

# ESTIMATING REBUILD COSTS

A few have expressed a wonderment at how I can estimate the cost of a rebuild or restoration without first seeing the instrument. The answer is so simple it may surprise you.

If we were standing in front of an old, unrestored instrument and talking about what it would take to fix it, what would I have to know in order to give you an intelligent estimate? Well, I would have to know if someone else had rebuilt any of it, if they had used traditional materials and glues, and whether or not all the parts were there.

In an old unrestored instrument, or an old partially repaired instrument, it isn't possible to determine these questions fully with a flashlight and a screwdriver. The instrument would still have to be taken apart, and that isn't a part of the common estimate. So we'd be standing there talking about it, with as much information as I can usually gather over the phone or by email.

The only thing that can be ascertained to a degree, is if major parts are missing. However, when this is the case, the owner knows it, because they see some larger nipples and elbows obviously supplying vacuum, which are empty and single, and would not go anywhere. Then they see empty screw holes and shadows where something used to be. So it stands to reason that something is missing, and that the larger nipple is usually pointing in the direction that it supplied vacuum to something.

Since any rebuilder who has had over 3 decades of experience in this art will probably have already seen most of the instruments inquired about, he will probably be acquainted with what he is in for when he receives this instrument, too. I restore instruments by replacing ALL soft working and sealing materials. I don't have to judge the unrestored condition first, since it all goes into the trash, anyway. I do not quietly say to myself, "Hmm, I think I won't have to worry about the valves in this one," or, "The gaskets are in good shape," or, everything is nice and clean, and this guy looks like he's got plenty of money and ready to spend it."

99% of the time, a visit to a piano in order to "estimate" it, is actually a visit to see just who wants the work done, and an opportunity to sell the job. The visit doesn't tell a rebuilder much of anything about the piano-- unless he intends to do as little as possible in order to claim a "restoration" and collect a full sum for what amounts to selective repairs. This is where I came in, years ago. I disagreed strongly with this approach.

Now I will admit that I visit pianos on occasion when the owner insists on it, or when the possibility exists that all it may need are repairs or partial rebuilding of things that have not yet been taken care of. So the personal house call is not useless in all cases. Only when we are looking at a piano that has not played for years, or which has not been restored and has recently given up.

It is impossible that 70-80 year old instruments contain leather and soft working materials that are still workable and will hold a vacuum well after they have played again under full pressure. It is possible that some old valve leathers will still work fine for perhaps up to 2-5 years after a rebuild. Unfortunately, the vacuum inside the player tends to delaminate old, dry-rotted valve leather quickly by a suction on one side of the leather goods, while the other glued side of that same piece of leather is being pulled away from the suction seat again and again. This caused dry-rotted leather to get rather thick and fluffy after awhile, unable to hold a vacuum. Multiply that valve by about 100 times, and the total leakage in a couple of years becomes more than that piano is able to compensate for. The effect is, the player just stops cold in its tracks.

I have had many people ask me to come out and fix their “restored” player piano, only to realize that it needed a complete valve job. When they got that estimate, they were not nearly as hopeful, as they thought it must just be something simple, like maybe a hose fallen off.

It's not a happy moment to be told that your player piano is, in effect, unrestored-- especially when you've just spent a lot of money to have it rebuilt. This is what happens, time and again. Remember, a so-called “restoration” is very likely to play well on original leather valves for several years before they need my full attention. The newly restored vacuum in the instrument will quickly shred them all, internally, but the former rebuilder got away with it anyway.

If you want to rebuild a player, I suggest strongly that you do it right, once, and get it unconditionally guaranteed to you. I guarantee that you will not have any old valve leather or pouches left in your piano. Neither will you have old flap valves, old original flap valve seats, no original packing leather, no original materials at all which degrade with time. That's why I can give you an estimate over the phone or in writing on the rebuilding estimate sheet. Each step of the rebuild has a price, and for items not covered, or things unseen, we are no different than anyone else in that respect-- we simply call you and talk about what you will need. That would be the same, whether we visited the instrument and sold you a job, or let you decide at your leisure without pressure or salesmanship, whether or not you wish to continue.

Pneumatic players of all kinds are a very good bargain today! They are probably the lowest they will ever be. In a few years, they are going to be rare and valuable. Restored right, once, all the way through and guaranteed to you is a good way to go, and the person who guaranteed that player will have a lot to do with its actual value in years to come. No other kind of playing mechanism even comes close to the reliability, power, sensitivity, or tonal beauty of an old pneumatic player piano. They still set the standards of excellence which have never been attained by any other company, foreign or domestic, since.

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