

## Cleaning Pianos

Before you clean, know when to hold them,  
know when to fold them, know when to walk away  
and know when to run.

Jim (Coleman?)

Whenever working with fire, smoke, flood or accident damage, you will be dealing with an insurance company. Look in the phone number under “water and fire damage.” Sometime during the lifetime of owning their piano, every homeowner can expect some kind of water damage that they can’t clean up. Between the owner, the restoration company and the insurance company and the piano technician, the only person who knows what to do about the piano is the technician. The owner is afraid that someone will ruin it in the process of trying to fix it, that they might end up with a piece of junk, that it will cost them money. The insurance company’s job is to figure out how much it would cost to put it back to the original.

**Insurance companies** know everything about you. There are profiles established for possessions, values, shopping habits, accident statistics, etc. The insurance companies have calculated that when they have paid out what they plan on paying, they will still have made a certain amount of money profit. When there is damage done, they want to spend what they have to spend to take care of the situation. They have a whole bunch of different product or ways of buying insurance to make sure the customer gets what they want to buy with their investment. Customers can get bells and whistles, or basic coverage. This is important because the restoration company has to know what to expect.

The insurance company calls the **restoration** and says that there has been a fire and that they want to know how much it would cost to restore the piano, or if it should be replaced. Consequently, the first question is how much was this piano worth before the accident? Can the owner buy another piano for the same value? Call or go to the piano stores and find out what similar pianos sell for. What is the retail price? Compare the range of store prices. Call the piano technician and ask how much it would cost to clean it up. For a half a day of time to clean a severely damaged piano, charge twice as much to allow for preparation, travel, decontamination of tools afterwards, etc. Many large service companies incorporate all the hidden expenses in the quoted price.

The piano is worth this much, the **technician** says it can be cleaned for this much, and the restoration company asks how well the piano is going to be cleaned. The technician answers with different degrees of cleaning – an A grade, a B grade, a C grade and a D grade. A D grade is good enough that you won’t get dirty when you touch it, and the smell is gone. An A grade means keep your check book open until everyone is happy. When the case parts are not working, the insides are probably so far gone that the rest of the piano is not worth it.

*Story:* The piano was trashed, and the technician declared the piano worthless. At the time he didn’t know that this piano had been given to the daughter by the father just before he was killed and now this piano was the only tie the daughter had to her father. The technician probably should have asked to do some research and call her back. A month later he found out that somebody had pieced it together for her.

*Story:* The restoration company asked him to evaluate the piano to see if it should be cashed out. The piano was shot. The piano could be replaced for \$7000-\$8000. This insurance company had a “simple uncomplicated insurance.” What will happen next is that the adjuster will be notified, and the adjuster will give the client \$8000 so that the customer can go out and buy any new piano. If they want a \$60,000 Steinway, the insurance will pay for it. The insurance company knows from statistics what the probability is of someone taking advantage of this. This policy is sold to people who are so anxiety driven that if they lose anything then they can replace whatever with something even better so they can make their life tolerable. The piano has to be cashed out because the premium has been paid on it.

**Communicate** clearly what needs to happen in the cleaning process. Only the technicians know. What is the worst kind of damage: water or fire? Water. What kind of water is worse: cold water or hot steam? Hot steam. Where does hot steam come from? From the hose water used to put out a fire. Inside that steam there are acids from the fire particles. When you come into this situation, ask some questions. Ask how the fire was put out. If the piano is sharp now, even though there is no rust or corrosion showing, six months from now the hide glue joints might all come apart, the sound board splits and cracks, and the

pin block doesn't hold a tune anymore. It might be that the insurance company's budget is at its limit, so they can't afford to replace it.

### **Restoration Companies**

First the owner hysterically calls the claim department at the insurance company. Claims tells the customer to call three different restoration companies and get some estimates. "Well, I don't know whom to call. Can you give me some numbers?" "No, but I could let you know whom we have worked with in the past." The three restoration companies are all competing for the job but need to know the bottom line for what it will cost to get the job done. They are the ones who cut the check, so they need to know what it will cost. This is why it is so important to know what condition the piano will be in six later on. To avoid litigation, restoration companies will back up very fast to ask what the insurance companies want them to do. The two companies work tightly together.

*Story:* The client had an old piano with a mirror and thought that this old upright piano was a rare breed. The insurance and restoration companies knew they would have to consider that this piano was valuable and agreed that the piano needed to be refinished. The client was too busy ever to come out and check the tinting of the stain. The customer was an extremely sensitive person and was a real perfectionist. As the piano was being moved back into the house, the customer was devastated that the job was horrible. The client called the technician all upset. The refinisher wrote a check to the client for the amount that the restoration company would pay and left. The end-product was that there were eight lawyers going through every inch of his house to see if everything had been done correctly, and all eight agreed that there was nothing wrong with the piano; it was in perfect shape. Because the refinisher did this, the act of writing the check essentially showed that he agreed with the customer that the job had not been done right.

### **How to categorize the condition of a piano.**

GREEN LIGHT PIANO: Everybody is happy. Go for it.

Be straightforward with the promise. There is no corrosion and the structure is good.

Do not clean corroded strings and pins, because you can't guaranteed that you got all the corrosion and acid from the string and pin. Replace the pin. If there is corrosion, then there will be corrosion right around the coil of hammer butt springs, damper springs, etc. According to State Farm, if there is going to be corrosion caused by a fire, it will show up within eighteen hours.

When a piano is cashed out, nothing is being thrown away. It's just that at that particular time that particular damaged piano is not the right piano for that particular customer. A salvager might buy it, clean it up and sell it to a new happy customer. If you're going to cash out a piano, go high in order for the owner to be happy.

YELLOW LIGHT PIANOS are on the line and will cost as much to restore as to replace it and cash it out. If the piano was not very good to begin with the damage is unknown, things are complicated, then this might not be worth doing.

### **RED LIGHT PIANOS**

You know it can be cleaned and the owner thinks it can't.

Pre-existing damage are an issue that must be pointed out. Do a thorough examination of the piano before doing anything. Check for cracks, swollen parts, broken or worn parts, etc.

Be wary if it is unsure as to who is paying for the job or even who owns the piano.

*Story:* The customer was so picky, that when the technician walks in, everybody looked with awe that he was the person who was going to touch the piano. When he opened it, it was covered with dust. With a flashlight, he noticed a cracked plate that had obviously been cracked for a long time. He pointed out the pre-existing problem to customer. She turned on her heels and stomped out of the house. It was clear that her plan had been foiled. She knew it was a hunk of junk and saw this as her opportunity to use the technician's liability insurance to buy her a new piano.

### **Conclusion**

Cleaning is not rocket science most of the time.

Is the owner happy? Is the party paying for the job happy? Are you happy?

Don't think you have to do this stuff alone. We are all in this together.

Leave a rose on the piano with a thank-you card.

### **The Practice of Cleaning Pianos**

Keep up-to-date on the latest technology. Keep the mindset of keeping on the forefront of research, techniques and procedures.

In front of us are two piles. Under the blue tarp is everything ready like an ambulance. This is everything he needs and is kept in his shop. Under the white cloth is what he carries in his general tools in the field.

#### **Field kit:**

- White coveralls
- Clean vacuum cleaner with a clean bag, with a blow feature
- New furniture pad for using the grand lid as a workbench
- 2 pieces of ¾ plywood for a workbench
- Flashlight
- 2 suitcases of tools
- Small paint brush
- MSDS sheet (It is the law to carry these sheets with commercial & industrial products)

#### **Shop tools used for fire damage:**

- ¾" drill motor with a bronze brush
- A good, clean shop vacuum, without wheels, with an extra long hose, and with ear protection
- Cem sponges (wall sponges), used by many cleaners. These are made to be used dry. Cut into small pieces. Once they are dirty, throw them away.
- Tarps
- Two leather boot straps
- 5 gal. Bucket
- Lots of re-usable towels
- Small paint sprayer
- Extension cord
- Shop light
- Scrub pads
- Garbage bags
- Carpet rake
- Safety tool
- Cleaning products
- Bamboo shishkabob sticks for cleaning small spaces
- Plastic examination gloves
- Microban disinfectant spray is an anti-microbial, better than a disinfectant.
- Soil-Solve is a butyl, and is called a non-carcinogen with MSDS. For sealed, non-porous surfaces. This will dissolve cigarette smoke
- Fresh-N-Air by McDowell Supply Co. is a deodorant, but should not be mixed with anything. Yet, a fire and water damage specialist found that these two mixed together works better than anything else.
- Brass barbecue brush with the scraper removed for cleaning bridge pins

#### **EQUIPMENT DETAILS**

Cem sponges get rid of **smoke** as long as the odor-causing molecule is gone. Ozone was the way. Then people found out that ozone was corrosive. Then along came Thermogen that used an internal combustion tool that reduced things down to sub-micron size; but it didn't work. Later it was found that if the ozone generator was kept at a certain level, it worked great and was not corrosive. They created ozone chambers. Cigarette smoke is sticky, goopy, smelly, and is the toughest of all things to remove because it has been

exposed every day. Sometimes it helps to spray a mask to cover the smell. Odor is the most primal function of the human body and people are very sensitive to smell.

Use cem spnges to:

Scrub action bed

Clean the sides and tops of keys

Wipe down action parts, e.g. hammers, shanks, etc.

Any kind of unsealed portion of the piano.

Shop vac;

Clean after each use, especially after cleaning mouse remains.

Bucket:

A butyl keeps working as long as it is wet. Keep all goopy things inside the bucket. Keep the bucket on the tarp.

Rags:

Dry rag

Solvent rag: put in solvent, ring it out, move the solvent with the grain, being specific, direct and diligently mindful as to its use. Return it to the bucket. Discard dirty rags on the tarp.

Gunny sacks are a great way to store rags. It keeps them clean, aired out and dry.

Sprayer:

Jim literally washes actions with a dry cleaning solvent with a little electric paint gun. He takes the stack off of grands. How do they clean Oriental rugs with unset blue dye? This has perc in it and is extremely toxic.

Shop light:

Magnet on bottom of lamp, sticks to plate

Carpet rake:

When you're done, you can rake out the carpet as you leave so that there are no footprints on the rug. The last thing in the car is the vacuum cleaner so you can vacuum your way out. Always leave things cleaner and better than they were when you came.

Chemicals:

Any solvent of any kind applied to a bas string will reduce the length of its life.

Scrub pads don't leave strands as steel wool does.

Test on the top of the back of a leg first.

First clean the legs, key slip, cheek blocks, music desk, then clean the things that cost a lot to fix.

The chemical you put into water doubles in capacity when the water is over ten degrees.

Leather boot straps:

Feed a lace under the strings from the bass to treble end. Tie a damp rag to the end by the bass, and the other lace to the other end of the rag. Now you can pull the rag back and forth under the strings quickly and easily.

Cleaning the tuning pin area:

Brush Soil-Solve on a small area of tuning pins in each direction between the pins. It will suds up.

Vacuum up the foam. Spray water on the area to rinse it, then blow air dry the area with the other vacuum.