

PIANO SCRIPTS

Dave Stocker

4/18/2020

Zoom

What everyone should know about pianos.

The main reason pianos go out of tune is ... NOT moving. It is humidity changes. Seasonal changes in moisture in the air cause the wooden structure of the piano to be constantly expanding and contracting. Here in Western Washington, we tune most pianos about once a year. Schools and churches are often twice a year, and performance pianos are tuned every time they are used. Mid-West and East Coast, they're tuning up to four times a year, because they have seasons. We have the rainy season and August 24th if everybody's been good. Otherwise, God looks down and says, "No sun for you!" In the Mid-West and East Coast, they go from very dry to very moist. Move a piano from Louisiana in the bayou to Las Vegas in the desert, it is going to go absolutely bonkers.

There are at least 4,000 to 6,000 parts to an automobile; there are 10,000 to 12,000 parts to a piano. It is a complicated machine. When a car hits five years, you hit the long list in the back of the manual: Belts, brakes, hoses, rear differential fluid, cabin air filter; touch everything, tweak everything. At ten years, you do that list again, AND the alternator falls off in the middle of Seattle rush hour traffic, on the freeway, in the middle lane, in a rainstorm. Don't ask me how I know this. After fifteen years, the (window handle/knobs) start coming off in your hand. Everything says, we're done here.

With a piano, the life expectancy in that sense is about twenty years for normal home use. At that point we give it a good cleaning, reshape the hammers, and regulate the action.

Reshaping means taking sandpaper and removing some felt to get down below the grooves and into some good felt. (Demonstrate with fingers) When the felt hits the strings, it compresses and then pushes off of the wire. It is a spring, made out of matted sheep's hair. This unique action is why hitting a piece of wire with felt makes a nice sound. When the hammer gets grooved, the felt does not flex the same way. It can just whack at the wire. The overall shape is also important as to how the hammer interacts with the wire.

Regulation is the word we use for adjusting the action. Between the key and the hammer, there are up to twenty-seven different things that can be adjusted on an upright. Times eighty-eight notes! The whole process takes me about a day. A grand has up to forty-five places adjustable on each note, it can take up to three days to touch everything. That's not part of tuning!

So, at forty to fifty years, we do all that again; and some kid has taken a hammer to the keytops, or some other set of felt needs replacing. At seventy-five, we are replacing some other things, and looking hard at the hammers. At a hundred years, everything needs replacing: hammers; felt left, right and center; keytops; key bushings; strings; refinishing - This is what I call rebuilding, rather than reconditioning. It usually only makes sense in a true family heirloom, not the piano you pick up at a garage sale.

Before I OK the Appointment

Thanks for signing up for an appointment. Before I ok the time and date, I want to ask some questions about the piano.

Is this a piano you recently acquired, had for a while, or is it a family heirloom?

How tall in inches is the piano?

Do you have an idea of how old it is?

When was the last time the piano might have been tuned?

Has any other work besides tuning ever been done to it?

Any other problems you are aware of, or concerned about?

We do not charge for looking at emailed pictures, and with my experience, I can tell a lot from a few pictures. The most useful pictures are: Shot of the whole piano; any obvious case damage; open the lid and find the serial number, usually five or six digits; a shot straight down onto the high treble hammers at the far right end of the piano (like the picture below). From these I can tell you how old the piano is, and what kinds of maintenance is likely due to be done.

You can also call my wife, Joanne, at the office number below, or email for any other questions you may have.

How Much is a Tuning

Basic answer first: Tuning is \$XXX in the Olympia area, slightly higher further out. If it has been a while since it was last tuned, it may need a pitch raise for an additional \$XX.

Now, some piano facts.

Pianos go out of tune because of humidity changes, not moving. Tuning about once a year is normal in Western WA, up to four times a year is normal in the mid-West and East. The longer it goes, the flatter and more out of tune it goes. If it is flat enough, a pitch raise is necessary to bring it back up to pitch. Tuning any piano makes it much more pleasant to play.

There are 4,000 to 6,000 parts to a car, 10,000 to 12,000 to a piano. After five years, a car hits the long list in the back of the manual, brakes, belts, hoses, adjustments, and so on. At ten years, you have to do all of that again, and the alternator falls off on the freeway in Seattle. At fifteen, the window handle falls off.

For pianos, it's about 20 years between reconditioning intervals. Cleaning, reshaping the hammers, adjusting the action (regulation is our term), about a day and a half's work. At 40 years, we do that again, and something else goes wrong. On older pianos, the list will be quite long. It is possible that it cannot be tuned as-is, either from failed glue joints or strings that will no longer sustain tension. A complete rebuilding easily runs in the thousands, and only makes sense in a family heirloom. So, determining the age of a piano, and how much wear is on it, is very important. How much work we do will be determined by how much you want out of the piano.

We do not charge for looking at emailed pictures. I like to get a general shot of the entire piano; open the lid at the top and find the serial number, usually 5 or 6 digits, with the name and serial number I can look up the age; and a shot straight down at the high treble hammers at the far right end of the piano; and pictures of anything else you think I need to see. I'm trying to see how much felt is in the grooves in the hammers where they hit the strings and get a general idea of the quality and condition of the piano.

If you like you can give my wife, Joanne, a call to set up an appointment, or click on the link below. We are also happy to answer any other questions you may have.

Looking at used pianos?

Some basic facts first.

Basic tuning is \$XXX in the Olympia area, if it has been a while since it has been tuned, it will need a pitch raise for an additional \$XX.

Pianos go out of tune because of humidity changes, not moving. Tuning about once a year is normal in Western WA, up to four times a year is normal in the mid-West and East. Before a piano is given away or sold, it often hasn't been touched in years, let alone tuned. That is why it will likely need a tune and a pitch raise.

There are 4,000 to 6,000 parts to a car, 10,000 to 12,000 to a piano. After five years, a car hits the long list in the back of the manual, brakes, belts, hoses, adjustments, and so on. At ten years, you have to do all of that again, and the alternator falls off on the freeway in Seattle. At fifteen, the window handle falls off.

For pianos, it's about 20 years between reconditioning intervals. Cleaning, reshaping the hammers, adjusting the action (regulation is our term), about a day and a half's work. At 40 years, we do that again, and something else goes wrong. On older pianos, the list will be quite long. It is possible that it cannot be tuned as-is, either from failed glue joints or strings that will no longer sustain tension. A complete rebuilding easily runs in the thousands, and only makes sense in a family heirloom. So, determining the age of a piano, and how much wear is on it, is very important.

It may be possible to tune a piano and do a couple of minor repairs. But, to equate a piano to a car again, it would be like expecting your child to learn how to drive on the freeway with a car from 1980. It will probably get them to the next exit, but you wouldn't want them to go to Seattle with it.

We do not charge for looking at emailed pictures. I need a general shot of the entire piano; open the lid at the top and find the serial number, usually 5 or 6 digits, with the name and serial number I can look up the age; and a shot straight down at the high treble hammers at the far right end of the piano. I'm trying to see how much felt is in the grooves in the hammers where they hit the strings. This can help sort out the pianos you should run away from, and the piano we should take a second look at. The second look usually involves me coming out and appraising it for \$XXX, which may be applied to moving o*r tuning that piano.

We also sell pianos. Prices include reconditioning or rebuilding, delivery, one in-home tuning, and a limited five year action warranty. I have a cheap and ugly spinet for \$1195, others going all the way up to serious grands for way more. The better used upright pianos go from between \$2,000 and \$5,000.

Sorry to be so lengthy, but I have seen too many people buy pianos they wound up throwing away. So, please, anyway we can help, let us know.

Questions about your piano

Let me ask:

What kind of piano do you have? (upright, grand)

How tall in inches if an upright, how long overall in inches if a grand?

Do you have an idea of how old it is?

When was the last time the piano was tuned?

Any other problems you are aware of, or concerned about?

Where do you live?

We do not charge for looking at emailed pictures, and with my experience, I can tell a lot from a few pictures. The most useful pictures are: Shot of the whole piano; any obvious case damage; open the lid and find the serial number, usually five or six digits; a shot straight down onto the high treble hammers at the far right end of the piano. From these I can tell you how old the piano is, and what kinds of maintenance is likely due to be done.

You can also call my wife, Joanne, at the office number to set up an appointment, or email for any other questions you may have.

Short basic answer

Basic answer first: Tuning is \$XXX in the Olympia area, slightly higher further out. If it has been a while since it was last tuned, it may need a pitch raise for an additional \$XX.

There are many other things besides tuning that a piano may need. Are there any keys that don't play right? Pedals work ok?

Things we will need to know to make an appointment –

Contact info: name, address, phone, email;

Piano info: upright or grand? How tall if upright? How long if a grand? How old is it? How long since it was last tuned, if known?

You can call our office number below to arrange a time, or you can go to our scheduling website and choose a time yourself:

<https://gazelleapp.io/scheduling/rfMVQWlLJmJnXw21VyB923G>

Feel free to call or write if you have any other questions.

Questions and Information for Evaluating Antique Upright Pianos

Here is some basic information about pianos:

Pianos go out of tune because of humidity changes, not moving. Tuning about once a year is normal in Western WA, up to four times a year is normal in the mid-West and East. Before a piano is given away or sold, it often hasn't been touched in years, let alone tuned. A piano can go quite flat in just a few years. Tuning such a piano is a bigger job than just a standard tuning.

There are 4,000 to 6,000 parts to a car, 10,000 to 12,000 to a piano. After five years, a car hits the long list in the back of the manual, brakes, belts, hoses, adjustments, and so on. At ten years, you have to do all of that again, and the alternator falls off on the freeway in Seattle. At fifteen, the window handle falls off.

For pianos, it's about 20 years between reconditioning intervals. Cleaning, reshaping the hammers, adjusting the action (regulation is our term), about a day and a half's work. At 40 years, we do that again, and something else goes wrong. On 100 year or older pianos, nearly everything is worn out and needs replacing or repair. A complete rebuilding easily runs in the thousands of dollars, and only makes sense in a family heirloom. So, determining the age of a piano, and how much wear is on it, is very important.

For antique value, three things are required: Age, Rarity, and Condition. One hundred years ago, manufacturers were turning out up to 360,000 pianos a year. This means age itself does not denote rarity. Most pianos have not been reconditioned or rebuilt, let alone tuned as often as they should. Old pianos in "excellent" condition are truly scarce.

To help you determine the value of your piano, and the best way to sell it, I need to know a few things. How long since the piano was last tuned? Has any other work been done to it? Is there a date certain when the piano has to be gone? Is there a bench? Any other information you may have on its condition would be helpful.

May I ask you to send some pictures? A general shot of the outside of the piano; lift the lid and find the serial number, five or six digits, usually near the tuning pins; a shot straight down at the high treble hammers at the right end of the piano; pictures of anything else that might be interesting or important.

The Kid Spiel

As an adult musician, what I have noticed is that people who can play the piano as an adult usually have lessons through high school, and sometimes into college. Not that they will necessarily be a concert pianist, but that they can play what they want to play on the piano.

Most kids want to quit about the time they are in middle school, when they would rather be outside doing something stupid, rather than practice. So the trick is, have the right answer for them when they want to quit.

I have that answer.

A friend of mine did the wrong thing, and you want to learn from your friends' mistakes when possible. He started his kid at five, and he was doing good at five, but he was going on seventeen. "I don't want to do this, I hate this, when can I quit?!?" My friend thought to himself, "If I can keep him going for ten more years, I should be able to keep him going after that." "You can't quit until you are fifteen," he said. Wrong answer! Every time the kid sat down, he said to himself "I hate this, I don't want to do this, and when I am fifteen . . ." It was a negative goal, and kids remember that kind of thing. My friend couldn't make it fifteen years and one more month, one more day, one more minute! "You said, you said!"

So, I thought about it a great deal, and parsed it all the way out. When my oldest turned ten, my wife said to me, "He has something to say to you." Inside, I said, "It's a parental moment, and I know what to do!"

"I want to quit taking the piano," he says. "Come with me," I reply. I go to the piano, where there is one of those Libraries of Music, a set of books they used to sell door to door like encyclopedias. They go from very easy to very hard. I grabbed the hardest book, opened it at random so there were little black spots, everywhere. I then said these very carefully chosen words

—

"Whenever I can take out a piece of music like this, and you can play it; you can stop taking lessons." His face falls, and he says, "Oh." "It's not just sight-reading: it's knowing the theory, learning how to improvise, how to accompany others. It's a bunch of things. A life's choice has been made for you, you are going to play the piano, get over it!" Now, I did not say he had to play that piece of music, because he might have done that. It wasn't a piece out of that book, because he might have done that! It was anything I could come up with. And it wasn't to stop playing the piano, it was stop taking lessons. A positive goal, the highest understandable and achievable goal I could come up with. I could always say, "Don't worry about it, go play football and be happy." But I could never raise the goal again. That was my friend's mistake.

That happened when he turned ten. At twelve, he started accompanying choir in middle school. That was when he owned it for himself, and we never had to tell him to practice again. He now has a Doctor of Musical Arts in Accompaniment, and is making a living playing the piano at the university level.

David Stocker, RPT, PNWRVP
Fir Tree Piano
360-786-8863 Office
360-790-4350 Mobile
firtreepiano.com

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/8rjyd0ted66mjx5/AAAYkELVkuqBaHQ_-nPYOQqda?dl=0