

Quirks, Delays, Interruptions, Tripwires

Every time I turn up at a piano tuning appointment, hardly anything is predictable at all. It's like the wild west sometimes, lawless and free-flowing. I never know what to expect and I must be ready for any surprise if I am to survive.

1. I've tuned day care center pianos often enough to expect action figures, toy cars, blocks, balls, bits of cloth and twine, and unidentifiable metal things to be discovered inside the piano, sitting on the keys or interrupting the natural function of the moving parts in goofy-sounding ways. It is normal for junk to be dropped or pushed inside during the course of an average day for pre-schoolers. Usually I can fix what's jamming the hammers once I get the piano opened up, and this is always to a huge draw for the instant audience. They all wonder what's going on inside anything, and all those tidy hammers in a row that flip forward when the keys are pressed are endlessly fascinating. They enjoy laughing when I pull out a plastic cowboy with a hat and a rope from in front of a hammer and exclaim, "How did *you* get in there? That's no place to do rope tricks! You're just a trouble-maker."

One time I had to endure a power struggle between the guys who were minding the daycare when I arrived. The younger of the two identified himself as the music teacher, which he assumed would give him some authority to make decisions about the piano maintenance. His pointy beard wagged as he announced that he wanted to have the piano tuned differently than normal. He explained that he was trying to teach the little ones (up to five years old, I gather) the sound of the pentatonic scale, found normally by playing the notes C-D-E-G-A, and leaving the others out. Another way to get that sound is to play only black keys starting on F#. But this music teacher, who must have been a self-made musician, wanted *all* the notes on the piano to be tuned to only the sounds of the pentatonic scale even when they were not supposed to. This would make all the notes on the piano completely out of tune with the way they are expected to sound, making the kids' ears turn inside out when typical kids songs are played by anyone. Each key would be so unpredictable that no notes would resemble in the least any other piano the kids might encounter anywhere else. C-D-E-G and A would come out of every key, no matter where it was, and what it looked like.

This plan was ridiculous from the first moment it was mentioned. It was incredibly ill-conceived and stunningly impractical. Furthermore, it would have taken a huge amount of effort on my part, tuning strings often much more slack than they are intended to be. His scheme was doomed from the word 'go,' and only negative chaos could come from it. So, I politely declined to do that to the piano. Luckily, the director of the place had overheard some of our discussion, and he came over to make sure he understood what the music 'teacher' was asking me to do. As the plan was unfolded once again for him, it became clear to the director that this suggestion had no merit whatsoever. I repeated my concern that the piano would be so hopelessly off-kilter from other pianos that no child would learn anything about music from this crazy tuning method. The director agreed with me immediately, which ignited a foolish dispute between them about who had the authority to make decisions about the piano in the first place. I said I was sorry, but I

would not tune the piano that way, told them ‘no charge,’ and went on to my next appointment. As the door closed behind me, voices were beginning to be raised as the argument gained momentum, and I was grateful to leave them behind.

2. On another day, I arrived at a very orderly home fastidiously arranged with lovely exotic items on display, including some very unusual blown glass sculptures sitting on a couple of shelves in a glass display case. The woman lived alone (except for her pampered Pomeranian) and wanted everything to be ‘just so.’ She was basically striving for the nirvana of perfection in the world of her home decor. Even before I started, she hurried upstairs to make an important phone call about an official matter, possibly for her club’s planning committee (I was not focusing on what I accidentally overheard.). As she began her conversation, a bit formally I thought, even though they seemed to know each other already, I started to clear off the top of her console piano, with a lovely dark walnut finish in pristine condition in spite of the piano being 40 years old already. Perched at a jaunty angle on the top was a healthy green plant with splendid pink blossoms bursting in all directions. The flowering plant lived in a polished gold metal box on the piano top, but as I reached over to move it to the floor somewhere, I was alarmed to see a dark liquid begin to ooze slowly from underneath the planter onto the perfect wood finish of the piano. Apparently the plant had been recently watered, and was overflowing. I needed to act immediately, but I was helpless, frozen like a deer in the headlights, and could think of nothing to staunch the inexorable flow of doom spilling from the planter.

My panic gave rise to the only solution available: “Mrs. McCracken, I need your help!” Upstairs, on the phone, she sputtered to a stop, stumbling out about six un-word-like syllables, like a tire skidding on uneven asphalt. Then: “Sorry, um, I’ll have to call you back.” She galloped down the stairs again, and I pointed to the demon liquid spreading all over her fine walnut finish. She tried her best to not act too much like a beheaded chicken, emitted one colorful swearword and raced to a cabinet around the corner. In her hands instantly was thick, thirsty and basically never-used bath towel randomly seized from her supply. It was a light blue, which changed color quickly to darker blue as she tried to stop the evil spill. Luckily, none of the water had yet reached the inside of the piano, which could have led to a much-speedier spread of damage. I helpfully lifted the planter off the piano and set it on the tile floor nearby, and she was able to complete the thorough wipe-up. It looked as if the gloss polish had done its job because all the water beaded up and willingly leapt into the deep pile of the towel, with no evidence that the spill had ever happened. She started to breathe more normally after that, and rummaged for another towel to place under the gold box on the floor, so that no further flooding could occur. “Boy, was I dumb to pour that much in there; I just wanted to get my chores done before you got here. I had just finished that when the doorbell rang.” She gave me a wan smile. “Thanks for alerting me.”

I was finally able to lift the top and remove from the front of the piano the equally shiny wood music rack with, and the rest of the tuning went as normally as ever. She returned to her phone companion upstairs and spent at least the first three minutes breathlessly explaining what had happened. I gathered the listener was amused, at the other end of the

line. It seems I arrived just in time; that leak could have gone on for a half hour longer if I had not noticed it.

3. I rarely have musical competition when I have a piano tuning scheduled, but once, decades ago, I started my work just as a succession of young women arrived at the home over the course of ten minutes. In each case the arriver would gravitate to the kitchen and get welcomed quietly by the home owner. After the last person arrived, as I was well underway on the tuning, the women started to discuss something they were collectively working on. Still, I did not suspect that anything was unusual about this arrangement--until I heard their voices raised in pleasant musical harmony. They were a sextet of vocalists, gathered for a rehearsal! Some sort of folk song was their first choice.

As you may have heard, piano tuners need to hear sounds from within the piano that are somewhat complex, with high overtones and 'beats' in the air as a pair of strings come into unison, or another interval. The air being filled with other sounds, especially musical ones, which compete with what I'm listening to, makes the tuning impossible to do. I always ask for the home's radios and TVs to be turned off whenever I tune for the same reason. My ears can't ignore those other frequencies floating through the air simultaneously. If they had been singing those harmonies in a place far removed from the piano, it may have worked, but in this case, with piano basically in the adjacent room, the task was impossible.

After struggling for a couple of minutes, I had to intercede, and I let them know that I would not be able to finish the tuning while they rehearsed so close by. They were a little surprised, and apparently it had not occurred to any of them that this could present a problem. They decided to call off their meeting and set a new time. I could have been the one to come back on a different day, but the woman who hired me wanted to give me priority, I am happy to report. I felt awkward but accepted that decision.

4. At another home in St. Paul, a family was present, including the mom and three kids (dad was apparently still at work), generally trying to keep the noise under control. The 8-year-old daughter was working peacefully on some homework at a table nearby, when I heard a very strange sound from the far end of the kitchen. It was a raspy, scraping sound that kept repeating, and suddenly it spiked into an ear-shattering squawk. When I asked the girl what that was, she looked up and after a moment of listening, answered, "Oh. We have a baby upstairs who's just waking up." Then the strange squawk split the air again from the next room. I shook my head. "That's the weirdest baby I've ever heard." At that point her mom popped around the corner of the kitchen and laughed, "I think he's talking about Carlos." Mom headed up the stairs to retrieve the baby. The girl started to laugh too. "Oh, yeah, we also have a parrot!" It's funny how sounds in a home can become so commonplace that the ears fail to notice them anymore. Imagining that sound coming from a baby became a really funny topic after that. I was able to finish my work by suspending the piano sounds for a few seconds at a time, whenever the bird interrupted.

5. In a small house in our neighborhood, across Powderhorn Park from us, everything seemed normal, but once the tuning was underway, I got a surprise. A large middle-age

guy had welcomed me and shown me the piano. He had in his hand a blank check that his wife had left with him. I presumed it was meant for me, but as it turned out, this check had been designated for some other purpose. (I added the sequence of details together on the fly.) Having heard during a phone conversation with her husband a few minutes earlier that I had been asked to come tune their piano, his wife arrived back home from work unexpectedly. She announced her arrival by breaking a small window on the outside porch right next to the front door. Obviously she was in a bad mood. She seemed furious and ready for battle. Dashing into the room I was in, she announced through clenched teeth, "There's been a change of plans!" Her husband emerged from the kitchen, surprised to see her home in the middle of the day. He jumped with alarm when she sprang towards him, and grabbed for the check she had left, now sitting on the kitchen counter. Without a word, the two of them disappeared from view and began a struggle that sounded rather drastic in amongst the kitchen chairs. They may have been trying to be quiet for my benefit, but it did not work. And that check seemed to be an important theatrical prop for them both.

Not wanting to become entangled in a domestic dispute, I quickly stopped my work, packed up my stuff, put the piano's front back on -- all during more scuffling and lunging sounds from the kitchen -- and made it out the door, carefully stepping around all the broken glass. That was the closest I ever came to getting caught up in some altercation within someone's home.

I heard from them a couple of weeks later. The woman was on the phone, apologizing for how things went down when I was there last time. "We want to have you back to do the piano. We've reached a deal now." I did set up a new time, and when I returned, the guy was gregarious and talkative. He had a friend over whom I gather he was going to play some music with when I finished. His wife was not there, which was fine with me.

6. When I got the call to come right down to Target Center for some piano work, I figured that some action part had flown apart during an especially strenuous rehearsal. Many jazz, rock and R & B bands play there when the basketball games and such are not scheduled. It's a cavernous place, seating many thousands and I felt a bit intimidated walking through there to a special behind-the-scenes rehearsal room I had never seen before. One of the Target staff people had to lead me there. The room was loaded to the ceiling with a whole lot of sound equipment and piles of instruments, horns in cases, a huge Hammond organ, drum supplies like crazy—it must have been quite an extravaganza-like show happening that night (I don't recall who it was...Rolling Stones, Beyonce? Probably not.), but no musicians were present at the moment. I was greeted by a slight young guy who introduced himself as the equipment manager for the band. He had a couple of roadies who were coming in and out, getting ready to move the stuff out onto the gigantic stage.

The equipment boss led me to a corner where a light brown Yamaha studio piano waited. He explained that this piano traveled with the band for occasional use during the show. The main keyboards were electric, but sometimes the star musician liked his keyboard

player to use an ordinary acoustic piano for special contrast (a switch from the usual bombast, I gathered).

“Okay, you want it just tuned before the show? Right here?” I asked. Sometimes the piano needs to get positioned in the array out there on stage before it gets tuned.

“Yeah, here. That’s not all. We have here a set of bass strings to replace the ones Mr. Keys Guy keeps breaking. He bashes that left hand like an anvil all the time.” The equipment guy held up a giant coil of brand new bass strings of various thicknesses, all wound together. One glance into the piano revealed that about six important bass strings were missing. Suddenly my task became a whole lot more complicated and time-consuming.

I was going to need to retrieve my big tool box that I usually leave in the car. Luckily my old vehicle was parked at a meter not too far away. That box is where the wire cutters, needle nose pliers, string gauge and such, were all stored—essential to the installation of bass strings.

I looked at the bundle of bright brass-colored strings and the hopeful guy holding them. “You know, don’t you, that these strings will stretch out some right after they are installed, right? They aren’t going to stay in tune after I leave, no matter what I do to stretch them in advance.”

“Yeah, I know about that, but the keyboardist carries a tuning wrench with him, so he can touch them all up right before we go on. Can you do it?”

“It’ll cost a bit of money.” I warned him. “That okay?”

He chuckled dismissively. “No prob. They’re making mega thousands a night!”

He was assuming a lot. Most piano tuners don’t like putting bass strings on. The strings need to have their copper windings carefully removed near both ends of each string to precisely fit the piano they’ll be living in from now on. And measuring the gauge of each string to match where it was going was complicated, since the neighbor strings always needed to be loosened and unhitched to allow their gauges to be identified. My heart sank, but I said yes, I’ll do it. For the next chunk of time I installed bass strings, sometimes using strings from the supply that were a half-size too large or too small (with virtually no difference in sound). ‘The show must go on, and we’ll make do with what we’ve got,’ I told myself. After grabbing my special tools from the car, I spent two and a half hours there (including the tuning) amid the equipment back stage at Target Center, as the piles of stuff around me gradually shrunk. Sadly, I never got to meet the stars. They were probably not going to use the piano much anyway, I guessed. So much for my brush with the rich and famous.

I left a hefty bill with the equipment manager, who was still around some of the time, and to my surprise he pulled out an industrial-size checkbook (with 6-inch checks, printed

three-to-a-page) and gave me my pay right on the spot. I was happy to see that pretty big number on that piece of paper with my name on it. The guy told me that this story unfolds over and over in a lot of cities across the continent, depending on how damaging the keyboardist's left hand has behaved on the previous night. Wow.

7. There are plenty of snags that piano tuners must cope with, and surprises are pretty much the norm, I've learned. It's a little unusual, but my fifty-plus-year history with piano work calls me pretty much everywhere, including to live-show theaters. A couple dozens of times I've been called in to the performance auditorium on the top floor of the pre-1900, stone building downtown, which has now been repurposed as rehearsal and office space for a number of arts non-profits in Minneapolis. They often put on plays (self-produced, or with visiting companies who rent the space) which involve all types of music. Sometimes the theater company calls me to tune the rehearsal piano in the dance studio, sometimes the lobby grand piano where receptions take place, but most often it's one of the stage pianos that needs help. There are trip wires involved with every theater, and the first one I usually encounter with this building is the fact that the elevator won't let me onto the 8th floor where the theater is located. This top floor at the art center building is locked out for people during the day, unless they have a special key card. If the elevator has not been set by staff in advance to allow me to take it to the auditorium floor, I must head to the offices on the 7th floor, in the back, where workers with key cards usually are hiding. Sometimes that office door is locked and no amount of knocking brings anyone to the door, so I'm 'SOL' for a while. If nothing else works, I sometimes can get ahold of the production stage managers by cell phone, and if they're in the building, they'll come find me and help me onto the 8th floor. Of course, advance planning helps, and often there is a pre-arranged way for me to access the piano. But sometimes that's just the beginning of my problems. I always remember to ask whenever I set up the tuning, "Will the lights be on?" Usually they say they'll make sure that's taken care of, but once in while the whole place is dark except for one bulb somewhere, and I need to hunt down someone else with the right key to get into the light booth in the back to flip on some stage lights, preferably not spot lights that point right into my eyes.

8. Once I was called to an established live theater in downtown St. Paul. It's a beautiful place where major productions take place regularly. Occasionally, groups who are producing a musical show there need to bring in a fine rented grand piano. In fact, there is a specific shared Yamaha grand that often gets moved around from one performance place to another. I've tuned that same piano in four different settings so far. Anyway, having been given specific instructions how to get into the stage door at this performance place, I arrived at my appointed time to an empty theater. Only the small work light was on and I had trouble seeing anything on stage. No people were around. And, most importantly, there was no piano to be found either. Surprise. I had a seat in the front row of the auditorium and Waited.

About 15 minutes later, after a fruitless phone call to my contact, I heard someone else coming in through the stage door, 60 feet away, then up and down the same couple of short flights of stairs I had used. Suddenly more lights came on with a loud thump. Soon a fellow stuck his head around the corner of the set's log cabin, built at the back of the

stage. He resembled a wayward farmer who finally had found his way back from his fields, delayed by an uncooperative flock of sheep, maybe. He smiled when he saw me sitting in the front there, and apologized for getting behind time. I told him, “no problem” since I sometimes have to arrive a bit late too, if parking is tricky, or if the previous place’s piano has some repairs called for that no one knew about in advance (which happens pretty often). The guy was very cheery and upbeat about the whole thing, so I did not care very much. He identified himself as the director of the show about to open in three days.

“So, where is the piano hiding?” I wondered. “I looked around, all over, but can’t imagine where it’s lurking. Is there a storage room somewhere back there?” I gestured toward the general back stage area, which had plenty of secrets in the dark that I was nervous about discovering (I had glimpsed them on my own trek from the stage door).

“Ha, ha, no!” he laughed. “It’s still on its way here!” He glanced at his watch. “They told me they’ll be getting here in about ten more minutes. The piano movers had some trouble getting it out of the other building.” So. This turned out to be the same traveling piano, making its appearance once again.

Sure enough, after yet another small delay, new rattling and clanking sounds were emitted behind the scenes, and the director disappeared back stage once again. Soon lots of noisier thuds and wheeling noises filled the air, with occasional yelled directions between the pair of musclemen grappling the grand around corners behind the log cabin. Grands always get moved by taking the legs and pedals off, dumping the piano on its side, and strapping it to a flat wooden skid, which in turn is lifted onto a smallish piano dolly. This four-wheel dolly is plenty strong enough for the weight of any piano, and being only a little longer than two feet, it is exceptionally maneuverable when turns are called for. Stairs are trickier, and usually the piano is taken off the dolly, with the piano slid up or down the steps on the piano skid itself. Clever planning, experience and equipment make for efficiency, and in this case it took the two guys only about fifteen minutes from the first odd sound at the back door to the final set-up in place, with the legs and pedals reinstalled back where they belonged. Very impressive.

Thus, my piano tuning was finally able to begin, only about 45 minutes late. The piano was carefully positioned in the wings behind a couple of props, where the pianist could see everything happening on stage with hardly any visual exposure to the audience. It was within this special musical cubby hole that my tuning took place, my unique contribution, an important behind-the-scenes step towards producing a perfect show.

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