



Restoring glory

Mitch Oxford knows pianos with a level of intimacy shared by few piano tuners – or pianists, for that matter

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Mitch Oxford poses with a Mason & Risch baby grand piano that he restored at his workshop near Guelph.

Mitch Oxford's path to piano restoration involved art, boat restoration and a love of music

When he left Mount Forest to study fine arts at Fanshawe College in London, Mitch Oxford laid a foundation for a career he never could have planned – largely because he didn't know it existed.

"I studied art at Fanshawe, but my heart wasn't into it as much as it was with music," says Oxford, owner of Oxford Piano Service, a company with a name that seriously under-represents the work he does rebuilding pianos from the legs up.

Look inside and outside the pianos in his rural shop east of Guelph and know that Oxford's delicate touch and expertise is directly responsible for the beautiful workmanship.

For full restorations, every tiny piece – and there are lots of them – is repaired or replaced. The wooden cabinet and legs are refinished; new steel wires are installed and adjusted; cracked sound boards are discarded and new ones crafted; the heavy

cast-iron plate inside the piano, where all the action takes place, is sanded and its surface resprayed with a polyurethane coating.

The 36-year-old knows pianos with a level of intimacy shared by few piano tuners – or pianists, for that matter. He is a master in everything he does, plus he plays beautifully, which is how this all got started.

"My family wasn't into music; I was," Oxford says. "At 12, I asked my parents to buy me a guitar for Christmas.

"When they gave it to me, I never put it down."

Oxford studied classical music, but he was also keen on rock bands such as Nirvana. At 22, living in London and studying at Fanshawe, he decided to purchase a piano. A budget-wise student, he had to settle for an old junker found online. The instrument fell apart but not before Oxford poked around its innards trying to understand how everything worked or, in this case, didn't work.

"I was peering into it, I was interested in the mechanics of it," he says.

Up to that point, Oxford was a trained guitarist and self-taught pianist with a desire to study seriously and possibly become a teacher.

He traded up to an electric piano, but that wasn't good enough. He says his teacher wanted him to get a real piano because of Oxford's desire to pursue Royal Conservatory of Music theory.

"No matter how good they (electric pianos) are at mimicking the real thing, it's not the same. The tone of a real piano cannot be emulated through speakers. No one is going to pay money to see a pianist on an electric piano."

By then he had already left school, having finished the second of a three-year program. He had run out of money and inspiration for visual art. He needed to get a job and, though he didn't realize it at the time, his



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two years of art training – particularly working in three-dimensional sculpture – gave him the skills he needed for his next job: boat restoration.

At 25, he moved to Guelph and started working in Rockwood at Peter Breen Antique & Classic Boat Co. His job was restoring vintage boats, some as old as the early 1900s and desperately in need of a skilled hand, a careful hand, an artist's hand.

"I didn't know about restoration, but I like antiques and I like history," he says. "I like a project with an end goal, fixing something that is really run down."

He finally had a full-time job and some disposable income. It was time to purchase a real piano.

Oxford went to a huge Mississauga piano outlet, the proverbial kid in a candy store, surrounded by the gleaming instruments he so loved. But then something else caught his attention – a piano tuner working at the far end of the store.

"It was fascinating," he recalls. "I wanted to see the action of the piano, how he pulled at the inner workings."

Music, particularly pianos, seemed to be his future so after six years at Breen's, Oxford quit and entered Western University's one-year piano technician course where he learned tuning and maintenance, skills that gave him an understanding of the inner workings of this complex instrument.

After graduating, Oxford promoted himself as a piano tuner. At first, he had few clients but as word of his skills spread, he took on more, including Robert Lowrey Piano Experts. Oxford now serves as the company's official tuner for its warranty program in Halton Region.

From tuning, it seemed a natural progression to offer full restorations. Oxford could look at a piano and see the possibilities as well as what was required to bring the instrument back to its former glory.

That end goal can take months and cost the owner thousands of dollars, but it's

never about money, he says. The owners of these pianos almost always have a heartfelt story attached to the instrument. The families want the instrument restored, not discarded or forgotten in a basement.

One client, a Jewish family, brought their piano from Europe at the start of the Second World War. Its place in the family's history and future is priceless.

"It's not the musical value, it's the sentimental value," Oxford says, noting he always asks about the family's budget because full restorations, which can be expensive, are not always necessary.

"I work to everyone's budget and I'm being realistic," he says. "An upright can cost \$1,200 to \$10,000; a grand piano, \$10,000 or more."

Not all pianos are so beloved, such as those tinny old parlour-room uprights.

"A lot go to the dump, there's no market for old instruments – they're worth next to nothing," he says.

"The Steinways, the Mason & Risch – pianos like that will hold their value," he says. "The old pianos people want restored still trump the market value."

When Oxford is offered dump-worthy pianos, there are usually bits he can salvage, such as the ivory keys. The trade in new ivory is illegal and the plastic alternative, though good, doesn't have the same weight. Occasionally, if the key has a small chip he can add a bit of filler.

On a hot day last summer, Oxford was in his shop happily unveiling a recently completed 1940s Mason & Hamlin grand piano. The instrument had been in such bad condition he described the lacquer finish as "resembling alligator skin."

The original owner was Ruth Sanders, a well-known pianist for churches, weddings and funerals in the Cambridge area after the Second World War. Her grandson, Geoff Sanders, has warm memories of his grandmother playing that piano and of her trying to teach him, a reluctant piano student.

His grandmother's purchase of the piano required a bit of luck, Sanders says.

Ruth and her husband, Sandy, an engineer, had been saving their money for a car so any thoughts of having extra cash for a piano must have seemed like a lost cause. Then something wonderful happened. While Sandy was away on a business trip to England, a raffle ticket he had purchased turned out to be the winner. The prize? A new car.

When Sandy called Ruth from Montreal on his way home, she informed him of the win – and that she was co-opting their now freed-up cash for a piano.

That grand sat in the family homestead for three generations, Sanders says.

When his grandparents' house was finally sold, he wasn't sure what to do with the piano. Offers came in then fell through, mostly because of its size. He was almost ready to sell it online when a Guelph friend, Lori Fleming, took an interest.

Owning such a piano had always been on Fleming's bucket list, but she also recognized it was in need of work, so she called Oxford.

"It hadn't been tuned in years," she says. "Mitch came and quoted what must happen for playability."

Fleming decided to go to the extreme and have the piano completely restored, but she wanted it to be a surprise to Sanders. The trick was trying to keep him out of her house for months while the piano was at Oxford's shop.

Finally, she could keep Sanders away no longer and when he saw that empty space in her music room, he was disheartened.

"I thought they sold it on Kijiji," he says.

Having the restored piano at Fleming's house is like keeping it in the family, he says, where the old instrument will continue a life of joyous music started with his grandmother.

Not every piano in Oxford's shop has such an emotional story attached. In the adjacent spray booth sat the scattered bones of a 1920s ebony baby

grand, taken apart piece by piece for a full restoration. The piano was made by Steinway's rival, Chickering & Sons of Boston, the first piano manufacturer in the United States. This piano has an impressive pedigree and was purchased by Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic High School in Guelph long before the restoration was completed.

"A piano like this restored doesn't fetch much, maybe \$8,000," Oxford says, noting there can be an imbalance between the value of the piano and the cost of a restoration. "When you're doing full restoration work, it can take four to five months."

The Chickering required disassembly down to the smallest part, then each piece needed to be either restored or replaced. It's a tedious, meticulous job that requires sourcing manufacturers for replacement parts, such as the felt hammer keys, which after hitting the metal strings a few thousand times tend to groove and become leathery.

Oxford removes the entire board with the hammers attached and ships the whole unit off to a Connecticut company that makes custom hammers using the originals as a template. It's up to Oxford to ensure the newly installed hammers have the correct tone, a practice known as voicing the piano or tone regulating. This can be achieved in several ways, including pricking the felt with a needle to expand the felt and soften the tone.

New metal strings are imported from Germany, and a Montreal company manufactures pin blocks, which are thick layers of maple that Oxford cuts to his needs. Tuning pins in the piano are anchored in the block, then the wire strings wrapped around the pins.

When disassembling a piano, Oxford sometimes finds surprises such as old photograph negatives or newspaper pages used as shims to align aging, wonky parts. Sometimes he finds the signature of the last person who worked on the piano who wanted to leave his mark.

"Lots of things get lost in there," he says. 

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