



WURLITZER

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Steinway may be the most recognized name in the American piano world, but probably the most common is Wurlitzer. If you don't have a Wurlitzer spinet, you probably know someone who does.

Our Wurlitzer journey begins with Franz Rudolph Wurlitzer, a German immigrant who established Wurlitzer Co. in 1856. He came from a long line of Wurlitzers that were originally known for their violins in the early 1600s. The first Wurlitzer factory was built in Cincinnati, OH in 1861. The company first started by selling German made woodwind, brass, and string instruments in the USA. Their initial success can be attributed to defense contracts selling band instruments to the US military. It wasn't until 1880 that their first

piano was crafted. By the early 1900s, their upright pianos were being manufactured in North Tonawanda, NY and their grands in De Kalb, IL.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Wurlitzer moved away from pianos and focused on creating electronic organs, jukeboxes, radios, and even kitchen appliances. The manufacture of portable electric pianos started in the early 1950s. Then in the 1960s, the spinet type piano took hold and brought Wurlitzer into a whole new world of success. The Wurlitzer spinet piano was highly sought after as it was small and inexpensive.



A spinet piano, whether made by Wurlitzer or another company, is considered an entry level instrument. They were made quickly and sold just as fast. The action mechanism is referred to as a “drop action” in a spinet piano. This is because the action and its parts are nestled deep in the case to allow for its small, short stature. The action parts are smaller, more difficult to work on and contain more parts than the modern upright piano, but not in a beneficial way like in a grand piano action. The additional parts do not add to the repetition of notes, but actually create extra steps between the movement of the key and the movement of the hammer to strike the string. In my opinion, these pianos are not good instruments for serious pianists, but rather someone who plays occasionally in a cramped apartment or just needs a keyboard to help write a song. As time went on and tiny pianos were no longer the rage, the spinet went out of style and the manufacture of such types of instruments was stopped.

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One of Wurlitzer’s most notable pianos, created around the mid 1930s, is the “Butterfly” grand. There were a few models ranging from 44 keys to the full 88. It had a symmetrical shape to it instead of the staple piano shape with a long left side for the bass and a short right side for the treble. The lid hinged in the middle of the piano and lifted from the sides giving it a winged appearance. I have worked on a few of these and would not consider them to be excellent instruments, but they do have a high novelty value.

In 1985, Wurlitzer bought the Chickering brand name. Wurlitzer remained in production for another decade until both Wurlitzer and Chickering were purchased by Baldwin. After this change of ownership, Baldwin had Young Chang build Wurlitzer pianos for about a year until they gave production to Samick in 1996. The Gibson Guitar Corporation purchased Baldwin in 2001 and additionally acquired Wurlitzer because of it. They continued production of pianos with the Wurlitzer name most likely by Samick at least until 2004 when Gibson acquired their first Chinese factory in Zhongshan. Pianos built with the Wurlitzer name ceased in 2009. The name does however live on through jukeboxes and vending machines still being built today in Hullhorst, Germany.