

## Restorer brings pianos back to life

By Stefanie Teller SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR



Mamta Popat / Staff Monday, March 15, 2004

**"An old piano after 50 years is like a human after 100 years," says piano restorer Jens Witter, resting here in his East Side workshop. He learned his skills in his native Germany.**

"Antique Piano" is not a cable television show, but perhaps someday it will be. For now, it's a piano repair and restoration business owned by Jens Witter, a German immi-grant who came to Tucson a year ago to fulfill two dreams: to live in the desert and to work on and research antique pianos for a living.

Judging from the panoramic mountain views visible from his small East Side workshop, it appears he has met success in both areas.

Witter's specialty lies somewhere between repair and restoration. Repair focuses on fixing a broken instrument by replacing or mending damaged parts so it can play again, while restoration returns a piano to its original state, even if that means it isn't functional. Witter often ends up doing a little of both.

"The most important is the inside," Witter said, emphasizing that a piano should first and foremost produce a beautiful sound. "If you press a key, that you are paralyzed, that you feel the magic of an instrument, and you say, 'That's what I like!' So that you feel well, that you feel home if you touch a key."

Witter's love of pianos is evident everywhere, from the numerous reference books (some of which he wrote) crammed on his bookshelves to his workshop brimming with specialized tools and pieces of dismantled pianos strewn about the room and patio.

Many of the tools are as old as the instruments he works on. Witter shipped most of them when he moved from Germany - along with 54 antique pianos.

Witter is also a piano tuner, which is how Dell Willmon found him. Willmon owns a 1915 Viennese baby grand that was in such poor condition it couldn't even be tuned to pitch. Witter convinced her that it could be tuned "true" if it were repaired, so she agreed to the necessary work, which took three months.

Witter's work on Willmon's piano included cleaning the corroded harp, repairing cracks in the soundboard, building a new tuning block and restringing the instrument with strings he ordered from Germany.

What started strictly as a repair project took on some aspects of a restoration as Witter returned the piano to its original finish and uncovered the inlaid brass lettering on the piano's face.

"He redid everything except the actual keys themselves," Willmon said. All together, Willmon spent \$10,000 to save a piano she bought for \$1,200, and she says she would do it again without hesitation.

"It seems absolutely worth it to me now, but at the time I thought I must have lost my mind," she said. "He just did wonderful things. He's an artist; he's an absolute master."

Occasionally Witter has to help customers decide when an instrument is beyond saving. Although most damage can be corrected, he says the critical factor is the condition of the soundboard, an 8- or 9-millimeter-thick wooden panel located inside the instrument that resonates each time a key or chord is played.

Witter goes to great lengths to repair cracked soundboards because, he says, it's that piece that gives a

piano its character and makes older instruments - whose aged wood gives them better resonance - so valuable. "The soundboard is the heart of the instrument, it's the soul. It is possible to make a new soundboard, but if you change this soundboard you should buy a new piano," Witter said.

Michele Hill recently consulted with Witter about restoring her 1825 English square piano, which she brought to Tucson from London. Hill, who has a doctorate in musicology, said the piano needs major work to repair damage it sustained during the move and to improve upon a previous restoration job. She plans to hire Witter for the task as soon as she has saved the necessary \$3,000 to \$4,000. She said she's looking forward to returning the piano to its near-original condition so she can "play some repertoire from that period and see what it was supposed to sound like."

Before moving to Tucson with his wife and two children, Witter worked restoring and repairing pianos for 15 years in Germany. He holds a Ph.D. in music and wrote as his dissertation an encyclopedia that identifies and catalogues more than 30,000 German pianos, dating back to 1788. He later wrote a second edition and soon plans to begin work on an American version.

Willmon, owner of the German baby grand, says an investment in repairing and restoring an antique piano has lifelong value.

"It's a lot less than you would spend on a car, and this piano will bring me joy forever," she said.

*Stefanie Teller is a Tucson free-lance writer*

**What:**

Jens Witter has two pianos on display that demonstrate his restoration skills. Both are German instruments that were made in the late 1800s.

**Where:**

Park Place Mall,

**If you go**

---

5870 E. Broadway

**When:**

Through the month of March.

---

**For more info:**

on Antique Piano, contact Witter at (520) 722-2882, or visit the Web site [www.antiquepiano.com](http://www.antiquepiano.com)

o

---