

Restoring beautiful music to an old piano

At 91, he's among most talented Steinway rebuilders.

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LANSING (AP) -- Elmer Reeder glides a gnarled hand over the white mahogany of the turn-of-the-century grand piano. "This is a rare one," he says, admiring the piece. "A real beauty." But the Chickering & Sons heirloom desperately needs some TLC. The soundboard is cracked and the aged instrument is weathered and worn, much like 91-year-old Reeder. The man and the piano share even more: Both still can produce beautiful results. Reeder, of Grand Ledge, is among a small pool of craftsmen nationwide considered top rebuilders of the famed Steinway pianos that have become one of the most sought-after luxury goods. For decades, Reeder has sanded, chiseled and glued damaged pianos back to their original splendor at his son's restoration center and showroom west of Capital City Airport. But piano restoration is the son's passion, not the father's, the elder Reeder is quick to acknowledge. "I'm no musician," the former logger and sawmill owner says. "I'm a simple woodworker." Elmer Reeder was born Feb. 5, 1915, the first of two sons of a farmer and a school teacher in Grand Ledge. As a kid, he took a few years of piano lessons -- at 50 cents an hour -- on an old upright of his mother's, but said they never really stuck. He preferred using his hands to cut wood. So after graduating from Grand Ledge High School in 1933, he went to work as a logger in Michigan's booming hardwood industry. When his younger brother returned from World War II, the two opened their own sawmill in Grand Ledge. Son Jim Reeder, now 67, started his piano business there in 1967 after studying music at a Seventh-day Adventist college in Maryland. For the first 10 years of the shop's existence, the elder Reeder worked part-time because he loves wood and working with his hands. He joined his son full time in the mid-1970s after he stopped selling wood veneer. He didn't know it then, but that turned out to be the first of three retirements thus far. None has lasted long. "I can't sit around doing nothing," he said. "I gotta keep working." Reeder taps the cracked soundboard of the old Chickering with his right index finger, mangled from arthritis. "It don't sound like it ought to," he says. "You know, machinery wears out in pianos just like my machinery is wearing out." But he keeps going. He toils five days a week for about six hours a day. Reeder takes an hourlong morning coffee break to meet with friends and discuss city politics and developments, such as new road construction projects. After work, he watches "Jeopardy!" to keep his mind sharp and relaxes by tending the vegetable garden outside the house he built for his first wife and two kids in the 1950s. While Jim Reeder had training in music and restoration, his father did not. His training came on the job. Reeder doesn't know how many pianos he's helped restore, but he's sure it's a lot. And it's a varied lot, but among his favorites are the old Steinways, a brand known for its fine craftsmanship and high appreciation rates. New, the storied instruments can cost about \$100,000. Restoration runs \$18,000 to \$25,000, Jim Reeder says, and only a select dozen or so craftsmen nationwide specialize in the Steinways. "We get them from all over the country," Jim Reeder says. "I just brought one back from Oregon." Some need all new innards. Others might need cosmetic work or new keys. Elmer Reeder's main job is the heart of the piano: the soundboard. "It amplifies the strings so you can hear the sound," he explains. Reeder has created molds for most models to help him cut and measure pieces of Canadian white spruce for new soundboards. But he doesn't have one for the Chickering. "Every piano is different, same as every person is different, but this one I call a freak of nature," Reeder says. "I've never seen one like it and I probably never will again." That leaves him to measure the interior of the piano and build a new soundboard from scratch. He doesn't mind, though. "This is quite satisfying to get it fixed," Reeder says, grabbing a chisel. "When they take it home it'll sound real good."

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