



STAFF Tech Support

For the first 15 years of his career, John Cavanaugh schlepped his tools wherever he pleased, and nobody paid him any mind. Then the World Trade Center came down, and everybody's guard went up. "It used to be that I could take my tools as a carry-on. Those were the days," he says. As executive director of

keyboard technology at the conservatory, Cavanaugh is a sort of piano whisperer—in demand not only across campus, but in major venues across the world.

"After 9/11, security started unrolling my tools and saying, 'Can you please come over here, sir.' They'd never seen anything like them. And suddenly they wanted to know who I was and where I was born."

A well-traveled native of Indiana, Cavanaugh is essentially the same guy most every piano technician is: an incurable music lover who can't resist the charms

of physics or math or engineering. "Piano technology satisfies our interest in sound and its connection with touch," he says.

Lost amid the artistry of any great piano performance is the artistry of the technician who toils for hours before the crowds file in. At Oberlin, Cavanaugh and his colleagues—Robert Murphy, Ken Sloane, Andy Bertoni, and Josh Spurlock—tend to the conservatory's collection of some 240 Steinway grands.

"As soon as we turn our back

from the piano and walk out the door, it's trying to go out of tune," says Cavanaugh, underscoring the fickle nature of contraptions crafted from wood and leather and felt. But the best technicians are not just highly skilled craftsmen; they are highly attuned collaborators who can customize each instrument to the exacting specifications of the performer. In 2014, Oberlin and Steinway & Sons

launched an exclusive two-year degree program to further develop the best of them. The artist diploma in piano technology will yield its first graduates this spring,

each one of whom will slide straight into a coveted job.

"The crux of the program is to take seasoned piano technicians and help them learn how to bridge the gap between what the pianist is looking for in a piano and how to make that happen in a technical sense," says Cavanaugh. "Most people don't understand that piano tech is a matter of problem-solving and patience. And once you find a problem and figure it out, you've got to do it 88 times."

—Erich Burnett