

# Small Shop - Big Results



## Refinishing Sharps – part 1

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When taking on a job of recovering keytops, the question of what to do about the sharps is usually a concern as well. After all, when the naturals need replacing, usually the sharps are in pretty tough condition as well. (For an extreme example, consider Photo 1.)



*Photo 1: Can this piano be saved, or is it beyond hope?*

The first consideration which must be taken into account before deciding upon what to do with the sharps is to ascertain what the old sharp keys are actually made of. Whether they are plastic, a less expensive white wood (such as pear wood) lacquered black, or actual ebony needs to be determined. On many older pianos, genuine ebony was used, as was done in the case of the piano above. The tip-off lies in the fact that beneath the worn-off lacquer, the wood beneath is very dark. In fact, if you cut an old ebony sharp in half, you will find that the wood is exceedingly dark all the way through.

Techniques for refinishing sharps, I have found, are as varied as recipes for potato salad. (My wife has an entire recipe book devoted to just potato salads – the variety is just amazing!) Upon posting inquiries on the pianotech and Piano World websites, I found that a lot of technicians have their own favorite procedure, but that there is definitely no fast and firm method which everyone subscribes to. In this first segment of the article, I will outline the procedure we use in our own shop with sharps which are indeed ebony. In the next segment, I'll go over tests which I conducted on some of the methods suggested to me by technicians around the world. All of the procedures were with the small shop setting in mind – no elaborate spray booth or other equipment required for any of them.

The first step on the road to recovery for such a set of sharps, no matter what method is to be used in applying a new finish, is to strip off what remains of the old lacquer finish. To do so in a way that stripper does not cause more damage than good, a rack made from a length of 4 x 4 deck post will prove to be a valuable addition to your shop. Simply dado cuts wide enough and deep enough to hold sharp keys in place and you will make the job of stripping and refinishing sharps much easier. Nothing is worse than having a coat of finish drying on a row of sharps lined up like pretty maids in a row on your bench, only to bump the end sharp and watch helplessly as they all fall over like a row of dominoes. It was after such an event that I fashioned my first sharp rack.



*Photo 2: Lay it on thick.*

To strip, apply a heavy coat of your favorite stripper (Photo 2). Whatever brand of stripper you chose to use, wear protective stripping gloves, goggles, etc. Place the sharps thus coated upside down in your rack (Photo 3) which will prevent the stripper from finding its way into the front rail bushing cloth.



*Photo 3: Here's where the rack comes in handy.*

Once the stripper has time to do its work (5 – 10 minutes, for the brand [Jasco] that we use), remove the sharps one at a time from the rack and scrub with # 3 steel wool ( Photo 4).



*Photo 4: Good quality protective gloves are an absolute necessity here.*

Once it seems as if you're down to wood, clean the sharp with a dry paper towel (Photo 5). If any remaining lacquer remains, apply a second coat of stripper, and repeat the procedure. No more than two applications of stripper should be necessary, if you're waiting long enough for the stripper to melt the old finish.



*Photo 5: The beauty of the grain is just beginning to show.*

When your set of sharps are stripped and returned to the rack I would allow them to dry completely before continuing. Find some other project to work on for an hour or so (never a problem in our shop), and then return to begin on the next stage of the procedure.

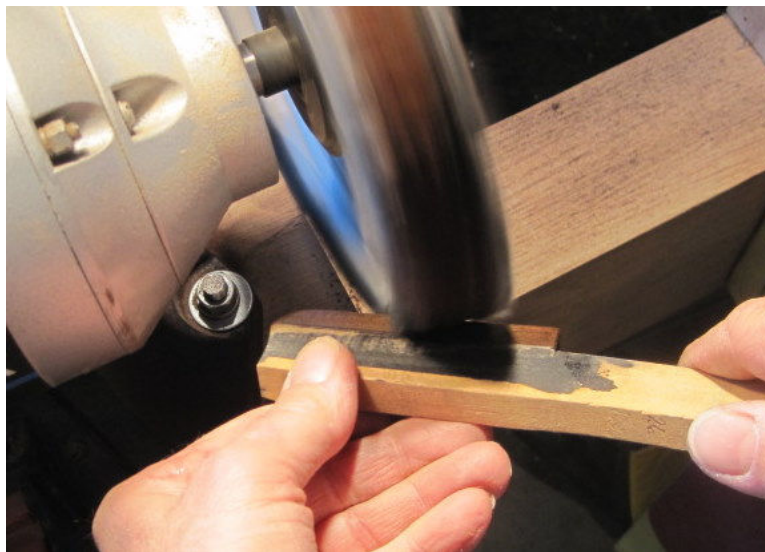
At the point at which any remaining stripper has dried, complete the cleaning process by first going over each sharp with a clean pad of steel wool, then wiping off with lacquer thinner applied to a paper towel (Photo 6). The sharp key is now truly clean and you are ready to continue.



*Photo 6: Final cleaning.*

It is at this point that opinions begin to diverge about the best techniques for refinishing. Some technicians favor recoating the sharp with an opaque lacquer finish. Speaking for just myself, however, if the piano being restored has ebony sharps I prefer to capitalize upon the natural beauty of the wood. To me, painting ebony with what essentially is black paint makes about as much sense as painting genuine ivory keytops with white paint. The best finish for ebony sharps, in my opinion, is no finish at all.

Instead of applying an actual finish coat, I prefer to sand out any imperfections with 600 grit sandpaper, then polish on a buffing wheel (Photo 7).



*Photo 7: Buff at a low speed setting.*



*Photo 8: The finished result.*

The type of polish you use will have an affect upon the final appearance of the sharp. In the case of the piano featured here, the owner preferred the somewhat reddish cast obtained by polishing with a bar of Tripoli, since the case of the piano was being stained in red oak. A black bar polish would obviously result in more of an ebony look.

If the keystick below the ebony sharp needs attention, paint it with a black dye. If a finish coat over the ebony is desired, either a polyurethane or a tung oil would provide protection. I generally opt for no additional finish on top of the polish.



*Photo 9: Everything begins to fall back into place.*

As the sharps and naturals are returned to the piano for leveling (Photo 9), the memory of the tragic appearance of the featured piano when it arrived in the shop (Photo 1) begins to fade. The satin finish on the naturals, and the ebony grain of the sharps, in my opinion, gives the piano a more natural, less plastic look.

Next month – a look at techniques used by other specialists in the field of restoration. A real learning experience for me – hopefully for you as well.

The coffee pot's always on. Stop by any time.