



BECHSTEIN'S REVIVAL

As managing director of leading store Jaques Samuel Pianos, and now Artistic Director of soon-to-open Bechstein Hall, Terence Lewis is helping to lead Bechstein's revival in the piano world. Claire Jackson pays him a visit

Terence Lewis outside Bechstein Hall

Travelling eastwards along historic Wigmore Street in Marylebone, a great black structure begins to emerge in the distance. As one draws near, it becomes apparent that the black monolith is embossed with gold writing. A gold crown gradually becomes visible above the writing and gets clearer and clearer. After an absence of more than a century, Bechstein is back in Marylebone.

From up close it is clear – the giant black structure is 22 Wigmore Street. Currently a building site, but soon to

be transformed into Bechstein Hall, the development will house a magnificent new two-floor showroom for pianos in the C. Bechstein family – Bechstein, Hoffmann and Zimmermann – practice rooms, and the statement piece of the project: a state-of-the-art, 100-seat concert venue, bar and restaurant.

Bechstein's more-than-a-century absence from Wigmore Street is a compelling story. The company was founded in Germany in 1853 – the same year as Steinway and Blüthner – and enjoyed success from the beginning with endorsements from Liszt and Debussy. At the beginning of the 20th

century Bechstein had the largest piano dealership in London and had just finished construction of its performance venue next door – Bechstein Hall. Following the outbreak of the First World War, Bechstein Hall was seized in 1916 as enemy property and sold, reopening a year later as Wigmore Hall.

Over a century later, in very different political times, and Bechstein has returned with a £40m investment which is just a few doors down from its original location; construction is on track for an opening early in 2024.

Employing the right team for Bechstein Hall has been critical for

Stefan Freymuth, CEO of C. Bechstein. The first appointment has gone to Terence Lewis (Hon.RCM, Hon. ARAM, ATCL, LTCL) as Artistic Director. Lewis's story is a distinguished one. After training as a classical pianist, he went on to become the piano buyer at Harrods before he was headhunted to run Jaques Samuel Pianos in 1996.

A haven for all

Catching up with Lewis at his Edgware Road-based piano shop, it is clear why Freymuth has entrusted in him as Artistic Director. His store not only boasts an impressive collection of instruments, it also contains a range of rehearsal rooms that are used by professional musicians, teachers, exam boards – and even the odd film star. Rene Zellweger, when filming her hit biopic, *Judy*, needed somewhere to rehearse – and so the film company approached Lewis. You never know who you might meet in the communal kitchen: as well as Zellweger, Jaques Samuel Pianos has hosted Shirley Bassey, Emma Thompson, Sting and many more.

‘Some people call it an oasis,’ says Lewis, sitting in his office above the rehearsal spaces. Not that you’d know what lies beneath – every room is efficiently sound proofed. ‘We have 16 practice rooms – we keep the hire costs as cheap as possible; I trained as a pianist myself and I appreciate that it’s hard to find affordable space. That goes for teaching too.’

It’s a Friday afternoon and the on-



The site for Bechstein Hall (© Luka Okros)

screen booking schedule near the front desk displays a hub of activity. Students wander in and out of rooms; a sign on a door indicates a regular singing teacher is in residence. On the shop floor, a couple peruse the glossy black grand and upright pianos.

‘Oh, this is a quiet day,’ says Lewis. ‘Very often every single room is in use. The Associated Board [ABRSM] and

Trinity [College London] use the space for exams and people request to come here – we have really good pianos in the rooms. There are brand-new Bechstein grands and uprights in there at the moment. Our rooms are regularly used for diplomas.’

He cares about all types of player – from beginner to concert pianist – and that empathy is reflected throughout the business. He remembers doing his own graded exams; unlike other instrumentalists, pianists are at the mercy of the instrument they are given – the quality of piano varies greatly depending on the venue. There are no such issues here: Lewis makes sure the pianos are kept in tip-top condition in every room.

The very best instruments are situated within a special sealed-off section on the shop floor known as the ‘selection room’. ‘These are our concert-hire pianos,’ explains Lewis. The sleek pianos attract the likes of Daniil Trifonov. ‘Daniil practises here and we supply the piano for his various recitals,’ says Lewis, ‘We provide for Angela Hewitt too.’ The Bechsteins have been enjoyed by the likes of Federico Colli, Cyprien Katsaris, Pavel Kolesnikov



From left to right: Terence Lewis, Luka Okros, and Mark Richards

BECHSTEIN

and Sir Stephen Hough. Every concert grand at Jaques Samuel Pianos is selected in person by Lewis. He often takes professional pianists with him as part of the selection process – in fact it was Kolesnikov who helped him choose one of the most recent additions to the Bechstein fleet.

Grand openings

Turning his attention to Bechstein Hall at the new site on Wigmore Street, Lewis has enrolled another leading industry figure to ensure Bechstein Hall is at the forefront of the music world in London. Georgian-born concert pianist Luka Okros will become Assistant Artistic Director of Bechstein Hall. Okros won the Jaques Samuel Intercollegiate Piano Competition in 2014, as well as many other competition wins, and has performed at Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall and widely across Europe. He has kept a close relationship with Lewis and the team at Jaques Samuel Pianos ever since. ‘Working with Terence is a great pleasure for me. He is not only an open-minded manager but also a very close friend who has stood by me in challenging moments of my life. Our team is ready for new ideas and formats at Bechstein Hall. Wigmore Street will be transformed and really benefit from this project, creating London’s new musical hub’.

Lewis has also brought Mark



Terence Lewis with HM King Charles

Richards on board as House Manager. Hailing from Manchester, Richards has been a trusted member of the Jaques Samuel team overseeing tunings and practice rooms. Catching a moment with Richards at the Edgware Road store, it was clear to see his excitement for what’s to come. ‘Moving down to London has meant I was unable to take part in the development in Manchester, however having the opportunity to oversee the front of house at Bechstein Hall in London more than makes up for that’.

During his 26 years at the helm, Lewis has established Jaques Samuel Pianos as a nurturing force within the music community. The company – and, through its association, Bechstein – has given a number of private gifts and bursaries to piano students. One of the most impressive initiatives is an intercollegiate piano competition between the four London conservatoires: Guildhall School of Music & Drama, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, the Royal College of Music (RAM) and the Royal Academy of Music (RAM).

The passion and energy that Lewis puts into the business is all-consuming – and it’s great to see that recognised; in 1996 the Music Industry Association awarded Jaques Samuel Pianos ‘Music Retailer of the Year’, and in March of 2019 King Charles, then Prince Charles, invested Lewis as an honorary member of the Royal College of Music. However, when asked which award means the most to Lewis he says ‘the most humble of them all, “A Pebble in the Pond”...’ presented to Lewis by Ghandi’s grandson, for his kindness to those in the pianistic world.

Does he own a piano of his own? ‘I don’t have a piano at home anymore,’ says Lewis, ‘but I’m happy to be surrounded by them here all day.’ As will so many people when they visit his new musical oasis on Wigmore Street. ■

www.bechsteinhall.com



BECHSTEIN COMES TO MANCHESTER

Bechstein Hall is only the most recent development from the historic German piano brand. After a partnership with Jaques Samuel Pianos in London, a brand new C. Bechstein Centre was opened in Manchester in February 2022.

The Manchester store is both an aesthetic wonder and a pianist’s dream. The 9,000 sq ft showroom stocks almost every single piano in the Bechstein catalogue, as well as six sound-proofed practice studios and an intimate recital space with streaming capabilities. Of Bechstein’s first purpose-built centre in over 100 years, managing director Stuart Kernaghan says: ‘We’re pleased to be able to offer pianists across the North West the opportunity to view, purchase and even practice on some of the most beautiful pianos in the industry.’



C. BECHSTEIN

W. HOFFMANN



Zimmermann.



C. BECHSTEIN

Centre Manchester



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