

# Property Casualty 360

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## Contents Claim Solved: The Case of the Priceless Piano

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August 8, 2013 • Reprints



Recently contents specialists accepted an assignment to inspect objects, authenticate exactly what they were, and provide valuations. One of the items to be inspected was a pristine vintage Bösendorfer piano.

At least that is the description provided by the insured, who claimed the piano was "priceless."

But was the piano a bona fide Bösendorfer? If so, then what would that portend for the value assessment?

First, a little background on Bösendorfer. The Austrian piano maker dates back to the early 1800s. The company pioneered the eight-octave keyboard, and its pianos have historically been considered to be extremely well built, using several unique construction methods which contribute to their unique sound. The Bösendorfer sound is usually described as darker or richer than the purer but less full-bodied sound of other pianos, such as Steinway & Sons.

Bösendorfer's concert grand piano is one of the world's largest and most sought after concert piano. A new Imperial Grand has a list price approaching \$250,000. Although good used examples of the Imperial Grand are not "priceless," they are certainly pricey—often approaching \$100,000 in value.

Good used or vintage examples of Bösendorfer's smaller grands are priced based on age, finish and condition, with finer examples commonly selling for \$50,000. The insured's vintage piano was purported to be from the first quarter of the 20th century, having been meticulously restored and in perfect condition.

Click on "**Next**" to find out how these pricey pianos are authenticated.

### Authentication

The process of authentication resembles a three-legged stool, involving the three elements of provenance, connoisseurship, and science.

"Provenance" is the ownership history of an item. Tracing an item's ownership back to its maker or time period can prove the authenticity of an item by itself. Connoisseurship is not as conclusive as provenance. Connoisseurship involves an expert's opinion regarding the nature of an object being consistent in style and nature with other known works by a specific maker or time period. It is an opinion, and is the least reliable factor of the three in establishing an item's authenticity.

"Science" can involve a range of activities from critical visual examination with normal "white" lighting, to viewing with UV or Infrared light, microscopic examination, chemical analysis or dating technologies. Science cannot by itself ever prove an item's authenticity. Science can only prove that the characteristics of an object are consistent with the characteristics of an authentic item and *may* be authentic. Although science cannot prove authenticity by itself, science can rule out authenticity by itself when characteristics inconsistent with authenticity are documented. These inconsistent characteristics are known as "inaccurisms."

When we arrived at the insured's home, the owner was anxious to show his items, including his beloved "vintage" piano. As soon as the piano's top was raised, we immediately observed a number of glaring inaccurisms, including modern Phillips head screws and evidence the piano top was made of a modern engineered wood product, a medium density fiberboard, to mention just a few. These fasteners and top material simply did not exist during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Our examination did find elements from a vintage Bösendorfer; however, the restoration process had been so invasive and disrespectful of the vintage nature of this piano, failing to retain original elements, components or construction practices, that it had been transformed into something else.

It did not require provenance, research, or connoisseurship of Bösendorfer pianos to reach the conclusion that what the insured bought was a playable piano with a focus on outward superficial appearance, but certainly not the pristine vintage Bösendorfer he thought he had purchased.

The piano's value was set at \$14,000, obviously a small fraction of "priceless."

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