



Small Shop - Big Results

Take Great Shop Photos – Part 3 (The Background Check)

By Chuck Behm

Central Iowa Chapter

Sometimes the most lasting lessons we learn are from the mistakes we make. In 2007 I had done the restoration of a grand for a small museum in Ames, Iowa. When the piano was back in its home, I was asked to do a write-up of the job to be sent to the various folks who had donated the funds for the work to be done. I gladly agreed to the project, and thought a photo of the piano all dressed up in its own little corner of the museum would be appropriate for the cover. I therefore drove to Ames with my camera and got some shots for the front of the little brochure I was putting together.

It was only when I was back at home with the photos on my computer that I noticed several unsightly electrical cords (Photo 1) appearing as if they're dangling from the underside of the keybed! Why hadn't I noticed those before?

Not being adept at photoshopping images, I proceeded to waste the better part of an hour trying to edit the wires out of the photos with uneven results (Photo 2).



Photo 1: Before touch-up



Photo 2: After touch-up

I'm sure that someone with experience at using Photoshop would do the job both better (the areas I 'fixed' appear grainy, especially when the photo is blown up a bit) and quicker. The point, however, is that there would have been no need to take any time at all in fixing the image if I had just done a quick check of the background to eliminate distracting details. In less than a minute, I could have unplugged the cords and moved them off camera so that the image would have been perfect as is.

From that time on, whenever I'm taking business-related photos of any consequence, I take a moment to do some "mental photoshopping" to get rid of unwanted clutter. It's amazing how much quicker the process is before the shutter is actually snapped, and how much more professional-looking the resulting photos will turn out.

This is not to say that every shot you take needs to be absolutely clutter-free. A repair procedure photographed in a shop may very well involve tools and parts scattered about a workbench (Photo 3). Workshops tend to be somewhat messy, after all.



Photo 3: Glue making in progress.

If possible, however, eliminate (or at least move things to one side where they can be easily cropped out) clutter not associated with the process at hand. A bit wider view of this scene (Photo 3) would have revealed an empty cereal bowl, a banana peel and a half full glass of O.J. The remaining coffee mug (top right) doesn't really detract from the business going on in the photo, but dirty dishes and peels would leave a less than professional impression with the viewer. With fairly wide angle shots, say of an action on a workbench, the camera will be taking in quite a bit of detail which necessitates taking stock of what the lens will reveal, so be thinking of what to leave in, and what to leave out.

Close-up shots are in a sense easier to manage than wider angle photos in that the field of view is more narrowly confined. On the other hand, with such an up-close look at the immediate background, making the shot look professional depends on choosing an effective backdrop to the subject matter.



Photo 4: Still shot.



Photo 5: Action shot.

One option for a small object is to blur the background by taking the photo with the lens as close as possible to the subject matter, as was explained in part 2 of this series. This can be effective for both still shots (Photo 4) and action shots (Photo 5). Not every object may be conveniently shot in this way however – for instance if two or more small objects are to be displayed side-by-side (Photos 7 and 8) below. What then? Side-by-side tweezers holding the parts in mid-air?

With so many technical articles requiring shots of small parts or tools, once I started writing in earnest, I began experimenting with surfaces on which objects could be placed for professional looking photos. To save my reader the trouble of going through the same process, I'll summarize my results here:



Photo 6: Towel



Photo 7: Corkboard

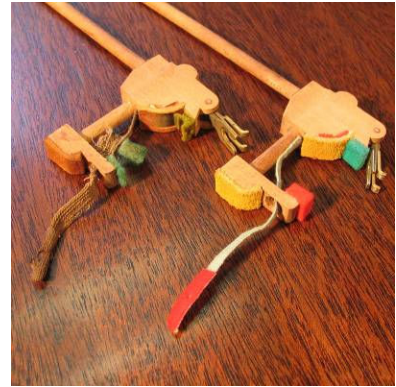


Photo 8: Upright lid

Anything I could find in the shop that I could be spread out flat or which naturally provided a useful flat surface became fair game. I took shots using shop towels of various colors (photo 6), but never really liked the results – amateurish, in my opinion. I experimented with a variety of surfaces from my misc. supply rack (corkboard [photo 7] used for facing my wood vises, Styrofoam [both white and blue], slate from old school chalk boards, etc., etc.) and thought the results (in some cases) were somewhat better, but nothing seemed to set things off the way I was hoping for. The polished top lid I used for photo 8 wasn't bad – I felt that I was getting warmer.



Photo 9: Table saw bed

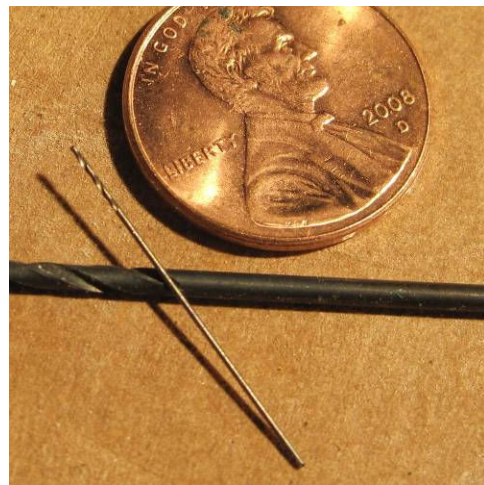


Photo 10: 220 grit sandpaper

One day I happened to need a shot comparing the various sizes of tuning pin bushings. I had the jars of bushings out on my table saw, and was arranging a miniature display of them with the shortest one in front, the tallest in back and the middle length and original bushing on either side. I found the camera angle that seemed to work to show the relative sizes, and I took the shot (Photo 9) without moving the parts to another surface.

I liked the resulting photograph. The surface set the objects off without drawing attention to itself, as was the case with the purple towel. Since my shop has a number of tools with similar, cast-iron surfaces, I now was able to find a suitable backdrop for small objects that would work on most days. I found that the results were best in daylight conditions, using natural light from the windows – flash produced unsuitable shadows. With certain lighting conditions and photo angles, I did have occasional problems with glare, but with a number of both power tools and windows, I usually could come up with a winning combination.

Another surface that I just happened to try one day that I like was ordinary 220 grit garnet sandpaper. I wanted a photo showing the extremely fine drill bit used to produce the holes for hammer rail springs (for doing a replacement job). The photo shows the miniscule bit leaning up against a 1/16" drill bit (the smallest size in most drill indexes), and next to a nearby copper penny for a comparison of relative size.

Again, the circumstances were unplanned ahead of time. I was deciding on the layout of the shot and a sheet of sandpaper laying face up on my bench happened to be the only clear area. I got the objects positioned, and took the shot. I tried it on several other surfaces (including the table of my band saw) but liked the sandpaper surface the best. Again, it was nondescript in a way that didn't draw attention away from the subject matter. I also liked the fact that was not reflective in a way that polished cast iron could be. I used the garnet paper again from time to time, and also like the results I got with finer grits of black wet / dry paper.



Photo 11: Hidden in plain sight.

I didn't discover my current go-to surface, however, until after I had been writing and shooting photos for some time. I keep a supply of pneumatic cloth of several weights in my shop (I occasionally get roped into doing player or pump organ work) stored out of the way rolled up on PVC pipes which are kept on a spare action cradle hung by hooks from a wall in the shop (Photo 11)

One day I happened to need the extra cradle, so I unloaded it and took it down. The heavier weight of cloth caught my eye and I unrolled a length of it and draped it over a bench. I got my camera out, positioned a couple of small parts on it, and took a shot.

It was perfect – just what I had been looking for! The material was non-reflective and unobtrusive. Depending on the lighting, angle and closeness of the shot, it could present a variety of different looks (photos 12, 13 and 14).



Photo 12: Felts.



Photo 13: Well-used caster.



Photo 14: Grand hammer head

With the close-up shot showing the difference of thickness of the thinnest and thickest front rail felts (photo 12), the texture of the cloth is more obvious, while in the

photo of the badly worn upright caster taken from a greater distance (photo 13), the weave of the cloth pretty much disappears.

In the shot of the grand hammer (photo 14) the cloth almost disappears as the camera adjusts itself to the bright white of the felt. Seen from a bit of a distance, it almost appears as if the hammer head is suspended in space – without the distraction of fuzzy, out-of-focus objects in the background (as in photo 4).

I now use the heavy pneumatic cloth now frequently for displaying all sorts of small parts and tools. I never cut a piece of it to use, but rather roll out the full width on a bench and find a flat spot to stage the subject matter on. I always have a stiff brush handy to clean off any dust or wood chips (they will show up clearly – witness the tiny speck of debris I missed in the lower left corner of photo 12).

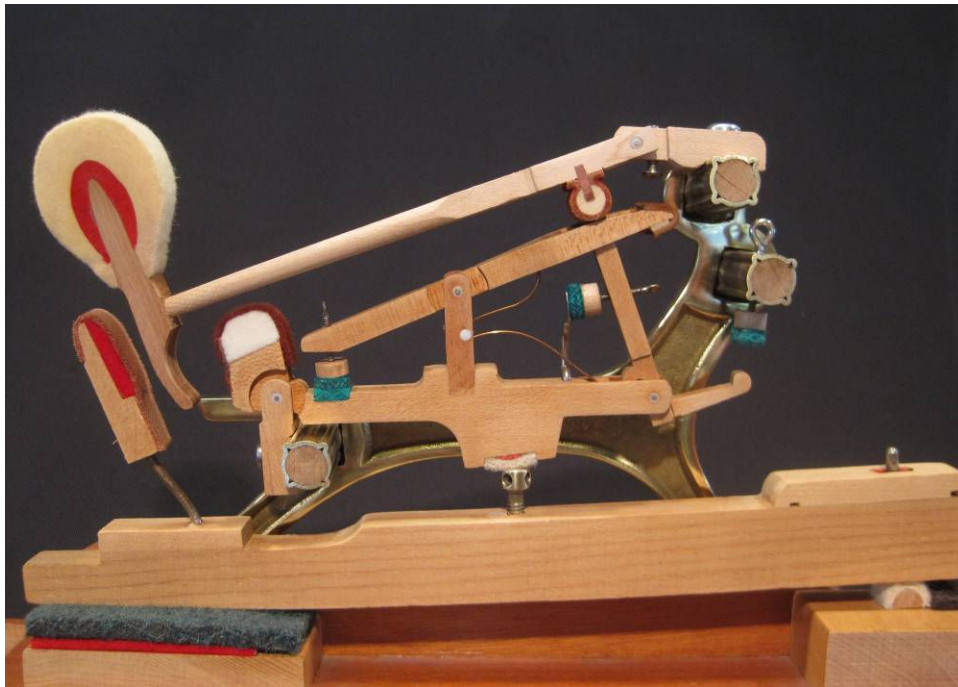


Photo 15: Complicated enough without distractions in the background.

The cloth works well for not only small parts, but for larger subjects as well. For the cutaway shot (Photo 15) of a grand action, for example, I placed the action model on the workbench with the cloth underneath it, then unrolled a length of cloth behind the model and extended it upwards in a gradual curve. There are no visible shadows on the surface of the cloth, and it gives an ideal neutral backdrop to the model so that the eye may focus on the complicated nature of the action without distractions.

Next month's installment, "If at first . . ." will deal with the fact that not every shot you want to take will turn out the first time. In fact, one photo took two entire days to produce. Stay tuned.

If you happen to find yourself in the Midwest, stop by for a visit. The coffee pot's on!

Chuck Behm is the owner of River City Piano Restorations in Boone, Iowa. He can be contacted at behmpiano@gmail.com.