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“WHEN YOU SEE HOW HILDA COMES TO LIFE NOW THAT THIS KEYBOARD IS GOING TO BE BUILT, THAT GIVES SO MUCH SATISFACTION” — WOLF LEYE

SMALLER KEYS, GREATER POSSIBILITIES - A CUSTOM-MADE KEYBOARD FOR HILDA HUANG

Introduction

For pianist Hilda Huang (30), a lifelong frustration regarding keys that are too large for her small hands is finally coming to an end. With the help of The Music Instrument Fund (*Het Muziekinstrumentenfonds*), a smaller keyboard is being custom-built for her in her Steinway. "This is the way to the future."

Emotionally Connected

In the showroom of Piano's Maene in the Belgian Ruiselede, Hilda Huang beams when she plays the enormous Maene-Violy grand piano with narrow keys and an ergonomically curved keyboard. With her height of 1.55 meters and small hands, she immediately feels the difference compared to her own grand piano. On this grand piano, she can easily reach the keys, which allows her entire body to relax. Her dream is becoming a reality at this very moment. In the workshop of the German firm Kluge, a custom keyboard is subsequently being made for her, which will later be placed in her grand piano in Maene's workshop. She receives the instrument on loan from The Music Instrument Fund (*Het Muziekinstrumentenfonds*). "I can't even explain how much the narrow keys are going to change my daily reality," says Hilda Huang. "I often sit on a book on her stool for a better position."

"She had been studying on narrow keys for a week to see what effect it would have. 'It felt shocking. Until then, some pieces by Rachmaninoff I hadn't quite mastered yet—like the comfort with which I could now play—were phenomenal. Because my hands were less stretched out, I could put more power and louder sound into it. I could play more relaxed and felt so much more emotionally connected to the music. That was perhaps the most wonderful thing.' A heavy burden lifted from Huang's shoulders: 'I began to think: couldn't more possible come from this?'"

Around the autumn of 2025, she felt confident enough about her request to approach **The Music Instrument Fund** (*Het Muziekinstrumentenfonds*). *"Could they help me get a piano with a smaller keyboard?"* Huang had a serious and well-reasoned story, says Frits Schutte, Head of Collection at The Music Instrument Fund. *"We concluded together that it is strange that this problem wasn't addressed sooner. With stringed instruments, there are different sizes and you can grow from a small instrument to a larger format. But that doesn't exist for pianos."*

"The comfort with which I played was phenomenal. I felt so much more emotionally connected to the music" — Hilda Huang

Surreal Feeling

"Until three years ago, I didn't even know a smaller keyboard existed. I saw such a piano for the first time in New York. 'I was initially afraid to play on it,' she looks back. 'I had been frustrated for years by the fact that my hands were too small. What if this felt great? Then I would be angry that this

didn't exist for me yet and it would break my heart if I had to leave this piano behind.' Playing on it for the first time felt surreal. 'It was as if someone had been pushing against a closed door for years that finally opened. 'It was the first time I played Rachmaninoff in public,' says Hilda Huang. 'I also played Poulenc and Brahms. Until then, I was known for my Bach repertoire. For baroque and chamber music, I didn't actually need what was needed there. Physical strain is not asked of you in a piano concerto the way Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff does.'"

Giant Workshop

The fund decided to help Huang. This is how they currently sit at **Piano's Maene**, where Huang and Schutte are welcomed by Chris Maene and project leader Wolf Leye. Huang can try out not only the special ergonomically curved keyboard from Maene: **Violy**, but also all other grand pianos from the showroom. Including her future Steinway, which still has a standard keyboard. They are led on a round tour of the giant workshop. Between the large machines where grand piano cases are bent, where wooden layers are glued on top of each other, and where the sawdust is meticulously vacuumed up, experts from Maene adjust the keyboard and all mechanical parts onto each other and place them into Huang's grand piano. After the tour, discussions are held with all involved about the exact size of the keyboard.

Hilda Huang poses all her questions: *Must we change proportions regarding the weight of the key actions? And how wide will the black keys be?* Frits Schutte emphasizes that the keyboard must be able to be swapped out with the conventional one, but for anyone using the instrument, it has to work. *"That can easily be done, our technicians slide the keys and the mechanism out of the grand piano daily,"* Wolf Leye reassures.

Unique Combination

The entire project costs 30,000 euros and is funded by donors and a crowdfunding campaign by the fund. For Maene, various keyboards are not completely new. *"Historically, it has always been common,"* says Leye. *"Especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only at the end of the nineteenth century were the sizes standardized. We at Maene have a special DNA. From our founding in 1938, we have built and restored both modern and historical instruments. Therefore..."*

Hilda and her Steinway

In 2024, Hilda Huang received a 1926 Steinway on loan from The Music Instrument Fund, but this instrument turned out to be unsuitable for installing a new keyboard. Huang was fortunate that a much younger Steinway (1999) from a legacy became available. The narrowed keyboard will be installed in this grand piano.

This grand piano underwent a restoration by Maene this past summer. Although the grand piano is relatively young—you could roughly compare its age to that of a human—it still needed a significant maintenance overhaul. The oxidized stringing was replaced, as were the tuning pins, hammer heads, dampers, damper guides, and the damper felt. Furthermore, the piano received new grapples, the pieces of copper through which the strings pass. Finally, a special lining was designed with soft foam and velvet. In this lining, the keyboard that Huang is not currently using can be stored safely.

"I'll soon be able to realize my ambitions much more easily" — Hilda Huang

There has been a lot of cross-pollination, and we share a lot of knowledge. Ten years ago, we built a smaller keyboard for Daniel Barenboim, but that wasn't a new idea; it actually wins out over the fundamental goal of the fund and Maene: to develop a suitable instrument for a musician. *'The proof of the pudding is in the eating,'* quotes Leye. "Naturally, you look at the technical inventiveness and the handiwork, but first and foremost in instrument building, you want an instrument to get played. And when you see Hilda blossom on this keyboard that has been built, that gives so much fulfillment."

Larger Span Width

Now that her hands have been measured, Huang is awaiting the arrival of the keyboard with anticipation. *'I dare not expect too much yet, but as I study with it each week, it gave me so much rest.'* Her new keyboard is 1.3 centimeters narrower per octave than the conventional one. Instead of the octave (eight keys) span width, she will soon be reaching a tenth (ten keys) with her hand. Because of the space and relaxation that creates in how she plays, she will grow artistically. *'I can realize my musical ambitions much more easily. I am ergonomically more efficient, so I can play better and longer. Also, playing changes my technique, for example, more flexibility in my hands. How smoothly I reach across the keys determines how well I can play legato. The connection between my hands and ears is so strong that switching between pianos takes me only a couple of minutes to adapt. By practicing on narrower keys, this will go even faster in the future.'*

Broader Application Base

All parties involved see a future for themselves in which both conservatories and concert halls have such a piano with smaller keys. *'There is a social aspect to accessibility,'* says Huang. *'Accessibility is for all body types. That fits our current society.'* She says she wishes that the taboo that has let itself be held back by thoughts like *'this is not for me, I'm sticking with Bach'* would disappear. Now that she is discovering what is more possible, she wishes others to do so as well. *'Worldwide, the available pianos with small keys are an endangered species. I am one of the first Steinways in the Netherlands with such a smaller keyboard. Everyone who is curious about it is welcome to try it out at my home. My door is open!'*