

# Four Days in the Life of a Grand Piano

1946. The war is over, and the baby boom begins. Tupperware is introduced to American consumers, and AT&T announces the first car phone. One gallon of gas will set you back 15 cents, two pounds of coffee 84 cents, and the average new house, \$5,600. The United Nations holds its first meeting in London, and along the bucolic banks of the East River in Astoria, Queens, a model S grand piano is built by the Steinway & Sons company and given the serial number 320202. Seventy-four years later, St. Mark's had technician Paul Wesley from Piano Emporium of Asheville spend a week working on #320202, and we're excited to share some pictures and information about the process with you.



The first order of business was to give our piano a good dusting. This is a little more involved than dusting your credenza. Piano technicians have special tools to dust the **soundboard**, which is the thin sheet of wood below the strings, responsible for making them resonate. Using a series of brushes, Paul carefully removed a few decades worth of dust from the entire soundboard.

Here is a picture of the **action** of our piano. The action is the mechanism whereby a hammer strikes a string when a key is depressed. In this picture the keys are on the far right, and the hammers on the far left. Because the piano makes sound in this way, it is sometimes classified as percussion instrument.



With the action removed from the piano, Paul begins **regulation**. Regulation is the process of adjusting the action so that a consistent tone and response to the fingers is produced across the entire keyboard. There are 88 keys on a grand piano, and each key has over 35 different points of adjustment!



In order to accommodate our recording schedule, Paul took the entire action back to his shop. Paul has been tuning pianos in Western North Carolina since 2002. Morganton's COMMA theater, The Orange Peel in Asheville, and Harrah's casino in Cherokee are a few of the concert venues where he frequently tunes. He is also the head technician and piano rebuilder and piano restoration specialist at Piano Emporium.

The **hammers** of a piano are covered in felt, which must be not too hard and not too soft. Over time, the felt becomes flattened and grooved from striking the strings, as seen in this picture. Part of the work included reshaping these hammers to their proper egg shape.



The **keys** of the piano were leveled, further helping to ensure proper response across the entire instrument. Except for the very lowest, there are actually three strings for every note. These sets of strings are tuned exactly the same, so we hear only one pitch per key.

Most grand pianos have three **pedals**. The leftmost is the soft pedal, which shifts the keyboard to mute all but one string, softening and changing the tone. The middle is the sostenuto pedal, which allows the player to sustain chosen notes. The rightmost is the damper pedal, which sustains all notes. Our pedals were tightened after becoming loose over the year.





After everything else was done, Paul cleaned the keys and polished the case. The case is constructed from bent hardwood laminates; add to that the cast iron frame inside, and our piano weighs over 500 pounds. It was owned by Chamin Meadows, organist and choir director at St. Mark's. It belonged to her mother, who was a major supporter of the local symphony where they lived in Florida. It is said that at one of her soirées, it was played by the world-famous composer and conductor Krzysztof Penderecki. Chamin donated the piano to us in the '90s when she could no longer play due to Parkinson's disease, and it has been enriching our worship life ever since.

*Alright, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up.*

This work was made possible by the Saint Cecilia Music Fund at St. Mark's. The Saint Cecilia fund provides money for special musical projects and events. It has allowed us to host solo and duet piano performances, college tour choirs, jazz combos, a folk ensemble from Russia, and other events that serve to enrich our lives and welcome the community into our space. Thank you very much to the many people who have contributed over the years. If you are interested in making a gift, please contact the church office.



*Orazio Gentileschi and Giovanni Lanfranco, Saint Cecilia and an Angel, c. 1617/1618 and c. 1621/1627, oil on canvas*