Tempo

Chicago Tribune Tuesday, January 2, 1990

Franz Mohr, chief piano technician of Steinway & Sons: a comfort to sweaty-palmed stars.

Instrumental to greatness

From Van Cliburn to Elton John, famous pianists depend on this musical mechanic for a tune-up

By Howard Reich
Entertainment writer

He has advised Elton John, aided Arthur Rubinstein, rescued Rudolf Serkin and comforted the late Vladimir Horowitz.

Though he never will be a household name—except, perhaps, in some of the world's most exclusive households—he has been responsible for more beautiful music than any performer who comes to mind.

Mention virtually any legendary pianist—Van Cliburn, Alfred Brendel, Jerry Lee Lewis, whoever—and chances are that an unassuming fellow with a slight German accent and a silver mustache helped make his music possible.

Franz Mohr, you see, is piano tuner to the stars.

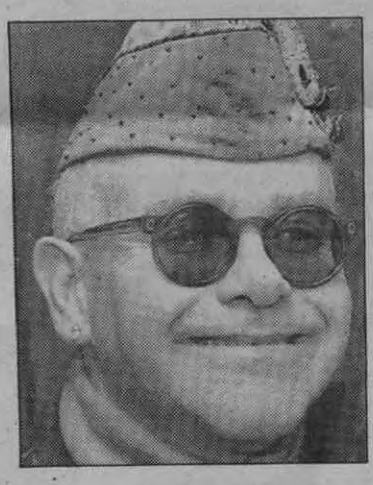
"You have to be part psychologist, part Father Confessor, part mechanic in this job," says Mohr, whose formal title is Chief Concert Technician for Steinway, the instrument favored by most (though certainly not all) of the world's major concert pianists. In his 28 years of toiling on Steinways in the United States (he has been Chief Concert Technician since 1968), Mohr has been backstage comforting more famous, sweaty-palmed artists than anyone else in the business.

He has seen our keyboard heroes at their most vulnerable moments, just before they walk on stage to face their critics and fans.

"I'll never forget what Horowitz said to me once in Rochester [N.Y.] just before he was about to give a comeback concert," recalls Mohr, who has been reflecting on Horowitz a great deal since the virtuoso's death in November at age 86.

"All of a sudden, the house lights went down, the audience became completely silent and the stage lights went up. The floor manager opened the stage door, and before Horowitz walked through it he turned around to me and said: 'Franz, that is the most lonely place in the world.'

"At that moment I said to myself: 'Thank the Lord I am just the piano tuner'—I would never have the nerve to walk out there."



Mohr's clients have included: Van Cliburn (from top), Elton John, Arthur Rubinstein.

Nerves, however, are an integral part of Mohr's life, for it is he who must calm fidgety pianists, assuring them that the instrument sounds precisely as they wish.

Because each Steinway piano has roughly 12,000 parts put into place by nearly 200 pairs of hands, no two instruments sound alike. With a few well-placed twists of the tuning hammer, Mohr can make a piano sound brilliant or mellow, icy or warm. Each of the instrument's 88 keys holds the potential for a rainbow of colors, and only one person—the virtuoso piano tuner—can give a performer the particular palette he needs.

"You have no idea all of the things that can go wrong with an instrument," explains Mohr, who has encountered them all.

"Take a piano off of an ice-cold truck, put it into a warm concert hall, and the instrument probably will go into shock. It may lurch out of tune, its sound will be entirely different from the way it was 24 hours before.

"The humidity will attack the felt and wood of the instrument, and a brilliant-sounding instrument now will be dull, muddy and out of tune. A mess!"

When this happens, even the most sure-fingered pianist is likely to be unnerved.

"You won't believe what happened when I tuned the piano for Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli," says Mohr, referring to one of the brainiest—and one of the most jittery—of today's concert pianists.

"When I heard Michelangeli practicing before the concert, it was obvious the piano needed work badly, especially because it was brand new and hadn't settled in. Michelangeli, unfortunately, wanted to get the sound right all by himself, insisting on practicing—on stage—until the last possible moment before the concert.

"So in the morning [of the performance] I started fighting with him, saying: 'Maestro, I must have two hours at least to fix this piano.' But he ignored me and kept on practicing.

"Then we were down to one hour, then a half hour—and I was begging him to give me a chance at the piano.

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Tuner

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minutes, and they were holding the audience outside the hall; still, Michelangeli couldn't tear himself away from the keyboard.

"At last, he looked up at me and said: 'All right—I'll give you 10 minutes.'

"That's when I said: 'Maestro, it is all over. I warned you time and again. I can do nothing in 10 minutes—now I will not even touch your piano.'

"Sure enough, the next day the newspaper critics wrote, 'It's too bad the maestro was given a piano that was completely out of tune.'

"Who do they blame? The piano tuner, of course."

Horowitz's giant sound

Such is the life of America's titan of the tuning-fork. Never dull.

● Not long ago Mohr received a nearly hysterical phone call from master pianist Rudolf Serkin, who had arrived in San Francisco to find that "the piano was in terrible condition. Rudie, who is one of the most appreciative pianists I have ever worked with, pleaded with me.

"'Franz,' he said on the phone, 'the hammers are like rocks, the piano sounds like a harpsichord. Can't you please take the next plane out of New York to come fix it?'" (Mohr obliquely, discovering that someone had overlacquered the hammers, which had to be stripped—one at a time.)

● When Horowitz made his sensational orchestral comeback in 1978 playing Rachmaninoff's torturously difficult Third Concerto in New York with the Philadelphia Orchestra), the pianist was so nervous in the hours before the performance that "he kept fighting with me, saying, 'Franz, I need more tone, I need more tone!'

"And Horowitz made me build up the tone [increase the volume] of that instrument so much, he pushed me so far, that, in my estimation, the instrument didn't even sound like a piano anymore.

"When I listen to the recording of that performance, I find it so horrible that I have to discipline myself just to sit still and listen to the whole thing.

"In later years, however, Horowitz came to see the virtues of a mellower piano."

● And when Mohr labors for the likes of Elton John or Jerry Lee Lewis, he finds that "they are absolutely no different than the classical pianists, although Jerry Lee hits the piano a little harder and therefore needs a mellower-sounding instrument, so that the tone doesn't become ugly.

"But backstage they are mostly alike, nervous in one degree or another about going on."

Mohr's unusual musical journey began in his native Duren, Germany, where he had aspired to be a concert violinist.

Valdimir Horowitz calls out a giant sound from the Steinway he always played.

Rapport with an instrument

Yet Mohr hastens to add that not every great virtuoso is a bundle of highly wired nerves.

"Arthur Rubinstein was wonderful—he didn't have a drop of neurotic blood," says Mohr, referring to the legendary *bon vivant* of the ivories.

"Some pianists, you know, can't make up their mind when they're picking a piano for an upcoming concert tour. Finally, they narrow it down to two pianos, bring them both on stage for rehearsal and still cannot make up their mind.

"Not Rubinstein. He would come here to the Steinway showroom [on West 57th Street in Manhattan], where I would line up five pianos in a row for him to choose.

"And he would sit down at the first piano and say: 'This is so beautiful, this is the one I take.'

"And I would say: 'But maestro, don't you want to even try the others?'

"He would reply: 'Either I have a relationship to an instrument immediately, or I don't. I love this piano. Now let's go to lunch.'"

Similarly, Van Cliburn—who recently returned to the concert stage after an 11-year absence—apparently retains the enthusiasm of a man half his 55 years.

"I was with him backstage in Philadelphia this summer when he played with orchestra, and I was with him in Dallas in September, and he didn't show a bit of nervousness: he was in fantastic shape," says Mohr.

"Just give Van a brilliant piano, and he does the rest. He doesn't complain—he knows how to enjoy himself at the keyboard."

Wrists cut short career

For Mohr, this unusual musical journey began in his native Düren, Germany, where he had aspired to be a concert violinist, studying in various conservatories from childhood. By the time he was 23, however, he had developed wrist problems, "and finally I had to face the terrible fact that I could not pursue an active musical career. At that point the world fell apart for me.

"Eventually, I saw an ad in a [Cologne] newspaper saying that a piano factory was looking for apprentices, and I thought I would give it a try. At least that had something to do with music.

Mohr estimates that it took him more than a decade to learn his art.

"But it wasn't until I started truly working on pianos that I realized I was really gifted with my hands when it comes to converting an instrument into doing what I wanted it to do."

Even more important than his hands, however, was Mohr's ear, which—having been sensitized to musical sonorities through a lifetime of study—enabled him to hear the subtlest gradations of pitch and tone quality.

Mohr estimates that it took him more than a decade to learn his art, and, to this day, aspiring piano technicians from around the world travel to New York to study with the master.

"I do not make it easy for my students," says Mohr. "I put them in solitary confinement in a training room, where they have to tune all day under my supervision.

"It is a long process—it takes years even to know if you have the gift to be a tuner for a Horowitz or a Rubinstein.

"Some people, though they try very hard and work with me for a long time, I must finally give up on them and turn them away.

"I tell them, 'Although you have very musical hearing, I have come to the conclusion that you never will be a first-class technician. We are all gifted in different ways—try something else.'"

Happy Birthday, Horowitz

Despite such a heartbreaking chore, Mohr, 62, remains convinced that he holds the best job in the musical world.

"You wouldn't believe all the letters I got from people when Horowitz died," says Mohr.

"Deutsche Grammophon [which released several of Horowitz's final recordings], sent me a beautiful note saying that 'behind Horowitz was the technician who created that beautiful tone.'

"Of course, it was really Horowitz who created the tone—I just gave him the best instrument.

"I'll never forget his last birthday party, which was at his [New York] townhouse," adds Mohr. "All sorts of celebrities were there: Isaac Stern, Zubin Mehta, Woody Allen, many more.

"And Horowitz pulled me down on the couch next to him, while everyone else was standing, and said to me in a whisper:

"'Franz, you are the most important person here.'"