

Specialist profile

DAVID WINSTON

Catriona Gray meets David Winston, founder of the Period Piano Company, and learns about the detailed craftsmanship that goes into restoring antique pianos

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Hidden away in an old brick workshop in the depths of rural Kent is one of the world's leading experts in the restoration of antique pianos. David Winston, who founded the Period Piano Company nearly 40 years ago, is something of a legend in the industry, with clients sending him pianos from as far away as China and Australia.

David's route into piano restoration was a colourful one. The Los Angeles native initially studied landscape design, then, on an impulse, moved to the remote Scottish island of Islay. The reason? 'I liked their whisky,' he says. A stint as a lobster fisherman followed, before he decided to leave the Scottish shorelines and train as a violin maker, only to change key and apprentice himself to some of the world's best-known piano makers instead. 'I learned all their secrets,' he jokes. 'That's why I don't have an apprentice.'

Restoring antique pianos is a complicated business; no two are the same, and they can vary wildly in shape and construction. If you buy a new piano today, you have to choose from what David describes as 'the Henry Ford school of design', meaning that you can have any colour you like, as long as it's black. This wasn't always the case. Up until the Thirties, piano-making was aligned with furniture design, so the style of the instrument evolved in tandem with the interior aesthetic. Art-case pianos were often created by the leading designers of the day; David's current stock includes examples by Edwin Lutyens and the Arts and Crafts designer C R Ashbee.

Many of the pianos that arrive in David's workshop are one-off pieces with significant historical merit and, because of this, he tries to restore each one as sensitively as possible, going to incredible lengths to ensure that he replicates the piano's original sound. While one of his co-workers works on the restoration of the case, David specialises in 'giving the piano its voice' and focuses upon the internal mechanism. The original component parts are reused whenever possible, but if they are broken, they will be carefully recreated using traditional methods.

Piano strings are hand-made - it can take up to three days to hand-wind a set - so are the little pegs that anchor them to the piano frame and the wooden hammers that strike the strings to produce the sound. Because each instrument is so different, every project presents a new challenge.

One rare piano needed a particular sort of leather to cover the wooden hammers - research revealed a complicated tanning process that involved soaking the hide in milk, so David eventually found a specialist tanner who was willing to replicate the old method. His determination to stay true to each piano's provenance means that he often calls in the help of external specialists to do particular tasks such as gilding or marquetry work.

Specialist details aside, the rest of the work is done by David and his well-established team, comprising technician Allen Wright, antiques restorer Phil Burrows and cabinetmaker Kirk Hogben. 'The thing about this business is that it requires an extraordinary range of specialist skills,' says David. Over the years, his team has developed a variety of techniques that are unique to the company and are closely guarded secrets. That, paired with David's formidable knowledge - Sotheby's often asks him to help evaluate pianos - means that they are able to restore instruments in a way that allows each piano to retain its individual quirks.

'I sometimes see these instruments as recording devices that store up all the music played in them over the years,' says David. 'Eventually they become mute through age, and then I come in, and all the stored-up sounds come tumbling out.' And thanks to his dedication, these beautiful instruments of the past will last long into the future □

Period Piano Company: 01580-291393; www.periodpiano.com



ALL PICTURES David Winston (top and bottom right) restores a variety of antique pianos, including one formerly owned by Liszt (centre). Allan Wright covers a set of hammers with leather (top left). Gilding is reapplied to woodwork (centre right). A stack of wood veneers (bottom left)

