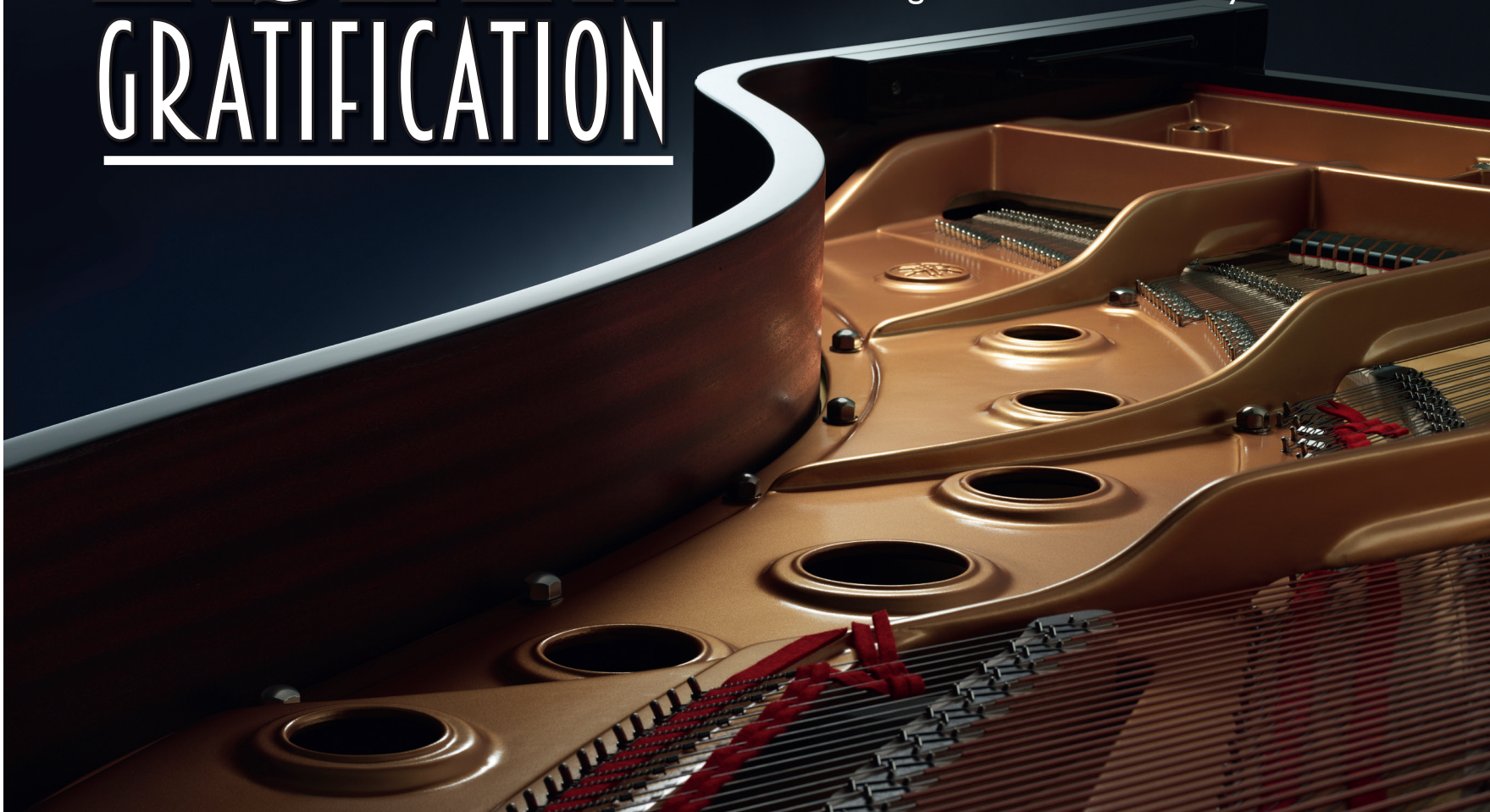


INSTANT GRATIFICATION

At the Musikmesse in Frankfurt, **John Evans** tested Yamaha's new SX series of pianos. It didn't take him long to discover what they had to offer



Don't think about how this piano was produced. Simply enjoy it. These were the instructions of a development engineer at Yamaha, and I did as I was told. The engineer was just one member of an extensive team who have worked on the company's new series of SX grand pianos. The series was launched in April at Musikmesse, the annual music-industry trade fair in Frankfurt.

Good advice, you would think. What really matters about an instrument, surely, is not how it's made but how it sounds. But a little history is in order. Yamaha launched their previous S series of grand pianos back in 1980. The SX series is the product of five years of research and development which has had far-reaching consequences for the piano's design and manufacture. The series features a host of technical innovations intended to take the piano to a new sonic level.

But just how 'new' is the SX? Closer examination reveals it to be an evolution of the S range, rather than an all-new instrument from the ground up. As Masahiro Wada, general manager of Yamaha's acoustic musical instrument development department, says, 'The SX

Series is not totally new but there are several new design elements to realise our target sound quality.'

The eagle-eyed among you may have spotted the redesigned cabinet and the distinctive 'S' curvings on the side arms. It's a detail that is echoed elsewhere on the piano, from the sinewy bentside to the rounded edges of the perfectly cast frame. It's impossible to say whether these features contribute to the piano's tone but at least visually, the effect suggests warmth and fluency.

Under the bonnet

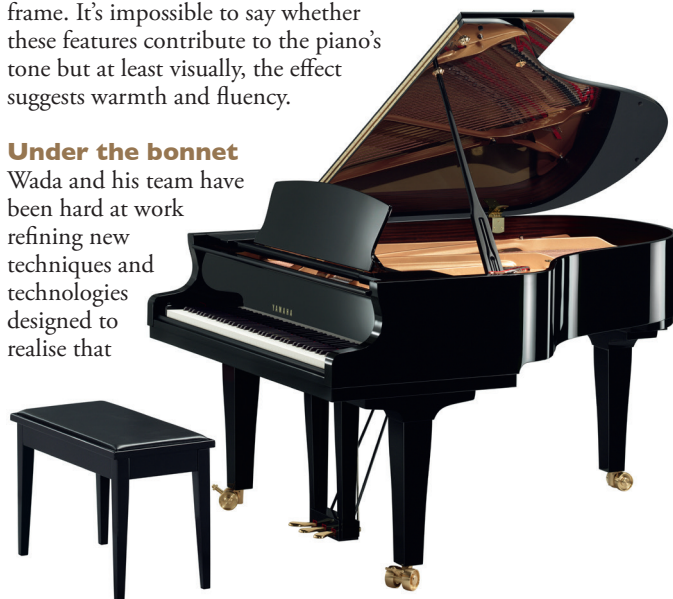
Wada and his team have been hard at work refining new techniques and technologies designed to realise that

Distinctive S curvings are a design feature throughout the SX series

impression in sound. Chief among them is a process, unique to the SX, that Yamaha calls acoustic resonance enhancement (ARE). In short, it's a way of accelerating the ageing of the wood used to form the piano's tail, spine and bentside, collectively known as the rim. At the same time, the rim is constructed from fewer laminates, with a commensurate reduction in sound-absorbing glue.

'With ARE technology we believe we have achieved the deep resonance that was only previously possible from wood that has aged naturally with time,' says Wada. 'Developing and refining the technique was the biggest challenge.'

The SX borrows assembly techniques from Yamaha's flagship CFX concert grand in the way that the soundboard, ribs and bridge are attached, in order to achieve richer overtones, low decay (in other words, a longer sustain) and a wider range of tonal colours. Innovation continues with the hammerheads, which are now made from an exclusive new felt. The result, says Yamaha, is greater elasticity and balance from bass to treble. The back frame has been beefed up with thicker beams that boost the rigidity of



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MAKERS



the instrument and help to reduce unwanted vibration.

It seems remarkable that, over 300 years since Cristofori invented it, the piano continues to evolve. Masahiro Wada is not so surprised. 'Yamaha believes the piano should be improved forever to express every pianist's expected sound. Ever since we began to build pianos in 1900, we have never stopped developing the instrument. We make everything – from the rim to the hammers. This gives us total control over quality and consistency at every stage of the production process.'

At the bench

Have the company's efforts paid off? On the Yamaha stand at the Frankfurt Musikmesse, I sat down at the bench to try out three of the four models in the SX range: the S3X (6ft 1in), S5X (6ft 7in) and S7X (7ft 6in). These pianos go on sale later this summer. The fourth, the S6X (7ft), follows at the end of the year. Prices range from £37,243 for the S3X to £57,647 for the S7X.

What struck me first was their maturity and warm, singing tone. Some modern grand pianos can feel heavy and intimidating. Time is needed before they reveal themselves. The new SX grands, by contrast, yield their particular tonal qualities almost as soon as you touch the keys for the first time.

The smallest, the S3X, is capable of the subtlest dynamic gradations. It's possible to give individual lines distinct tonal character with ease. It's effortlessly warm and glowing, and decay is impressively long. There's bite if you want it but without the hard or metallic edge that afflicts some pianos. Despite its compact dimensions there's power to spare, too, within a fair-sized room.

Played as an exercise without pedal, a piece such as Debussy's *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* ripples along, glittering and sparkling. Repeated with a dash of pedal and at a slower tempo, the sound becomes spacious and plush. You can have fun with this instrument; it flatters and inspires in equal measure.

The SX series is squarely aimed at the high-level demands of professionals and conservatoires

The S5X is the S3X duplicated on a slightly larger canvas. However, where 20kg separates them, 60kg and almost 12 inches set the S5X apart from the S7X. The qualities that make the smaller pianos such a pleasure to play are here in abundance. Despite its greater power and projection, the S7X has the same clarity and finesse as its smaller siblings.

'We set out to achieve not just a big sound but a rich, deep and warm one with a wide dynamic range,' says Wada about the new pianos.

In the course of developing the SX, Yamaha constructed 50 prototypes and invited pianists and keyboard experts from around the world to sample them and give feedback. Among them were Nicholas Walker of the Royal Academy of Music in London, John Thwaites, head of keyboard at the Birmingham Conservatoire, and Graham Scott, head of keyboard at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Given these names, it's not difficult to guess what level of pianist the SX is aimed at. 'We have a clear target customer for the new instruments,' says Wada. 'Music academies, small concert halls, professors, and high-level students and professionals.'

Did Yamaha aim to benchmark the piano against competitor instruments? 'We did not need to benchmark it; we just developed the SX Series for these target customers,' says Wada, confidently. At Musikmesse, it was claimed by one Yamaha that a dealer representing another, particularly revered brand was deeply impressed with the new SX line-up: perhaps Wada and his team really have hit the bull's eye. ■

SX AT A GLANCE

Model	S3X	S5X	S6X	S7X
Length	6ft 1in	6ft 7in	7ft	7ft 6in
Width	59in	59in	61in	61in
Height	40in	40in	40in	40in
Weight	330kg	350kg	390kg	410kg
Key surfaces (white)	Ivorite	Ivorite	Ivorite	Ivorite
Key surfaces (black)	Wood composite	Wood composite	Wood composite	Wood composite
Price (incl VAT)	£37,243	£44,376	£51,841	£57,647

More about the Yamaha SX series at:

UK <https://uk.yamaha.com> Europe <https://europe.yamaha.com> USA <http://usa.yamaha.com>