



Grand Obsession: A Piano Odyssey

Perri Knize

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A fascinating, lyrical memoir about one woman's obsessive search for the perfect piano-and about finding and pursuing passion at any age

How can a particular piano be so seductive that someone would turn her life upside down to answer its call? How does music change human consciousness and transport us to rapture? What makes it beautiful? In this elegantly written and heartfelt account, Perri Knize explores these questions with a music lover's ardor, a poet's inspiration, and a reporter's thirst for knowledge.

The daughter of a professional musician, Knize was raised in a home saturated in classical music, but years have passed since she last played the instrument that mesmerized her most: the piano. Surprised by a sudden, belated realization that she is meant to devote her life to the instrument, she finds a teacher and soon decides to buy a piano of her own.

What begins as a search for a modestly priced upright leads Knize through dozens of piano stores all over the country, and eventually ends in a New York City showroom where she falls madly in love with the sound of a rare and pricey German grand.

"At the touch of the keys, I am swept away by powerful waves of sound," Knize writes. "The middle section is smoky and mysterious, as if rising from the larynx of a great contralto. The treble is bell-like and sparkling, full of color, a shimmering northern lights. A soul seems to reside in the belly of this piano, and it reaches out to touch mine, igniting a spark of desire that quickly catches fire."

The seduction is complete. But the piano far exceeds Knize's budget. After a long and painful dalliance, she refinances her house to purchase the instrument that has transfixed her. The dealer ships it to her home in Montana, and she counts the days until its arrival. When at last she sits down to play, almost delirious with anticipation, the magical sound is gone and the tone is dead and dull. Devastated, she calls in one piano technician after another to "fix" it, but no one can.

So begins the author's epic quest to restore her piano to its rightful sound, and to understand its elusive power. This journey leads her into an international subculture of piano aficionados -- concert artists, passionate amateurs, dealers, technicians, composers, and builders -- intriguing characters all, whose lives have also been transformed by the spell of a piano. Along the way she plays hundreds of pianos, new and vintage, rare and common, always listening for the bewitching tone she once heard from her own grand, a sound she cannot forget.

In New York, she visits the high-strung technician who prepared her piano for the showroom, and learns how a wire tightened just so, or an artfully softened hammer can transform an unremarkable instrument into one that touches listeners to their core. In Germany, she watches the workers who built her piano shape wood, iron, wool, and steel into musical instruments, and learns why each has its own unique voice. In Austria, she hikes the Alps to learn how trees are selected to build pianos, and how they are grown and harvested. With each step of her journey, Knize draws ever-closer to uncovering the reason her piano's sound vanished, how to get it back, and the deeper secret of how music leads us to a direct experience of the nature of reality.

Beautifully composed, passionately performed, *Grand Obsession* is itself a musical masterpiece.

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