

By Elissa Toto



## A HEART FOR BUSINESS



Born blind, pianist Thomas Solich has overcome every life challenge with a happy tune.

**W**ith his booming voice, confident demeanor and incredible business savvy, you'd never guess Thomas Solich is only 24. "When I talk with somebody on the phone, sometimes I feel like I'm 24 going on 40. That's a good thing in the business world, but you talk to people, and they just never realize how young you are," he says.

It's easy to see why even Solich feels older than his age at times. He's a whirlwind, part 20-something energy, passion and excitement and part old-pro direction, business acumen and experience. What's even more remarkable is Solich has perfectly married his artistic and pragmatic sides. And this union is delivering great success for his business, Solich Piano & Music Co. in Boardman.

Solich has been at the helm of Solich Piano & Music since purchasing the already-established, 12-year-old piano store in February 2006. Under his guidance, the store has become the fastest-growing piano company in Ohio and Pennsylvania. A lion's share of the success can be attributed to Solich him-

self. He's warm and engaging, and he knows pianos, having played every model on the market. He travels to the National Association of Music Merchants and Manufacturers convention nearly every year to finesse the keys of the more than 400 pianos made worldwide and familiarize himself with all of the options available to his customers. He uses his ear and feel for the instrument and his knowledge of his customers to determine which piano will meet the demands and desires of his clientele. A piano matchmaker of sorts, Solich can tell customers with certainty that each piano carries the right tune for each price point — music to anyone's ears.

But perhaps what is most striking about Solich and his staff is an undeniable love for music and the joy of sharing it with others. "Nothing we do is lukewarm, because of our passion for what we do. We live, speak and breathe pianos," he beams. And that is completely clear during a conversation with Solich, who practically lights up as he speaks about the piano.

## A STAR IS BORN

Solich, a native of Howland, was introduced to the piano in kindergarten when he began playing in a group setting. Realizing his affinity for the piano, his parents began the search for a special kind of instructor who could teach their son. Born blind, Solich needed a teacher who could show him to read music through Braille. And as Solich entered the third grade, he began what would become 10 years of weekly lessons in Akron with Nicolas Constantinidis, a semiretired pianist from Egypt who lost his sight at age 6. "He was more than just a piano teacher," Solich says of his mentor. "He was one of my greatest earthly role models. He was perhaps the one and only person in the country able to teach me the way he did."

While Solich attributes his success as a pianist to Constantinidis, he recognizes how much of his attitude and determination have been shaped by his parents, who gave him every resource he needed to succeed.

"They wanted to make sure that I had the same opportunities as my sighted peers. When I was 6 years old, my mother insisted that I be able to clamor on the monkey bars just like all

it an entry-level digital model or the \$52,000 black-satin-finished Charles R. Walter beauty at the center of his showroom. And guiding his interaction with every customer is the Solich Promise that he has personally played every piano that exists today and the brands he partners with are the best of the best in each price point.

As the economy softens, Solich finds himself with record sales months thanks in large part to his inventive marketing efforts and the deals many piano manufacturers are offering on interest rates and rent-to-own options. He places pianos in unexpected locations like grocery stores, which piques people's interest enough to encourage a visit to the store, and sees to it that pianos are attainable for middle-class families. He also equips a piano lab at the Ursuline Center in Canfield through a piano loan program. Solich Piano & Music offers group instruction for children in the Kawai piano lab. Then, once a year, Solich gives the students the opportunity to buy the pianos on which they've been learning. The store then replenishes the supply at the center.

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— Thomas Solich, Solich Piano & Music Co.

the other kids." At the time, Solich thought it was just the "normal thing to do," but in retrospect, he realizes "those experiences from the get-go have enabled me to be where I am today and will enable me to be where I will be 10 years down the road."

With their encouragement, Solich began entering competitions at 12, earning the nickname Piano Star from his schoolmates. It was these early competitions that shaped his approach to challenges, knowing he was working with a different set of talents than his peers. "One thing I've learned growing up blind in a sighted world is that in order for me to succeed, I can't be just as good as the best person in my field who is sighted," he says. "I've got to be better."

## A PIANO SALESMAN LIKE NO OTHER

More important for Solich than being better than others is the idea of constant growth. "I've always been a kind of competitive person, and my teacher taught me to compete against yourself because you'll always have the opportunity to get better," he says. That attitude has made Solich a humble businessman, willing to seek guidance from veterans of the piano industry and learn from their successes and mistakes.

And part of that learning process has come from Solich's international performances, including at some of the most beautiful cathedrals in Europe. But he doesn't find the venues he's played nearly as electrifying as the instruments themselves. "The ideal concert venue is the opportunity to play on what is the finest piano in the world," he says, gushing about the Italian-made Fazioli, a \$250,000 instrument produced only in double-digit numbers annually. "That gives me the same sensation that a car enthusiast feels when he's driving in his most souped-up ride at 80 miles per hour."

It's because of this through-and-through knowledge that people not only from the Mahoning and Shenango valleys but also from Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Chicago flock to Solich to spend thousands of dollars on a piano. Clients trust him to help select just the right instrument, be

teachers and network of more than 150 Solich-certified instructors also know the value of solid piano instruction. "You're only as good as you've been taught to be," he says. He prides himself on being strict without squashing students' interest. He instills the need for discipline and practice, which even he needed to be prodded to do as he was learning. With a wide variety of students, including children and senior citizens who have never played before, and adults who once played and are relearning the instrument, Solich and his team have learned to be flexible in their approach to students.

## GROWING THE SOLICH EMPIRE

With word of his expertise spreading and competition shrinking — Lentine's Music, with five stores in the Cleveland/Akron area and more than \$16 million in gross annual revenue, closed last year in early February — the market may be right for expansion. Many of the piano buyers in the arts-heavy area who once would have turned to Lentine's for a piano are now turning to Solich and the Mahoning Valley. And he's in the research-and-development stages of plans to expand across central Ohio and western Pennsylvania.

As he continues to ship pianos to Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Chicago and beyond, Solich feels he's accomplished the largest part of his business goal. He's established himself as a consummate professional who clients trust with a major purchase that most will make only once or twice in a lifetime. He's excited about his company's potential for growth not because it will make him a Piano Star in a new way, but because it could lead to the enrichment of so many lives through the love of piano.

Since he was a 6-year-old on the monkey bars, Solich has never sat by while others were doing something he could also be doing, and he's still taking this approach in life and business. "Hopefully, by the time I'm 26, I'll be shipping [pianos] to Europe," he laughs. "If I don't make it happen and make it happen now, then someone else is going to do it." With this attitude, Solich is sure to realize every goal he sets for himself.