



Una Corda

TUCKED AWAY in the back streets of old Havana and well off the tourist trail, is the National Workshop of Instrument Repair warehouse. When I arrived a man came out of the workshop and looked at me, then disappeared, only to return thirty seconds later waving an Irish flag. The workshop was dark and dusty but very tidy. A number of volunteer technicians sat around talking. Even though there was work to be done on the pianos, a shortage of parts and supplies meant they were unable to carry this out.

When the Russians became Cuba's close ally in the 1960s and '70s, they used the workshop as a training centre for what is now the current generation of Cuban piano tuners and

technicians. Two classes of blind and partially-sighted tuners graduated from here – the first in 1970, and another two years later. But, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, the aid that it had provided to Cuba came to an end. This decimated the country's economy and the National Workshop of Instrument Repair's training programme ceased and the workshop fell steadily into disrepair. With the US trade embargo, piano technicians on the island have been unable to buy the tools and materials they need, and as the older generation of Cuban tuners retires, the skills that go with the tools are also disappearing. The island's tropical climate is particularly hard on things made from wood

Now an Irish group is helping to restore thousands of pianos that have fallen into disrepair. Since 2006, Irish piano



tuners have been going to Havana to help train local technicians. Under the title "Una Corda - The Irish Cuban Piano Project", and working in conjunction with the Havana Arts Authority and the Cuban Ministry of Culture, they have now been given the responsibility of restoring and re-equipping the National Workshop. The organization has three objectives: sending a small number of piano-tuners to Cuba to tune pianos and train people locally; to help restore Havana's National Workshop of Instrument Repair; and to encourage Irish people travelling to Cuba on holiday to carry piano parts with them, which Una Corda supplies.

Over the past few years tourists travelling to Cuba have made a real contribution to the project by becoming one of Una Corda's 'mules'. Volunteers simply carry a package of

piano parts or tools with them in their luggage when they go. When I travelled there I took pots of glue and sandpaper with me. So far over almost one-third of a tonne of parts have been carried in luggage, all with the approval of the Cuban authorities.

The pianos that are being repaired and restored by the parts Una Corda is sending to Cuba belong to Havana's music schools. Up to 20 of them are in the workshop at any one time. Recently five-time Grammy award winner Chucho Valdes played a series of fundraising concerts in Ireland in support of the project and over time this money will go to help restore the workshop.

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