

News & Notes



Newsletter of the Boston Chapter
of the Piano Technicians Guild

SEPTEMBER MEETING

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Tuesday, September 15, 2009

Aardvark Piano Restorations

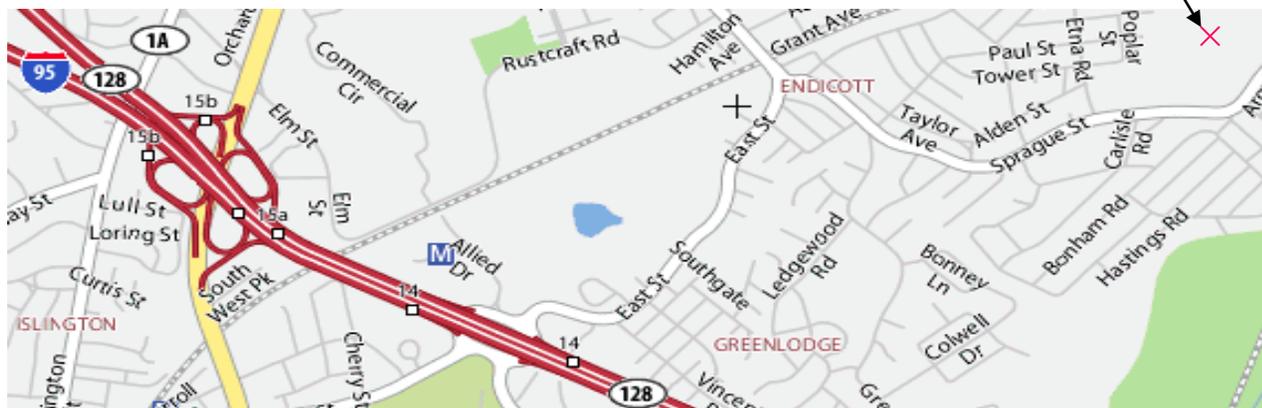
65 Rear Sprague Street,
2nd Floor
Hyde Park, MA 02136

Gather: from 6:00pm, food by Evan Ewing!

Business Meeting: 7:00pm.

Technical presentation by Scott Jones: 7:30pm. *The Pitchlock Touchrail*, a smart solution for touchweight control in grand pianos. Scott presents this his latest invention for the trade.

Directions: I-95/128 (Exit 14) to East Street east to Sprague Street (#65—at the rear).



Laurie Cote, Piano Tuner Extraordinaire

From the HARVARD GAZETTE ARCHIVES, 5/7/2004

Laurie Cote loves pianos and loves being around them. He plays, but his passion is getting them to sing in their best voices.

"I love the piano," said Cote, who has timed pianos at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences for the Past 18 years. "They have a beautiful lush sound, bell-like. It almost makes you think it'll be fattening to play".

Cote learned to tune pianos at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, which offered piano tuning as a vocational training option. Cote had already begun taking piano playing lessons, but he didn't think he was good enough to make a career as a pianist. By tuning pianos, he said, he's been able to build a career around the instrument he loves.

"I decided if I became a piano tuner and hung around pianos long enough, good things would happen," Cote said. "And I was right ."

Excerpts from *THE BIG PICTURE*, Laurie Cote, *University Tuner* by Alvin Powell



Photo by Justin Ide Harvard Gazette 11/18/1999



Photo by Kris Snibbe Harvard Gazette 5/27/2004

Eulogy delivered by Lew Surdam for Laurie at his memorial service at the First Church in Belmont on Aug 16, 2009:

"I am the Manager of Piano Technical Services at Harvard University where Laurie worked for 20 years. I met Laurie in 1986 when Andre Svetlichny, my piano tech counterpart at Boston University, asked me if we could use a little extra tuning help with our 200 pianos. I had of course heard of Cote, he was the vaguely known but menacing standard by which all concert tuning was measured. The offer Andre made was that Laurie, who worked at BU then, would tune 100 pianos for \$2000 in order to make some quick money for his upcoming wedding. I questioned the quality of these tunings and was assured with a bit of a smirk that they would probably be better than anything I was used to. So, on the agreed date, the prodigiously large Mr. Cote presented himself at the Harvard Piano Shop. I had never met Laurie and cowered as these big eyes behind thick glasses on an oversized head with a great mane of unruly hair peered down on me and asked where the pianos are. Only a few days later, as he stomped out a cigarette, he declared 20 down 80 to go. I scrambled over to the Music Dept thinking no way is he performing good work that fast. The 20 pianos, mostly uprights, were meticulously tuned, the best I'd ever encountered. He blew through the next 80, collected his money and got married. In the meantime, I had decided I could not live without having this heavyweight in my corner. So we offered Laurie a deal that BU could not match and across the river he came.

For the next 20 years Laurie never ceased to amaze. He brought with him (alas) a lot more than unmatched tuning

(Continued from page 2)

skills, but let me start there for just a moment. His unison tuning was so masterful that any piano tuner fortunate enough to encounter an instrument Laurie had recently tuned could only conclude that there Is a God. He was someone the rest of us, in spite of our many different methods, opinions and goals, could all admire for the same reason. He was built for piano tuning and, after literally thousands of tunings, never complained of a single ache or pain that had anything to do with his work. His long frame served him well and enabled him to work with a minimum amount of body movement. His temperaments were masterpieces and his speed got us out of jams countless times. Every concert tuning he ever did was in itself a piece of art. But to me where his superiority was at its most stunning was the length of time his tunings lasted, or in tuner talk, stability. I remember a young Russian pianist who played at Paine Hall. The program was two and a half hours of 20th century Russian music and the pianist was giving our Steinway D a sadistic beating. I felt like throwing a white towel onto the stage and screaming, "Stop, you're wrecking our piano." I was certain he'd break a string or snap a key in two as an ear splitting din rose from the instrument. Afterwards, I ran up to see if anything was broken and then decided to see how the master's tuning had fared. Not one unison even slightly off! When I reported this back to Laurie, he shrugged and said something about hundreds of pianos and learning in the trenches.

Laurie's knowledge of antique tuning systems was astounding and there were more than a few tenured professors at the Harvard Music Dept who learned from his enthusiastic rants. When I was present during these exchanges, I was always on high alert knowing that at any moment we could go from scholarly discourse to dirty joke. At Harvard, political correctness is practically an art form and Laurie was not even remotely schooled in the art. At these times, I could only stand by terrified as he launched into a joke that had just occurred to him with a professor or two politely waiting for the punch line. If there was nothing I could teach Laurie about the piano that he did not already know, I thought I might be able to give him some pointers on how not to get fired. He was a manager's worst nightmare, and at times I felt like a parent trying to keep their well-meaning rambunctious child out of trouble. But over his 20 years of employment, I never lost sight of what it was Laurie brought to our department besides terrific tuning skills and hundreds of limericks, and that was the bridge he made to a bygone era when piano building was a Boston based industry and the best tuners in town were larger than life characters. Laurie met many of these characters and had fascinating and humorous tales about them. And this gave us an

inspiring perspective on our chosen field. He played a significant role in the history of our craft and each one of us was proud to be able to call him a friend and a co-worker.

Laurie did not attend college, but if you did not know that you might wonder which field he received his degree in. His recall on such subjects as politics, the Civil War, trains, American history, antique cars, baseball, and much more was Rain Man like. He was faster than Google when it came to chasing down a name or date having to do with American politics. In spite of his poor eyesight, he was a voracious reader of hefty 800 page tomes on the life and times of famous people. His retention was awesome.

Laurie's eyesight remains a mystery to me. Certified legally blind, he nonetheless rode his bike from his home in Medford to Cambridge year round for the majority of his years at Harvard. And when he was a young man, he rode his bike alone from Boston to California, an adventure he loved to recall. I admired his toughness. He would take one or two bad falls a winter when the roads were icy. Sometimes, he'd arrive to work with torn clothing and bleeding. When I'd show concern and suggest a trip to the clinic, he'd look at me as if I was crazy. Occasionally, Laurie would ask for permission to come in on a weekend to work on a home project that needed a table saw. Against all common or professional sense, I'd give him a thumbs up, hoping he still had two of them himself on Monday. A legally blind person who is unsteady on his feet might be wise to steer clear of a screaming table saw, but interfering with one of Laurie's projects was not an option. More often than not these projects supported another passion of his, amateur radio operator. He followed that interest to its highest level and achieved Expert certification. For a full year he studied a thick daunting textbook on the subject and practiced Morse Code in preparation for the grueling exam. He had the perfect voice for broadcasting and made many friends over the air, friends he would often speak of at the shop. And as if the wisdom of bike riding wasn't already tenuous enough, he rigged his bike with a repeater which enabled him to broadcast and receive while riding to and from work. With an extra long antenna rising from the rear fender, switches and buttons taped to the hand grips, headset and dark glasses crammed into an extra large helmet, and battery packs in his pockets, Laurie left onlookers speechless and security guards nervous. Another Kodak moment!

As the late Don Angle, a friend of both Laurie and mine, used to say about himself, they broke the mold before they made me. How true of Laurie as well! He was an extraordinarily unique person, a loyal friend and colleague, and a lover of music. He will be fondly remembered for many years to come."

THE PRES SAYS

Greetings, Tech Heads!

Looks like we're going to have some interesting tech presentations this year. It's been a nice summer so far, with just enough work in my shop to keep things percolating. Not gangbusters, but respectable and Madame Prez hopes all of you are doing well.

Are you advertising? If not, consider setting aside money to get the word out on your services. Love for pianos and piano playing is alive and well but the noise out there can drown out the message. My pet peeve is that piano companies only seem to advertise in trade journals, singing to the choir.

If you think money is wasted on adverts because they don't pay for themselves, you might want to simply build a website the PTG can link to- I would prefer billboards on RT. 128 or the Expressway, but that's just me.....

Our first meeting of the '09-'10 season is September 15th at Aardvark (food at 6pm by the awesome Evan Ewing, so no excuses about needing to "get dinner"). Scott Jones is going to show us his new product, the Touchrail. Information is posted on our chapter website.

October 3rd we'll have Nick Gravagne and the opportunity to spend a full day with this great master. Not to be missed, if you really want to upgrade your skills.

Please send me emails with your thoughts, suggestions for technicals, complaints, gossip, or precious insights on cosmic origins.

Best,

Doshie

SCOTT JONES: PITCHLOCK

Scott Jones received a Bachelor of Music in composition in 1984 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After college, he started his own business as a piano technician, serving the Raleigh, NC area. In 1989, Scott joined Steinway & Sons in New York City. During his 12 years at Steinway, Scott held positions as concert technician, manager of technical education, and also worked in product development (R & D), where he authored four US. patents in the field of piano design: piano escapement action 1996, piano escapement action 1999, piano sostenuto assembly 2000, and damper adjustment device 2003. Scott is the Founder and President of PitchLock Inc, where he developed the PitchLock Piano String Couplers and a fifth patent is pending for the new PitchLock TouchRail.

The **Touchrail** is now available from PitchLock Inc. and offers a smart solution for touchweight control in grand pianos. Designed for easy installation and adjustment, the TouchRail can reduce key downweight by as much as 10 grams with virtually no loss of low key repetition. It can be used for either note-to-note or full-scale touch adjustment. Scott invites you to be among the first to experience his exciting new product.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Boston Chapter Technical: October 3, 2009

All day presentation: Nick Gravagne
 Topics: Action Geometry / Soundboards
 Location: Larry Buck's shop
 171 Lincoln Street
 Lowell, MA

November Meeting: November 17, 2009

Technical Presentation: Bruce Clark
 Topic: The new WN&G action stack, etc.
 Location: Mason & Hamlin factory
 Haverhill, MA

"We are sad to report the passing of our esteemed chapter member, Owen Jorgensen, RPT. Owen died last weekend at home at the age of 81. He leaves behind his wife of 62 years, Barbara, and two sons, Michael and Les. Both sons followed their father's footsteps and are practicing technicians, Michael at CMU, Les in Okemos.

As you know, Owen was PTG's latest Golden Hammer Award recipient, and several of our chapter members were fortunate enough to be present at the national convention to see him so honored. We have been proud to have Owen as a member of our chapter. A memorial service is planned for the fall in Lansing, where Owen taught piano technology at MSU for many years. Details will be forthcoming when we have them."

Christine Brown, Northern
Michigan Chapter PTG

OWEN JORGENSEN DIES AT 81



From left to right: Kathy Smith, Owen Jorgensen, Conrad Hoffsommer, Jan Bittner, and Karen-Jane Henry celebrate Owen's Golden Hammer Award.

THE POEM PLACE



PASSAGE FOR TWO

In brightening blacks of night,
in a chance moment of
minds embraced,
the country of
complete acceptance opened:

a bedside lamp, the clock,
and a nightly glass of
water, witnessed—
and the threadbare arms of
the old armchair,
the heaps of
that week's clothing—

From the open window,
a fragrant breath of
lilac. And lightly,
from separate depths of
dreaming,
an honesty of
free will surfaced.

Christopher Brown

MIKE MORVAN: TUNERS, BELLYMEN, LEND ME YOUR KEYS!

In our last meeting (hosted by Aardvark Piano in Hyde Park), Mike Morvan of Blackstone Valley Piano went over several important repairs in the world of piano keys. He holds that both cosmetics and functionality are important to repair success. Balance hole, mortise and key button repairs are intimately connected with proper spacing and functionality of the keyboard. Poor balance hole repairs cause bad alignment fore and aft (which your client will notice) and poor mortise button repairs can cause bad alignment side to side. No pianist enjoys playing on an uneven keyboard.

Key balance holes can be replaced using a balance hole locator (pictured below). Self-centering jigs don't locate the actual place where the balance hole should be. Any variation will cause alignment problems. Here is a basic outline of the beginning process:

- 1.) Secure Keyframe to bench
- 2.) Elevate keys to playing height
- 3.) Clamp straight edge to key fronts
- 4.) Remove punchings
- 5.) Slide balance hole locator (one edge square, one edge rounded for accuracy/consistency) to bottom of balance pin
- 6.) Insert key in place, and gently press to create guide marks.



Balance hole locators by Blackstone Valley Piano

Helpful hints:

- Key pins are tilted backward 2-8°; this should be accounted for in the re-drilling process
- Old material can be removed using a router
- New balance holes should be chamfered
- Drill right at 0.146"
- Steam balance holes to aid in spacing
- Poplar can be used for inserts
- Chamfer the top and bottom of the mortise
- A longer jig can be made to compensate for keys with shoes/cleats.

And here is a key button replacement method that Mike suggests. It should be noted that front mortises should be bushed before replacing the key buttons. (For worn front mortises, consider Mike's mortise inserts.) Be sure to measure and account for key flare angles when cutting button material!

- 1.) Pick samples (buttons that look well aligned) from odd and even keys, remove all other buttons, remove glides
- 2.) Set up straight edge and square pins FIRST, prop up keys
- 3.) Glue in samples being aware of alignment fore and aft. Beware of different keyboard offsets (distance from front of button to mortise)
- 4.) Replace odd numbered keys to keyframe
- 5.) Glue on every other button with hide glue
- 6.) Once odd numbered key buttons are set, remove keys and replace even numbered keys to frame and glue remaining buttons

There is a wealth of knowledge at Mike's website, including several slideshows to walk you through various key repair procedures he provides. In addition, he has an array of quality services (including keyboard fabrication), key repair materials and adhesives for sale, and ivory information.

You can find him online at www.pianoandorgankeys.com.

Elizabeth Snow, Secretary

THE SHAMELESS SELF-PROMOTION SPOT!

Acoustic & Digital Piano Buyer

by Larry Fine

I've been publishing The Piano Book since 1987 (current edition, 2001) and the Annual Supplement to The Piano Book since 1996. Over the last fifteen years, there have been tremendous changes to the piano industry (globalization, China, computerization of manufacturing) and in the way consumers expect to receive information (the Internet) and what they're willing to pay for it (nothing). Instead of rewriting The Piano Book yet again, I've produced an entirely new publication -- Acoustic & Digital Piano Buyer -- based on new concepts. Highlights include:

- Published twice-yearly
- Includes information on both acoustic and digital pianos -- new, used, and restored
- Available free online in an attractive, electronic magazine format, as well as in print
- Partially supported by advertising
- Replaces the Annual Supplement to The Piano Book (The Piano Book itself will remain in print as an additional resource)

The new publication is a hybrid book and magazine. Each issue will consist of a core set of short articles, illustrated and in color, about various aspects of buying a piano, as well as articles of a more temporary nature, and all the brand and price information that formerly was published as part of the Annual Supplement.

Also a part of the PianoBuyer.com website is a free, searchable database of over 3,000 piano models, styles, and finishes. Search and sort on brand, price, size, style, and finish. Use it as much as you like at no charge.

Visit www.pianobuyer.com and give the new publication and database a spin.



MIKE AND GARY PITCH MINI'S

Mike Morvan has joined the Boston Chapter and volunteered to work under Pat Draine (Interim Technical Director) in the role of Assistant Technical Director. He asks all chapter members for input on what we would like to see for upcoming technicals.

In an effort to boost monthly technical attendance and advance associates to RPT status, the chapter is forming a committee to sponsor a "Skills Workshop" that will consist of mini technicals on various topics. These mini technicals will be held an hour before the regular monthly technical. The committee will consist of about 8 members and will be headed by Gary Ford, RPT. Please volunteer if you can.

Thanks to the very hard work of a number of members, par-

ticularly Larry Buck, we have had spectacular technical presentations in recent years. Note our good fortune.

To continue with and expand on the very high standards to which our chapter aspires, the skills workshop/mini technical every meeting will be covering key bushing, string tying, various aspects of regulating, and all manner of repairs, hoping to draw a greater number of members out to meetings. These will also be designed to help Associate members upgrade to RPT. Please come join the fun. We will be looking for committee volunteers at the upcoming meeting.

Mike Morvan, Assistant Technical Director

Gary Ford, Head of Skills Workshop Committee

News & Notes

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