

# The Buckeye Backcheck

Newsletter of the Columbus Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild

Volume 38 Issue 3 March 2013



## Chapter Meeting Minutes February 19, 2013

The meeting was held at Graves Piano & Organ Co.

### Attendance:

John Schmoll, Bryan Hartzler, Ron Kenreich, Chris Burget, Doug Brandt, Dwight Hansen, Kim Hoessly, Doug Meszaros, Mark Ritchie, Tim Thompson, Ben Wiant, Victor Wolfe.

### Treasurer's Report:

As of the meeting the Chapter has \$3468.66 in checking.

### Old Business:

All old business was from the November meeting and it primarily dealt with location for February meeting and part two of "The life and times of a piano technician" discussions.

### New Business:

Location for the March meeting to be held at Burke Hall at Denison University. Meeting time will be at 7:00 pm, a half hour earlier than usual, so members won't get home as late due to the extra driving distance for some members.

The Chapter will once again donate a \$100 scholarship to the Central East District of the Ohio Music Teachers Association (OMTA) for its Summer Music Program.

Reduced fees for retired members was briefly discussed.

It was also mentioned that Chris Purdy, former Chapter president who spends part of his time in Tennessee, may have offered to do a technical sometime this Spring covering the topic of agraffe repair.

Chris Burget will be working to put the recorded "Life And Times Of A Piano Technician" onto DVD's for the Chapter Library. Also discussed was making these available to members who would like a copy and also posting the videos on the Chapter website.

## Butts & Flanges

Mark Ritchie posed the question, "How long does it take to remove \$5 in change from a Steinway B?" He still doesn't know because he may have only retrieved \$4.35 up to this point. It seems that someone spilled a whole pile of coins in the piano and they were rattling around on the soundboard and elsewhere. One of the residents of the home even told Mark that if he kept it up he just may find enough to pay for the job!

John Schmoll showed the Chapter an app from Damp-Chaser that he downloaded onto his ipod touch. It is called "Piano Tech Pro" and has a few features that may be of interest to some technicians. The feature he focused on was an aural aid that he thought beginning tuners might benefit from. It allows one to choose two different notes and hear the beat rates of the intervals chosen. Some of the other features are more useful than others, but can still be handy. They include: schematics for installing PLS units in various pianos; a list of piano serial numbers (though limited); an electronic tuning fork; an action geometry reference; a temperature and humidity table. It can be downloaded from here: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/piano-tech-pro/id429952103?mt=8>

Kim Hoessly showed us an improvised stringing tool (pictured below) she used to replace a broken plain-wire string that intersected with the overstrung area in the bass on an AB Chase grand. It is two pieces of clear plastic flexible tubing taped together side by side. In some cases it may be easier to use than the longer rigid tubes, or curtain rods, that are available. It also keeps both sections of wire parallel and facilitates easier seating of the wire bend on its hitch pin.



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## The Life & Times Of A Piano Technician II

The February meeting was a continuation of "The Life & Times Of A Piano Technician" discussions. This time around it was Mark Ritchie and Victor Wolfe sharing some of their experiences, stories and words of wisdom gleaned from their years in the profession. It was enjoyable, educational, and sometimes funny to hear of their journeys. One thing is clear with both of their paths, they were helped along the way by many other people. Hopefully, I have all their names spelled correctly. Also, regrettably, I only have a little bit of space to recount a brief synopsis of their stories. Videos of this series will be made available at a later date.

"The job sort of picked me!" Mark told us. It was late 1970 and Terry Piano & Organ Co. needed piano movers. A friend of Mark's worked there and offered him the job and thus began Mark's foray "at the lowest rungs of the piano world" as he put it. He also learned some refinishing and a little bit of the technical aspects of piano service. It was soon evident to him that it was easier to take things apart than it was to put them back together. Still, he felt that he had learned quite a bit during this time. He did this for about two years before going on a sabbatical, of sorts, with his wife, Marilyn. For six months they travelled throughout North America and upon returning to Ohio, Terry's still needed some help. He had enjoyed it before, he thought to himself, so back to work he went.



Now Mark's endeavors took a more serious turn as he apprenticed under Cloyd Cook. Mark had to sort of prove that he was serious, as Mr. Cook's previous understudy quit to become a welder, much to Cook's chagrin. He attended his first piano tech meetings then, too. "A fly on the wall" is how he characterized himself at that stage. Being a guitar player, Mark had some knowledge of intervals and such which helped a little while learning to tune, though most of his first work was technical in nature. He worked there for four years there doing floor/warranty tunings and repairs before the ownership reorganized and moved to what would be William's Music in Worthington. Mark leased some shop space in the back of the store where he did some rebuilding work. He was there until William's closed in 1985. During this time he had an apprentice, or two. One being Phil Walters, and the other being Chuck Watts. Chuck was a talented musician with a very good ear. He played violin and eventually left the shop to tour with Hank Williams Jr. Maybe it was for the best because "...he often got frustrated tuning pianos. I tried my best to explain to him that you can't make a Kincaid spinet sound like a concert grand...."

For the next thirteen years he rented a storefront on N. High St. near Stanton Ave. This is when his wife left the banking and mortgage industry and entered the piano business and began doing the bookwork and, later on, key recovery work as well. Kim Hoessly started working there too. They did a lot of rebuilding, turning out a dozen or more pianos a year. They focused more on higher quality turn-of-the-century instruments. After having to rebuild lower quality pianos under another shop owner's orders, Mark now had the authority to be a little more discriminating in his work. This coincided with much of the renovations going on in the German, Victorian and Italian Village neighborhoods at the time. In many homes, there could be found older quality instruments that people were willing to restore, and this proved beneficial to Mark's business. Also, many Guild meetings were held there too. He has since moved from there and now has a shop next to his home near Westerville.

On business practices, Mark was fairly straight forward and simple. First, treat people how you would like to be treated. He recounted a story of a plumber who was to show up between 2 and 4pm. By 5pm, the plumber hadn't even called to say they were running late. Which leads to his next rule: be prompt. It is better to be fifteen minutes early than five minutes late. Keeping good and accurate records is important too, and so is having a retirement plan. If you're totally self employed, with no other benefits coming from elsewhere, planning is very important. Tuners can't tune forever, though many try. Postcard reminders have been a boon for him. He has a simple program that prints them out and he sends them out at regular intervals. A web presence is growing ever more important as well. He says he really has received a lot of business from PTG sites as well as his own. He stressed the importance of being polite, neat, clean and professional in appearance. Then he told us not to treat client's homes/possessions like our own, but better than our own. Don't lean case parts on walls and furniture. And remember... always wipe your feet!

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"My two occupations as a musician and a piano technician are so intertwined that I can't talk about one without talking about the other," Victor stated. In the early 1960's, Victor played piano for rockabilly groups like Cliff Nash & The Rockaways. They played around Ohio and made appearances on local radio station WMNI, the show being sponsored by a local C&E Supermarket (owned by Cliff's dad). At the time, he was playing a Wurlitzer model 120 electric piano.

"I'm still trying to forget that piano. Whoever designed that action in those things should've been institutionalized!" Evidently, it was hard

to regulate. Every week he would take it to the Lazarus Department store, where he bought it, and the store technician would regulate it for him. After just a little bit of playing, the piano would go out of regulation. So, after watching the tech several times, Victor fashioned his own regulating tool kit and set about to correct things himself as needed. So begins Victor's journey to becoming a piano technician.

Eventually, Victor met an elderly tuner by the name of Albert Harowick (sp?) who had undergone eye surgery. He was unable to drive but could still work on pianos. He offered Victor to show him the trade in return for driving him to appointments. Albert taught him about tuning and repairs and got him started working on player pianos, which is a specialty of his now. "That was probably the best break I had had in my life..." he recalled. Victor worked with him until the man died about a year and a half later. Sometime after that Victor heard of some technician's meetings at a store near Pacemont and High St. These were loose-knit informal affairs where many of the "old boys" would get together and swap ideas and war stories. This is where he met Dutch Elliott who eventually took Vic under his wing and showed him rebuilding. "In those days, rebuilding might have involved restringing but often meant repinning the original pinblock with larger pins. If they felt good and tight then you probably did a good job!"

Victor then went on to tell us about his stint in the Army where, after basic training, he played glockenspiel in the 338th Army Reserves Band. Even in basic training at Fort Knox he had fun with music. Anybody stationed at Fort Knox knows about "Misery Hill" so he and a few other guys formed a bluegrass band, The Misery Hillbillies, and played some talent shows. He played mandolin.

After the Army, he returned to playing music in clubs around Ohio, backing up artists like Skip Robinson. The band saw its share of drummers. As far as pranks went, it was open season on drummers. He told several stories, one involving a drummer who had the habit of resting his forearms on the rims of his snare drum in between songs and during slow parts. Victor and his band mates devised a plan where they would take wires with alligator clips on the ends, attach them to the metal snare rim and connect them to the ground lift switches on the backs of the guitar amps on either side of the drum kit. Poor guy would get zapped everytime he went to rest his arms. During this whole time playing music at night his daytime piano service business steadily grew, his only advertising being a yellow pages ad and word of mouth referrals from pleased customers. He also told stories about an autistic boy who would accompany him on appointments. While Victor worked on pianos the boy would say, "Mr. Wolfe fix. Mr. Wolfe fix." Then one day in the car, the boy looked at Victor and asked, pointing to himself, "Mr. Wolfe fix?" He felt so bad for the young man.

That last thing leads into one of Victor's basic tenets. "Be good to people. Be personable and amiable." People often remember the little things. If you're running late, call the customer. The little things mean a lot. Merely filing the hammers on a few offending notes, that had been bothersome to the owner for years, led to Victor being invited to a Thanksgiving dinner. He also agreed, in principle, with everything Mark had to say about business practices.

Ron Kenreich spoke up and told of seeing Victor perform with the Remember When Band. Ron noted how it was plain to see that he loved what he was doing. And on servicing pianos, Victor said, "I'm 70 years old... and I'm still enthusiastic!"



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[www.ptgcolumbus.org](http://www.ptgcolumbus.org)

## Go With The Flow....



<http://www.pianostreet.com/blog/piano-news/the-fluid-piano-2004/>

## Van Cliburn Dies at 78



[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/arts/music/van-cliburn-pianist-dies-at-78.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/arts/music/van-cliburn-pianist-dies-at-78.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

### Columbus Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild

**President** John Schmoll, RPT  
**Vice-President** Bryan Hartzler, RPT  
**Treasurer** Ron Kenreich  
**Secretary** Christopher Burget

*Contributions and pictures for  
the Buckeye Backcheck and the  
web page are always welcome,  
(even if they are only  
peripherally related to pianos)!  
- Chris Burget*

### Upcoming Events

**Chapter Meeting**  
**Tuesday, March 19, 2013,**  
**7:00 pm**

Burke Hall Of Music & Art  
Denison University  
240 W Broadway  
Granville, OH 43023

Google Map Link:  
<http://goo.gl/maps/SVJdS>

Campus Map Link:  
[http://www.denison.edu/admissions/denison\\_campus\\_map.pdf](http://www.denison.edu/admissions/denison_campus_map.pdf)

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