

# THE SOONER TUNER

Newsletter of The Oklahoma Chapter 731 of the Piano Technicians Guild, Inc.  
August 2008

## COMING EVENTS

**AUGUST** – On the 21st at 8:30am will be our next meeting. The technical will be a movie on the building of a 9" Steinway concert grand, including interviews with technical people and artists, what they look for in a piano, etc. Greg Lynch is bringing the DVD and it will be shown on big screen at Quail Springs Church of Christ, 14401 North May Avenue in OKC. North of Memorial Road on May Avenue just past the business district on the west. Big cream colored sign with green lettering. If you go to the Baptist church you've gone too far!! Come in the southern most glass door on the front (east side) of the building. You won't want to miss this!

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I don't want to achieve immortality through my work.  
I want to achieve it by not dying.  
--Woody Allen

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## **A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT:**

The thought has occurred to me from time to time, that there is, at times, a definite conflict between being a craftsman/craftswoman and being a business person. Probably every piano we encounter could have improvements made, so long as we are willing to take the time, and our customers are willing to pay for it.

If we were to put our services on a scale from one to ten; one, being "tuning at A-440, making sure all of the keys play, no dampers ring and the pedals work", and ten being tuning, complete regulation, weigh off, string leveling hammer shaping and fitting, damper timing etc, most of us probably stop at the five mark or less on most pianos. Does this mean that we are not good craftsman/women because we don't take every piano to the "10" level?

Is this where the business person part of us takes over?

I believe there is a magic stopping point where our customer is happy and we are being paid a fair wage. Where that point is, depends on the demands of the person playing, and the quality of the instrument. If we go beyond that magic point, either we are working for free, or the customer is paying for something they can neither feel, hear, or appreciate. However, if we stop before that point, our customer will not be happy and our business will not grow. In short, we have to make our customer happy, but if we can't make any money, we can't stay in business. Does this mean then that we should do as little as possible to satisfy our customer? No, because we still have to live with our selves!

I have a rule of thumb. If I can make a significant change in less time than it takes to call the customer into the room to explain it, ie; spacing and filing a few hammers, adjusting a damper, regluing a loose hammer etc. I'll do it at no extra charge. If it needs more work, I'll explain what needs to be done, give them an estimate, and schedule the work accordingly.

Of course, common sense also plays into the scenario. If the customer has a BL[bottom line] spinet, for example, they probably can't justify the extra expense, nor would they be able to tell any difference anyway. There again, the conflict comes into play. The craftsman portion of the brain says, "seat those strings on the bridges regardless of any extra pay, while the business side of the brain says "take the money and go on."

I can't tell you what to do, it's your conflict, just like it's mine. See you at the next meeting.

Bob  
Bob Scheer, RPT  
Edmond, OK

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Things alter for the worse spontaneously if they be not altered designedly.  
--Sir Francis Bacon

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## Pianists Revenge

A pianist and singer are rehearsing "Autumn Leaves" for a concert and the pianist says:"Okay, we'll start in G minor and then on the third bar, modulate to B major and go into 5/4 time. When you get to the bridge, modulate back down to F# minor and alternate a 4/4 bar with a 7/4 bar. On the last A section go into double time and slowly modulate back to G minor."The singer says: "Wow, I don't think I can remember all of that."The pianist says: "Really? That's what you did last time."

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## A Little History; The saga of Lester and Gus

Many people know the general rule about a piano's lifespan being about 75 years. Well, usually. Long before the Lester Piano Company even dreamed about plastic, as in elbows, and waterfall keys, and even of Betsy Ross, Lester was building pianos, and fine ones at that. I came across Lester #34,893 (circa 1905) once more. Usually, I visit Lester about once a year to service him. This Lester is 52" tall in a very handsome, well cared for case with a little gingerbread ormolu. Since this Lester is used mainly for a place to put family photographs, it is likely to live a lot longer. On his cast iron plate is the statement, "Resonant metal frame and New Scale and 10 year guaranty". Boy, the company was safe on that one. A number of years ago someone, before me even, had reshaped his hammers and installed new bridle straps. When I first came across Lester over 20 years ago, he was still in solid condition, Visiting him about once a year, he hardly moved at all from his exactly 100 cents low which is where I originally found him. Lester has been living a good life with no one picking on him, scratching his skin, or pounding his hammers. This home, in a well-to-do neighborhood belongs to a moneyed family. I would not be surprised to find that Lester has belonged to this family since he was brand new.

Lester had the added feature of a mute strip that would drop down between the hammers and strings when a lever on the right cheek block actuated it. This would quiet the sound quite effectively. Each place where the

hammer contacted the felt strip was worn through and the cut marks are as clean as a whistle, but the mechanism still works very smoothly. The middle pedal was a bass sustain feature and I am surprised that he did not have a sostenuto feature with the quality of construction that he contained. Along the top of his plate was a little tuner's sticker which, parenthetically, took great pains to show it was printed by a Union printing company. The name information was August Englemann, Piano Tuner, 3113A California, St. Louis, Mo. It included a telephone number but said you could also reach him by calling Hinton's Drug Store! There were 2 tuning dates on the card, 10/21/16 and 6/23/23. This card had a whole story on it. Explanation follows:

Before 1920 there were two competing phone companies in St. Louis. One was the Bell Phone Company and the other, the Kinloch Phone Company. Each one had its business listings and a subscriber of the one phone company could not connect with subscribers of the other system. Think of two competing systems like Blu-Ray and HD DVD's. For a business to not lose customers, they needed a phone receiver for each company and two different phone numbers. These two companies fought tooth and nail for supremacy but as 1920 neared, you could tell who was winning by the size of their respective phone books. Bell Phone Company finally won and absorbed the Kinloch Company. In those days, print advertising ruled to get publicity for any company to prosper; yet there was no advertising in those early phone books, you had to know the name of the business beforehand to reach them. So, Gus must not have had a Bell phone because as he obviously had an agreement with Hinton's Drug Store to take messages for him so he could return the calls, sort of an answering service. Hinton's Drug Store was on the corner of Arsenal and California, a few doors away from where Gus lived. It also may mean that Gus was either not married or his wife worked, as he needed someone to answer the phone during the daytime. Keep in mind that private party phone service was not cheap back then.

Transportation was another key issue in Gus's business life. The area where Lester lived was a long way from Gus's abode. Back then, geographically bunching up as much work as you could was almost necessary because of the problem of traversing long distances with either public transportation or whatever car one may have owned. Though I also lived with an 'A' in my address, back in the late 60's, I am sure that living on the 2nd floor anywhere was not as desirable as living on the 1st floor. There is no way to tell how old Gus was in 1923 but whatever his tuning fee would have been would seem ridiculously cheap today. Even in 1962 when I began tuning pianos the fee was \$10.00 in the city and \$12.00 in the county. I would think back then (1923) a couple dollars would get you a piano tuning.

I do not know what became of Gus but his memory survives on in the cards he left in the pianos that he serviced, giving him a kind of immortality. Piano Tuner Gus certainly lives on in this old Lester piano, built when Lester made fine pianos, i.e., before the days when Betsy Ross spinets with waterfall keys and plastic elbows would end the Lester saga in 1960.

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"Lester and Gus" by James Grebe

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I love Mickey Mouse more than any woman I have ever loved.  
--Walt Disney

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