

How to learn the care and feeding of the piano

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Steve Hornbeck's first piano concert was given to a small collection of wet laundry hanging around his mother's basement.

He didn't have a choice. The piano was kept downstairs.

But rather than dampen his spirit, the experience led him through four years as a bass player for a rock group and another four years as a piano tuner.

He will be joined by three other piano technicians—the preferred term for a tuner—at 8-10 p.m. on May 18 at the Farmington Community Library, 2580 Liberty.

Together with a little help from the Farmington Musicals, they will show prospective musicians the proper care and selection for their next keyboard instruments.

Like Hornbeck, 26, the men are members of the Detroit-Windsor Piano Technicians Guild, a professional society which passes along trade information.

It's their expertise that keeps the pianos tuned and ready for the Detroit Symphony at Ford Auditorium or the Meadow Brook outdoor concert series.

HORNBECK, of Whitmore Lake, is a relative newcomer to the field. He started out to become a music teacher until his senior year at Oakland University, when his tuba instructor squelched the idea.

"He told me there weren't any jobs waiting for music teachers. That's after he got up after falling on the floor laughing when I told him I wanted to be a music teacher," Hornbeck remembers in a half-joking manner.

Instead, the teacher suggested he look into piano tuning. Hornbeck's tuba instructor switched to showing him the piano tuning business and a new, unexpected career was launched.

He apprenticed under Tom Pettit, a piano technician who will speak with him at the library. Afterwards, he attended the Yamaha Piano School in Buena Park, Calif., to further his skills.

As a piano tuner, Hornbeck is required to know the different parts of the instrument much as an auto mechanic is familiar with the inner workings of a car. But he is exempted from being a good pianist.

"You don't have to be a great race driver to be a great mechanic," he explained.

AND TO HEAR Hornbeck tell it, it's just as well he isn't required to be a good pianist.

"I play at it," is how he describes his piano technique.

At first encounter, the ivories didn't tickle young Hornbeck.

"The piano was an old grand that made it into the basement but was too large to make it back up in one piece," he remembered with his customary humor. "You know the kind. It broke a few steps going down into the basement."

Practice was far from a favorite pastime, according to Hornbeck.

"How would you like to practice in a damp, chilly basement with laundry hanging around you?" he asked in mock horror.

Hornbeck emerged from the basement when his uncle gave him an old ukulele and taught him to play "Has Anybody Seen My Girl?"

From there, he made the unlikely progression into a rock band by the



STEVE HORNBECK

time he was 13 years old. For four years, he and three buddies played together as the Panic in the Park, a group managed by Mike Quatro.

"I played guitar. But then it was discovered I couldn't handle more than four strings. So I rented a bass," he said, jokingly.

FOUR YEARS ago he made the switch from music student to piano technician. Along the way, he's had an opportunity to work on the piano used outdoors at Meadow Brook.

After tuning the instrument in the morning, the technician is expected to be on hand for the performance. Changes in the temperature and the humidity affect the wood and the sound of the piano.

The night air is bound to affect the action of the keys and hammers within the piano.

Most of the time, the pianos Hornbeck tunes belong to persons who want their child to have something they missed in their own childhoods.

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according to Hornbeck. His favorite customers are those who demand that their piano be perfectly tuned.

"They know what to look for and they follow it up," he said.

While more women are entering the field, there are about two who are members of the Detroit-Windsor guild.

But guild membership is necessary for work in the area. It's more of an information outlet so about only half of the area's technicians are members, according to Hornbeck.

AT THE MOMENT, the guild is trying to change the image of its members. The generalization that most piano technicians are blind or cigar ash shedding slobs is becoming obsolete, according to Hornbeck.

"We are trying to upgrade our image. Piano tuning is one business where you are in total control of what's going on," he said.

As long as people tickle the ivories, there'll be jobs for piano technicians. After all, technicians say, you can tune a piano but you can't tune a fish.

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Marie Bush, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Bush of 21500 Orchard Lake Road, Farmington, was recently tapped by Epsilon Delta Alpha at the Hillsdale College Spring Honors assembly.

The group is an honor recognizing outstanding scholastic achievement.

Golden chosen for frat

Thomas Golden, son of Mr. and Mrs. John W. Golden, 36325 Grand River, Farmington, was recently tapped by Phi Mu Alpha Solfonia at Hillsdale College.

Phi Mu Solfonia is a professional music fraternity.

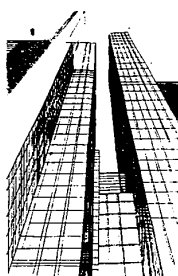
Somerville added to list

Deborah A. Somerville, of 33482 Colony Park Drive, Farmington Hills, has been added to the dean's list of the University of Denver.

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