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A piano builder named Chris Maene has been doing some very interesting historical and innovative piano work, recently releasing a new model of piano unlike any other. The offspring of piano technicians, Chris Maene was born in Ruiselede, Belgium in 1953 and built his first instrument by the age of Sixteen. He has a specific passion for historical instruments and the building techniques used over the last few centuries. He has made fantastic replicas of the first Steinway & Sons "kitchen" fortepiano, the Ignaz Pleyel concert grand from 1843, and a Broadwood-made fortepiano specifically produced for Ludwig van Beethoven in 1817. He has collected over 300 historically significant pianos and fortepianos and displays some of them at his museum next to his factory in Belgium. Some of the pianos have been rebuilt by his factory and are used in concerts today.

From his extensive knowledge of the last 300 years of piano building, Maene decided to design and build his own piano to give the music world a new sound to work with. He took the long abandoned straight-strung piano design and gave it new life. He is using modern manufacturing techniques and machinery to improve upon a design that has not been used for over 100 years. The bass strings on a straight-strung piano do not cross and are slightly shorter than bass strings on cross-strung pianos. The benefit, though, is that there is not as much of a timbre difference between the bass section and the rest of the piano because the strings are all on the same plane. It would go out of tune more equally than a cross-strung piano as well.

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After creating a new type of straight-strung piano for the world to explore, Maene decided to go a step further and build a piano that continues his innovations. Last month, he released a new piano called the Maene-Viñoly concert grand (pictured above). He partnered with renowned architect Rafael Viñoly to accomplish this goal. The piano continues to use a straight-strung design, but the soundboard is made bigger by the unique curve shape. This gives the straight-strung sound more power and clarity. The keyboard is slightly arced to facilitate a natural reach that a pianist would have if stationary. Like most, I have not played one, but it appears that the player would be able to turn slightly to reach the keyboard ends instead of having to lean or reposition. Maybe it is easier to play, maybe it is just good marketing. Either way, it is again something different for the world to explore.

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I find the exploration of historical piano building techniques engaging as there have been so many different techniques to do the same thing or to expand upon other techniques. There have been hundreds of different action designs with different pros and cons. A multitude of different building materials have been tried. There are pages and pages of string designs that use a slightly thinner steel wire here or a compound ironlike metal wire there. There is so much history to learn from! Looking at some modern pianos makes me wonder how they ever got funding for production at all as they make designs that originally worked extremely well much worse. There are also many brilliant ideas that were shelved because the production cost was too high. It will be interesting to see the new pianos ten years from now.

*All photos from chrismaene.be

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