

# A piano less ordinary

## Fancy footwork

Another intriguing instrument that vanished almost without trace is the pedal piano. First appearing as early as the beginning of the 18th century, the pedal piano was based on the same concept as the clavichord with pedalboard (circa 1460) and was essentially a practice instrument for organists. Mozart himself owned and performed on a fortepiano with independent pedalboard which was specially built for him by Anton Walter (this is on display in the Mozarteum in Salzburg). Louis Schöne constructed such instruments for Schumann and Mendelssohn, and the great Erard and Pleyel also produced them. Dr Albert Schweitzer even took one with him to Africa in order to practise his organ compositions.

Today, although there are strange pianos being built with disconcerting, transparent carapaces (Seiler and Kawai's Plexiglas novelties) or bizarre appearances (Schimmel's already-mentioned wacky Pegasus case), surely these oddities are restricted to aesthetics? In terms of actual instrumental design, you wouldn't find such a freak creation as the pedal piano being manufactured now? Would you? Well, think again.

In the year 2000, Italian piano designer and manufacturer Luigi Borgato proudly unveiled his modern version of the pedal piano: the rather unusual-looking Doppio Borgato.

The first-ever double concert grand with pedalboard (previous examples either incorporated the pedalboard into the same upright instrument, or had it attached to a separate upright), the Doppio Borgato actually consists of two grands: the top piano is Borgato's thoroughbred L 282 concert grand while the recumbent bottom instrument is the 37-note, three-octave, P 402 pedal-operated grand. One of the Italian designer's additional touches on this extraordinary piano is the ingenious 'resonance' pedal which simultaneously activates the damping mechanism on both instruments. ▶

So, what could possibly have inspired the desire to bring the pedal piano back from the grave? Well, there is actually a very fine corpus of music specifically written for it. The distinguished list of composers includes Alkan (who wrote pieces for the feet alone), Gounod, Liszt, Saint-Saëns and Schumann. The latter's Studies for Pedal Piano op 56, *Sketches* op 58 and *Six Fugues on the name B-A-C-H* op 60, are considered among his loveliest compositions. Indeed, so captivated was he by the instrument that he even persuaded Mendelssohn to institute classes for it at the Leipzig Conservatory.

Moreover, not only is Borgato's reincarnated pedal piano available to performers who wish to explore this neglected repertoire (previously only available in transcription), but it has also opened up a range of possibilities to contemporary composers; several of whom – Fabrizio Marchionni, Jean Guillou and Franco Oppo – have already produced works for it.

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Doppio Borgato: A concert grand with pedalboard

