Taken from Aug 20, 2001 New Yorker

Erica Feidner knows the piano you want.

BYLINE: JAMES B. STEWART

Erica Feidner has a gift. Not, perhaps, the gift her father was hoping for when he woke her every weekday morning at four-thirty to practice the piano. Or when he put his thirteen-year-old daughter on a bus for the four-hundred-mile round trip from their home, in Bennington, Vermont, to the Juilliard School, in Manhattan. But it is a gift nonetheless. No one who experiences it seems to forget it.

Glady Faires, of Knoxville, Tennessee, met Feidner at the Steinway & Sons showroom on West Fifty-seventh Street in Manhattan, where Feidner is a salesperson. An amateur pianist, Faires already owned a Steinway grand, as well as a piano by the fabled Austrian maker Bosendorfer, but she wasn't especially happy with either instrument. The Bosendorfer had been a gift from her husband, so she hadn't chosen it herself, and the other piano had been, at the time, the only Steinway grand for sale in Knoxville, so she hadn't been able to compare it with others. The tone was too dark and sombre for her taste.

She was looking for something with a brighter, more cheerful sound, and she was hoping Feidner could help her find it. Steinway Hall, as the showroom is called, was built in 1925; it contains an ornate Beaux-Arts room decorated with paintings of Schubert, Berlioz, Mendelssohn, and Rubinstein and illuminated by a massive crystal chandelier hanging from a domed ceiling. In the center of the space stands a single piano, usually a nine-foot Model D in an ebonized finish-the company's signature concert grand, with the distinctive Steinway & Sons logo in gold on its side.

Almost every twentieth-century virtuoso has passed through this room en route to Steinway's Concert and Artists Department, housed in the basement, where he or she can select a concert grand for performances at Carnegie Hall, across the street. Feidner and five other salespeople have desks on the periphery of the room. Despite their presence, there is a hushed atmosphere, like that of a cathedral or a museum, punctuated only now and then by the distant, cascading notes of a Chopin etude. Oddly, the phones never seem to ring.

Steinway Hall is by now so rich in history and symbolism that no one would dare change it, though company executives worry that it is intimidating to many potential piano buyers. But, like most of Feidner's clients, Faires found herself quickly at ease in the formal surroundings. Feidner is about five feet four, very slender, and strikingly attractive, but it was her ready laugh, her high energy, and her contagious enthusiasm for the piano which enveloped Faires. Before looking at any instruments, the two sat at Feidner's desk and spent more than an hour discussing Faires's tastes in music, her level of experience, where she would be using the piano, how often it would be played, what kind of response she wanted, even how and when she would use the piano's pedal mechanism. Faires stressed that she wanted an instrument with a bright tone, one that was very "forgiving" to the

player, for use in a second home in Hilton Head, South Carolina. She liked to play all kinds of music, from classical to pop. When they were finished, Feidner took a piece of paper and wrote down a six-digit number, which meant nothing to Faires.

Then Feidner led Faires to the pianos, through a long corridor that functions almost as a museum of the piano and has had on display, among other artifacts, the upright Steinway bought by John Lennon in 1979, and then into the showrooms, most of them wood-panelled, with more portraits, more chandeliers, and Chippendale furniture.

On a typical day, Steinway Hall holds up to three hundred pianos, seventy-five per cent of them grands-the largest concentration of Steinway pianos in the world. Customers can buy pianos from a network of Steinway dealers in major United States cities, but in recent years production has fallen short of demand; in Los Angeles, there was a period last year when the dealer had no Steinway grands in stock. As one of only six company-owned stores (others are in London, Hamburg, Berlin, and Munich), Steinway Hall gets priority.

After explaining various technical aspects of the Steinway, Feidner urged Faires to play. Like many amateur pianists, Faires is shy about playing and hates to perform. She said she would rather listen to Feidner play, so that she could hear what the pianos sounded like from a distance. Feidner was sympathetic but firm-there could be no substitute for Faires's playing the piano herself-and left the room, so Faires could play alone.

When Feidner returned, though, she relented, and sat down at the piano herself. She began playing a Chopin nocturne. She seemed momentarily transported, playing from memory, her eyes half closed, her concentration intense. But she stopped abruptly, and resumed the conversation.

Successful piano salespeople aren't necessarily accomplished pianists. Most can play at least a little, but it's not an occupational necessity, or even something Steinway looks for in a prospective salesperson. Still, Feidner's playing stood out. Faires wondered if she had been a concert artist. Even in the brief Chopin excerpt, Feidner seemed to have the expressive power of a professional pianist.

Then, as Feidner led her around the room, Faires tried out one piano after another-more than a dozen in all. She said that the one she liked best was a five-foot-eleven-inch Model L. "Do you love it?" Feidner asked. In truth, Faires had been a little disappointed in the tone. It was not quite the bright, singing sound she had hoped for. "I have one more," Feidner said, explaining that a piano had just arrived from the factory and was still in the basement being serviced. Feidner had played the piano that morning. "I'll have it brought up," she said. Fifteen minutes later, the instrument was ready. Faires sat at the keyboard. As she began to play, her spirits soared. This piano had the cheerful sound the others had lacked. It was forgiving. It was as if someone at Steinway, in making the piano, had built it to her exact specifications. When she turned to Feidner, she didn't have to say anything. They both knew the piano was sold.

"Look at the serial number," Feidner told her. Faires found the series of numbers stamped on the iron frame just inside the rim. Then Feidner produced the piece of paper on which she had written some numbers at the end of their interview. They were the same.

Feidner, who is thirty-seven, has been the top salesperson in the Steinway organization since 1994, and in 1999 alone her sales netted four million dollars. "We don't know anyone who has done what Erica has done," Frank Mazurco, the head of sales and marketing and a former salesperson, told me on a recent visit to Steinway Hall. "If only we could clone her. How does she do it?" Mazurco paused to think, and mentioned a few characteristics of people who succeed in selling pianos. (An enthusiasm for the Steinway product certainly helps.) But then he shrugged. "We just don't know." Like the sound of a great piano, he said, "it's something intangible that makes her unique."

It is not unusual for Feidner's customers to describe her as a force of nature. This is not because they feel pressured by her but because after they meet her many soon find themselves in the grip of musical ambitions they never knew they harbored. These ambitions often include buying a specific piano that they feel they can no longer live without, even if it strains both their living rooms and their bank accounts.

I know that feeling. One winter afternoon, I walked into Steinway with no appointment and was referred to Feidner. (Walk-ins are assigned in rotation to the available salespeople.) On a first visit, Steinway Hall is indeed intimidating, and I felt half apologetic for taking up Feidner's time. But I was soon confiding my musical aspirations. I hadn't studied the piano since I graduated from high school, but I still played for fun. I had moved into an apartment large enough for a grand piano, something I'd dreamed of owning since fifth grade, when I began taking lessons, and I was close to buying a used seven-foot Yamaha that I'd been testing for several weeks. I thought I should at least compare it with a Steinway, but I had no intention of buying anything so expensive.

I had brought along some Schubert piano pieces, and, at Feidner's insistence, I played many pianos, including new ones, even though they were flagrantly beyond my stated price range-more than twice as expensive as the Yamaha. Then she steered me into a smaller room of used pianos, upstairs from the main showroom, and left me alone. Two ebonized six-foot-eleven-inch Model Bs stood side by side, and I began to play. I don't recall how much time passed. I had never played pianos like these. At some point, Feidner quietly reappeared. She complimented me on my playing and asked if I'd considered taking lessons. She said she could suggest some teachers who might be appropriate for me. I thanked her and left as quickly as I could.

The next day I was back, with more music. I tried some Debussy preludes. Swept up in my own playing, I didn't think to ask Feidner to play, and, apart from sounding out a few chords and scales, she didn't volunteer.

A few days later, I returned again. Feidner and I discussed the tone, the action, the pedigree of the two pianos I liked, and, finally, the

price, which was plainly marked on sales tags attached to them. I said I couldn't afford them and asked about a discount. Feidner said that Steinway doesn't discount. But she showed me a monthly payment plan with below-market-rate financing. On a monthly basis, it didn't look so bad, I decided.

When I came back the following week, I had become such a regular visitor that I just waved to Feidner and went upstairs. But something in the room was different. The pianos had been rearranged. The two pianos I loved were no longer side by side. I raced to ask Feidner what had happened. "It sold," she said, referring to the slightly brighter, more aggressive of the two instruments.

I had all but forgotten that this was the point of the Steinway showroom. I was shocked that something so expensive had been bought by someone else, evidently on impulse. Mercifully, the other piano had been spared.

Feidner had earlier asked me if I wanted to make a small down payment to reserve one of the pianos, an offer I had rebuffed as too much of a commitment. Now I practically begged her to take my check.

Feidner smiled. She explained that she knew I would fall in love with it when she saw me carrying the Schubert score. His music calls for an instrument with a warm, rich, even, singing tone across the full range of the piano; a long sustain and an action that can produce legato passages; and a dynamic range from hushed triple-piano to fervent double-forte. I wasn't an experienced enough pianist to know this at the time, but Feidner did, and, consciously or not, I had responded to these qualities in the instrument.

Some months later, I ran into the saleswoman who had nearly sold me the Yamaha. "What did you decide?" she asked. I told her I had bought a Steinway. "You made the right choice," she said.

Erica van der Linde first came to Steinway Hall when she was ten years old, on her first visit to New York City. Her parents drove her from Bennington, where her father, Reinhoud, was a professor of mathematics at Bennington College, and her mother, Rosamond, taught piano and was the president of the Vermont Music Teachers' Association. Her father was also a talented musician, playing oboe, organ, and piano, and had studied in his native Holland.

The youngest of four daughters, Erica, like her sisters, had begun studying piano at the age of three. Along with her oldest sister, Polly, she showed unusual promise. When she was seven, her father began giving her lessons and coaching her in the classical repertoire. By the time she was nine, she was assisting her mother by giving lessons of her own. At ten, on the visit to New York, she auditioned for Juilliard's Pre-college division, where she was accepted and awarded a scholarship. At eleven, she made her debut with the Vermont Symphony, playing a Haydn concerto.

Rein, as her father was known, had immigrated to America at the end of the Second World War with a dollar-fifty in his pocket. Handsome and outgoing, he worked his way though college, earned a Ph.D. in

mathematics at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and married Erica's mother, who was one of his students at Bennington. Although the van der Linde family struggled to make ends meet, they lived in a large, rambling house in Bennington and owned twenty-six pianos. Each morning, the daughters rose at four-thirty for an hour or two of practice. They all studied other instruments as well-in Erica's case, the violin and the viola. As soon as they got home from school, they resumed practicing or helped their mother teach. When not playing and practicing, they learned Dutch from their father, and they often spoke it at home. One night a week, each of the daughters was responsible for preparing the family dinner. They also babysat for their younger brother, Tiaan. During the summer, their parents ran a piano camp called Summer Sonatina. Sometimes there were scores of young pianists in the house, and the van der Linde children all worked to help keep the camp running. "It was a boot camp," Erica remembers.

Every day was a potential adventure. Rein took them sailing, and Erica proved to be an avid fisherman. They bought land in New Brunswick, where, every summer, the family camped in tents, made dinner over a fire, and then heated stones to warm their beds. Eventually, they moved an old house there and restored it, doing almost all the work themselves.

But music remained the focus of the family's life, and Erica "was always the prodigy," according to her sister Amy. At an early family recital, when Erica was six or seven, held in the church where Rein was the organist and Rosamond the choir director, Amy heard Erica, fourteen months younger, play "The Bear," by Vladimir Rebikov, a piece in which both hands play in the bass clef. It was obvious to Amy that she could never keep pace with Erica. "I was upset," she says. "I didn't want to perform. I hated it. Later, I found other things I enjoyed." All the children were entered into numerous musical competitions, but it was Erica who most often won. Her parents sat in the audience, taking copious notes. "Thank God it wasn't me," Amy says now. "They wanted us to be professional musicians. Erica bore the brunt of this."

Erica moved from one triumph to another. She played a Mozart concerto and a Mendelssohn concerto in return engagements with the Vermont Symphony. At seventeen, she won a competitive audition and played the Beethoven Choral Symphony with the Albany Symphony. She studied piano with Daniel Epstein, played a brilliant junior recital, and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from SUNY Purchase. "We all just assumed that Erica would be a concert pianist," Amy says.

When Erica was a sophomore in college, she saw a television ad for the Miss America pageant, which stressed the money available for scholarships. Unbeknownst to her parents, Erica had been plotting ways to buy a piano and live on her own after she graduated from college, and the pageant seemed to offer the means. She entered as a contestant from Bellows Falls, Vermont, a town of three thousand people. For the talent competition, she played a Liszt concert etude, "Forest Murmurs," on a small upright piano, and advanced to the state finals, held in a high-school gym in Middlebury. Miss America-the former Miss Utah, Sharlene Wells-was on hand to crown the winner. Erica's parents were somewhat taken aback by this unexpected turn in their daughter's

career, but they attended the pageant. Erica was one of five finalists. When the fourth runner-up was announced, Erica heard her name and came forward. Then there was a shuffling of ballots and someone announced that a mistake had been made. The list of names had been read backward. Erica was the new Miss Vermont.

She was awarded thirty-five hundred dollars, a ski pass, and a fake-fur coat. She had given little thought to the actual duties of her new position. Shortly after the pageant, she was asked to crown the dairy princess in a county near the Canadian border. Wearing her gown and tiara, Erica was pulled in a cart by live oxen through the streets of Enosburg Falls, ending up ringed by Port-O-Sans in the muddy field of a local hog farmer. There, as the dairy-princess contestants and their families looked on and a cold rain fell, she performed the "Forest Murmurs" on a badly tuned upright.

Four months later, Erica stepped onto the stage in Atlantic City. She had had no coaching before the pageant. She had bought a sequinned evening gown for five dollars after spotting it hanging from a tree at a yard sale. In the swimsuit competition, she felt nearly invisible next to some of her long-legged, big-bosomed, blond rivals. Nevertheless, Erica was considered a contender, because she had won a preliminary talent competition, and talent counts for a sizable percentage of the outcome. Eight seconds of her performance (the "Forest Murmurs" again) was broadcast on national television. But as she walked down the runway in her evening gown she stumbled and lost a shoe. She was not among the ten finalists.

Still, Erica had won three thousand dollars in the talent competition, and with the money she set out to buy a piano and resume her concert career. Over her parents' objections, she moved to New York with her boyfriend, Eric Feidner, a French-horn player she'd met in college. She found a used Steinway Model S, the company's smallest grand, for five thousand dollars. It was more than she could afford, but she fell in love. Using her contest winnings, she borrowed the balance from her teacher and a sister and bought the piano. She paid them back by giving piano lessons, and auditioned for the master's program at Juilliard, playing Schubert's demanding "Wanderer Fantasy." In a concert that brought special pride to her family, she performed the Bach triple-keyboard concerto with the Vermont Symphony, with her father and her sister Polly at the other pianos.

After the concert, she and Eric went skiing. Erica fell, and said her hand hurt. But she kept skiing. She fell again. Her hand hurt so much that Eric took her to the emergency room of the local hospital. When she emerged from the hospital, her hand was in a cast; she had torn a ligament in the thumb. For the first time since she was a young child, Erica could not play the piano.

She remembers that moment. She felt immense relief: a burden had been lifted. Ever since her performance with the Albany Symphony, for which she had felt inadequately prepared, she had doubted her abilities and the strength of her commitment. Seven hours a day of practice had been lonely and seemingly never-ending. Despite her early success, she suspected that she would never make it into the top ranks of the world's concert pianists. After a lifetime of immersion in classical

music, "I felt trapped," she recalls. "I had no other strengths." She wondered if the falls on the ski slope were unconsciously deliberate. The accident, Erica now says, gave her the excuse she needed to abandon a concert career.

Erica was not the first van der Linde child to fall short of her parents' musical ambitions. Tasha, the second daughter, became a successful model. Amy worked briefly in construction. Tiaan sailed in the summer and worked on ski trails in the winter. But Erica's decision may have been the most painful. She quit playing completely, even after her hand healed. She sold her teaching practice. Amy recalls that the family was shocked and disappointed, feeling that a great talent was being wasted. "It was hard for me- it was hard for all of us, but especially my father," Amy says. He would try to get Erica to play something on visits to Vermont. She refused. Eventually, he gave up. He never overtly criticized Erica's decision, but his silence underscored his disappointment. As Erica started a new life in New York, she and her father grew apart.

Like her father, and like many other talented musicians, Erica had an aptitude for math. She enrolled in business school at Baruch College, in Manhattan, and found a part-time job selling Bosendorfer pianos at a Manhattan dealer. After she graduated, in 1992, she moved to Steinway.

Erica's performance skills languished. She tried to avoid playing for customers. When someone insisted, she played as briefly as possible. Customers may have been impressed when they heard Erica play, but they had no way of knowing how painful the experience was for her.

At home, Erica's Miss America piano, as she called it, sat untouched, a silent, nagging monument to her past.

Blindfolded, a person would find it hard to believe that all the pianos in the Steinway showroom bear the Steinway name, so different is each piano's tone, touch, feel, and resulting sound. Some of this is the natural variation in any handmade product consisting of more than twelve thousand moving parts. Some of it comes from the varying resonant characteristics of different pieces of wood, even from the same species of tree. All Steinways have Sitka-spruce soundboards, pine ribs, and rims made from up to eighteen layers of hard-rock maple, but the evenness of the grain and the dryness and age of the wood can produce significant variations in sound. These can easily be heard by reaching into the piano, plucking the strings, and listening to the resulting tone and the speed with which the sound becomes inaudible-the sustain time. A tone that seems to hang in the air indicates a piano with an ability to sustain, a quality that is prized by Steinway, but one that even some Steinway pianos lack.

Feidner readily concedes that some Steinways are inferior. But, contrary to rumors that seem to have begun after Steinway & Sons was acquired by CBS, in 1972, this is not because newer Steinways are not as good as older ones. In 1962, Steinway replaced felt bushings, which surround the pins, with Teflon bushings. This sparked some criticism, and in 1982 Steinway returned to felt. But the piano expert Larry Fine, writing in the most recent edition of "The Piano Book,"

described such concerns as having been "magnified" by bad press at the time and states that "most technicians feel that Steinway grands, properly serviced, are among the best-performing pianos-if not the best-made." CBS sold Steinway in 1985, and the company is now public, trading on the New York Stock Exchange. Within the past two years, Steinway has acquired its European supplier of piano keys and its American manufacturer of cast-iron plates, to insure supply and quality. Steinway points to such capital investment in defending the pianos' quality as the best it has ever been.

In fact, Steinway has no desire to produce instruments that are essentially interchangeable, like those of many of the Asian manufacturers, who achieve consistency by relying on machine, rather than human, labor. Much of the variation readily discernible in a visit to the showroom is deliberate. The sound of a piano is produced by a wooden hammer, covered in felt, that strikes a group of two or three strings strung to a high degree of tension. Steinway uses a relatively soft felt, which produces a mellower, softer sound, with richer harmonic overtones. In time, as the hammers repeatedly strike the strings, their surface firms, so that the sound of an older Steinway may be more brilliant and percussive than that of a new one. In a process known as voicing, technicians may add chemicals to the felt to harden the surface, achieving the same effect. Or the felt may be pricked to produce small holes, which will soften the sound. Many pianos require that both methods be used to produce an even sound across their range. But voicing is far more than a mechanical process. It blends artistry and craft to coax the finest sound possible from each piano. The resulting wide variations mean that Steinway can produce a piano for nearly every musical taste, but when no two pianos sound alike finding the perfect piano can be a bewildering experience.

The Manhattan literary agent Joe Regal came to Steinway Hall looking for a small grand piano, not because he really wanted a small piano but because that was what he could afford. As he explained to Feidner in their initial interview, he had studied piano, and had even been accepted at Juilliard, but he hadn't played in thirteen years. He and his wife were moving from Manhattan to a house in New Jersey, so he felt they had room for a larger piano, and he wanted to play again. Feidner took Regal to a five-foot-one-inch Model S, Steinway's smallest grand, and he began testing it by playing the Brahms G-Minor Rhapsody.

The Brahms rhapsody was a revealing choice. Brahms himself must have possessed an exceptional piano, because so many of his compositions celebrate the deep bass notes of the instrument-an area that exposes the weaknesses of most pianos, especially small ones. Dark, moody, and passionate, the rhapsody lives in the deepest reaches of the piano, calling for a low A, the standard piano's lowest note, at a climactic moment. Feidner quickly suggested that they move to larger pianos, whose richer bass tones are produced by much longer strings. It was only when they reached a six-eleven Model B that Regal began to hear what he wanted. Even then, he felt that the deep tones weren't "singing."

The instant he used the word "singing," Feidner said, "I have the perfect piano for you." She led him upstairs to a room with five

enormous, nine-foot Model Ds, the Steinway concert grands, and directed him to one of them. "Give this a try."

"It was instant," Regal says. "It sang. It was like a romantic encounter. I knew this was right. I know she knew." He resisted. "I'm a little concerned," he told Feidner. "It makes me sound better than I am."

"What's wrong with that?" she asked.

Regal returned to Steinway "desperate," he says, to find something smaller and cheaper. On one visit, he met a sixteen-year-old prodigy, who was playing the same Brahms rhapsody on what Regal now thought of as his piano. The two talked, and the sixteen-year-old asked Regal why he had abandoned his study of the instrument. "You'll understand someday" was all Regal said. Then Regal started worrying that the prodigy was admiring his piano too much. "I started to fear that someone else would get it."

On his next visit, as Feidner led him to the room, they heard someone playing, someone with a virtuoso sound and technique. When they entered, a man was playing Regal's piano. It sounded fantastic. But Feidner interrupted him.

"This is his piano," she said, referring to Regal. "I'll have to ask you to play another one."

After he had left, Feidner turned to Regal. "Do you know who that is?" Regal didn't. It was Barry Douglas, a concert pianist whose acclaimed recording of Moussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" Regal had played for his wife on their second date. Later, Feidner introduced them, and Regal told Douglas how much the recording had meant to him. By then, he says, "I was sold. It was fate."

It's not unusual to run into a famous concert artist at Steinway Hall; last year, ninety-seven per cent of piano soloists with the world's major orchestras chose Steinways for their performances. A remarkable roster of pianists, from Martha Argerich to Krystian Zimmerman, are "Steinway Artists," which means that they both own a Steinway and use Steinway pianos exclusively in their concert appearances. Steinway offers no financial incentives to these performers, but, as Mazurco, the head of sales, told me, the company recognizes that their patronage is "critical" to the Steinway reputation. "The only way to maintain this is to provide the best pianos," he said. Still, Steinway caters to their preferences by maintaining a fleet of about three hundred concert grands-an inventory worth twenty-one million dollars-which is at their disposal for concert appearances around the world and is unrivalled by any other manufacturer. (Performers or their hosts pay rental and transportation fees.)

In 1988, Andre Watts caused a stir when he dropped Steinway for Yamaha, complaining about maintenance standards on the concert grands. Steinway responded by tightening standards for its maintenance personnel and reducing the number of authorized Steinway dealers from a hundred and fifty-three to seventy-four. Watts returned to playing Steinways in 1993.

Of course, most of Feidner's customers are not concert artists, and few have trained at Juilliard. Many do not play the piano at all. They may hope to learn, or perhaps they hope their children will. Many are drawn to Steinway by the allure of the brand name, and the pianos' reputation for quality and as a good investment.

Buyers should not come to Steinway expecting a bargain. Other pianos sell for half or less than half of Steinways; the Steinway list price ranges from fifteen thousand dollars for the smallest upright to eighty-six thousand for the basic concert grand. "No one compares a Steinway to a piano that's half the price," Mazurco says. "If you can afford it, you gravitate toward a Steinway, either new or pre-owned. That's the competition."

Earlier this year, Feidner agreed to let me observe her with a customer. This was Cathy Weisenburger, who lives with her husband and her two children in Greenwich, Connecticut. She and Feidner had never met, but they had spoken on the phone. After studying the Steinway brochures, Weisenburger told Feidner that she thought she had room in her home for the six-eleven Model B. She had added that she didn't play, but that she and her children were planning to take lessons. "I can help you find a teacher," Feidner had said. They made an appointment to meet at the showroom.

Not being a musician, Weisenburger seemed more concerned about how the piano would look in the living room of her house, where she also wanted to install a harp, to create a "music-room effect." She wondered what kind of wood she should choose. "What do most people get?" she asked. "I want it to fit in." Feidner asked her to describe her interior decorating-"traditional, tufted, fluffy"-and established that the room's floors were cherry, a warm, reddish-toned wood. She explained that although Steinway still sells more ebonized pianos than any other kind, natural wood veneers have been growing in popularity, and Steinway has introduced a collection of pianos featuring exotic woods. Black can be "cold" in the traditional environment that Weisenburger described, Feidner said. "Mahogany, perhaps, or rosewood." Feidner later told me that many customers focus on the look of a piano. It is, after all, a sizable and permanent fixture in a home, and she often has to function as something of an interior decorator.

Walking toward the rooms of pianos, Feidner said, "We have sixteen new Bs just now, but there are two I absolutely love." She led Weisenburger to the pianos and played a few chords on each.

Weisenburger noticed another model B in the same room, as did I. It was the most beautiful piano I'd ever seen. Feidner pointed out that it was veneered in East Indian rosewood-part of Steinway's Crown Jewel collection. But it had already been sold, by Feidner. She summarily dismissed another attractive model in mahogany. "Don't waste your time-it honks." En route to see some restored pianos, Feidner led us through a room with a piano that caught Weisenburger's attention immediately. "What's this?" she asked.

This was another stunningly beautiful piano. Feidner explained that it was a limited Tiffany edition with hand-carving in African Pommele

mahogany. The Model L we saw, one of two hundred Tiffany pianos made, was already sold, and was undergoing a final polish before delivery. But Feidner mentioned that there was one remaining Tiffany B in the factory in Queens, which she had played and could recommend. She would arrange to have it brought to Manhattan so that Weisenburger could hear and play it. The price was a hundred and fourteen thousand dollars.

Though not a musician-at least, not yet-it was obvious that Weisenburger was smitten by the unseen piano. Within an hour, she had left a thousand-dollar deposit reserving the Tiffany B.

Several days later, Feidner reported that Weisenburger's husband had balked at the Tiffany Model B. I thought it was too bad that Feidner couldn't get him into the showroom with his wife, because I suspected that in Feidner's presence his inhibitions would quickly evaporate. But Feidner seemed unfazed. She subsequently located a slightly used five-foot-eleven-inch Model L, also a Tiffany edition, in a beautiful East Indian rosewood. Its price was eighty-two thousand dollars. After playing it herself and liking it, Feidner had Weisenburger return, to see and hear the piano. Weisenburger loved it, and took delivery in March.

In part because Feidner refuses to sell what she considers an inadequate piano, her "closing ratio"-the percentage of her walk-in customers who actually buy a piano-has not always been the highest at Steinway. She will often ask a customer to wait until the right piano materializes, and this can take months or, in rare cases, years. Her sales success stems from the large volume of customers who ask specifically for her, usually referred by a former customer or by a piano teacher. (Feidner has had dealings with more than eight hundred piano teachers in the metropolitan area.) In many cases, they suggest Feidner because their own experience with her was so positive or memorable, and because her involvement with her clients doesn't end with the sale of a piano. This, too, is something I have experienced.

After my piano was delivered and I began the monthly payments, a steady stream of correspondence arrived from Feidner. There were sales events, reminders to insure my piano, updates on price increases-all to be expected-but also invitations to recitals at Steinway Hall, hosted by Feidner. Among its other attributes, the acoustics of the impressive domed room provide an ideal setting for the Steinway sound, and the salespeople can reserve the space for evening recitals, both for individuals and for teachers who wish to showcase their students.

It is true, as Joe Regal had suggested, that a great piano can make a pianist sound better than he or she may actually be, but it can do only so much. I played my new piano for several years, and I had to confront the fact that I was not getting any better. Even by my own forgiving standards, nothing I played was suitable for performance, even before a group of close friends. Feidner's suggestion that I resume lessons nagged at me, although thirty years had passed since my last one, just before I graduated from high school. I had been an undisciplined and, for my teacher, an exasperating student. I seemed to have an aptitude, and I could sight-read easily, which was more a curse than a blessing, because I could coast through lessons without

practicing. Though I had never aspired to a concert career, I sometimes wondered what I could accomplish if I had some direction and actually practiced. But in all those years since my last lesson Feidner was the first person with any musical training to encourage me. So, finally, two years ago, I called and took her up on her offer to help me find a teacher. She seemed delighted to supply me with the names of three teachers who accepted adult students, and who she felt would be suitable for someone at my level, which is how I ended up taking lessons from Bari Mort, a pianist on the Upper West Side who also teaches at Bard College. It was a good match.

In a matter of months, Feidner called to tell me she was working out the next year's schedule for the Steinway recital series and wanted me to perform. I was, of course, immensely flattered, and naive about how much work it would take, so I committed myself to a date. I chose several works I loved but couldn't play, and began practicing and preparing with Bari. I had weekly lessons, and I practiced an hour each morning. No longer an adolescent, I cultivated patience and humility. Feidner called periodically to discuss my repertoire, check on my progress, and offer encouragement. During several weeks that I was travelling to promote a book I had written, Feidner contacted Steinway representatives, who made pianos available to me in every city I visited. In Chicago, I was introduced to a visiting pianist who was practicing for an upcoming performance with the Chicago Symphony as a fellow "Steinway Artist."

Finally, the date arrived. I was uncharacteristically nervous, never having experienced anything like a solo recital, and worried that the results of my hard work could easily be a catastrophe. I especially regretted having chosen to open with a treacherous Bach prelude and fugue. But, once I arrived at Steinway, a certain calm descended as I realized that, whatever happened, it would soon be over. Exuding confidence, Feidner led me to a practice room to warm up. The audience was made up mostly of relatives and friends, and I was encouraged by the applause that greeted my arrival at the concert grand. I got through the Bach, wandering, inexplicably, from the score only once. When I returned for the centerpiece of my performance, a Schubert Sonata in A Major, my nervousness had dissipated and I began to enjoy myself, becoming absorbed in the music and all but forgetting the audience. My adrenaline flowing, I finished with a Liszt valse and a Brahms intermezzo. The applause seemed thunderous, but I couldn't deliver an encore, since I had exhausted my repertoire. Still, the experience was exhilarating, and I rank it among the high points of my life.

In the early nineteen-nineties, Rein van der Linde learned that he was suffering from leukemia, and his health began to deteriorate. When Erica's first child, Luke, was born, in June of 1996, she called and asked if he and her mother would come to the city to see their grandson. He declined, saying they might come later in the summer, after their annual vacation in Canada. In tears, Erica called Amy. "Don't they realize how important this is to me?" she pleaded. Eventually, her father relented, and he and her mother came for a visit. But Erica deemed it a complete failure. The weather was oppressively hot, her father seemed to resent being there, Luke cried,

and, as a new mother, Erica was too exhausted to do much to boost her father's spirits.

A few weeks later, her brother called, and then her mother got on the phone. While they were in New Brunswick, her father had experienced a crippling headache, and had been taken by ferry to a hospital in Calais, Maine. His leukemia was in an advanced stage. Erica started crying. She hadn't called him on his birthday, the day before, and now she felt terrible, and worried that it was too late. Taking time off from Steinway, and leaving Luke with Eric, she flew to Calais. Her father was conscious, but he couldn't speak or eat. He had asked that his life not be prolonged artificially, and he was not receiving any nutrients. Alone with her father, Erica told him, "I know we've grown apart. I don't know why, but I'm sorry."

Erica spent the night in the hospital with her sisters. The next day, she returned to New York; there was nothing to do in Maine but wait.

Two days later, with no new developments at the hospital, Erica and Eric prepared a dinner celebrating her father. They made Martinis, Rein's favorite cocktail, and listened to a recording of Dinu Lipatti, his favorite pianist.

But later that night Erica felt restless. "I want to go out," she told Eric. "I want to be alone."

After she left the apartment, she found herself walking toward Steinway. When she arrived, the building was locked. She let herself in. The large hall was eerily silent. The chandelier illuminated a concert grand, Serial No. 531248. It happened to be Erica's favorite piano then in the showroom, and she didn't know that it had been placed on display in the center of the room. She went to the nearest desk and called her father's hospital room. Amy answered, and Erica asked her to put the receiver to her father's ear.

Then Erica walked to the piano, and sat at the keyboard. She began playing from memory, first the Chopin Ballade No. 4 in F Minor. Then two Bach preludes. Then the Chopin C-Sharp-Minor Nocturne, Opus Posthumous. The music came pouring out, flawlessly, effortlessly. Erica felt that she had never played better, or with such feeling. As the last notes of the nocturne faded, something told her to stop. Emotionally drained, she sat for a moment in silence, and then told her father that she loved him. The next morning, Rein died.

After her father's death, Erica began playing again-the Chopin polonaises, the mazurkas, the F-Minor Fantasy-though she didn't lose her inhibitions overnight. "I'm still struggling," she said recently. "But I've had bursts of playing." She is continuing to practice, and plans to take up Prokofiev's Sonata No. 1 and the Schubert Sonata in B-Flat Major, written just before the composer's death. Her sisters have also returned to music and the piano. Polly is running the piano camp with their mother in Bennington, and Tasha teaches there, too. Amy is teaching piano in Manhattan; several of her students have been referred by Erica.

Two years ago, Erica was testing a new ebonized Model B at Steinway, and discovered a piano she felt that she, too, couldn't live without. "I could tell it what to do," she said. "I knew that within two seconds. The sound is assertive, bold, fiery." But, for someone so adept at matching people and pianos, she agonized over her own choice. "When it comes to yourself, it's different," she told me. "I couldn't quite hear." She consulted two Steinway technicians, who reinforced her initial impression: it was an exceptional piano. She bought it, using Steinway's employee discount, and she and Eric found room for it in a new, larger house in suburban Mount Kisco. Erica gave birth to a daughter last summer, and Luke, now five, has been improvising on the piano.

This March, Erica performed in public for the first time in fourteen years, at an event for students and their parents at the Performing Arts Center in Westhampton Beach, New York. The audience was wildly enthusiastic, even though she had two minor memory slips in a Chopin polonaise. Once, she would have agonized over this, but now it didn't matter, she told me shortly after the performance. "I don't have to be a professional. I can relax."

Steinway concert grand No. 531248 was sold soon after Erica experienced her reawakening at its keyboard. She hated to see it go. But before it left the showroom she had a technician remove one of its bronze pedals and replace it with another. The original now rests in a drawer in her bedroom.