

Who They Are

Ernie Miller

An Interview with Phil Soper and the May Contest Winner: Musical Project

Ernie and Sandra Miller are quite the team. Both Millers are musicians and Ernie is the woodworker while Sandra accents the musical projects with incredible fine art. Ernie's musical project submitted for the monthly contest was a full harpsichord. His harpsichords range in value from \$12,000 to \$24,000 depending on size.

Miller stated the following in his submission, "After years of building harpsichords based on 17th century instruments, I decided to design my own. This small instrument (just under 5' long), was designed as an entry level harpsichord without most of the decorative niceties (soundboard paintings, lid paintings, platform, multi leg stands, etc.) that enhance the aesthetic value but also enhance the price. It's relatively light weight and screw on legs make it an easy instrument to transport. It has a single 8' register with a buff stop." The keyboard shifts to allow it to transpose from A-415 (the old pitch) to the modern A-440 pitch."



From the website (<http://www.ernestmillerharpsichords.com/workshop.html>) regarding harpsichord construction, "Everything is done for its aesthetic appeal. In a harpsichord, it's the soundboard and what lies hidden below it that counts. ...bracing is what keeps the instrument from imploding under the tension of several thousands of pounds created by the strings. Any movement in the case, especially in the bentside and tail, will cause the instrument to go immediately out of tune. The bracing is what keeps the case rigid enough to withstand this tension." Ernie also acknowledges that his skill development is a result of time with his mentor and friend, Paul Kennedy.



Ernie started seriously making harpsichord in the 1990's. He relocated to North Carolina in 2004 and began concentrating on harpsichords. For him, the appeal of building begins with transforming raw wood into a concert quality instrument. These are not production pieces. Each harpsichord is uniquely created from "a plan and wood." according to Ernie. He builds 2-3 instruments per year.

Ernie got the bug when he was a child and a student at the Music and Art High School in Manhattan. His interest was in pursuing tuning over playing. When the family brought home a piano for him to learn to play, seems our intrepid harpsichord builder reached for pliers rather than the keyboard and started tuning the used piano. Ernie confesses, "I was always sensitive to things being out of tune."

What drew him to harpsichords was the opportunity to tune one for a conservatory in New Jersey.

Ernie and Sandra recently donated a harpsichord to Tyron Palace. Regulars to the NCWoodworkers.net will recall a link to a tribute piece in the New Bern newspaper. The piece captures a lot of the background of the Miller's harpsichord history.

What kind of shop is needed for building these musical works of art? For the Millers it is the garage attached to their house in Eastern North Carolina. Not as complicated as you may think. Ernie's shop featured power tool is a Grizzly® 1023RL table saw. His shop also houses a band saw, benchtop planer, and spindle sander among other items. Clamps? Yes, clamps and a plethora of hand tools for the precision work of creating his masterpieces.



One of the more unique tools in Miller's workshop is a special-order, Byrnes Luthier's Thickness Sander with a 1-5/16" capacity and accuracy in thousandths of an inch. Who says woodworkers don't use micrometers?

Phil asked Ernie for advice for the new woodworker. Ernie's first bit of advice to all (newbies) woodworkers is to break large projects into manageable smaller projects. Secondly, learn where precision is critical and to be as precise as you must be where it is needed.



Phil reflected on his time with the Millers, "The biggest take away from the meetup was how good of a team they were-both supporting each other and helping in every way they could. I left saying to myself we need to be like them."

It is great to have master craftsman Ernie Miller as a member of the NCWoodworker.net forum. I suspect there are many more master craftsman, current and aspiring, among us. Who will be the next contest winner?



Want to know more? Ernie is willing to respond to questions. You can also find out more about his work including how to obtain a complete harpsichord build plan at his website, <http://www.ernestmillerharpsichords.com>.

Editor's Note: Ernie will receive a \$25 gift card from NCWoodworking.net sponsor, Klingspor Woodworking. Another reason to shop for your woodworking supplies from our friends at the Klingspor Woodworking store near you and online. Please join us at the Klingspor Woodworking Extravaganza, October 21st-22nd, at the Hickory Convention Center, Hickory NC. For more information link to <https://www.woodworkingextravaganza.com>.