

«On the job»

Technician tunes, repairs pianos



Spencer Ainsley/Poughkeepsie Journal

Andrew Vincitore of Poughkeepsie tightens a hammer flange on a restored 1904 Mason & Hamlin upright piano above. Vincitore, an accomplished piano tuner, relies on a variety of specialty tools, some custom made, for his business.



Profile

Andrew Vincitore

Age: 46.

Years on the job: 36.

Education/training: Working for family piano shop.

Family: Wife, Mary, three children — Audrey 17, Madeline, 16, and Joseph, 9.

Work takes independence, inner motivation

By Bernard Langer

For the Poughkeepsie Journal

There are 88 keys on every piano, and it's Andrew Vincitore's job to ensure each note sounds exactly right.

As a piano technician, Vincitore spends most of his time driving to people's houses and tuning their pianos. But there's more to his job than that.

"You can't be monolithic," he said. "You have to approach the business from every perspective. That includes tunings, which are like the piano oil changes. The second level is technical repair, and that's fixing notes that don't work. Lastly is restoration and transportation, and I do all of the above."

According to Vincitore, the process of tuning a piano becomes fairly straightforward with experience. Inside every piano, there are more than 200 pins attached to the strings. Each pin needs to be adjusted with a tuning hammer, often rotated as little as a couple of degrees, and the neighboring strings need to be isolated with a rubber mute. Usually, the whole process takes less than an hour.

"It's lather, rinse, repeat," he said.

Small motor skills are essential to a piano

technician, but even more important is experience. Vincitore, 46, learned how to fix pianos at his father's piano store in Poughkeepsie when he was 10, and started tuning them in his late 20s. He has been an independent contractor to the family store, Vincitore's Hudson Valley Piano Center, since 1997.

Apprenticeship period common

This is fairly typical, according to Barbara Cassaday, executive director of the Piano Technicians Guild. She said beginning piano technicians usually go through an apprenticeship period of a few years before becoming independent.

"Oftentimes, the retail stores are a great place to start," she said.

There are schools where one can learn to be a piano technician. The North Bennet Street School in Boston has a well-regarded two-year program. During the first year, students learn the basics of tuning maintenance, and then in the second year, they learn more advanced techniques including how to rebuild a piano.

Chris Storch of Belmont, Mass., worked

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Piano: Job is often done part time

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at an acoustic consulting firm before enrolling as a student at North Bennet Street School.

Having played piano since he was 6, he tried to study piano as a major in college, but discovered he wasn't good enough and got a degree in acoustic consulting. When he graduates, he wants to return to work for the acoustic consulting firm as a piano technician — but has plans beyond that.

"I see myself opening my own shop," he said. "I like the rebuilding of pianos. Most people when they have ideas of opening a rebuilding shop, they start with tuning as a living, and take on a few project pianos per year."

Salaries vary widely depending on the region and scope of the technician's business, according to Cassaday. Furthermore, it's a part-time job for many, making salary estimates particularly difficult. Vincitore charges \$120 per tuning, \$80 an hour for other service work, and upward of \$200 for a move.

Usually, Vincitore has more work in the fall and winter, when children are in school. In the summer, he gets work with performance venues. The economic downturn hasn't affected his business, which he attributed to people spending more time at home.

The work does have some idiosyncrasies.

"You have to be a very independent person," Vincitore said.

Job facts

Job: Piano technician.

Job description: Tune, move and rebuild pianos.

Training: Through apprenticeship or trade school.

Earnings: Data not available, varies by region and scope of business.

On the Web:

■ Piano Technicians Guild: www.ptg.org

■ North Bennet Street School: www.nbss.org

"You have to be an inner-motivated person, because if you wait for customers to call you, they won't. Repeat business is the most important element.

"With very rare exceptions, there are no life-and-death emergencies in the piano business," Vincitore said.

Most of the job's difficulties are not technical, but come with dealing with customers. Occasionally, they're not at home at the appointed time. It is also tough telling them their piano is broken and needs a costly repair.

"You're going into people's homes. Things can get very odd. We're talking about artists very often; they do not necessarily live conventional lives," he said.

Typically, Vincitore does two or three tunings a day, though a busy day can involve seven or more. He can be home with his wife and three children by 2 p.m. to work on longer-term projects.

"It's a great job for family men," Vincitore said. "I feel very fortunate; I love what I do. It's a great job."

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