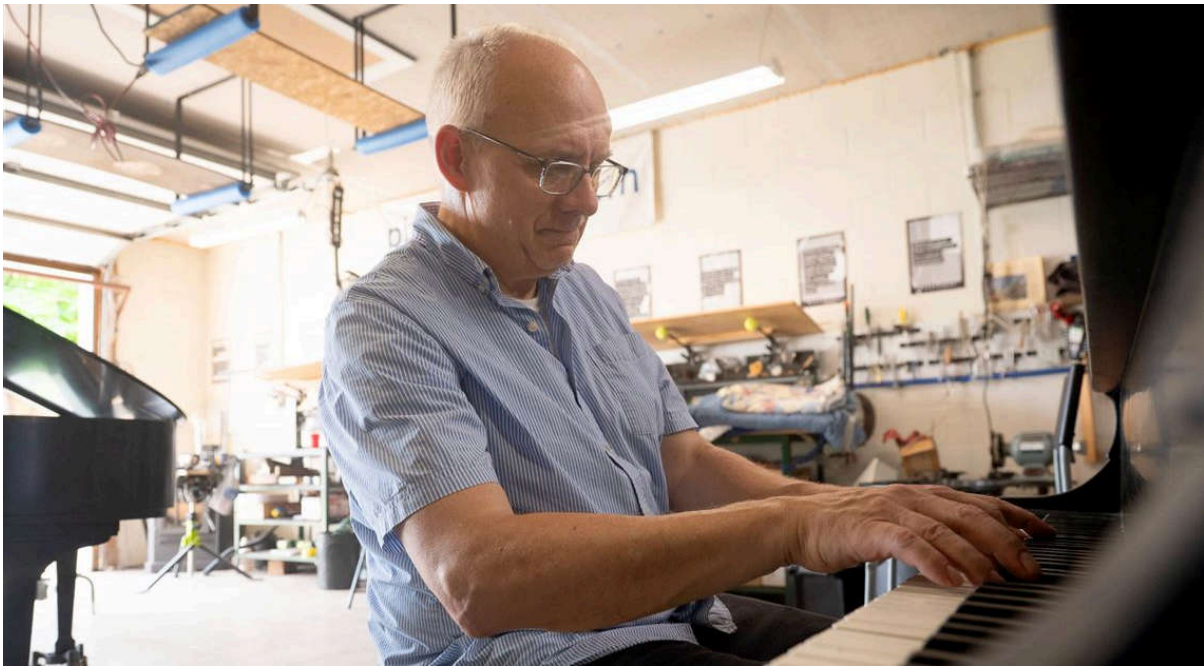




Backstage virtuoso keeps the pianos tuned and the music flowing at Heinz Hall

For 20 years, Peter Stumpf has played a key role in the ‘sublime’ duet between the piano and the artist

JEREMY REYNOLDS

For the Post-Gazette

JUL 29, 2026

4:00 AM

Everyone who has heard one of the grand Steinway pianos at Heinz Hall has heard Peter Stumpf’s handiwork.

He plays a key role in the city’s musical life, but when he does his job well, he’s often invisible. In addition to tuning pianos for every concert performance of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, he adjusts the feel and sound to suit each piano soloist who visits the Downtown venue, working with them to adjust individual notes by the millimeter before showtime.

“I’m not a psychiatrist,” Stumpf said, “but I can tell when someone’s anxious.”

He got the job after telling a whopper of a lie. When he was trying out for the role in 2007, he had to tune and adjust the piano for the soloist Yefim Bronfman, who still performs concertos with the orchestra to the day. Then disaster struck: Twenty minutes before Bronfman was to meet Stumpf and test the piano, a string snapped.

After silently screaming every profanity he knew in his head, Stumpf restrung the piano and “lied, just lied, lied through my teeth” when Bronfman asked him how the piano was.

His work held up. Bronfman didn’t notice anything amiss, and 19 years later, Stumpf is still tweaking that same piano for the likes of Yuja Wang — his favorite soloist to work with and to listen to — as well as Lang Lang, Emanuel Ax, Helene Grimaud and other globetrotting players who chose to play an instrument that is unique to each concert hall.

“Peter is a terrific specialist,” said Bronfman. “It’s a pleasure to work with him.”

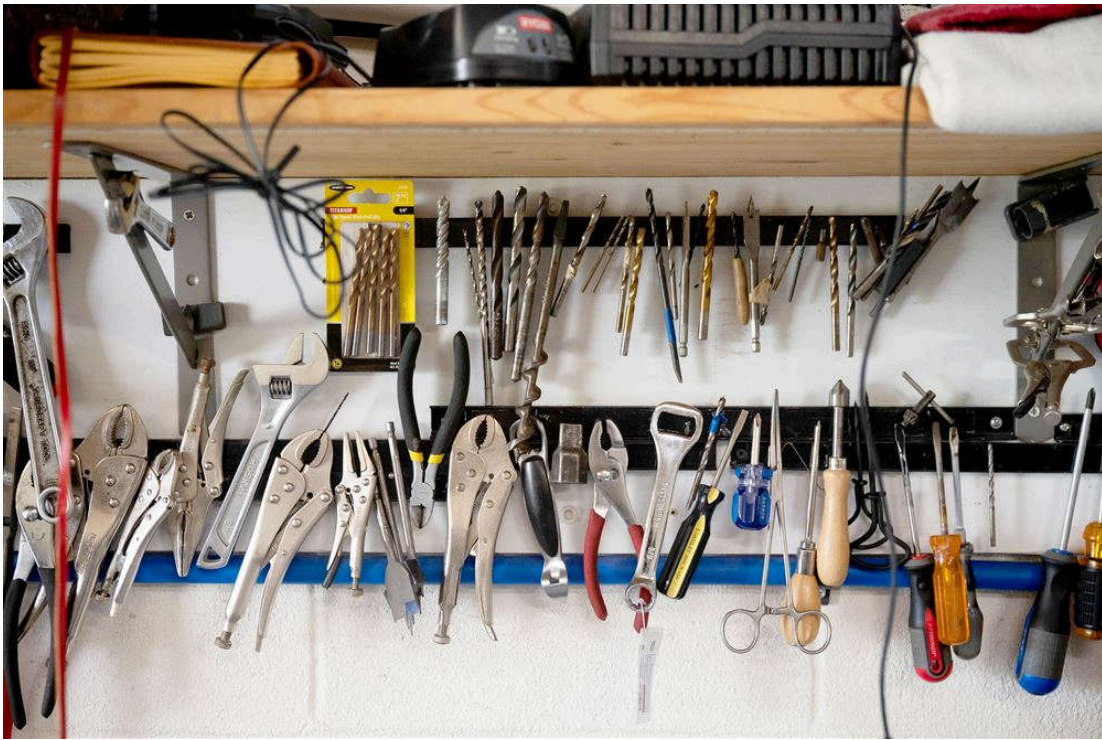
In April, Stumpf had a tune-up himself.

He’s currently recovering from heart surgery, but three months out, he’s back at his regular haunts, touching up the pianos at Carnegie Mellon and Point Park universities in addition to Heinz Hall’s two concert Steinways, which Bronfman had a hand in selecting off the factory floor in New York City.

House calls

Nearly every musician who plays with an orchestra is able to tune their own instrument, but most piano soloists do not travel with their own pianos due to the expense of shipping such a large, heavy instrument.

This means that a soloist must rely on the pianos and technicians at each hall where they perform.



Stumpf keeps the tools of his trade attached to magnetic strips in his workshop.
(Giuseppe LoPiccolo/Post-Gazette)

“That rapport is extremely important,” Bronfman said. “Being a tuner is not enough. If the piano has a problem, the technician must be able to fix it.”

When he tunes for a soloist, Stumpf listens to their recordings to get a sense of how they play. He said the most nervous performers ask for the most adjustment, mostly adjusting the “color” of individual notes to the pianist’s liking.

Occasionally there are mechanical issues like a key sticking or the action failing; this is rare for well-maintained, climate-controlled instruments like the ones in Heinz Hall.

These well-maintained grand pianos are not his only projects, however. During a recent tuning at a house in Mount Washington where the piano “hadn’t been tuned in 30 years,” Stumpf applied a lubricant to the strings of an upright Kawai, patiently hauling the pitch up a full semitone over the course of two hours.

“I like to be old school,” he said, rapping a metal tuning fork and holding it to the instrument to check the starting pitch. To this day, his wife, Julie — also his high school sweetheart — handles most of his scheduling from a landline telephone in their home in Baldwin Borough.

Stumpf is now in his 60s and there's a slight tremor in his hands, but his ear is sharp, and his adjustments are methodical and precise. He tunes pitch by pitch, string by string, smiling slightly when a note locks into place.

When he finished tuning the Kawai, he paused to test his handiwork with a snatch of the slow movement of Beethoven's "Pathetique" sonata, famous for its tranquility.

No piano is too humble for Stumpf, but he enjoys telling stories about famous pianos around the city and performers he's tuned for while he works.

"I won't say who, but one performer once told me that a particular note sounded 'abstract' and asked if there was anything I could do to fix it," he said, chuckling.

Punishing career

Stumpf grew up in Somerset County, visiting the city regularly for Pirates games — "we didn't know how good we had it in the '70s" — and he started taking piano lessons at age 9 from a teacher who believed in focusing on the fundamentals, scales and chords.

He never wanted to play professionally, but he still enjoys playing at home.

"When my mom died, I would mourn by playing Chopin for her," he said. "Or when I was mad at something, I'd go and let the piano have it. It matches your emotions. Sometimes we need that outlet."



Stumpf plays a Steinway & Sons piano in his Allentown workshop.
(Giuseppe LoPiccolo/Post-Gazette)

He organizes [Pittsburgh Piano Day](#) each year to celebrate the instrument, usually around the end of summer. He invites the public to hear concerts

and play instruments in public spaces like scenic overlooks and on roving flatbed trucks and even boats in the city's rivers. [This year's event](#) is set for 2-7 p.m. Aug. 8 at Heinz Hall in Downtown.

When he was a teenager, Stumpf started taking his family's piano apart piece by piece to see how it worked and then couldn't put it back together. His father hired a technician to repair it, and made his son sit and watch.

"It wasn't a punishment at all," he said, smiling. "To be honest, I think it was more punishment for the tuner. I just asked questions the whole time."

His career started in print shops owned by his parents. He was 29 when that work dried up, and he enrolled in the Shenandoah Conservatory of Music in Virginia for a one-year piano technician program. His brother was already a successful tuner, and Stumpf had never lost his fascination with the mechanics of the instrument.

After graduating, he moved to Pittsburgh with his wife and began building his business with her in the early '90s. He grew into a highly respected professional.

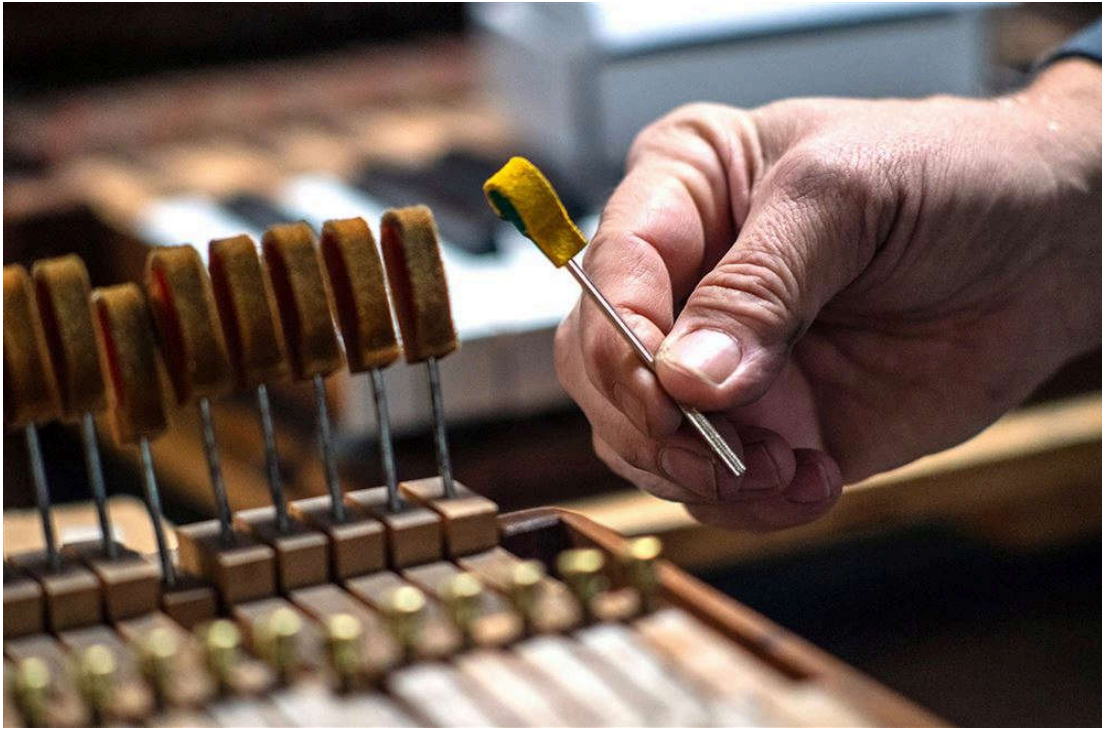
"A tuner such as Peter can give invaluable advice," said Ax, a frequent soloist at Heinz Hall.

"The best tuner is a real partner in helping to create the best possible attempt at a good concert."

Replacement valves

Stumpf has watched the piano business evolve over the years. Sales for new instruments have slowed over the decades, but the work of maintaining and restoring pianos has only increased, especially as the price of new pianos has risen. A new Steinway & Sons Model M retails for more than \$100,000.

"I have two pianos in my home, each of them is over 50 years old," he said. "A washing machine or dishwasher would never last that long."



Stumpf updates a century-old piano with state-of-the-art components.
(Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette)

The Heinz Hall pianos are about 5 and nearly 30 years old, and Grimaud told the Post-Gazette in 2022 that “the old piano in Heinz Hall is still very well maintained,” complimenting Stumpf by name.

In April, he underwent surgery for an aortic aneurysm. Ever the technician, he was fascinated by the procedure and the machinery used to keep him alive during the procedure, listing the work and materials that went into his chest in exacting detail.

Now, he’s ready to reduce his hours overall, but he’s not ready to move on from his role at Heinz Hall.

“I’m kind of a liaison between the piano and the performer,” Stumpf said.

“Whenever they go out and they perform, it’s a duet between the piano and the artist. It’s sublime. It really is. And I love doing every little thing that I can do to help make that happen.”

Jeremy Reynolds (jreynolds9315@gmail.com) is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer covering culture and the arts.

First Published: July 29, 2026, 4:00 a.m.

