

Upper Valley LIFE

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Pianos Close to Home: Frederick Johnson Pianos

By ANDI DIEHN

Photography by JON GILBERT FOX



Need some ideas for a “grand” gift for the family this holiday season? Or perhaps you only have room for an upright? Whatever your square footage, the gift of music is everlasting and won’t be outgrown for at least a few years, maybe never.

We associate premier piano shops with cities like New York or Boston, but here in the Upper Valley we only have to travel to White River Junction, Vt., to get the best in sales, service, quality and price. Frederick Johnson Pianos — celebrating its 80th birthday this year — is the place to go to be introduced to your piano.

“People ask me, ‘Don’t you ever get sick of banging on pianos?’” says Dale Howe. Howe and Richard Johnson, son of the original owner, are co-owners of Frederick Johnson Pianos. “Personally, I don’t. Whenever I want to relax, I go find a piano to tune.”

After 45 years of tuning and selling pianos for Frederick Johnson Pianos — 38 years as a full business partner — Howe would be forgiven for wanting to find a new way to relax, but apparently the sound of the piano has too strong a pull.

PIANOS FOR SALE

The white clapboard building, which sits between a gas station and a smattering of hotels on Route 5 South, looks small and unassuming from the outside, but the showroom is stocked with about 100 pianos plus benches, sheet music and music stands. And if that’s not enough piano for you, head downstairs to the basement where rows upon rows of used pianos wait to be discovered by people operating within a stricter budget.

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Dale Howe (seated) and Richard Johnson
at the Frederick Johnson Pianos showroom
in White River Junction, Vt.

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"We carry all the best major brands," says Howe. "Steinway — 90 percent of concert pianists in the world use Steinway. Yamaha is the most popular, it's the highest quality made on the assembly line — nothing to compare it to for the money. They also make Clavinova digital pianos." Digital pianos have no strings inside them, so they're smaller and cheaper. If you're not sure your child will commit to more than a year of piano lessons, a digital piano might be an excellent option for your family.

"Digital isn't really comparable, but from a distance it sounds like a real piano," Howe says. "We used to sell more acoustic pianos, now we sell more digital. It's not a great profit for us; they're a lot less expensive and don't need to be tuned."

A new digital piano can cost as little as \$1,400, while the lowest end acoustic piano — tuned and delivered and with a bench — starts at \$2,700. For the serious pianist who wants an instrument that will last forever, Steinways start at \$25,000 and go up to \$150,000. Frederick Johnson Pianos also carries the brands Boston and Essex, which are Steinway-designed pianos made on the production line instead of by hand. "They're about half the price," says Howe. "It works well to have both. We pride ourselves in being competitive, pricewise."

Even with lowered prices, some families may still balk at the expense. Frederick Johnson Pianos offers a rent-to-own program to help out; rent your piano for up to six months before paying off the balance. Not only are your payments easier but you'll know for sure this is the piano for you.

BEYOND THE SALES FLOOR

Acoustic pianos need to be tuned regularly to maintain the best possible sound. "We're also piano tuners," says Howe. "We service everything we sell. More than 40 of our clients have been clients for more than 40 years." Howe and Johnson are registered piano technicians, a title granted to those who pass tough tests given by the Piano Technicians Guild.



Dale Howe tunes a Steinway grand piano, his briefcase of tools by his side.

Frederick Johnson opened Frederick Johnson Pianos in Norwich in 1930; Richard joined in 1970. The shop moved to its current location in 1972, the same year Howe stepped in as a partner. All those years of hanging around pianos have made Howe and Johnson experts at their craft. "Because I've been doing it for so long, I've taken tuning to a level of accuracy I never thought possible," Howe remarks.

It makes sense for a piano shop to be staffed by musicians. Johnson sings baritone in the Hartland Community Chorus. Howe plays "virtually any instrument"

but he spends much of his spare time playing the saxophone with the Hartland, Vt.-based band, Moonlighters.

Did you catch the Suzanne Vega and Mark Cohn show at the Lebanon Opera House last spring? Or maybe Natalie MacMaster, Chris Botti, Richard Marx or Bryan Adams for one of their local gigs? Take in any of the Vermont Mozart Festival, or see Andre Watt perform with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra? The pianos on stage belonged to Frederick Johnson. Pianos are difficult to lug around on tour, so musicians generally rent these

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instruments closer to the venue site.

“The concert pianist has to have the best, and the pop pianist wants to have the best,” says Howe. “We rent out pianos for single performances, sometimes two or three times a week, all over northern New England and even into Boston. Our Steinway Concert Grand pianos are what musicians perform on.” Howe and Johnson make sure the pianos they send on stage are performance ready, masterfully tuned, the best possible instrument for the artist.



A Clavinova, a digital piano by Yamaha

But as brightly as their pianos shine on the stage, the heart of Frederick Johnson Pianos lies among the gleaming instruments waiting patiently on the sales floor. Or maybe it beats downstairs in the basement showroom in between the rows of used pianos waiting like puppies for adoptive families. Or maybe in the practice rooms where children take lessons from one of the two piano teachers who teach out of the shop. Probably, though, the heart of the shop is most evident in the men keeping the pianos in tune. UVL

Learn More 

Frederick Johnson Pianos is online at www.fjpianos.com

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