Harpsichord & fortepiano

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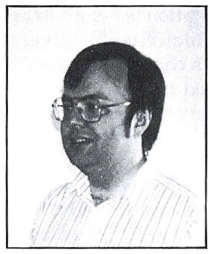

Should we stop restoring and playing original instruments?

Göran Grahn, *curator of the Stiftelsen Musikkulturens främjande in Stockholm, presents his view on the topic of restoration, or rather the avoidance of it.*

SINCE the time when the major collections of keyboard instruments were started the attitude towards the restoring and playing of original instruments has changed considerably. In the 1950s and 60s the main task of curators was to restore the instruments in museums to playing condition, in order to give the public and musicians an experience of how the music sounded in the particular period of the instrument. The instruments served as a very important source of inspiration to the newly awakened interest in early music. It was at this time that the first pioneering research by makers like Frank Hubbard and William Dowd was done. The discovery of the qualities of the original instruments both in sound and construction resulted in the start of copying the original instruments, which eventually led to a near-total redundancy of the big factory-made harpsichords with 16' and pedals. These instruments derived musically from the neoclassical *Orgelbewegung* and technically from the construction of the modern piano. Towards the end of the 1970s copies of original keyboard instruments had also started to become more common domestic items due to the development of kits for building at home.

This process of discovery has also had a price: original instruments have undergone numerous restorations where sometimes brutal alterations have been carried out in order to retain playability. There are examples of instruments where original parts have been thrown away without documentation, wooden parts and soundboards have been thinned out in order to get 'better' sound. Unfortunately there are too many examples of instruments where interesting information, showing what techniques the original maker might have used, have been lost for ever. We are therefore left with a partly damaged heritage to hand over to future generations. Unfortunately this type of restoration is still going on in many museums, therefore it is important to make museum curators and other possessors of original instruments aware of their responsibility not to increase the damage and to protect untouched what still remains.

A Bone of Contention

Technical aspects

In restoring a historical keyboard instrument there is always a great risk that severe damage can occur: the framework or soundboard and bridges might not be able to withstand the pull of the strings and break. This might then have to involve the re-gluing of frames and bars, resulting in loss of possible traces of gluing techniques of the original builder. In order to make the instrument work properly the action has to undergo alterations such as replacement of original bristles and remains of plectra in harpsichord jacks, remains of original cloths which can give information on original key-depths and other regulation, leather on fortepiano hammers, etc. Nowadays it is rather common that the original action or parts of it are replaced by a copy and the original parts stored away. Taking original parts out of an instrument always includes a risk of their disappearing—maybe not in the immediate future but, in a perspective of at least 100 years, one must consider the possibility of a succeeding curator's having little interest or knowledge of keyboard instruments.

The removal of parts also makes measurements of original parts and their relations within the instrument impossible since details such as cloths on keys and jackrails will have to be altered to fit the replacement action parts. One important question can also be raised if one is really playing the original instrument when such a vital part as the action is a replacement. A restored instrument, especially a harpsichord, is also bound to be strung, voiced and regulated according to the taste and ideas of the particular person carrying out the restoration.

Furthermore, once the restoration has been carried out a new problem arises, namely that large numbers of players from all over the world want to come and play the instrument with a possibility of a heavy wearing down of the action and key-covers by frequent playing. The question is then: whom do we restore the instrument for? Who will be allowed to play it and how much? Is it only for the famous players for their concerts and recordings, or is it for all students interested in the instrument? A very simple solution to all these problems is an unrestored instrument with all its parts remaining together which can serve as a study object, hopefully with a thorough documentation such as drawings, photos and measurements. With the original instrument preserved and untouched it is also possible for future makers to come back to the instrument with fresh eyes to review the research made earlier.

What do we want to achieve?

The central question that needs to be addressed is what our expectations of a restored instrument are. Are we really hearing the original instrument or a version of it that corresponds with the taste of the particular restorer that the museum trusts at the moment? What will we do if the restored instrument turns out to be a disappointment? Will we have to 'improve' it to fit our taste? Why do we think an original is better than a good copy? Maybe our experience of an old instrument's being better is only psychological just because we know that it is the original. The opinions about what constitutes a good instrument are as many as there are persons active in this field. Since we do not know exactly how the instruments were voiced and regulated all restoration is bound to be a matter of speculation. It would certainly be very interesting to make blind tests comparing already restored instruments and good copies. The copying of instruments is also developing rapidly to the point where makers in the future will need to search for untouched instruments in order to find enough information for making adequate copies. Another problem is of course that museum directors or sponsors might have different attitude from the curators to these questions. Therefore the curators have a very important responsibility to resist wishes from museum boards to show off with a posh concert on original instruments for attracting sponsors. No sponsor money in the world can pay for, or get back, lost information in the restored instrument. A frightful comparison can be made with Stradivari violins where there are now no instruments preserved in original condition.

Our heritage, in the form of keyboard instruments that are in our hands to pass on to coming generations, is too valuable to be altered and used up for our own pleasure or prestige. It would be wise to make a world heritage list of untouched instruments that would encourage museum curators and other owners to refrain from the temptation of having instruments restored. Instead there should be greater effort to encourage more research in various fields concerning instrument making so that we can come closer to the older traditions and also develop within them ourselves. In this work, unaltered and unrestored instruments serve as indispensable sources of inspiration, so my plea is—*STOP RESTORING NOW.*