

Hello!

My name is Peter Acronico, Registered Piano Technician, and I have been associated with the Steinway Society for about 15 years.

Since I am a concert piano technician, whose been working with world-class artists in local, major concert halls for over 20 years, we thought it might be interesting to share, briefly, about serving in that capacity. Please read Gary Lempcó's excellent program notes, which are informative and scholarly, to learn more about the composers and the pieces being performed this evening. I also wish to thank Larry Koran for his input on this presentation.

Concert artists are some of the most intelligent, disciplined, and aware people we ever meet. They are generally well-versed in current events, have read a swath of literature, including fiction, non-fiction and, of course, anything they can get their hands on concerning the composers whom they perform, as well as, to the life and times of the period.

Concert artists are rarely the unstable, prima donnas' myth would suggest. The more distinguished they become, the more friendly and ingratiating they truly are. It is the average player who crows about his talent, upset about not being recognized by the critics, or audiences, and demanding respect, who will place his aggravation onto the scene around him.

Just as all great historians, these artists will possess strong views as to how the music of the various composers, and the music written during specific time periods, should be played. This continues to be of supreme import, because, after all, teachers and artists are not only the stewards, but also the guardians of classical music!

*There exist three main aspects of quality concert work:*

*a) Preparing the piano for the artist before her arrival.*

*b) Meeting and greeting the artist to establish rapport, and to address her concerns, which may include regulation and voicing of the piano, adjusting lighting, positioning cables, procuring extension cords, positioning cameras, the podium, the piano, acoustics of the hall, balance of the registers of the piano and whatever else may present itself.*

*And the third, is to be on-call for whatever may arise before and during the concert.*

There remain the myths about pianists preferring not to shake hands (pre-Covid, of course.) This is not true. There may be some who do not, but most will approach the technician to introduce themselves, and with a firm, yet soft handshake, a relationship is born.

A piano, regularly maintained by a competent technician, will most often please an artist when she arrives to perform the "sound check" confirming the piano to be acceptable for performance.

Serious concert technicians aspire to PRESENT the piano to the artist, rather than allowing them to stumble upon it when they arrive at the hall. All preparation must be completed, and the piano re-assembled. They must not see a dis-assembled instrument. Often, the artistic director of the organization promoting the concert will provide room, and board, or at least, monitor the hospitality and accommodations of the artist, and it is important for the director to be in prior communication with the piano technician.

The concert piano technician serves as a calming influence on the artist, and deigns to be of the utmost assistance, almost to an unlimited extent. Often, pianists suffer exhaustion from travel and erratic schedules, or they might be ruminating over the latest reviews, and nervous about the condition of the piano whence they arrive. They regularly make it to the concert hall from some faraway destination only a few hours before the concert. Answers to their questions, most often, need to be in the affirmative, so the collaboration flows smoothly. And yes, it is a collaboration between the artist, the piano technician, and the knowledgeable technicians of the hall in which she is performing.

Often, there will be concerns about the “voicing,” or the positioning of the piano and the overall nature of the acoustics in the hall. Pianists are keenly alert to the acoustics of a concert hall. This is the reason pianos reside in various locations on the stage. The artist may wish to be closer, or farther away from the audience. She may be uncomfortable with too many guests seated behind her, so she might want to shift the piano more to stage right (from the audience, that would be on the left-hand side of the stage.) Many times, the piano must be positioned in such a manner as to relieve it out from under an over-head curtain or sound shell, which may defeat the tonal projection of the instrument. If there is a proscenium, she may wish to locate the piano there, but not necessarily so. It is not always up to her, and again, the theatre technicians and the piano technician will offer suggestions for any scenario on stage.

Quite often, the piano technician’s job encompasses interpreting the descriptive, artistic language of the artist into technical understanding he has gleaned from his many years of service. Sometimes, one can be distracted by an artist’s vague terminology, without truly understanding the mechanical qualities of the grand piano. The worst-case scenario might end up being a goose chase, circling right back around to the starting point. Much like a doctor trying to get to the point of diagnosis with his patient, it is necessary to develop a keen understanding of what the artist attempts to convey.

The hall is empty upon their arrival, but the acoustics change once the hall is filled. Pianists are keenly alert to the acoustics of the hall. There may exist concerns about lighting, air treatment, ingress/egress onto the stage and considerations of any sound system they might require for a narrative before performing a particular piece. The piano must never be amplified (as technicians say, “miked.”) This would interfere with the artist’s ability to correctly phrase music, and it distorts the tone of the instrument.

Technicians never “play” for the artist, or wherever/whenever they could be heard. Musicians do not want to hear it. *That is too much collaboration!* Chords, chromatics, octaves are the only sound that should be coming from the piano, besides the monotonous plunking during the tuning or touch-up; however, she may ask, while walking to the back of the hall, to make some noise on the piano, so she can acquire a sense of how the piano will project. And by the way, technicians are NEVER as talented as the artist, and while they may believe their piano preparation is uniform, accomplished players can spot an inconsistency immediately. So, we must remain ever humble.

VOICING is a truly subjective venture. Indisputably, the piano needs to project. Often this can be achieved by bolstering the hammers with hardener so the tone may fill the hall. But this can yield a strident piano sound, and it is to be performed, if ever, as a final procedure.

Often, voicing consists of evening out the “attack” of each note throughout the scale of the piano. A simple 10-15-minute pass usually suffices on a well-maintained instrument. The soft pedal, being of use in pianissimo passages, as well as being employed for tonal coloring in legato playing, must yield a mellifluous quality, although pianists differ in their preferences. But certainly, no notes should jump out.

Then there is the issue of the keyboard. Pianists prefer the light from above to fall onto the keyboard in a particular way. And by the way, it can be disastrous to move a piano after the artist has begun preparing for the concert, for any number of reasons.

Most concert attendees prefer to find seats providing them with a view of the pianist’s hands, as well as the keys. From a distance, the keyboard will appear to be sagging, so Steinway crowns the center, thus highlighting it. The treble and bass are a tad lower to accommodate the hands reaching to the extremes. Also, more wear in the center, over time, will cause the keyboard to truly sag after many hours of vigorous play. One humorous explanation being the keyboard follows the curvature of the Earth.

Having attended concerts regularly from early childhood, I propose the best seats to be near two-thirds back in the hall, from the stage, right of center. After several minutes of watching the pianist’s hands, it becomes an uninspiring view of the pianist’s back; however, connecting with the artist by admiring her face and bodily movements, and their relationship to the piano as she performs, begets a truly engaging experience. Also, the acoustics are superior from that location, given the dimensions of the grand piano, and the treatments in most concert halls.

I would like to share a few stories covering the spectrum of concert service experiences:

One artist appeared distraught. She did not like her accommodations (among other things), and when she arrived at the piano, she played three notes and a chord, leaned back in disgust, and looked at me disapprovingly. Of course, my heart sank, and skipped a beat. This was a well-maintained piano, and it was preferred by most. However, nothing did she want me to address,

nor would she elucidate further. Then, the air conditioning began to blow, and she swiveled around on the bench declaring that if that “wind” did not stop “I shall not play!” But the situation soon shifted. With me, and the Theatre manager, standing at the piano, by her side, in several moments, she turned to face me and uttered, “I get nervous before playing” and I responded with, “so do I.” A sigh of relief was shared by all.

On one occasion, when I unsuccessfully met the artist’s last-minute request, upon witnessing my distress, he presented his face very close to mine, looking smartly into my eyes, stating he thought the instrument would be just fine for the concert, and with that comment, he dispelled any anxiety on either of our parts, the doors opened to people flowing into the hall, and the two of us removed ourselves from the stage.

Sometimes the artist will say something like, “You’re a technician, and a magician.” Kind of trite, but a complement, nonetheless.

I have had artists thank me for things I am certain I did not do.

Sometimes an artist, with the help of the piano technician, needs to press the reset button. “Maestro, would you like to take a short break to allow me to tend to this concern?” “Yes,” he says, “I can see you know what you’re doing.”

One artist saw me at the post-concert reception and from inside the admirers gathered around her announced loud enough for many to hear that the piano had been “heaven to play!” This, of course, has all the indications of Ego, but wherever Ego, I go too.

An experienced technician can learn a lot from watching the artist practice and perform. Concerns she might have about the piano, can be filtered by him through his understanding of her playing style. One pianist played a few measures of a piece and declared disapproval with the piano. “Please play a little so I can establish what I might do for the piano,” I requested, and from that, we reached a consensus, and then he relaxed.

Inherent in the process of working with the artist, there develops an elegance and respect between the two which is rewarding and humbling. Rule number #1, however, is to be “interested,” and not “interesting!” Any light conversation should concern the artist. It is all too easy for the technician, through his nervousness, to attempt to dominate. To that end, familiarity with the program, and any significant ones the artist has performed in the past, demonstrates essential deference in the exchange.

Sometimes you will see the piano technician situated next to a wall in the lobby, holding his compact concert kit by his side. Dedicated parts and tools will be contained in that kit. Often, the technician is required, due to contract negotiations, to remain backstage throughout the entire concert, and most of the time, the public will never see him, unless the piano is being used twice, in both halves, by the orchestra or in a recital whereby the technician, artist or promoter desires the piano to be “touched-up.” I prefer to be seated in the hall, aisle seat, in order to assess the piano, for work having been done, or work I envision in future preparations.

Broken strings in orchestral concerts are rarely replaced. They are either cut out or cleared. In a recital, it might be repaired. Given three wires for every note, it would depend on whether two adjacent notes lose only one wire each, or one note loses two of its wires. The latter is perilous to ignore. And pop a bass string, notes 1-8, that is a showstopper, and must be managed.

The tuning of the piano must be solid, and spot on. While pitch is paramount when playing with other musical instruments, solo performances grant some latitude. It is extremely important not to de-stabilize a piano by moving strings around aggressively when the piano may be quite settled into its environment. Of course, air conditioning, which cools and dries the air, juxtaposed to heat and the breath of the audience, which warm and humidify the air, are virtually uncontrollable by any technician, may drastically affect the tuning, and is usually controlled by higher authorities, often from a completely different location than the stage or the concert hall.

The set of spotlights, above the stage, in some concert venues, can be so hot as to make it uncomfortable to place a hand on the lid of the piano, much less sit at the instrument while performing. In one hall, I witnessed the top of a \$1,200 artist's bench start to smoke when the lighting boom was lowered to within three feet of it! Today, theatres everywhere, are replacing these dinosaurs, with much, much cooler, although much, much more expensive, energy-efficient LED lighting.

Because of the ministrations involved in preparing the piano, the technician seated in the audience, listens attentively, although peculiarly, his undergoing a kind of mental gauntlet, note for note, until he is certain his instrument will hold. Satisfied all is well, a warm glow of work well-executed may descend upon him.

In this concert, the Artist probably will be performing on a Hamburg Steinway. What is the difference between the Hamburg and the New York concert grand, you ask? Let us save that for another presentation.

Thank you for visiting this presentation, and please enjoy a truly engaging program, featuring a wonderful artist, Anna Fedorova!