
Pianos I Have Known

By Kenneth Maue

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The first piano I owned was mine for five minutes. I'd moved into a remote cabin, ideal for playing music, and, short of money, had patiently, fervently, waited for a free or cheap piano to appear. A friend who taught school phoned. "We have a piano that was supposed to be hauled out months ago. The janitor's so keen to get rid of it, just come take it."

I rushed over and played a few bars. Beautiful! A classic old upright. It wasn't glamorous -- nursery blue, banged up -- but the actions worked, ivories were intact, and O! that sound! Most old uprights, even the humble ones, really sing. For depth of soul, true speaking voice, few instruments equal them. Never mind that it was out of tune. It sang. I loved it right away.

A friend offered his truck, assuring me he often moved pianos. A few blocks from the school, the truck lurched, Bob braked, and two sounds tore my heart: a dry wood splat like dropped kindling, and the long eerie clang of the strings' last chord. The piano had snapped its ropes and smashed on the pavement. It was no longer a piano. A gold sports car struck the debris and the furious driver picked a fight with the cop. Bob straightened them out and an hour later we slid the blue piano's remains into the county dump.

Rosewood Chickering

Heartbroken, I got lucky again. News of the blue piano spread fast. A friend offered her Chickering upright on easy terms. Chickering was the USA's best piano before Steinway took over. This one was built in 1904; rosewood case, bright golden voice, definite bass. I lined up a crew of engineering-smart friends and it took us half a day to coax the nine-hundred pound box down the narrow cliff-edge path to my house.

So began a new era of my musical life. The Chickering remade my tunes and my soul. Instruments, like all things, shape us, but uniquely so: they're more like intelligent beings than tools of our will, creating sounds alive as fire yet articulate too.

Touching any piano I listen for what it knows, and fit my music to it: a talk between pianist and piano. The Chickering, by its wide range of subtle tonal shading, molded my raw "roll" tunes -- rolling rhythms driving deep-felt harmonies -- into a choir of stories. It gave my voice its tongue. It taught me to speak.

The Night I First Rolled

Earlier, I'd learned to roll on a small upright a friend had inherited and lacked space for. Keeping it for him, I began to play for the first time since music school where, dodging orthodoxy, I'd stopped, having studied since age seven. Its maker's name escapes me; it had a pretty varnished case and ringing tone. On that piano I relearned music from scratch.

Using finger motions, not ideas, for guidance, I built up the habits, common nowadays, of pattern evolution: phrases yielding their own variants. These habits redefined harmony (mobility, not tension-release), melody (emerging voices, not statements), form (steps, not maps), and rhythm (relationship, not measure). I might have learned this with another piano but the little upright's unusual resonance -- blending of overtones -- gave the exact key to unlocking these organic habits.

Listening to that piano's vivid resonance, I heard how the vibrations' tiny waves can bind the music. This came to me by slow dawning, then a flash: the night I first rolled. Imagine pushing a friend on a swing. You start with lots of muscle, then it's easier, then effortless -- pushing in phase with the swinging. That's roll: feeding a wave its own power; in music, shaping the entire music, even the overall form, on the overtones, to get perpetual-motion lift and unity.

One night, during a strong dance rhythm, the tune suddenly powered itself, ease replacing effort. Thrilling! With practice I learned to control the effect. I called it roll because that's what it does. (Rock 'n' roll originally rocked and rolled -- dig those big turning wheels in "Lucille" -- then after the British invasion only rocked -- like the jackhammering of "Glad All Over.") That pretty little upright, with its rich resonant overtones, started me rolling.

Glue and Clamp

My boyhood piano was a tall elegant upright by Vose & Sons. A family friend who taught me classical piano for ten years, Harry Crowley, chose it at the store with my dad. My first musical discovery, sitting at the Vose, amazes me to this day: one of nature's great mysteries. Seven years old, I played a note. Lovely. Another. Good. Then two at once. What was this? I could hardly believe my ears.

With child's mind I expected two notes, like two colors, to mix as a new one. But they both sounded! I tried more. Same. However many notes I played, each note remained itself. Then and now, this has seemed to me a marvel. Only one object fills a space; logic calls a thing true or false; ownership is unique. Sound alone makes room for all: a clue to how human peace might work?

The Vose taught mechanics too. Uprights have a joint in each action that comes apart when the glue fails. It's easy to fix. I learned at age eight, doing it routinely for years. You take the front off the case, undo four thumb nuts, and lift out the works. Two screws release the broken action. The broken joint is two pieces of hardwood machined like metal, fitting snugly. All they need is a dab of glue. It's always a nuisance when these joints fail, but fixing them brings a satisfaction rare in modern life.

To Wake the Angels

I now play an old Christman upright I got free. The day I rented a rehearsal loft I walked to a thrift shop for furniture. Did they ever sell pianos? No, never carried them -- except by chance, out back, they'd had two that week. A tuner got the good one; I could try the other. Stashed in a corner, filthy with dust, ivories gummy, tilted by a missing foot, it revealed, in six bars of music, a voice to wake the angels. The store man said it was mine to haul away; I gave him \$20 to hold it for a week.

Other pianos are more powerful; but no sound on earth is more beautiful than this old upright. I scrubbed the case, vacuumed the inside (tuner's card: June 17, 1941, Scranton, Pennsylvania), washed the ivories, and called the tuner. He pointed out details that mark a

good piano, such as its strong pegboard, which holds the tuning well. The Christman now glows.

Call It Love

It, too, has changed my music. Haunting, echoing, it is more a force of nature than a human device: howling wind, soaking rain, the fury of a dance-hall cancan. It digs out the marrow, bares raw tissue. I cannot hide anything from the Christman, nor put on airs; it pulls my blood into the air.

How does a human-made object of plain design -- you can see each part work -- reach the soul's inner chambers? This piano, a modest instrument built for a family home, now age-worn, speaks memories and secrets, grief and hilarity, loves carnal and divine. It does not so much tell my meaning as read the world through the evidence of my bones.

I have known many pianos; in truth each has known me. Even the blue piano, crying its last from the street, awoke me to why I live. We say the sound of instruments is a deed of human invention; I say, call it love.

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