



▼ **MARTIN SNOW** has been repairing, restoring, and tuning the pianos and harpsichords at CFA, the Castle, the Tsai Performance Center, and Marsh Chapel for more than two decades.

MARTIN SNOW ARRIVES at the College of Fine Arts before 7 a.m. In just a few hours, the hallways will swell with music, but for now, the building is eerily silent.

His footsteps echo as he makes his way from room to room. His routine hasn't changed in twenty-four years; as CFA's chief piano technician, he begins every morning by playing a few notes on each of the school's 105 concert grands and 65 uprights.

Slipping into one of the fourth-floor studios, Snow leans into the opening of a nine-foot Baldwin concert grand and scans for broken strings. Taking a seat, he plays a passage, listening for tonal abnormalities. To the untrained ear, the melody is pleasing, but Snow is not satisfied.

"The notes are a little harsh," he says, removing the piano's key blocks and fallboard. Sliding out the keyboard, he takes a three-pronged voicing needle from his tool roll and carefully punctures several of the instrument's felt hammerheads.

"There should be note-to-note consistency throughout the whole piano," he explains, brushing the hammerheads with a wire brush. "Otherwise the pianist can't express the range of musical dynamics the composition calls for."

He plays another passage and nods approvingly. "Much better," he says. "The

Piano Man

*Making 170
stringed
instruments
pitch-perfect*

notes are more mellow now.”

Snow grew up in England and graduated with a degree in music education from Bretton Hall College in West Yorkshire. He taught music in London before settling in Boston, where he completed an advanced program in piano technology at the North Bennet Street School. Since 1986, he’s overseen the repair and restoration of every piano and harpsichord at CFA, as well as those at the Castle, the Tsai Performance Center, and Marsh Chapel.

By the time he finishes his rounds in the school’s new practice rooms (see story on page 6), the halls are crowded with students. He ducks into his basement shop and compiles a list of instruments requiring tuning or adjustment; later in the day, he’ll dispatch a crew of five part-time technicians.

“The number of pianos needing work can be a bit overwhelming,” he says. “Making those daily morning rounds is the most effective way to stay on top of the repairs.”

With its intricate ensemble of strings and hammers, a piano’s interior tends to mystify students. “String players can replace a string, and woodwind players can fashion their reeds,” Snow says. “But pianists generally know very little about their instrument.”

It’s not just students who lack the knowledge. Professionals such as Murray Perahia, Jorge Bolet, Paul McCartney, and Peter Gabriel have called on Snow for help. “Piano tuning isn’t glamorous,” he says with a chuckle, “but every once a while, you meet someone famous.”

The last time the University made a significant purchase of pianos was in 1984 — most of the Steinway concert grands were bought even earlier.

“If rarely used and properly cared for, pianos will last for decades, even centuries,” Snow says. “But CFA’s pianos are played by thousands of students, year in and year out. It takes a toll.”

Later in the morning, the rich rumbling of a piano draws Snow to the first-floor concert hall. Eyes closed, arms crossed, he listens as two pianists rehearse.

“Sometimes it’s important to step away from the technical side of the work,” he whispers, “and just drink in the performance.”

VICKY WALTZ



VERNON DOUCETTE

Up on the Roof

Flying low over Boston University, some might see a congested Commonwealth Avenue bordered by a multitude of buildings and parking lots. Others might see acre upon acre of available space, where gardens could grow, energy could be produced, and scientific theories could be put to the test.

Nathan Phillips, a College of Arts & Sciences associate professor of geography and environment and director of the Center for Energy and Environmental Studies, regards rooftops as an unexplored frontier, where with some creative thinking much can be done in the name of research and sustainability. Phillips envisions starting with the “lowest hanging fruit,” like rooftop gardens of potted plants, and moving to more complex projects, such as solar panel installations.

Rooftop developments have, in fact, mushroomed all over (above) campus. Among them are seven solar panels and a (recently stolen) wind turbine atop the School of Education. The energy they generate, while modest, is stored in a battery or funneled back to the building’s electrical grid.

↑ **NATHAN PHILLIPS**, a College of Arts & Sciences associate professor of geography and environment (right), and **JARED NEWELL** (GRS’10) on the CAS roof with a gadget that helps measure Boston’s carbon footprint.

And Phillips has carved out a space on top of CAS for a project that is measuring the carbon footprint of Boston.

“It’s like a home energy audit, but we’re doing it on a much larger scale,” says Phillips, whose thirty-month-long project is funded by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Forest Service.

Meanwhile, another team of researchers hopes to determine which roofing option — white, vegetated, or solar — would be the most energy-efficient choice for buildings around Boston.

The Compost-ability club, with three compost bins on the CAS roof, has one very happy neighbor: the Organic Gardening Club, which is using the roof’s greenhouse. LF

↑ **WEB EXTRA**
Watch a slide show about BU’s rooftop real estate at bu.edu/bostonia.