Written by Carol Pomeday
Wednesday, 10 March 2010 15:32

A Port church's vintage Steinway is getting new life at the hands of a Fredonia man who turned his mechanical engineering talent to the intricacies of pianos

A grand lady — a 1921 Steinway grand piano that was donated in 1979 to First Congregational United Church of Christ in Port Washington — is a familiar instrument to piano technician Mike Spalding of Fredonia and once again in his workshop.

Spalding adjusted the piano and replaced the action — the keys and hammers — in 1995.

Now, thanks to a bequest from the estate of Fred and Gladys Marquardt, Spalding is restoring the piano's belly — replacing the old wood soundboard and 11 stiffening ribs with new ones, installing new pins, weaving new strings between the pins and precisely fitting it all beneath a 300-pound cast iron plate he will

refinish and gild with gold — to bring back the harmonic sound indicative of a Steinway.

The mahogany case will also be refinished. The restoration, which started in December, will take about nine months, Spalding said.

The piano was donated to the church by Port native Viola Boerner Supper, who received it as a gift from her husband in 1931.

“It’s been in the church sanctuary ever since and has been used on Sundays since I’ve been here,” said the Rev. Jeff Suddendorf, pastor of the congregation.

“The Marquardts were members of the church community for many years as well. This will complete the restoration. The piano should have another 30 to 40 years of life before it needs any major work. The most exciting part is to be able to maintain and preserve such a beautiful instrument.”

Spalding said his goal is to have the piano sound like it did when it was built. He is refurbishing as much of the original mechanism as possible, including the curved bridge root that holds the pins.

“We know more about acoustics now than they did in 1921. Sometimes, you might discard a piece and make a new shape, but not this time. I want it to sound just like it did when it was brand new,” Spalding said.

“When we joined the church in 1993, the piano had a pretty good sound, but it was almost impossible to play. The action was very stiff. I talked them into letting me do some work on the action of the piano, and it turned out pretty well.”

Spalding’s workshop, which was designed for piano restoration, is in the lower level of the Town of Fredonia house he and his wife Jane built in 2000. The workshop has a 10-foot-high ceiling, large windows that look south over a two-acre wetland and a paved driveway to the lower level so pianos can be wheeled in. Before that, the dining room of their Cedarburg home was filled with piano parts.

Spalding is a mechanical engineer who became fascinated with pianos when he purchased a Baldwin upright for his two daughters 26 years ago.

“I wasn’t pleased with the service we were getting, so I decided to figure out how it works and see if I could do better,” said Spalding, who made himself a guitar when he was a senior in high school.

The Baldwin turned out so well that soon he was regulating pianos for family and friends as a hobby, doing about one or two a year.

“Each piano I had a chance to work on I learned more, and it kept pulling me in deeper and deeper,” he said.

In 1993, Spalding and his wife moved from Green Bay to Cedarburg when he took a new job supervising a team of designers and engineers who did custom work.

“I started out a stereotypical engineer — ‘Let me sit in my cubicle and solve technical problems.’ By the time we moved here, I was doing direct customer contacts daily,” he said.

“I found that I enjoyed trying to make decisions that would be best in the long run for both the customer and employer.”

In the meantime, Spalding continued to learn more about pianos and joined the Pianos Technicians Guild. He went to a national convention in June 2000, where he talked to other technicians and learned more about the business.

“I came back really fired up. I realized this was something I could do full time and figured in about five years I could retire,” Spalding said.

“A month later, I was fired. Between my severance pay and my wife’s job, I was able to take the time to learn how to tune pianos and do other things so I could make a living at this.”

Spalding passed the exam to become a registered piano technician. He now works on projects with Tim Dickson of Milwaukee, the technician who administered the exam and has become his mentor.

Learning to tune pianos was essential to being successful in his business, he said.

“The best place to find rebuilding jobs is from customers whose pianos you tune,”

he said. “From the moment a piano is tuned, it begins to get out of tune. It always needs adjusting.”

About half his work is tuning or in-home repairs and the other half is rebuilding and restoring pianos in his workshop.

“Regardless of who owns the piano or how good a piano is, I just want to make it the best it can be. Every piano, from humble spinet to majestic concert grand, has a musical potential,” he said.

“I couldn’t be happier. I never looked back. The more complicated the job, the better I like it. I would be bored if the next project wasn’t more challenging than the previous one.”

While he is working on the 1921 Steinway, Spalding loaned the church his Steinway grand piano that was once owned by a pair of musicians who bought it for each other as a wedding gift.

“I lucked upon it in a want ad. One had died and the other was in a nursing home, so their son was selling it,” Spalding said. “I’m very happy to have it.”

Spalding explained that the soundboard of a grand piano acts like a diaphragm and is integral to its sound.

“The soundboard takes the vibrations of the strings and creates sound waves that we hear. The stiffness of the soundboard and how well the strings are coupled to it are essential to how it sounds,” he said.

Each of the hundreds of new pins will be inserted into a new hole drilled smaller than the pin, then pounded into place. Spalding filled all the old holes in the original curved bridge root so new holes can be drilled.

When the 224 strings are strung through the pins, they will be adjusted to tensions ranging from 160 to 300 pounds for a total tension of almost 40,000 pounds, Spalding said.

That will be one of the last steps.

“The most exciting part will be hearing it for the first time,” Spalding said. “I enjoy

all the woodworking, all the processes. I get a great deal of satisfaction from completing each step.

“But by far, it’s hearing and feeling what you end up with that’s the best part.”

Spalding is keeping a journal and posting photographs of the piano restoration on his Web site www.spaldingpiano.com. It is expected to take nine months to complete.

Photo by Sam Arendt