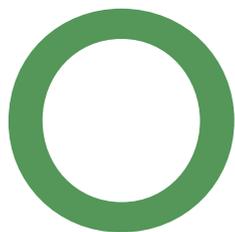




# A PIANO WORTH WAITING FOR

A Fazioli takes two to three years from start to finish to produce – so is it worth the wait?  
**Erica Worth** takes a trip to the Fazioli factory in Italy to see for herself



Oh, how I love Italy – that land of pasta, red wine, opera, designer fashion and holiday destinations.

The country has produced some legendary pianists of course – think Michelangeli and Pollini – and, I hasten to add, our issue 77 cover star Federico Colli, from the new generation. But when it comes to piano makers, Italy has been rather low-key. Until now. Over the past 30 plus years, Fazioli has been making its way into the piano scene and has become the piano of choice for such pianists as Angela Hewitt, Louis Lortie and our cover artist Daniil Trifonov. I've tried only a couple of Faziolis over the years, so the

chance to visit the factory in the town of Sacile, some 45 minutes outside of Venice, is intriguing. Give me Versace and Chianti, any day. But an Italian piano? Let's see.

On a hot spring day, along with a group of piano technicians, piano teachers, performers and journalists, I am standing outside the impressive factory, noticing how the Fazioli logo glimmers brightly in the sun (more about that logo later), when we are joined by Paolo Fazioli. Even though Paolo (as I will call him, so as not to confuse with his eponymous piano make) will be entertaining us for the next couple of hours showing us round the factory, his eager eyes will be watching every workman like a hawk – a friendly hawk, though. He has a relaxed charm about him, the Italian equivalent of 'je ne sais quoi'. He looks

like a combination of crazy scientist and arty designer with his floppy hair and casual attire.

Paolo's story began next door, inside what was the furniture factory once owned by his father. 'My family gave me one little space where I could start this "adventure",' he says with affection. 'My parents were sceptical. It was not easy to think of a project like this at the time. The history of piano makers, as we know, is very old and there's lots of tradition. We had none of this.'

But Paolo was driven – he thought the sector was 'sleeping', as he puts it. 'Everyone was saying that the piano has reached this level, and nothing should be changed. This is stupid. I demonstrated from the beginning that it's possible to do much more. We've made a big contribution to the development of piano industry. They



discovered they were sleeping, and they reacted!', he chuckles mischievously. 'For the vitality of the sector, our presence was important. We gave some benefit to everyone. We made everyone improve. I think history will say that about us. And the fact that the piano was played by Brahms and so on is not important to me. It's the instrument itself. I am sure today, for example, if Liszt were here, he'd love my pianos!'

The Fazioli piano company was officially launched in 1981 and its first prototype, the Model 183, was shown in Milan that same year. Although the 183 was sold, 'I bought it back; I wanted it!' Paolo says.

Fazioli was a small team back then, consisting of Professor Pietro Righini, an expert in musical acoustics, and Lino Tiveron, an expert in piano construction. Today, the bespoke 6,000-square metre factory houses 45 staff – a lot of space per workman. The factory has produced 2,300 pianos to date. 'We make 130 pianos each year,' Paolo says, 'But we'd like to make 150. We need bigger space, though.'

To me, the factory looks vast, and as I walk into the entrance, I am overwhelmed by the natural light and beautiful proportions. Very tasteful. Oh, and it's designed in the shape of a piano! Trust an Italian to be so design conscious.

We start off where the inner and outer rims are made. They comprise layers of Canadian maple wood, with mahogany for the outer rim. I'm told the rim remains for four days

wrapped around the gig and press. Then it's a process of waiting two years before using a rim. There's a lot of waiting so it seems, but Paolo says that 'if you want quality you must wait'. There's an array of different-sized rims. Since the prototype days, there are now six grand models: 156 (the 'Piccolo'), 183, 212 (which Paolo says is the most popular, at 7ft), 228, 278 (the concert grand) and the enormous 308 (at over 10ft). Why such a beast? 'The length of string influences the sound of tone. When longer, the sound is more "pure". I wanted more clarity in the sound.'

### Lasting logo

I can't help but ask about the striking Fazioli logo we first saw at the factory entrance and which appears on every instrument. 'The logo was made at the beginning and it was the biggest investment I made,' Paolo explains. 'Giulio Confalonieri designed it, and it cost a fortune! He was top level – like Philippe Starck. I thought, "I will spend this money today and I am spending it for life." Back then, it was judged a little odd. But now, after all these years, it's fantastic. Everyone likes it and remembers it. Confalonieri said he was inspired by the name Fazioli, and by studying the Golden Section system for the letters. It's very harmonious, nothing is wrong.'

Just like that logo, there's something about Fazioli that is so balanced. Paolo explains the elements of the Fazioli philosophy: to produce grands only; not to imitate any other existing pianos; to individually handcraft each piano

**Photos, this page, clockwise from left: Pianist Editor Erica Worth and Paolo Fazioli in front of the rims; Paolo explains the gig and press process; sanding the lids using a special machine**

combining traditional methods and technology; and to constantly improve the quality by using the results coming from scientific research. For this last point, he says, 'I felt that there wasn't enough research. I felt makers were just looking at business and profit etc. I thought I can come into this market with new things.'

We go into the polyester room, where six layers of polyester and resin are coated on to the surface of the piano's rim. More material is used than necessary, and then it's a matter of sanding it down, though it's a wait of 15 days before it can be sanded to polish. The sanding starts with a course grade, and then moves to an ever-finer one each time. The final sanding process reminds me a bit of a carwash machine: A big polisher goes all the way around the rim, with small hand polishers for the edge bits. 'Our company designed this,' Paolo says proudly. Everything is done by hand unless the machine does it better, that's the ethos of Fazioli.

Paolo stops by a tray of hinges and takes one out, telling us that they're not made of the usual brass, but are 18ct-gold plated. They are gleaming brightly. We walk into another room where a happy-looking man called Michele is doing the veneering. Anything with a particular wood veneer is made to order (inside every standard Fazioli it's the wood of the burr of poplar). I mention how driven the workmen seem. 'There are some people who have been working here for 30 years,' Paolo replies. 'We



prefer to start with young people who don't have experience. We teach them. They are very proud and loyal. They come to the concerts. Some who didn't know music, now know a lot. They became much more connected. There are three departments they can work in: soundboard, polyester and action. They stay within their department, but they are able to move around within it.'

I peer at the wooden framework of the underneath of the piano and observe that there are no screws in the joints. Everything is natural wood, with dovetail joints made with laser precision. This allows for no gaps and for the piano to breathe naturally, says Paolo, who adds that once the wooden frame is ready, it has to wait between four to five months to be used. More waiting.

Now to the soundboard, the very core of the piano. We enter a room that has precisely 26 per cent humidity – the 'Soundboard Curing Room' – in which a soundboard is preserved for three years before use (goodness, now that's really a long wait). After curing, a craftsman cuts the bridge. It's a dangerous job and our particular craftsman got so nervous with us watching him that he had to stop and wait until we'd gone! The soundboard spruce comes from the Val di Fiemme's forest in the eastern Italian alps, the same forest from which the violin makers of the Cremona school (including Stradivari) sourced their

spruce. Paolo holds the wood up close for us to see. There's such an even grain you can make out all the layers in it – just like a fine layer cake.

Then we are shown how the wrest plank, or pin-block, is fitted perfectly to the iron frame. Paolo tells us how important it is to get it fitted correctly, and that each wrest plank belongs specifically to an iron frame. We move into the iron frame room, where an employee named Danny shows us a board on the wall with a list of specifications that need to be ticked off in order for the frame to pass through to the next stage. 'Last month we threw away 35 frames,' he says, 'and sold them for scrap iron. It was too expensive to return them.'

### Coming together

From seeing the piano's body come together, we move into the stringing area. It takes a day and a half to string a Fazioli, using Röslau wires. A piano string is made with a steel core wrapped with wire. The lower down the piano, the thicker the wire (copper wire is used for the bass string). We watch a bass string being made. It's just fantastic to witness the wire whizzing its way around the core, rapidly from one end to the other. Fazioli makes the copper wires used for the bass strings themselves. By doing this, they can decide the exact length and thickness – and, of equal

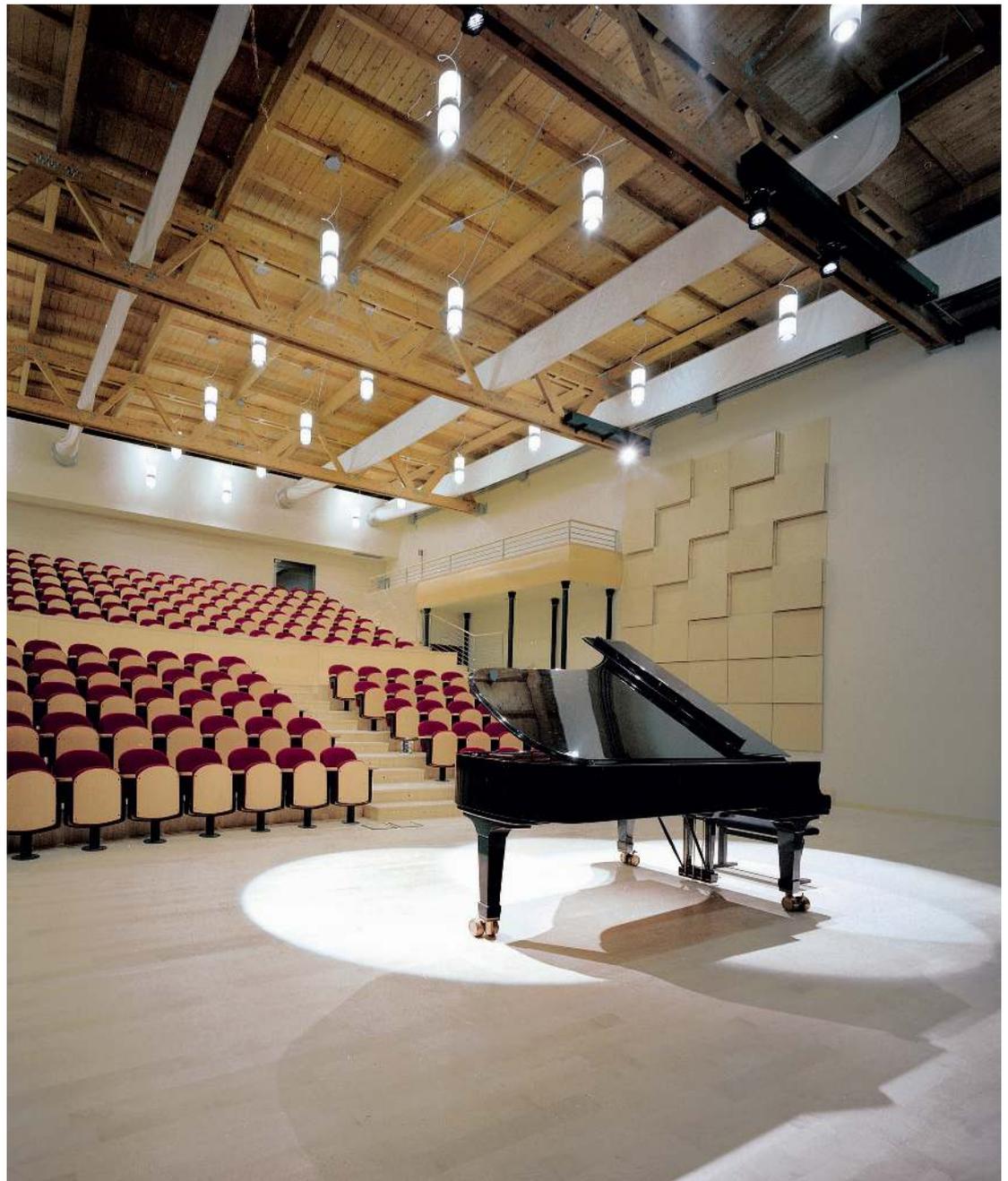
**Photos, this page, from left: Delicate work is required on the bridge; soundboard wood showing the fine layers; steel frames**

importance, they are completely sure about the quality of steel, copper and the whole procedure. I'm given that particular bass string to take home with me (an honour indeed – I am now the proud owner of a Fazioli bass string!).

Now into the spacious action department, where we watch a craftsman meticulously check the Renner hammers (Paolo checks them again too). What they are doing here is testing the hammer flanges to make sure the resistance is just right. If anything isn't just perfect, it's put aside. At the next piano, Paolo demonstrates the weighting of the keys, which is done with lead weights, and again we see how complex and precise this process has to be. The whole regulation process is a few days work – duplex scaling is one day's work; tuning and voicing two and a half.

Along one side of the room is a row of three rooms with closed doors. The first is for the initial voicing. The middle room is the 'playing in' room, where a machine literally bashes all the keys of the piano, going up and down – thick chords, very loud! This room is where everything gets 'shaken' into place (it certainly shook me up!). The third room is the final voicing room.

The piano is ready to go now, but not before Paolo tries it. He tells us that he tries out every single piano before it leaves the factory. He is a perfectionist,



as underscored by yet another set of Fazioli precepts that are aimed at attaining as good a sound as possible on the pianos: clarity of sound (so that you can't hear 'noises' within it); evenness (the timbre has to be the same, no matter what register one is playing in); duration of the sound (the sound to remain as long as possible); more dynamic spectrum (from big *fortissimos* to tiny *ppps*) and sound selectivity (being able to hear different voices in polyphonic compositions). 'This is what we are trying all the time to perfect,' Paolo explains.

At the end of our tour, we are treated to a recital by Australian pianist John Granger Fisher in the Fazioli Concert Hall. The 198-seat hall, which was built to ensure the finest acoustics, was opened in April 2005.

At the end of the day, a piano is only worth its weight in gold if there's a

pianist to play on it, and Paolo has been fortunate in those who play his pianos. Nikita Magaloff was one of the first. He performed on a Fazioli in Sacile's own Teatro Zancanaro in 1981. Paolo recounts, 'I convinced him to come to Sacile. Just days before the concert, when he discovered it was a tiny city, he refused to come – the mayor was upset! Then he accepted, and he played the concert in December 1981.'

Others followed: with Aldo Ciccolini in 1984 at Teatro Alla Scala, Milan; then Argerich, Brendel and Ashkenazy in 1988. 'And then we come to the most recent, Angela Hewitt,' Paolo says proudly. 'She is our greatest fan today.'

'This is the right way, that the younger generation are coming to us. The older generation spends their whole life with one piano. Pollini, Schiff, Sokolov, Lupu – they are not interested in changing. It doesn't make sense for them.'

**Photos, this page, counter-clockwise from top left: Making the strings; working on the veneer; Paolo checks the hammer flanges; Paolo demonstrates weighting of the keys; Fazioli Concert Hall**

Today, in the UK, you'll sometimes find a Fazioli gracing the stage at such venues as the Wigmore Hall and the Southbank. There are four concert grand 278s on tap in the UK, housed at Jaques Samuel Pianos in London, Fazioli's exclusive UK dealer. They were handpicked by Louis Lortie, Trifonov, Boris Giltburg and Hewitt. Recent pianists who have opted to play on a Fazioli include Federico Colli, Francesco Piemontesi and John Lill.

This issue's cover artist, Daniil Trifonov, will be playing his favourite Fazioli at his Royal Festival Hall recital on 30 September. For him, no doubt, it was worth the wait. ■

*Jaques Samuel Pianos (www.jspianos.com) is the exclusive Fazioli dealer in the UK. To find a Fazioli dealer around the world and for further information about the make, go to www.fazioli.com*