

# THE SOONER TUNER

*"An official publication of the Oklahoma Chapter of the PTG"*

**Hello everyone,**

**What a great month it has been so far. I wish I didn't have to work so much. Stop right now and smell those roses or it will get too cold before you know it. This month's meeting will be on Thursday November 18<sup>th</sup> 2010 at The Bruce Piano Service Shop located at 9513 Hillcrest Dr. Edmond Oklahoma 73025. It is the first street east of the intersection off Charter Oak and Kelly in the smoking oaks addition. The third house on the left. If you have any questions please call Jordan at 405-314-2407.**

**The presentation will be given by Gary and Jordan Bruce on the different stages of rebuilding a grand piano and how to efficiently achieve success. We will view a grand piano in the exciting stages of an actual rebuild.**

[If we all did the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves.](#)

Thomas A. Edison

## The piano tuner: Good vibrations

Meeting a blind African jazz player as a child inspired Roy Martin's choice of job. Now, he tells Lisa Bachelor, his celebrity clientele include the likes of U2

By Lisa Bachelor

Should Conservative supporters in the posh London suburb have had reason to celebrate this week, the piano tuner might find himself picking canapes out from between its strings before long. It must have been really bad for him to have chosen it from the thousands he has tuned over the years, though.

Martin's fascination with the trade started with his mother's piano tuner when he was a boy of six or seven and has led him to the upmarket houses of celebrity clients and the recording studios and theatres of the West End. His experiences have provided his friends and family with such a rich vein of amusing and fascinating anecdotes that he is now compiling them into a book, with the working title *Diary of a Gay Piano Tuner*.

We are sitting in the well-hidden, underground Dean Street Recording Studios, a typically anonymous looking Soho dive you can easily walk past at street level. There's a battered old leather sofa surrounded by speakers, a drum kit, keyboards and, of course, a piano that needs tuning.

I had been hoping to meet Martin, 50, later in the week for a regular tuning at the house of Michael Portillo ("an eminently charming man who makes a very nice cup of tea") but, funnily enough, the former Conservative minister turned television presenter wasn't keen to have a journalist in his house. But there are clients with even greater star billing in Martin's diary.

There was the time he had a tuning "in a shed with James Blunt's band", followed the next day by a job at Wembley with U2. His regular work also takes him from the Roundhouse Theatre for the Royal Shakespeare Company ("They have a thing about using flying pianos which they have to hoist down from 20ft in the air for me to tune") to the Union Chapel in north London, a live music venue, where Martin tunes the piano for a series of concerts run by BBC Radio 1 DJ Jo Whiley.

But rewind to the early 1960s and this hobnobbing with celebs was all just a glint in a young boy's eye.

"There's something very magical about a piano tuner and I realised that early on," Martin says, recalling a humble upbringing in a small suburban rented house with a tin bath and outside loo. His mother kept a piano and Martin remembers being thrilled by the tuner's visits. "He was a blind, African jazz player and he would come and work on our piano for maybe two hours," he recalls. "I would be there, listening to everything, fascinated. I told my mum at a very early age it was what I wanted to do."

At the age of 19 Martin enrolled on a three-year course as a piano technician with the London College of Furniture. "I never imagined that one day I would be tuning pianos for London's lords and ladies and all these famous people," he says, with a chuckle.

Before meeting Martin, I had assumed that piano tuners learned on the job, without college training. It only takes five minutes with him at a piano for me to realise how wrong I am. He patiently talks me through how the job works, explaining, crucially, how a piano tuner is not necessarily listening to the pitch of the note itself but to the "beats", the interference or distortion that occurs when two strings of different intervals are struck together.

He hits a note on the piano hard. "Can you hear that?" he says. "That underwater, wiggly wavering sound? That wavering is what you learn to count." All I can hear is the echo of the single note he has just hit. "But it's so loud!" he protests.

Despite Martin describing his work as, at times, "like having an argument with a child that won't behave", he finds the process meditative. "I'm a relatively anxious person and people have suggested to me that I take up meditation," he admits. "But one hour of putting everything back into place in a piano is my form of meditation."

However, he concedes it hasn't always been like that. Recalling the early years of his training, he describes sitting in one of the white cubicles, complete with an upright piano that the college had set up for trainees. He noted some strange semi-circular marks on the walls as he tried in vain one Friday afternoon to find the "beats" in a bass note.

"After three hours I lost my temper and hit the wall with the round end of my tuning crank," he says. "It left behind a perfect semi-circular indent. It was then I realised all the tuners who had been sitting there before had been doing the same in frustration."

His eureka moment came one day on the bus home from the college when he found himself counting the beats in the ringing of the bus bell. Stepping off the bus, he found he could hear beats in between the notes that two birds were singing outside. "I was skipping around in euphoria," he says.

It hasn't all been plain sailing, though. A few years ago Martin went through what he describes as "a depressive period" when he lost his energy and enthusiasm for piano tuning and wound up working for a friend in a travel agency. "That was when I learned the downsides of working long hours, for someone else, in an office, for commission," he says.

Intriguingly, it was Google that rescued him from that period and enabled him to get his business, [LondonPianoTuner.co.uk](http://LondonPianoTuner.co.uk), back off the ground. He set up his own website (basing the colour on the then-green hue of the Guardian's sports pages) and "threw money" at the search engine to get his business at the top of the listings when people searched for a piano tuner. Now it comes top much of the time from the sheer volume of web traffic it gets.

"I aimed my website at the residents of what is good 'piano country', in other words places like Hampstead and Chiswick with big Victorian houses," he says. "As a result, the quality of the pianos I tune has gone up."

Another piece of technology has also helped the resurgence of Martin's career: the iPhone. Not only does he use it to organise himself, but he also has an invaluable piano tuning application on it that he uses along with his crank and tuning pins. "The application is so good that to buy all the equipment that would do the equivalent roles would cost me £8,000. This was £2.50," he says.

Considering the fascinating clients Martin has had over the years, I wonder who his all-time favourite is? He surprises me by picking out a tuning for Param Vir, the Indian-born British orchestral composer. Vir had written a piece as a backdrop for a sculpture called Cloudgate created by Anish Kapoor, which was performed at Hammersmith Town Hall in London.

"This piece of music was using a string technique called *glissando*, where the notes stretch in pitch and go up and down. You could actually visually see what the music was meant to be by looking at the lines of the sculpture," he says. "I had seen the piece of music on a floor in a Fulham house the day before and to then see the skill of the orchestra and the genius of this composer in action was amazing."

Other tunings have been memorable for completely different reasons – like the one he did for a "flouncing" Russian artistic director at a ballet, who insisted he tune the piano two beats a second higher than the conventional concert pitch employed by most orchestras. Not only did this make the beats harder to count but the stage hands insisted on whistling a note, out of tune, every time Martin hit a key.

"It was one of the only times I have lost the plot at a tuning," he says. "If you want to know how to annoy a piano tuner, whistle while he is working. Oh, and don't rattle cutlery! I've noticed when I do a tuning in a restaurant that the pitches of the knives and forks clattering together are the same as the pitches of the high strings on a piano. It's incredibly annoying."

Despite the relatively poor pay and the occasional irritating Russian director or restaurateur, Martin loves his work, "absolutely adores" pianos and the people side of the job.

"To me being a piano tuner is nothing special, just another trade like a plumber," he says. Yet there is something different about people's attitudes to piano tuners, he concedes, pointing out that back in Victorian times a piano tuner – typically wearing a top hat – would be invited through the front door of a well-to-do house, whereas a plumber would be sent round the back.

Attitudes haven't entirely changed, it seems, with some clients even baking cakes for Martin when he visits. "It's ironic really," he chuckles, "as plumbers are so much richer than piano tuners". At least he is no longer required to wear a top hat to work.

## CV

**Pay** £55 per tuning, regardless of whether it takes 15 minutes or three hours, and whether it's a standard or a grand piano. "I typically do around 10 tunings a week."

**Hours** "I don't like the rush hour so I start at 11am, with my last tuning around 4pm. Sometimes I work in the evenings, especially if a studio calls me in. There have been days I've done five or six tunings a day and finished at midnight."

**Work-life balance** "I work my own hours and meet amazing people who I often end up going to see perform."

**Highs** "I'm spending most of my time working with an instrument that I'm also composing on. Most clients are happy for me to spend a moment playing something that comes to me."

**Lows** "If anything, it's not being paid to take holidays coupled with the potential worry of weeks without earnings."

## *From the desk of the President.....*

During the Regional PTG Seminar last month, I overheard a technician telling a story about a confrontation he recently had with a client. Apparently, he had tuned a lady's piano, and she called the next day complaining that it was not in tune. "I told her" he said, "that I knew that I had tuned her piano well, and that I had tuned pianos for several prominent musicians in the area, and that NO ONE had EVER complained about his tuning before! After she insisted on a return visit, he reluctantly agreed. "When I checked the piano" he said, "The tuning was fine, but it needed voicing. I told her, that, for an additional \$75.00 I would voice the piano, but she became irate!" " Forget it" she said "I'll call someone else, and I'm going to tell everyone I know not to use you!" "Fine" he said, "But you'll find that I gave you a good deal! The other guys are at least ten dollars higher than I am!" Can you believe that" he said.

Ouch! So, who's right? Did he tune the piano well? Does it really matter? When she called and scheduled the appointment, and a price was established, a verbal contract was made. When she paid his fee, she fulfilled her part of the agreement. Although he might have tuned her piano better than anyone in the world could have performed the task, in HER mind, and with HER ears, it wasn't in tune. So, his part of the agreement was not fulfilled. And, although he felt like he saved her ten dollars, in HER mind she lost the amount she paid him.

Our best advertising comes from "word of mouth". It's been said that, " a satisfied customer will tell 2 or 3 others, while a dissatisfied customer will tell 10 or 12.

Most, if not all of us, have had call backs from time to time, and there are many legitimate reasons why. Pitch raise instability, humidity change, marginally tight tuning pins, previously replaced unsettled strings, and bridge pin problems are not uncommon. Of course, even the most experienced technician can have a bad day.

So, then, the question is "How do you handle a dissatisfied customer?" It's probably not possible to have one answer that fits every occasion, but we can probably agree that it's generally best to end a conflict on a friendly note.

Clearly, the technician in this story had a bruised ego, and his pride was hurt because he had to go back. On the other hand, the piano owner probably dreaded having to call him, and was naturally defensive too. Unfortunately, he didn't realize she was giving him a second chance!

Perhaps the situation could have been resolved early on, if, when she called him, he would have responded with, "I'm sorry there's a problem, and I want you to know that it is equally important to me that you're happy with my work. I appreciate your letting me know, and I'll be happy to come out and see what's wrong." And, if the truth be known, he probably could have resolved the problem with less time and effort than it took to argue.

In piano work, there is more than one type of temperament that needs to be refined! Good customer relations is the key to success in any business!

See you at the next meeting!

Bob

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## *From The desk of the Vice President.....*

### *Fellow Chapter Members:*

*We haven't done any recent outreach or service projects. Barbara and I visited the Norman homeless shelter recently and evaluated their piano. It is an old Hoffman upright in need of*

*action work. Minor repair, hammer filing, some repinning, regulation and tuning would go a long way to make this piano more serviceable. I am told it is used quite a bit. Would several of you be willing to donate some time to this good cause? I think particularly of Associates who might benefit from working alongside us more experienced technicians. Three or four might be a good number. We could even ask the Chapter to buy our lunch and I plan to suggest we consider discounting test fees for Associates who participate in this or other similar projects. Call me if you would like to be part of this. I may try to make it happen next week, before our upcoming meeting. David Bonham, cell 413-0233*

Call if you have any questions.

David

*"Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em, "Certainly, I can!" Then get busy and find out how to do it." - [Theodore Roosevelt](#)*

*Chapter officers are:*

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