

# Grand old pianos get new voices

By Janet Ginsburg

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

**T**hey are old, very old. Some more than 100 years old. Their voices have been dulled by age, their legs aren't as strong as they used to be and years of summer humidity and winter dryness have taken a toll. But for the 30-plus baby grand pianos in various stages of disassembly and repair at Renaissance Craftsmen Restoration Inc. in Forest Park, the future not only looks bright, it sounds pretty good too.

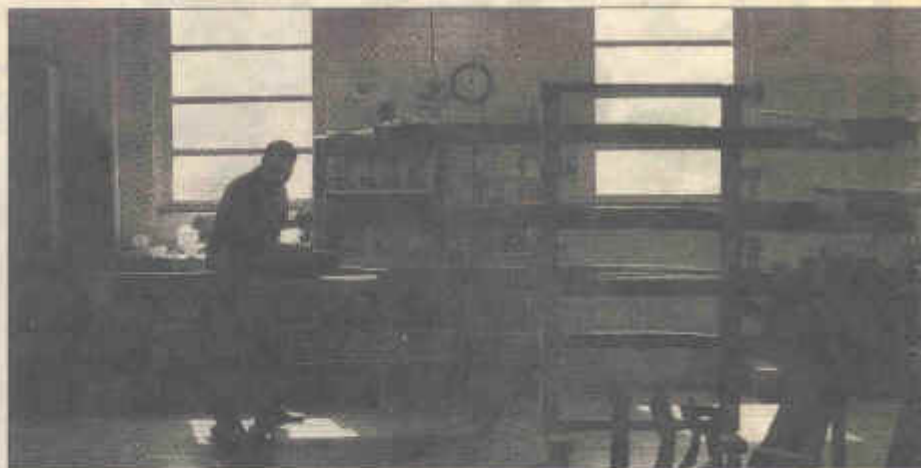
The full restoration of a vintage piano can take anywhere from four to six months and cost \$8,000 to \$15,000, depending on whether it is an upright or grand, the intricacy of the woodwork and the extent of the damage. It includes a complete refinishing and restoration of the exterior cabinet, reconstruction of the sound board and the pin block (where the strings attach to tuning pins), as well as new strings, hammers and keys. If the job is done well, a good restored piano can be worth as much as \$45,000. However, technique counts: If any part of the job isn't perfect, what was once a valuable instrument can become worthless.

"You need to restore a piano when it won't stay in tune, the keyboard is sloppy or the sound quality is poor because the hammers have worn out or the strings are brittle. Or if it looks crummy," says Jeffrey Cappelli, president of Renaissance Craftsmen, one of a number of Chicago firms that restore pianos. Fortunately, considering the price tag, it is a job needed only once every 50 years or so. But that means many of the great pianos from the 1920s, '30s and '40s are now due for an overhaul.

Often it is a piano's sentimental, rather than its musical, value that prompts an owner to restore it. "Most of the better pianos are owned by pianists. The rest are generally family heirlooms," Cappelli says.

Scott Carlin, sales manager at Pickle Piano Co. in Bloomingdale, agrees.

"We probably restore about



Tribune photos by Milbert Orlando Brown

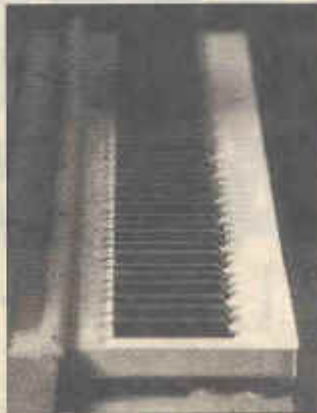
Finisher Alexander Camachio at work (above and right). A restored antique piano may be worth \$45,000—if it was an excellent instrument to begin with. A piano keyboard removed for restoration (below left) and the Carving embellishing the sheet-music holder of a 1928 Chas. M. Steiff custom model piano (below right).

a hundred pianos a year and a lot are family heirlooms," says Carlin. "Most of the old uprights are not worth restoring except for sentimental value. After 80 years, the wood gets dry and begins to crack."

To determine whether an older piano is worth restoring, have it appraised by a technician. Both Cappelli and Carlin suggest calling around to music conservatories, orchestras and dealers for references to a good piano restorer.

"There are just so many details between the finish work, the keyboards and the action work [how the hammers hit the strings]," says Cappelli. "You need to ask whether a restorer is going to stay authentic. If it's a Steinway, are the parts going to come from Steinway or some other manufacturer? You need to find out whether any part of the job is going to be sent out. Find out who's going to be working on your piano. Is it someone well-trained or someone still learning?"

The pianos lined up in the RCR workrooms have played



it all, from classical and jazz to ragtime and rock 'n' roll. Whatever the genre, soon they will be able to play it again.

Renaissance Craftsmen Resto-

ration Inc. is at 733 W. Harrison St., Forest Park; 708-771-6987; [www.rcraftsmen.com](http://www.rcraftsmen.com). Pickle Piano Co. is at 104 W. Lake St., Bloomingdale; 630-894-7748.