ELECTRONIC TUNERS

Electronic tuning devices (ETD) have been around for decades in one form or another, but their quality has improved significantly in recent years. They can be a valuable tool for tuners, and there are technicians who rely exclusively on an ETD for their daily work. There are also others who adopt a more purist approach and only tune aurally, and many more who use a combination of the two methods as they find convenient.

Accuracy

With proper software, even a mobile phone can be turned into an ETD. A number of questionable free apps are available, though reputable programs can cost more than some of the pianos they tune. Those are very accurate and certainly have their benefits:

- Reduced aural fatigue by following the pitch in visual form.
- Faster tunings, by going through notes individually without having to perform interval checks against other notes, which are necessary when tuning aurally.
- Pitch raises take less effort with devices that estimate the over-pull needed to achieve the desired pitch in one pass.
- A tuning pattern can be consistently replicated on another instrument for duets, or on the same instrument in a studio where material has to be recorded across different dates.
- Useful when tuning in noisy environments.
- Tuners can develop hearing problems throughout their careers and may need assistance with certain frequency ranges.

On the other hand, some technicians do not feel the need for the visual cue, do not like the additional visual distraction, or simply enjoy tuning by ear. Many fine concert tuners do not use electronic devices at all, and the quality of a tuner's work cannot be judged based on whether an ETD is used or not. Not all technicians tune the same way, and the choice to use a device is largely a matter of how much it somehow improves their work.

Artistry

Besides mathematical accuracy, piano tuning also requires a touch of artistry. The aim of tuning is always to produce a musical result, and a tuner may make choices in that regard that can on occasion diverge from digital advice. Every piano differs from another, even if they are the exact same model. Listening to what the piano best responds to is part of the artistry involved in tuning.

Good quality ETDs offer a number of options for octave stretching (2:1, 4:2, 6:3, 8:4, 3:1) but tuning by ear allows the tuner to adjust stretching on an individual basis, and to make subjective decisions that involve tone as well as pitch. Fine tunings that favour certain intervals can result in a piano that sings beautifully, because of sympathetic resonances across the keyboard that can be individually tweaked.

For the finest levels of tuning, even the repertoire being played may influence the degree of stretching, so besides a good tuning ear, a technician can benefit from having an understanding of the musical context as well.

For tuners trained aurally, using an ETD normally requires some minor adjustments, whereas those trained with a device from the beginning may find it a little harder to move to aural tunings. Extensive practice is required to learn the aural skills, and one must develop and refine those skills through the years. Our own experiments with ETDs showed us that is rather easy to become reliant upon the little screen, as it offers little incentive to perfect the art.

Finally, it is important to remember that an ETD can only assist with the listening part of tuning. A finely trained hand is needed to adjust the pin and string to a stable position, and that is actually a harder skill to master, with or without ETD.

As for ourselves, we do tune primarily by ear, as we have received excellent aural training. After many years of experience working this way, we prefer the result achieved by tuning aurally. We use ETDs occasionally, mostly to map out the overall pitch of a piano, sometimes for large pitch raises or in particularly noisy places. That is just our choice, we may change our minds in the future.

In any case, we always have a traditional tuning fork at hand. Besides the odd battery issue, electronic tuners can also get stuck with loud rumbling noises outside, like a concrete mixer in F#. We've had it happen before.