

The Piano Tells You What It Wants

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Every nine or ten years, my wife and I like to get our piano tuned. We're picky that way. Recently we realized the time was again upon us when a friend of our son pronounced our instrument unplayable. He recommended his family's tuner, and one Saturday soon after the man came and gave our little Hallet & Davis ("America's Greatest Piano Value") its decennial fix.

The tuner was personable. The session stretched into lunch. He joined us for sandwiches. And over tuna the tuner told his tale.

He told us how he learned to tune. Of the challenges of his profession. Of the risk it posed to his hearing. Of the dubious practices of some piano retailers. He told us of a showroom he had once worked in that had brought in a new, nine-foot concert grand and prepped it for sale. As it awaited attachment of its legs, the piano was placed on its side in a hallway just off the showroom floor. Immediately, the little uprights housed on that part of the floor began sounding better and selling faster—the soundboard of the nine-foot grand, said the tuner, was amplifying and enriching the sound of the nearby uprights. (That a piano generates sound in reaction to sound can be easily demonstrated by sticking your head inside an open piano and saying "Hello." The strings will begin to sing, and the bigger the piano, the bigger the effect.)

This wasn't a deliberate deception, said the tuner, but the sales staff certainly noticed the result. "And they maybe left it there longer than they should have."

All this was fascinating. But, he said, the sales and tuning communities in San Diego were small, and there was "sort of a love-hate relationship" between them. If I wanted to know more, I should contact Bud Fisher, president of the Piano Technicians' Guild of San Diego.

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Fisher has been president of the Guild for the last year; for three years before that he was vice president. He came to San Diego nine years ago, and from the day he arrived, he says, "I have been tuning pianos every day of my life. It has been my profession for the last nine years." He says this with a clear, distinct emphasis on the word *profession*.

He came from Denver, where he had already been tuning part time for three years. There, he started just about the time the first of his two children was born and just about the time he'd hit rock bottom in

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STEVEN L. SHEPHERD

the job market. "The record distributor I'd been working for got sold and resold and my job ran out. I kind of bounced around to a few other jobs, and I thought I'd end up going to truck driving school or something." Instead, his stepfather suggested he take up piano tuning.

His stepfather, who also tuned, gave him a few tools, and a family friend put him in touch with a dealer who let him begin tuning in the back room of a warehouse. He worked for free—"Because I wasn't any good. Absolute practice is what it was." But all the same, he feels fortunate to have had the chance. There is, he says, "a huge debt of gratitude."

Mostly, he tunes now with a tuning fork—it's faster than using electronics. But when he started, it was with the aid of a "little Seiko quartz tuner. It gave me 12 tones and, honestly, was not very accurate." He worked without much guidance but says now that he's glad of the hands-off approach. "Because if I had known how really involved it was, I would probably have become too discouraged and not wanted to do it."

Much of that early frustration derived from his struggle to develop the tuner's

most basic physical skill: the ability to manipulate the 230 metal wrest pins around which the ends of the strings are wound and the tightening or loosening of which adjust the pitch. Most commonly, these pins are set in a wooden block beneath the piano's cast-iron frame. The trick is in breaking the friction that holds the pin in place, making the proper turn, and then getting the pin to stay put—all while taking into account that the pins have some degree of flex and that pianos vary in the amount by which their tone changes in relation to the movement of their pins.

In the living room of Fisher's Mira Mesa home are two grand pianos. One is a 1921 Baldwin model "C" (the other is "a little no-name grand") that Fisher describes as "springy." To demonstrate what he means by this, he puts his tuning hammer (which despite its name is a wrench) on a pin and begins repeatedly striking a key while varying the pressure on the hammer. Each sound differs slightly, though all he's doing is flexing the pin. "Because I'm not moving it until it pops, until I can feel that friction break loose.

"Now, that doesn't mean this is good or bad or anything else, it just means this is how this piano feels. Other pianos don't feel that way at all. So you need to change your technique in order to fit that piano. And it usually only takes a few minutes to feel how that piano is going to react to what you are doing to it. But the piano tells you what it wants, how it feels."

Learning to feel and hear a piano tell you what it wants is one of the great joys of his profession, says Fisher. These days, he tunes in private homes, colleges, restaurants—just about everywhere there are pianos. He also tunes in concert venues. But the first time he tuned for a concert he didn't yet have that feel for a piano. And he definitely wasn't ready.

He'd been in San Diego less than a month and was tuning floor models for one of the city's prominent dealers. "All

of a sudden he calls me into his office and says, 'Hey, Bud. You want to go down and tune a concert at the such and such hotel?' And I said, 'Absolutely not.'

"He says, 'Just look like a piano tuner. Don't worry about it. Just go down there.' "

The hotel and performer had had a misunderstanding about who would arrange for the piano, and when the mix-up was discovered, a man was sent to the dealer: "And he comes running in at 1:30 and he needs a piano at the hotel by 4:30. It was just some ridiculous time. But they got a piano onstage at 4:30 or so, and I think I even got there before the piano.

"And I remember being very nervous. I am sure I was sweating. Visibly sweating. And here comes a piano and they put it on the stage and I sat down and... just did what I could. I could do some things, but God bless the performer; he sat down and played a little bit and said, 'Okay.' He was very gracious."

Even today, when he is often named in contracts as the designated tuner, Fisher says performance tuning is never easy. There's always pressure and rarely enough time. "It's not like walking into Mrs. Olson's living room and being fed cookies and milk and everything's fine when you leave." Instead, there's noise, chaos, and uptight production managers. ("They're going, 'All right, check number four, Harry! Bring those...' You know, they're setting things up, it's wild, they're screaming at each other, and I'm trying to listen to a single minute piece of a single note?") Always, too, is the need to contend with the preferences and demands of individual musicians.

This in its way is an artistic act in itself. The pianists will ask for a little more of this or a little less of that, and Fisher will try to accommodate. Perhaps he'll massage a string (using a piece of brass to

change the way a string's shape conforms to the bridge) or do a little voicing (softening the hammers by fluffing the felt pads with needles). But, he says, "You don't want to customize a piano totally for one performance—change it forever for this one guy for one night. Because, you know, 45 minutes later he's on his way to Milwaukee."

Most of all, what you don't want is to have something go wrong in the middle of a performance. That, he says, "is a very uncomfortable, miserable position to be in. You walk right onstage—sometimes they have a curtain, sometimes they don't. You can't hear anything. And it is complete and utter damage control. You're just looking to see if there's anything that just absolutely exploded."

Strictly speaking, voicing, string massage, and fixing things that have exploded are aspects of Fisher's work that exceed the boundaries of piano tuning—that is, of bringing strings into pitch. But he says most tuners do more than tune, and that's why the Guild is called the Technicians' and not the Tuners' Guild.

In Fisher's case, these added activities include occasionally consulting with prospective instrument buyers (the concept being similar to that of taking a car you're thinking of buying to a trusted mechanic for an inspection). He also rebuilds. He restrung the Baldwin in his living room and rebuilt its action—the 88 wooden assemblies that transmit force from the keys to the strings. He rebuilds about two actions per year and is now in the middle of an action for a 1917 Steinway grand, whose numbered parts lie in boxes scattered about his living room.

And he plays. Unlike the proverbial player who takes up tuning for a little side money, Fisher learned to play specifically to augment his abilities as a tuner—"So I

could empathize with them. You know, if someone hits a key and says, 'That feels funny,' and I don't play the instrument, I'd say, 'That feels perfectly okay to me—it's going up and down.'"

He is more than a little bashful describing his skills as a player, searching hard for the right words and saying only, "I play the piano. I play at the piano. Well, how 'bout this? I'm a piano player, not a pianist." But clearly he has been captivated.

In his living room, along with the twin grands, are music stands and chairs, a drum set with conga, and an acoustic bass. They are waiting for a group of Fisher's friends who bring horns and harmonicas and gather at his house every Friday night to play jazz. And though he characterizes them as mostly in it for fun ("I guess if we were good musicians we'd be out working"), he illustrates what they play with a few nicely embellished bars of "As Time Goes By."

"I fell in love with playing," he says. "And who knows? I may just chuck all the technology someday and become a starving jazz musician. I think that's what I really want to do anyway. No, that's just a... certainly it's a joke.

"But corny as this sounds, I have a passion for this instrument. I'm not the most religious guy in the world, I don't believe in a lot of superstition, but it seems as though—they're alive, they know. The darn things know if you're good to them or not. And I have found that the more I did for them, the more they did for me. And even if at the end of the day, when I'm going... 'Oh, Lord.' It's the end of the day or something, and I'm thinking, 'Oh, God, I hate...' I stop myself in the middle of that sentence. I do not hate this. I absolutely love this." ■