



# Team 'Red,' reporting for duty

Music Matters presents North American debut of rare instrument

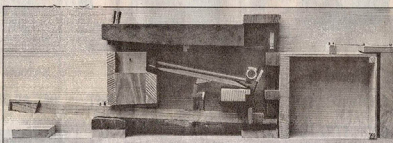
By RICK KOSTER  
Day Staff Writer

**T**he young man in a sweater and Chuck Taylor Converse All Star high tops is seated at one end of a narrow contraption shaped like a coffin in an old Western — although it's painted a distinctive shade of red.

Turns out, it's a piano — a painstakingly crafted facsimile of an instrument originally constructed by Bartolomeo Cristofori in the Baroque era, and which was, in fact, the FIRST piano.

World renowned pianist Artem Belogurov is the gentleman in the Chucks, and the instrument has been positioned in the main gallery of Stonington Borough's La Grua Center. Belogurov's hands are darting and caressing the keyboard in casual and liquid delivery of a bit of Bach, and his efforts are to confirm specificities of action, tone and sustain.

The piano arrived in Boston on Monday and was trucked to La Grua on a wet, cold day, ensconced in the sort of secure road cases one



COURTESY CHRISTOPHER GREENLEAF

**Above,** a scale model cutaway view of the piano action mechanism on Bartolomeo Cristofori's "red piano," as constructed by instrument builder Kersten Schwarz. **Top,** Artem Belogurov plays the "Red Cristofori" at the La Grua Center in Stonington.

would expect to transport material from a nuclear testing site. The piano was assembled Thursday morning and now listeners are attenuated to sound as the instrument adjusts to room and its atmospherics.

Next to Belogurov are Christopher Greenleaf, artistic director of La Grua's Music Matters series, and Kersten Schwarz, the acclaimed keyboard/instrument craftsman who built the Cristofori and has overseen its transport and assembly. Belogurov, who lives in

the Netherlands, and Schwarz, a resident of Germany, both arrived on Monday as well.

The Cristofori makes its American debut Saturday when Belogurov performs "The Very First Piano" for a sold-out Music Matters audience. It's no slight to either the musician or the instrument to ponder which is the star of the show. Perhaps it's best to call it a double bill.

**Why and how?**

Built from the same source of

## IF YOU GO

**Who:** Artem Belogurov on the "Red Cristofori"

**What:** "The Very First Piano," Music Matters

**When:** 5 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** La Grua Center, 32 Water St., Stonington

**How much:** \$20

**For more information:**  
[www.lagruacenter.org](http://www.lagruacenter.org)

Italian poplar Cristofori used on his prototypes, the red piano is beautiful and gives off a slightly spiced aroma in nuance to the rich, buttery sound Belogurov summons.

"The scent is because poplar is an oily wood," says Schwarz in a slight German accent, "and it's a nice element. But the shrinkage and expansion of the wood mean the sound is more problematic than with a modern piano. We're lucky today," She smiles. "There was only one note out of tune this morning — high up F-sharp. You could've pushed me over."

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# Music Matters: The Red Cristofori makes first U.S. appearance here

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Belogurov says, nodding approvingly. As there are no pedals for the Cristofori; dynamics and sustain are nuanced by the pianist's touch and knowledge of the keys and the "action" relationship with hammers and strings.

Saturday's recital will focus on post-Cristofori Baroque music including work by Giustini, Bach, Scarlatti, Handel, Platti and an anonymous composition commissioned by Ferdinando III de' Medici.

Born in Latvia and raised in Ukraine, Belogurov moved to Boston at 18 to study modern piano at the New England Conservatory. Equally virtuosic on pianos of various vintage, harpsichord and clavichord, he's won numerous international competitions and performed with Concerto Köln around Europe, at the Lincoln Center and Library of Congress.

Chatting in the La Grua, his casual friendliness is the sort one might associate with a guy who adopts aging hounds — then teaches them to paw their ways through "Clair De Lune."

Responding to a comparison question about the sonic and tactile differences between the piano and its modern counterparts, Belogurov thinks a moment and smiles. "It's like the difference between an acoustic guitar and an electric guitar." Somehow, it makes perfect sense.

**But how does it work?**

To further explain design subtleties to a visitor, Schwarz and Belogurov take a moment to remove the keyboard and display the parts responsible for the instruments hammer action. Schwarz's delicate handiwork, including a hand-crafted balance rail, the repetition lever, and precisely wrapped

paper rolls at the end of the hammer shank, is almost intimidating in its precise execution.

Indeed, there's an artful beauty to the complex geometrics on display, and it's intriguing to note how much the three of them can admire the logic, design and functionality of something built as a delivery system for art.

Providing a bit of context, Greenleaf explains that Cristofori's new piano astonished the musical world when it was built. Working for the Medici family, he initially experimented with harpsichords-with-hammers before, in the 1720s, building the archetypal pianos. Three originals still exist, in New York, Rome and Leipzig.

For her part, Schwarz spent years as a restorer and instrument maker at museums and shops including Florence's Accademia Bartolomeo Cristofori and Leipzig's Grassi-Museum. Acclaimed across Europe and beyond, Schwarz has risen to the peak of her profession in a field typically associated with male craftspeople.

It was at Grassi-Museum where Cristofori's surviving 1726 instrument inspired Schwarz to build her own replica. She finally had time to do so during the pandemic. Now, as its North American premiere draws nigh, Schwarz seems calmly happy that she's in Stonington — "It's so beautiful here," she says, pointing out the window at the water — and it's all going to happen.

**Four years was worth it**

"To have this piano here, to have Kerstin here, it's such a privilege," Greenleaf says. "And, of course, Artem was the first pianist we thought of when we decided to do this. He's a big favorite with Musi-

cal Masterworks audiences."

This concert is the result of four years' effort by Greenleaf. He was aware that Schwarz had replicated the instrument and that musicians across Western Europe were playing, recording and rehearsing with "The Red Cristofori."

"So, of course, I reached out to the best!" He says he never doubted his decision to try to lure the Red Cristofori to La Grua. To anyone who might ask why he'd undertook such effort, he laughs. "I can't understand why I WOULDNT do this!"

The piano's permanent stateside home will be at First Lutheran Church in Back Bay, Boston — making it more accessible to touring artists. But Greenleaf's reputation and work in Boston and with La Grua means the red piano will frequently travel to Stonington. Along with another frequent "guest," Greenleaf's 1886 Chickering concert grand, and the La Grua house piano, a 1930 Mason & Hamlin parlor grand, the center boasts a rather astonishing collection of rotating instruments.

"This concert is part of our developing mission," says Daniel Brandt, executive director at La Grua. "To have this instrument here, and Belogurov to play it, means our audience is going to hear Baroque music basically through a time machine. We're happy to be able to host its North American debut."

Greenleaf, who is also a renowned record producer and music journalist, says he hopes in the near future to record Belogurov playing the Red Cristofori, and to schedule more concerts. His eyes brighten as he discusses the possibilities. "I wouldn't be in this business if I wasn't capable of childlike joy over something like this," he says.



RICK KOSTER/THE DAY

From left are Christopher Greenleaf, Kerstin Schwarz and Artem Belogurov.