

+13%

Forte Piano

A new location brings together retail traffic, performance, and education



Forte Piano owner Vladimir Zaslavsky in the new Paramus showroom.

At the bottom of every invoice, Forte Piano asks customers one question: How did you hear about us? In answers recorded since opening in 1995, the piano store has tracked the shift from yellow pages to web reviews—while teacher referrals, always a Forte Piano strong suit, never really go out of style. Since its move to a new location in 2016, though, a different kind of response keeps cropping up: “We saw you passing by.” Ironically, Forte Piano’s *old* location on Route 17 in Paramus, New Jersey was one of the highest-traffic spots in the country’s densest retail center: At more than \$5 billion annually, Paramus generates more retail sales than any other zip code nationwide. Because it was set back

from the highway and clustered among other businesses, however, the storefront was only half-visible to passing drivers. For better or worse, Forte Piano had to find a new Paramus location after its longtime lease expired two years ago—and it became the store’s golden opportunity for an upgrade. With showroom windows directly facing westbound Route 4, a major thoroughfare for commuters to New York City, Forte Piano became possibly its own best advertisement. To be clear, says owner Vladimir Zaslavsky, it’s not that New Jersey motorists often stop in and buy a piano on impulse. When they do start shopping for a piano, though, it pays to be the first name they think of. All told,

Forte Piano sales rose 13% to around \$3.6 million for 2017. “It’s made all the difference,” says Zaslavsky. “Now, when people in our area are looking for a piano, they know exactly where to go.”

As Zaslavsky recalls, he didn’t have long to find Forte Piano’s new location after property owners gave him 90 days’ notice that they planned to repurpose his rented space on Route 17. With local rents among the highest in the country, he had to think outside the box to find a new storefront, ultimately choosing a former furniture store that needed major renovations to convert its blocks of small “sample bedrooms” into a wide-open piano showroom. With the new space, though, came new possibilities. Zaslavsky made the most of its prime location by placing two striking Schimmel grands in the front window, one of them an avant garde art-case model once displayed in a modern art gallery in Florida. These days, some visitors come inside just to see if it’s a real working piano. (It is.)

At 8,000 square feet, the new store also gave him space for a recital hall, which he had in the old building but improved on in the new space with a performance stage, refined acoustics, and seating for 138. Performers can choose from Bösendorfer, Shimmel, and Shigeru Kawai concert grands. As in the old store, the venue is most often used for student recitals, giving students and their teachers a professional-level stage to perform on. For Forte Piano, meanwhile, it means an audience packed with parents and other prospective piano buyers. Since opening the new location, the store has been booking more than triple the recitals it used to hold. Besides that, the venue has played host to professional musicians ranging from classical pianists Anton Batagov and Eugene Skovorodnikov to jazz legend Benny Golson, jazz guitarist Stanley Jordan, and the Finnish jazz violinist Vitali Imereli. “They love to play here because it’s hard to find a piano this good in any jazz club,” says Zaslavsky. “It’s like inviting a great driver and giving him a Rolls Royce to drive.”

With a focused piano selection spanning four brands at four distinct price points—Bösendorfer, Shimmel, Kawai, and Pearl River—Forte Piano took home its share of accolades for 2017. For the year, it was the New York tri-state area’s top