

For would-be tuners, this school hits a chord

By CRAIG PIECHURA

There are already schools for people interested in becoming bartenders, computer programmers and disc jockeys located in Southfield. Now a new school has opened for people who want to learn how to tune and rebuild pianos.

Forget the stereotype that the only good piano tuners are blind craftsmen who possess golden eardrums, say Karen Sue Ford, 35, of Canton Township and Bruce Robinson, 45, of Taylor, respectively the director and owner of Piano Technology, Inc., 26940 W. Eight Mile.

Most people, they say, misunderstand the method of tuning a piano. You don't tune to a pitch, you listen for a mathematical beat frequency between two notes. But tuning a piano by mathematics alone or by relying solely on an electronic tuning device makes a piano sound flat to the human ear. The sound has no presence.

"The problem with an electronic tuning device is you're using a perfect device on an imperfect instrument," Mrs. Ford says.

Knowing when to tweak a certain string and when not to is where lessons and experience come in.

"A well qualified technician is always in great demand," says Mrs. Ford, a piano tuner herself in a sales pitch to prospective students. "If I must have competition, I prefer that it be the best possible. . . ."

"If you have average intelligence, normal hearing and a love for quality music, I can train you in my field. No musical experience is necessary and you don't have to have a 'perfect ear.' All you need is the desire to learn."

THE SCHOOL opened last month and at present only two students are enrolled. But Robinson says 28 persons called for information after the Detroit News ran a tiny article about the opening of the school.

Doug Juntunen, 24, of Livonia, is a laid-off Ford Motor worker and the article about the piano tuning school caught his eye. A trombone player in the Farmington Community Concert Band and the Farmington Jazz Band, Juntunen says "I just like working with pianos and stuff. They fascinate me."

His teacher, Mrs. Ford, says Juntunen is quick to pick out false beats in the upright piano they're restoring in class and "that's a good sign." It's too soon to predict whether piano tuning

will become a career with Juntunen, but he figures learning the skill can't hurt him.

The owner of PTI, Robinson doesn't expect to get rich teaching piano tuning to the masses. He says there probably aren't that many persons in town interested in the skill. But piano tuning classes, Robinson said, would be ideal for musicians and maybe ministers who want to tune their own instruments accurately.

There was unused space in the building that also houses Robinson's three-year-old organ repair business, Keyboard Services Inc. Since there is only one other piano technician school in the state, the Detroit School for Piano Technicians, he and Mrs. Ford decided to open another. Pianos that students repair in class will be sold to the public.

Eventually, PTI hopes to become affiliated with the national Piano Tuners

Guild, a society that works to improve the standards of the century-old skill.

Too many people who call themselves piano tuners are self-taught or graduates of correspondence schools, says Robinson.

"YOU CAN learn just enough to do a lot of harm," he says.

Pianos in Michigan should be tuned at least once a year, say school directors, and preferably twice a year because of the high humidity in the state. Putting off periodic tuning and preventative maintenance can turn an expensive instrument into an unplayable piece of furniture.

Asked if pianos used by boogie woogie or rock 'n roll players go out of tune faster than pianos that play waltzes, Mrs. Ford said pianos in Southern Baptist churches usually show signs of piano abuse.

"They stomp on pianos, beat on pi-

anos worse than rock bands because they use it more often and they play it so fervently," Mrs. Ford said. "That's great business for us."

Part-time classes at the school range from \$35 for four hours instruction in tuning and repair to \$45 for a six-hour class.

In class lectures, students learn that a standard piano has 235 tuning pins, holding strings that should be wound with 20 tons of tension. Tightening a

string too far could cause it to break and severely injure the hapless or even headless tuner not to mention ruin the piano.

A responsive chord has been struck. After hearing that dire warning, students quickly develop a new-found respect for the piano.

"And it looks so innocent sitting there," laughs Robinson, pointing to the ever-changing \$85.

Doctorate awarded

James Randall Wilson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Donald J. Wilson of Summerwood Ave., Farmington Hills, has finished his graduate studies and has received a Ph.D. in Plasma Physics from Princeton University.

He was a graduate of East Junior

High in Farmington, Cass Tech High in Detroit and received his B.S. degree from the University of Michigan.

He is now employed by Princeton as a research scientist at the Plasma Physics Laboratory on the Forrestal Campus at Princeton.

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