Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 5, No. 1 October, 1994

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

Conservation conversation

A report on the course on musical instrument conservation given earlier this year by the Museums and Galleries Commission

THROUGHOUT the museum conservation world it is now generally recognised that use uses up. By playing on old instruments we are, literally, consuming our heritage. Not even unique, rare, fine or special examples have been spared: on the contrary, they have often been the most radically altered by multiple restorations. However, if the musical instrument world intends to pass on a legacy of representative examples which faithfully reflect original workmanship and sensibilities then a general shift in emphasis from playing to preserving must somehow be accomplished. The week-long course in musical instrument conservation offered this past August by the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) and held at the Horniman Museum in South London seems to have taken this as its main underlying assumption, yet it focused curiously little on how this shift might actually be achieved: rather it concentrated on the practicalities of conservation.

One important principle to emerge was that musical instruments differ little in their conservation needs from other classes of object such as boats, machinery or furniture. All, like musical instruments, may be composite objects—that is, made of several types of materials with perhaps conflicting conservation requirements. Still, it was reassuring to learn that current techniques of materials conservation are quite well documented and can be drawn from many published sources under a variety of non-musical headings.

Fundamental to any conservation plan is environmental control and monitoring. This was the subject of a lecture given on the first day by May Cassar, a scientist and author from the MGC's Conservation Unit. Later in the week, Friedemann Hellwig, the distinguished musical instrument specialist now teaching conservation techniques in Köln, spoke about wood identification. Peering at prepared samples through magnifiers and pocket microscopes, the twenty-one participants began to appreciate, some for the first time, the subtleties of the science of materials identification. Bob Barclay of the Canadian Conservation Institute, and a specialist in brass instruments, discussed conservation treatments for woods and metals. Pitfalls of various 'routine' cleaning procedures were exposed, and some common notion about the care of brass objects—e.g., that they should be lacquered—were shown to be misguided. Scott Odell, well known for his work at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, conveyed a cogent philosophy for the conservation of musical instruments in museum settings by reference to a historic boat collection in France. Instead of the objects' being 'prettified' or restored with a concomitant loss of original surfaces, interiors and evidence of use, vessels were displayed in various states of dilapidation: from the authentic ruin to the new sea-worthy replica. The analogy for musical instruments was clear. Cary Karp from the Swedish Natural History Museum set sights to the very near future when, using laser scanning, an object's dimensions will be accurately measured without the need to handle it. The technology and machinery for this method is not only in existence but already in use elsewhere in the museum world. Information thus gathered will very soon be available and disseminated through Internet, the global electronic network. The comparatively dangerous, cumbersome and unreliable nature of more conventional measuring and documentation procedures was made plain. Unfortunately, there was very little time to discuss the wider ramifications of the information technology revolution for the museum world as a whole.

In fact—and this is a general criticism of the course—wider ramifications were in the main allocated to a later time which never seemed to arrive. On the afternoon of the last day discussion finally broke out, sparked by an assignment for each participant to write practical guidelines for the care of a musical instrument collection, reflecting his or her own philosophy towards conservation and the knotty problem of the playing of museum instruments. An almost complete gamut of opinion was heard. Many issues were thoughtfully addressed, not only by representatives of public bodies and institutions such as English Heritage, but also by those from private workshops, music colleges, and museums wholly sustained by charitable contributions and volunteer labour.

It would have been interesting to have mounted this exercise at the outset as well, in order to gauge the influence of the course, if any, on the attitudes of the participants. But it seems more likely that any changes—however urgent—will come about only gradually, as working assumptions in the musical and curatorial professions and prevailing public expectations undergo their slow metamorphosis.

MIMI WAITZMAN