

The Buckeye Backcheck

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Newsletter of the Columbus Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild

In this issue:

[*From the Editor...*](#)

[*Meeting Minutes...*](#)

[*Franz Mohr at Graves Piano & Organ...*](#)

[*From Other Newsletters...*](#)

[*From the Arts Journal...*](#)

From the Editor...



The highlight of the first month of the year was the appearance of Franz Mohr at Graves Piano & Organ on January 20, 2004. Franz, as many of you know, was the Chief Concert Technician at Steinway & Sons for 30 years. He is perhaps even better known as the piano tuner/technician for Vladimir Horowitz for 25 years, having tuned at all his concerts and for all his recordings. This knowledgeable and engaging man held our attention for some two hours, and we all thoroughly enjoyed listening to him. He is a kind and humble individual who loves what he does - traveling to talk to people all over the world about his favorite piano and pianist - Steinway and Horowitz. This month's Buckeye Backcheck will contain Part One of my recollections of the talk by Mr. Mohr, and the March issue will contain the conclusion. I hope you enjoy reading the article about him.

Meeting Minutes (excerpts)

Upcoming technicals and possible topics: Grand Hammer hanging, Sostenuto regulation, Historical Temperaments, Charles Walters, Vertical Dampers.

Delegate to Council: Chris Altenburg has agreed to be our delegate for the June 29 - July 3 National Convention in Nashville.

Elections: Chapter elections will be held in either May or June.

Franz Mohr at Graves Piano & Organ ...

Franz Mohr, the legendary piano technician for Vladimir Horowitz, gave a charming and enlightening talk at Graves Piano & Organ on January 20th 2004. Those in attendance included many members of the Columbus Chapter of the PTG, along with other technicians from Cleveland and Dayton and other outlying areas. Franz spoke to us for nearly two hours, and, after he joined us for dinner, he spoke again to a large group of music educators. In attendance at that second lecture was Barbara Zuck, who wrote a nice article about Franz in the Columbus Dispatch.

Before Franz began his lecture, Ben Wiant stated that he had recalled seeing Franz on the Martha Stewart show some time ago. Franz said that he indeed had been on the show, and that Martha had asked him the proper method of cleaning keys. (We never did get the chance to ask Franz how he answered her question.) Following Ben's inquiry, Christina Kauffman, who helped organize Mr. Mohr's visit to Graves, began the session by playing a prelude on the piano, which she did to our enjoyment.

Franz then spoke to us in a sincere and friendly manner, saying that he considered all of us "a family of technicians." He continued by saying that he not only tries to impart what he knows to fellow technicians, but that he also in turn "learns from others." He brought up an amusing story of how he was once in Bangkok, Thailand speaking to a group of technicians. He looked behind himself just before he began his talk, and he noticed a large banner displayed across the stage. As it was written in the native language, he asked that someone translate it for him. The banner read "The World's Greatest Technician." Franz's humble response to us: "I am not". Franz has lectured all over the world- including speaking to 120 technicians in a recent trip to Beijing, China.

Franz stated that his talk to us would be about tuning, regulating and voicing. Although he touched upon those topics, the main thrust of his speech was about his association with Vladimir Horowitz. For twenty-five years Franz Mohr tuned for all of Horowitz's concerts and recordings. Franz began with the story of how he originally came to Steinway in 1962. The Chief Concert Technician at that time was Bill Hupfer, who had had that position at Steinway for fifty years, and who traveled with and tuned for Paderewski and Rachmaninoff. Franz said that although Bill Hupfer was "a legend", he was not inclined to teach, and Franz had difficulty in extracting useful technical information from him, other than that what was gained through observation. (Franz, on the other hand, says that he "loves to share information" with fellow technicians.)

If you read Franz's book. *My Life with the Great Pianists*, you will be astonished to learn about the world he grew up in. Franz was born in a small village near Duren, Germany on September 17, 1927. He recalls living in a musical family comprised of his parents and two brothers. His father sang and played instruments, and classical music and opera was frequently heard in the household.

Hitler took power in 1933, when Franz was six years old. His father hated the Nazis and foresaw the disasters to come. Franz himself was forced to join the Hitler Youth Group when he

was 10 years old- a requirement for German boys of that age. On September 1, 1939 the war began. Franz's older brother Tony was drafted shortly afterwards, and Franz recalls that it was an exceptionally difficult parting for Tony and the family when he left to fight in the war. Franz never saw his brother again.

Within this tragic setting, Franz continued to involve himself in the musical world. He studied violin, and his instructor, who was the concertmaster in the Duren symphony orchestra, encouraged Franz to go to Cologne to study further. Franz recalls these weekly visits to Cologne as happy moments in those war years. He not only played violin in chamber music gatherings, but he also played viola, an instrument for which he says he displayed a greater proficiency.

In the Spring of 1943 Franz arrived in Cologne to see his music building half-destroyed. The auditorium itself was on fire- Musical visits to Cologne were to be no more. On November 16, 1944, Duren itself was destroyed by Allied bombing. The Mohr house was demolished by a direct hit, and he became injured, disoriented and was separated from his family for over a month. He found his parents just before Christmas of that year. His younger brother Peter died in the bomb attacks, and later Franz and his father buried six bodies- of which one was surely Peter. Franz said that 98% of the people living in Duren that day - 24,000 people - were killed by the bombings.

As the war came to an end, so did the music begin again. Franz continued to play the violin and viola, but a wrist injury later curtailed his career, and he gravitated towards becoming a piano technician. He did an apprenticeship in Dusseldorf, Germany and later traveled to Steinway to begin his career in the States.

(Conclusion next month)

From Other Newsletters...

This article comes from News & Notes, the Newsletter of the Boston Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild.

Tuning Tip

By Toby Stem, RPT

Tuning octaves up from the temperament, I listen to the 4ths and 5ths. No big deal. If I hear one I don't like, I try the octave-10th test. If this test confirms that the octave is good, I check out the 4th and 5th with the same test. If this checks out OK, it means there is something wrong with the unison in the 4th or 5th. Sometimes I don't hear a problem in the three-string unison, but there is a noticeable beat in the interval. I check the unisons of the lower note by playing the interval. Surprise! I hear the beat again by isolating the offending string. I missed the questionable unison because the beat is almost inaudible between two strings, but not when the interval is struck.

Solution: Re-tune the unison using the interval, in other words, play the 4th or 5th above at the

same time. I was amazed at how much better all three strings sounded. I thought, “Now THERE’S a real clean unison.”

From the Arts Journal...

PICKING THE CARCASS CLEAN It didn't take long for the vultures to descend in South Florida, where the now-defunct Florida Philharmonic auctioned off its salable assets yesterday, with many items going for far less than their actual value. When the final gavel banged, the Phil had raised only \$170,000 from the sale of instruments, music stands, and other musical detritus. Miami Herald 01/23/04

WILL FLORIDA LEARN FROM THE PHIL’S DEMISE? The Florida Philharmonic’s bankruptcy auction marked the final humiliation for an orchestra which, for any number of reasons, never found its niche. In fact, orchestras across the Sunshine State are in similarly dire straits, and many observers fear that Florida is losing whatever tenuous commitment it once had to creating a respectable arts scene as a result. St. Petersburg Times 01/23/04

IS SELF-PRODUCING THE FUTURE OF CLASSICAL RECORDING? With the major record labels continuing to downsize or eliminate their classical imprints, an ever-increasing number of orchestras have been taking their recording business in-house. Now, violinist Gil Shaham, dumped two years ago by Deutsche Grammophon in favor of the more photogenic Hilary Hahn, has started releasing independent albums as well, and the movement towards classical independence very likely represents the future of classical recording. As Shaham puts it, “I think of a chef opening his own restaurant. You may take on the risk, but with risk comes an unbelievable freedom - you can put as much garlic in the hummus as you like.” [Boston Globe 01/23/04](#)

DISSECTING THE THEME Most classical music fans would quickly recognize the Paganini theme that Rachmaninoff expanded into one of the most familiar piano concert-pieces in the repertoire. But most listeners have probably never considered what actually goes on in a theme-and-variations, where one composer’s singular idea is transformed into a wide-ranging and free-flowing work, yet without ever straying too far from the original thought. Rachmaninoff penned 24 variations on that Paganini theme, and Michael Barnes has taken the daring step of actually explaining each one in an American newspaper. The Pop Culture Enforcement Squad is presumably making its way to Austin to deal with Mr. Barnes. Austin American-Statesman 01/22/04

TENOR WALKS ACROSS ENGLAND SINGING American tenor David Pisaro is walking 200 miles across England. “He will stop each evening to perform Franz Schubert’s Die Winterreise in 13 venues along the route including village halls, shops and churches with pianist Quentin Thomas. The song cycle traces the physical and emotional journey of a rejected lover traveling away from home and Mr Pisaro says he hopes his trip will bring the music to life.” BBC 01/19/04

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