

## PIANO MOVING CAN PROVE EXPENSIVE

I've dealt with piano movers many times during the years that I worked on reconditioning and reselling used pianos in my "shop." I settled into one company for most of my moves once I learned that they were the least expensive of my options. The piano buyers usually paid for the moving, but, occasionally, I would throw in the moving costs as part of my price for the piano, so cost-saving was important. The company I used was a father-son team and they generally gave me a good price since I sent them quite a bit of business over the years.

During my heyday of piano buying and reselling, I often went through twelve pianos in a "season." I would watch the newspaper ads for auctions, estate sales, moving sales, and older people—now empty-nesters--just wanting to get the piano out of the house. Sometimes I worked with grand pianos, but mostly I chose old full-size upright pianos to work on, since they were often very inexpensive or free, and I knew how to choose the one-in-ten that had a good future. The full-size upright pianos were super popular during their big run, mostly 1900-1930. Of course, when twenty million upright pianos get made in thirty years, that means that now, toward the end of their useful days, there continues to be a huge glut in the market. That overload has been really filling up the for-sale notices on Craigslist and everywhere else since about 1990.

Many people are anxious to unload their old beat-up full-size pianos, offering them for free for anyone who wants to pay for the moving. What they often mean (in the undercurrent of their ads) is, "Help! Please haul away my junk piano for me!" That's why choosing carefully is so important. If nine in ten pianos are destined for the dump, it's easy to get stuck with a piano that needs much more effort and investment than it's worth. I've learned what pluses to look for and what disqualifies a piano from consideration. Sometimes a piano can look quite beautiful on the outside, but be a disaster area on the inside.

One friend-of-a-relative recently moved a very ancient donated upright piano (1890) into her house as a kind of surprise for her house-mate, whom she liked a lot, and wanted to do a favor for. Her house-mate had been a pianist from childhood on, with years of successful lessons behind her, but she no longer had a piano to play. Sadly, this 1890 piano (from an underground restaurant) was a hopeless cause, so completely deteriorated that it could never hold a tuning or play properly ever again. Clearly, the piano should have been checked out before the move. This was an expensive lesson to learn since the cost of moving, first into the house, then out again to the dump, must have totaled \$600. I hope that a decent and functional piano did eventually make into that music-loving household. Fingers-crossed.

I placed two words, above, in quotes for a reason. "Shop" and "season." First of all, I have always been someone who values *low-overhead*. It's easy for people to go into business for themselves and fold within a year due to the weight of overhead on the budget. My choice for the location of my "shop" was my own garage. Pluses: no extra cost, convenient to show customers pianos, easy to get to work, easy access for the piano

movers. Minuses: smallish, no heat, no place to put one of our cars. That's where the idea of "season" enters in. My piano shop, year-after-year, would open up in early April and close down again before the snow flew in the late fall. I would have to plan my acquisitions carefully so I would not be stuck with an unsold piano or two when it started to get too cold. In Minneapolis, it's not possible to function in an unheated garage in the winter. Every fall, Patty and I would celebrate the departure of the last piano of the season, which would mean that the garage could return to its original purpose, sheltering one of our old cars from blizzards. Now, as a retiree from buying and selling pianos, our garage has entirely reverted to its original purpose, except for several vestiges of the "shop" that remain. Primarily it's a big row of old upright piano actions lined up along the back wall of the garage (the car just barely fits in), which occasionally supplies ancient repair parts for pianos out and about, especially in schools, nursing homes, churches, and houses where the piano owners are hold-outs for the preservation of the oldest pianos in the city. Also still present in the "shop" are shelves of purchased new repair parts and supplies for all kinds of pianos; tuner/techs never know what dilemmas might confront them next.

One piano tuning customer in central Minnesota by Lake Mille Lacs (where for forty years I used to visit for piano tunings about three times a year) told me his story of how expensive piano moving can be. His old upright had resided in the living room of his home for many years. One year not long ago, the family decided to remodel the lower level of their place, changing an unappealing and disorganized walk-out basement into a delightful, well-appointed, beautiful rec room, with great wood paneling. Once the rec room was completed, the pre-designated space for the upright piano from upstairs was glowing invitingly. The dad of the family got a couple of helpful neighbors, and with excitement (especially from the kids watching) and enthusiasm they joined forces to undertake the task of moving the giant piano down the new stairway to its 'better place.' The stairs had a turn in the middle, which helped, but it was tricky business for the novice movers, and according to the story told by the man himself, at some point his back got wrenched around. The piano arrived safely at the spot along the wall downstairs where it belonged, and the other two helpers had no problems with any of their various overtaxed muscles or bones. However, the owner himself needed to head immediately to the ER for an assessment about his strained (or worse) back.

After a few hours of imaging, x-rays and other tests, he was cleared to go home with no serious injuries to cope with. The visit to the hospital cost over \$500, it turned out. By the time I showed up a month later to tune his newly-moved piano, the owner had recovered, but he chuckled that this misadventure must have been the most expensive piano move in history. At that time, the average charge for a pair of experienced movers to muscle that piano down the stairs was probably less than half that. Next time, they'll probably go with the experts.

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