dampers, hammers and felt. He restrung the piano with new strings, repaired and refinished the soundboard, and reset the bearing to increase the tension in the soundboard. The new pin block is a high-quality, many-layered plywood from Germany that is much stronger than the original pin block and can withstand the tension from the parallel pin design. The pin block was carefully sized and matched to the original plate. All of the action parts, except those mentioned above, are original.

In March 1998, the piano returned to BBN. Nobody wanted the piano to go back to the corner of the exercise room. Josh wanted recitals again, so he proposed putting the piano in Newman Auditorium. Access to Newman is restricted, so although there could be recitals, no one could easily use the piano. I suggested putting it in the 7th floor conference room at 10 Moulton. The piano could be accessed whenever the conference room was not in use, and the conference room was large enough for small recitals. Josh liked the idea, and David approved it. The piano has an honorable place in a major conference room.

For a few years, the piano was locked, with the intention of preventing piano abuse. All the lock did was prevent people from using the piano, so after a few years the lock was removed.

I became the "keeper of the piano" after its return. I make sure Yury comes regularly to tune and care for the piano. It has taken time for the rebuild to work its way in, but with each tuning, it keeps getting better.

My Story

I started my quest to find out about BBN's piano after my mother asked me why BBN had a piano. My answer to that question had always been, "because it's BBN," and in truth, it is the best short answer to that question. But I became curious. A corporate action as unconventional as purchasing, housing, and maintaining a piano happens in a context, and I wanted to find out about the BBN that made that unconventional decision.

I was hired in September of 1989, after BBN's first layoff ever. The BBN I am most familiar with, although still an absolutely wonderful place to work, has had to face the reality of hard financial times, space squeeze, corporate buyouts and mergers, and the like. Now we are part of Verizon, a very small blip on the Verizon screen. Tad Elmer, BBN's current president, is focused on making BBN a first-class research organization again; BBN's primary goal is to obtain interesting research-oriented work.

I found out about the piano soon after I was hired, and played when I could. It wasn't in the best condition, but it was still playable. In less than a year, I was on a critical path on my project, and my time became tight and piano playing became very rare.

In 1993, I transferred to a different department and was moved into a different building, not convenient to the piano. I stopped playing altogether.

In 1997, when I was pregnant with my son, David, I wanted to play again to give music to my child-to-be. I had transferred to another department located on the 5th floor of 10 Moulton Street, so access to the piano was quite convenient. I went to the exercise room and discovered only the piano bench. Already hormonal, I freaked at the possibility that BBN no longer had the piano. Calls to facilities pointed me to Josh Seeger, my department manager, who told me about the piano being rebuilt. The piano was returned in March 1998, less than a month before David was

born, so I did get to play for him while he was in utero.

Early in 2001, I took my son to the Museum of Science. There was an exhibit on digital music. A Yamaha Disklavier GranTouch Digital Grand Piano was part of the exhibit. I had an opportunity to try it, and was impressed by its action. I couldn't get it off my mind, and it sparked an interest in playing again. I returned to playing BBN's piano, and in May 2001, I purchased a GranTouch.

With piano playing such a central part of my life again, I talked about playing and the BBN piano a great deal, which often precipitated the question, "why does your company have a piano?" And thus my quest began.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to many people who talked with me and answered my emails.

Mario Grignetti, Don Allen, Wally Feurzeig, and Ray Nickerson shared their memories of obtaining the piano and its early days. It is because of these men that BBN has a piano.

Paul E. Murphy, Jr., president of M. Steinert & Sons (www.msteinert.com), came to BBN to look at BBN's piano and did research on its origin. He also provided me with a piece he wrote in April 1996, *A Brief History of M. Steinert & Sons*.

Yury Livshetz (yurys-piano@email.msn.com) gave me an in-depth tour of his shop and a detailed description of what he does when he rebuilds a piano.

Josh Seeger told me how the piano came to be rebuilt. It is because of Josh and David Campbell that the piano has a new life.

Bobbi Freeman shared pictures, tapes, and stories of the 1984 BBN Talent Night and the BBN chorus.

Larry Fine, author of *The Piano Book* (www.pianobook.com), shared technical details of the piano when it first came to BBN. Although he stopped tuning pianos in 1988, he clearly remembered BBN's piano because he thought it was so unusual that a corporation like BBN would have a piano. I read *The Piano Book* to learn about the inner workings of the piano. The background the book provided me was immensely helpful when Yury gave me the tour of his shop.

Steve Heinrich gave me insight into BBN's corporate culture in 1979 and 1980.

Jennie Connolly looked through old BBN newsletters for information on the piano and BBN Talent Night.

Dick Koolish suggested I contact M. Steinert & Sons to see if they had any records on the piano. I thought the idea was nuts, but I did it anyway out of desperation, and this turned out to be a very rich source of information. Dick's idea was right on.

I had brief conversations about the piano with Duncan Miller, Pat Sallee, John Makhoul, Tad Elmer, Walter Milliken, David Mankins, Janet LeBlond, Karen Seo, Stanley Silverman, David Getty, and Julie Sussman.

I had brief email exchanges about the piano with Carol Luddecke, Rusty Bobrow, Richard Tenney, Debbie Deutsch, Larry Sher, Aram Boornazian, Morris Keesan, Nancy Baltz, William Plummer, Elsie Leavitt Laughlin, Radia Perlman, Bernie Cosell, Dick Pew and Doug Dodds.

I referred to *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins of the Internet* by Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon for early BBN history.

All of these people have been my guides on what has been a truly joyful trip through the glory days of BBN. I thank you all.