

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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... Or should good restoration still be carried out?

THE TREMENDOUS increase in performance on original keyboard instruments has rightly brought forward the question of whether restoration should be done at all. In an ideal conservation heaven we would all only play on copies of original instruments, and they would all be of the highest quality, comparable with the work of the great master builders. Yet there is a magic to playing on original instruments which simply cannot be duplicated. Not all musicians want to play on modern copies, certainly they cannot all afford them, nor do all concertgoers want to hear them. If we are going to keep the music alive, we need to look for a way through the warring camps.

Not every instrument is a candidate for restoration, nor certainly should all instruments be restored, but it is my feeling that to make a blanket rule that all surviving instruments should now be left unplayable, is unnecessarily pedantic.

Restoration clearly holds a vital place in conjunction with new building. Sensitively restored musical instruments can often give us an important yardstick by which we can judge the success of our new efforts. The true art of restoration is the rediscovery of the maker's original intentions, not the imposition of the restorer's own notions.

The often heated debate regarding the ethics of restoration of keyboard instruments is, I believe, in part due to the extraordinarily rapid explosion of interest, without a well-established Code of Practice to guide both restorers and players or collectors. There is considerable pressure on what is only a finite number of high-quality original instruments. It is my suggestion that by establishing some clear, simple guidelines which form a Code of Practice for restorers, we can do much to prevent the loss of historical data, while at the same time giving us the opportunity to hear original instruments as they may have sounded.

TO BEGIN we need to establish if an instrument is suitable for restoration. It may not be if: it is the only known instrument of its type and model;

it is an important instrument in entirely original condition;

in the course of restoration original information will be lost which cannot be preserved.

If it is decided to proceed with the restoration work:

the restoration should ultimately be seen as part of the conservation of the instrument;

all work needs to be reversible;

careful records need to be kept of all work done;

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photographs and a written report should be kept with the instrument, and on file with both the owner of the instrument and the restorer;

use of correct materials. If the correct materials are not available then it is perhaps better not to undertake the work until they are;

anything removed should be saved and kept with the instrument or, in the case of a museum environment, carefully marked and filed.

Finally, there must be a clear understanding of the client's wishes before proceeding. The client needs to be instructed by the restorer about special conditions for conservation once the restoration is complete. The restorer must make a subjective judgment as to whether he feels the instrument, if it is of particularly great value historically, will be cared for when restoration is complete. I have sadly seen how sometimes the damage to an instrument is not done in the restoration, but more often by the poor treatment which the instrument receives once the restoration is complete.

IT IS often said of important works of art, be they paintings, buildings or musical instruments, that they are never actually owned by anyone, but that we can only be the caretakers for them in our own lifetimes. It is this direct connection with the past which creates the magic for listeners to original instruments. These instruments have a story to tell, and it is by giving them voice that we can hear what they have to say.

