

The Value of a Pneumatic Player Piano

by Craig Brougher

A lot has been said about the “bottom dropping out” of the Pneumatic Player Market. We’ve been reading that the value of a player piano has declined greatly. This has been a long thread in the MMD (Mechanical Music Digest)—“Piano Without A Player Action Is More Valuable.” You might wish to check out this subject. (See 2002.09.27.05, 2002.09.28.11, 2002.10.02.08.)

A number of respondents have mentioned that they can’t resell their player pianos until they remove the player parts. But their value declining or gone? I haven’t noticed it, and neither has any quality rebuilders I personally know. For some reason, a few owners and merchants have been singing the blues about how difficult they are to sell, today. I’d just like to say, “It’s never been any different. Some player pianos and reproducing player pianos sell quite easily, and some don’t.” There is a right and a wrong way to do it.

On the same MMD thread, we have recently read about a Knabe grand reproducer which wouldn’t sell, and a J.S. Fischer Grand Reproducer which also didn’t sell amidst a showroom of brand new electronic players (which also are not selling too well, recently). The Knabe was said to play “ok-ish” by its owner. Now this is not a personal criticism. He is honest. But think about the thousands of players that just look or sound “ok-ish.” What’s that mean? Does that sound like, “If you don’t listen too critically?” “*Give me your money, and don’t get too picky.*” I think I am getting a glimmer of the real problem-- how about you? I have even been told, “The average customer doesn’t hear it play like you do, Craig. He just wants something that plays well enough for his own enjoyment.” I have also told those owners or salesmen, “Maybe they hear more than you give them credit for?”

One comment was: “*Looking back, I have NEVER been able to sell a player grand regardless of price or condition to the general public. I have always had to remove the player. This particular piano is very nice, the best I have ever owned out of say 25 grands. But the expression needs attention.*”

But, what?? There is no way that a wonderful, like new player upright or reproducing grand will not “sell” to those who can afford it and want one. When the stock market hits the skids and all is wrong with the world, it’s going to be the items of greatest intrinsic net worth which receive their value in a sale. If that antique instrument doesn’t still look like an 85 year old piano but an almost new one, while its price is half as much as a new one, it’s power of tone much greater than all but the most expensive, and its resale value probably equaling or exceeding its present sale value, then what else determines “intrinsic net worth?” That’s what is called real value. Let’s get real practical for a moment.

When you see an old upright player that looks old, leaning into a corner of an antique shop, are you drawn to it? No, except for its “possibilities.” But does it have intrinsic net worth as a fine instrument? Not yet. When you look over a showroom full of new grand pianos and players, and you have money to spend, you want to buy something that will retain its value, but if the only

“old” piano is a player grand that looks a little dusty around the pins and makes you doubt how long this will hold a tune, will you invest? Are you drawn to it as a good investment without possibly a lot of work? No. Chances are, you will never get to speak to the rebuilder of that instrument either.

Here are shiny, brand new pianos filling the showroom, and one or two rather oldish looking ones that are priced such that if you needed some unseen major work, you would have more money in them than they are worth. Do you believe the salesman who promises you that they are as good as new? I don’t think so. Does he give you a new guarantee on it? I doubt it. Why not-- if they are 100% restored as claimed? Why not give the same (limited) guarantee the new ones have, if it’s mostly new inside-- where it counts? Why not put in writing that all old working materials have been replaced, unless otherwise noted? If there are limitations, well, there are limitations on the new ones, too. List them. That’s fair, I would think.

The beauty about buying a fully restored antique piano-- most especially a player or reproducing piano-- is that its value can only rise. It cannot depreciate. Antique player pianos do not depreciate, unless, that is, they are just “repaired,” or rebuilt with less than quality materials. If the rebuilder has done whatever necessary to just make them play ok-ish, has then given them a new coat of lacquer, some decals, and is turning over his stock, then that antique player piano may not only depreciate in value, but it can completely lose its value. There’s a difference between a fully restored player and one that has been “fixed” for resale with the claim of “restored.” If it is claimed “fully restored,” get that in writing. Have them affirm that all old working and sealing materials have been replaced with new. Expect their signature, and what they will do if that is not the case. Good luck.

One piano store owner acknowledged why he felt player pianos are fun. Understand this, because it is the key to everything you have read so far and into the future. Why would you suppose someone would tell you *“I think player pianos are a lot of fun!”* Well, read his first answer:

“I have always liked mechanical items and the player piano fills my needs to tinker with something mechanical. They can be used year 'round and you do not get greasy while working on them like you do when you work on a car.”

I like player pianos too. And while I restore them (I wouldn’t call it tinkering), my first answer would definitely be, “the music.” I absolutely LOVE the music. A player piano is the happiest machine that men ever invented. It is probably the greatest invention overall that has ever been offered for home entertainment, and the most powerful interactive home entertainment opportunity that an entire party can be easily built around. It will even draw in others who aren’t particularly fond of music at all, just because of the antics and horsing around you can have with it! That’s why I think player pianos are a lot of fun! And, there’s the words to the songs, on the rolls, themselves. The one thing I am sure I would not include in player piano advantages is this:

“The player piano can give you plenty of exercise with its pedals, and I guess the car collector whose car breaks down can get exercise pushing his car home.” 2002.10.10.02

[note to John: I am just guessing that the .02 part means Teach's comment will be numbered in order in today's digest 02.10.10. As the 2nd letter posted.]

My suggestion is this: "Find your own unrestored player and pay to have it restored by a proven restorer and guaranteed to you." If it is guaranteed to play as well or better than new, then you have a deal, and you have it in writing. If instead you buy it off the floor, you take your chances.

If you were a piano merchant, would you restore everything in a resale player, even things the customer would never know about until years later, if you didn't have to, to sell it? A few might (at first, anyway), but most will not. Custom restoration to your own standards with a reputable restorer is the only way to go!

Reproducing Player Pianos

The reproducing player was selling to music conservatories across the nation and the world, even in the 'teens and 20's. When a teacher wanted to let his students actually hear what a great artist does on the same piano the student himself is learning on, he could hear Paderewski or Bauer, or Hoffmann or Rachmaninoff play the same music that he himself was learning. That's the thing about pneumatic reproducers-- they play with the same power and command as the artists themselves.

When has any modern commercial electronic player ever claimed such a feat? Ask them to hear Hungarian Rhapsody #10, full power. The pneumatic player is not for uneducated yuppie "me-too-ers" looking for a live background music toy just like their friends have. While a pneumatic reproducer will also do that, it can also provide the true realistic, full-power live performance! But only if it is restored like it was, back when it was first built. (*Pneumatics can both play softer and louder than any commercial solenoid player piano, and do so without danger of overloading. And if anyone doesn't believe that esthetically, they can do the math.*)

Besides the performance advantage of pneumatics, what do we have? We have a tremendous cost advantage. If you don't think so, price a new electronic player. We have a stabilized value advantage (new pianos traditionally lose half their value the same day they are delivered). We have a tremendous future value escalation possibility because they are antique and still play paper rolls. Someday, they will be over 100 years old and 3 generations will have not known that such a thing even existed. We have an over-obvious reliability advantage, because they do not usually "wear out." They eventually decay. After that, they are eminently restorable, all over again! Well- - yes, provided they were done right, all the way through once, and guaranteed to you, the first time. Right?

And Now More-- Much More!

Coming very soon is an invention that will utilize all the greatest advantages and power of those simple, reputable pneumatics, plus the incomparable convenience of electronics. What owner of an electronic player wouldn't trade his tiny little solenoids powering everything from spinets to

the \$50,000 player grands for some real pneumatics? And then somehow, to have either a quiet, background piano or a full power concert performance on their huge 7 foot grand without worrying about getting out the air freshener and calling the factory trained rep halfway through the first movement. Well, your wishes are being answered. Soon, we hope to offer the best of both worlds. That is, to those people who know the difference and appreciate real performance and true, lasting value without equal. Those who appreciate the value of reliability and repair ability of thoroughly restored pneumatic players plus the incomparable convenience of electronic “rolls,” and with no degradation of that instrument’s original ability to play vintage or new re-cut player rolls, from now on!

We now have a truly reliable electronic interface on the horizon that appears to be so dependable it can power a concert grand day and night, barely even getting warm. Expect software that can contain thousands of performances by the greatest concert artists and popular artists the world has ever heard, and played either full power or salon style-- your choice-- right in your own living room. Also, you will very likely have many other vendors of music to choose from.

Think of it. The great artists of the last century and the great artists of the next. Not only that, but its software has the ability, given a MIDI keyboard, to record your own playing or other MIDI files, and reproduce it on your own piano. You can also use this same device and hear your piano play the latest concert sensation to hit the circuit, live! What’s the hitch? If there is a hitch, the hitch is, “Is your pneumatic player up to the task?” Most are not. That is the question.

Hopefully, we are now at the threshold of a radical change. Customers and owners need to start expecting brand new performance from their fully restored pneumatic players, and not excuse their piano, “Well, you know it’s an old piano, an antique, and there’s no real guarantees for an antique.” Of course there is! I for one, will give you a written guarantee. And if you want your player to have some real resale value, why not just tell your prospective buyer that Craig Brougher fully restored your player piano, and then give him my phone number? If I rebuilt it, it will have my name on it. Simple.

I like particular, critical customers who have high values and expect the best from their restorations. On the other hand, I am not a high-priced restorer. You cannot eat off the floor of my shop. We do not serve canapes and wine in the foyer. But you can bank on the job I do, and I do it all in writing, so you don’t have to guess what it was that I did.

The value of pneumatic player pianos? They will fluctuate, but overall, if restored fully can only rise. The value of brand new electronic players as an alternative? They too are very nice. They each have their individual features and charm. As to the ultimate investment in a self-playing instrument? I trust you to decide.

Craig Brougher