

Wednesday, August 9, 2006 in the Columbian

## **In Tune with Ken Serviss** by Harold Harbaugh

The Estey pipe organ and the Steger and Sons piano on the stage of the Fries Auditorium at the Washington State School for the Blind have traveled more than a lot of people. Ken Serviss remembers the Estey's splendorous presence on the stage when he and other students gathered weekly for inspirational bible passages and music. Ken has been a part of the scene since arriving as a student in the mid-1930s. "I was 5 or 6 years old," he estimates. His contribution to the School for the Blind has been ongoing for more than 70 years. "I was in and out of this place. I call it the revolving door," he says merrily.

Ken is legally blind but has reasonably good vision. That's why he came back a couple of times but then returned to public schools to complete requirements. He finished his piano tuning training at the School in 1949, the year that the piano tuners' school became independent and moved to 2510 East Evergreen Boulevard, where it remains today as the School of Piano Technology for the Blind. Established by Emil Fries, it is one of the oldest private non-profit tuning schools in the United States and unique in its purpose, training blind and visually impaired people to service pianos. Ken's business card reads, "The Tuner Alone Preserves the Tone."

During the Depression the number of pianos sold plummeted from 320,000 to 28,000 per year and blind piano tuners were out of work. But Emil Fries continued to educate new tuners because he loved it and because he saw tuning as something blind people could do in a competitive way with sighted people. That the newly restored auditorium on campus is named for him and his wife Wilda is fitting, and Emil lived long enough to receive this honor.

The School for the Blind, a notable Vancouver landmark, was established in 1886, three years before Washington became a state. After the current Superintendent, Dean O. Stenehjem, Ed.D, arrived in 1990, the "Old Main" building at 2214 East 13th Street finally found its way onto both the State and National Register of Historic Places and restoration began. In the Fries Auditorium, "The ceiling was crumbling," says Superintendent Stenehjem. "The roof leaked," adds Ken. Preservation architect Terry Harder joined the project. Stenehjem continues, "It was built between two eras, Victorian and Art Nouveau, but we had the architect lean toward the Victorian motif." When remodeling began, Ken and others clearly saw the necessity of returning the Estey organ to its rightful place on the stage of the school's smaller auditorium as a symbolic step. It took 12 years to find it at Fort Worden State Park near Port Townsend. It had been sold in 1972 as surplus property, and Stenehjem says, "We negotiated the return of the instrument and raised about \$60,000 in private funds to rebuild it." Built in Brattleboro, Vermont, the \$2,130 Estey crossed the country and was installed in the school around 1919. The school archives still have the original documentation. Ken Serviss, Dean Stenehjem, and Emil Fries enlisted the help of the Lions Club, the Columbia River Organ Club, and in particular Richard Wooldridge to move the process forward and supervise the return of the instrument. Ken accompanied the group to Fort Worden. The Estey had been vandalized, neglected. It was still a gem, but its 1,000 leather pneumatic valves had to be replaced as did what seemed like fifty miles of rubber and lead tubing. But now it stands, restored to its former glory, on its home stage. The new Fries' first big function was the Estey's 1997 dedication on the day that Emil Fries died.

It shares that stage with an equally splendid, historic Steger and Sons piano. After rounding South America's Cape Horn, it was placed in a San Francisco Opera House after the 1906 earthquake. But research on the Steger's history beyond this has yet to be done. "Wouldn't it be great to have a sign up there saying, 'Rachmaninoff played on this piano,'" speculates Superintendent Stenehjem. "If I was a great pianist, that would be kind of a thrill," he adds as he closes the lid of this fine instrument. Ken Serviss, who started piano lessons in 1943, recalls that The Steger was in the studio right across the hall. Back in the 70s when the school judged it too expensive to overhaul, Ken and Don Donaldson wrote a letter stating the piano's value. He admitted that the School could buy two new instruments for the cost of restoration, but they would not be of this quality. Ken and Don prevailed. Now Ken is the Steger's tuner. But when asked if he currently served on a preservation committee, he said with a twinkle in his eyes, "No, I'm too busy."

One way to hear the Steger is to attend Live at the Fries, a performance series by professional musicians that has graced the Fries stage for the past two years. Its 2006-07 Series has "a world travel, pre-World War II theme," according to Thomas Rheingans, Artistic Director. "When I went to school here in the 40s and early 50s," says Ken Serviss, "hardly anybody in town knew where this place was or what it was. And it's still a big secret." Well, the secret is out and the community is invited to see and hear the results in the lovingly restored, visually splendid, acoustically fine Fries Auditorium.