

THE SOONER TUNER

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

“to attempt what no other technician has done before”

This month the meeting will be held on September 17 2009 at Larsen Music 4001 NW 63rd St Oklahoma City, OK 73116-1984 (405) 843-1573 at 8:30 a.m.

We will have an accountant at the meeting to discuss the important matter of running a piano technician business. Whether or not to incorporate, items that can be deducted, can you really write off all those miles, should you charge taxes on the parts you already paid taxes on, can you write off that lunch, should you claim all that cash, why am I getting arrested for tax evasion...etc...etc...

From the President

The Times They are a Changin'". Do you remember this Bob Dylan song made popular in the '60's? Those of us who remember the 60's will look back on a difficult time of, government protests, high unemployment, and questionable morality and ethics in a highly polarized nation. History has a way of repeating itself, doesn't it?

Whether you are Right Wing, Left Wing, or just Winging it, I believe we can all agree that we are once again living in a polarized nation with government protests, high unemployment, and questionable morality and ethics. What goes around comes back around!

The good news is that we will survive these changing times just like we survived the 1960's. Remember, the Hippies of the 60's are the [old] Yuppies of today. I'm thankful that we still live in a country where we can openly express our sentiments without fear of imprisonment. We can still hire and fire our elected officials with our votes.

As Piano Technicians, we are fortunate to be in a specialised occupation with relatively low overhead and high demand. We made it through the economy of the 60's and we can make it through the economy of today.

Bring it on! Bob

And now for something completely different.....Well not really.....

The End of the US Piano Industry

Apr 23rd, 2009 | By admin | Category: Industry News

-Jeffrey A. Tucker

Today the highest-price good that people buy besides their houses is their car, and this reality leads people to believe that we can't possibly let the American car industry die. We couldn't possibly be a real country and a powerful nation without our beloved auto industry, which is so essential to our national well-being. In any case, this is what spokesmen for the big three say.

What about the time before the car? Look at the years between 1870 and 1930. As surprising as this may sound today, the biggest-ticket item on every household budget besides the house itself was its piano. Everyone had to have one. Those who didn't have one aspired to have one. It was a prize, an essential part of life, and they sold by the millions and millions.

That too was new. Americans before 1850 mostly imported their pianos. American manufacturing was nearly nonexistent. After 1850, that changed dramatically with the flowering of what would become a gigantic US piano industry. The Gilded Age saw a vast increase in its popularity. By 1890, Americans fed half the world market for pianos. Between 1890 and 1928, sales ranged from 172,000 to 364,000 per year. It was a case of relentless and astounding growth.

They were used in classrooms everywhere in times when music education was considered to be the foundation of a good education. They were the concert instruments in homes before recorded music and iPods. They were essential for all entertainment. American buyers couldn't get enough, and private enterprise responded.

New York, Boston, and Chicago were the homes of these companies. There was the great Chickering piano made by a company founded in 1823 and which later led the world in beauty and sound. There was Hallet and Davis in Boston, J. and C. Fischer in New York, as well as Strich and Ziedler, Hazelton, William Knabe, Baldwin, Weber, Mason and Hamlin, Decker and Sons, Wurlizer, Steck, Kimball in Chicago, and, finally, Steinway. The American piano industry was the greatest in the world, not because the Americans came up with any new and great manufacturing techniques, though there were some innovations, but because the economic conditions made it most favorable to be manufactured here.

With the rise of this industry came a vast marketing apparatus. Piano ads were everywhere, as a tour of old magazines shows. It was widely believed that spending money on a piano wasn't really spending. It was an investment. The money you paid would be embedded right there in this beautiful and useful item. You can always sell it for more than you paid for it, and this was generally true. So people would make great sacrifices for these instruments.

With the growth of this manufacturing came an explosion of shops that served the piano market all up and down the industry. Piano tuning was a big-time profession. Retail shops with pianos opened everywhere, and the sheet-music business exploded with them. Ever

notice how in big cities the music stores are typically family owned and established 40, 50, and even 100 years ago? This is a surviving remnant of our industrial past.

All of this changed again in 1930, which was the last great year of the American piano. Sales fell and continued to fall when times were tough. The companies that were beloved by all Americans fell on hard times and began to go belly up one by one. After World War II the trend continued, as ever more pianos began to be made overseas.

In 1960, we began to see the first major international challenge to what was left of the US market position. Japan was already manufacturing half as many pianos as the United States. By 1970, a revolution occurred as Japan's production outstripped the United States, and it has been straight down ever since. By 1980, Japan made twice as many as the United States. Then production shifted to Korea. Today China is the center of world piano production. You probably see them in your local hotel bar.

And what happened to the once-beloved and irreplaceable American piano industry? Steinway survives to make luxury instruments that few can afford (a reader notes that Baldwin is still around today too). Mason & Hamelin has made a great comeback in the high-end market. The rest moved overseas under new ownership or were completely wiped out.

Does anyone care that much? Not too many. Have we been devastated as a nation and a people because of it? Not at all. It was just a matter of the economic facts. The demand went down and production costs for the pianos that were wanted were much cheaper elsewhere.

Now, a piano aficionado reading this will say, buddy, you are crass. Listen to the sound of an older model Chickering and you can tell the difference. It was warm and wonderful, nearly symphonic. It is mellow and perfect for the best repertoire. By comparison, this new Chinese piano is sharp and angular and pointed. It sounds like a marimba. You can't play Schubert or Brahms on such junk. No one wants to hear that thing. Bring back the old days when pianos made sounds that sounded like real music!

Well, you can still get that old Chickering sound, even from a piano made in New York. You can buy a Steinway. Of course you have to pay \$50,000 plus and even as much as \$120,000, but they are there. You say that is unaffordable? Says you. It is all a matter of priorities. You can forego your house and live in a tiny apartment and still own the most gorgeous instrument money can buy. In any case, it makes no economic sense for you to demand a magnificent piano at a very low price when reality does not make that possible.

In the same way, many people will bemoan the loss of the US car industry and wax eloquent on the glory days of the 1957 Chevy or what have you. But we need to deal with the reality that all that is in the past. Economics demands forward motion, a conforming to the facts on the ground and a relentless and realistic assessment of the relationship between cost and price, supply and demand. We must learn to love these forces in society because they are the only things that keep rationality alive in the way we use resources. Without them, there would be nothing but waste and chaos, and eventual starvation and death. We simply cannot live

outside economic reality.

Let's say that FDR had initiated a bailout of the piano industry and then even taken it over and nationalized it. The same firms would have made the same pianos for decades and decades. But that wouldn't have stopped the Japanese industry from taking off in the 1960s and '70s. Americans would have far preferred them because they would have been cheaper. American pianos, because they would be state owned, would fall in quality, lower and lower to the point that they would become like a Soviet car in the 1960s. Of course you could set up tariff barriers. That would have forced American pianos on us. Except for one thing: demand would still have collapsed. The pianos still have to have a market. But let's say you find a workaround for that problem by requiring everyone to own a piano. You still can't make people play them and value them.

In the end you have to ask, is it really worth trillions in subsidies, vast tariffs, impositions all around, just to keep what you declare to be an essential industry alive? Well, eventually, as we have learned in the case of pianos, this is not essential. Things come and things go. Such is the world. Such is the course of events. Such is the forward motion of history in a world of relentless progress generated by the free market. Thank goodness that FDR didn't bother saving the US piano industry! As a result, Americans can get a huge range of instruments from all countries in the world at any price they are willing to pay.

Today government is even more arrogant and absurd, and it actually believes that by passing legislation it can save the US car industry. It can subsidize and pay for uneconomic activities, and pay ever more every year. The government can also pay millions of people to make mud pies because mud pies are deemed to be an essential industry. You can do this, but at what cost and what would possibly be the point? Eventually, even the government will have to accord itself to the reality that economics reminds us of on a daily basis.

The opinions of this author are not endorsed in any way by the PTG..... but it is pretty interesting.

Come on folks get to the meetings. The young'ons need your years of expertise. Don't let all your proprietary skill fade into the sunset of retirement...

We still need you :)

President – Bob Scheer

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