

KEEPER OF THE KEYS



Photos by Erica Dischino / West Central Tribune

Dennis Benson tunes a grand piano April 15 at Refuge Church in Willmar. He has been a piano technician for 55 years.

Willmar piano tuner has been making pianos sing for 55 years

By Carolyn Lange
clange@wctrib.com

Dennis Benson has tuned pianos for celebrities including Loretta Lynn, Ronnie Milsap, Crystal Gayle and Wayne Newton prior to their concerts at regional venues.

One time, before a duet by guest musicians, Benson tuned their two pianos that had a combined value of a half-million dollars.

He's also tuned hand-me-down family pianos for local students taking beginner lessons. Some pianos harbored mouse nests and dead mice and one time a mouse ran out from under the piano and scampered down the hallway.

No matter the value of the piano or who's playing it, Benson's goal is the same — to make that piano "sing" and bring joy to the person playing it and those listening to it.

He's been doing it for 55 years and has no plans to stop.

"It keeps me going at 72," said Benson, who studied at the MacPhail School of Music the summer after he graduated from high school in 1966. He tuned pianos to help pay for his college tuition at Bemidji State University, where he graduated with a degree in music.

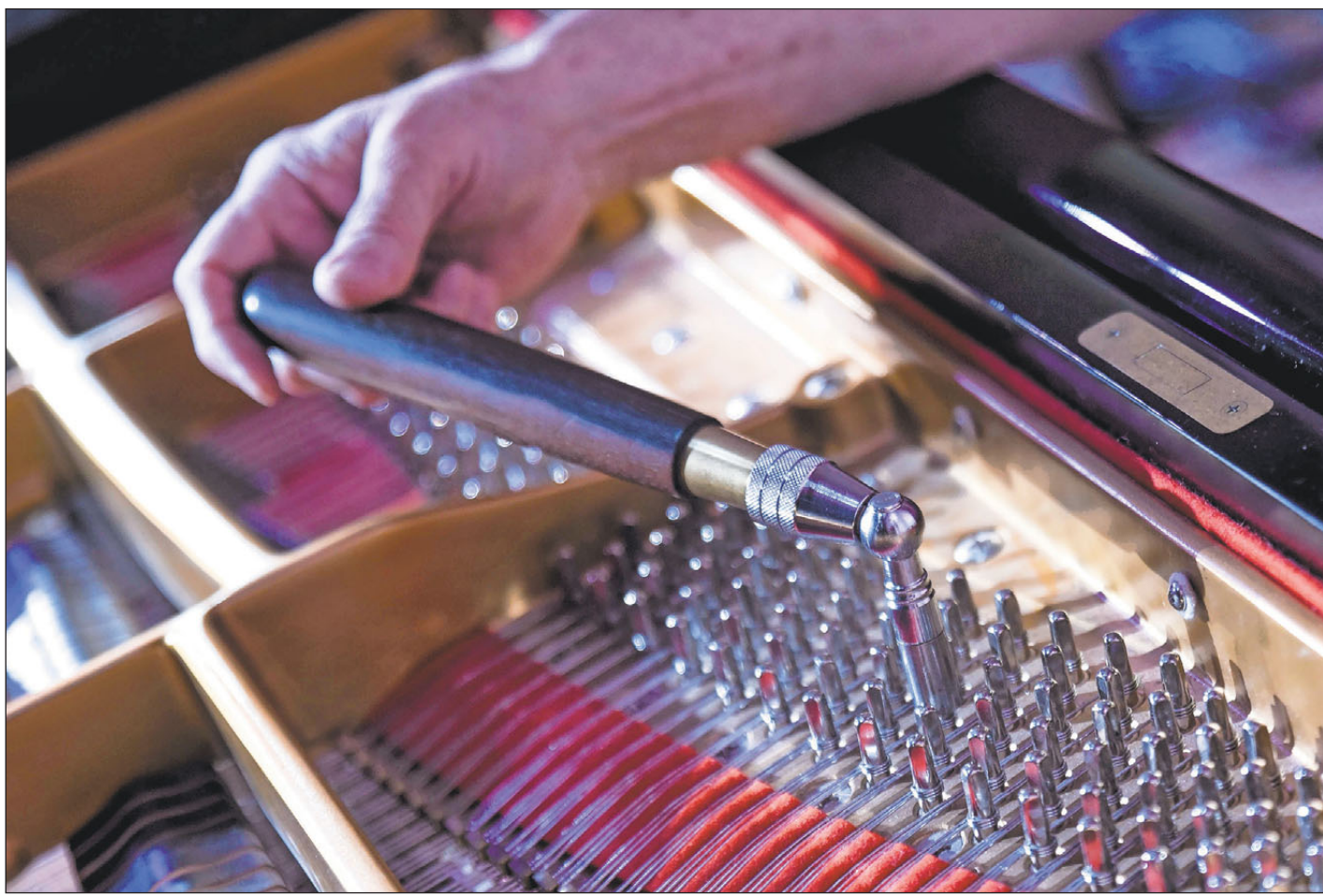
Benson continued his craft while in the Army in the 1970s, tuning pianos on U.S. bases in Germany. "They were all lousy pianos," he said.

Benson — who said he prefers the term piano "technician" rather than piano "tuner" because he not only puts a piano in perfect pitch but also makes repairs to give pianos new life — has been performing his craft in Willmar ever since.

As far as he knows, he's the only full-time piano technician from here to the South Dakota border to the west and Cokato to the east.

"It's a pretty rare profession," he said, especially in rural Minnesota.

Benson — who plays trombone, is the conductor for the Prairie Winds Concert



Dennis Benson uses a tool to tune a piano at Refuge Church in Willmar.

Band's summer series, is a web designer and is also an accomplished photographer who documents community events — doesn't need to have a steady job tuning pianos. He said he does it because he loves the end product.

"When it gets all sounding sweet and nice, it makes a difference to somebody," he said. "Whether it's the kid taking lessons or Lorie Line or Reba McEntire."

'Boring job'

"It's such a private life. Me and the piano," said Benson, who confesses that the process of tuning a piano isn't all that exciting.

Sitting at a piano for an hour "hearing ding, ding, ding, ding" is a "pretty boring job," said Benson.

"I listened to a piano tuner tune a piano one time and it was the most excruciating thing I've ever done," he said. "But when I'm at the piano doing it, it's different."

I just want people to take care of their pianos.

— DENNIS BENSON



Dennis Benson, shown April 15 at Refuge Church in Willmar, said the church's grand piano will last at least 300 years, but ignore or mistreat a piano, and its history will be shorter.

PIANO: Page C4



Photos by Erica Dischino / West Central Tribune

Dennis Benson shows the app on his phone he uses to find the correct pitch. He has a tuning fork, but says he prefers the app.

PIANO

From Page C1

There's a lot of knowledge, experience, expertise and patience behind those boring dings produced by hitting a piano key over and over.

"To learn the basics of how to tune a piano isn't that hard," he said. But "understanding all the nuances of manipulating the tuning hammer with the pins and how strings react" is an entirely different skill set.

"You can take it to a level where it (the piano) sounds pretty decent or you can take it to that craftsman, artisan level where it just sings," he said.

Benson carries a small case with a set of tools for tuning a piano, but his trunk is full of additional equipment in case he needs to make repairs.

With more than 10,000 moving parts, 230 strings that are under nearly 20 tons of tension, a soundboard made of quarter-sawn spruce and a cast iron frame that



Dennis Benson walks through the sanctuary up to the grand piano April 15 at Refuge Church in Willmar. Benson was hired to tune the church's piano.

prevents the piano from "imploding," Benson knows uprights, grands and spinets inside and out.

"In order to get to the artistic part you have to understand the mechanical part," he said.

Benson said he's only come across two pianos in 55 years that were too far gone to repair and tune.

When he started tuning pianos, Benson charged \$10. His current

rate is \$100, which he said is well below the typical Twin Cities fare of around \$150.

Tune up

Sitting at the grand piano in the Refuge Church in Willmar, Benson uses mutes to isolate the strings so he hears only one specific note. Without mutes wedged between the strings, the vibrations would create sounds that make it impossible to properly tune individual keys.

He has a tuning fork but prefers to use an app on his phone to fine-tune the pitch.

It typically takes him 45-60 minutes to tune a piano, "depending on how the piano cooperates with me, how long it's been since it's been tuned and how good the piano is," he said.

A performance piano like those in churches and schools are typically tuned four to eight times a year, or prior

to a performance. Most home pianos are done once a year or "once every 10 years," said Benson with a grimace.

"They should be tuned when it sounds bad, and sounding bad is a relative term," he said.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Benson had a full schedule of tuning pianos in homes; most of the pianos in area churches, schools and community auditoriums in the region' and performers' pianos at Jackpot Junction Casino in Morton.

From November until Christmas Eve, Benson said would typical tune four to five pianos a day. COVID slowed that pace because there were no concerts.

However, online piano lessons by a local teacher helped bring him some new business during the pandemic.

Benson said a Willmar piano instructor began doing lessons via Zoom, and when she heard how awful her students' pianos sounded, she advised them to call Benson for a tune-up.

Following COVID safety guidelines, Benson tuned at least a dozen pianos. Most

hadn't been tuned for years and some didn't have working keys, he said.

Tips for piano owners

With regular tuning and ideal heat and humidity conditions in the church, Benson said the grand piano at the Refuge Church will last at least 300 years.

Ignore or mistreat a piano, and its history will be shorter.

"I just want people to take care of their pianos," he said.

Benson said pianos should not be placed near heat sources, like a vent or wood stove. "That'll kill them," he said.

Putting a piano by a window can be risky with temperature fluctuations. If the exterior of a piano is hot to the touch because of sunlight, it could affect the soundboard. Humidity also raises havoc on the tone of a piano.

Regular tuning is also key to the life of a piano. Keeping a piano tuned "makes all the difference in the world" and makes playing a piano more fun, he said.

READER NEWS

Send your story to the Tribune's Reader News

The West Central Tribune is seeking content for Reader News.

The content of Read-

er News, scheduled to run every Saturday, will consist solely of stories and/or photos contributed by Tribune readers. This content will feature news about the people and organizations of

west central Minnesota.

The primary content criteria will be that the event must have occurred recently and that it has not been published previously.

Submissions may be sent

to: readers@wctrib.com. Each item should include the writer's name, mailing address and contact phone number, in case of questions. Submissions may be edited for basic grammar,

style and length purposes. Photos need to be high resolution, captioned and cannot come from Facebook. The full names of everyone in photos required for publication.

Share your Milestone in the West Central Tribune

Every Saturday, the West Central Tribune's "Milestones" section shares with readers the news of family "Milestones," such as engagements, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, reunions, new babies and more.

Publication fees are \$30 for wedding and engagements, and \$25 for all other "Milestones" announcements.

To submit your Milestone news go to modulist.news and click on "Get Started."

For more information call 1-866-910-9009. The deadline is noon Wednesday.

WANTED

Great Recipes

Reminder RECIPES

Readers' Recipes

Send in your favorite recipe for a chance to win a valuable gift certificate from an area merchant.

Send to: Reminder Recipes
P.O. Box 839 • Willmar, MN 56201
or email to news@wctrib.com

Reminder
Serving West Central Minnesota



WEST CENTRAL Tribune

Access the E-Paper Archives!

In addition to the most current news, we record the history of your community. Learn how you can easily access the e-paper archives for full newspaper editions or quickly and easily search for the news that matters to you.

wctrib.news/archives