

Small Shop - Big Results



Preparation for a Beautiful Brushed-on Varnish Finish – part 2

By Chuck Behm
Central Iowa Chapter

If, since the August installment of the Journal, you've procured an old upright piano to work on and have successfully torn it apart, you're probably anxious to get going with the project. With the piano disassembled, work on the finish of the case may begin in earnest. It's a bit more complicated than "off with the old, on with the new!" but it's not rocket science either. If each step outlined in the next several issues is carefully executed, the end result of the project will be a beautiful piano which will be a showpiece in your home or the home of an appreciative customer.

II. Stripping:

Like death and taxes, stripping off the old finish is an unavoidable necessity before beautification of your project piano may begin. While the process is messy and admittedly arduous, it is just plain fun to see what lies beneath that opaque, century-old finish. Many times the detail of the veneers used is amazing – unlike any you are likely to come across on a visit to a modern-day piano showroom. My advice is to roll down your shirt sleeves, and enjoy the process.

First, gather needed materials and tools (Photo 1), and prepare your bench and the area around the body of the piano for using stripper. I like to layer the top of my bench and the floor around the piano with multiple newspapers. That way, to clean up at the end of a work session, merely peel off the top layer, and you're good to go.



Photo 1: Stripping bench with necessary supplies

Here's a list of the materials and tools you need to begin:

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| ✓ 1 gallon heavy duty stripper | ✓ Old cookie sheet |
| ✓ 1 quart water soluble stripper (if piano has ornate casework) | ✓ Half dozen wooden blocks (2 x 4 scraps ideal) |
| ✓ Medium size metal can without lid | ✓ 3 or 4 rolls of cheap paper towels |
| ✓ 2 old 2" paint brushes, one full length, one chopped off short | ✓ Pair of stripping gloves |
| ✓ 1 or 2 packages of #3 steel wool | ✓ Wrap-around protective goggles |
| ✓ Putty knives –assorted widths | ✓ Long-sleeve work shirt |
| ✓ Assorted old chisels | ✓ Stack of old newspapers |
| ✓ Inexpensive set of carving tools (for ornate casework) | ✓ Container of water |
| | ✓ Rags |
| | ✓ Respirator (see insert below) |

Notice that most items on the list do not have to be purchased at the hardware store. Much of what you will need can be scavenged from around the home. Whatever you find to use, however, won't be good for much else afterwards, so pick things (such as the old cookie sheet) that won't be missed.

As far as what stripper to use, there are a number of brands of commercial stripper available, and it seems to me at least that everyone that you talk to who strips and refinishes furniture will swear that theirs is the best. Over the years, we've used a variety of brands of stripper in our shop. The brand we've used the most frequently in the last few years is Jasco, a product sold at Lowe's. **Caution: With this stripper, and most other commercial strippers, use latex, chemical resistant gloves, and wear wrap-around eye protection.** You'll also probably want to dress in long sleeves and pants. If just a drop of this brand of stripper splatters onto your skin, you'll know it immediately. Have a container of water and rags nearby as a safeguard to clean off any stripper which makes contact with your skin.

Anne Beetem Ackers offers these additional suggestions:

When using chemical strippers, don't forget they are dangerous to more than your skin. You should use a respirator, or at least do it outdoors. Those fumes are hazardous to your brain cells and your respiratory system. Dispose of contaminated materials appropriately. You can create a storage area for them and take them to your community's hazardous waste drop-off site or event. Even better, you can avoid the bother and begin to investigate green methods. I've become very fond of the orange stripper. You can slop it on, leave it for a few hours to overnight, and everything just comes right off. It is environmentally, brain cell, and skin friendly.

To play it safe, I would recommend heeding Anne's advice to wear a respirator or to work outdoors, especially if your shop is confined in nature. I admit that we don't wear face masks, but the room where we do the stripping is fairly open, and usually I turn a fan on to circulate the air. Better be safe than sorry, though.

The following steps are for the benefit of those technicians who haven't yet had the opportunity to strip the finish from a piano.

1. Apply the stripper to the work piece, one or two parts at a time. Pour stripper into your medium size metal can to a depth of several inches, select a piece to strip and you're ready to start. As you begin, is to brush the stripper on in a thick coat, then allow it to do its job. Load up your brush (old 2" varnish brushes are perfect for the job) with stripper, wiping off one side of the brush to prevent excessive dripping, and apply to the work piece in a heavy coat, as in Photo 2 below. If you're working on smaller parts, such as the endblocks or keyslip, it's more efficient to have two or even three pieces going at the same time. That way, while the stripper is doing its work on one piece, you can be applying stripper to another. Alternate between several pieces to make the best use of your time.



Photo 2: Apply a heavy coat of stripper



Photo 3: Wait as the old finish begins to loosen up



Photo 4: Remove the loosened finish with a putty knife

2. Once the old finish has loosened up (as evidenced by a wrinkled appearance), remove as much as possible while the treated finish is still soft. Depending on the size and shape of the part being stripped, we use either one of three sizes of putty knives, or a piece of #3 steel wool for this step. Scrape the residue off of your putty knives and onto the cookie sheet for later disposal. (Keep an old stripper can to fill using a motor oil funnel and a wooden dowel [to use as a plunger] slightly smaller in diameter than the spout of the funnel.) On a good day, the old finish will come off as easily as in Photos 3 and 4 above, taken of the stripping process done on the fallboard of a Schmoller & Mueller upright. The putty knives work best on flat surfaces, while steel wool is ideal for any rounded work piece. If fancy carving is involved, a brush with the bristles cut short is your best bet. Load it up with extra stripper, and work it around aggressively to remove the finish. Hold the brush as you would a mixing spoon while stirring stiff dough. Also, for this type of piece, use a water based stripper (Photo 5) that can be hosed off outside— otherwise removing the stripper from around the fancy carved work will be exasperating.



Photo 5: A water based stripper is called for in this type of situation

At times, unfortunately, the finish does not come off as easily as in the example photos, and a 2nd or even 3rd application of stripper will be necessary. With a stubborn finish, after using a putty knife to scrape off what you can, use #3 steel wool loaded up with stripper to remove the remaining varnish. Employ steel wool as you would sandpaper, and scrub the wood in the direction of the grain. Working cross grain will cut into the fibers of the wood, and create more work for you later on in repairing the damage you've done. I cannot stress this enough. There will be situations, such as in the corner where the back of the arms of the piano meet the sides of the case, where it will be extremely tempting to simply run your steel wool up and down to clean off the old finish at the back of the arms. Don't do it! When you sand the arms down, everything will look fine, until you put on stain. Then you're very likely to see the telltale cut lines pop out, as the cut fibers soak in the dark stain more than the surrounding areas. A little extra time spent following the grain of the wood will pay off in a better appearance in the end.

3. Clean the remaining stripper from the work piece. For clean up, use inexpensive paper towels. After cleaning with the paper towels, let the piece dry overnight, and then finish cleaning off any remaining residue with a clean pad of #1 steel wool. I like to unwind the pad before using it. When the steel wool becomes gummed up, discard and unroll a fresh piece of steel wool. Again, follow the rule of using your steel wool only in the direction of the grain of the veneer.

The question arises at this point as to how far do you go in stripping case pieces? In our shop, our rule of thumb has always been to remove the finish from both front and back of all the individual parts of the piano, and also from the inside of the sides of the piano from the keybed on up. This necessitates carefully masking off the plate (if it is not removed from the piano for installation of pinblock panels or soundboard work) to avoid damage to the lacquer finish. Your attention to these details will result in a more professional finish – one that holds up to a scrutiny of the parts and the case even when the piano is disassembled for servicing in a customer's home at a later date.

Once you are finished stripping for the day, put your stripping brushes back in the stripper pot, pour in about half a bowl of fresh stripper, and cover with aluminum foil. If you don't do this, the brushes will cake up. Scrape up the pile of used stripper from the cookie sheet, and transfer to old stripper can for later disposal.

Veneer repair projects can range in difficulty from replacement of concise areas of missing veneer (such as the front of the toeblocks) to large areas where patching in is required. In next month's issue of the Journal, I'll help you tackle the problem areas on the case of your project piano. Successful replacement of bad veneer is an essential skill if one is to do a professional job of refinishing pianos.

Until then, here's wishing you the best. If you're traveling through the Midwest, be sure to stop by for a visit.



Colder days are dead ahead

Chuck Behm
River City Restorations
410 Monona Street
Boone, Iowa 50036
behmpiano@gmail.com