

Music to our ears

A converted forge in the Dales is striking the right note with pianists, writes Mairead Mahon

This summer Cavendish Pianos is celebrating its first birthday as the only British firm to make pianos from scratch. Based in the Yorkshire Dales, on the estate of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, it is owned and run by Adam Cox, who was trained in the art of making pianos at the Leeds College of Music.

The UK used to have a strong reputation for producing pianos: composers Liszt and Chopin both favoured them. However, recent years have seen the decline of this once thriving industry and when the last remaining manufacturer of British pianos closed its doors and transferred



to the Far East Adam decided that something would have to be done. For many years, he had sold pianos in the family business and knew that there was a steady demand for British ones. He also knew that the skills needed to make them still existed, particularly in Yorkshire.

'I had plenty of experience in selling pianos,' he said. 'I knew how to make them and I knew that specialist skills were available in the country but for all that, it still remained a dream and if it wasn't for a Sunday bike ride through the Bolton Abbey estate, it might never have become a reality. I had just whizzed down Beamsley Hill and

was taking a rest when I saw a derelict building, an old forge, nestling in an idyllic spot. I just felt that if I was ever to realise my dream, this was the perfect spot in which to do it.'

Adam's family are all musical and supported his vision of becoming England's only piano manufacturer. His wife, Charlie, and their three daughters gave him their blessing and, armed with that, he approached the Bolton Abbey estate office to find out if it would be possible to use the old forge as his workshop.

'They were very helpful but I was astonished to receive, a few days later, a call from the Duke himself. He and

the Duchess are well known music patrons and had both lamented the fact that the British piano manufacturing industry had died. They were intrigued by my idea and wanted to know more. They invited me to go and see them and, at the end of the meeting, not only had they agreed that I could use the old forge but they had also offered to invest in the business and to become its patrons. Charlie had the idea of naming the business in their honour and every piano made here proudly bears the Cavendish name.'

The first job was to renovate the old forge into suitable premises. Adam was allowed to use materials from the ►



MAIN: Cavendish Grand Pianos are made in the Dales
ABOVE: Yorkshire pianist Emmanuel Vass playing a Cavendish piano in Bolton Abbey Priory





BOTTOM LEFT: Adam's wife, Charlie, giving a piano lesson to their daughter, Milly
 LEFT: Adam (seated) with staff and Duke and Duchess of Devonshire (2nd and 3rd on left)
 TOP: Devonshire family arms on piano
 ABOVE: Close up of Cavendish marquetry

estate, including some oak carvings from a disused church and today, the space houses a workshop and showroom made chiefly from Yorkshire wood and stone. It is a special, peaceful and atmospheric place and many customers like to visit it to see exactly where the pianos are made and to soak up the atmosphere of a traditional workshop.

'Almost all the skills needed to make top class pianos are to be found here and it is true to say that these pianos are truly Yorkshire instruments,' said Adam.

'The felts come from Hainsworth's, one of Leeds' oldest manufacturers and the veneering is done by Otley craftsmen, to name just two examples. For many of our customers, it is important to know where their instruments have come from and knowing that they have been made by traditional Yorkshire craftsmen is certainly a bonus.'

Those customers come from far and wide and include the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, who are currently planning to install a Cavendish piano

at Chatsworth. Professional musicians are also pleased to be associated with the firm. The organisers of this year's Yorkshire Day have invited the respected pianist Emmanuel Vass to give a classical recital on one of the instruments: as he had already played on one, he was only too happy to agree. The firm also came to the attention of The Spice Girls, who thought it would be a good idea if a Cavendish piano could be used in the musical 'Viva Forever', which is based upon their careers.

'The call from one of the producers came out of the blue and I was happy to tell him that we would naturally be very pleased to be associated with the musical,' said Adam.

'However, my daughters were even more delighted when the producers invited the whole family to the opening night, gave us front row seats and invited us to meet the cast and the Spice Girls who had also attended the premiere.'

Since its official launch the firm has handmade 52 pianos and demand

remains steady. Prices start at £5,000 and many people are choosing to invest in something that can become a family heirloom. Customers are encouraged to discuss their requirements in detail and Adam is always ready to provide whatever is best for their needs.

'It is an investment and, whether it is going to be used by a professional pianist or by someone who is only beginning to learn, we pride ourselves on making the perfect match,' says Adam, as he holds a folder full of letters from happy customers.

Many of those customers will be attending the first birthday party of Cavendish Pianos. The Duke and Duchess of Devonshire will be the guests of honour and the birthday cake will, unsurprisingly, be in the shape of a grand piano. There is certainly a great deal to celebrate: not least the rebirth of the British piano industry in a converted forge in the Yorkshire Dales.

For more information visit www.cavendishpianos.com ■