

# Leader Features



FROM LEFT: Warwick Dalton, Ken Ackerman and Wayne Stuart at the Preston College of TAFE's piano technology department.



# The piano lives on

PIANO sales in Australia are booming.

If you are under the impression that electronic sound totally dominates today's music scene, think again.

Recent years have seen the piano regain its popularity and around 12,000 are expected to be sold this year. Sales will certainly outstrip those of electronic organs — so much in favor only a few years ago.

Mr Geoff Oakley, general manager of the music products division of Brash Holdings Ltd, of Elizabeth St says just eight years ago electronic organs outsold pianos eight to one.

Today, piano buyers can choose from a range, probably wider than any available elsewhere.

They can buy a Chinese-made piano for a little over \$2000 or a "really refined" grand from Austria or Germany for about \$70,000.

Fears that the acoustic piano would become the dinosaur of the keyboard world in a high technology age were clearly unfounded.

"During the last decade the piano industry has been buoyant," says Wayne Stuart, head of Preston College of TAFE's piano technology department.

His students reveal a commitment to the traditional values of craftsmanship which fascinate visitors.

The two-year course they undertake is all about the development of human skills. The onslaught of hi-tech has been carefully examined — and found wanting.

"We consider the use of electronic tuning devices unsatisfactory," says Wayne Stuart firmly, explaining that machines do not have the flexibility to cope with the infinite variations produced by instruments of complex harmonic structure.

To develop their aural skills to the level needed to tune a piano well, students must practise for five hours a day in soundproof cubicles. Almost eight hundred hours of tuning practice are scheduled in the first-year timetable.

During the course each student must undertake complete restoration of an upright piano and, if time permits, a grand piano.

New playing mechanisms are installed, cabinets and iron frames refinished and students spend about 100 hours on a spray painting program run by Batman Automotive College of

not only because of their better tone and construction, but because they were cheaper.

Disruption of supplies from Europe during and after World War I boosted local production but popular taste then favored player pianos in the American fashion and piano sales fell.

The 20s were good times for the increasing number of local manufacturers and for importers, too.

In 1926-7 more than 24,000 pianos were sold in Australia, costing a total of more than three million pounds.

But the impact of the depression and the advent of radio had a dramatic effect.

Just five years later, only 170 pianos, 26 of them imported, were sold.

World-wide, piano manufacturers were forced to consolidate or close. In *The Piano: A History*, Cyril Ehrlich points out that World War II was less disruptive to piano making than the first, because there was less to disrupt.

In Australia, sales remained slow until the mid-50s — affected both by the post-war downturn at home and abroad and the arrival of television.

Today the vast majority of pianos sold in Australia are from Japan and continental Asia.

The declining fortunes of Australian manufacturers were reflected in the lack of skilled people capable of tuning and repairs. Many who worked in the industry when it was buoyant between the wars were aging by the time the piano regained popularity in the 60s. Few, well-trained young piano technicians existed and the apprenticeship system had broken down. Rex Hobcroft, then Director of the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music recognised the problem and sought international advice on how it could best be alleviated. In 1974 a Japanese master came to Sydney and established an intensive one-year course in piano tuning under the auspices of Nippongakkai Rose Music, manufacturers of Yamaha instruments.

Wayne Stuart believes the Sydney course alleviated the immediate problem of providing competent piano tuners but was not a total answer.

He was in an ideal position to assess the contribution made by the Sydney course in the mid to late seventies. As a youngster in Tasmania he was increasingly fascinated by the technical workings of the instrument in the family home.

## Story — Carolyn Rance. Picture: Jim Stirling

TAFE in North Coburg to gain specialised training in up-to-date spray gun and paint and lacquer application techniques.

The restored pianos must be restrung and prepared for assessment by several outside examiners.

Wayne Stuart believes the repair and restoration work enables students to encounter a multiplicity of problems and to delve into the construction of the instrument and achieve greater understanding of the way in which they function to create the piano's inimitable tone.

Not surprisingly, he emphasises that the course is a serious undertaking, in no way suited to people who may be under the impression that piano tuning is a hobby.

It was introduced in 1983 as a pilot program and the first group of students completed their studies in the middle of this year.

A second intake has now embarked on the course. Student numbers are kept deliberately small to facilitate the specialised tuition required.

An examination of how and why the course was established involves delving into the history of the piano in Australia and why its popularity has survived the high technology challenge, for despite the popularity of electronic instruments, many musicians have now concluded that they simply can not compare with an instrument developed over centuries.

Sadly though, the boom in piano popularity is something Australian manufacturers have not survived to enjoy and when the Sydney firm of C.E. Davies went out of production in the mid-70s, it was the end of an indigenous industry with a proud tradition.

Piano manufacture began in Australia in the 1850s. In his history of the Allan family, *The Music Sellers*, published in 1976, Peter Game notes that between 1863 and 1866, the Melbourne piano makers, Wilkie, Kilner and Co, sold 350 of their pianos at prices from £36.

The economics of the international market place and changing fashions in musical taste have probably had more to do with the fluctuating fortunes of the local industry than the quality of pianos produced.

Peter Game writes that at the turn of the century, German pianos were the most popular,

When he left school he sought an apprenticeship as a tuner but none was available and he settled for an apprenticeship in cabinet-making instead. Two years into his training he heard about the proposed new course at Sydney and was accepted into the first intake of students.

Such was his skill and enthusiasm that in 1974 he received an \$8000 grant from the then Australian Council for the Arts to study in Japan. He returned to take over the running of the Sydney course and remained there until 1979 when a further grant enabled him to study with eminent European and American piano makers.

He returned to Tasmania to run a private piano service, at the same time trouble shooting for some of the major mainland music houses, and later moved to Melbourne to establish the new Preston course.

His students come from all over Australia and are carefully selected for their perception of sound, manual dexterity and the motivation needed to carry them through an intensive period of training.

The present group of students ranges in age from 18 to mid-thirties. The two Queenslanders, one Canadian-born West Australian and three Victorians come from diverse backgrounds but share a love of the piano and a commitment to the traditions of craftsmanship that have helped the instrument survive in popularity.

Ken Ackerman, who moved from Perth to undertake the course, previously worked as a television repair man. He says he has wanted to study piano tuning for some time and the career change is a conscious decision not to remain the perpetual student that life in the electronics industry demands.

Warwick Dalton, of Surrey Hills, is a professional pianist who started carrying out his own tuning when performing in the original stage version of the Rocky Horror Show in Melbourne about 10 years ago.

"I am fascinated by the piano," he admits.

It is clearly a fascination many Australians share.

The writer acknowledges the following reference sources: *The Music Sellers*, by Peter Game, published by The Hawthorne Press, Melbourne, 1976, and *The Piano: A History*, by Cyril Ehrlich, published by J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, London, 1976.