

# • The making of a classic Steinway

Keith Cheveralls gives us a unique insight into the making of this extraordinary and rare Louis XV-style Doheny Steinway piano

In May of 2007 representatives of Steinway & Sons, the legendary American maker and purveyor of fine pianos, visited the studio workshop and home of master carver, Dimitrios Klitsas. There, perched high atop the hilly terrain of rural western Massachusetts, they talked with Dimitrios about the possibility of a highly specialised and unique commission – creating a copy of a much earlier Steinway & Sons masterpiece known as the Doheny Steinway. The company was familiar with the depth and breadth of Dimitrios' experience as a fine woodcarver and sculptor, but a whole piano almost from scratch?

## The task

All original plans and drawings of the piano had long since disappeared, so Dimitrios would be responsible for executing the entire carving project, including all new re-design and drawing work for the carved features, and would be aided only by very old photographs found in a Steinway book. For Steinway's part, they would deliver to Dimitrios' studio, a mahogany piano case to his exact specifications. The case was to arrive replete with metal frame and inner workings, all mounted on a custom built adjustable and movable carver's frame.

## Gilding

As Dimitrios awaited delivery of the actual piano case, he was able to begin the project by carving the legs, pedestal, and music shelf. The pedestal and music shelf were, essentially, of standard grand piano dimensions. Scaling and fitting the designs to each was relatively straightforward. It was here, however, that the carver's skill and eye were to be first tested.

The entire project was to be gold leafed, requiring a perfectly smooth finish be left 'from the chisel'. Gold leaf is so thin, fragile, and reflective that it highlights any surface imperfections. Additionally, for the true beauty of the carving to shine through, it was critical that all lines and edges be ultra sharp and crisp.

## Legs

The five supporting legs of the piano were to be carved by Dimitrios' son, Spiro. The placement of these legs created one of the biggest challenges of the project.

Piano legs are always removable. The design called for the legs to flow smoothly and precisely up into the matching shell and scroll elements on the case itself. To meet this challenge, the leg and case carvings were precisely designed and carved to create the visual effect of being a one-piece construction.

Dimitrios and Steinway were to spend much time and effort together working out specific construction tolerances, ultimately allowing a minute overlap of less than 0.8mm (1/32in) in order for everything to invisibly mesh together.

## Frame work

The piano case arrived at Dimitrios' studio on its heavy metal mobile carving stand. Steinway craftsmen had constructed the curvaceous casework to exacting standards using forms and epoxy laminated sheets of 3mm (1/8in) thick mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) for a total thickness of 16mm (5/8in).

Much of the carving on the 5.18m (17ft) casework features individual frames to house period art, painted directly onto the gold leaf. Though these decorative frames have the appearance of appliqué work, they were actually carved firmly in situ.

Steinway cleverly used the same forms from the case to exactly replicate the inside curve of the frames, to precisely match the curve on the case where they were to be located.

Again, 3mm (1/8in) pieces of mahogany were laminated to create sufficient height, width and depth to accommodate carving of the flowing floral design.

The same technique was used for all of the other features on the case itself, including the locations for the legs. Again, sharpness of detail and a near perfect finish from the chisel were essential for the carving to work with the gold leaf.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEITH CHEVERALLS AND DIMITRIOS KLITSAS

## Cherubs

The busts of the two cherubs seen at each end of the keyboard, were executed after the case work carving had been completed, but while the piano was still with Dimitrios in his Hampden studio. This was done so that they could both be carved in proportion to the overall project and, specifically, to their final location on the keyboard ends. Both busts are individual sculptures and were carved entirely by eye from pictures provided by Steinway.

▲ Dimitrios with the plan drawing of the music shelf

## The work of an artist

With all the carving work completed on schedule, arrangements were made by Steinway to move the piano some 300 miles to upstate New York where the gold leaf was to be applied. Thereafter, the separately commissioned artist spent some time painting the individual period panels.

The finished 21st century Doheny Steinway was delivered to Steinway & Sons, New York facility on 1 January 2009, before being delivered to its final destination.

Looking back over the project Dimitrios is quick to emphasise only a sense of humility at being selected by Steinway to work with them and other very talented artists in recreating such a masterpiece. Yet, not far from the surface, must surely be a hard earned sense of pride in doing something that in reality, he has been working toward all his life. Like others of his generation and skill, the ability and passion to





## About Dimitrios

Dimitrios Klitsas was born in 1948 in Vatathes, northern Greece. At the tender age of 13, he was despatched to Ioannina Technical School for four years of study, and placed in the woodcarving department under the tutelage of Angelo Moshos, a Greek Master Carver. Here he was encouraged to combine critical technical skills, with the more subtle mastery of designing his own work. Most projects had to be drawn free hand and directly onto the wood. Angelo's teaching methodology followed a logical progression from simple projects to more complex relief, architectural and sculptural work. Dimitrios follows exactly the same method in teaching his own students today.

In 1966, Athens and independence beckoned. Dimitrios took work wherever and whenever he could find it, involving mostly the execution of varied projects for other well-established and respected carvers of the time. The value here, as Dimitrios explains, was to look, learn and work for some of the finest designers and craftsmen in Greece. This nomadic work-based life-style went on until Angelo Moshos arrived in Athens to set up his own carving business, and immediately hired Dimitrios. With Angelo now acting as mentor, Dimitrios was charged with designing and creating carved furniture and architectural features for his master's new house. He was encouraged to seek inspiration for designs everywhere from traditional Greek architectural works, to the decorative work of Grinling Gibbons. Dimitrios acknowledges that those five years were the most important and influential experiences of his career.

In 1971, Dimitrios set up his own carving business in Athens with an old school friend, specialising in carving period furniture, primarily in the style of Louis XV.

➤ proceed toward such fine work as the Doheny Steinway project are many, many years in the making.

An anonymous poem hangs on the wall of the studio where the project was carved:

*He who works with his hands is a labourer,  
He who works with his hands and his head is an artisan,  
But he who works with his hands, his head and his heart is an artist.*  
Author unknown

The carving world is indeed fortunate to have those with the resources to fund such projects. The world is yet more fortunate to have many who strive to attain the skill, knowledge and passion to create great works for another generation to appreciate their artistry. We can only hope that all who have the good fortune to hear the wondrous sound of the Doheny Steinway played, will also see the passion of the artists who contributed to this project. ▀

*Side view showing panels and shell for one of the legs*



*View of the keyboard complete with period panels, and the beautifully carved and gilded music shelf*



*An exquisitely carved lyre forms the support for the foot pedals*





### The original Dohney Steinway

The original piece on which this Steinway was based, was carved around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the style of Louis XV, featuring ornately carved decorative floral motifs wrapping around the entire piano case. The intricate floral theme for these panels continues into the music shelf, piano bench, lyre and five ornately carved supporting legs cleverly concealed in their connection to the main frame by overlapping shells. Finally, at each end of the keyboard sit two individually sculptured children's busts.



*The finished Dohney Steinway piano*



*Much of the casework features decorative carved frames with period characters painted by the artist Rick Muto*



*A detailed view of the carved keyboard end, before gilding*



*The finished leg located under the case shell*



