

Piano poser: can we be in tune with Expressions?

TOP NEW Zealand pianist Michael Houstoun will not come to Hutt City unless the council does something about its ageing Steinway.

That was a message to city councillors last week as they discussed the future of the Steinway, which is housed in the Little Theatre. They had to decide what to do with \$50,000 that has been set aside to repair it or help buy a new one.

Repairing the piano would have to be done overseas and could cost as much as \$120,000.

Sue Barlow of Chamber Music Hutt Valley said that if Hutt City is to attract top performers, a quality piano is a must.

"Michael Houstoun will not play that piano, so we are missing out... We would really like a good piano so we can continue to contribute to the musical life of the city."

Councillors indicated they favoured giving the chamber the \$50,000 and letting them either repair it or buy a new one.

A new Steinway costs \$253,000 and a Fazioli, which Mrs Barlow indicated the chamber favoured, \$165,000.

Cr Ross Jamieson pointed out that Expressions in Upper Hutt has a Steinway that it borrows from Television New Zealand. He asked if two "high brow" music venues could be justified and suggested the chamber should be talking to Expressions.

Councillors instructed officers to talk to the chamber about the future of the piano and whether or not they would be prepared to take possession of it. Mrs Barlow told the *Hutt News* the chamber would be prepared to look at all options, including sharing a piano with Expressions.

A top quality piano will attract the best performers and that will in turn increase use of the Little Theatre, she says.

Not only would people like Michael Houstoun come here but the Little Theatre could be a venue for the New Zealand International Arts Festival.

Expressions director Roger Lloyd, a former artistic manager for the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, says he would be happy to talk to the chamber. Top class performers are very cautious

about where they play and the first question they ask is 'what sort of piano' does a venue have, he says.

New Zealand's leading pianists, Michael Houstoun and Diedre Irons, both perform at Expressions.

There are some practical problems with sharing a piano. Steinways are very heavy and moving one is a specialist operation.

"Pianos may look like musical elephants but they are actually very delicate and when they are moved, they have to be moved very, very delicately."

Transporting a piano from Wellington to Hutt Valley can cost as much as \$3000 and he says that would have to be taken into account in any sharing arrangement.

Insurance could also be a problem but overall he thinks that there is merit in talking with the chamber to see if they can work together.