

Piano Man

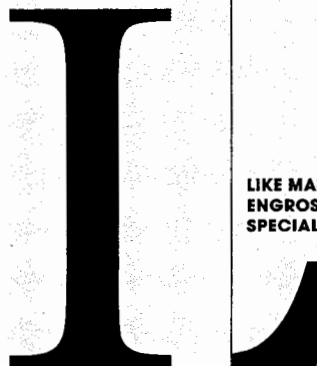
Musically-minded scientist *Thomas Strange* restores old pianos—but it's more than a matter of dust and decay. He ensures the concerto never ends, *hundreds of years* after it began.

by *Stephanie Trotter*
photography by *Paul Mebaffey*

Strange has a wealth of foals and piano parts in his Eastley studio, including these harpsichord jacks.



ON THE KEYS:
Tom Strange's fixation on pianos began in college when he played a hand-built clavichord of a physics professor. Strange himself built his first harpsichord at age 24.



LIKE MANY MUSICIANS ENGROSSED IN THEIR SPECIALTY,

PIANO PLAYERS TEND TO HAVE FAVORITE PIANISTS: BEETHOVEN, RACHMANINOV, PERHAPS LISZT, OR HOROWITZ. EASLEY'S THOMAS STRANGE TAKES HIS FOCUS ONE STEP FURTHER—HE HAS FAVORITE PIANOS, AND THEY'RE ALL FROM THE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES.

"I love their stories. History comes alive when it's a story you can relate to," he shares. "When you play these pianos, you're hearing eighteenth- or nineteenth-century America, and it's authentic. You're hearing what they heard. It's like you've turned the clock back all of those hundreds of years."

Strange, senior director of research and development at St. Jude Medical in Liberty, South Carolina, discovered this love while studying physics at the University of South Carolina. One of his professors kept a small, hand-built clavichord in his office. "I played it, and I was transfixed. It created a lifelong interest on where these sounds come in, the creation of sound and music," he says. Science collided with art in perfect harmony, and in 1980, at age 24, Strange built his first harpsichord: a Zuckerman Flemish X. "It took about 280 hours to build. Truth be told, I met my wife Debra over that harpsichord! We were living in the same neighborhood, and she would come over and see how it was coming along. She doesn't play, but she's an excellent audience. She puts up with my playing and thinks it's wonderful," he recalls with fondness.

Family and work dictated the staccato of life. Strange didn't have time to tap into his

hobby again until 1997. By then, the Internet was making it easier to find harpsichords, fortepianos, and square pianos, all delicately-toned predecessors to the more versatile pianos built today. With a few strokes on computer keys, he bought a 75-key Collard & Collard off eBay. "It had been stored in a barn, and when it arrived, it smelled like it," he remembers with a chuckle. "There were nests inside. I thought, Debra is going to be mad." Two hundred hours of learning and labor later, the piano sounded like new. Well, nineteenth-century new, with its subdued, chocolaty sound.

And like a grand crescendo, his passion grew *con spirito*. Today, Strange owns 25 antique pianos and five harpsichords. He's logged more than 10,000 hours refurbishing, rebuilding, and restoring what time has torn apart. Most importantly, he's helped establish a network of fellow enthusiasts preserving these pieces of the past, before their notes fade away forever. His Web site squarepianotech.com gets up to 60,000 hits a month, as like-minded specialists share preservation tips, covering everything from how to import antique ivory (you don't), to what new materials mimic the sound of 200-year-old vegetable-tanned, sheep leather (artisanal-tanned elk). The woodworking on these heirlooms alone entails tutorials on Brazilian rosewood and Honduran mahogany.

Once the award-winning physicist's left brain puts the 12,000-piece piano back together, the right-brained pianist takes over to use it. "I can play convincingly, but I can't hold up against real musicians," he admits. So, Strange invites world-renowned musicians and local groups—particularly students—to his home in Easley. "One of the rules of the house: you have to touch everything!" he announces to a young crowd from Brevard's Music Center. The students beeline for Strange's grand (played by master Chopin), the Tomkison, the Reuss. "You don't learn about it until you touch it," he explains. "You are opening the doors to imaginations of students and adults alike, to be able to take them back in an authentic way to a period they want to know more about."

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THE CHOPIN GRAND

1845

ORIGIN:

LONDON

MAKER:

JOHN BROADWOOD AND SONS

KEYS: 78

HIGH NOTE:

PLAYED BY FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

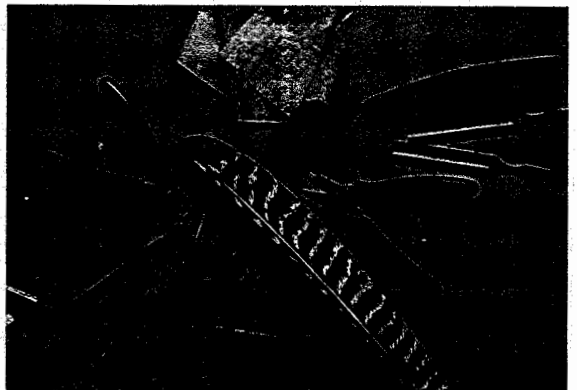
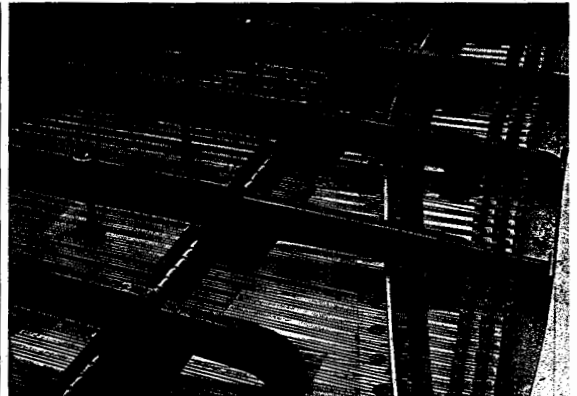
Sometimes a collector needs a little luck. Sometimes that luck comes with perseverance.

And that's exactly how a piano, used by one of the great masters, arrived in Easley. When the French monarchy collapsed in 1848, Frédéric Chopin fled his home in Paris. He found refuge in England, where Henry Broadwood provided the musician with three full-concert grand pianos. Chopin used these to prepare for large events, but he also played other pianos in private homes, earning 20 pounds for a two-hour show.

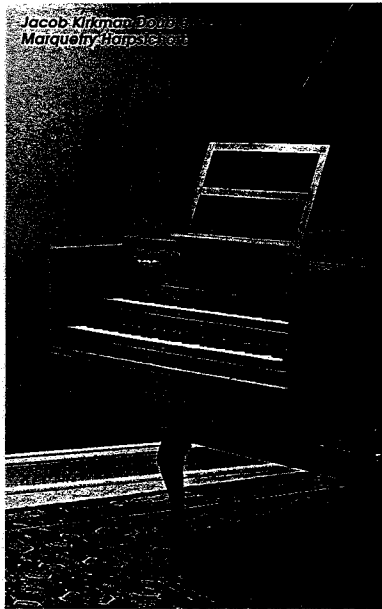
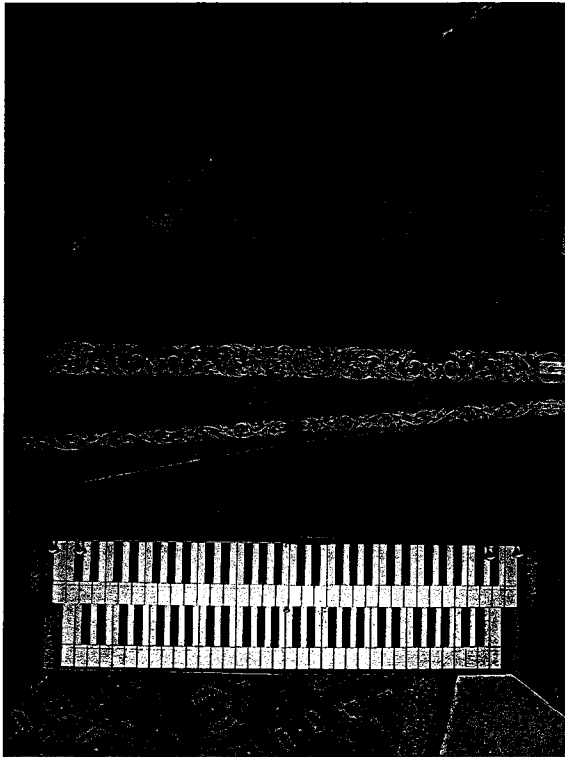
In 2012, Strange was looking to acquire a piano *similar* to the Broadwoods Chopin used for concert practice, as only one of the three originals still existed. Strange's representative in England found such a creature that was very dirty, but in mysteriously good shape. With an unknown history, it was relatively inexpensive. Strange bid 3,600 pounds and won.

Once on U.S. soil, he began to dig into the instrument's origin. The auction house would not reveal the seller who wanted to remain anonymous, so Strange took the piano's serial number and cross-referenced John Broadwood & Sons record books. Using a buyer's name from ages ago, he googled a few email addresses and sent queries into the cyber world, expecting nothing in return—but he got a response. A rather miffed Brit revealed the piano's invaluable history. William Amory purchased the grand in 1845. Three years later, his wife hired Chopin to play in their home on this very piano. The Amory's youngest daughter later inherited the house and piano. When she died in 1923, it sat in storage for 80 years, until Strange won it at auction. Today, due to its well-preserved, original condition, pianists performing on the Chopin grand are touching the same keys, hitting the same strings, hearing the same sounds as Chopin and his audience that May day in 1848.

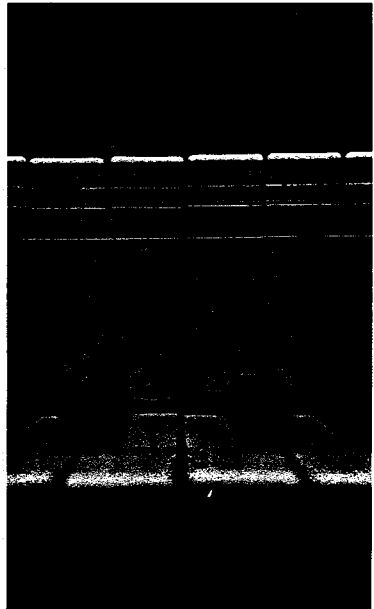
Strange plays the John Broadwood and Sons grand piano that master Frédéric Chopin played at a private concert in England in 1848.



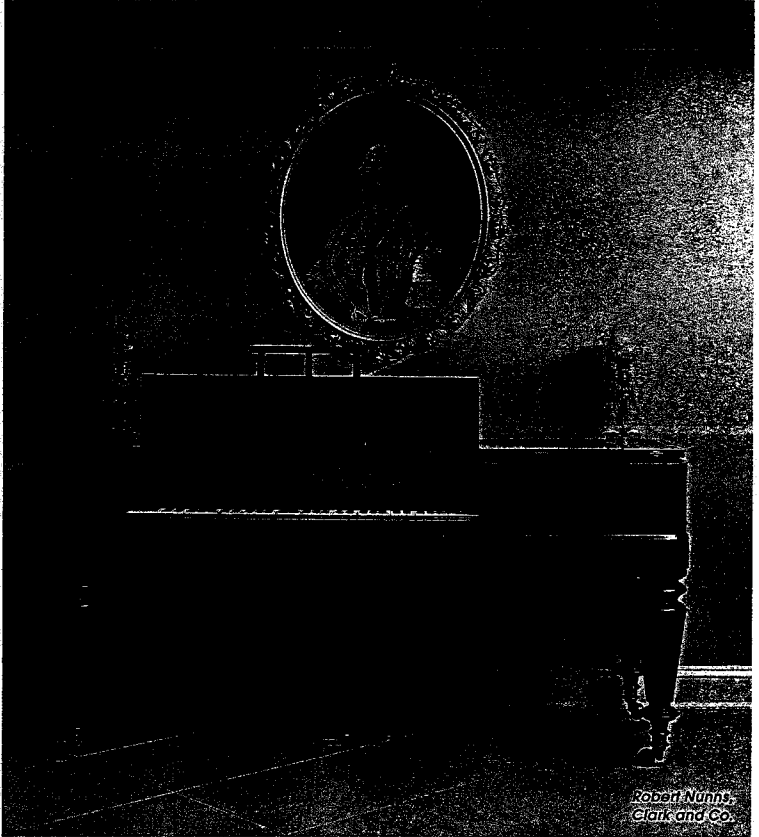
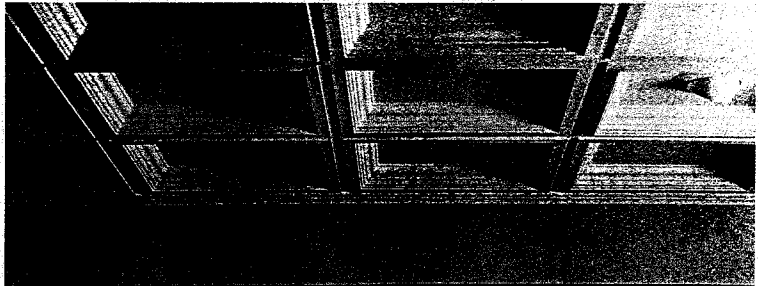
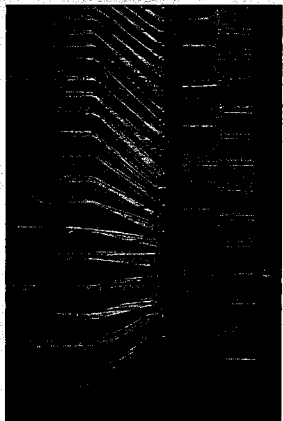
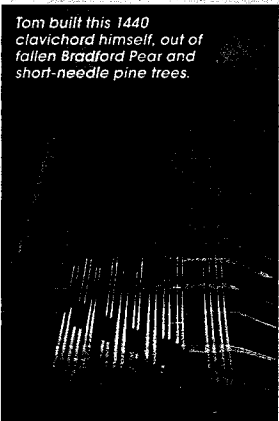
Patent
Repetition Grand Piano forte
John Broadwood & Sons
Manufacturers to Her Majesty
32 Great Marlborough Street, London, W.1
London



Jacob Kirkman 3018
Marquetry Harpsichord



Tom built this 1440
clavichord himself, out of
fallen Bradford Pear and
short-needle pine trees.



Robert Nunn,
Clark and Co.

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WHEN IT COMES TO DOORS, THE STRANGE HOUSE MIGHT AS WELL FEATURE ONLY THE REVOLVING KIND, WITH AS MANY AS 12 GROUPS CROSSING THE THRESHOLD EACH YEAR. IN ADDITION TO STUDENTS FROM BREVARD, YOUNG MUSICIANS FROM FURMAN UNIVERSITY, THE GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS & HUMANITIES, THE FINE ARTS CENTER, BOB JONES UNIVERSITY, AND THE GREENVILLE MUSIC TEACHERS ASSOCIATION ALL COME TO PLAY HIS TREASURED HEIRLOOMS.

The Stranges also draw upon the collection to participate in six concerts and one large fundraiser annually. "We never charge to use the instruments," he reveals. "The fundraisers are to help provide greater access for those who want to see them."

Last year, in a unique partnership with the Governor's School, the Stranges helped to establish an endowment to provide buses and scholarship money for those coming to Easley to view the collection. The plan was to raise \$15,000 via a series of concerts featuring the pianos. "We did it in a single blow," Strange explains with excitement. "In one night, we raised more than \$26,000!" The fund continues to grow, with this year's charity event set for October 29.

The physicist's philanthropic work runs the scales far beyond fundraising, into education and performance, as well. He's shared his instruments and knowledge to assist others by way of historical recordings, collection displays, and patron seminars at museums in Greenville and Columbia, Colonial Williamsburg, even the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. And while Frédéric Chopin and Muzio Clementi tickled these ivories, as well as Vladimir Ashkenazy and Raymond Leppard in the 1970s, Strange recently has hosted Vadym Kholodenko, winner of the prestigious Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, and renowned composer and pianist Inessa Zaretsky to inspect and utilize the antique pieces.

"WHEN YOU TOUCH THESE KEYBOARDS, WHEN YOU PLAY, YOU HEAR SOMETHING DIFFERENT. SOME OF THEM STILL HAVE THEIR ODOR ABOUT THEM—IT TOUCHES ALL THE SENSES." —TOM STRANGE

THE DOUBLE DECKER

1758

ORIGIN:

LONDON

MAKER:

JACOB KIRKMAN DOUBLE
MANUAL MARQUETRY
HARPSICHORD

KEYS: 120

HIGH NOTE:
TOURED WITH
A TOLSTOY IN
A VW BUS

It's not the summer of love, but the hippie counter-culture is in full swing.

In 1966, about the last thing you'd expect to see spilling out of a VW Microbus is an eighteenth-century harpsichord. But that was the scene in Mexico, as Paul and Christy Tolstoy unloaded not only their Kirkman double decker, but their friend Randy Mickelson's as well. Paul was an anthropologist with interests pulling him to Central America. While he worked, Christy and Randy played their vintage harpsichords under the Mexican sun.

The Tolstoys lived in New York, descendants of those who fled the Russian Revolution. Paul purchased the harpsichord for Christy in 1965. It's one of only 17 Kirkmans with elaborate marquetry that exists today, and one of only four produced with this particular, rich design, the most elaborate ever made. (King George III gave his new bride Charlotte one of the others.) These Kirkman harpsichords were typically used in wealthy English manor houses. Tolstoy purchased his gift for Christy from such a house, The Bower House, and had it shipped to the States.

The double decker eventually landed in a Manhattan townhouse where it sat unattended for two decades without air conditioning. Once Strange acquired it in 2012, he polished off years of neglect and installed new iron and brass strings to replicate the original, buttery, articulate sound.

Strange's long-term goal is to move the collection to a permanent venue in the Greenville area, with a curator to keep the pianos playing, and the audible history alive. "When you touch these keyboards, when you play, you hear something different. Some of them still have their odor about them—it touches all the senses," he says. "Sharing these pianos is more valuable than anything I do. It's about as fulfilling as it gets." **■**

TIME & TREASURE

Strange's collection attracts world-class musicians and gifted students from area schools, such as Greenville's Fine Arts Center and the Governor's School for the Arts & Humanities. The Stranges host a fundraiser each autumn to provide scholarships for Governor's School students and to allow them access to the pianos.

THE FAMILY HEIRLOOM

1834

ORIGIN:

NEW YORK

MAKER:

ROBERT NUNNS,
CLARK AND CO.

KEYS: 73

HIGH NOTE:

SAVED THE FAMILY FROM
YANKEE SOLDIERS

Cue "Ashokan Farewell" by Jay Unger with a sweeping pan of Ivy Hall Plantation in Fairfield County, South Carolina.

Drunk Union soldiers have already lit one plantation on fire, and now they are storming Ivy Hall, ready to loot and pillage. As they're threatening the family, taking the sugar, preparing to destroy the piano, the lady of the house calmly says, "Come. Sit down and let me play it for you before you do." She entertains them with a spirited mix of songs, and the Yankees are so moved that they leave everything unscathed and head down the road. The family heaves a sigh, as the Nunns & Clark remains standing for another day.

The nineteenth-century piece was built in New York and shipped to Charleston, where Austin Peay bought it for his daughter Eliza. The piano's unichord, or single-string-per-note structure, was popular from 1829–1835 in rural areas where tuners were hard to find.

After the Civil War and Eliza's eventual passing, the antique went to her daughter Carrie, and then stayed in the family and South Carolina, eventually making its way to Greenville. Strange was visiting a local home to purchase a piano, when he spied the Nunns & Clark. He valued it for its rare, unichord feature and bought it instead of the one he'd come to inspect. The piano's owner had been the family historian and held paperwork that sent Strange climbing up a family tree rooted at Ivy Hall. It turns out Eliza's sister married a Myer, and Strange's mother came from the Myers. After consulting with the curator of the Fairfield County Museum, Strange can say with certainty he now owns the piano his great-great-great grandfather bought for sweet Eliza.