

HOW TO TRAIN A PIANO TUNER

Did you say you're a piano tuner?

Tuning pianos is a beautiful way to earn a living. Listening to a recital by a world-class pianist on a concert piano that you have just tuned can be a proud professional moment. You get to meet young artists whose music you will end up following, or older ones who you have known all your life. And you will meet people from a wide cross-section of your local community on a daily basis. Music teachers, students and music lovers are some of the most interesting people you can come across, and many of them will become cherished friends after a while.

The work itself has its challenges, expectedly. Not all pianos are of concert quality (be warned!), in fact some are barely tunable. Regardless of your skills and effort, sometimes they will never sound good. Tuning can be hard on your ears, hands, shoulders, backbone, and you should expect to drive tens of thousands of kilometers every year for that. Running your own business also requires a number of extra skills which may not be your cup of tea – project management, bookkeeping, IT, marketing, customer care. Without previous experience, you will have to learn all of that as well, and quickly.

Big things aside, there are plenty of little things to enjoy in your working hours. Driving around to people's homes can take you to beautiful parts of the country that you would not have known to exist. After tuning over 200 strings, regulating 88 keys and voicing 88 hammers, sometimes you manage to turn a harsh-sounding clunker into a beautiful singing instrument. Teary eyes from owners who can have their music back after a long-awaited service are a beautiful reward at the end of a long day.

In addition, we go against the grain in an economy of disposables. Our work involves conservation, restoration, refinement and constant improvement, which brings another layer of satisfaction to what we do daily.

Lastly, if you are interested in tuning theory, there is a noble lineage of inquisitive minds who applied their efforts to the mathematical quandaries of tuning - Pythagoras, Archytas, Ptolemy, Aristoxenus, Mersenne, Galilei, Descartes, Huygens, Kepler, Newton, Euler, Ellis and Helmholtz, to name a few. You will be in good company.

Schools

There are more instruction books on how to train a dragon than on how to tune pianos, and possibly for a good reason. Piano tuners are a relatively recent profession, as historically most keyboard players (except organists) would have tuned their own instruments, like other musicians still do. It is said that JS Bach could tune his harpsichord in 15 minutes, and it was during his later years that the piano started to mature as an instrument and to slowly take the place of the harpsichord.

During the eighteenth century, improvements in steel strings and cast-iron frames steered the development of pianos towards the larger/louder end of the spectrum. The higher string tensions made the new instruments increasingly harder to tune, and by the early nineteenth century piano tuning became a separate, specialised line of work.

Initially, training was provided in factories, of which there were thousands in Europe (Paris alone had 3,000 makers at one stage). Not only tuning, but all aspects of piano construction and maintenance could be learned there. Fast-forward to the present and things have changed, with very few establishments offering that option now. Modern factories are mainly available to well-trained technicians associated with the brand to perfect their skills – anyone interested in learning the craft has to look elsewhere and there are fewer choices than ever. This is a little surprising, given that there is a general shortage of technicians and that the current generation is approaching the age of retirement.

In Australia, a small number of reputable courses were available in different eras, but neither of them was particularly long-lived. Today, many of the necessary parts to make the training system work seem to be missing: official recognition necessary to obtain funding (there is no such a thing as a piano technician, according to the ABS), master technicians available for teaching and mentoring, young students able to foot the bill without funding etc. A further decline in numbers looks inevitable, with retiring tuners not being replaced at a sufficient rate.

During recent years, online courses have appeared as an alternative, trying to fill the gap left by traditional courses that shut down. However, even for them, any chance of success still relies on a local mentor being available to provide some hands-on guidance to the students, as they can only achieve so much by themselves and on their own pianos. One of the benefits of learning at a university with a large music department, as we did, or at a factory, as many others did before us, is to have access to hundreds of different instruments to practice on. An online course obviously has no means to provide that.

Students

People often think that perfect pitch is a requirement to become a piano tuner. In reality, it is not, and in all likelihood will only make the job more difficult. Being a musician is not essential either, although it is most certainly beneficial, and even more so if you are a good pianist. To be able to understand from a practical point of view the context in which instruments, temperaments, tone and repertoire evolved into today's piano will give you a different appreciation for the work you are doing.

To study Piano Technology, we had to move overseas, interrupting degrees, jobs and spending a considerable amount of money on foreign universities. After graduation, with proper training and some experience in hand, returning to Australia to start a business had its difficulties, some more expected than others. Little support came from the industry, struggling with low numbers but unable to embrace newcomers. Much welcome encouragement and advice was offered by a few individual technicians, though, and we are very thankful that we could benefit from their experience and generosity.

Pathways for further training do exist, again mostly overseas and with limited access. We are fortunate to have international colleagues whose doors are always open, as opportunities for hands-on, face-to-face collaborations in Australia are few and far between.

That said, once business is up and running, a lot of learning takes place as we come across all sorts of situations on a daily basis. More recently, having the space to build our own dedicated workshop has provided us with a valuable source of professional growth and development. With the knowledge and experience we already had, being able to research and experiment with rebuilding techniques has been a real treat, and every piano we work on brings something new to the workbench.

Perhaps one day we will be able to take on an apprentice and pass on what we have learned so far. Interested, anyone?