

MUSIC and the Lawyer

By Naseem Stecker

From pianos to the law,
Steven Manley is constantly fine-tuning

With the lightest of touches, his fingers softly fly across the narrow keyboard of his Viennese forte piano, producing sounds so subtle, so exquisite, that listeners feel they're transported back to an earlier time, when Mozart and Beethoven reigned. And just as he can evoke so much quiet subtlety, Steven R. Manley, senior research attorney at the Michigan Court of Appeals in Lansing, does not flinch from unleashing all the fire and passion that runs in his veins when he's rendering an intense piece like the "Moonlight Sonata."

"I'm playing to become part of the great music out there which has always spoken to me loudly and so I throw myself into it—it's in my blood for now and I really enjoy that," Manley said.

As a piano technician in a former life, Manley is extremely particular about the kind of instrument he plays. His choice of a classical forte piano custom built by master piano craftsman John Lyon—who personally inspected Mozart's piano in Salzburg, Austria and reproduced it—reflects the perfectionism that he constantly strives to achieve.

Although Beethoven is his absolute favorite—"My reason for being born was to hear Beethoven. He's the one who does it the best for me"—he chose Mozart's piano as the prototype because it was the best of its type in the late 1780s. "This piano has a wider ex-

pressive range. Most five octave Viennese-type forte pianos of this sort do not get as loud as mine, do not get as richly soft as mine, and don't have as sophisticated an action. I really enjoy it very much and want to be up close and personal with Mozart and Beethoven—and that is what I mainly play on it, banging the hell out of it. You hear the piano straining with exquisite drama and take on these qualities which are of course

lost in a Steinway which comfortably yawns and handles anything."

He had planned on a career as a piano technician, graduating with a Bachelor of Music in applied piano technology from Michigan State University in 1981. As head piano technician at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana from 1985 to 1993, Manley had considerable success and experience tuning. "I've met some of my heroes and



have had that thrill of working on some of the best pianos for some of the best pianists—it was a great way to do that and I really hit my stride there.”

After working for so many years on Steinway concert grand pianos, it was the smaller historical predecessors that fueled his yearnings. He had wanted such a piano for over 15 years and was finally able to order it and took delivery of one about the same time he was sworn into law practice in 1997 after graduating with high honors from the Chicago-Kent College of Law. Manley paid \$20,000 for his classical piano. The price of this instrument today is close to \$30,000.

The decision to make the switch to law was due to various reasons. One was a purely physical one—eight years of pounding pianos to tune them can be hard on the arms and fingers. Manley also decided that it was time to exercise a different part of his brain.

“I thought that I had nearly exhausted possibilities as a piano technician,” he observed. “I went into the business thinking it was open-ended, that the personal opportunities would go on forever, that the opportunities for advancement would go on forever and I would find new challenges inside pianos. To an extent, pianos are inexhaustible. They always throw you a curve, but in a very significant way there’s diminishing returns at some level. You’re mainly repeating yourself.”

Law, on the other hand, is repetitive in certain aspects but never entirely because every factual situation is different. Manley also possessed certain qualities that made him a good candidate for law school. “Something in my mind was always attracted to this business of disputes and dispute resolution, the way common law developed to address certain issues and the way certain principles have arisen . . . I was attracted mentally to this sort of thing for a long time and some people say I was practicing to be a lawyer long before I got out of the piano business.”

Manley thinks that his “gift of a gab” as well as an analytical nature and the ability to make things work together where it’s not obvious that they should, all tied in nicely with his new profession. “The musical background helped a lot. When I was in law school, I thought the way my brain is accustomed to organizing material—thinking in terms of

playing a piano piece. You’ve got sections. You think of the sections, how do they relate to each other, the one triggers the memory of the other. You think in terms of form. So, my experience as a player certainly came in handy that way. I always thought that musicians had a natural advantage in law school that probably most people don’t appreciate.”

A busy job with the court of appeals leaves little time for Manley to practice, but he faithfully puts in about an hour a day. “I go through all the movements of Beethoven’s first sonatas, remembering what I can. I try to learn a few more measures and get a feel for it—at least spot check them so I don’t forget them before I’ve learned them. I might play a few fa-

vorites.” Although Manley loves to play and can usually be persuaded to do it for an audience, he requires an instrument that is halfway decent. For him, that means a “grand piano in passable shape and of fairly recent tune.”

Steven Manley combines an appreciation for fine instruments (he’s ordered a German-style harpsichord which will also be made by John Lyon of Fraser, Michigan), expertise to tune and tweak them, and an ability to produce captivating music—a serious music lover, who loves to fine-tune, not just music but also the law. ◆

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal.