

Piano man keeps things tuned up

Van Cliburn liked Dave Gustafson's tune-up; Mario Andretti might not.

But that's understandable.

Gustafson, 45, who works at the University School of Music, is a full-time "piano technician."

An easygoing sort, precision is Dave's byword when he tunes a piano and the approach sometimes pays off in welcome praise.

He recalls the time in 1973 when he carefully tuned the 230-odd strings and checked the 26 key-to-hammer actions of an instrument concert pianist Van Cliburn was to use in a campus performance.

"When he walked off after the concert," Gustafson remembers, "I was standing backstage. He

turned and thanked me for a good solid tuning."

"A piano must be tuned solidly for use by a performer," he adds.

"They must be able to play a concert of hard, heavy music and end with something soft and quiet and still have an instrument that's in tune."

Keeping the University School's music instruments in tune requires a never-ending work cycle, Gustafson says.

His duties include caring for 84 pianos, six pipe organs, four harpsichords, two clavichords and about \$100,000 worth of assorted band and orchestra instruments. By the time the last piano is back on key, others are off and his weekend activities are often inter-



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rupted by a trip to the campus to attend to a temperamental instrument before a concert.

Occasionally, he handbuilds replacement parts for damaged instruments (there are about 9,000 parts in a piano, he says) or restrings an older piano. And, although he complains that he often has to work in a noisy practice room, he tunes about three pianos a day.

In addition, Gustafson teaches a University course in piano tuning and repairing. He also tunes the pianos used in the University's student union and those used for rock concerts in McArthur Court.

During his own abbreviated college days, Gustafson spent his time listening to the crunch of

football helmets, as well as to the subtle vibrations of piano strings.

A partial football scholarship helped him pay expenses during the two years he studied music at Adolphus Gustavus College in St. Peter, Minn. He later transferred to Indiana University at Gary, where he spent a year before draft pressure from the Korean War build-up pushed him into the Coast Guard.

Four years later, his tour of duty completed, Gustafson returned to his parent's home in Hancock, Mich. where his tuning career started.

"When I came back from the service I wanted to play the piano we had at home, but it was out of tune," he says. "The only tuner I could get said it would be three months before he could come out to fix it. That seemed silly to me so I decided to go to piano tuning

school and learn how to do it myself."

There were no cheerleaders at the College of Pianoforte Technology in Chicago, but Dave found the studies interesting.

After a stint in the Midwest tuning trade, he moved to the Eugene area to set up his own business. The University became a client and in 1970 he accepted a full-time campus position as a state Civil Service employee.

Nearly 21 years of piano tuning haven't dulled his love for the instrument, Gustafson says. He still likes his job.

"I like to do something else. Watch TV or, if there's nothing good on, I'll go out and work in the garage," he says.

But work in the garage is not meant to tune up the car. It's to build harpsichords.



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