

INCOMPETENCE

By Craig Brougher

I love to work on player pianos. And the more I learn about them, the more I'm amazed and delighted. Over the years I've spent lots of time building things to test stuff, like valves of many different kinds, ratios of pouches versus valve diameters, basic kinds of valves, and all sorts of regulators, cutouts, and vacuum logic related to players, reproducing pianos, and orchestrions: None of which netted me a dime, directly. But the reason I enjoy it is because I want to learn. It seems the more I keep learning, the more enthusiastic I am. This is so much fun!

I hear about rebuilders who get "burned out." I've never experienced burn-out because I've never allowed it. I don't let my business control me. I control it. I am not its slave. I do not get tired. I really like what I do because I was born to do this.

When I started rebuilding players, I would spend an inordinate amount of time working on them because I wanted everything perfect. What I lacked in ability, I made up for by worrying it through. So I'm comfortable with the very first players I turned out. Most are still playing— 38 years later— because I labored mightily to do it right. I didn't know very much then, agreed, but what I lacked in knowledge, I made up for in "good intentions." I am not going to play that down now, because that's the subject of this little story.

I really appreciate other rebuilders who have a determination to do it right. Their heart is in the right place and they have set themselves to make each player they restore an extension of themselves. They are not afraid to put their name on the instrument. To me, this is the "American Dream." I do not agree that success is strictly making lots of money. I think the American Dream is to be a success in many ways, which in turn strengthens America in lots of inscrutable ways-- like I'm doing right now, and just like many Americans are doing. It is the chance to do what you want to do, and be what you want to be, to the advantage of everybody.

When I was very small, I wanted to restore player pianos. I always thought that if you work really hard at it and get really good at it, the money will come. You will support your family and at the same time, make a lot of friends. Your business becomes a very important facet of your life. So I put all my heart into my chosen endeavor and expect that sooner or later it will be appreciated. I discover, decades later, that I was right. I want to make a "difference" in whatever field I undertake, and I found that takes continual work-- above and beyond what most people are willing to expend, today. I want all rebuilders to have the same feeling as I do about that, but obviously, many don't.

Now comes the "incompetence" part.

I am getting a lot of players that have been "restored" and I am sickened at what I see. These guys have no idea how they are depriving themselves of the fun and satisfaction they could have by detailing their work in a conscientious way. It seems like they are looking for a quick way out of the mess they got themselves into. The first thing they decide to do is not to bother with problematic materials like 'Hot hide glue.' They prefer Tite Bond. Or Silicone Seal, or Tub and tile Caulk, or Plastic Glue— of the PVC-E variety, to cover and replace pneumatics and to glue down stuff that used to be gasketed and screwed.

The next thing I see is bad choices of materials. The rule of thumb has always been, “Never use leather that you wouldn’t want to wear.” The evenness, nap, and thickness of leather is very important, but so is the solidity and air-tightness. For example, you would not use pigskin, sheep hide, or cow hide. But you would use lambskin, kangaroo, calfskin, and solid, even leathers that are beautifully tanned and skived. Unless a rebuilder knows what is good leather versus bad leather, good cloth versus bad cloth, and good tubing versus bad tubing he is out of his league before he even begins.

I have seen new leather used on valves that I would not have around my shop. So much of it looks like someone surely skinned a Yetty himself that I begin to think that’s why we haven’t officially spotted any. The rotted original leather would have still been better than the new stuff was. By merely replacing the poor quality new leather, that player worked after a fashion— whereas initially it wouldn’t even play. “New” doesn’t mean “good.” Everything he’s done is wrong to a degree, but as you knock down the problems one at a time, performance gets better and better.

The glues that a rebuilder uses say the most about him. Unless he prides himself in restoring an instrument that can be restored again, he is strictly self-serving. He doesn’t care about the next guy. He was lucky because the player he fixed was restorable, but he’s not going to pass it on that way. All the luck is going to stop with him. If he enjoys stripping out wooden screw holes as a part of his wrist exercise regimen, he causes a lot of damage that cannot be repaired quickly. Stuffing holes with toothpicks and matchsticks which fall right out again might be acceptable with one or two holes, but when you find literally dozens of holes repaired like this, then you know the guy was just a shade tree mechanic who did everything the quick way. He was in a hurry and could care less. If it’s worth doing at all, it’s worth doing right, thoroughly, once, all the way through and then guaranteeing it.

About half of the players we get to fix nowadays have some degree of incompetence in them, and that degree is usually found to the degree the instrument was repaired. Shops big and small, cheap and expensive are guilty, and they need to assure their customers that they will use only the finest leather and hot hide glue for everything it can be used on.

The best assurance is that the name of the rebuilder goes on the piano permanently, somewhere. I’ve noticed that in every case of incompetence, a name is nowhere to be found. Either they have omitted the most time-consuming portion of the restoration while everything else is done properly, or they have used their permanent hardware-store glues and leather they found in the scrap barrel and their whole player is unrestorable without the major re-manufacture of many components. You say, “they might not know that they did a bad job?” Then where’s their name? Why don’t they sign their work? What are they afraid of? Or is that just an oversight, too? On complete rebuilds, there is no way that a rebuilder should not have his name on the work. Yes—over the years other rebuilders can get into it and make it look really bad. But that isn’t very assuring to the owner who paid for the job to begin with, is it? And when bad work is never signed by anybody, who would blame the original rebuilder for the botched repair? When we find a factory worker’s name on the bass key, do we attribute what we find to him? Likewise, if you sign your work, no one else is going to judge your original work as poor, unless it obviously was.

Another real problem has been pianos which have been refinished poorly, but with conversion varnishes

and impenetrable coatings that used to be unavailable except to the military or heavy industry. 20 years ago you didn't run into this problem, but today it's rampant. The refinisher can keep pure methylene chloride on the finish for hours and when it's wiped off again, it still looks like glass. Unless a finish can be repaired, it's worthless. A permanent finish that cannot be removed without harming the wood should be used only on MDF (medium density fiberboard) of cheaply constructed new pianos, patio furniture, and children's toys. The only strippers that can safely remove these permanent finishes quickly are no longer available for general use, today. The substitutes employ very little active ingredient, lots of wetting agents and fillers, and require up to 3 days per section of slow "cooking" and that not only costs an awful lot of money but changes the natural patina of the wood. It also removes the factory's individual little grain repairs that leave small pock marks, difficult to refill without being obvious, trying to do it over remaining discolored stain.. Not to mention the fact that many repairs to the case will be disassembled by the stripper in the same length of time, and what was once a good repair is now a time-consuming problem, once again. Piano benches are especially likely candidates for this problem.

The impenetrability of a finish is unimportant and does not necessarily make the finish stronger. For instance, shellac used to be used for this job and yet it was also used for gym floors. Any finish will mar and chip on the corners and that's where it almost always happens anyway. Lacquer with a catalyst added should be just fine, but hardware store finishes designed for wooden picnic tables is not fine. Such finisher isn't aware of the fact that clarity alone, nor the light pine sample hanging on the side of the bin does not tell you how really deeply beautiful wood is going to look under it. There are far more important factors, such as the surface tension, wetting ability, and refractive index, which allows the grain to either look stunning, or simply "encapsulated." Add to this the fact that none of these films that I know of can be sanded and buffed properly, and you have "the perfect picnic table finish," used on a fine piano! Congratulations are definitely not in order for ruining a priceless antique in this way. It's caused by ignorance and a philosophy of "That's good enuf for who it's fer." (*He really means "whom"*).

If a customer wants you to cut corners with an entire player piano and just fix what needs fixing, then it might be wise to tell him that unless you are able to take care of whatever needs fixing, you will not do it. That doesn't mean you plan to run up a bill. It means you will restore components and guarantee only those components, but you will not guarantee the overall performance of the player. If he's smart, he will take you up on it. Rebuilding requires two people— the owner and the tradesman— and both have to be smart enough to get the job done right. *Why "rebuild" a player piano and after writing out the check, still need one?* Everything begins with a philosophy— before you pick up the pencil, you have to know how to get the job done right, the first time. If everything in an old player is as old as everything else, then how is it that by merely replacing a few select items, you can "satisfy a customer" for a few more years? He thinks it's forever. You know it isn't, and... it wasn't, was it?

If you think that all rebuilders do these things once in awhile, you are wrong. If you think we will find such tricks in all shops, then you are probably one who does it that way. But remember this: *"Faithful in little, faithful in much. Unfaithful in little, unfaithful in much."* When you cheat and cut corners on the little things, you will cheat and cut corners on the big things. When you lie about little stuff, you will definitely lie about big stuff. If life is composed of what you can get away with, you are missing it, almost altogether. You cannot put a monetary value on the really satisfying things. When I send out a piano— as do other conscientious rebuilders— we all feel a solid satisfaction in having done it the way we did. We have total confidence. And even though we charged our customer, we feel we also served him well, we gave him more than his money's worth, and we know that he is solidly pleased. It should give you no end of happiness and confidence that you don't have a single player out there, anywhere, that's less than your best job.

A really good player piano rebuilder should be able to be taken for granted. His work on complete restorations should well outlast him and his customer. There are ways of doing that. And if it seems as though you're not making any money when you do it thoroughly and in detail, well, that's the price for learning the trade the right way. Do it just the same. Sooner or later your thankless work will pay off— for you, at least.

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