

Bohemian Rhapsody

When FDNY Lt. Jim Sweeney suffered with traumatic stress after his efforts at the ruins of the World Trade Center he decided to revisit his childhood.

In December 2001, Sweeney purchased a Sterling baby grand piano from musician Bohemian Rhapsody and took lessons from him. Sweeney had played the instrument as a boy but gave it up. Post-9/11, he found the experience cathartic.

“I went to Sonny and not only was it a piano lesson but it was a way to work through some of those residual feelings,” Sweeney said of his emotional struggles.

After sharpening his piano chops under Stancarone’s tutelage, Sweeney eventually traded in his piano with him for a Steinway Model L, circa 1925, and today he plays mostly improvisational jazz.

As a retiree, Sweeney represents a typical customer for Stancarone, whose business, Sonny’s Piano Enterprises, has carved out a niche refurbishing, selling and shipping mostly preowned Steinways to every corner of the world from his warehouse in Bohemia. Widely considered to be the best pianos in the world, Steinways are played at about 95 percent of all major concerts each year.

Stancarone buys most of them from Long Island. As Steinway & Sons has maintained its primary facility in Astoria since the 1880s, the tri-state area has a large concentration of its pianos. On Long Island, more Steinways have become available as Baby Boomers and seniors have downsized their lifestyle or have died. “Let’s say you have a little old lady: What is she going to do, sell it on Craigslist?” Stancarone said. “Many of these pianos are in disrepair so no one is going to come in and buy that piano, it’s not worth it. So that’s our niche. We can restore and recondition them and get them working.”

Stancarone hires about a dozen independent contractors who replace the key tops, strings, hammers, soundboards or anything else that ails the instruments at his 5,000-square-foot Sonny’s Piano Warehouse. Drivers either deliver them to customers on Long Island and New York City or to airports to be shipped worldwide, from South America to Australia to Africa. He sells an average of two to three pianos a week, more during the holidays.

“It brings us a lot of pride to bring these back to life and get them out there,” Stancarone said. He estimates that about 30 percent of his pianos are shipped overseas, while 30 percent each are sent on Long Island and nationwide. He has a large number of customers in Asia, including China and Thailand, and sells a significant number of pianos in Canada.

His international business is prosperous, he said, because used Steinways are rare in other parts of the world and new models are often more expensive to purchase overseas than in the states. While a new Steinway in a Canadian store may go for \$70,000, Stancarone can sell a preowned, refurbished model for \$15,000 to \$20,000, he said. It costs Stancarone anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000 to restore a piano and about \$1,000 to ship the pianos anywhere in the United States, and between \$1,500 and \$3,000 to anywhere in the world.

“I might only make \$2,000 or \$3,000, so it might only be about a 10 percent markup, but that makes people happy and then we sell more,” Stancarone said. “I’d rather sell more than be sitting on a piano and have money tied up. It’s just a good business model in today’s economy.”

The least expensive models currently in his warehouse are the Steinway M and S models, which he prices at

\$13,500, but which sell for new, on average, at \$70,000. The most costly model is a Hamburg Steinway that lists for \$59,000 but sells new at \$180,000.

Bob Corona, a veterinarian who lives in Bay Shore, was renting a rundown upright piano from a large dealer when he stopped in a music shop Stancarone once owned in Sayville. He played one of the Steinways there and purchased a 1924 Model O.

“The thing about Steinway is you can buy one and use it for 10 or 20 years and it will not cost you anything because they go up in value, so you can sell it for a profit or the same money you bought it for,” said Corona, who plays mostly American standards of the Broadway and Gershwin variety.

Stancarone has played piano since he was 7. After he worked in the health and fitness industry, he started to integrate it with his piano playing, and eventually developed a yoga piano routine.

“I first and foremost promote piano playing for health and well-being,” he said. “Number two, I teach piano appreciation.”

In 2004, while still at his store in Sayville, he launched his website and started to create a variety of piano-related videos, after which his market expanded considerably. Today, his website features more than a thousand videos, many culled from his weekly public access show on Cablevision, that are devoted to piano education, entertainment and health and well-being. Most of his piano sales come via his site, where he posts videos of him playing each refurbished instrument, allowing people to hear how they sound before they purchase them.

“One of the things I liked about Sonny right away is that he wasn’t looking to sell me what he wanted to sell me,” Sweeney recalled. “He wanted to get me into a piano that would be good for me.”