

The Buckeye Backcheck

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Newsletter of the Columbus Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild

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From the Editor...



Hello, Folks. In this issue I have published the conclusion of my transcription of Franz Mohr's talk at Graves Piano & Organ. I have also included a thought-provoking letter from Chris Solliday of the Lehigh Valley, PA Chapter regarding the current status of RPT's and Associates. And thanks to Ben Wiant for hosting the February Chapter Meeting on "Piano Appraisals"- and to Jon Chandler for the great chili!

Meeting Minutes (excerpts)

Chris Altenburg Will be our delegate to the National Convention in June.

Eugenia Carter, an active participant at the national PTG conventions and an individual who wrote a series of articles in the Piano Technicians Journal on Interactive Grand Regulation with Roger Jolly, has recently passed away. We offer condolences to her family.

Franz Mohr at Graves Piano & Organ (Conclusion)...

Although retired from Steinway since 1992, Franz today spends much time traveling and speaking, and he still does concert work for two very prominent artists- Andras Schiff and Maurizio Pollini. It seems he is as busy as ever. On the subject of tuning a piano, Franz states

that he does not believe in electronic tuners, saying that one must listen with their ears to know precisely how to move the pins. He believes aural tuning to be a very intimate procedure. He does, however, have no problems with the use of an electronic tuning fork- especially when he has to prove to the Berlin Philharmonic that pitch is indeed set to 443! Franz also believes in giving the piano “a few hard blows” when tuning it. “Don’t be afraid to hit it,” he said. He further stated that he always expects a piano to be the same shape following a concert as before it. A thunderous Rachmaninoff concerto played by Vladimir Horowitz should not appreciatively change the tuning of that instrument. During the discussion of tuning Franz evaluated the Steinway on the stage to his left, and he asked who tuned the piano. Sam Stahl, who works for Graves Piano, replied that it was he. Franz proceeded to compliment Sam highly on the quality of the tuning, saying that it would definitely pass muster for concert work. High praise indeed from the tuner for Horowitz!

Franz said that when doing concert work you must pace yourself in the available time you have with the instrument. Broken strings are more problematic, although it has been an infrequent occurrence in Franz’s concert work. It has only happened on two occasions with Horowitz. Franz recalls one of those broken strings being an Ab₂ duple, and the other being an Eb₂ duple in Berlin where the bass section went mysteriously sharp. Both situations were quickly resolved. Franz said that he never did touch-ups during a concert, but he would sometimes do some voicing at intermissions- especially for Pollini. Whatever problems any piano displays, Franz believes, the technician should “keep your piano problems to yourself. Don’t burden the artist.” That is, of course, unless the artist is the one who brings up the problem to you! Franz uses a rather short tuning hammer. He said that Bill Hupfer used a similarly small hammer, and he put his pinkie finger on the end as he tuned. Franz uses his hammer in the same fashion.

Again, Franz says, “I don’t believe in the machine. Only our ears will tell us this note is in.” He does admit that with a machine “you might improve your eyesight.” He also says, “you need your hearing in order to voice.” As far as the methodology of tuning pianos, Franz said that he does stretch his octaves, but he “doesn’t go overboard.” He hates vacuum cleaners in halls, too. (Can we relate to that one?!)

Franz moved on to talk about piano regulation. His description of the piano action is as follows: “Everything in an action moves up and down- not left and right.” He advises technicians to align the hammers to the strings slightly to the treble- about the width of one string. This, of course, facilitates the effective use of the unacorda pedal. Aftertouch, he says, must be even. You can have a little aftertouch or more than a little, but it must be even.

Horowitz’s pianos had a very light action. Downweight was in the neighborhood of 45 grams, and upweight was around 30-32 grams. Compare this with Rubenstein’s piano, which had a downweight of about 65 grams. It should be mentioned that Horowitz was the only one who played his pianos. It is probable that most pianists would not want to play his pianos, even if given the opportunity. Murray Perahia was a notable exception.

Horowitz’ pianos also had a very strong repetition spring. Franz says that “only Horowitz could play pianissimo on it.” He also liked his piano to have a strong booming bass and a relatively

mellow sound at the break from wound strings to bare strings. Sometimes, though, Horowitz would be come obsessed with getting more power out of the entire piano, instructing Franz to continually work the hammers by filing and juicing. At one point this was carried out to the extreme, and Franz was eventually forced to replace the hammers- without Horowitz's consent. Horowitz's response following this action worried Franz, but it turned out the Maestro was pleased with the sound derived from the new hammers.

Despite challenging moments like these, Franz said he "learned from Horowitz." Horowitz himself had an affectionate relationship with Franz. He used to tell him stories of how he left Russia at the age of 19 years with "1,000 rubles in my shoes." Horowitz left Russia to go to Berlin, and soon he was playing throughout the world. Horowitz also had very few students in his life. He once said to Franz, "I acknowledge only one piano student of mine- Byron Janis." As far as juicing hammers, Franz believes in the mixture of 1.5 oz. keytops to 8 oz. acetone. He carries a small bottle of this mixture with him at all times. He puts one drop on the strike line of a hammer, and then he spreads it out. He was first given this mixture by an old friend who was a Baldwin concert technician at that time.

Franz, like all technicians, does not like fluctuations in air moisture. "Dryness and humidity are enemies of the piano," he said. He described a time when he and Horowitz were in Florida, and the climate control system in the auditorium had broken down. The stage itself was excessively humid, and- to make matters worse- Horowitz was late. By the time he arrived to play, the piano had deteriorated to the point where let-off was lost; this being due to the excessive moisture within the knuckles and felt. Franz advises buying a hygrometer and leaving it in the piano. He doesn't advise buying the new magnetic wippens, however. Franz was asked about their effectiveness and he responded that he did not find them necessary. "I'm a simple guy," he said. "Don't re-invent the wheel," Franz talked about his working relationship with Maurizio Pollini. He describes Pollini as "a nervous guy" who would typically pick out a note prior to a concert and ask for "more brilliance". Horowitz, he says, never did that. However, Franz added, "you have to be supportive of the artist." One time Pollini was fretting about the piano and the approaching concert time, and Franz figured out a way to calm him down. He grabbed a copy of his own book and gave it to Pollini and told him to read the chapter on Horowitz while the work on the piano was completed. Horowitz, by the way, never practiced on the day of a concert. His belief was "if you don't know it by now..."

Franz said that Pollini and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli can be described "high maintenance pianists". He did not say this in any disparaging way, but rather to communicate to us listeners how these artists react in concert settings. Pollini might be occasionally challenging for the technician, but Michelangeli must have been outright exasperating. Franz recalls a concert where he was to tune for Michelangeli, but the artist refused to stop practicing until a very short period before curtain time. As Franz kept imploring Michelangeli to stop so the piano could be tuned, Michelangeli said, "I will give you ten minutes." Franz concluded by extolling the virtues of the Steinway piano. He said that Steinway makes 13 pianos a day, whereas Yamaha makes about 800 a day. The implication was clear to him that Steinway craftsmanship is superior to mass production. He likes the Steinway design and the woods they use, and he feels this yields a

piano with great color and brilliance. He believes that Yamaha by comparison has brilliance but less color. He is respectful of Bosendorfer, saying that their build' ers and designers do excellent work, and that they produce pianos of good quality. He feels, though, that they pianos are not solid enough to hold a tune as well as a Steinway, and that Bosendorfer pianos do not stand as well in an orchestra when a powerful work is to be performed. He said that a Bosendorfer is better for works by Debussy and Mozart. Following Franz's talk, we all headed to The Olive Garden for a nice dinner. Franz then had to head back to Graves Piano for his second lecture. I can conclude that Franz is a wonderful speaker and is a man who exudes warmth to all around him, and one who exhibits love for his craft. He feels he has had a rich life. To those who have the opportunity to schedule a visit from this man, please do so as soon as you can. You will have a memorable day awaiting you!

From Other Newsletters...

A Change in the By-Laws?

The following is the text of a letter from Chris Solliday of the Lehigh Valley, PA Chapter, proposing a change in the by-laws of the PTG.

To all PTG Chapter Presidents
For all PTG members

Dear fellow PTG member,

For many years, it has been apparent that a problem exists with the PTG membership classification system. The largest part of the problem is the erosion of the marketable value of the Registered Piano Technician brand. This is made most apparent by the emergence of a category that was never intended to exist, that of the Associate Timer technician. Working in parity with the RPT, these members do not intend to upgrade. Their limited perception is that the public does not recognize the difference between the RPT and the Associate, so they continue in this category with no intention of changing. Since all other benefits are the same except certain voting privileges they see no incentive to upgrade. Their argument continues to grow in strength as the percentage of Associate Tuner/ Technicians who are operating their business exactly as RPTs increases. This further blurs the difference and decreases the recognition the RPT has in the public's eye. Unfortunately these folks are right. There are less tangible reasons to upgrade, but these are practical people. Thus far no viable way to overcome this perception has proven itself.

The thought has always been that these Associate Tuner Technicians would find some reason to upgrade. If the chapters could only provide enough enthusiastic help through PACE programs, mentor ships, seminars, reasonable arguments, browbeating, etc., upgrades would occur. Unfortunately, the trend has never been anything but down. Many more associates join each year than upgrade to RPT. Many have tried to reverse this trend and none has succeeded. And this is the secondary problem, we are rapidly becoming an organization of Associates

instead of an organization that sets and maintains standards.

Lehigh Valley Chapter 180 has developed a bylaws change that we feel addresses the above issues, and improves our organization. It is included in this envelope for your examination and consideration. It is our hope that you will agree with us and join us in co-sponsoring or endorsing this legislation, and vote for this at Council 2004 in Nashville.

We have created two new categories, although they used to exist prior to the last classification change, Student and Apprentice. The Student category and the current Associate category will be the entry-level categories. A candidate for membership will choose either a tuner-to-be-tested track. Student, or a non-tuning, non-testing status. Associate. Students who pass the Written Exam will upgrade to Apprentice, and Apprentices who pass the Technical and Tuning Exams will upgrade to Registered Piano Technician. Associates will be all others who are non-tuners, and violating the non-tuner clause will result in dismissal. The Honorary category is not affected.

Implied, but not directly spelled out, is that an Associate can change to Student by simple declaration at anytime, or vice versa. An Apprentice could similarly change to Associate. An Associate cannot become an Apprentice by simple declaration. The member must declare as a Student and then pass the Written Exam to become an Apprentice. Given their names, these categories carry their own incentive to upgrade. There are no proposed time limits for upgrading, the names, and each person's talent and ambition should take care of that. All member benefits will continue as before including the right to advertise. Students will advertise "Student Member" and Apprentices will advertise "Apprentice Member." Associates will continue to advertise "Associate Member" as before. These advertising rights, again because of the names, will add weight to the incentive to upgrade. Since the "Associate Member" will not be tuning, there will no longer be any competition or confusion on the part of the public. Although there is some commonality from those who don't tune, but rebuild, it should be up to those members to make the case for a specific category, or develop the current Piano Builders Association.

That is the plan. We have endeavored to provide the most incentive to upgrade and disturb the status quo the least. The only lost benefit will be that the Associate Tuner/Technician will no longer be able to hide in the Associate category, and frankly we don't consider this a loss, rather a gain for the organization. This proposal strengthens our commitment to standards and that is a win for all members.

So far, several other chapters have committed to co-sponsorship, and their Associates, who are nonfranchised members with the right to vote in chapter meetings, have voted unanimously in favor of this change. The same thing occurred in our chapter. This speaks for itself.

If you have any questions regarding this proposal, feel free to contact me by letter, telephone or email at anytime. In order to co-sponsor this bylaws change, your chapter must contact the Bylaws Committee Chairperson Carl Lieberman before December 31, 2003 in writing. After that date, endorsement will be accepted by email or letter up until convention time by contacting me.

Chris Solliday RPT

Industry News...

Genck Cases To Stop Production of Tool Cases June 1st, 2004.

After 20+ years of providing quality, functional, professional looking tool cases for piano technicians, Genck Cases will shut down production in June. It's always been a challenge to make a quality product, in small quantities for a limited market, and still keep the price affordable. In addition, the cases last many years, which affects repeat business and contributes to the current saturation level for this market. Rather than alter quality, and/or cheapen production methods to keep costs down and increase sales, I would rather step aside and say "job well done."

If you're considering purchasing one of the Genck Cases for the first time, need to replace an older model, or would like an extra one for the future, now is the time to make your move while supplies are good. Call Schaff Piano Supply for product details on all four models at 800-747-4266.

I would like to thank all the technicians from around the country that have supported me over the years. Your loyalty and referrals have been very much appreciated!

Respectfully yours,
Bruce Genck RPT
Genck Cases

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