



# Audio Engineering Society – New York Section

## NEWSLETTER – MEETING NOTICE

### 2009-2010

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212.666.2257

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917.855.2889

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201.920.9026

John Chester  
908.638.5487

Chris Hoffman  
The New School  
212.229.5896 Ext 4578

Noah Simon  
212.992.8402

Ira Kemp

Tuesday May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010

**ALL PLACES FOR THIS TOUR HAVE BEEN FILLED.  
NO MORE RESERVATIONS WILL BE TAKEN.**

**A confirmation e-mail has been sent to those persons who replied during the posted window. If you did not receive a response it means that you do not have a reservation.**

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Steinway & Sons  
38<sup>th</sup> Street & 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Long Island City, NY 11105

Please arrive no later than 9:15 am  
Tour starts at 9:30 am and ends at Noon

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### The Steinway Piano Factory Tour

Host: **Joel Spector**

Presenter: **Bob Singleton** - Greater Astoria Historical Society

Special Thanks: **Loretta Russo** - Steinway Factory Tour Administrator

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Steinway & Sons was founded by master craftsmen who built their pianos one at a time, applying skills that were handed down from master to apprentice, generation after generation...and today, as you'll see on the tour, they still build their pianos that way.

We will see all aspects of the manufacturing process including the shaping of the soundboard, bending of the rim into the piano shape, creation of the bridge which supports the strings, construction of the piano's "action" components, selecting the piano's veneer, and voicing the instrument to enhance the unique personality of each instrument.

#### Important Notes

- The factory is quite large and includes walking 3-4 flights of stairs, so you are encouraged to wear comfortable shoes.
- Due to safety regulations open shoes and sandals are not allowed.
- Also due to safety regulations, **people with pacemakers will not be allowed to participate in the tour** because of recently installed equipment that may damage or cause interference to their device.

The company states that there is no charge for the tour but at your discretion you can make a tax deductible donation to help them in completing the William Steinway Diary Project with the collaboration of the Smithsonian Institute Libraries. With your assistance, the Smithsonian will make available on the internet a great unpublished 19th century source for the history of American Music and the cultural history of New York City.

A brochure and a donation card will be available for you to take home at the end of the tour.

Doron Schächter  
Interval Music  
646.321.2813

Danny Kopelson

#### NY SECTION WEBSITE

Webmaster  
Bob Tis  
Studio Consultants, Inc  
212.586.7376

#### NY SECTION ADVISORS

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## MEETING REPORT Tuesday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010

The Steinway Piano Factory Tour Host: Joel Spector  
Presenter: **Bob Singleton** - Greater Astoria Historical Society



On a rainy Tuesday morning, 20 members of the AES New York section showed up at the Steinway piano factory in Astoria, Queens, and embarked on an over two-hour tour of the facility from top to bottom. Our genial host was Bob Singleton, who does not actually work for Steinway, but with their cooperation has conducted tours of the factory for over a dozen years.

Mr. Singleton immediately initiated us into the lore and history of this legendary company. Steinway is certainly not the largest piano manufacturer in the world--the Queens factory only produces 2,000 pianos per year, and the Hamburg, Germany plant only produces 1,000 per year. But the percentage of major concert artists who use Steinway pianos in their concerts is over ninety percent, at least in the U.S. Steinway is very proud of their position in the industry, and claims to make the "standard" piano of the world for concert use. Other companies (Baldwin, Yamaha, Boesendorfer) have tried to make inroads on this prestigious market, but, even now, in the 21st. century, Steinway still dominates.

Then we donned safety goggles and stepped onto the factory floor. As we learned during our tour, Steinway has kept their position by a unique combination of traditional hand craftsmanship combined with continuous innovation, dating back to the founding of the company in the 1850's by German immigrant Heinrich Steinweg. Almost the first thing we saw in the factory illustrated both aspects: the scheduling of the tour allowed us to see a group of workmen forming long strips of many-layered wood that had just been glued together to make a grand piano casing. About six men picked up the glued wood and carried it over to a special custom form, and proceeded to wrap the wood around the form and secure it in place with clamps. Because the glue sets rapidly, the entire operation had to be performed in less than twenty minutes. This called for precise placement and pressuring of the wooden assembly in the jig. It was rather like watching an intricate dance, as the workers coaxed the wood into place and clamped it with just the right pressure at multiple points. This method of forming a piano casing was invented by Steinway. It also has evolved over the years. At one point, the pressure of the clamps was set with the help of automated wrenches. However, it was found that humans could better sense the variability of the wood and adjust the pressure more suitably, so they went back to doing that task by hand. Bob pointed out that this task takes place with virtually no talking among the workers.

Similar combinations of old and new working methods were seen throughout the factory. For example, the legs of the pianos were carved by a huge computer-automated wood lathe, capable of tolerances to a few thousandths of an inch---except for the legs for custom styles like Chippendale or Louis XIV. Those more intricate designs are carved and assembled by hand by skilled wood workers. The principle seemed to be to use modern tools and methods wherever there was an advantage in precision or efficiency, so long as quality was not sacrificed.

The Steinway facility is definitely a factory and was often quite noisy. Many of the workers were seen using earplugs for hearing protection. It is a very clean, orderly factory, with only a little wood dust in the air, and the occasional smell of the traditional varnishes and finishes used on the pianos. Modern, polymer-based finishes are not used, as they affect the sound of the instruments. At the final stop of our tour we met Wally Boot, who has been with Steinway for over 47 years. He is the final tuner and adjuster of every piano to leave the factory. He played some Beethoven for us on the piano he was working on at the moment, and it sounded very nice indeed.

**Report by Robert Auld**