

# *THE SOONER TUNER*

Newsletter of The Oklahoma Chapter 731 of the Piano Technicians Guild, Inc.  
August 2009

Hello fellow tuners and technician welcome to this month's issue of the Sooner Tuner.

**The August 20th meeting will be held at the residence of Mr. Jordan Bruce at 8:30am.**

The technical will be the intricacies of upright damper technology.  
The installation and regulation of new damper assemblies in a vertical piano.

Jordan Bruce  
9713 Hillcrest Dr.  
Edmond, OK. 73025  
405-285-8324 (res)  
405-314-2407 (cell)

If you have a navigation system. Congratulations. If not, here you go.

Directions to the residence of Mr. Jordan Bruce are as follows. I-35 to Waterloo Rd. Go west to Kelley ave. proceed North two miles to Charter Oak rd. Go East 1/32nd of a mile and make your first left (North). It's the third house on the left.

From I-44 go north to Lake Hefner Parkway past Memorial Rd. It turns into Portland Ave. Continue on Portland Ave. to Waterloo Rd. Go East approximately five miles to Kelley. Go North two miles to Charter Oak Rd. Turn east approximately 1/32nd of a mile and make your first left (North). Go to the third house on the left.

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## ***From the President***

Have you ever had occasion to use a common household product to solve a piano problem?

About 30 years ago, after tuning and preparing a piano for a symphony concert, the guest pianist, on his own, without asking or telling, decided to add more friction to the keyboard by rough sanding the

keytops with sand paper. Of course, after the performance, he was on a plane to the next show.

The damage was unknown until the day before the next concert. The next pianist refused to play unless the keytops were replaced, or another instrument be used.

At that time, there were no other concert grands available, and there wasn't time to replace the keys.

While brushing my teeth on the morning of the concert, I decided to make a desperate attempt to resolve the problem. I took a tube of tooth paste and a wash cloth to the Music Hall and polished the keytops.

Although it didn't completely remove all of the scratches, it worked well enough to satisfy the guest artist. It also gave the piano a beautiful smile with minty fresh breath!

I'm sure many of you have stories involving household piano remedies. Please send them to Eric Williams for the Chapter Newsletter.

It's been said that duct tape and WD-40 can fix anything.

## Do you have any stories?

Oklahoma Chapter President  
Bob Scheer

[illegible]

The mistakes of the fool are known to the world, but not to himself. The mistakes of the wise man are known to himself, but not to the world.  
Charles Caleb Colton

It requires wisdom to understand wisdom: the music is nothing if the audience is deaf.  
Walter Lippmann

## *Portable Grand Piano*

*This article is based on Helen L. Cripe, Monticello Keepsake, April 12, 1972*

Thomas Jefferson and John Isaac Hawkins of Philadelphia became involved with each other over a piano[1] and exchanged several lively and interesting letters on the piano and other subjects over a period of years. Hawkins, born in England, was a little of everything - he had been a civil engineer, a poet, a preacher and a phrenologist. He had musical talent, had had some musical training, and even composed a little. He had a great natural gift for mechanics and had invented, or modified, a number of things, I among them a polygraph and a physiognotrace. At one time he had the prospect of "making money by selling patent rights for improving Rum and Whiskey." Hawkins' and Jefferson's mutual friend, Charles Willson Peale, was sure that Hawkins' "ingenious mechanical powers will be of great advantage to America if we can keep him."

Although Hawkins was not primarily a maker of musical instruments, his gift for mechanical experimentation had led him to try piano building. In 1800 he patented his famous, or infamous, little upright piano, which he called a "portable grand." The piano was musically worthless. Its importance to piano building lay in the fact that it was one of the earliest attempts to build an upright piano with perpendicular stringing and a metal frame.

Mr. Jefferson, that inveterate tinkerer and lover of gadgets and novelties, saw this new musical creation of Hawkins' and could not resist it. "A person here," he wrote to his daughter Martha Randolph in May, 1800, "has invented the prettiest improvement in the Forte piano I have ever seen. It has tempted me to engage one for Monticello, partly for its excellence and convenience, partly to assist a very ingenious, modest and poor young man, who ought to make a fortune by his invention."

The ingenious young man called his invention a portable grand because when closed it was small enough to look like "the underhalf of a bookcase" and could easily be moved anywhere by its handles. To early nineteenth-century eyes, accustomed to rectangular or wing-shaped keyboard instruments with horizontal stringing, it looked weird. Mr. Jefferson, however, was "tempted" to the

amount of \$264

for Hawkins' five-and-a-half octave model. He paid for it in four installments between January and May, 1800.

The queer-looking instrument came to Monticello in the early summer of 1800. It had been exposed to much rain, a normal hazard of eighteenth- and early nineteenth century piano transportation. Mr.

Jefferson thought that it had been too well covered to sustain much damage, but it was very much out of tune. He tuned it and everyone was delighted with it. Even Martha preferred it to any keyboard instrument she had ever heard - except, of course, her own magnificent Kirkman harpsichord.

Charles Willson Peale sent Martha, via her father, a "piece of Music composed by Mr. Hawkins, the

person whose patent Piano she is in possession of; its effect may perhaps be improved from associating

the two circumstances." The "piece of Music" was, "The People's Friend," one of three little songs

which Hawkins wrote in honor of Jefferson's election. Peale's son, Rembrandt, wrote the lyrics, which were about the same quality as the music.

The portable grand's career was short and inglorious. After only two years, Jefferson was ready to

send it back for repairs. It simply would not stay in tune. For over a year it had not been in tune for

even an hour. Jefferson assured Hawkins that he had not let anyone else try to repair it, although one

suspects that Mr. Jefferson may have worked on it a little himself. Hawkins was not surprised at the

piano's failure; the same thing happened to two others he built, but he was absolutely certain that he

could repair all of them. He regretted that he was so short of money, necessitating Jefferson's paying

for the repairs and for the shipping charges to Philadelphia, about \$40. Hawkins would pay Jefferson

back as soon as he returned from England, where he was going to claim a legacy, as soon as he could

raise the money to go.

In the meantime, Jefferson saw in a newspaper that Hawkins had invented another musical

marvel, the  
claviol, which was similar to several other attempts to give a bowed string sound to keyboard  
instruments. Jefferson gave Hawkins permission to sell his piano if he had a buyer for it, and  
send him  
either a claviol or another piano. Hawkins noted the arrival of Jefferson's piano, not improved  
by  
another bout with wet weather, and wrote back announcing that he no longer made pianos. He  
just  
happened to have one around, however, the "best I ever made," and he would swap even.

In the same letter, Hawkins sent a drawing and a rapturous description of his claviol - it was  
as loud as  
"12 or 15 violins and basses" and at a distance sounded like a "full band" in which you could  
distinguish the sounds of various instruments. Up close it sounded like an organ. Its soft tones  
were  
perfect, too; they were "extremely soft and sweet," like a glass harmonica. Unfortunately,  
there were  
some "imperfections in the machinery" which rendered the claviol useless to anyone but  
Hawkins.

A year later, bubbly and confident as ever, Hawkins told Jefferson that he was going to  
England to start  
a claviol factory and that Jefferson should have the first perfect model. He went, but never  
seems to  
have organized his factory, and eventually others appropriated his ideas. Apparently Jefferson  
never  
received either a claviol or another piano from him, and the claviol seems never to have burst  
upon the  
musical world. A contemporary encyclopedia laconically stated that "We have never heard or  
seen this  
instrument . . . and only give this account of it as an advertisement. If its perfections are not  
exaggerated, its invention would be a valuable discovery." One concludes that its perfections  
were  
indeed exaggerated. One also wonders what happened to Mr. Jefferson's \$300.

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To be satisfied with a little, is the greatest wisdom; and he that increaseth his riches,  
increaseth his  
cares; but a contented mind is a hidden treasure, and trouble findeth it not.  
Akhenaton

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Men never plan to be failures; they simply fail to plan to be successful.  
William A. Ward

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I've missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot . . . and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.  
Michael Jordan

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The art of living is more like that of wrestling than of dancing; the main thing is to stand firm and be ready for an unseen attack.  
Marcus Aurelius

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Rest your arms while you can. This season change can be a very profitable one.

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Till next month

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