

Double time

Rafael Behn made his money selling galoshes to Hamburg's well-heeled concert-goers, but his real passion lay inside the concert hall, a passion he shared with his cousin Hermann. Both were keen amateur pianists and composers and Hermann was a close friend of Gustav Mahler. In 1895 he wrote a version of Mahler's Symphony No.2 in C minor, "Resurrection," for two pianos.

Four years ago, a live recording of that piece was made at the Laeiszhalle in Hamburg, featuring Christiane Behn, great-granddaughter of Rafael, together with her playing partner Mathias Weber, soprano Daniela Bechly and alto Iris Vermillion. Christiane, a professional pianist and teacher at the Hamburger Konservatorium, is today the owner of the twin Model Bs and recently had them restored by Steinway technician Jan Höppner, bringing a remarkable 100-year history full circle.

Above: the twins in the pavilion at 42 Maria-Louisen Strasse, together with a rather fine organ

Right: Rafael Behn, who ordered the twin pianos from Steinway New York in 1912





This twin pair of Steinway Model B grand pianos was made 100 years ago for a wealthy Hamburg businessman named Rafael Behn. Recently restored, they are now in the possession of his great-granddaughter Christiane, who told the whole remarkable story to **Tim Glynne-Jones**



Documents now in Christiane's possession include the original quote for the pianos, and a drawing showing Rafael's initial thoughts on design – a far more ornate style than he finished up with. "He wanted something in grey," says Christiane with a look of alarm. "Thank goodness he didn't go ahead with that!"

The pianos were made from the same piece of Honduran mahogany and, perhaps surprisingly, they were built in New York. "This is so interesting because these pianos for that time were really hip, a very new style, not ornate like the drawing, but more like art deco, really modern."

The pianos lived a suitably genteel life until World War II, by which time they had become the property of Christiane's grandfather, Dr Herman Behn. He had built a special pavilion

Above left: illustration of Raphael Behn's original, ornate spec

Above: consecutive serial numbers stamped on the plates

Below: the original estimate mentions Raphael's desire to have the pianos in grey



for them attached to his house at 42 Maria-Louisen Strasse in Winterhude, at the north end of the Alster lake in Hamburg. Like his father, the doctor was an enthusiastic musician and his wife Maria was a singer. During the war they hosted concerts in their house, sometimes three times a week. These were welcome bright spots in the lives of the Behns' fellow Hamburg residents, and they paid their admission not in money but in essentials, such as coal or potatoes.

Despite the bombing raids on Hamburg, the Behn house survived, thanks to a combination of preferential treatment, the weather and sheer luck. Winterhude was a popular neighbourhood for British residents before the war, thanks to the size and quality of its houses, many of which were designed by British architects. The British were keen to return to their lovely houses after the war.

When Winterhude did eventually become a target for Allied bombers, the weather intervened. That night in 1944, a heavy fog sat on the Alster, obscuring this crucial landmark from the air. The bombers unleashed their terror elsewhere. But two bombs did eventually land on 42 Maria-Louisen Strasse. Miraculously, they were deflected by the curved roof of the pavilion and landed in the garden. The pianos survived intact.

The house concerts continued after the war, with the permission of the British occupying government. Thanks to their contribution to Germany's "cultural guardianship," the Behns were allowed to keep their pianos and use the house as a concert venue rather than a hostel for the homeless. Several volumes of handwritten books now in Christiane's possession show details of every concert held at 42 Maria-Louisen Strasse. They include some significant names, such as Carl Seemann and Eduard Erdmann.

Christiane remembers her grandfather with great fondness. "He was a very good pianist and I have all the scores with his marks on. He was my first piano teacher. At the age of five he took me on his knee and he played with his arms around me. It was very intimate. It was like I was playing myself."

Christiane began to take regular lessons at the age of eight and decided to study piano at sixteen, when she made the second of two appearances in the Steinway Competition at the Laeiszhalle. When her grandfather died, she inherited one of the twin pianos.

"It was the one my grandfather wasn't so fond of because my grandmother wanted the good one. They are totally different, even now



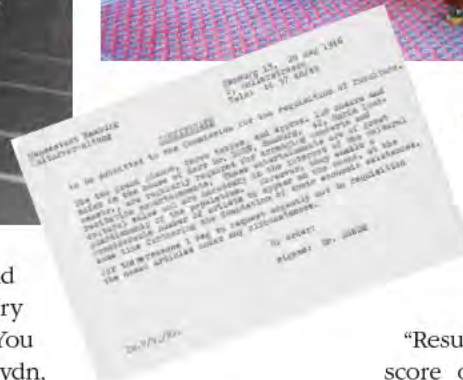
after the restoration. One is very calm and soft and you can play very romantic and very good minor. The other one is more clear. You can play very good Bach and Scarlatti, Haydn, Mozart. But if you want to play Brahms, the other one is very good. It has more overtones. The strings sound more together, it's not so clear."

But Christiane developed a preference for the one she inherited and it followed her from one flat to another as she developed her career. "I had to move it seven times!" she exclaims, "because pianists are always unpopular with the neighbours. Moving it is a horror, and these weren't always on the ground floor. Then I moved to a bigger house with more space and my grandmother moved into a home, so I had both pianos.

"Everything is new now: new strings, new hammers; but still it's the old sound, and this is so interesting. It's a different sound to how new Steinways sound today. It's like the famous Rubinstein recordings of Chopin: a little more chamber; not the brilliance and sharpness like it is nowadays."

With the twins reunited, there was still one piece of the picture to find: the piece relating to her great-granduncle, the friend of Mahler.

"Hermann Behn did lots of things for the university in Hamburg and gave lectures on music and was quite an important person, but my family



Top left: Christiane aged five, learning the piano beside her grandfather, Dr Herman Behn

Top right: the restored twins as they are today, at Christiane's house in Hamburg

Above: a submission to the British Commission in Hamburg after the war, requesting that the house concerts at 42 Maria-Louisen Strasse be allowed to continue

Below: Christiane Behn



never told me much about him. They wanted me to make my own way [as a musician]. Hermann gave Mahler money. It was a close relationship, especially at the time when Mahler was a conductor in Hamburg."

Behn's two-piano version of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony was the first printed score of any Mahler composition. Christiane's father had the only remaining copy and lent it to the Mahler Society in Hamburg. "After my father died in 2003 I got it back. During all my research I got to know Dr Kubik from the Mahler Society in Vienna, who kindly sent me lots of information and letters from Mahler to Behn."

Thus Christiane was able not only to perform and record her ancestor's work, she was also able to fill in the blanks about the part he played in the life of one of Europe's finest composers. Hermann and Rafael Behn would surely have been delighted to know that their contribution to piano music would still be living and breathing in one of their own, one hundred years down the line.

You can see and hear the twins being played by going to www.christianebehn.de. The sound recording is by Ralph Kessler of PINGVIN Ing. Buero, using "virtual acoustics" technology.

Mahler Symphony No.2 in C minor for Two Pianos, featuring Christiane Behn, Mathias Weber, Daniela Bechly, Iris Vermillion and the Harvesthude Chamber Choir, led by Claus Bantzer, is published on the **Musicaphon** label. ■