Steinway Myths
by Rachel West, Associate Member

Those in attendance at PTG'S recent Central West Regional Seminar were treated to a lecture from guest speaker Kent Webb of Steinway and Sons. The lecture concluded with a very special Q & A session titled "Steinway Myths," a takeoff of the popular tv series "Mythbusters." Webb was presented with a daunting list of the piano tech community's perennial questions about Steinway. Here are a few of his responses as well as some very helpful hints.

Q.) Have Steinway hammers always been soaked in lacquer?
A.) No. They used to be soaked in shellac.
Is it possible the person posing this question was really asking: *Why can't Steinway make their hammers right?* According to Webb, Steinway believes lacquer is simply "part of the recipe" that ensures the quality and longevity of the "Steinway Tone."

Q.) True or False: Steinway Factory voicing is completely different from Steinway Hall voicing, and they fight over it.
A.) True.
However, the Factory and the Hall are trying to cooperate better in order to unify the processes used in the factory with the comments of their Concerts and Artists (C&A) Department, who are, according to Webb, Steinway's "biggest and best" customers.

Q.) True or False: Bill Garlic taught that rubbing an action center pin in the skin oil of your nose lubricated it well. Steinway endorses this "procedure."
A.) Webb was unaware of this practice either in the factory or the C&A Department, but that kind of oil, lanolin, CAN be a good oil for lubrication and protecting finishes, and it has also been suggested for use on guitar pickups.

Q.) Who ever thought of brass-covered action rails? Why is Steinway the only company that continues to use this strange design?
A.) The Steinway family developed it in the 1880's; the rail's design is referred to as the "Rosette" design.
The idea is that the rail's four protrusions will capture flanges and prevent screw loosening. The other advantage of using a metal rail is that metal does not warp. The process involves drying a wooden dowel and driving it into the rail so that the dowel can receive a wooden screw. The design is patented, non-traditional, and expensive; Webb also suggested that the reason no other manufacturers use this design is that nobody wants to "copy" – and thereby endorse – Steinway's design.

Q.) True or False: Steinway "invented" sostenuto.
A.) True, in 1885.

Q.) Whose idea was it to use teflon bushings? Why did they disappear so mysteriously, and is Steinway covering any of these instruments with any kind of "warranty?"

A.) The Steinway engineering team used teflon bushings from 1962 to 1982, an innovation to try to minimize friction and improve consistency. Teflon, of course, caused problems when it failed to adapt to the seasonal swelling and shrinking of the wood it was attached to. This was an attempt to introduce modern materials, but nothing is easy in manufacturing; there are always unexpected consequences to any change. As for warrantee, it will have expired on all those parts. They are now over 30 years old anyway and should be replaced.

Q.) What were all the reasons to leave ivory behind as a keytop material?
A.) Ivory was banned in the mid-1980's.
Other porous key covering materials have been suggested, everything from cow bone to mammoth tusk, but plastics are standard in Steinways. Plastics work well and have been in use since the 90's, and it's what many musicians expect now.

Q.) Why even make a console piano? They are expensive, quality made, but really don't sound any better than another good quality console at a far lower price.
A.) "We only make one piano, in different sizes."
Steinway produces mostly grands, but there is still a demand for Steinway uprights with the Steinway sound. Steinway's uprights use the same New York hammers and all the same materials as the grands. While the upright action parts are currently outsourced to Renner, the same materials, designs and standards are used, and Steinway will continue to offer uprights as long as the demand is there.

Q.) Will Steinways ever be made by machines? It might just help make them more consistent from one piano to the next, given the same quality materials.
A.) Steinway components are currently machine-made, then assembled by hand. Steinway continually invests in better machinery in order to produce the best possible components.

Q.) True or False: The jigs used by workers to assemble and regulate parts are the same as a century ago.
A.) True.
The oldest machine in the Steinway factory is a veneer splicer that dates back to 1873.

Q.) Is it true that, in the early 1900's, Steinway produced Model O's without a duplex scale? Why???
A.) True.
Between 1902 and 1904 these models were produced as part of Steinway's constant experimentation in search of new and better sound.

Q.) What's the advantage of Steinway's fallboard-cheek block system? It's such a pain!
A.) Keeping the fallboard attached to the cheek blocks prevents damage during moving. A Steinway fallboard will never fall out when the piano is on its side. Steinways may not be the friendliest to service, but they are "road-tough."

Q.) Why stop using damper springs? It doesn't seem like Steinway dampers are as effective as in the past.
A.) While there is a loss of efficiency in the current design, the touch is more uniform. Pianists preferred the consistency of touch that results when everything is controlled by gravity and mass alone. Webb went on to note that this design feature originated in the Hamburg models, which may have had softer damper felts than the New York models, and therefore a cleaner termination.

Q.) If Steinway's use of the "pressure bend" in regulating dampers is so good, why doesn't anyone else imitate it?
A.) Steinway oversizes its damper guide holes to prevent binding in some weather conditions; the side pressure is to prevent flagpoling. It's just a choice Steinway made which other other manufacturers didn't.

Q.) True or False: The Steinway bell is a crutch for a poor quality soundboard.
A.) The bell is a substitute for a brace that is usually found between the belly rail and rim. Steinway chose a free cast-iron support cone instead so as not to impede the soundboard. The cone shape also has the advantage of being resistant to push and pull, and is therefore more stable. This design is not found in other pianos because it is patented.

Q.) True or False: The Steinway soundboard is only good for 7 years. That's why dealers are asked to sell their rental C & A grands after having them for 7 years.
A.) Steinway grands are like race horses. A retired race horse will still leave the average horse in the dust.
With occasional exceptions, yes, most of Steinway's concert grands are retired and sold to artists after eight years of intensive use and maintenance. This is in keeping with the normal life of any soundboard: it is finite, and will begin to deteriorate after 10 years or so. To expect otherwise is to expect too much of a piece of wood under that kind of pressure.

Q.) True or False: Steinway marketing has kept Steinway in business. Not its quality.
A.) Steinway's marketing is great, but "quality prevails."
"You can't b.s. for 150 years; someone would be on to us by now."
Besides, said Webb, the best advertising comes from things Steinway doesn't even pay for, like the front page of the New York Times, or the independent film Note By Note.

Q.) The 1098: WHY???
A.) Steinway realizes that the pressure bar on the 1098 upright model made it cumbersome to tune. Here's how they fixed it:

1) Eliminated cast mound
2) Shortened tuning pins to 2.5" (1/8" shorter), reducing torque
3) Revised pin scaling

The old ones are still tough. Webb suggests applying Prolube to the understring felt using a center pin lube bottle. That helps.