

# The piano doctor

Article and Photographs  
by Kristy Boyce

Somewhere in Muskoka, a child sits banging out an ear-splitting rendition of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star, or perhaps an old woman, tone deaf from birth but a trooper nonetheless, learns the classics on her rebuilt Heintzman baby grand.

The music may be awful but you can bet the piano sounds great. And to former jazz pianist and Huntsville transplant Tim Sullivan, that is the sweet sound of satisfaction.

Sullivan says he is here “to make sure the piano sounds and feels as good as it can, so you get as much control over the sounds as you can; that’s my favourite part, trying to do that for people. Some people are completely blown away after they hear what I’ve done to their piano especially if the piano has been neglected for awhile.”

Sullivan is what retired teacher and customer Bob Attfield calls in his opinion, the area’s “premiere piano technician.” The two met when Attfield asked Sullivan to have a look at a piano he was thinking of purchasing and came to Sullivan for the second time when his piano needed work.

“It’s mind boggling what he was able to do with my piano,” says Attfield. “I was absolutely blown away... these guys, like many skilled craftsmen, don’t get the publicity they deserve.”

Sullivan tunes and maintains pianos at the Haliburton Pavilion, Gravenhurst Opera House and Algonquin Theatre, just to name a few.

Sullivan was born and raised in Timmins and is the second youngest of six kids; two of his older brothers also went on to have very successful careers in the



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music industry.

His brother Joe teaches at McGill University and has released several CDs playing the trumpet. Another brother, Peter now plays trombone with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra after a successful run with the Montreal Symphony. He has played professionally on every continent.

"I asked him once how many times he'd played Carnegie Hall; he said, 'I don't know.' He's played every major concert hall in the world," says Sullivan.

Sullivan dropped out of the University of Ottawa after two years of study to attend Concordia in Montreal. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a major in jazz studies.

In Montreal, he says he worked with several different groups and made a few records, some even for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

"CBC used to actually have an arm that made recordings and they hired our group to make an album. Back then, we weren't sure if it would be put out as a CD because the technology was so new."

One of Sullivan's gigs had him playing two sets a night, seven nights a week. He remarks that playing that often kept him sharp but at a price. "It was really brutal, too. I never got home until four in the morning. You can't have a family and be doing that every night. I'd be up at noon every day. I found it very tiring to play that much."

The pace of the jazz pianist lifestyle also showed on some of Sullivan's older colleagues.

"There were quite a few older guys in their 40s and 50s doing the same thing that I was doing at 20. You could see that it was a difficult life and I didn't want to be there at that age, doing that."

A summer course at the Banff Centre led Sullivan to a new appreciation for the work of the piano technician. "There were all these pianos being used constantly but they were all being kept in the old log cabins and there were only a few guys there to maintain them," says Sullivan.

"Few people really know what's going on beyond the keys, it takes a lifetime to master. I've now been doing it for 14 years and though I'm a professional, there's still much more to learn."

The technicians at the centre were from George Brown College where Sullivan decided to take the Piano Technician program. There he learned not only the ins and outs of tuning but also general maintenance and piano rebuilding.

Cue to 1992. Neon was in, the mullet was still a socially accepted hairstyle to wear on your wedding day and Sullivan was ready to leave Toronto. Though he'd enjoyed college in the city and Toronto was where he met his wife Julie, he wanted to live somewhere that was at least an echo of the northern Ontario lifestyle he grew up with.

When he heard a technician from the Huntsville area was looking to retire, he jumped at the opportunity. Now, after living and working in Huntsville for 14 years, he has never looked back.

"When we were kids, we were always outside either fishing or swimming or doing something out in the bush," says Sullivan. "Up here, we have that. There's a river just across the way; our kids swim there; I tie my canoe up there but I can still walk to downtown."

After watching Sullivan's attention to detail and

quiet grace as he works to rebuild or tune a piano, it's no surprise to learn he is the son of a general surgeon who would build cottages in his spare time. He even has the little fold-out piano surgery tool kit that looks much like a doctor's, with the exception of the odd tuning fork here and there.

"I always liked working with my hands, and found it quite enjoyable to have a completed project at the end of the day, which in music there's no such thing; there's no end," he says.

"For me now, at the end of the day, I know if I've done a good job re-bushing a set of keys or putting on a new set of hammers. It allows you that kind of satisfaction."

Satisfying as a good day's work is, nothing beats getting invited to play on the bill at Heinz Hall (seats 2,500) alongside your two brothers and backed by a world-renowned orchestra.

"I don't know if we sold out but we had a good... gate," Sullivan says with a laugh.

"When they showed us to our rehearsal spot, someone had put a little sign on the door that read 'Sullivan Brothers.' We opened it and inside there was a nine foot Steinway, a rehearsal hall the size of a gym, beverages and then there was the dressing room as well."

Not only was the rehearsal room a space Liberace would feel at home in but the brothers played a tune that Joe wrote specifically for the event and was conducted by renowned composer Marvin Hamlisch for the four-night event.

Hamlisch has composed over 40 motion picture scores including *The Way We Were*, *Sophie's Choice* and has won every major music award: three Oscars, four Emmy's, four Grammy's, and well, you get the picture. Sullivan says the whole experience was quite an honour.

As with any field as old as the piano tune/rebuild/sale business, there will be its share of misconceptions. Remember when Grandma told you her old Heintzman upright was like a fine wine, that only got better with age and that screeching sound was definitely not coming from the piano?

Sullivan sheds a little light into that dusty corner where your piano sits and discusses a few tips, tricks and myths about piano upkeep.

"There is a myth that if a soundboard is cracked, it can't be repaired. A cracked soundboard can be repaired and pretty easily too; it's an old wives' tale," he says.

"Ninety per cent of pianos that are older than 40 years old have cracked soundboards. And sometimes it has absolutely no effect on the tone at all and if it does, it can be repaired."

Sullivan adds while many people know they have to get their piano tuned after moving it, they may not realize a move can mean simply shifting the piano to another room.

"Your piano will likely go out of tune after a move but only if it's moved from different environments," he says.

"If you move it from one room of the house to another it won't go out of tune; it will go out of tune with a change in moisture levels so if you move it to the basement, it will go out of tune and vice-versa."

Though some people take this to mean you have to tune your piano only after it's been moved. Sulli-



Like father, like son: Sullivan shows his six year-old son, Sam, how to play some cools licks on the family piano.

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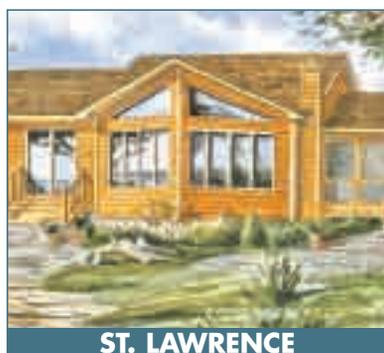
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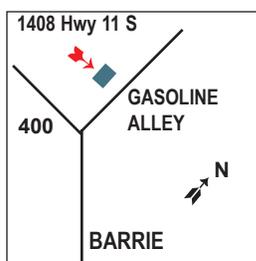
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van says tuning should be done at least yearly and ideally seasonally, as climate change can affect pitch.

Why is tuning so important? Sullivan says every piano can sound better with the proper care and at the end of the day, it's all about being able to play and enjoy the instrument.

For a young pianist, a well-tuned piano can make all the difference. Sullivan says all pianos should be in tune. It is imperative for a piano a child practices on, be tuned to standard pitch.

"Kids learn pitch from the source they have around them. If the source is flat, you're teaching youngsters to associate notes with sounds that are incorrect," he says.

All that talk about careful tuning is useless if the piano you have just bought is better suited for kindling than for playing Bach. Sullivan says when buying a new piano, it is a must to have it looked over by a piano technician before buying.

"I get calls all the time from people who've just bought a piano. I go over and have to tell them this piano should have gone straight to the dump. It's because the seller is not knowledgeable and the buyer is not knowledgeable.

"It's very rare that a seller would do that intentionally. They just don't know. They may have just seen a used ad in the paper last week for a piano for \$1,000, so they figure that's what their's is worth.

"Then someone buys it and the piano's not tunable. They've just spent \$1,000, a few hundred more to get it moved and now they're paying me a fee to tell them that they've just made a big mistake and they're going to have to pay someone \$200-300 to take it to the dump. So get it checked out, because it's not expensive."

Sullivan says a buyer still needs to do his homework, even when purchasing new.

"The industry is complicated and weird. Sometimes you see a piano with a name on it and you have no idea where it came from. We have some good dealers, but we also have some bad dealers – dealers who will tell you a piano is made in Germany when it's actually made in China and inflate the prices by three times."

Sullivan knows of a person who paid \$15,000 for what they thought was a German instrument. The dealer had pulled off the made-in-China stickers on a piano worth only \$5,000.

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Sullivan says though that is a very atypical situation, you have to do your homework and decide what piano sounds and feels the best to you at your price point.

Although these days Sullivan considers himself much more of a piano technician than a musician, you can still find him playing in the Muskoka area from time to time.

He played at the Northern Blues Review in September and will be playing at the Huntsville Festival of the Arts in the summer of 2007.

Did you know?

Standard pitch was adopted by the American Standards Association in 1936, though the Paris Conservatoire had adopted it as early as 1812.

If an instrument is below standard pitch, that means it is out of tune.

There are 220-240 strings and over 2,500 parts in a piano. Most people tune their piano on average once every 10 years, though it should be tuned at least once a year.

It costs approximately \$80-\$120 and at least an hour to get your piano tuned in the area, though it may be quite higher in larger cities such as Toronto.

Forty to fifty years is the life expectancy for a good piano.

There are no companies in Canada still manufacturing pianos, though we do export the raw building materials to other nations. 

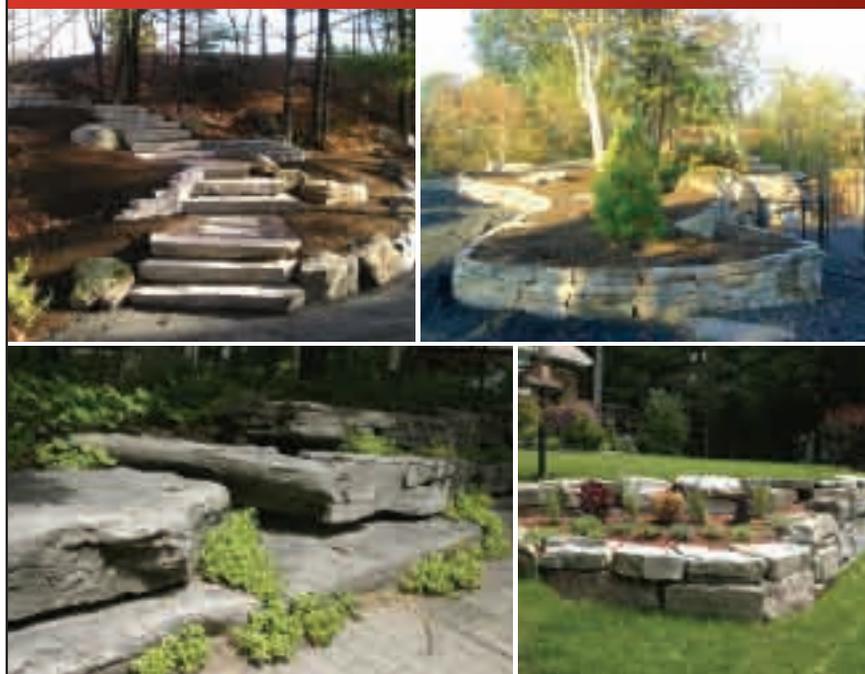


Sullivan plays a composition on his own piano at his Huntsville home.



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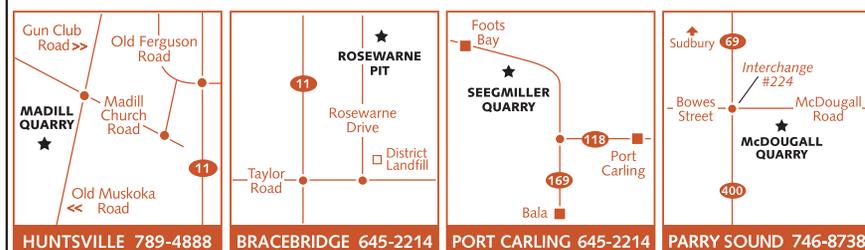
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