

## **“Some of the Keys Don't Work, But There are Plenty of Other Notes for my Child to Play”**

I am a piano technician. I was recently called to perform a piano repair on an emergency basis. A member of the Music Teachers Association of California had scheduled her performance class in a student's home. The home had a beautiful rebuilt Steinway grand piano, seating for 45 in the living room, and plenty of parking. Four days before the class, the teacher checked the piano to see if it needed tuning. She found that the piano was practically unplayable. Every note made a sound, but eliciting that sound took an inordinate amount of effort. Control of dynamics was extremely difficult, and the variation in touch between notes was enormous. Playing beautifully on the piano was impossible. That is where I entered.

I found a Steinway grand piano that had an excellent refinishing job, an adequate restringing, and the installation of new parts in the action. It appeared that an attempt had been made to regulate the action, but without the knowledge of proper tolerances. I concluded this because action settings change slight amounts in predictable directions, when the change results from normal wear. The settings on this action were very inconsistent and farther away from correct than I had ever seen. There are ten major regulation settings for each note. Of these, nine were incorrect. One of them was off, on average, by a factor of four. I judge that I could have played the piano a maximum of five minutes before giving up. Three children had practiced their lessons on this piano for seven years.

Obviously, this is a dramatic story, but it is not unique. If you ask your tuner, you'll hear numerous similar tales. Often, a student's piano gets tuned only if a key breaks, and then only after 3-4 weeks of complaints to the parents.

The first point of this article is to suggest that if you have a student who is not improving, it's time for a call to the parents. In addition to asking about the regularity of practice, I recommend you ask if the piano has been serviced in the past six months.

Now consider another situation. I was called to tune a 5-year old piano that had not been tuned since it was delivered. I found a quality piano that was one-half tone low, and which was so out of tune that it was hard to recognize a melody when it was played. I raised the pitch to standard and fine tuned the piano, then invited the student to play it. I almost fell over. He played at a high performance level. I can't imagine how he ever learned on that piano, but he had enough talent that a teacher would never have guessed that he had an inadequate piano on which to practice.

The second point of this article, then, is this: What if your most talented student never reached his/her potential because of the condition of the practice piano?

That might be a greater tragedy than having a moderately talented student give up.

I have talked about the least and the most talented students being hampered by inadequate pianos, to illustrate the importance of checking that each of your students has an adequate piano on which to practice. The question is, how to do that effectively. Often, teachers tell me that they have recommended me to all their students. On average, I'll hear from 2 of those families, unless the teacher teaches in the students' homes. Then the average increases to 20. If the pianos I see are often a wreck, imagine what the pianos are like that never get care. It's an obvious waste of the parents' money for lessons, a waste of your time and effort, and a tremendous waste of the child's time and talent. I think it's an important enough issue that it should be addressed up front with parents. There are many ways of doing that. Whatever way you choose, it's important to follow up to see if it actually worked. One way that might work would be a letter like the following. If you already have a "welcome letter" for your studio, you may wish to just add some parts of this one that deal with piano maintenance. If you wish, you can download the letter from my website by clicking "downloads" at the bottom of any page of my website: [www.QualityPianoTuning.com](http://www.QualityPianoTuning.com). You could then edit it to suit your needs.

If you simply hand this letter to parents, it will likely be filed with the junk mail. Parents are often too overwhelmed with child-rearing tasks, to read everything they are handed. To get compliance, you will probably need to read it to them, then give them a copy. If you are committed to results, you may wish to ask them to sign a copy. If you ever have to call the parents due to lack of the student's progress, you can refer to the letter, or offer to send them another copy.

I hope all this will help you have more success teaching children the joy of playing music. The story at the top of the article had a happy ending. The piano was regulated and tuned in time for the class, and it went very well.

Ned Klein is a Piano Technician in the Pasadena- Glendale-Burbank area. He is a Business Affiliate Member of both the Pasadena and Glendale branches of the MTAC, and an Associate Member of the Los Angeles Branch of the Piano Tuners Guild.