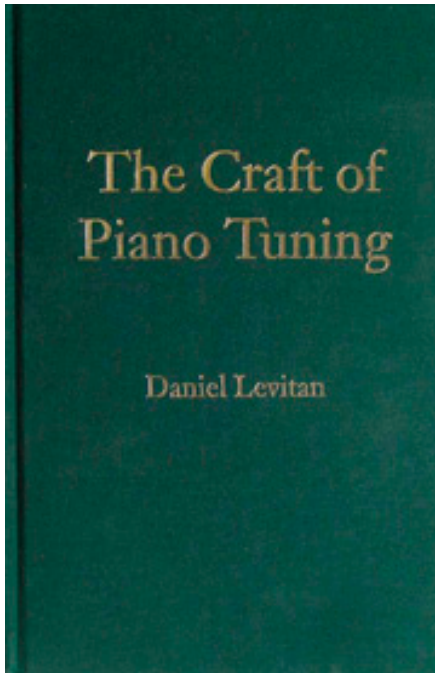


Daniel Levitan, *The Craft of Piano Tuning*. New York: Soundboard Press, 2011, 252 pp., many ill. and tables. ISBN: 978-061-5430492, \$100.



Books and articles on the theory and practice of piano tuning in America have flowed in a steady stream over the last century, at least since William Braid White established a modern understanding of tuning practice (*Theory and Practice of Piano Construction*: with a detailed, practical method for tuning, New York, 1906). Most references incorporate large sections on piano repair some go further to include piano rebuilding. The first edition of the standard American text on complete piano service, Arthur Reblitz' *Piano Servicing, Tuning and Rebuilding* (Vestal, New York, 1976) included only 24 pages and one chapter on piano tuning; the second edition was expanded to 37 pages and two chapters. While the more serious efforts treat both theory and practice, nearly all address only the modern piano, which constitutes the income base of most working piano tuners. So it must be said at the outset of this review that the target audience for this book is also limited to the practitioner or student of modern piano tuning. There is no effort to address historical tuning, unequal temperaments, or pianos built

before the modern age (ca. 1860 and earlier). Having said this, the book is an important reference for all who might wield a tuning hammer.

There are many paths in North America to the practice of piano service; training includes one- and two-year schools, apprenticeship with piano rebuilders, training in a factory (today only three factories exist in the US). Certification can be obtained with the Piano Technicians Guild for basic tuning and repair skills and a basic knowledge of the trade. Many successful piano technicians have completed no formal program, but have informally apprenticed, or latched onto factories such as Steinway and Sons. Most tuning practitioners use "ETD's," sophisticated electronic tuning devices with customized programming abilities; this reduces the need for the tuning professional to have a complete set of aural tuning skills. Aural tuning schools exist, one is represented by those who have trained in the basement of Steinway and Sons. A nearly militant anti-ETD philosophy is espoused by these exclusively aural tuners who have learned certain refined skills of aural tuning, often for performance. Incredibly able tuning theorists, such as Rick Baldassin, former tuning editor for the *Piano Technicians Journal*, have articulated both theoretical and practical approaches to highly refined tuning theory and method.

It is widely thought within the piano service community that the most successful tuners, such as the philharmonic technician, may not have stellar all-around abilities, but are extremely successful at tuning very clean and stable unisons. This is probably true; the ability to sell work, and to present it well (firm and clean unisons help with this), is usually sufficient. The challenges of tuning stability in a hall are severe enough, including wide temperature swings in the day prior to the concert (often stage doors are opened to intemperate weather), and increasing temperatures during the concert. So that just achieving stable unisons makes the tuner a hero. However, this writer never forgets the day when

he sat in the audience and listened to his own work, always very stable and rock-solid, and was extremely disappointed in the flat treble! The demands of a symphony performance are different than those of a faculty studio or home teaching piano. However, Perri Knize, in her best-seller *Grand Obsession: a Piano Odyssey* (New York, 2008), entertainingly revealed the world of the piano tuner-technician as she established for herself that the elusive dream piano she spent most of the book searching for was not a piano, so much as a dream tuning. Specifically, a tuning used by head Manhattan School of Music piano technician Mark Wienert, as learned from another master tuner in the Steinway and Sons basement. While this may seem far-fetched, pianist-tuner-technicians like myself, who have the privilege of playing our work immediately after it is completed, might be open to her conclusion. The highly virtuosic, refined tunings performed by the most able aural tuners, or possibly even the most sophisticated ETD tuners, can have noticeably different results than a carelessly performed tuning with extremely clean unisons.

Author Daniel Levitan, an accomplished piano technician in New York City (and a recognized composer for percussion ensemble), has taken the theory and practice of the art of tuning the modern piano to a highly refined level. His work exemplifies the highest level of professional understanding within the piano service trade today. Levitan is known as an active member of the Piano Technicians Guild, the Kansas City-based trade organization which certifies piano tuning and repair specialists through Registered Piano Technician (RPT) testing. This book takes the reader far beyond the basic knowledge and skills of that certification to a high level of artistic and scientific craft. His chapters are rightly called essays, and are short, focused treatises on tuning. Levitan pointedly avoids writing a comprehensive tuning resource, while masterfully focusing the theory and practice of virtuosic modern piano tuning.

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The Craft of Piano Tuning is divided into two treatises, "The Tuner's Ear" (Four Lectures on Basic Aural Tuning) and "The Tuner's Hand" (Fundamentals of Piano Tuning Technique). "The Tuner's Ear" provides the foundation of the book, four chapters covering nearly the first 100 of 223 pages of actual text. While recent expositions on piano tuning have risked irrelevance or impracticality due to overwrought scientific-technical explanations, these four lectures balance thoroughness with an elegant simplicity of writing which makes this work a new "must" for those seeking to understand and practice the art of piano tuning. Of course, descriptions of complex tuning sequences are not simple, and the uninitiated will be intimidated. But the writing style is only as complex as absolutely necessary. This first treatise is followed by seven supplements, thirty-seven pages of advanced tuning discussion, from "Partials Above the Sixth" to "More on Difference Tones" to "Intentional Mistuning." The second section, "The Tuner's Hand", consists of five chapters discussing the technique of piano tuning. These comprise only thirty-five pages, while the seven supplemental readings comprise forty-five pages entitled "Fundamentals of Piano Tuning Technique".

On the day I wrote the bulk of this review I had several tuning appointments, and I could not take my mind off *The Craft of Piano Tuning* while working. The pianos at hand caused me to wonder if Levitan suggested strategies for poor string rendering found in the 5'3" Premier grand just donated to the Episcopal Church choir room, or whether the recommended pitch compensation strategies, standard procedure in the business, would work on the next appointment, a Steinway vertical. I knew that I had to abandon conventional pitch-raise wisdom on the Steinway style "N" 54" 1912 vertical while adjusting pitch from A-435 to A-440, or I would spend the next two hours undoing the disaster I had just wrought. Even a straight pull to A-440 resulted in the

mid-treble over-shooting to A-441. Are these challenges and anomalies discussed? Not that I could find; as comprehensive as this work is, it does not cover every essential technique. I would have liked a chapter covering additional tuning challenges, not only the near-universal tuning problems of Steinway verticals, or the string rendering problems of the Premier grand. Both rust and excessive string bearing angle made this piano a real "bear" to tune, which years of experience overcame, but cannot fully compensate for in result. A third section should also cover the unusual tuning systems encountered in the field, from simple tapered tuning pins found on all Chickering's past 1900 to Wegman and other tuning systems, to the unequal unisons found in all Steinway and Baldwin "D"s for decades, to how to address "duplex scale" complications, including buzzing duplex terminations and strings with hardened terminations at the V-bar. Having said this, *The Craft of Piano Tuning* stands on its own for its fundamental thoroughness. The tuning apprentice is still expected to be taught by a mentor, who should make up the difference.

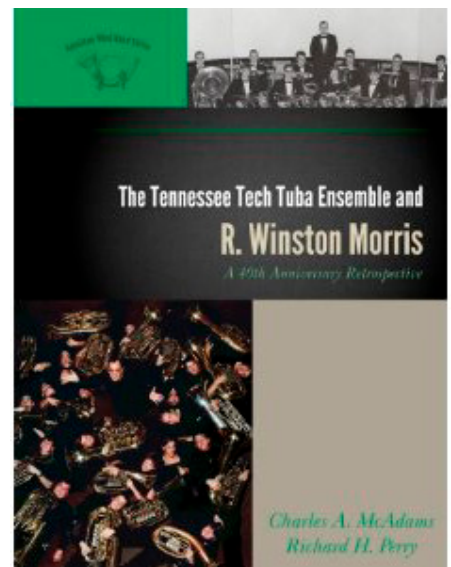
In *The Craft of Piano Tuning*, Levitan provides the next textbook on tuning the modern piano. A student of piano technician Bill Garlick while studying at the North Bennett Street School, he has thrived at the center of New York City's rich tradition of high-level piano tuning; built innovative tuning tools which reflect his advanced understanding of tuning; and engaged in sometimes heated discussions in the Piano Technicians Journal. Those who expect Levitan to discuss in detail the use of electronic tuning devices will be disappointed. Levitan is very clear: these are useful devices, but not until the tuner has achieved a mastery of aural tuning. Only advanced training of the ear can provide the tools for assessing electronic tuning results.

With what is known about the rise of equal temperament in the early nineteenth-century, tuners of pre-modern pianos may benefit from the advanced tuning knowledge and

skills offered in this work. My colleague Fred Sturm has just completed an English translation of an important nineteenth century work on equal temperament, Claude Montal's *L'Art d'accorder soi-même son Piano (The Art of Tuning One's Own Piano One-self)*. Soon these two books might become the standard resource for equal temperament tuning. *The Craft of Tuning* would not be so accessible but for the profuse and clear illustrations by John Hartman, the premier technical illustrator in the American piano service trade.

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Charles A. McAdams and Richard H. Perry. *The Tennessee Tech Tuba Ensemble and R. Winston Morris: A 40th Anniversary Retrospective*. Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2010. 206 pp.: 91 black-and-white photographs. ISBN: 978-0-8108-7730-6. \$56.24 (hardcover).



The Tennessee Tech Tuba Ensemble and R. Winston Morris: A 40th Anniversary Retrospective looks into the forty-year history of R. Winston Morris and the Tennessee Tech Tuba Ensemble (TTTE) and catalogs the monumental impact and accomplishments of two well-established icons in the tuba and euphonium world. The book serves as a scholarly resource on the history of the tuba ensemble and a pro-

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