

WINE VVS

World's first 108-key concert grand piano built by Australia's only piano maker

ABC Riverina By Oscar Wills and Rosie King

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PHOTO: The world's first 108-key piano has a range of nine full octaves. (ABC News: Rosie King)

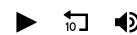
One of Australia's last remaining piano-maker has just created an instrument the likes of which the world has never seen.

Most grand pianos have 88 keys but Wayne Stuart's family-run business in Tumut, southern New South Wales, has built the first known piano with an impressive 108 keys.

This means it boasts a nine octave range, unheard of on the piano until now.

"It's the 21st century, we need new things," Mr Stuart said.

"We need new horizons and this is certainly a new horizon."



AUDIO: World's first 108-key piano unlocks lost musical potential (AM)



PHOTO: Wayne Stuart is the man behind the masterpiece (ABC News: Rosie King)

Mr Stuart has been handcrafting pianos for 40 years but this is by far his most ambitious creation.

Made with ancient Tasmanian Huon pine, the masterpiece measures 3 metres in length and took 18 painstaking months to build.

"We've got an awful lot of strings and they needed to be supported," Mr Stuart said.

"Also, the performance culture has changed a lot and increasingly, pianists are stretching into the piano and playing on the open strings.

"It's not just about the keyboard, it's about the whole instrument so we've had to re-engineer the front of the piano so that it's more pianist-friendly, if you like.

"You only get one hit with things like this and you've got to get it right, and I think we've made a pretty good fist of it."

The result, according to Mr Stuart, is a grand piano that feels and sounds more like an orchestra than an instrument.

Limits of engineering

Concert pianists Dr Stephanie Neeman and Dr Edward Neeman were quick to give the unique instrument their tick of approval.

"I think it's wonderful, I feel like a kid in a toyshop," Stephanie Neeman said, after seeing the Stuart and Sons creation for the first time.

"There are so many possibilities of sound and composition with this piano, it's just wild."

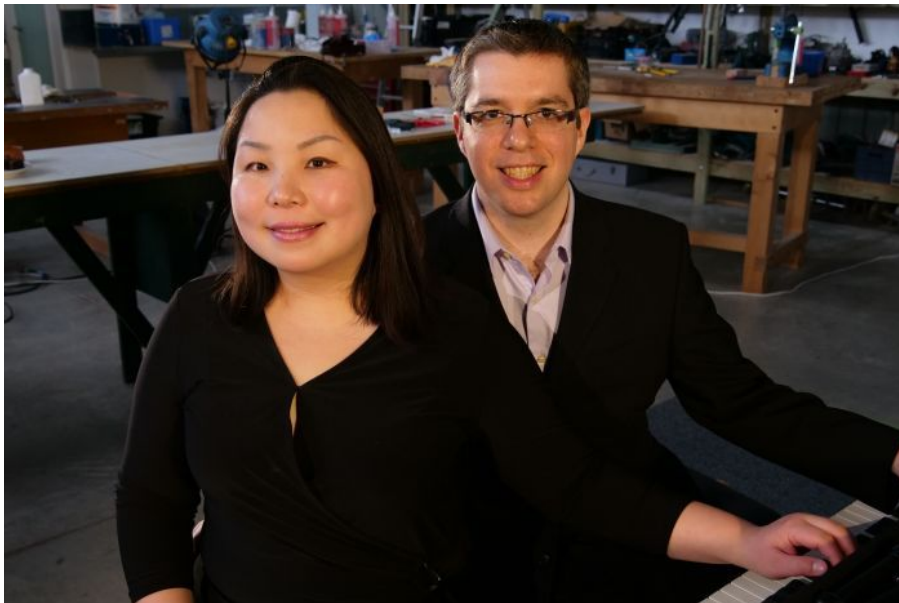


PHOTO: The Neemans sit at the world's first 108-key grand piano. (ABC News: Rosie King)

Edward Neeman said he can feel the difference, even if he is not utilising the extra octaves the 108 keys offer.

"You don't even need to play the extra keys to get the effect," he said.

"You get a really warm and brilliant sound, and the whole bass becomes much richer [and] the resonance is more when

there are more keys on the piano.

"This is as big as it gets, it's pretty much the limits of human hearing, the limits of engineering."

Piano's new home

The 644-kilogram piano has been named The Beleura in honour of its new home — Beleura House and Garden on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula.

Beleura House director Anthony Knight commissioned the piano, which had a \$300,000 price tag, and said it would be used to nurture Australian musical talent.



PHOTO: Drs Edward and Stephanie Neeman couldn't wait to get their fingers on the extra keys. (ABC News: Oscar Wills)

"The man whose house this was, John Tallis, was a musician and a composer," Mr Knight said.

"John Tallis always wanted to help young creative people so that's what I thought we should do [and] we have, I think, the best bloody piano in the world."

Industry that could have been

The Beleura may not be the only 108-key concert grand in existence for long.

When asked how ready he was to make another one, Mr Stuart replied "Straight away!" without a hint of hesitation.

"I've always seen myself as a visionary in the piano industry and I think, to be realistic, I'm not going to start a mass production facility in Australia," he said.





PHOTO: The piano was made using ancient Tasmanian Huon pine. (ABC News: Rosie King)

Mr Stuart said that was partly due to Australia's high costs when it came to manufacturing and as a result, Australia has resorted to importing most of its pianos.

Statistics from the Australian Music Association show Australia imported 7,416 pianos last year and 20,783 since 2015.

Only three of Mr Stuart's handcrafted masterpieces have rolled out of his Tumut workshop in the last three years and he wonders what could have been for the Australian economy.

"That means that a lot of money is not sloshing around in this country, particularly in areas that can actually make a difference to people and people's lives," he said.

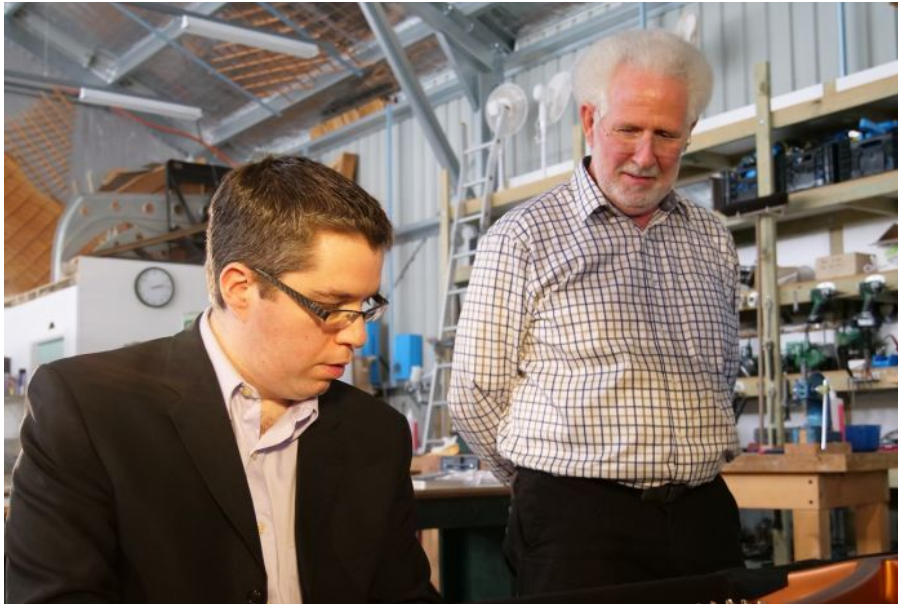


PHOTO: Dr Edward Neeman loved the feel of the piano. (ABC News: Rosie King)

Mr Stuart believes the import culture has also had an impact on Australia's perception of music.

"I have seen the piano industry industry wither on the vine and I don't think musicians really understand how it will ultimately affect them over a long period of time," he said.

"It will come to pass that they will not be able to find a piano tuner to tune their instruments or to maintain them properly."

New standard for 21st century

For now, Mr Stuart wants to continue to push the piano's traditional boundaries which he said had been stuck in time for far too long.





PHOTO: The 'Beleura' piano is 3 metres long and weighs 644 kilograms (ABC News: Rosie King)

"There has been music around for the 108-key range for quite a long time and it's not a peculiar range because it actually mirrors the range of the pipe organ," he said.

"We want to continue with the 108-key range; I personally think it's the minimum frequency range for a piano in the 21st century.

"I could not stand to sit at an 88-key piano now. I would want to take an axe to it because it's just too limiting."

Mr Stuart's message to the doubters: "The new range is nine octaves. Get used to it!"

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