



# The Victory Vertical Project

A Historical Case Study in Recreational Music Making

by Garik Pedersen

Two nights past we received welcome entertainment when a jeep pulling a small wagon came to camp. The wagon contained a light system and a Steinway pianna (sic). Mom, you would laugh if you were to have seen it, because the Steinway is not at all like Uncle Jake's. It is smaller and painted olive green, just like the jeep. We all got a kick out of it and sure had fun after meals when we gathered around the pianna to sing. The only thing missing was Uncle Jake's high notes. I slept smiling and even today am humming a few of the songs we sang."

This letter, dated May 6, 1943, was sent from Kenneth Kranes to his mother in New York. Private Kranes was killed the following week by German tank fire (Steinway Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives). The Steinway "pianna" described in this letter is one of 2,436 40-inch upright pianos built for the military during World War II and, to a lesser extent, the Korean Conflict. Pianos were deemed "nonessential," and their manufacture for civilian sale was prohibited by the War Production Board after the United States entered the Second World War. But just a few months later, the U.S. military ordered the first shipment of ODGI (Olive Drab Government Issue) "field" pianos to be built at the Steinway factory in New York City. These pianos, which were built to War Department specifications, were delivered to troops across the globe for the purpose of improving morale by giving soldiers an opportunity to participate actively in music making. Steinway & Sons willingly complied with the

Author's Note: This article was written before any of us had heard of COVID-19. When you read this, I hope we will be looking back on the worst of this global pandemic with a new perspective about what is essential to life and living. According to a Latin proverb, *Metus enim mortis musica depellit* (Even the fear of death is dispelled by music).

needed design changes to their Regency upright, curtailing the use of restricted metals (no copper-wound bass strings, for example), limiting the weight of each piano to 455 pounds, adding handles for easy moving and loading, and making special accommodations for climatic and environmental challenges associated with their use in war conditions on four continents. Pianos were tightly packed in special crates and loaded on trains, ships, planes, jeeps and even submarines to be transported wherever troops were deployed. Some were even parachuted, along with other supplies, to the front lines!

### Music and Morale

“Anyone who could play an instrument, whether they were good or bad, would play, and the guys loved it.” The letter from Pvt. Kranes at the beginning of this article is one of many first-hand testaments to the way that what we now call “recreational music making” lifted spirits in a time and place where the morale of troops could impact survival for a soldier, a squad or an entire battalion. “It kept a lot of guys from going stir-crazy” (Warth 2004).

I doubt most parents who were encouraging their youngsters to learn music in 1930s America knew they were providing an outlet that soon would be used to “soften the tension a little bit” during a world war (Warth 2004). But the piano was the entertainment center of the home, a magnet that drew the generations together for fun, wholesome, interactive music making. Often the whole family gathered around the piano on a daily basis to play, listen and sing together. This social and societal role of music, and the piano as the essential musical instrument, extended from the home into all realms of life, and the piano became the style-neutral, class-neutral, race-neutral



source of all kinds of music for all kinds of people. Pianos were equally appropriate at church and on Tin-Pan Alley, in the concert hall and the honky-tonk.

### Music and Memories

Reports indicate that “Victory Vertical” pianos, as Steinway & Sons dubbed them, were put to almost constant use. Soldiers and sailors devoured the sheet music that was packed



into the special crates built to ship the pianos. Incidentally, the package also included tools and instructions for tuning and minor repair. While playing, singing and listening to popular songs of the '40s—patriotic tunes, familiar hymns and easy classics—soldiers must have felt like they were enjoying a slice of home right there on the battlefield!

During the interwar period of the '20s and '30s, it seemed that everyone played, or wanted to play, the piano. Piano teachers were everywhere, and yet, there were never enough. I doubt that many of these teachers realized they were preparing their students for a time when they would “play to remember and play to forget—sometimes they would play for their very lives” (Manning and Granström 2009). As they taught their young students to play familiar songs, simplifying at sight when necessary, transposing up or down a step and adding chords to a melody, these practical pedagogues knew they were providing their students with musical “survival skills,” but they probably didn't realize they were actually equipping them for the exigencies of war! Some of the “keen” teachers would have shown their students how to “jazz up” a piece by adding a

boogie-woogie “eight to the bar” bass, emphasizing the “weak” beats in swing style, and/or incorporating 6th-, 7th-, or 9th-chords. Little did they realize that these skills would soon remind their student/soldiers of a carefree youth that had been abruptly interrupted by war. They were not polished musicians, but some of them played very well. And under the circumstances, “any kind of music can go a long way to make a person feel better. It made a lot of guys really happy” (Warth 2004).

### Music and Emotions

The Steinway & Sons factory in New York had already been repurposed for the war effort (it was producing wooden gliders and caskets) when Henry Z. Steinway and others came up with the idea of building small, sturdy, lightweight pianos for soldiers. Other piano manufacturers were invited to join the proposal, but declined. It must have seemed a rather far-fetched and unlikely plan. Mr. Steinway told me that the initial “pitch” to the Department of War was quite simple: “Everybody loves music and knows it makes you feel better. And if you're going to have music you need pianos!” (Steinway 2008) They bought it!



It is patently obvious to anyone who has been studying, or even casually observing the role of music in our culture, that what was once an addiction to active music making has now, in many cases, become an addiction to passive listening, or even background noise. Music teachers, at least those of us of “a certain age,” often rue the encroachment of “a sports culture,” or “the screen dilemma,” or other distractions our students battle. But the loss of daily “recreational” music **participation** must also be acknowledged as a primary offender. People who **play music for the enjoyment of it** on a regular basis get habitual practice in sight-reading and functional skills like harmonizing and transposing. In addition, a pianist with a modicum of creativity and a few ounces of boredom is very likely to explore ways to ornament, stylize or reharmonize a familiar favorite after playing it 50, 100 or even 500 times. It is really not all that surprising that back in the days before sight-reading became a specialized skill with its own distinct pedagogy, many “recreational” pianists were sight-reading circles around today’s typical piano student.

### Music and Belonging

The United Service Organizations, Inc. was founded in 1941, bringing under one umbrella six civilian non-profit organizations whose shared mission was to support troops and provide wholesome recreation. With partial funding from the United States government, USO centers sprang up wherever troops were stationed and more Victory Verticals were ordered, built and shipped all over the world to support this “wholesome recreation.” These pianos were used for informal sing-alongs, impromptu worship services, dances, concerts and, of course, the famous celebrity USO shows. Well-known composer, conductor and teacher R. Nathaniel Dett was among the first USO music advisors, offering lectures, concerts and “community sings” that brought the races together for music while the military was still segregated.

Even more than today, in the 1940s, the boundaries between recreational and (what shall we call it?) “non-recreational” (!) music making were invisible. All kinds of music were important, and different styles were appropriate for different situations, not unlike wardrobe choices. Young and old crossed musical genres as naturally as they crossed the street. Hitler’s ban on jazz and swing music in 1939 helped propel jazz into the mainstream of American culture, and racially integrated groups like the Benny Goodman Band were invited to play in the most prestigious venues in the country, including Carnegie Hall. The country was awakening to the fact that jazz is good for democracy and vice versa. According to Dave Brubeck, who played ODGI pianos during his service in the army from 1942–1946, the way to reach out to the rest of the world was through cultural exchange: “No dictatorship can tolerate jazz—it is the first sign of a return to freedom” (Perrigo 2017). But this wholesale embrace was in addition to, not in place of, other musical styles.

### Music and “American” Ideas

Samuel Barber was already an internationally celebrated composer when he was drafted into the Army in 1942, at the beginning of the war. In another phenomenon that seems today sadly anachronistic, Barber was kept stateside after basic training to **contribute to the war effort** by writing “American” music. Recognizing that the war was preeminently a confrontation between opposing ideas and cultures, the U.S. recognized that it was more important now than ever to maintain a culture worth preserving. There was just one problem: Samuel, who had been raised on the Philadelphia Orchestra, trained at the famed Curtis Institute by teachers from Russia and Italy, and had spent an extended period studying in Europe during the ’30s, didn’t really know what “American” music sounded like! The thorough and resourceful young composer went to the Library of Congress, where he encountered for the first time in his life,



recordings of authentic American folk music. He was fascinated by everything he heard in these amateur performances, but particularly by the sophisticated rhythmic patterns which, in some cases, may have simply been the result of rhythmic deficiencies or sloppiness among the performers! One result of Barber's new patriotism was his *Excursions* for Piano, a four-movement piece that contains a boogie-woogie, a blues, a cowboy song and a square dance.

Were these field pianos worth the investment? A gentleman who attended my first

Victory Vertical Project performance shook my hand after the program and, with tears in his eyes said, "I fought in Vietnam; if only I had felt that someone cared about my morale..." I've never seen a cost-benefit analysis. But the project lasted: Steinway continued filling orders until 1953, when the Armistice Agreement ended the Korean Conflict. Each piano cost less than \$500 to manufacture, but a true assessment would have to add the cost of approximately 800 military ensembles, mostly small "dance" bands (each of which made use of a field piano), the USO centers that usually billeted a piano and provided a place to make music, and the equipment and man-hours required to deliver each piano to where it was needed. Those costs would be counted against the enjoyment, well-being, healing, strength, comfort and resolve the Victory Verticals provided. Firsthand reports indicate that they were sometimes given names and cared for by their divisions as prized armaments. When damaged, they were carefully nursed back to health, and when irreparable, they were recommended for special honors, medals and commendations. One must also consider the way music unified combat operations with the home front and lifted the entire national spirit. The men and (for the first time in Steinway history) women who built ODGI pianos were proud to have a role in these remarkable "care packages." The men and women who built them, played them and heard them were acutely aware that they were all linked by a common purpose. They knew that recreational music making was serious business.

Amateur pianists enjoyed listening to the "serious" concert artists of the day, keeping track of their lifestyles and activities and learning about their musical perspectives. Although they may have started playing the piano "just for fun," they discovered Bach, Beethoven and Rachmaninoff and, before long, found themselves "seriously" captivated and their repertoires expanded. It is no coincidence that community music making, including amateur orchestras, bands and choirs, and community concert organizations entered their heyday after the war. America was singing, playing, and listening! The Victory Vertical Project, which includes boogie-woogie, swing,



jazz and popular music alongside works of Bach, Rachmaninoff, Chopin and contemporary composers of the 1940s, is an attempt to celebrate this milieu. Jazz was moving from the fringe to the mainstream. Classical music was finding new audiences among soldiers who had not attended the symphony or the opera before the war. And, of course, there were “serious” composers reaching across in the opposite direction.

### Music and Transformation

Yes, the war itself changed America’s music. Violinist-humanitarian Yehudi Menuhin came out of “retirement” and gave more than 500 concerts for American and Allied troops during World War II. He was one of several performers who observed that many soldiers’ musical tastes change during the course of their deployment; classical music provided a spiritual encouragement that could calm their emotional stress. “A change occurs when men are taken into the army and sent overseas” Menuhin wrote. “That change makes them something more contemplative, emotional and nostalgic. They are different human beings. They need inspiration...need more than a joke” (Fauser 2013).

Not long after the WWII demobilization, the United States found itself embroiled in a “police action” in Korea. The USO was revived, and new orders for “field” pianos were received. Esteemed MTNA member Seymour Bernstein, army pianist, performed concerts in the U.S., Japan and Korea during the “conflict,” including about 100 on the front lines. “As there was always the danger of enemy shells landing on us, we placed the piano at the foot of a hill as a precautionary measure...Those men sat and listened to us merely because they wanted to. It was here that we made countless converts to the classics among men who had never heard a single note of serious music before” (Bernstein 2002, 286).

Is there a present-day moral to this story? Does music making still appeal in our instantaneous culture? Does music still appeal to morale, memory, emotions and belonging? Can it still carry meaning that changes lives and transforms cultures? Is there, or could there be, a modern-day phenomenon analogous to

“The Victory Vertical Project”? According to recent data, fewer than 15% of Americans play or sing regularly, and 85% of the rest wish they did (NEA 2015, NAMM 2009)! Our work here is not finished! ~

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**Garik Pedersen** first heard about “Victory Vertical” pianos during an impromptu interview with Henry Z. Steinway in 2008. Since its launch in November, 2017, the Victory Vertical Project has presented this amazing story throughout the United States.

