

Ward Guthrie Life's Intervals



I have been playing piano for 66 years. I have only owned two pianos in my life. One of them, a 5' 4" Henry F. Miller baby grand, is not quite within shouting distance but close, just up the road from where I live in Montana. The other, a Yamaha 7' grand is, from where I'm sitting here typing, so close I can touch it. To some a piano is a piece of furniture. For me it's my lifeline and informs a long love affair. It requires attention. My relationship to both instruments is intricate. Being drawn to play an

instrument is one thing. To form a relationship opening a dialogue filled with challenges and expectations is quite another. You are partners in an endeavor of discovery that can last a lifetime. The instrument reveals who you are and offers a constructive path paving your musical journey. Yet that journey leaves the instrument subject to the gravity of age and aging. You have a responsibility to its health. This is where another relationship becomes vital to that pursuit, that of the piano technician. The person I entrust the health of my piano to is Ward Guthrie.

Ward has been tuning my Yamaha piano since 2010. He is a member of the Piano Technicians Guild (PTG) and a Registered Piano Technician (RPT). The PTG was formed in 1957 from a merger of the American Society of Piano Technicians and the National Association of Piano Tuners. The PTG's headquarters are located in Kansas City, Kansas. I asked him about the significance of the guild. He said there had been a level of secrecy with piano tuners before the merger. They had withheld their methods from each other believing that by sharing their tricks of the trade they would find themselves out of work. The PTG steered the craft to an encouragement of sharing. Ward said, "The piano technicians decided when the guild was started, rather than be secretive about it, if we could share our information and taught all the best ways to do things, the technical level of *all* technicians would rise . . . those who didn't care to improve their work would go out of business." He said they concluded that sharing would end up creating more business in the long run; the main thrust being that clients with pianos would receive better quality work and better tunings as a result of the higher standards in place. I told him I wished the world operated under that kind of system.

A full-time piano technician since 1974, Ward didn't become an RPT until 1975. There are a series of three exams to qualify. RPTs perform a standardized tuning on a piano that has been *master tuned*—a piano that has been tuned by a group of techs until they all agree that no improvements can be made. The results are then stored on an electronic tuning device. The piano is then detuned and handed over to the examinee. *Those* results are then compared to the master tuning for scoring. Ward's credentials are as exhaustive as what it took to earn the

title of RPT. A master of organization, Ward organized and developed some 800 technicians along with 200 instructors from around the world as the PTG Institute Director of Grand Rapids, MI. He also held the same title in Bellevue, WA. He is the only person who has headed more than one Institute. I couldn't have a better person looking after my piano.

Ward comes from a musical family. His grandfather sang in the church choir for 65 years. Ward's mother taught piano and his father, Harold, was a music teacher. "He mainly taught bands. One of his later jobs in life was Supervisor of Music for the Livingston School District." Following that job, Harold became assistant superintendent for the whole school district. "One summer he thought 'this is a lot of work.'" A turning point to solving his dilemma was when he realized, "I'm in charge of hiring and firing." That led him to approach the superintendent and ask, "Can I fire myself from being assistant superintendent and hire myself as the junior high school band director again?" He was told that wouldn't be a problem. "He finished his teaching career as the junior high band director in Livingston, Montana," Ward said. Harold didn't stay retired for long, though. He went on to become Livingston's mayor for two terms. The thread of politics was to be found elsewhere in the Guthrie family. "My older brother, Richard, majored in vocal music at the University of Montana. He went on to do performances in Alaska, where in Juneau, it appeared he was being groomed to become governor of Alaska." Richard passed away from a brain tumor before that could happen.

Ward's sister is a jazz musician in Colorado, and another brother is a music teacher, both majored in music. To his own background he said, "I majored in music education, with emphasis on clarinet, at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio." He later taught school at Montana State University in Bozeman before becoming a piano technician. His daughter, Angela Espinosa, is also an RPT. She is a performing musician, playing harp in the Bozeman and Billings Symphonies. She also teaches piano lessons. Ward's other three children, though heavily into music during high school, "still do music for personal enjoyment."

I asked Ward what music he was attracted to. "It boils down to classical orchestral . . . the Romantic Period: Wagner, Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky." He expanded on his love of concertos, "Tchaikovsky's 1st Piano Concerto, was one of my favorites for many, many years." He adds the Grieg Piano Concerto and Rachmaninoff's piano concertos. As much as he likes the piano concertos, he concluded, "for me being a clarinetist to begin with, it's orchestral."

Ward is the official tuner for Yellowstone Park, where he has spent the last 35 years working on pianos. At first glance, Ward appears to be unassuming. The photos of him for this piece reveal, subjectively, the jazz pianist Bill Evans; however, he also has a daredevil side with a wonderful sense of irony and humor. He has written about his exploits in this part of the world, "having been 'required' to see Yellowstone many times." Montana is not Disneyland. The dangers are real, the beauty is stunning, and, aside from being inhabited by people, it is also home to many wild animals. He has come into close quarters with grizzlies on a couple of occasions. One such encounter unfolded when he went to tune the piano of someone living at the "end of a mountain road near Yellowstone."

This was Ward's first time to his client's house, so the two of them exchanged pleasantries before going inside to begin work on the piano. Somewhat abruptly, the man asked, "would you like to meet my bear?" Ward was taken aback, "At first I thought he might be joking, but he pointed to an enclosure about 50 feet away." It consisted of a chain-link fence on four sides as well as across the top, with a small den in the corner. "By this time the bear heard us talking and came out to see who was there." The man told him that the bear, while friendly, could become "disappointed when he did not get to meet visitors." Ward negotiated with him about how often he let the bear roam freely. He was told "they let him wander inside their house like a pet dog!" He also went on to say, though, that when guests arrived they put him back in his cage.

"So did I want to meet him?" Ward thought, well, okay, sure. But that lasted only a moment. Red flags were surfacing fast.

Another factor had to be whether or not Ward trusted his client on the friendliness of the bear. He was getting a lot of contradictory information: the bear would be disappointed when he didn't meet visitors; he was usually put back in his cage when there *were* visitors. Ward was also advised that when the cage opened, the bear would "come running out, heading straight for you, and slam his snout into your crotch. Then he will root around for a while until he is satisfied you are okay."

The red flags were in full force.

What swung his decision to going through with it was pretty simple. "I might never get another chance to safely meet a bear." I'm not sure many of us would have framed it as safe.

There was one last instruction before letting the bear loose: "You must stand your ground . . . or my bear will think you do not like him, so he will not like you. He will probably show his teeth and growl at you. So stand your ground." Ward stood facing the charging bear, who indeed slammed into his crotch upon impact, rummaging about as he lifted him "off the ground a couple of times." When the bear was finally satisfied, Ward gathered himself, coming off of his adrenaline high, and the two of them "spent some time" with each other. "Just another day in the life of a tuner."

Beyond Yellowstone there is a world open to Ward Guthrie that belies what might seem like a solitary profession. That world is occupied by numerous personalities and shared interests, designed to inspire and give purpose to an occupation that is evolving each year while maintaining a balance of tradition. "We have an Annual Institute that lasts for three-and-a-half days of classes. It used to be four-and-a-half days," he said. "You get to spend time one on one with many of the great technicians around the United States and the world, such as the head concert technician for the Sydney Opera House." He has also met the head technician for the Chicago Symphony. There is a camaraderie that exists at these conventions which are held all over the United States. "I have also known and have spent time with the owners of some European piano manufacturers." The strength of the Institutes Ward attends is "you talk to

people who have encountered various problems with pianos,” he said. “If a piano was at one time a quality instrument, there’s numerous quick-fix things that I can do that’ll make it stay in tune.” He remarked that for some years now his involvement with the Annual Institutes has opened a rewarding path of teaching. He often teaches with people that he looks up to and highly respects. It is not only what he learns from them, it is about getting to spend time directly with them. He mentioned a seminar in Kansas City with Kathy Smith and David Vanderlip, two of the top technicians from Los Angeles. “To spend time with them and hearing them up front teaching, I learn a lot. David spends more time in the rebuilding and Kathy spends more time in the concert halls.” Like Ward, David and Kathy are with the PTG (Piano Technicians Guild). Those credentials are golden, he says.

At age 73 he has attended 36 Annual Institutes. His first took place in Cincinnati in 1975. His wife, Eileen, who handles Ward’s schedule, knew exactly what year he attended. He described the goings-on of his first convention: “. . . a lot of us are using electronic tuning devices now, but when they first came out it was just about that time in 1975. There was a River Dinner Cruise we went on and the fellow that developed the first really good one was Al Sanderson, and I spent oh, maybe 15, 20 minutes talking to him about his machine.” I asked Ward if he uses an electronic tuning device these days. “Yes and no,” he said. He makes use of it but considers himself an aural tuner, meaning he tunes by ear.

“But how I use it, which I think a lot of the better technicians do the same, is to save time and save stress. So what I do is put the string where the tuning device says to put it and then I listen and say is that right or not? And if it isn’t then I make it sound right by ear.” He told me a good example of that approach. He was tuning a Steinway Grand, a Spiro Grand, “. . .which is their modern high-end player grand piano. There were about three or four strings that if I put it where the machine said [it was in tune] it did not sound good, it just did not work. And what’s interesting, is after I tuned it by ear the machine said it was still right!” So much for relying on technology. We both had a good laugh.

“Have you ever met a piano,” I asked, “that you grit your teeth and say, man, I’ve got to tune this again?” He said, “Many technicians feel that way about spinets in general. Ideally and acoustically the bottom number one string on a piano should be 29 feet long. And so as you make pianos smaller and smaller, it’s harder and harder to get the sound and the overtone series to work just right.” He explained the bottom string of the spinet is only three feet long and the sound just isn’t there . . . “you can’t get all the partials and intervals to all work together. For a lot of technicians, they will go through the motions quickly of tuning the instrument, not worrying about it being great because you can never get ‘em great.” Ward’s approach is to take a little more time to do as good a job as possible. He brought up some brands that are less than optimum.

“One of them is called the Melodi Grand with an i. Those are terrible. Lester spinets are terrible. Many of the Aeolian spinets are bad,” he said. He explained that Aeolian is a company with a number of different manufacturers’ names attached to them, “. . . so there’s a couple of them there. I try and do as good as I can, but they’re just absolutely horrid.” He mentioned a

school—without revealing where it is—that has an instrument they’ve had him tune over and over again. He’d suggested they get rid of it more than a few times. “It’s absolutely impossible to tune,” he repeatedly told them. “They haven’t had me tune it since the last time I was there. So perhaps they finally took my advice.” He said he was much relieved as “that piano is the one I dread tuning the most.”

While there are temperamental pianos, there are also temperamental artists. Beyond the actual tuning and prepping of the piano, there lies the art of dealing with the personality of the artist. He listens to their complaints and concerns, writes things down, addresses what he can, and is there to build trust, letting the artist know he’s doing everything he possibly can to work with them. He is well aware that artists can find things that he can’t. “So I do what I can, and quite often that satisfies them. It’s my job to settle them down and solve what problems I can with them.” I said he didn’t have to name names if he didn’t wish to. Ward said, “I’ve run into that and have learned this from other people who have spent a lot more time in the concert halls than I do. One real good story is from a friend of mine. He had just carefully gone through prepping the piano for the concert and was really satisfied with it. Things went sour the moment the artist arrived and sat down to play it and then abruptly told anyone within earshot ‘I can’t play this piano! You’ve got to spend some time to make it work.’” Ward said his friend knew there was nothing else he could do to improve on what he had already done. After the artist went off in a huff, the tuner went back, waved his hands and “threw a hex on the piano and left.” Ward said, “The artist came back later and said, ‘I don’t what you did to it but it’s beautiful now.’”

One of the many things I admire about Ward is his thoroughness, his seeking out ways to add to his considerable knowledge. He is always learning about his craft. He recalled training at the Yamaha Little Red School House in Los Angeles many years ago. There is a procedure they teach called the 37 steps. It was suggested that Ward memorize each step before taking the exam. He studied in his vehicle on the long drive from Montana to California. Whenever he drove, Eileen would ask him questions from the book Yamaha provided. When Eileen drove, he studied the book and memorized it. Upon taking the test he was given clues; however, the clues were not matching up with what he had memorized. Ward was completely puzzled as to what had happened. The instructor told him that no one had ever memorized the 37 steps before, and that the clues didn’t match up because they had changed three of the steps! Ward is now one of the instructors.

And what are the 37 steps? He told me there were “26 steps on every single key, with the remaining steps for adjusting the pedal, bedding the keyframe, etc.” He noted “the heart of the mechanism is the jack, and the jack defines how the other parts work. The jack has to be square to the knuckle on the hammer shank. It has to be exactly a certain distance, front and back, it has to be a certain distance up and down.” Some of those measurements are within 1/1000th of an inch. . . . and if it’s 2/1000th something isn’t going to work right.” He amended his statement to say while it might work, it would not be topnotch. He told me of a 7’ Yamaha grand he had worked on years ago for one of the performing artists in Bozeman, Montana. The artist was well familiar with it, having played the instrument many times. The performer asked

the owner of the Yamaha to have Ward apply those steps to what was a relatively new instrument. Upon completion the artist said, "Ward, before you worked on this piano it was a Cadillac. It was beautiful, a wonderful piano. But now it's a Porsche."

I asked Ward regarding the number of pianos he's tuned and the number of parts in a grand piano. "The pianos that I have a record of tuning are 35,419. I am sure I have missed some. Also, I have done perhaps 4,000 pitch raises, which is a quick tune to get tension back on the strings. So when you add those together, I am just shy of 40,000. As far as the number of parts in a piano . . . I have a model of one key with the associated mechanism for that one key on my piano display. I just counted all the parts for that one key only. There are 127 parts for every key. Multiply that number for 88 keys, that comes to 11,176 parts for the keys only. Then in addition, you have all the parts in the body of the piano. My wild guess is there might be an additional 1,000 or more parts."

I wondered about the day-in and day-out wear and tear on his body, particularly to his hands, his eyes, and his ears. "I've been very aware of that my whole career. I'm kind of unusual in our industry. Most technicians have to start quitting around 20,000, 25,000 because it's hard on the body like you say." He addresses pain when he begins to feel it. "I ask myself 'why is that hurting?'" He knows the litany of aches and pains that can happen. "Quite often I'm using a muscle wrong or stressed or I have a position that my bones and muscles won't handle it; so I figure out what the issue is and solve it by changing my technique," adding, "most technicians work under a lot of pain."

A few times during his career he experienced severe pain coming from his elbow, fingers, and shoulder. He thought he would have to quit the industry. He found relief in trigger point massage, along with his analysis of the pain and, as importantly, his actions that brought it about. Thankfully, he was able to solve those issues. Ward illustrated the repetition of playing a string in order to bring it into tune. He uses the fingers in his left hand to hit the key over and over again. "I have to hit it pretty hard to get the string stable. What I attempt to do is to make my test blows as hard or slightly harder than anytime a performer will hit the key. Because if the performer hits it harder than I did, there's a good likelihood the string is going to leave tension across the bearing points and go out of tune." Ward told me this amounts to "thousands of strikes of the key, hard, on every single piano tuning. It's amazing that my joints and cartilage are still functional." He uses the technique that involves hitting a "hard, loud blow to the key, but your bones and structure doesn't take it because you release it instantly." Ward asked if I made use of the technique. I told him I was taught that, I'm quite sure, but it was so early in my training that I now do it unconsciously. I related the following to him: I had hurt my left thumb playing, pounding really, the acoustic piano too hard on stage—Little Feat was recording *Waiting For Columbus*. I made the decision to lighten up my touch. I had to or I could have risked permanent nerve damage, not only to my thumb but the side of my hand, as well. I thought if the band can't hear me then so be it.

When I asked him about the health of his eyes, he stopped me and said, “Actually my eyes aren’t as important. I do an awful lot of tuning with my eyes closed, in fact I focus better.” He acknowledged that blind technicians he knows can do everything he does.

He and I talked about the craft of what he does, the romance of it. I told him what was romantic about it to me was imagining that he could be tinkering on an old Chevy and be quite content. It turned out I wasn’t wrong. I realized though, I had never asked Ward how he became a piano technician.

“I was in 4th grade. I always enjoyed tinkering with things. One time Mom’s kitchen clock quit, and she was going to throw it away.” He asked if he could see how it worked. Upon opening it he “discovered what was wrong and repaired it. She used that clock until I was in college.”

While he attended Oberlin College, they offered a semester-long class in piano technology. He went as far as to adjust his schedule as a junior but to no avail. The demand for the class was so great that by the time he registered only seniors were allowed to take it. Upon organizing his senior schedule he was once again prevented from taking the course as it was removed from the curriculum. And though his interest in studying piano technology was delayed, his sense of purpose was far from being put off indefinitely.

He spent three years teaching in public schools in Sunburst, Montana, before teaching as an adjunct faculty member at Montana State University. “Larry Sowell, the clarinet instructor, was taking a sabbatical. During that year, the piano technician, Ed Graff, joked with me a few times that he was working 20 hours a day, eight days a week tuning and repairing pianos. He suggested I quit teaching for a year and see how I liked the profession. I was young and we had no kids, so I said ‘Sure.’” Ed was generous in helping Ward, sharing a few of his clients. Within a year, despite the difficulties of getting started and adding to his roster of clients, Ward’s heart was in being a piano technician rather than a teacher.

We never know where life is going to turn. Tragedy struck. As Ward described it, “About four or five years later, Ed was working one night on a grand piano in his shop.” It was late, around midnight, when Ed decided to move the piano. The floor was neither even nor smooth. He attempted to move the piano by pulling it towards himself, resulting in the piano leg breaking and the weight of the instrument falling on his foot “. . . pinning him to the floor in the middle of the shop.” It took him hours—Ward thought three to four agonizing hours—before he was able to free himself by working his crushed foot out of his shoe. He died approximately six months later from complications of that injury.

Ward now held the position as the “only piano technician in town.” He had lost his mentor but was prepared for the path that opened up along with the attendant responsibilities.

All of us need help, guidance, and confidence that can be critical in helping us achieve our goals. Ward has been surrounded by many people who have shaped his professional life, a good many of them from Los Angeles. LaRoy Edwards is at the top of the list. LaRoy was “one of the

instructors at the Yamaha Little Red Schoolhouse,” still considered one of the “top technicians in the world.” Others imparted their gifts to Ward: what it means to be a professional; the importance of trying to achieve the perfect tuning, even though it is unachievable; the importance of developing relationships with people; understanding the mathematics of tuning along with the geometry of how a piano works; the regulation of the instrument and the craftsmanship that goes into the vital process of maintenance. It is one thing to be given support and instruction and quite another to absorb those lessons and apply them. It is complicated and requires constant and renewed attention to detail.

In tackling a complete action rebuild, involving many parts—other than keeping the keys and the frame—Ward takes off the hammers, the wippens, the jacks, throws them all away and orders those parts from Steinway or whatever piano company it is and then puts them all back together. “There’s been numerous times, and it’s really kind of funny ‘cause I start out and put them all back on and the piano absolutely won’t even function.” I laughed at that. “And I say I’m in trouble,” bringing more laughter from both of us. “I just start down through the process: do this step, do this step, do this step, and when I’m done it’s amazing that they work so well. Pianos are so well designed if you have good quality parts.” He told me he doesn’t do a lot of major rebuilding of pianos. “I don’t do any soundboard work, I don’t do bridge work.” Fortunately for me, though, he also does work on the regulation of the piano. My piano was in dire need of his attention.





Other than a few incidents when I could direct Ward to a problem with the instrument, his main objective has been to tune my piano. He made minor adjustments over the years, of course, but given my travel schedule, I was not focused on what I wanted from the instrument. With Covid-19 all of that changed. Ward and I had a heart-to-heart talk about what he could provide to elevate the quality of the piano I was now becoming reacquainted with. He handed me a brochure from the Piano Technicians Guild entitled TECHNICAL BULLETIN. The topic was regulation of the piano and the considerations of having it done. I had noticed an unevenness to the sound when I played. If I struck one note, I could hear—depending on how hard or soft I hit the key—unwanted overtones occurring along with aberrant noise manifest in a harshness from the string(s). He asked me to make a list of what I was hearing and where it was on the keyboard. He advised me that that process was something I would have to do a few times as he went about regulating the instrument. It was summertime in Montana. Ward told me he would like to pull the action (the actual keyboard) out of the instrument and work on it outside, as there would be attendant dust from him cleaning and literally shaving down the felt on the hammers. He would do the work but we would work together on the details of bringing the sound of the instrument to what I would like. I've always made use of the soft pedal when playing at home. He told me that in general he could soften the sound of the piano in addition to my using that pedal. It was a wonderful suggestion and once implemented made playing more rewarding. Ward warned me, because of critical listening, I would be aware of more things that should be addressed. He was right. Nothing overwhelming, but as my attention was

drawn to something he suggested I should document the problem and see if there was a consistency to it. Such a problem occurred that required his coming back to the house.

I had asked Ward to check out a squeak I was hearing while playing the left pedal. I played the piano that afternoon and heard the noise. It was intermittent, which never bodes well for finding something when you need to. In this case Ward arrived and I played the piano for him and no noise could be discerned. He saw I was wearing my socks and shared another story with me. There was another pianist whose home instrument was making noises similar to what I was describing to him. This fellow had several people check it out but to no avail. He finally invited three people to his house to see if they could find the source of the noise, a squeak. They were standing around the piano, I imagined it not unlike a few guys standing around an old car that needed work. He kept playing but none of them could hear anything. Finally, one of them said, "I know this sounds crazy but take off your shoes." The fellow continued to play and lo and behold they heard the squeak. The man who made the suggestion said, "This probably sounds even crazier but take off your socks." He did so and they heard nothing again. It turned out that the noise that was driving the guy nuts was coming from his foot rubbing inside his sock creating an audible squeak. Problem solved!

No such luck with my squeak. We never found it. He lubricated a few parts, which made sense. I played it, and, of course, to my quiet exasperation, everything sounded fine. He left to drive home. I went back to the piano, sat down and played it and the squeak occurred within a minute or so. Such is life.

We live in highly charged times. I was taken back with this story Ward related to me in my kitchen following work on my piano.

He told me about a Montana chapter meeting that took an ugly turn. One of the members was so upset at Ward he threatened to shoot him. I was incredulous. Why I asked? "There were many reasons but the final straw was this person wanted to be the president of the chapter in Montana and I wanted someone else who lived in Great Falls." Ward relayed what had happened to Eileen and his children and said he needed to attend the next meeting to at least stand up to the person if nothing else. He told them when leaving that if he was shot he hoped he would at least be close enough to the hospital to arrive there before dying. The other board member from Great Falls had also told his wife he thought he might be shot, as well. He was elected president of the chapter without further incident.

It never fails that I learn some interesting revelation about the person I'm writing about towards the end of a project. On a call to ask some follow-up questions, Eileen casually told me that Ward, who was not available, had been a firefighter. When Ward and I spoke a day later, I mentioned that conversation to him. He laughed and said yes, that along with his brother, they had been firefighters in Montana and Idaho, when he had been in college. The first summer they had volunteered as a pick up crew. There had been an abundance of fires late that summer in Gallatin and Park County of Montana. They found the work rewarding. The next summer they applied to the forest service for the regular crew. "My brother got a job offer working in Idaho on a district crew, which he accepted. A day later he got an offer to work on a

hotshot crew in northern Idaho.” He recommended they hire Ward, who was the same height and build. Ward spent two summers in northern Idaho, explaining to me that “the smoke jumpers are the first ones to hit a fire and then they put the hotshot crews in next. And so it’s initial fire suppression when the fire’s at its worst and at its hottest.” A dangerous job not to be taken lightly under any circumstances.

From Montana summer fires to its bone-chilling winters, he has seen and participated in it all. Having played a couple of gigs with Leftover Salmon in extreme winter conditions, I know how crazy things can get. It comes down to commitment. Well, that, and a you want to dare-me-not-to-do-this attitude. Ward has a firm handshake with commitment and hanging over the edge. He calls it “Extreme Piano Tuning.”

On what Ward described as a “normal December winter weekend” in Montana, he undertook the task of tuning a piano on a golf course at the Montana Big Sky ski resort. The instrument, a 9’ Steinway, trucked in from Salem, Oregon, was slated for a series of three concerts across the weekend, “In A Landscape: Classical Music in the Wild.” And wild it was. “Snow on the ground was 15 inches deep, so the trailer/stage was towed into position by a snow cat.” The piano sat in the trailer that night with a “normal quilted piano cover” as its only protection. There was no heat in the trailer. The temperature that night was 0°F. Tuning would commence the next day, Saturday.

At noon, dressed in “long johns and layers under my heavy coat,” he made use of an “insulated glove on my tuning hammer hand,” but his left hand was exposed to the elements, his fingers starting to go numb. The temperature was sitting at 9°F with a 15 mph wind, adding to the worry of frostbite in wind chills well below zero.

What on earth did the promoters of this event have in mind? “The program included the slow movement from the Ravel Piano Concerto accompanied by an orchestral recording.” This made it mandatory for the piano to be tuned at A-440; otherwise, Ward could have “floated” the pitch—tuning could have started higher of A-440—for “better stability.” The piano was already well sharp by 10 to 25 cents.

He tried but failed to get any stability from the pitch correction mode on his Cybertuner. “I decided to instead concentrate on unisons and unison stability and let the intervals float.” In other words, he was attempting to bring the octaves (from, let’s say C to C, D to D and so on) in tune and let the notes in between fall where they may. It was an exercise in compromise, and not a bad strategy given that “most of the unisons sounded fine” even though there were some that were not meeting the test, along with the problems with other intervals. The first performance took place that Saturday.

On Sunday he once again began tuning around noon. The piano had been left sitting in the snow overnight in a balmy 7°F temp. Sunday afternoon was around 15°F. The pitch of the instrument was now “4 to 15 cents flat,” from the day before when it was sharp. “When I tune using pitch correction mode, I begin at the bottom and work up.” When tuning in the middle

range of the piano, he couldn't understand why the pitch checks were not aligning as they should. He realized that "the sun was now shining on the strings, adding warmth of up to 35°F." The piano was drifting dramatically sharp. He had to start tuning again, figuring that the afternoon performance would be in the sun, so he had something to work with.

Not so for the evening performance. The moon was full, not a cloud in the sky, that beautiful evening. He began tuning at 6:00 p.m. The stage was dark because the lights were deemed to be used only for the performance. With "sparkles of frost dancing in the light from my headlamp" Ward was enjoying the experience. The pitch this time was ranging from 5 to 15 cents sharp. When he started tuning the temp was at 9°F, when he finished at 1°F. It didn't feel as cold as Saturday had with the wind. "The tuning actually seemed good when I finished. Not great, but good. Unisons and most intervals were quite decent." A great way to end his part of a challenging but successful weekend.

Ward returned to the house a week later to touch up the piano with the elusive squeak. He did some minor adjustments, shared another story, and drove off into the sunset. I sat down at the piano and played. The tone was beautiful, the squeak was non-existent, the consistency to the touch and feel of the action (the weight of pressure it took to press down on any given keys) accorded a control and confidence I hadn't felt in years. As I played I wandered into a familiar territory, a refuge of the tactile and aural, transporting me to another place. I've done it all my life. It's what drew me to playing the piano in the first place. I thank Ward for his part in bringing my piano and me back together in what has been an enduring conversation, at once intimate, productive, and magical.

Bill

Montana, February 2021

My heartfelt thanks to Ward and Eileen for all they've generously shared with me. And, as always, my thanks to my friend and editor Gary Bays for his thoughtful approach to making me look good. My love to Polly for the same, and more.