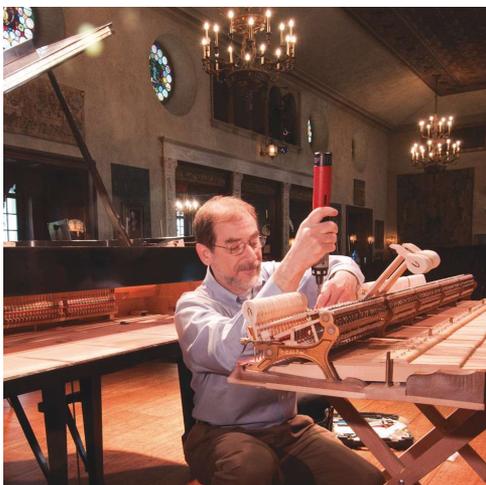


Piano technician Russell Gordon at work in the Rosen House Music Room



A Tale of *Three* Pianos

By Christina Horzepa

While Caramoor founder Walter Rosen may be best remembered for his expansive and eclectic art collection, he was also an accomplished amateur pianist. During his life, the Steinway Model B he played took center stage in the Music Room, where he and his wife, Lucie, entertained friends. In 1946, when the couple opened Caramoor to the public, his piano shared the spotlight with some of the world's best pianists.

At 6' 10½", it was not a full-sized concert grand, but the Rosen piano was considered a perfectly appropriate instrument for the cozy ambiance of the Music Room. "It was Walter Rosen's," said Caramoor Managing Director Paul Rosenblum, highlighting the importance of the emotional connection to Caramoor's founder. "It was the piano that went with the house, and its size was suitable to the intimacy of the room."

By the early 1990s, this thinking began to change. In 1992, then-Artistic Advisor André Previn began using the piano more regularly, performing publicly several times a year along with the young artists in the Rising Stars mentoring program. Plans to upgrade to a full 9-foot concert grand took shape, funded by Caramoor Trustee Susan Freund and her husband John. According to Mr. Rosenblum, then-Executive Director Howard Herring contacted Steinway and, after careful consideration, purchased a Model D concert grand piano from its concert department. Mr. Rosen's piano was then moved to Caramoor's Diane Moss Education Center, where it is used for rehearsals and education programs. A third piano, a Steinway Model A, which was a gift to the Rosens from their friend Sonia Landman, occupies the Gifford Guesthouse, where it is used by artists-in-residence.

The official maintainer of these three storied pianos is Russell Gordon, a second-generation piano technician from nearby Goldens Bridge, NY. Mr. Gordon learned the craft from his father, who was a recording engineer with Columbia Records and worked with Leonard Bernstein before apprenticing with the Steinways and becoming a piano technician. Initially, Mr. Gordon pursued a career in biochemistry. However, he found a certain appeal in the combination of art and science that comes together in piano construction, and chose to learn the craft from his father. In 1986 he



was hired to care for Caramoor's pianos; in addition to providing regular maintenance and tuning, he also completely rebuilt both Walter Rosen's Steinway Model B and the Gifford's Model A.

"When I started at Caramoor, the Music Room was still set up as the Rosen's living room," he recalled. The Rosens were gone, but their friend, Marjorie Gifford, lived at Caramoor, in the guesthouse that now bears her name and is used to host visiting artists. In 1991 she encouraged Mr. Gordon to refurbish Walter Rosen's piano, which was built in 1911 and "needed attention."

Indeed, the Rosen piano required a new action. Many of the keys had become heavy and unresponsive. "If you think of the keys on the piano as steps on a staircase with each step at a different height, you can understand how hard it was to play," Mr. Gordon explained. During a six-month period he rebuilt the piano, replacing the musical components, installing a new soundboard, pinblock, and action, and calibrating the keys so they moved smoothly. "The goal of the restoration process is to make the workings of the keys transparent, so the music that's in the pianist's head translates directly to the keyboard. The pianist shouldn't have to think about compensating on the keyboard," Mr. Gordon said. After he completed the restoration, which was funded by Mrs. Gifford, the piano was used for concerts in the Music Room. After the purchase of the concert grand, the Rosen Model B was moved to the Education Center, where it is used for Caramoor's arts-in-education programs.

In 2009 Mr. Gordon rebuilt the Model A, thanks to a donation from Joe and Susan Handelman. "When artists-in-residence came to stay at the Gifford apartment, they would all get very excited to see the piano there," Mr. Gordon recalled. "Before I rebuilt it, we'd have to say, 'well no, don't get so excited; it's not in good condition.'" Now, after Mr. Gordon's careful restoration, which included the addition of a specially designed humidifier, the piano is in perfect working order, used regularly by Caramoor's string-quartet-in-residence and Rising Stars young artists.

According to conventional wisdom, pianos should be tuned seasonally, roughly three or four times per year, to account for changes in temperature

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Piano technician Russell Gordon with Caramoor Managing Director Paul Rosenblum.

and humidity that affect the sensitive wooden structure and internal mechanisms. Unless, of course, the piano in question is a concert piano, played professionally by the world's greatest artists. In that case, Mr. Gordon notes, a more appropriate tuning schedule might be closer to three or four times *per show*: before rehearsal, after rehearsal, at the concert's start, and—for some of the more demanding performances—during intermission. The heat of the stage lights, the humidity of an outdoor setting, and the exacting standards of a world-class artist call for an increased attention to detail. At Caramoor, a piano technician is on hand at all performances.

During Caramoor's summer season, the technicians come from the Queens, New York headquarters of Steinway, which supplies the Model D concert grand pi-

anos in the Venetian Theater and Spanish Courtyard. At nearly 9' in length, these pianos come from Steinway's concert division and are specially made and selected for professional performances.

"The piano is a living, breathing instrument," explained Mr. Rosenblum. "Most people don't understand how much care they require. If you send the technician home after intermission, you may live in fear! If a string breaks—it's rare, but it does happen—you need to call on the cell phone and get him to come back."

For Mr. Gordon, being on hand during the Music Room concerts is one of the job's greatest perks. Of all the luminaries he's worked with during his 25-year tenure, he's most in awe of Caramoor's own. "I've worked with Andy Armstrong and Eddie Arron since the Rising Stars started," he said. "To watch them perform is a magical experience." ■

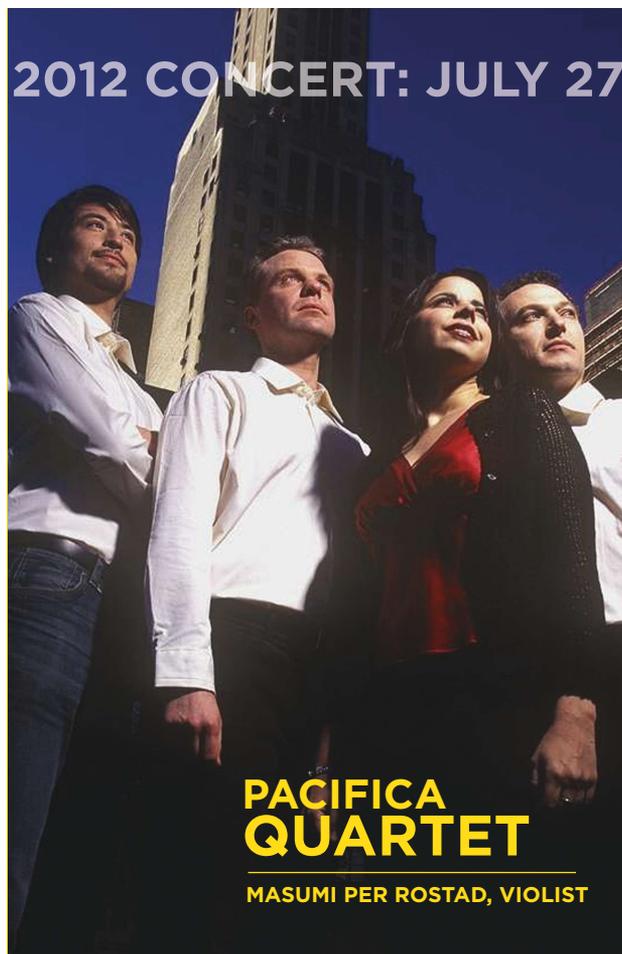
ADVICE FOR YOUNG MUSICIANS:

When I was just finishing school, an older musician advised me that I should never turn down opportunities to work, if possible. I have always tried to keep an open mind. Thus, I haven't found myself in a musical box, and I have kept meeting new musicians and discovering new music.

WHY MUSIC MATTERS: It's hard to imagine the world without music, but that would be a sad world! We all need this artistic realm: we need to lose ourselves in abstract thought every so often, to be inspired by intellectual connections that spontaneously occur, or to simply feel without thinking at all.

INSPIRATION: I grew up in Englewood, NJ, near a nature center called Flat Rock Brook. When I go back there, as I walk up into the woods and to the top of the cliff, and then back down a different path next to the stream, I always come back feeling inspired.

Photo by Lisa-Marie Mazzucco



POPULAR LISTENING: It is the strangest thing; three members of a string quartet keep showing up wherever I go. I can't seem to shake them. So, besides too much quartet repertoire, I listen to loads of old vinyl. Everything—and anything—I can get my hands on. The problem is finding the time to sit down and listen. I hate listening to music on an iPod. I am also really into podcasts. So much so that I started my own: *Inner Voice* (like my shameless plug?)

PICNIC BASKET CONTENTS: Cheese. Chocolate. Mmmmm.

FAVORITE DRINK: Stony Hill. When the quartet plays in Napa, we often stay as guests of the vineyard. Peter and Willinda are known among the winemakers in the valley as producers of the best Chardonnay in the area. It is made in the French style so you don't get the pop bottles of oak-flavored sugary alcohol that often get labeled as Chardonnay. Cheers!

MUSICAL INFLUENCE: The quartet's mentors include Bobby Mann of the Juilliard Quartet; Paul Katz of the Cleveland Quartet; Menahem Pressler of the Beaux Arts Trio; The Emerson Quartet; (quartet member) Brandon Vamos's parents.

PRACTICE ROUTINE: The quartet has loads of repertoire to juggle, so we rehearse together about four hours a day. In addition to the constant striving for higher artistic goals, I suppose fear of sucking could also be counted as motivation!

ADVICE FOR YOUNG MUSICIANS: Try to be around musicians who are better than you as much as possible.

WHY MUSIC MATTERS: No sane person makes the decision to go into a life in the arts for the money. The arts are a wonderful thing for everyone, whether as a producer or receiver. It is a community project to even have the arts at all. In our grand world, we can easily forget that each of us bears a cultural responsibility. What is yours?

INSPIRATION: Did we mention Stony Hill Chardonnay, chocolate, and cheese?

Photo by Anthony Parmelee