

# Play it Again

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TIMES WRITER

Christmas will come early for the congregation of First Presbyterian Church.

When church members said goodbye to their 81-year-old Steinway piano in late May, they didn't anticipate seeing it again until December.

Sent away for a complete restoration, the plan was to present the finished piano, tied up in a big red bow, to the congregation at Christmas.

But James M. Reeder, owner of Reeder Pianos, Inc., in Lansing, expects to be ready to deliver the historical instrument well before Thanksgiving.

In fact, it could be finished as early as October, he said.

"It's so exciting," said Mary Anderson, chairwoman of a drive that raised \$12,000 for the piano restoration and purchase of a new bench, dolly and protective cover for the top of the piano.

Restoring the piano captured the imagination of local musicians and music lovers, she said. The money was raised within a month. Most came from the congregation, but friends of the arts in the community also contributed, Anderson said.



▲ Skilled hands file down piano hammers.

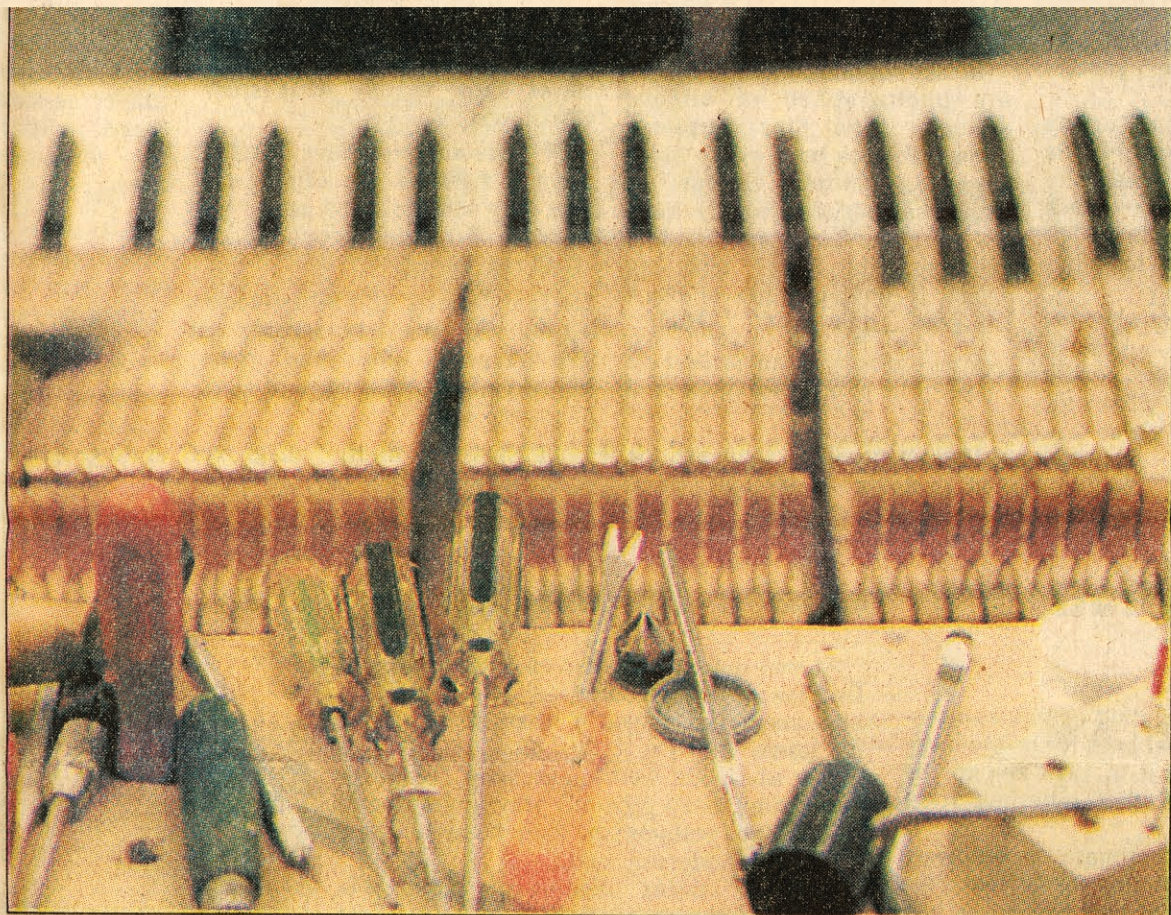
"We hope the community at large will recognize that the piano is here for them, too," Anderson said.

First Presbyterian is the site of many community concerts throughout the year.

"The piano is over 80 years old and will be good for another 80 years. Mr. Reeder said, for a piano of its size, he has not seen a finer instrument," Anderson said.

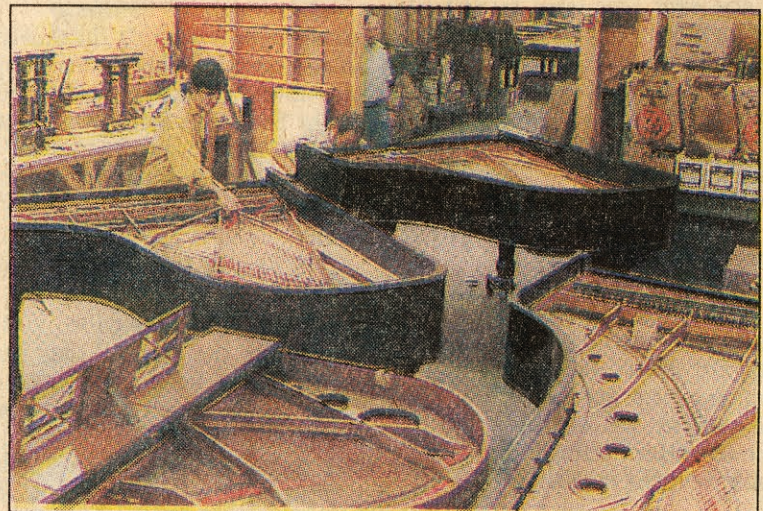
Anderson never doubted the quality of the piano. But she still loves hearing music experts praise it.

"The Steinway pianos have always been very wonderful instruments, but some are better than others. This one always received heaps of praise from everyone who played it," she said.



▲ Diann works on the keyboard of First Presbyterian Church's 81-year-old Steinway. Each key is individually removed and thoroughly cleaned before replacing the felts.

► Employees of James Reeder Pianos in Lansing work on Steinways, repairing and tuning the instruments.



# Piano restoration to restore its original quality

From 1C

Because of its outstanding quality and history, the piano is special both to the Steinway Co. that manufactured it in 1913 and to the Bay City congregation that inherited it in 1938.

"Ordinarily, they estimate a Steinway doesn't need any restoration for 40 years. . . . This one is 81 years old and had never had anything done to it," she said.

Anderson and other members of the congregation assumed the piano was the property of the late Dr. H. Russell Evans.

Affectionately known as "Rusty" to generations of public school students and musicians throughout the state, he was First Presbyterian's minister of music for 39 years prior to his death in 1962.

But when Anderson, a flutist with the Saginaw Symphony Orchestra and music instructor for Saginaw Valley State University and Delta College, began researching the piano, she learned from Dr. Evan's daughter, Jean Meisel, that the piano was not his.

Wanting to know more, she set off on a fascinating trail of discovery. Her findings are now part of a scrapbook devoted exclusively to the piano.

She learned that the Steinway Corp. has archives in which the history of every Steinway built, including original ownership, can be documented through the individual serial number stamped on each piano.

This piano, the company's Model A concert grand, was built in New York on Nov. 3, 1913, and shipped to a Detroit Dealer, Ginnell Brothers Music, at the end of November.

The piano was purchased by Mary Hill Smith, a member of a prominent Bay City family, and arrived in Bay City on Dec. 1, 1913.

"It obviously was purchased for a grand house and a grand way of living," Anderson said.

Anderson said a granddaughter of Mrs. Smith, Sue Frantz of Essexville, told her stories about Halloween at her grandmother's house where a pianist and string quartet would entertain the children.

Upon Mrs. Smith's death in 1938, the piano went to her daughter, Mary Parker Smith, who gave it to First Presbyterian Church. It graced the sanctuary of the church for a short time until the sanctuary was renovated and a new organ was installed.

At that time, it was moved to the home of Dr. Evans, who composed music on the instrument and played it in small recitals at his home.

"He was quite well known as a composer and I think that's probably why it was donated to First Presbyterian. They knew it would be used," Anderson said.

After Dr. Evans' death, the piano was returned to the church sanctuary for worship services and community concerts.

Many of the area's notable musicians have played on the Steinway, including Bay City's Kevin Cole, now a nationally acclaimed composer now in San Francisco. Concert pianist George Fee of Midland and Catherine McMichael, a composer, are among other area pianists who have played and praised the unique piano.

"It really is part of the musical history of the area," Anderson said.

However, the congregation probably wouldn't recognize the piano if they saw it at this moment. It has been completely disassembled and its parts are being worked on throughout Reeder Pianos.

But even there, in its scattered state, it's receiving praise from those working on it.

"I play the piano and this makes you appreciate it more," said Diann Silvernail, glancing at a set of piano keys in front of her — part of First Presbyterian Church's piano.

Silvernail removed and cleaned each individual key, then steamed off old, worn felts and replaced them with new ones.

The piano has been through a lot through the years.

Along with 81 years of dust and grime, workers found a cookie inside — dropped, perhaps, during a recital where the piano was center stage.

Cleaning the keys was made more difficult by black spray paint that apparently was applied at one time to improve the aging keyboard's appearance. Silvernail painstakingly removed every bit of the paint from the wood of each key, even on the parts of wood that wouldn't be seen.

That's because owner James Reeder believes in perfection. By the time a piano leaves his factory, he wants it to be as good as or better than when it was made.

"We succeed most of the time," he said. In the case of this Steinway, it will look exactly as it must have looked when it first

arrived in Bay City.

The ivory and ebony of the white and black keys are in such good shape, their roughened corners will be smoothed and the keys polished, but the original keys will be intact.

In many pianos of its age, the keys are too badly worn and must be replaced with plastic because it now is illegal to use ivory, Reeder said.

The piano is in good company.

One of about 60 to 80 pianos to be restored in the shop this year, its parts lay alongside the parts of 19th century Steinways and other fine pianos. Most of the pianos have been sent to Reeder from churches and schools, while some are owned by individuals.

Each part of the First Presbyterian Steinway is tagged with an ID number to track it through the shop. The parts are not interchangeable with parts from other pianos.

Reeder, whose interest in restoring pianos began as a musician, built his shop from his first business as a piano tuner. He also was a Steinway dealer for about 14 years.

From his new shop, built five years ago and already outgrowing its 11,000-square-foot space, he services pianos all over the nation. Each restoration takes three to four months, depending on how long he has to wait for parts.

"Everything has to be made to fit the individual piano," he said.

Not all instruments are worthy of restoration. But for those that are, "it's a more than one lifetime investment because that's how long it's going to last," he said.

A reconditioned Steinway like the one owned by First Presbyterian generally would be worth \$18,000 to \$20,000 in this area, he said.

"But the value is subject to the history of the piano. This piano probably has a higher value because of the history.

Anderson estimates the value at over \$40,000.

"The exciting thing is it can be a performance instrument again," Reeder said.

The nicks and scrapes on the piano's black case are gone now. Cases receive 10 coats of a special, durable lacquer and are allowed to cure up to four weeks before they are wet-sanded by hand with fine steel wool to remove even the tiniest bumps and make the finish glow.

"It makes a beautiful sheen," Reeder said of the process.