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**THE KEY MASTER: FOR FRANK HENNESSY, IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PIANOS (Published April 23, 2005, in the Columbia Business Times) - 4/12/2005**

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COLUMBIA, Mo. – Frank Hennessy may start by showing you his guitars, but it isn't long before he takes you closer to the heart of his store, the pianos. And pretty soon, he'll even show you the heart of the pianos.

If you're lucky, he'll take you into the back room where he reconditions and rebuilds aging Steinways, Baldwins and Yamahas. That's where you get to see the piano innards and how the parts ought to be constructed to produce the best sound. He'll tell you how to use black shoe polish to make sure the pin block in your piano has been shaped properly and how you should never hammer a tuning pin into its hole because it burns the wood.

It's all about the sound, Hennessy says. "Don't listen to the salesman; listen to the piano."

Hennessy ought to know. He's been selling and repairing pianos and other musical instruments at his West Broadway store in Columbia for 30 years. He came to Columbia in 1975 after managing one of the ten largest Yamaha dealerships in the country in Dayton, Ohio, leaving Ohio because his doctor said his long hours and job stress were leading him to a heart attack.

A friend in the industry told him to "find himself a little market, open a store and let it happen." He chose Columbia because statistics showed it to be the third-fastest growing city in the United States at the time, with half of the phone numbers changing every year. That first year brought sales of about \$150,000, and his annual sales in recent years have risen to as high as \$1.1 million.

But sales figures are not what make Hennessy tick. His passion is rebuilding an aging piano to its former glory, often making it sound better than it ever did before. Hennessy said many people can do parts of a piano restoration, but he is one of only a select few who can do the whole thing. As far as he knows, he is the only person who does full piano restorations between Colorado Springs, Chicago and Dallas.

He learned the technical side of pianos in Dayton in the 1960s, when a plant superintendent from the Baldwin piano factory in Cincinnati gave a repair seminar. Hennessy

peppered the man with so many questions and demands for demonstrations that he finally let Hennessy come in to watch the old craftsmen in the factory, who were usually very secretive about their work. He traveled the 100 miles to Cincinnati for five years on days off, watching the craftsmen make pianos.

At first, not wanting to show their cards, the craftsmen would put their tools down and back away from their workbenches when Hennessy, a complete stranger, showed up to watch. But the plant superintendent told them Hennessy was O.K. Like an apprentice, Hennessy stood and soaked up the knowledge. Then he went home and duplicated what the craftsmen did.

"That's how I know all this stuff;" Hennessy said. "In the late 1980s, I was talking to my friend, the superintendent's son, and I told him something about getting up into the factory. And he said nobody got to do that, and I did all the time. And he said, 'You're the only one. My dad said, 'The guy's willing to take a day off work without pay and drive 100 miles; I'll help him.'""

Hennessy focused on instrumental music in high school and became a high school band director at age 18. He earned a music certificate from the Air Force School of Music in the early 1950s and later earned a music degree from the University of Dayton, where he served as a staff technician. Hennessy chose the technician route partly because a stuttering problem he has battled his entire life often made it difficult to get music teaching jobs. But the teaching world's loss is the vintage piano's gain.

Reconstruction can pay off for those looking for a bargain or investment. Currently restoring an 1879 Steinway for another client, he proudly displays a rebuilt \$34,000 1971 Baldwin 9-foot concert grand piano on his showroom floor. Listing for \$193,900 if purchased new today, he says his restored model "walks all over the brand new one" in tone. For pianos that require extensive refinishing work, sometimes Hennessy works with a company in Juarez, Mexico.

Hennessy Music sells pianos, guitars and organs, and sells, rents and repairs band instruments through an associate, Butch Antal. Hennessy's new piano brands include Yamaha and Pearl River, a Chinese company with which Yamaha and Steinway have joint ventures. One new model that has become very popular at the University of Missouri is Yamaha's digital recording piano, which reproduces an exact duplicate of what has been played, making it possible for soloists to practice with a recorded accompanist and for pianists to listen and improve their playing.

His store has four full-time employees, four part-time movers, seven music teachers and an intern with the city's CARE program. Hennessy says he breaks all the rules of sales, refusing to use high-pressure tactics, take people's names and call them up later pushing for a sale. He does not hire salespeople on commission, and suggests that people who want that should go to a car lot. "We treat people like we would like to be treated. If you buy or don't buy, it doesn't matter," he said.

Hennessy's has about 150 music students and five teaching rooms. His advice on music lessons to parents: "Watch the expression on the face," he said. "When the kid goes in the lesson and comes out, it will tell you everything you need to know."

Hennessy says a big trend in the piano lessons has been the growth in senior citizens wanting to take lessons. It used to be that all the students were children, but now grandma and grandpa are taking it up again for fun or to help keep arthritic fingers limber. He puts it this way: "What do you do when you're 50 years old, and nobody will come out and play?"