

MINI MEMORIES, PART 2

Every home has its share of unusual decorations on display, unique things that make the people who live there totally individualized. The owners of most homey places make a sincere attempt to beautify their environment with unusual items from around the world, which impart something special about their culture of origin. Sometimes on display are touristy items from exotic places, featuring eye-catching colors and artistry from everywhere.

Other times the display pieces I face are home-made wonders like the wall full of hand-carved and painted masks used for story-telling presentations from the native cultures of Central America. Many of those vivid masks seemed to be frowning at me judgmentally as I attempted to make the piano sound presentable. Angry faces staring at me are always disconcerting. Are they shocked, dismayed, worried, suspicious, fed-up? That sort of wide-spread disapproval can really undermine one's self-confidence. As far as I could tell, the masks were not making sudden moves or sputtering grunts of distain, disgusted noises of mocking mirth, or joking guffaws, except in my imagination. At least I don't think they were, but the psychological impact on my psyche still has its effect on me.

Costa Rica or the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Aleutian Islands, possibly Bali or Nepal, and many other places unidentifiable to me have all been present during my tuning adventures. Some settings transport me to another place and time, which is a pleasant departure from the typical living space. Many homes have great floral arrangements on the dining room table when I arrive (in wintertime they are replaced with dried flowers and stems). Commonly, bright-colored flowers in pots have been placed on the top of the piano, which require delicate removal, paying special attention to the tendrils and trailing stems that can so easily get caught on something. Most of them have dishes under the pots to keep the water from escaping, but once in a while, a pot will leak and cause some damage to the insides of the piano.

One time the grand piano I sat by faced a wall with a very unusual wall hanging: a bare six-foot-long branch with many twisted angles, gnarled lumps and rough bark suspended by nearly invisible thin wires. It truly appeared to be floating in mid-air, casting a dramatic shadow on the ivory-colored wall behind it. It felt like a miracle created by a special effects department in a Hollywood studio. The ceiling light above the nearby living room couch cast an atmospheric beam of light on the drifting wood which was really striking. Someone had planned the scene in a most miraculous way. Only beautiful music in the air would be fitting here.

Fridge magnets seize the imagination of some households, especially those that remind everyone of where you've visited in your travels. I've seen some very exotic photos magnetically attached to the doors. Some lucky grandmas have special messages on their fridges from resourceful and loving grandchildren. One that I remember well was a lovely child-drawn card featuring a carefully colored little dog on one side, with a neatly hand lettered message on the other that read, "Grandma, you're as sweet as puppies! I wish you could live in Golden Valley nearby us. Love from your grandson, Rob." Thanks, Rob, that's a simile I never would have thought of myself.

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Back in my early days of tuning, I sometimes took jobs quite far away from home. I usually would visit some place in central Minnesota and line up as many tunings in the vicinity as I could. One

time I needed to stay overnight in a public camp ground at a state park. At that time, I drove an old green Ford van with a mattress and bedding in back, so it was not necessary to set up a tent. I could have checked into a cheap motel nearby, but a van at a camping spot was the least expensive method of all. It was a quiet night in the fall, with not many people staying in this camp ground, so I had a lot of sites to choose from. I selected a spot near a large lake under some very tall and stately trees. It seemed to be an idyllic spot as I settled in for the night, with a full tummy from a local café. I was in for a surprise rather soon after I first fell asleep. It had been an exhausting day for me, so I was out like a light. Wham! The whole roof of my van rang out like it had been struck with a ghost hammer. Soon after that, another wham, and another. It was always completely quiet after each noise, except for the crickets and frogs. I had no idea what was going on. The anvil of my metal roof reverberated like a church bell—every few minutes. I didn't want to go outside while I was half asleep, but I did glance out my window briefly to see if there was something randomly striking at my truck. I grabbed my flashlight...peering around for animals, or anything that moved. Panic, danger, concern, puzzlement.

Suddenly, another loud wham! And a small motion on the ground. Looking down I saw an acorn roll away and come to rest. There were several acorns on the ground around the van. Nothing else threatened me. No creatures nearby. I opened the car door and shined the flashlight up into the air. Beside the truck at my camp site was the tallest oak tree I had ever seen, maybe 70 feet high. I may have seen higher ones but I never took any notice. As I watched, another tiny orb spun out of the dark from high above me, gained size and smacked the van's roof top. Clang! I was being attacked in the night by acorns! They each must have spent several seconds descending from the top of that oak, gaining speed and menace as they accelerated toward me.

Wow, I could have chosen a camping site that had maple trees beside me, but NOOOO, I was not thinking ahead at all. At least I knew what my peril was now. I managed, with my new-found awareness—*wokeness* you could say—to sleep fitfully the rest of the night. In the morning as I checked out at the 'ranger station' (as they used to do things), I asked the worker if anyone had ever complained about the noise of falling acorns. I explained that I had chosen to park next to a giant oak, and it had been showering me with acorn missiles all night. No, he laughed, that was a new one for him. Sigh. Just my ill luck taking charge again. I drove down the road. Onward to more pianos to save! I thought I'd seen everything, Nope.

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In an upscale suburb north of St. Paul, I came across a beautifully decorated home with an extensive array of amazing furniture I had never seen before. Everything was quite tasteful, and the new, glossy ebony, medium-size grand fit in well. The entire living room floor, which was twice the size of any regular house's, was covered with a priceless handmade Persian carpet with a vivid red and blue pattern which was all too easy to lose yourself in--visually brilliant with a remarkably intricate weave. The artifacts that occupied 'most every table top and open surface brought to mind the atmosphere and mystique of Arabia, without looking overcrowded. Each piece seemed unique, artistically crafted and well chosen. In some ways it reminded me of an incredible museum where no expense had been spared. This was a household where aesthetics really mattered, and fortunately the available funding seemed limitless. It was a wonderful experience to be there. The two kids who lived there were happy and clever; both played the piano capably in spite of being probably only 6 and 8 years old.

It's likely not worth mentioning, but I was especially struck by a unique type of settee sitting in the middle of the room, something I had not ever come across in my extensive home visits. It had very colorful rich, fine fabric that covered the entire cushioned expanse. It was about nine feet long and at least three feet across with tall ends that those sitting could easily lean against—almost as high as a sitting person's head. Most unusual was the fact that there was *no back* to it at all. I could easily envision several party guests yakking at once, sitting on this piece of furniture using *both* sides! What an interesting concept. Of course, I've led a sheltered life and there are plenty of things I've never seen before. That was an amazing furniture centerpiece highlighting an already great room. This place was way out of the ordinary. I spent my time there with a tingly feeling, in awe of the whole setting; it gave me the inspiration to make the piano sound as sweet as possible. That space deserves beautiful music, I told myself. I think the family liked how the piano tuning turned out as I played it over after I was finished. I felt proud of the results, which could have maybe even been on par with the decor. I like to think so anyway, as a small contributor to the house's artistic atmosphere.

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Over the course of my years as a piano tuner-tech, I sometimes have been called upon to step out of my role. Sometimes by necessity, other times because it's the right thing to do. That may have taken the form of merely acting as a calm adult when a large and noisy storm is frightening the youngsters or the resident pets present. Or when some advice is requested about issues in people's lives that have nothing to do with pianos. When I arrived at a nicely-built seniors residence in a north suburb, I visited for the second time a fine, dignified old gentleman. His grown daughter had set up this tuning with me on his behalf. She had mentioned to me on the phone that her mother had died just a month earlier, and her father was still adjusting to the change. From the lobby, I rang the bell for his place, and after identifying me, he buzzed me in. As he opened the door for the apartment, I was met by a subdued and sad old man doing his best to meet the challenge of my presence there. The previous visit had entailed being greeted by and interacting with a cheerful older woman too. Both the elderly guy and his daughter had concluded that a tuned piano is more pleasant to play than a sour one, and he played quite well. They both hoped that turning to the piano more often would be therapeutic and relaxing in his period of mourning. I greeted him as normally as I could, asking how he was doing; I told him how sorry I was to hear about the loss of his wife. He looked at the floor and mentioned they had been married nearly 60 years. I ventured, "I suppose things seem a lot different around here these days." He shook his head, "Do they ever! It's way too quiet and empty, and," he chuckled, "I have to do *everything* myself now."

We gravitated over to the piano, and, as an older man myself now, I understood how he felt a bit compromised by his age and lack of strength. He walked slowly and carefully using his measured coordination well. I asked about his friends here at the seniors place, and he answered, "Sure. I have plenty of people here who I know and appreciate, but they are just acquaintances. They know what's up and help me through my day—some have lost their mates, too. But my best friend for life is gone now. It's a struggle," he admitted, shaking his head.

He continued, "Say, I need some help here and I'm hoping you wouldn't mind doing something for me." I nodded and smiled a little. "The top of this piano used to have some standup photos on

it, but for quite a while now they've gone missing. I'm not able to hunt around very well anymore." I offered to have a look nearby, and within half a minute, I was able to spot three 8 X 10 photos in frames with glass fronts wedged near the floor between the back of the piano and the wall. Of course, he could not have reached those himself. I moved the spinet piano away from the wall a little (a task he surely was not up to) and with some effort, I carefully extracted the escaped pictures one at a time from deep behind the piano. I brought them out into the light again and placed them on the nearby couch. The man brightened up as each group shot appeared, and he told me briefly who they were in his and his wife's lives, and, since they were decades-old shots, what folks were doing now. Some of them had died, of course, but others were still in touch a little.

Each frame had its glass intact, luckily--spinet pianos are usually just over a yard tall, so the pictures did not have far to travel down. The final photo I retrieved turned out to be their main wedding picture from all those years before. He glanced at it, took it from me and held it to his heart for a moment. "I haven't seen this for a while." He turned it so I could see it. "Isn't she a honey? I got real lucky. What a gem!" I felt warmed by his quaint terminology, and had no trouble agreeing that she *was* a real honey, a truly beautiful young woman, radiating joy. He looked just as joyful in that posed picture as she did. "You make a great pair," I commented.

The special picture joined the others on the couch, and once the tuning was done, an hour later, and everything was closed up again, he returned to the living room to help oversee the positioning of these three photos on the piano top. The wedding shot was to go in the middle as it always had before. I placed them carefully and reverently in their proper places and angles, to the old man's satisfaction. That step seemed just as important as the actual tuning of the piano itself.

I bid him good bye and best of luck, and wished him "happy music making." He seemed more relieved now, and told me, with a wan smile, "I'm really looking forward to it."

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Thinking of other senior citizens I have worked for, there was a 85-year-old woman, widowed for at least ten years, who still lived in a pleasant rambler along the highway north of the central Minnesota town I visited regularly for 40 years. Garrison Keillor used to call his imaginary Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, "the Gateway to Central Minnesota." And that's what this charming, small town felt like to me. In places like this, odd things transpire sometimes. This fully-alert and healthy woman told me a story about something that happened the previous week. I had taken care of her piano on about four other occasions in the past, but this was the first time she had told me anything (other than small talk) about her life.

It seems that she was busy cleaning around the house (which overlooked a large, quiet lake) in the middle of the afternoon when a gruff and unkempt 50-year-old man walked into her house. No knocking, no doorbell used or other introduction. She had never met this man before. He seemed to be on foot heading towards town. The man found the lady of the house in her kitchen and, without any preamble, holding out his hand, he demanded, "Give me five dollars." Short and to the point. He seemed anxious and in a bit of a hurry, according to the story-teller, and he smelled of alcohol. She did not deliberate long in her mind what to do. She went to the hallway, fished out a fiver from her purse and handed it to him. The guy accepted it, nodded, and spun out the door again, resuming his trek to town, about a mile down the road.

The woman did not feel frightened, but was relieved to have him out of the house again. She clearly enjoyed telling this story, though, and using what could have been a theatrical stage gesture she learned in a high school production 67 or so years earlier, she spread her hands and flicked them sideways in opposite directions, as if dismissing the situation, exclaiming, “There’s nothing you can do with those people!” I gathered that she meant that arguing with or challenging someone like that probably would not be a good idea. I wondered when and if she would ever get a roommate companion, or move to a seniors place nearby, so as not to be so vulnerable. In my estimation, she probably could handle just about anything non-threatening for a few years more. I admired her tenacity, and hoped for the best for her.

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