



### Race promoter races north

Rejected by Tucson, air race  
promoter finds support in  
Marana.

Page 3

### Times admits bias for facts

Editor talks about what it  
takes to make the New York  
Times.

Page 8

### East or west, view still same

Whether its imports, exports  
or investments, relationships  
are crucial.

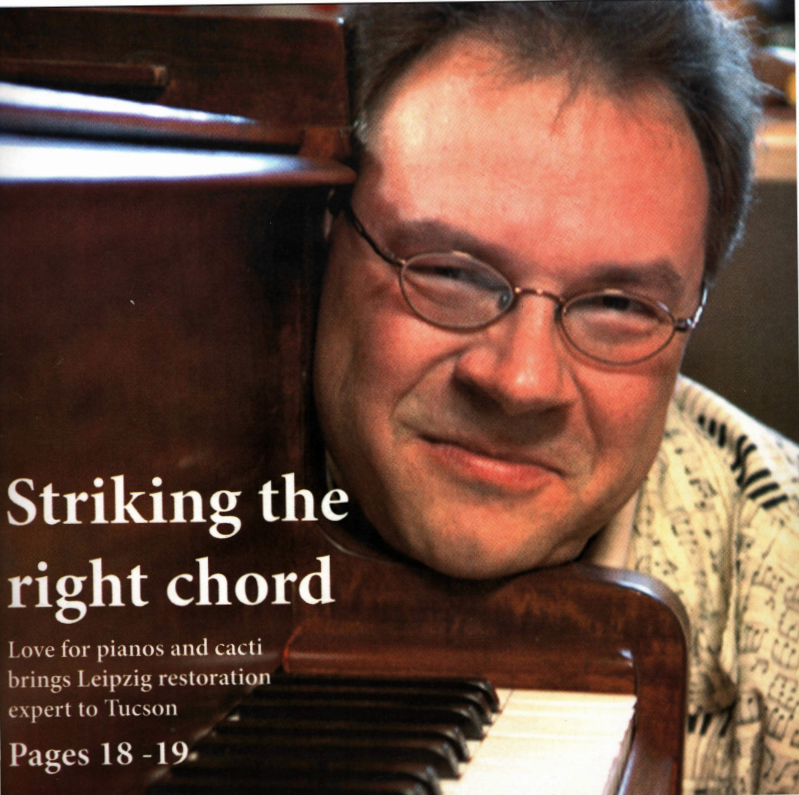
Page 14



### New theater takes the stage

Offering first-run films and  
live performances, local  
operator set to break ground in  
Marana.

Page 22



## Striking the right chord

Love for pianos and cacti  
brings Leipzig restoration  
expert to Tucson

Pages 18 - 19

Edly Jo Eschke Photo

## INSIDE

Editorial.....	4	Sales Moves.....	15
Opinion.....	5	Briefs.....	17
Valley Views.....	6	Finance.....	21
Alan Warshaw.....	6	Calendar.....	25
Inside Media.....	8	People in Action.....	25
Tech Talk.....	9	List.....	26



PROFILE

# Keys to his heart are pianos and cacti

German antique piano doctor breathes life into classic instruments

By Martha Lundin, *Inside Tucson Business*

**W**hen it comes to working with things of great age, Jens Witter figures his work as an antique piano restorer puts him in a much better position than a doctor. "When doctors have a patient over 100 years old, they don't have such good ideas for them," said the German-born piano doctor. "But my 'patients' might be 300 years old and I can bring them back!"

Witter and his wife, Trudy, run their company Antiquepiano, from a workshop at their home. They specialize in antique piano restoration, but they also do piano repair work. Witter tunes pianos, too, and is in charge of tuning the pianos for Amphi School District.

Growing up in East Germany, Witter first learned to love piano music because his father played for the Central German Broadcasting station. But he wasn't satisfied with just playing the piano. "I wasn't happy just pushing the keys," Witter said. "I wanted to see inside to see what's underneath the ivory."

While working in a piano factory in Leipzig, East Germany, Witter started cataloging pianos, inadvertently beginning what would eventually become his doctoral dissertation.



President Calvin Coolidge once owned this piano. Dr. Jens Witter restored it at his home workshop in Tucson.

Kelly Jo Rashka



## PROFILE

"Once, there over 103 piano factories in Leipzig," Witter said. "I started talking to the older people about the factories and started to write down the pianos that were manufactured – the manufacturer, the years pianos were made, if the factory moved. I wrote thousands of cards on pianos."

Initially, Witter thought he was doing it for himself to save information for future generations and to honor the memory of the European piano makers. The catalog grew into 25 years of work with over 32,000 entries of European pianos dating back to 1788. The first complete catalog served as his dissertation; he has also completed a second edition and hopes to translate another edition into English.

Witter said he first thought of traveling to Arizona on his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. "My brother showed me a shooting star, and at the time, I was reading a book that had a picture of Saguaro National Monument Park East showing a very tall cactus with a man in a red shirt who looked so short next to it," Witter said. "At that moment I thought that if I could see those cacti some day, that would be gorgeous."

Witter said he put thoughts of Arizona out of his mind because he knew that the opportunity to travel outside East Germany would be unlikely. "I had to ignore it or it would drive me crazy," he said.

Eventually, he applied for release from his East German citizenship, which was granted. He left East Germany just as the Berlin Wall came down.

When he met his wife Trudy, they traveled all over the world, and in 1996, finally came to Arizona to see the cacti.

As he came out of the airport at Tucson International, he saw a saguaro slightly taller than he was, and in that moment, his boyhood memory of the giant saguaro came rushing back. "I said to my wife that I feel I would have roots here, a feeling of being home. I said I would die in Tucson," Witter recalled.

Witter eventually emigrated to the United States with his family in 2002 and settled in Tucson, carrying on his dream of living in the desert and pursuing his passion of restoring antique pianos.

He brought 54 pianos with him, a moving feat which required three 40-foot shipping containers.

Trudy Witter, who has been working with her husband to restore pianos for the last 14 years, grew up with music, too. "My family made lots of music. We tried lots of different kinds of musical instruments," she said. Her favorite part of working on pianos is restoring the veneer.

One of Witter's most recent projects was a restoration of a 1909 grand "Mason & Hamlin, Boston" piano once owned by President Calvin Coolidge. The Witters put 2,036 hours of work into the restoration, which took almost six months.



Kelly Jo Rashka

Not only does he repair them, Witter cataloged 32,000 pianos, from 1788 to 2000.

Witter elected to donate the piano to the New Apostolic Church of Los Angeles, after seeing its women's choir perform here in Tucson. "I saw the piano and wanted to restore it. I had three choices with the Coolidge piano," Witter said. "I could have sold it to a private person and no one except that person would see or hear it; I could have donated it to a museum, where people would have to pay to see it, but could not touch it or hear it; or I could donate it to a place where people would see it, play it, and hear it."

Witter, who estimates he has worked on about 40,000 pianos in his career so far, restores pianos from all over the country. Recently he finished work on piano from Alaska, and is talking with someone from Mississippi who has a flood-damaged piano they are interested in restoring.

Although he is passionate about his work, Witter is careful to keep from injecting his own ideas into the restorations. "I do not want to interpret my own knowledge into the pianos. I have to bring them back to what they were, what they were intended to be, how they were intended to sound," he said.

Witter loves the desert and his instant attraction to the saguaro cactus when he was 13 has developed into a hobby that gives him a break from piano work. "I love cacti. In all we have about 10,000 cacti, probably around 500 different kinds," he said.

The Witters are looking forward to construction their new workshop in Vail, where they recently bought 40 acres. "We will build our workshop on the top of the hill there, and I will be even more inspired," Witter said.

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Courtesy of Dr. Jens and Trudy Witter

A picture of a saguaro brought Witter from Leipzig to Tucson. "I thought if I could see those cacti some day, that would be gorgeous," he said.

### Biz Facts:

**Antiquepiano.com**

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