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Steve Benjamins, the man who works slowly

By Sophie Braccini



Steve Benjamins starts playing the 1896 Chickering & Sons he has been restoring to its former splendor. Photo Sophie Braccini

Steve Benjamins lives on another planet, one where timelessness and quality reign. In our world where impermanence is everywhere, he talks about musical instruments made to last centuries.

His calling is to restore the instruments and give them back the majestic sound they were built to produce. In his Golden Gate Way atelier he is now working on a 1896 Chickering & Sons, from the first American piano manufacturer, giving it back concert quality sound and enjoying himself immensely in that process.

Benjamins says that one thing he loves about his job is that people pay him to work slowly. He never takes more than one or two instruments a year and has built such a reputation now that the waitlist is long. He can even refuse to work on instruments too recent that he does not feel are worth a restoration. Benjamins also tunes pianos and plays professionally.

"After the Great Depression, people started to take shortcuts and use cheaper material to make the pianos," says Benjamins. He gives the example of a 1970 German harpsichord that looked like a beautifully made instrument. The artisan explains that in the middle of the harpsichord, two pieces of pressed wood had been used under the rose wood veneer, maybe to save a few Deutschmarks, but when Benjamins started to tune it and put it to tension like he does for well-made instruments, these pieces would not stand the tension and broke, completely destroying the instrument. "It had to be trashed," he adds sadly.

But nothing of the sort happened with the Chickering he is restoring now. He says that the Hillsborough client had bought a large mansion and needed a piano to go with it. Friends of friends owned the old American instrument, a family heirloom, but had no use for it anymore. The client bought it for \$2,500. The restoration will cost them \$20,000, but then the value of the antique piano will jump to more than \$100,000.

What is special about this Boston manufacturer is that he was the first in the world to use iron bars to increase the tension in the piano and thus creating a more profound base that gives each piano its personality.

"When this happened, pianos were finally able to produce the big sound that some composers, like Mendelssohn, needed," says Benjamins as he brings back to magnificence a piece of history.

Benjamins starts playing the instrument that's now in the final tuning stage. The sound is stunning, full and sonorous, ready to become the medium for the most intense musical emotions. The piano restorer and tuner is also a player and already imagines playing the restored Chickering in the large hall it was purchased to adorn. People sometimes hire him to play at parties.

Moving through his warehouse, Benjamins points to the old pianos he has purchased to rescue them. He says that today's piano are made to last 80 years, and then go. What made the big difference for the old instruments was the quality of the woods, metal and other material that were used to construct them.

"This wood was probably cut down in the 1850s," says Benjamins, pointing to the frame of a 1893 Steinway Baby Grand he is also restoring, "At the time the wood was cured in open air for some 50 years. This wood now is as hard as a nail and it was cut so thick, two inches of American oak, that we can clean it up with a chisel and return it vibrancy." Once cleaned the wood will be given a coat of West Marin Epoxy to reseal it. Benjamins says that the wood used now comes from trees that were not given enough time to grow and then to dry. He adds that the first Stradivariuses were made out of very old German trees that simply do not exist anymore.

Benjamins pays also great attention to the bent sideboard that, when made right, with spruce, will make the piano sing and give it its personality.

Benjamins' client said he could keep the instrument for a few more months to tune to perfection the new set of cords. He will continue this work of love for a few more weeks. Benjamins also will come to people's home to tune their piano, even if they don't own an exceptional instrument. "It should be done every three years," he says.

Scott Hildula recently produced a documentary about Benjamins that was featured in the Lamorinda Arts Council's documentary competition. It can be viewed online at <https://youtu.be/271m8zoqQW8>. More about Benjamins at <http://www.restorationpiano.com>.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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