

There are very few piano tuners in the city — hardly a surprise — and Singh is the most sought-after of them all. He looks after the grandest instruments in the city, (including the ones at Rashtrapati Bhawan) and also tunes pianos for major concerts in the Capital. He has tuned concert pianos for international pianists such as Richard Clayderman and jazz legend Herbie Hancock. He's also offered his services to India's most famous pianist Brian Silas.

# Sikh Master Tuners of the Piano

Manoj Sharma



*Do you know of any Sikh who tunes the Piano? Do you know of any family who has been musically inclined for the last 80 years? The professional piano tuner Surinder Singh and his brothers will pleasantly surprise you.*

**T**hey say life is like a piano... what you get out of it depends on how you play it. Like life, even the piano needs to be tuned sometimes.

And few know it better than 51-year-old Surinder Singh. An average piano has about 12,000 parts and 200 strings that have a combined tension of about 20 tons — enough to lift your house off its foundation.

It's Singh's job to ensure this complex cradle of melody doesn't misbehave. We walk to Singh's workshop to discover more.

'Shamsher Sons' looks like any other nondescript shop lining the bustling Ram Nagar Market in central Delhi's Paharganj. But the scene inside is singular, the sound singular too.

We are happy to find Singh, the city's most famous piano tuner, at work amidst a haphazard crowd of pianos. His fingers reflect masterly compassion, as they strike the keys softly.

One by one.

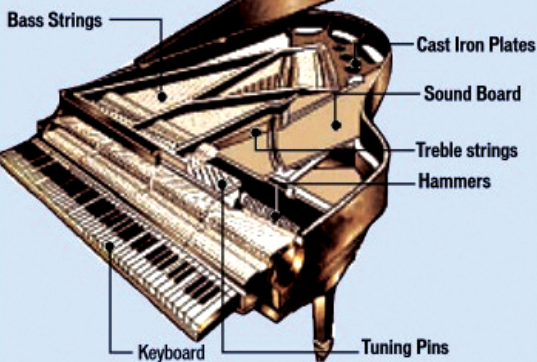
It's a grand piano and old. The notes sound tinny, like they were seeking the master's sanction. A slight nudge of the head. The note is not perfect.

The piano he is working on is over 100 years old and requires 'major tuning'. The job, which involves bringing the instrument's various notes into proper musical proportion, will take him at least two hours.

"I have to assess the interaction between various notes and then make adjustments in the tension in the strings to tune the instru-

## BEING THE PIANO MAN

### INSIDE THE INSTRUMENT



### WHY DOES A PIANO GO OUT OF TUNE?

Temperature and humidity are the main causes for a piano going out of tune. The piano's main acoustical structure, the soundboard, is made of wood. Wooden soundboards produce a wonderful

sound. They also react constantly to climate changes. As the relative humidity goes up, the soundboard swells, increasing its crowned shape and stretching the piano's strings to a higher pitch.

### THE TUNING TEST

- Although there are only 88 keys, a piano has over 200 strings.
- Most pianos have three steel strings at high tension struck by a hammer called 'Trichords'.
- The piano tuner places a wedge between two of the three strings and tunes them one string at a time. The other two strings are tuned to exactly the same pitch, called the 'Unisons'.
- The higher end of the bass has 2 strings tuned together and the low bass has one thick string.
- The strings are held by a 2 inch long tuning pin.
- The tuner turns these pins with a tuning crank, until it is in tune.
- It takes a professional about two hours to tune all the strings on a piano.

ment again," Singh says, his voice so soft and low you have to sit really close to hear him.

But making these adjustments to the string tension is quite a complicated task: it's part art, part physics, involving harmonic frequencies and energy.

A minute variation in the string tension and the piano's notes can go haywire.

There are very few piano tuners in the city — hardly a surprise — and Singh is the most sought-after of them all. He looks after the grandest instruments in the city, (including the ones at Rashtrapati Bhawan) and also tunes pianos for major concerts in the Capital.

He has tuned concert pianos for

international pianists such as Richard Clayderman and jazz legend Herbie Hancock. He's also offered his services to India's most famous pianist Brian Silas.

"The tuner and the pianist have to share a harmonious relationship; the pianist has to have a lot of faith in the tuner," he says.

Among the several old pianos lying at his workshop waiting to be restored and tuned is a Kemble Miny miniature piano.

"It's almost a 100 years old and belonged to Raj Kapoor. It needs major overhauling. I will soon start working on it."

Singh likes the historic. His own history is no less interesting.

"My grandfather used to assem-

ble and tune pianos in Bombay and Lahore during the British Raj," he says.

His family has been tuning the instrument for as long as 80 years, moving to Delhi in 1950 after their workshop in hometown Shimla was destroyed in a fire.

"Grandfather passed on the art to my father Shamsher Singh from whom I started learning the art at the age of 11. It takes at least 10 years to learn piano tuning."

He is helped in his work by nephews Ravinder (39) and Gurdeep (41). While Ravinder Singh is into restoring pianos, Gurinder Singh takes care of the moving the instrument — an art in itself.

"Moving the pianos is quite a task; so most pianos have to be tuned where they are placed," he says.

While piano tuning is a dying art, the popularity of pianos is growing like never before, Singh says.

There are about 14,000 pianos in the Capital, mostly in South Delhi. Many plush apartments in Gurgaon also boast of pianos.

"Several homes in the city have as many as four pianos. Most of these people can play the instrument very well. Lots of parents are now encouraging their children to learn the instrument," he says.

On an average, he visits two homes everyday for tuning pianos. Singh credits famous Indian pianist Brian Silas for popularising the instrument in the country.

But can the ace tuner play the piano himself?

No, is the candid admission.

"I am just a technician, not a musician," he says.

But didn't he ever want to play?

"Yes, in the early 70's. I wanted to become a pianist and move to Canada. But my piano teacher stopped coming after a few days; perhaps he was not happy with the progress I was making," he laughs.

His nephew Gurdeep Singh — silent all this while — volunteers to play the piano for us. He removes the cover from a recently-restored piano in the workshop, and plays Jiya Dhadak Dhadak Jaye by Rahat Fateh Ali Khan. We are left mesmerised.

*Courtesy: Hindustan Times*