

GRAND IDEA

Philly firm returns to piano manufacturing

By **TOM DI NARDO**
For the Daily News

A CENTURY AGO, a piano was a fixture in nearly every American living room. The family's rented upright, spinet or grand was as essential an obligation as today's car loan, and this area boasted six piano manufacturers and a host of retail stores.

Piano sales peaked in the 1920s, when more than 365,000 were leased or purchased domestically every year. The Depression crushed that number to about 50,000 by 1932, and it was further diminished by the advent of television 20 years later — and, more recently, the lack of music education in most public schools.

Then, in the mid-'90s came the book "The Mozart Effect," which talked about the impact of playing music on developing children's brains. Suddenly, parents wanted their kids to play instruments again, a trend that continues today.

Thus the Cunningham Piano Co., a prestigious local institution since 1891, has decided to take a giant leap back into manufacturing pianos.

Their new instrument, which has a remarkably rich sound, will be demon-

strated in a July 30 concert by renowned pianist Hugh Sung at the Woodmere Art Museum.

The new Cunningham pianos are assembled in Shanghai, China, with Italian keys, German strings, Japanese action and parts from several other countries. An instrument from that Shanghai factory is the official piano at the Beijing Olympics.

"Because we don't make the parts or assemble them here, I don't consider us a piano manufacturer," said Timothy Oliver, who, with fellow longtime employee Richard Galassini, purchased Cunningham last February.

"But we have designed it ourselves, on our terms, with an intimate knowledge of all the parts," Oliver continued. "These pianos have a truly unique tonal palette. And after they come in, many hours are spent on each one in our factory to adjust them and make them absolutely perfect before delivery."

In its heyday, Cunningham built more than 2,000 pianos in a year, most of them tall uprights (referred to as "cabinet grands") and player pianos that worked with pi-

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YO!



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no rolls.

George Gershwin composed the early stages of his opera "Porgy and Bess" on a Cunningham piano near Charleston, S.C., where still can be seen in a "Porgy" museum.

The business was founded by Patrick J. Cunningham, who established his factory at 0th Street and Parkside Avenue and his showroom in Center City — precipitating a battle with John Wanamaker, then the largest local piano dealer. Cunningham retaliated by building his 11th and Chestnut streets showroom higher than Wanamaker's store.

In 1941, Cunningham sold the business to Louis Cohen, who moved it to Germantown Avenue near Coulter Street. Manufacturing ceased, but Cunningham has refurbished thousands of pianos and sold new and used instruments to customers throughout the world.

Fifteen technicians work on three floors of the atmospheric old building on all stages of piano repair and restoration — including the intricate metalwork and fine cabinetry — using arcane and unique skills. One craftsman recently spent a month studying restoration techniques at the Viennese factory where the famous Bosendorfer pianos are built.

Co-owner Galassini majored in vocal studies, musical performance and piano technology at Temple University but needed more than the income from singing church jobs. In 1987, he saw an ad in the *Daily News* for a piano salesman and discovered a new calling.

The idea of building a Cunningham piano again was first discussed around 1995, 4 years after manufacturing had ceased, Galassini recalled. "We became frustrated with what was available and realized there was a real void in the affordable piano market."

So a design was launched with help from



Photos: ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Daily News
Cunningham Piano Co. owners Timothy Oliver (left) and Richard Galassini in their second-floor showroom.



Piano keys are stored at the Germantown Avenue facility.

George F. Emerson, who had created designs for name manufacturers Baldwin and Mason & Hamlin. Having the pianos crafted overseas brought the price to more affordable levels. (A third of all pianos sold in the U.S. are made in China, which suddenly has millions of piano students thanks to its expanding middle class — as well as the star-quality example of such famous Chinese pianists as Lang Lang and Yundi Li.)

A new, American-made Steinway grand could easily set you back \$50,000 to \$60,000 or more. But a new Cunningham five-foot grand goes for \$8,190, a 5-foot-10-inch grand goes for \$11,800, and a nine-foot concert instrument is \$44,000. From another major manufacturer, a concert grand would run at least \$100,000.

"Hugh [Sung] called and asked to see some pianos," said Galassini, "and I remembered that I had waited on him years ago when he was a youngster. He didn't remember me at all, but in trying all our pianos he eventually was so impressed . . . that he bought a 5-foot-10-inch instrument for his home.

"We have 25 more grands coming in, and over 20 percent are already sold. We should have 200 this year, and are planning on 300 to 400 annually."

Cunningham also hopes to sell its pianos through other dealers.

Sung's recital is one of an ongoing series of Cunningham-sponsored programs to es-

he's never even met.

Sung's career began with a Philadelphia Orchestra debut at age 11, then Curtis at 13. He graduated in 1990 and three years later, at 24, he joined the faculty.

Holding the impressive title of Curtis' Director of Student Recitals and Instrumental Accompaniment, Sung helps schedule the popular, free Monday-Wednesday-Friday student concerts. Most also involve him as accompanist.

Years before a student could

Sung generous with his time, talent

By **TOM DI NARDO**
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Mention pianist Hugh Sung's name to any recent Curtis Institute student and it will trigger an enthusiastic outpouring about his artistry — and generosity.

A brilliant artist and caring mentor, the diminutive Philadelphia native tirelessly shares his enormous musicality and roaring laugh with virtually every student at Curtis, and with whom

ever dream of playing a concerto with an orchestra, Sung's versatility supplies the orchestral accompaniment, reduced to a dense piano part. To eliminate turning pages, he reads music from the 6,000 scores available on his laptop, using a foot treadle to move the pages onscreen.

Sung often accompanied soloists in preliminary rehearsals for the Philadelphia Orchestra's Christoph Eschenbach and has

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Sung will perform at the Woodmere Art Museum.

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