

THE Gold STANDARD



by Barbara Stahura

Roger Williams LIMITED EDITION GOLD PIANO

Scores of professional pianists over the past 150 years, from Paderewski to Billy Joel, have demanded the absolute best instrument, and so chose Steinway. Yet Steinway's biggest performer-fan is probably Roger Williams. Perhaps that's appropriate for someone nicknamed "Mr. Piano," who was the first pianist to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and who is the greatest-selling pianist in history. Now a proud owner of three Steinways (one D and two Bs) in residence at his Encino, California, home, Williams began playing at age 3. Now 80, he has produced 116 albums, including 18 gold and platinum discs. His signature song, "Autumn Leaves," recorded in 1955, quickly became an American classic; a half-century later, it still stands as the best-selling piano recording of all time. Fittingly, Steinway has produced a special Art Case piano specifically for him: "The Roger Williams Limited Edition Gold Piano."

"This is the only piano we have ever built and named for an artist," says Frank Mazurco, Steinway executive vice president. "Roger is a legendary pianist with incredible credentials, and he's played nothing but Steinways his entire life. He's an American treasure."

In return, Williams says, "This is a great honor, one of the most beautiful things to ever happen in my life." Then he adds with a chuckle, "So I'd better be good when I sit down to play it."

As if someone who knows 10,000 songs by heart and can play them in any key could be anything less than good.

Just like other Steinway Art Case pianos, this one began with a glimmer in someone's imagination.


In the fall of 2003, "we had been talking to Roger about building a piano for him," recalls Joe Sidorowicz, supervisor of Steinway's pattern shop and designer of this Art Case piano and others, "and in our conversations, it came out that he wanted something bright and showy and perfectly at home on center stage. We developed the idea to build a gold piano."

Sidorowicz created the elegant Art Deco design, using its architectural lines to reflect that historic period. His choice of that time period was accidental, he says, and only later did he realize it commemorated the era of Williams' birth. But he also wanted this instrument to specifically honor Williams' signature musical number, "Autumn Leaves."

The sight of the Roger Williams Art Case piano is breathtaking: Its gold metallic finish, accented by a high-gloss top coat, throws off a glow under stage lights that is "incredible," according to Sidorowicz. Along the piano's perimeter is lettering that forms the lyrics to the first verse of "Autumn Leaves" in an Arts and Crafts font, with gold leaves falling and dancing between each line of the verse.

When Williams first saw the design, he requested only one change: That those gold leaves be darker so they could be better seen from the audience. Sidorowicz gladly complied.

The piano's music desk is decorated with signature notes from "Autumn Leaves" aligned on a music staff. Williams' favorite



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decorative element on the instrument is inside: Unlike the typically golden-colored cast-iron plate inside standard pianos, this one has been custom painted with an autumn landscape.

Sidorowicz says he chose this scene because autumn is his favorite time of year. Of course, it doesn't hurt that it also graphically portrays Williams' biggest hit. When the lighting is right, the pastoral scene is reflected in the underside of the piano's golden lid, showing itself off to the audience.

"It's so outstanding," says Williams of the painting. "The only problem is that people can't see it unless the piano is open."

Of course, no matter how beautiful the outside, a piano isn't worth much if the sound doesn't measure up. And, like all Steinways, this one produces glorious sound.

"I sat down at this piano for the first time," recalls Williams, "and at that minute, I knew this was the best piano I'd ever played on."

Steinway & Sons stores the gold piano, priced at \$258,000, and ships it to the various venues where Williams plays. (Only eight models of the Roger Williams Limited Edition Gold Piano will be produced.) Williams debuted it on Oct. 1, 2004, at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum in Atlanta. The occasion? Mr. Piano and the former president both turned 80 on that day. As if that wasn't occasion enough, Williams played a concert that lasted 13.5 hours, composed entirely of about 400 requests from the 2,000 people in the audience. Many of those requests were physically demanding, such as some of the Chopin or Liszt numbers, yet Williams bested his old marathon concert record by half-an-hour. He says his daily three-mile walks keep him in the kind of shape such an effort requires. As is usual after one of his marathon concerts, his fingertips were bleeding on this day, too. He doesn't mind, though. "Sitting at the piano is the best therapy in the world for me," he explains.

As a child, Williams began his piano playing on an old player model his father, who was a preacher, brought home. He remembers learning the scales by putting his fingers on the appropriate keys as the automatic player mechanism pushed the keys down and lifted them up. Yet at his father's church was an old Steinway, so young Roger went there often to play that instrument instead, beginning to develop and perfect the inimitable style that's made him an international celebrity. Even at that tender age, by comparing the player piano to the church piano, he began to realize that "a Steinway has a soul. It reflects all the work that has gone into it."

Mazurco, who has listened to Roger Williams' recordings for much of his life, was present at a February 2005 concert that Williams performed in Michigan, seated at his gold Steinway piano. "When it was over, 400 or 500 people waited and then walked by the piano, just to see it and touch it," he says. "It was a magical night."