

The Whidbey Examiner

News from the Heart of Whidbey Island

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Musician cares for orphaned uprights

By Toni Grove
For the Examiner

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Dean Petrich is in a race with the elements.

Stored inside of six metal-framed tents and one Quonset hut on his Freeland property are dozens of old wooden pianos. Some of their lids are bowed and benches broken, but others remain stately and dignified, their intricately carved scrollwork intact and needing only a good refinishing.

The colors of the many woods used to build them run the gamut from pale to dark, the textures ranging from fine-grained to burlled. And if they could talk, each instrument would doubtless have a story to tell.

Sadly, falling temperatures, damp air and condensation raining down from the underside of the tents all threaten to permanently silence their music.

What he'd like more than anything, says Petrich, is to find homes for those pianos before they're beyond repair.

"I'd rather have these pianos in somebody's house, being used," he said.

Petrich, who tunes, repairs and moves pianos out of his home and adjacent shop, never set out to adopt 187 pianos. But in recent years, a growing number of people have opted to get rid of their old pianos instead of having them repaired.

The shrinking middle class has also played a part in determining their fate. The affluent want to spend many thousands of dollars for a grand piano, Petrich explained, while the rest of us might get an inexpensive electronic keyboard at a big-box warehouse store.

"These in-between pianos, the old uprights, people are giving up," he said.

Petrich couldn't bear knowing the last sound these pianos might make wouldn't be a haunting melody, but a discordant crash at the bottom of the garbage heap at the dump. That's why he's been rescuing them.

For a long time, Petrich admits, he would pick up the pianos for free. As a professional piano mover whose service area includes not only Whidbey Island but also the greater Seattle area and beyond, he has all the proper equipment and knows he can move pianos more efficiently and safely than your average homeowner.

But rising fuel costs and the amount of time he was dedicating to his one-man piano rescue effort forced him to begin charging to haul them away.

"I can't do that anymore," he said.



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At Dean Petrich's house in Freeland, several storage buildings are chock full of old pianos. Petrich wants to find homes for at least 100 of these aging instruments before time, humidity and cold weather render them irreparable.

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Interested in adopting a piano?
Contact Petrich's Piano Shop at
206-324-5055 or
petrich@whidbey.com.

Along with his “orphaned” pianos, Petrich also has pianos that are available for rent, and another 25 he would like to sell. Several dozen pianos are in his shop right now, each waiting its turn to be refurbished. It’s a prospect that seems farther and farther away as Petrich, like all good business owners, must complete the jobs that pay the rent before taking on the ones that are clearly a labor of love.

“It would take me nine years of no pay to rebuild all these pianos,” he said.

Some of the pianos have some hope of being played again. But if no one steps forward to claim the ones stored in the tents, their outlook is grim.

Behind Petrich’s home sits a massive pile of wood concealed beneath a large plastic tarp. Here lie the remains of pianos that couldn’t be saved and were disassembled for their parts, a process that takes Petrich about four hours to complete.

Sections of sides, back and lids, along with thin pieces of veneer, have all been cut into stove lengths for use as kindling for the next several winters. Sturdy four-by-four posts are stacked under a nearby tree, while another pile contains pieces from which Petrich will remove by hand any metal parts that can be reused to repair other pianos.

A final pile holds wood containing metal fittings that are too numerous, small or damaged to be salvaged. These pieces may have to go to the dump, though the notion of not being able to find some use for them is difficult for Petrich to consider.

“I recycle everything,” he said. “I’m a total environmentalist.”

A tour of his home and property bears this out. All of his toilets are the composting kind, and all of the windows in the multi-level home that he designed and built himself were reclaimed from other buildings.

Petrich says he gives the iron plates from the pianos’ internal workings to local charities to sell for scrap metal and the collected usable parts are stored on shelving that once held medical records in a local clinic.

Altogether, Petrich figures he has enough parts for 10 pianos and is determined to spend the winter sorting it all out.

Like a farmer who uses every part of the pig but the squeal, Petrich says he tries to find a use for everything. But this piano man does the farmer one better.

Of the pig’s squeal, Petrich said, “I’d probably record it.”

Petrich’s home is a wonderland of secret doors, a tunnel, pools, water slides and a conical shop that looks like the perfect home for friendly dwarves or a visiting hobbit. It all seems to fit the personality of a man who’s devoted himself to music – he plays the piano, guitar, violin, recorder and mandolin – and to whimsy. This is the home he’s made for himself and he says he’s staying put.

“You make paradise where you are,” he said, “You don’t just keep looking for it somewhere else.”

There are other surprises to be found at Petrich’s home. Who else do you know who owns 42 different clown costumes, a half-dozen unicycles and a drawer full of gags like fake mustard that shoots out of a bottle, whoopee cushions and snakes that pop out of a can?

These are the stock in trade of Petrich’s alter ego, Deano the Clown, a local fixture who’s been bringing laughter and fun to the island for decades. In fact, Petrich says he started clowning professionally about the same time he began tuning pianos and believes both professions complement each other.

“They’re opposites,” he said. “Clowning is chaotic and with a lot of people around. Piano tuning is very structured and quiet and solo. One’s summer, one’s winter. One’s outdoors, one’s indoors. So I always have work.”

Right now he’s focusing on his pianos. He said he is thankful there are still people out there who appreciate his craft. It’s not unusual for people to keep a piano because it has sentimental value or is a family heirloom, and some keep them tuned and continue to play them.

These are the lucky ones, because he’s convinced you’re missing half of the musical experience when you’re not playing

one of these old instruments and sharing what others before you have felt.

“When you feel, it feels,” he said. “When you play music, music is all about feelings. All their emotions went into their piano.”

Petrich knows some of his orphan pianos need work, but finding them loving homes would be the first step to giving them a new life and a new chance to make music.

“They’re free,” he said. “I’ll give them away if somebody wants them.”

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