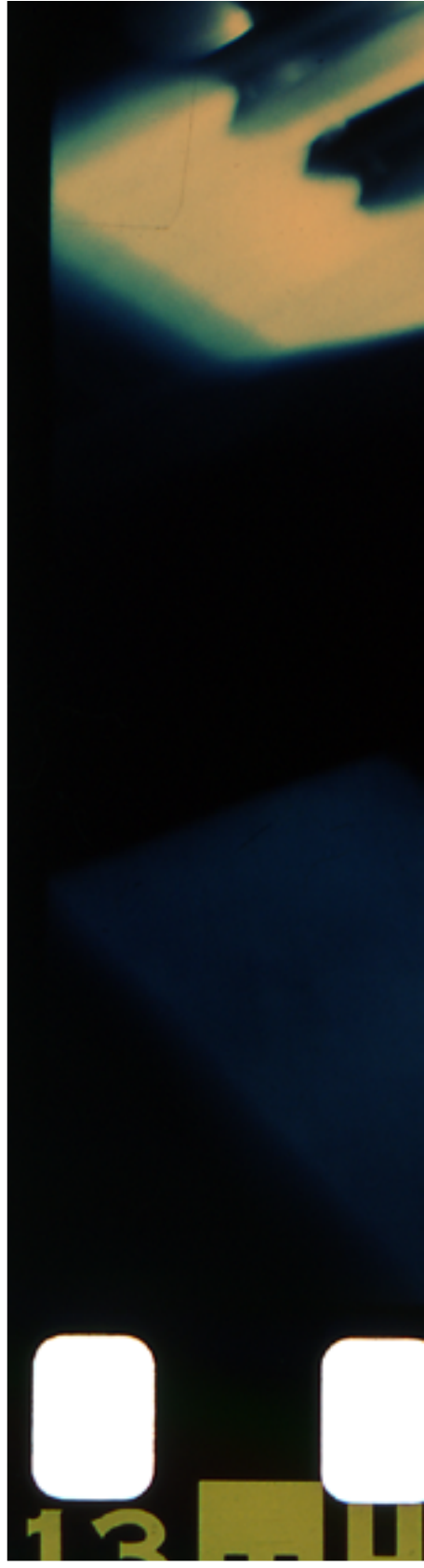
DUELLING PIANOS

STORY BY **HARRIET CUNNINGHAM** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ARUNAS**



JULY 2000. THE SEVENTH Sydney International Piano Competition is in full swing. The atmosphere in the Olympic city is electric. From a field of 36 competitors, there are just six finalists about to face the grand play-off before an audience of 2,500 with a further 1.6 million listeners tuned into ABC Classic FM's live broadcast.

Who will it be? The dazzling young performer from Japan; the powerful and commanding Ukrainian; or the retiring Russian girl, in whose delicate hands Mozart floats like gossamer through the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House?

With all votes in, the hall falls silent as the chair of the jury makes the long-awaited announcement. The winner of the 2000 Sydney International Piano Competition is … Steinway! Yet again, the world's most prestigious brand of piano has taken out the top prize, as it has done in every competition since the first, in 1977. Of course, there was a name announced: the winning performer received prizes worth more than $30,000. The piano, on the other hand, a top-of-the-range Steinway & Sons nine-foot (274 centimetre) concert grand, was sold for more than $200,000.

This was a slight discount on its sticker price – it had, after all, seen some serious action in the two previous weeks. And in the four weeks that followed, despite – indeed, because of – some high-profile hammering, Steinway's agents in NSW, sold a further $250,000 worth of pianos used by the winner and her co-competitors. With numbers like that, it is not surprising that Sydney's eighth International Piano Competition, which starts next week, is a major event on the calendars of piano manufacturers.

The Sydney International Piano Competition was established in 1977 by Claire Dan AM, OBE. Modelled on European competitions that launched the careers of soloists such as Vladimir Ashkenazy and Peter Donohoe, the Sydney competition was to be a showcase of pianistic virtuosity to discover young talent from around the world and put Australia on the map as a real player in the international piano scene. But there have always been two sides to the Sydney competition. Warren Thomson OAM, the artistic director, is unapologetic when he admits: "It's a competition between the piano manufacturers as well."

The contest exists, if not for, then certainly by virtue of, the major piano manufacturers, which invest heavily in the event. In 2004, Steinway & Sons, Kawai and Yamaha will each install two concert grands and five or six practice pianos in Sydney's Seymour Centre where the heats take place. They will also write cheques for upwards of $5,000 in prize money and cash sponsorship. And then there is the question of staff: each company will provide a team of piano technicians, who will work up to 12 hours a day to keep the performance pianos in peak condition, and front-of-house representatives to provide a similar service to the competitors.

At this point, it's beginning to sound a lot like Formula One. And indeed, talk to any piano manufacturer about their instrument and they all make the same comparison. "It's the Grand Prix of the piano world," says John Blanch, national sales and marketing manager at Kawai Australia. "We bring out our best, which is the concert grand … You have your Steinways; you have your Yamahas; and you have your Kawai. The Steinway is probably like the Bentley – a solid old workhorse. Whereas the Kawai is the fast stallion, the Ferrari."

Whether the other manufacturers agree with this particular comparison, the parallels are certainly there. Like the weirdly customised machines designed purely for the race circuit, a concert grand is a perfectly specialised artefact which acts as flagship for the brand. Its construction is highly labour intensive, requiring teams of skilled craftsmen. It goes faster and is louder and brighter than other models, designed, as it is, to take the lead out front of a 90-piece symphony orchestra and to negotiate the most fiendish of concertos. And, once it is on the road, it requires constant tuning and revoicing to meet the demands of its virtuosic drivers.

The drivers, however, are where the parallels stop because, unlike Formula One, most competitors are not, at this point in their career, attached to a particular team. So in Sydney, the first real competition is on day one, when the 36 young pianists line up to choose which brand of piano they will play in the heats and finals. Each competitor has 10 minutes to try out the three pianos on stage and decide which they will stick with for the rest of the competition. It's a tough call, and can reduce less-experienced players to tears, not least when you consider the pressures brought to bear on their decision.

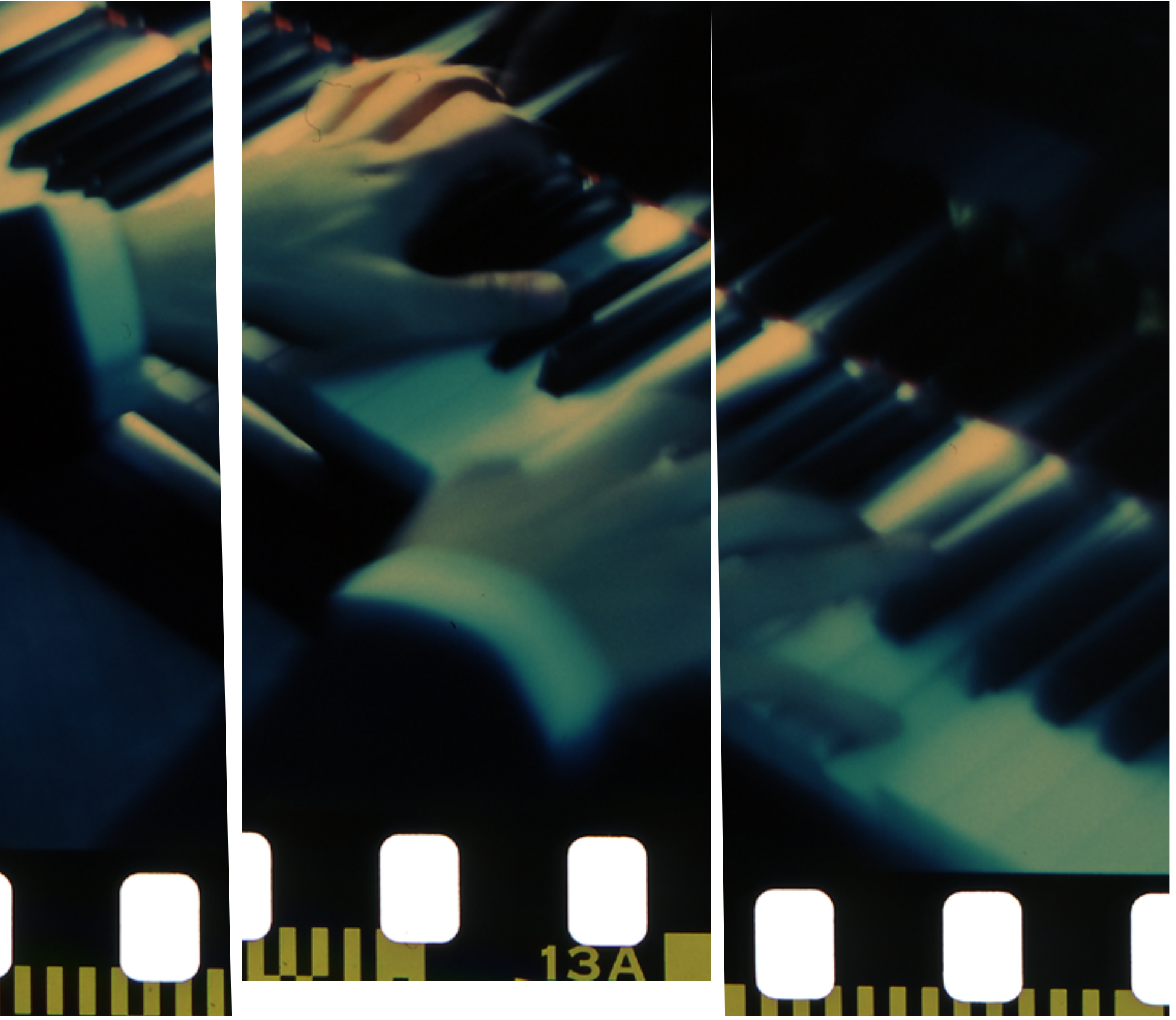
"There have been instances of certain manufacturers that are quite avid about applying pressure," says John Perry, concert pianist and frequent jury member on the international piano competition circuit. How avid? "One of the manufacturers decides to remove some of the spokes from the other guy's cars or puts a tranquilliser into another guy's coffee in the morning," Perry says by way of illustration. "There's some hardball that gets played."

Suggestions of any such sharp practices in the Sydney competition are met with raised eyebrows and conspiratorial glances, but the offer of, say, a promotional tour, overseas engagements and introductions in exchange for an artist's endorsement is nothing new. Indeed, Steinway & Sons has, from the mid-1800s, been a trail-blazer in the field of brand marketing, using prominent musicians to promote what it called its "Instrument of the Immortals".

IT WAS IN 1871 that William Steinway financed and managed an American concert tour for the acclaimed Russian pianist, Anton Rubinstein. The charismatic virtuoso did 215 concerts in 239 days, including seven farewell concerts at New York's Steinway Hall – and yes, New York's premier concert venue of the period was built by the Steinway family. In the process, Rubinstein earned $US80,000 and turned himself and Steinway into household names. It was an inspired piece of marketing by William Steinway, although, at the end of the tour, Rubinstein was so exhausted he vowed never to return to the United States.

The list of Steinway artists now tops 1,000, and includes names from classical, jazz and pop music. Vladimir Ashkenazy, Martha Argerich, Harry Connick jnr and Billy Joel all make the grade, as does Piers Lane, the Australian concert pianist who will perform the opening recital and sit on the jury at this year's competition. And the company has made it

The Sydney International Piano Competition is the Grand Prix of the piano world – the battle on stage almost eclipsed by that between the companies that make the instruments



their business to ensure that their artists can expect to find a Steinway piano in almost every major concert venue in the world, claiming 99 per cent of concerto performances are given on a Steinway. It's a situation that some manufacturers, inevitably, find hard to swallow. But there are serious contenders for the Steinway crown.

Yamaha, a company now better known for its motor vehicles and sound equipment, has a pedigree in musical instrument making almost as illustrious as Steinway. Torakusu Yamaha was a medical instrument maker and inventor who made his first pipe organ in 1887. This led him to set up a successful manufacturing business making organs, then pianos, and now a comprehensive range of musical instruments. Although the company started making upright pianos in 1900, Yamaha only went head-to-head with Steinway in 1967 when it produced its first concert grand, the CF. It was, initially, an almost screw-for-screw reproduction of a Steinway. However, Yamaha's factories were far more technologically advanced than Steinway's and they soon refined their designs to take advantage of modern manufacturing techniques. The CF is now regarded as a worthy competitor to the brand leader.

Yamaha also chose to take a different tack in marketing. Rather than Steinway's top-down approach, enlisting celebrities to build kudos, they started from the ground up, establishing music education programs to drive demand among a burgeoning middle class, and producing high-quality competitively priced factory models to feed this demand. In the last Sydney competition their grassroots investment paid dividends: Ayako Uehara, then a 19-year old pianist based in Tokyo who had been studying in Yamaha music schools from the age of three, qualified for Sydney.

The firm looked after her like a secret weapon, installing her at a comfortable Sydney hotel away from the other competitors (who stay in student accommodation) and making sure she had a piano, Yamaha of course, available at all hours. She gave a dazzling performance, just missing first prize but taking out seven others, including the People's Choice Prize. She has since gone on to win the 2002 Tchaikovsky International Competition, again on a Yamaha piano.

Other manufacturers prefer not to enter the fray. Bösendorfer, for example, which entered a piano in 2000, suffered the ignominy of having no contestant choose its brand. It decided not to renew its sponsorship this year. And, as for the Stuart piano, the Australian-built grand that has attracted much attention for its radical design philosophy and handsome looks, it will never appear in the competition. "It's just a market brawl," says its maker Wayne Stuart from his workshop in Newcastle, NSW.

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The outspoken designer recalls the first competition, which he worked on in his capacity as piano technician at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Sir Rex Hobcroft, the then director of the Con, loved the idea of including a showcase of different

manufacturers' pianos in the competition. "It sounded good at the time," muses Stuart, "but it was probably naive … All the serious contenders went straight to the Steinway. "What people need to be very aware of is that piano competitions are extremely high pressured and extremely conservative, so if you put anything in front of a pianist that is less than second nature they won't touch it."

To his mind, the Stuart piano, with its unusual tone colours, extended sustain and extra notes, would not get a look-in with the novelty-shy competitors. Faced with gruelling technical challenges and a perceived need to play immaculately at all times, they will opt for a piano which, he says, has barely changed in design since 1900.

Which raises a broader issue with piano competitions in general: the competition environment does not tend to reward risk-takers. The jury has a hard enough job choosing winners and losers from a field of musicians who are all outstanding, so a careless slip or an idiosyncratic turn of phrase can make its decision that much easier. To avoid early elimination, competitors need to play faultlessly and inoffensively.

And that has very important implications for the future of piano music, says Stuart. "Steinway claim 99 per cent of performances around the world are done on their piano," he continues. "If that is the case, in 50 years there will be no piano. It will be stone dead. Because that will mean Steinway has sat on the dunghill for 200 years. It is unprecedented in music history that one æsthetic has dominated for so long."

Such criticism of the competition format is anything but isolated. Pianists and music critics are increasingly finding fault with the international competition circuit. There are more competitions than ever, and more prizes, but as a launch pad to an international performing career, they no longer deliver. If you look back through participants in the Sydney International Piano Competition since 1977, you see names such as Du Ning-Wu, Alexander Korsantiya, Xiang-Dong Kong and Marina Kolomiitseva: all great pianists, but hardly household names.

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Could it be that, instead of discovering exciting new talent, piano competitions encourage winners who can negotiate the circuit; winners who are fast but ultimately boring drivers stuck within an æsthetic created in the 19th century and perpetuated by the self-interest of the manufacturers? Which pianist will take the top prize in the 2004 Sydney International Piano Competition is anyone's guess. But it's odds-on the winner will be playing a Steinway. ■