

Remaking music

Restorer brings beauty back to antique pianos

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At the turn of the century, piano manufacturers like Steinway, Baldwin and Kimball produced hand-carved pieces of art as beautiful as the music emanating from the piano.

After spending about 3 years just to prepare the wood, workers sculpted the pianos cabinets with decorative carvings with elaborate detail down to the foot pedal. They put a lot of care into constructing the pianos, putting detailed design where it wasn't even needed.

At Renaissance Craftsmen Restoration, Inc. in Forest Park, the craftsmen put the same effort into restoring these old beauties as the original artists did. Renaissance workers can restore vintage, heirloom and traditional pianos and antique furniture. They specialize in antique pianos that date back to the turn of the century up through the Depression era.

Renaissance is owned by Jeffrey Cappelli who also runs in Oak Park the Cappelli Institute of Music, which provides professional instruction for all ages in piano, guitar, violin and cello.

A pain-staking process that takes 4 to 6 months to complete, Renaissance workers restore antique pianos to their original beauty and luscious sound by gutting the piano down to the bare wood and repairing every part from the soundboard to the strings to the key pins down to the stenciling.

Because even a small crack or nick in the wood soundboard or its separation from the cabinet can affect the sound quality, workers go over every inch looking for imperfections.

"They're trying to look for whatever they can to improve the integrity of the piano," Cappelli said. "They meticulously go over every interior component (of the piano) finding what isn't right about something that's about 100 years old."

Assessing repairs

They start by assessing what pianos, shipped in from around the country, need. After the cast-iron plate is refinished, workers replace the old, rusted strings with those specially ordered from Stein-

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way. They replace the hammer and action with duplicates specially made to fit the piano. The key frame or bed is completely restored. And they re-cover or replace keys with good imitation ivory.

At the finishing stage, craftsmen hand-strip and refinish the original cabinets which were made of a fine cut of aged spruce from the now-rare African mahogany or rosewood trees.

Workers put seven new coats of lacquer on the wood, sanding it smooth in between each coat. They sprinkle a powder of rotten stone and pumice stone with oil and rub for two days until they "get a beautiful, soft glow to the finish."

"That's how you take grandma's piano that's been in the family 100 years and make it last another 100," Cappelli said.

"It becomes a costly effort because there are a lot of people working on it at a lot of stages. We're not interested in rushing. We want it to be perfect."

Increasing value

Although it's a costly process, Cappelli said it's better to restore an old piano than to buy a new one off a production line. Quality restoration of an antique can boost the value of these pianos to as much as \$500,000, depending on the level of detail on the piano.

Renaissance can restore most consoles, up-rights, baby grands, parlor grands and concert grands. But there's a limit to what these highly skilled workers can do.

"We can restore any well-made piano," Cappelli said. Pianos made off assembly lines from the '70s, they can't because the pianos probably aren't worth restoring. Modern pianos aren't as detailed and they are made from a cheaper cut of wood that was aged differently, he said.

"Now-a-days, woods are dried in an oven. It's a hurry-up process. The natural process produces gorgeous looking woods and more stable woods."

Back at the turn of the cen-



Anthony Caruso/Pioneer Press

Above, Jeffrey Cappelli, president of Renaissance Craftsmen Restoration, Inc., stands beside a 100-year-old Steinway Model B piano he intends to rebuild and restore for himself.



Anthony Caruso/Pioneer Press

At left, Alberto Vazquez, a foreman and craftsman, fixes the soundboard of a piano.

tury, piano manufacturers would let the logs, cut from hard wood like maple, sit in water for quite a long time. When logs were finally removed from the water, they were stacked to dry for up to two years. The logs were then cut into slabs, which sat on

outdoor drying racks for about nine months. This more than three-year process to prepare the wood for piano construction isn't used any longer because it's just not efficient.

Cappelli adds, the restored
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piano is a better product than it was in its original form. "Even though things are made by craftsmen with nice wood that isn't available anymore, some of the components are improved at this point," Cappelli said.

Quality parts

Technology to make the strings, the way hammers and felts are constructed and quality of the finish and lacquer have all improved.

People can have a digital playing system custom-installed, which operates the piano like the old player pianos.

"If you're an absolute purist, maybe you don't want it," Cappelli said. But if you do have it installed, "You're watching your keys playing Rubinstein, Horowitz, Gershwin." The disc contains over 5,000 titles.

For those who say an altered antique is no longer an antique, "A piano's purpose is

to make music," Cappelli said. "No one would look at (the re-finished piano) and say I want that old (unrestored) dog back."

Cappelli started his restoration business from scratch in 1980. Cappelli, who trained as a concert pianist, went into piano restoration after his father encouraged him to take an apprentice program in piano technology. The course wasn't well-taught, but taking the piano apart piqued his interest.

Knowing the piano as intimately as he does — as a pianist, teacher and restorer — makes his business so successful.

"I think that's the key. What if I restore your piano and I don't play. How do I know? I don't think there are a lot of places like this that has to do with piano lecture and rebuilding.

"Everyone wants to think they're the best. We just do our best."