



RESTORING HARMONY

After years of economic hardship in Cuba following the end of the Cold War, the country's pianos are now in a desperate state of disrepair. And that, explains photographer David Creedon, is where a remarkable Irish charity has stepped into help...

As we drive down the narrow streets of old Havana I can see elderly men and women standing outside the doorways of their homes smoking and talking. Children, playing in the street, step off the road on to the broken footpaths to let our car pass. I'm on my way to photograph the National Workshop of Instrument

Repair in Santo Tomás, between Arbol Seco and Subirana in Centro Havana. Not many tourists venture to this part of town, so when I arrive I feel unsure about whether we've come to the right place. But my fears are quickly put to rest – a man peeks out of a doorway and quickly disappears only to return 30 seconds later waving the Irish flag.

There's a reason for this... In my bag, I have brought pots of glue and sandpaper, just as many of my Irish countrymen before me have turned up at the workshop carrying a varied array of piano parts or tools. We've all done so through the initiative of Una Corda, an Irish

group that is helping to restore thousands of pianos that have fallen into disrepair in the Caribbean country.

Since 2006, Irish piano tuners have been going to Havana to help train local technicians while, under the title 'Una Corda – The Irish Cuban Piano project' and working in conjunction with the Havana

Irish pianos tuners are going to Havana to help train up local technicians

Arts Authority and the Cuban Ministry of Culture, the organisation has been given the responsibility of restoring and re-equipping the National Workshop

there. So far, over 300 kilos of parts have been transported by tourists acting as volunteer couriers, all with the approval of the Cuban Authorities. Cubans love the piano, and always have done. However, the demise of the country's instruments can be traced back to the end of the Cold War. When, in the 1960s and '70s, the Soviet Union became Cuba's close ally, the latter benefited massively

from substantial financial, and cultural, investment from its Communist friend, ever grateful for its Caribbean toe-hold. The National Workshop was used in collaboration with the Russians as a training centre, giving rise to the current generation of Cuban piano tuners and technicians. Two classes of blind and partially sighted tuners graduated from there – the first in 1970 and a second class 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. The withdrawal decimated the Cuban economy and there were persistent food and fuel shortages. Cuba lost approximately 80 per cent of both its imports and exports while its GDP dropped by 34 per cent. Oil imports dropped to about ten per cent of pre-1990 amounts. It forced Cuba to change from a nation of consumers, dependent on external oil sources, to a more sustainable economy based on meeting basic needs and conservation. Cubans today live at a lower standard than before 1991.

At the National Workshop of Instrument Repair the training programme ceased and the workshop fell steadily into disrepair. With the current US trade embargo, piano technicians on the island can not 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 also particularly hard on things made from wood.

So, Una Corda has three objectives: send a small number of piano tuners to Cuba to maintain the pianos and at the same time to

train the local people; help restore Havana's National Workshop of Instrument Repair; and encourage Irish people travelling to Cuba on holidays to carry piano parts with them, which Una Corda supplies.

The island's climate is hard on things made of wood

Many of the pianos under restoration belong to Havana's music schools. Up to 20 pianos are in the workshop at any one time. Word has gone out across Cuba and many

more pianos are queuing for restoration. Recently, five-times Grammy award winner Chucho Valdés played a series of fundraising concerts in Ireland for the project and over time this money will go to restore the workshop.

The workshop itself is dark and dusty but very tidy and clean. As I set to work with my camera, a number of volunteer technicians sit around talking. Even though there is work to be done on the pianos, a shortage of parts and supplies means they are unable to carry this out. But with Una Corda's help, this state of enforced idleness will hopefully be short-lived. ■

For more information, visit www.unacorda.org



XXXXXXXXXXXXX: (above, from left)

XXXXXXXXXXXXX: (above, from left)

