

Miniature Memories. Part 1

A while ago, I arrived at a fabulous huge contemporary home in the western suburbs to tune a fine new Steinway grand piano. The home must have cost some millions of dollars. The middle-aged couple had two teen-aged children. The room where the piano was situated was a kind of glorious library with artifacts and ancient books spread artfully around the space. While talking with the homeowner, I learned that his wife was the one who decided almost everything about how their money was spent, due to the fact that they lived almost entirely on her inheritance. The artifacts in the room must have been assessed at \$10M, mostly art from all ages in history from several countries around the world. It looked a lot like an eclectic museum, and the man's wife was quite proud of everything there, including some books from the 1500's. She told me she was unhappy with the volume the piano emitted in the large room when her husband (the only pianist in the house) played his 'ragtimey' music. She was hoping I could suggest ways to quiet the piano down. "The first thing to do," I recommended, "is to close up this piano lid. That will lower the volume quite a bit." As I started to put the lid down she stopped me. "No, no! Stop! Then it won't look like a grand piano." In some environments, appearances are paramount.

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I've mentioned that I've tuned pianos in a variety of different and unusual settings. Once when I arrived at a nice residence in a southern suburb, I was surprised to find that the house was owned and decorated by a contemporary pop artist from Japan. The first item I saw inside the door was a psychedelically-painted full-size motorcycle with various splashy 3D decorations on it, sticking out dramatically, including an artful array of neon lights. The art work in frames on the walls was decidedly abstract, but inventive, with many bright colors and bold shapes. And on the piano room wall lay a very striking display that I've never seen anywhere: mounted on hangers were about fifteen large-size skateboards with a representational graphic scene on each one. Some were Japanese anime-style, while a few others were imaginative settings of highly active people with intense expressions doing athletic things. The stylistic continuity all matched. High energy was radiating from each one. Each scene covered most of the skateboard, and the resolution of the details varied from stark clarity to deliberately blurred. This was a wild environment to tune a piano in, and I felt pretty jazzed to be working there.

This is in contrast to another well-decorated home where three acoustic guitars were on display on floor stands. One rather cheap guitar I noticed had a broken neck; the slack strings were obviously dangling loose. The neck must have snapped while this old guitar sat there in the sun, day after day. It seems I was the first one to notice it had fallen apart. The home-owner was surprised and alarmed. Apparently all the guitars were ignored most of the time. This one might have already languished in that drastic state for weeks, lost, unseen, unappreciated.

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In a comfortable 1920's home in St. Paul, an actor had placed his console piano in the living room along the wall to the dining room. Over several years, I had tuned this same piano in three

different houses, so I was familiar with it. Above the piano on that expansive wall hung a giant work of art. It was an abstract painting filled with sharp shapes that dominated the living room. It appeared to be an experimental work by a student artist. It was not the greatest painting, but at least it was direct in its intention: ‘notice me, observe my dramatic color contrasts, and don’t try to relax.’

What I remember the most about that day is an issue with the piano lid and the fact that, when opened, it leaned against the bottom of the abstract painting’s frame. This made the picture jiggle ominously as it rocked on the wall. I needed to have the lid open to do the tuning, so we hunted around for something that could cushion and steady the picture as the lid stood open against it. We settled on a comical cat toy which turned out to be a funny doctor who for some reason had his hands, with surgical tools, high in the air. His specs were stuck low on his nose, and he wore a wide-eyed, surprised expression, complete with his mouth in the shape of an ‘O’. Perhaps this active appearance made sense when he was held tightly in the cat’s mouth. When placed between the top of the piano lid and the picture frame, the lid landed perfectly, right in the doctor’s middle, and he looked to be forcibly trapped in the uncomfortable position of keeping the two things from coming into contact. He appeared to be squeezed and alarmed and outraged all at once, and seemed to be crying, “What are you doing?! I can’t work like *this!*” The owner, with his natural theatrical mind-set, commented, “Haven’t we all wanted to do this to our pushy, bossy, mean old doctors!” Yes! That’ll show them! Misery flows both ways.

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Elsewhere, on another piano, one particular key was sticking *some* of the time for no apparent reason, and once all the usual suspects were eliminated, I had to take the key out to look for other more obscure causes. There it was: an ordinary pin lodged in the key bed with the head down, pushed straight up into the wood under that key repeatedly enough for it to remain in a vertical position right under the bottom of the key. Each time the key was played, depending on how hard it was struck, the point of the pin would regularly get imbedded in the underside of the wood. Stick a pin into any wood it will usually get stuck. I was surprised to see how solidly the pin was fixed in that position, lurking under the fingers of the players ready to stab the key sporadically. “What am I doing wrong?” thinks every beginning piano student. “It’s not your fault,” I have had to explain several times over the years, showing them whatever was really causing the keys to not work right.

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Many times, after confirming that the piano action itself does not have foreign objects in it, or anything broken, I have removed the keys, searching for obstructions. I have found pieces of gravel, sand, dirt, leaves, pine needles, holly berries, seeds, pieces of pet food, gum wrappers, papers, lollipop sticks, gummy bears, wood matches, and everything else known to human kind. Apparently the piano is a favorite place, in many households, hospitals, churches, park buildings and schools, to spill and dump things. Lots of plants have fallen onto the keys sometimes cracking them in half, requiring the keys to be glued back together again with clamps and careful reuse of the original wood. Of course, debris falls in the cracks between the keys every time a

plant lands there. For all pianos, it's a never-ending battle to keep those cracks unobstructed. Once I found a pile of mysterious un-popped popcorn under the keys, not causing any trouble. But why? The woman of the house scowled when she saw the corn, and recognized that someone young and devious and ill-mannered had dumped it there in an attempt to sabotage the piano, so having to play it would be curtailed.

I mentioned elsewhere the piano I discovered which held over thirty pens and pencils inside on and around the keys. This particular old upright piano had the kind of horizontal music desk that had no stopper on the back edge, and once the pen or pencil rolled off the edge, it would join the others collecting within the innards of the piano where the pianist could not reach them. That collection must have been growing for the previous 15 years.

One spinet piano in an apartment building years ago had something amiss with the piano action which was not typical in any way. Spinet piano actions are hard to work on since they are buried inside, lower than the keys themselves. After eliminating the ordinary causes, I had to look much more closely at the moving parts inside, which meant getting on the floor and looking up into the action where all the elbows and levers quietly work out of sight. There I found a collection of about six very small metal pieces that were impeding the moving parts when the piano was played. The notes that didn't work right all had individual little chunks of metal mixed in with the wooden levers and other parts. The curious piano owner came over to have a look as well. We both spotted a hole in the bottom of the piano that should not have been there. A look of realization came over the guy's face. "Wow, that's a bullet hole. There was a shooting downstairs last month. That bullet must have sailed through my floor and into my piano." I collected the fragments and handed them over. The man was kind of fascinated by them, chuckling about how he felt lucky that he wasn't at home when that happened. Everything inside the piano was back in working order after that, with no damage, remarkably, to any of the parts. The bullet must have lost all its speed by the time it ended up in the bottom of his spinet.

At another house, a woman reported to me that her piano had stopped working right after a party her high-school-age daughter held when mom was not home. She was sure that some wild party-goer had deliberately messed up the inner workings of the instrument, and her daughter had failed to stop them. When I arrived, I noticed a large decorative candle sitting on the top of the piano, right in the middle. It had been lit recently, it appeared, since the now-solid wax had escaped its original shape, spread out and oozed in all directions. This was the type of upright piano that had a hinge on the top that runs end-to-end halfway in (so that half the piano top could be opened up to let out more sound when needed). This meant that there was a gap in the top, a crack that could allow wax gradually to drip into inside. Once I took off the front of the piano, it was clear that's what had happened. As the party had been underway, over a few hours, the candle had done its insidious work. There was an obvious pool of solid wax that had formed on top of most of the dampers and action parts in the middle octave. Even a few of the hammers had received some wax splatters. It was a huge mess that took a couple of hours of work to get cleared out. Most of the damaged dampers needed to be replaced, but surprisingly, once the wax was removed carefully from the moving parts that had been immobilized, the piano was restored to normal function, even if the freshly-'waxed' interior didn't appear very pleasing, aesthetically.

The owner agreed that it was not too important how it looked inside, since no one but me ever would see it, so we left the wax in place wherever it didn't affect the function. At least the damage wasn't caused by deliberate destructiveness, just melting wax with a mind of its own.

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Saturday morning at 11:00 AM is generally a good time to tune a piano. But one time years ago, a bright and confident teen-age girl met me at the door and brought me into the living room where a lovely black grand piano dominated the whole space. She told me that her mom would be writing the check (gesturing to the next room) and she disappeared down the hall to her own territory. In the adjacent dining room two middle-aged women were having a sort of mini party by themselves. This party might have started as a get-together of old friends, but the second bottle of wine had already been opened and the two ladies were starting to slur their words. Also, everything they come up with in their wide-ranging and somewhat incoherent conversation struck both of them as extremely humorous.

They noticed my presence but continued on with their jolly joking. Some of what they were saying had to do with the foibles of a mutual friend. Both women were very uninhibited and loosened up already, and had a habit of filling each other's glasses whenever either got too empty. They were drawn to what I was doing and watched for a few seconds, listening and giggling about the twangy sounds I was generating. Then they started to ask questions, most of which never really finished because the logic of the sentences never could congeal. This led to more embarrassed laughter since the effort to stay straight enough to make sense continually failed. They both were trying very hard to come across as serious and thoughtful witnesses to my amazing work, but every attempt fell down that slippery slope into the unintelligible. More laughter, and more swaying with their wine glasses, risking the beautiful white carpeting. And this was happening at 11:00 AM on a Saturday. I was wondering if I was going to be able to do my tuning at all with this much distraction.

Luckily, the teen daughter came back onto the scene just in time. She was perfect in her coaxing and cajoling, and, picking up the half-empty wine bottle, she herding both the older ladies out of the area while they jabbered objections. The young woman was firm, like a stern school teacher. "Let's head to the basement rec room, you two. Come on, now. Bring your glasses. This man needs to be left alone." She was successful in her herding, like an insistent sheep dog, and soon the whole noisy conglomeration swayed out through the kitchen and gravitated down the stairs. I was suddenly surrounded with blissful silence. A couple of minutes later the girl came back through, shaking her head with embarrassment. "Sorry for that. Jeez, it's not even noon yet." She hastily handed me a nearly unreadable check signed by her mom, and went on toward her room.

"Thanks so much for the help," I called after her. "You saved the day." She waved her hand and disappeared into the dark hallway.

A few days later I got a call from that mom full of apology and contrition. I told her that it was okay, I didn't mind, and that I was kind of entertained by their performance. I also congratulated her daughter for handling things so capably.

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In my travels all over the Twin Cities and beyond, I occasionally was called upon to visit an empty church. When no one was around, I sometimes needed to handle things on my own. I visited a large Catholic church a half dozen times over a three years span, and each time the door was open, the cavernous space was empty and dark. On my first visit, a maintenance man was around and showed me where to find a giant light panel hidden away behind the scenes. He pointed out the switches for the area where the grand piano was set up, so I was able to fend for myself any time I came. It felt powerful to me to be able to walk to the back-stage area, to the wall right on the other side of the pulpit itself and flip the right breakers. Let there be light.

On one occasion, as I was getting ready to tune the grand, a pair of Hispanic men poked their heads in from a nearby door. They glanced around and found I was the only one around within sight. I think they may have been intimidated by the vast empty space there, only some of it lit up, just as I was every time I arrived. It felt like God's house to them, I'm sure. One of the guys looked nervous, worried and deeply unhappy. The other man asked if I was a priest. I got the picture right away: the first man was in need of a priest and spoke only Spanish. I suspected he was anxious to have a confessional right away. Something very dark had happened and he was in need of comfort and resolution ASAP. I nodded at them both seriously and explained that I was not a priest, just the piano tuner. They would need to check with the church office in the parish building just across the street. I think some of those upper floors held the actual residences of a few of the staff priests. The translator spoke quietly to his friend, and both went on their way to the nearby building. I hope they found what they were looking for, with the sense of emergency eased before long. I wished I could do something more for them, but at least the dilemma was redirected to the church people who could really help.

I tuned the sanctuary piano and then another in a community room in the basement, thinking the whole time about the troubled man and his terrifying situation. It's in God's hands now, I thought to myself. And I'm a Unitarian.

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At another much smaller church in a working class neighborhood, the cheerful character of the place was what made it charming and attractive to the small congregation, even though there was no elaborate ornamentation or ostentatious religious artifacts. Simplicity, reverence, honest colorful flowers and sensible decorative touches. The young minister was a very friendly and gregarious extrovert, full of pleasantries and welcome. He was very good at his job, it seemed to me. The person who brought me there, a middle-aged cabdriver, after having his own piano taken care of by me over the last year or so, had told the minister of my skills with old upright pianos. Their church piano just across the 'stage' from the lectern, was indeed in need of some piano magic from someone like me. I could tell that the music and singing in the church was probably integral to the emotional power of the services.

I was invited into the small church office inside some glass walls right behind to 120-seat sanctuary, and the casually dressed minister, a flock-leader who wanted everyone to feel at home no matter what their background, was all smiles and good cheer. A surprising touch in the office

on the wall by the entry door was a three-foot-tall Hollywood poster of the *Three Stooges*, Moe, Larry and Curly, if memory serves. I used to watch them a lot on black and white TV as a kid. After some talk about the piano problems and some joking around, I glanced at the prominent poster of the guys watching us closely, disapprovingly, I thought, and offered, “So, are these some of your deacons?” This sent the minister into gales of laughter so strong that he had to sit down behind his desk. Everyone chuckled about the idea of the Three Stooges as deacons, including my friend the cabdriver, and a couple of other volunteers hanging around the office, working on a mimeograph machine making the church programs for Sunday. Before long the minister had to confirm that I knew who these guys on the poster really were. “Yeah, those are the Three Stooges,” I admitted. I wouldn’t be surprised if that bit of exchange in the church office made an spontaneous off-the-cuff appearance in his sermon that Sunday.

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A long time ago during one of my visits to the exurb countryside, I remember another situation where I ended up becoming helpful to someone. As I was invited in at a pleasant home near the big lake, I was immediately pulled into an artistic question about a pair of figurines sitting on the dining room table. The college-age woman was the only one home.

“How beautiful! Is this for your own wedding?” I surmised they must be the decorative figures planned for a wedding cake sometime in the very near future. I couldn’t help being drawn to them. Together they made a remarkable work of art sitting just three feet away, the center of attention.

She chuckled. “No, I’m just a friend of the bride. I’m the one in charge of making these two look good on the top of the cake.” I could tell she was a serious artist quite proud of her work, a pair of hand-painted people gazing at each other in a very loving way. I’m not sure what the material was, not wood, but something like *sculpy*, two mini sculptures waiting for their big moment. The clarity of their wedding clothes was remarkable, colorful, precise. Everything was nearly finished.

I got the idea this emerging artist felt she could trust me. Maybe she thought I, as a musician, would have some artistic sensibility that would help her. There was a reverence in the moment that made me feel privileged to be present. Deeply engaged in her work, she quietly asked, half to herself, *what’s missing?* I felt honored to be asked for my reaction about details that were still undecided. I looked more closely at the remarkable scene and suggested a tiny improvement I thought should be added. After a moment, she nodded. I’ll never know whether or not she decided to incorporate that touch.

Thus, in a way, I became a contributor in the creation of this decorative eye-catcher (although I certainly did not have the skill to actually do anything), and, by extension, in the whole event itself. I joined all the people in the circle working together to make the best possible outcome for the happy couple. A holy moment for me behind the scenes. I live for opportunities like that.

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I remember visiting an apartment in a western suburb that was rented by a family of recent emigres from Russia. At the appointed time I was met at the door by an older man who understood virtually no English. No one else was home. But he knew I was coming and gestured for me to come in, then led me around the corner to the adjacent room where a small black piano stood. It was basically a brand new piano with nothing but Russian letters on the front board. This instrument was my assignment there. The man spoke Russian to me, but I was not at all up to speed (like, *zero* comprehension), so with gestures he told me to go ahead. I decided to take a chance with my high school German just in case. “Sprechen sie Deutsch?” I asked. The old man lit up. “Ja!” My German was pretty basic, but I had taken three years of high school German, and we were able to actually have a small conversation. I was grateful to my German instructors at that point. With a little trial and error he told me (in German) that this piano came from Russia just his week. He told me how to say the name of the piano, which I don’t remember. He pointed to the name—all Russian characters—and a series of totally unfamiliar sounds came from his mouth. He laughed. I pointed to the name of the city beneath the name on the piano, and he told me how to say it in Russian (still unintelligible), but then he told me (in German) that people in the US call that city *Minsk*. Minsk is a place I had heard of! Communication!

He had an important question for me about the piano. “Why doesn’t it play?” When I tried random keys it was true that none of them functioned; they were all stuck! I took off the front of the piano and was surprised to see (for the first time and last time) that this piano had been specially packed for shipping to protect the moving parts during its ocean voyage. The piano action had been taken off its lower mounts. The bracing ‘legs’ of the piano action were now stuck into wood blocks, while the top holders were still in place. Thus, the piano keys could not move and the piano’s other internal parts were immobilized. I showed the Russian gentleman what was going on inside, and he expressed amazement. After a minute of trying different tactics, I was able to remove the bracing blocks and reposition the action on its proper mounts. Suddenly all the keys came to life again and sour notes rang out into the air! Wonderment and relief ensued.

I was able to give the piano its long-awaited tuning, and the tone quality was rich and rewarding. The old man was quite happy with the results. He may have been the most active pianist in the family. I asked if he lived here now, and he told me that he was just visiting for a month. His son and daughter-in-law had moved here all the way, along with the old man’s five-year-old grandson, who was soon to start studying the piano. “Everyone will like the piano much better now that it works,” I told him, and he agreed.

He explained to me how he picked up some German-speaking skills, just after World War II, during the time when the Russian army assigned him to a place in Germany where the Russians were the occupying force. He was in his early 20s then, and he stayed for nearly a year, working with the German civilians as everything started to get cleared away, put back together and rebuilt. I was pleased to connect so well with someone from the other side of the world, not something I have the opportunity to do very often. Wow.

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