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Mike Geryk made pianos as perfect as they could be

Hugh Fraser
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The Piano Man is dead.

Mike Geryk looked after Hamilton's pianos for 20 years, from those played by the famous at Hamilton Place, to the piano in the parlour thumped by the most reluctant student. He died last Friday after a tragic accident on July 3 as he was coming down the Claremont Access on his bicycle.

He was 49.

"I cannot conceive of Mike being gone," said Boris Brott, conductor for 21 years of the Hamilton Philharmonic and founder of the National Academy Orchestra. "He was a musician. I never thought of him in terms of being a piano technician. He spent countless hours, far beyond what was expected, making sure the piano was as perfect as he could make it. I really believe he is irreplaceable." Anton Kuerti, celebrated as his generation's greatest interpreter of Beethoven, described Geryk as "a truly outstanding piano technician and a warm, sympathetic person who outdid himself making pianists feel comfortable. He will be missed by all of us."

He was the official piano technician for The Great Romantics Festival. Its founder and artistic director Alan Walker said Geryk, "was highly respected by the dozens of international piano virtuosos who have visited the festival across the years and with some of whom he established close relations. They came to expect the best work from him and he invariably provided it. I speak of all our artists -- from the United States, Britain, Hungary, Germany, Japan and Canada -- when I say we owe him a debt of gratitude for helping ensure that our concerts met the most exacting standards."

New York pianist Justin Kolb remembers the musician within the technician. "Once, he floored me with a performance of the scherzo movement from Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata. He was more than a technician to pianists, he was a colleague. For instance, he'd call and ask if I wanted him to attend a performance in case his skills were suddenly needed and often did so, asking no fee."

Canadian concert pianist Siegfried Tepper bought Geryk's Yamaha piano in 1979, knowing it would be the best maintained piano he'd ever find.

"He had a true love relationship with his instruments, something that is very rare indeed in the business of tuning. It showed in the sensitive and caring way he performed his work and was an expression of a character of integrity and devotion to his career. I count it a privilege to have known him as a friend."

Neither Tepper nor internationally renowned pianist Valerie Tryon would have anyone else tune their pianos. Tryon said she never had a better piano tuner anywhere in the world. "And his work seemed to last forever. I kept telling him he wasn't good for his business as his work was just too good. He completely reconditioned my piano.

"I called him the day of the accident to come and tune my piano," she said. "In summer he would always bring me something from his garden, a cabbage or some tomatoes, and in the winter a bottle of his homemade wine. And he always came on his bicycle, even in winter. He said he liked it. He was a sweet and wonderful person."

For another great friend, Ken Gee, pianist, teacher and onetime Spectator music critic, the memories crowd in. Of facing each other over the chess board in the attic of his mother's house while each sipped on a brandy. Or when legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz came to Toronto's Massey Hall in 1976, for his first concert tour in 25 years, and they organized a group to go to Toronto and line up to buy as many "cash only" pairs of tickets as possible.

The two would hang out at the old Mercury Mills warehouse near Gage Park where Terry Collett, the concert tuner for Hamilton Place and McMaster University and technician for Yamaha, had his workshops. He became a piano tuner and technician and was so good that when Collett moved to Nova Scotia, he left his Hamilton Place and university contracts to Geryk.

The history of Geryk's involvement with music is best told by his mother.

"He joined the choir of St. Patrick's Catholic Church when he was 10," she recalled. "And he discovered the organist also taught piano. I had an old piano at home, so he told me he would take piano lessons, use it and save up to buy his own baby grand.

"And he did. By working away at a Dominion grocery store and the Loblaws in the basement of what is now the Ramada Inn. He traded in my old piano, that had a soundboard that was split through and through, for \$200. He practised and



Mike Geryk

practised, to the point his sisters got up in the night and asked him to stop so they could get to sleep." So entranced was Geryk by the piano that when he went to Scott Park after his years at Cathedral High, his mother would get phone calls informing her he had never reached the classroom. "When he got home, he'd come in and say: 'You know, they have beautiful pianos in Eatons.' He'd been there all day playing them." A funeral mass will be held at St. Patrick's Catholic Church at 10 a.m. today.

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