

In Tune With The World

Resourcefulness

On occasion, during my years as a piano tuner-tech, I have had to invent several improvised solutions to various problems inside pianos. Some of these were tricky to pull off, such as having to install a screw at exactly the right angle on the end of a broken pedal lever in order for the pedal to function at all. This was at a large church where the whole main basement space was converted into a sanctuary for about 400 people (upstairs had about 3000 capacity). It was a decent studio upright piano that was used for leading songs in the 'lower church' but in this case, in a wild fluke, this not-too-old Yamaha had a plastic piece built on the end of the sustain pedal's horizontal wood lever that never should have been asked to perform this task. It was a case of *poor design*, where that much stress should never have been placed on that single spot. Plastic inside pianos is always a really bad idea since it breaks much more easily than any wood parts. I believe my repair is still functioning now after about 20 years. I have never seen that particular problem in newer Yamaha uprights, since that weak spot has been redesigned.

Of course, sometimes unexpected and unplanned problems happen *outside* the piano in the places I'm working. One time, I was paid in advance by the piano owner and left in the house alone. This is not usually a challenge, but in this case she automatically locked the door behind her as she went off to work. To my surprise (when I tried to leave), this was one of those unusual locks that required a key from *each* side. The door could not be opened without a key from the inside, which the lady had not thought of at all. Advanced planning would have helped in this case, for sure. No one else was home, so I was trapped. Of course, most houses have a back door, but in this case the back door was blocked and apparently never used. I spent about ten minutes moving obstacles out of the way to reach this door, which I was relieved to find had a conventional lock I was used to, the kind that locks automatically when pulled shut. Escape!

Another time, a regular customer on mine promised to leave the door open for me as she went off to work. Upon arrival, I found the door locked with no note left. I could see my check sitting on the piano waiting for me, so this was indeed the right day. Luckily, I did have the woman's work number (not always the case, such as with the woman who locked me in). It was funny to hear my friend's reaction when I called her. She picked up the phone at her desk in her usual cheery fashion. "Oh, hi, Warren!" (one-second pause). "Oh shit!" Complete change of tone. The day was saved in this case by her clever contingency planning which led me to the back patio where a certain potted plant had a house key left under it. Everything worked out well.

On another day, I was called upon to tune a piano in a church that was attached to a grade school. The usual closing-up for the day by the staff included locking the door that led to the school area. I had already been paid, and it was late in the day, so no one was left in the building. Locked in again! In this case, when it was time for me to leave, I found my way to the church's main entryway at the front and tried all the doors to reach the outside. All were locked *from the inside*....except for one. I made it out to the sidewalk and walked around a half block to the back of the church where the parking lot had only one car left: mine. I suppose there must have been some type of alarm that reached some security company somewhere, but probably

the security cameras showed just a solitary piano tuner with a small box of tools leaving the building, and making sure the outside door was closed tight. Probably harmless.

When I'm working in a place by myself, I have to be ready for anything. Like when the power goes out, as I mentioned somewhere else. Luckily in that case plenty of sunlight was pouring into the room, so I had no trouble seeing the piano's tuning pins. Sometimes I have lots of trouble seeing, like when the daylight fades away and I can't find any of the light switches, or, I try them and they don't do anything. Lights in a home are sometimes hooked up with automatic timers and I have to cope with low light to finish my tuning. Those lights probably will turn on eventually, but who knows how long it will be? And when will the owners arrive back?

Once, I was tuning a piano in a large performance area in a university building somewhere when the lights went out suddenly without warning. Pitch dark! I groped my way to the door I came through when I arrived and managed to open it up, letting in a little daylight from a hallway nearby. With the door open I was able to see into the room a little. After some searching, by feel as much as by sight, I found some switches and located one that turned on a work light. I found out about twenty minutes later that this work light had a timer on it. Darkness fell again. Apparently this light was connected to a motion detector and the lights simply turned off on their own when no motion in the room was detected. Well, at least this time I remembered and was able to use my piano tool box's *tiny flashlight* to find my way to the switch again to get it back on for another twenty minutes. This is a great system for dowsing the lights when students take off and accidentally leave the lights on, but not for me, who needs the lights even though I don't move around enough to be discovered by the motion detector.