



Book Review: *Pianos Inside and Out*, by Mario Igréc

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When I began my training as a piano technician in 1972, my teacher had us buy a book called *Regulating and Repairing of Pianos*, published by Tuners Supply Company of Boston. No author is credited and the original publication date is not listed in the front pages, but I got a rough idea of the book's age from the following advice on salesmanship, on page 149: "Wear a clean shirt and tie. Your trousers, waistcoat and hat should be well-brushed." Although the book contains much good and useful information, it was obviously out of date by 1972! Being a person who learns by reading as much as by listening to teachers, I was desperate to find more printed information about working on pianos.

Most of the books about piano technology that had been published by the early 1970s were either out of date or out of print by then. By my recollection, only John Travis's two books, *A Guide to Restringing and Let's Tune Up*, and W. Dean Howell's *Professional Piano Tuning*, were in print and still useful at the time. William Braid White's redoubtable "bible" of piano tuning, *Piano Tuning and Allied Arts*, was still in print, but parts were quite out of date.

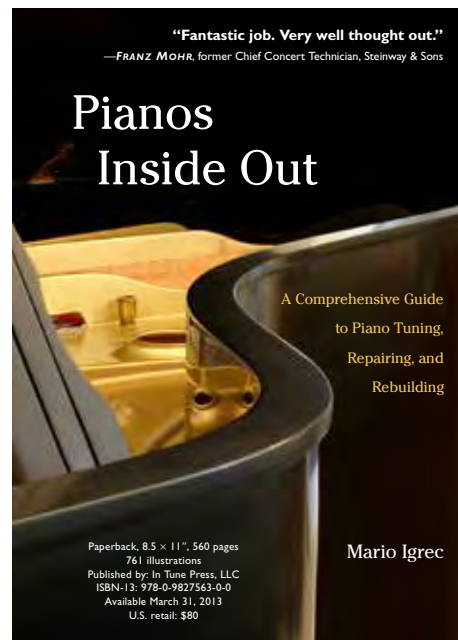
The literature now available is huge by comparison—consider that in 1972 the Piano Technicians Guild had existed for only about 15 years. The Journal articles alone from the past 40 years have added considerably to our literature. *Piano Tuning, Repair & Rebuilding*, by Floyd Stevens, appeared in 1972, and Arthur Reblitz's *Piano Servicing, Tuning & Rebuilding* was originally published in 1976. Both of these books aim to be comprehensive texts on the subject of piano technology.

The publication of any new book in our field should be a cause for celebration, and we've had a lot to celebrate recently. The past half-dozen years alone

have seen the publication of two excellent and very technical treatises on tuning: *The Craft of Piano Tuning*, by Dan Levitan, RPT, and *Theory and Practice of Piano Tuning*, by Brian Capleton as well as a revised edition of Rick Baldassin's seminal *On Pitch*. During the same half-dozen years Capleton's *Piano Action Regulating*, André Oorebeek's *The Voice of the Piano* and my own *Under the Lid: The Art and Craft of the Concert Piano Technician* also saw publication.

Into this pantheon now comes *Pianos Inside Out*, by Mario Igréc. Due for publication by about the time this issue of the Journal hits the streets, I believe it is the first attempt at a comprehensive guide to piano technology since the second edition of Reblitz appeared in 1993. After reading through a late version of the text (this is in February, before the actual publication of the book), I must say that *Pianos Inside Out* is certainly the most ambitious book on piano technology ever written, and very likely the most complete and successful. The book is big, tipping the scales at a robust 3.3 pounds and running to 560 pages, including 761 illustrations and photos. But what really makes it unique is that it not only covers a very broad spectrum of piano technology topics, but does so in much greater depth than one would expect for a book covering such a wide range of topics.

Pianos Inside Out begins with a preface or introduction that explains how to use the book, and offers a few precautions. The first chapter provides a nicely concise and accurate guide to the history and development of the instrument and a discussion of current market trends. Chapter Two is a 72-page introduction to the design and construction of pianos that is quite detailed for a survey book like this. The chapter on tuning explains the theory of tempering the scale and even discusses inharmonicity, including



all the math, and features nine practical lessons on learning to tune a piano. This is not a correspondence course or even a guide that would, by itself, enable most people to learn how to tune, but certainly this section would be nice for reference material if a person were learning to tune by apprenticing or studying at a school. The tuning chapter ends with advice on pitch-raising and a discussion of electronic tuning devices. The information is up-to-date, with descriptions of all the currently available ETDs. The book's third chapter is a brief treatise on how to maintain a piano properly. It contains information that would be useful to piano technicians, piano owners, and institutions alike.

Chapter Four, on action regulation, begins with advice about protecting the customer's property as well as protecting yourself from rodent-borne diseases and toxic chemicals sometimes found in pianos. Igréc explains how to gain access to different kinds of pianos to remove and work on the actions. Next is a discussion of friction in the action and what to do about it, including lubricant charts show-

ing what lubricant to use where. The actual procedure for regulation in this chapter is quite thorough and detailed. Igréc later presents a whole chapter on touchweight, geometry, inertia, and playability. A true polymath, Igréc is not only a piano technician, but a concert-level pianist as well, which gives him extra insight into what a pianist needs from the action.

The chapter on voicing is detailed and excellent, as is the chapter on repairs. There is even a chapter on moving pianos, for those who are so inclined. Chapter Nine, on touch, geometry, and playability, is about as detailed and thorough as anything I've seen, short of Walter Pfeiffer's two books on action design. Igréc describes many practical suggestions for dealing with an unsatisfactory touch, among them spring-assisted wippen, the Scott Jones TouchRail™, and altering the action leverage ratio by various means including altering knuckle distance, capstan position, and balance point.

Igréc's 164-page chapter on rebuilding could qualify as a book all by itself.

I believe this is the most comprehensive exposition on piano rebuilding I've ever seen anywhere. It covers most rebuilding procedures except soundboard replacement, and in a fair amount of detail. For instance, there is a very current chart listing the various options we have for replacement hammers, discussing the characteristics of each.

I find very little to criticize in *Pianos Inside Out*. Some may object that the section on hammer replacement shows only freehand methods for tapering, shaping, and hanging the hammers rather than using jigs. Others might complain about the occasional infelicitous or imprecise

choice of words: "double-repetition" instead of "double-escapement" or "Place a strip of felt over the wippen (instead of "over the repetition levers")." But measured in light of Igréc's great achievement with this book, these would be small quibbles indeed.

As I noted earlier, we are now blessed with an abundance of written reference works on piano technology. It remains to us to take advantage of them. *Pianos Inside Out* will be available March 31 at www.pianosinsideout.com for \$80. At that price, it's a bargain. My advice to you is simple: Buy this book. Read this book. You will be glad you did. □

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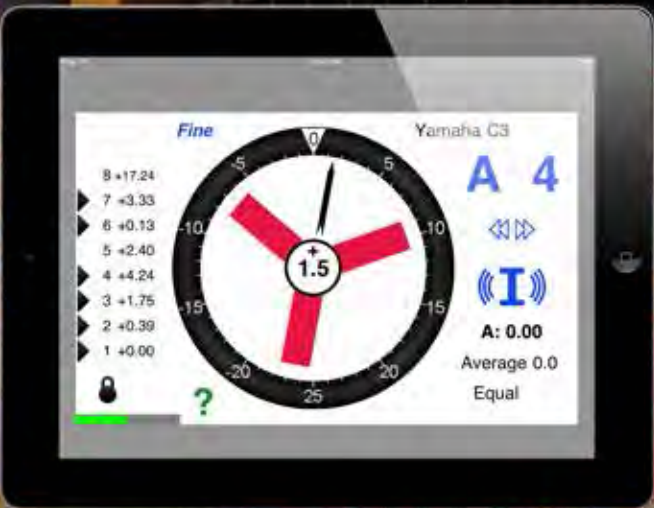
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