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INSIDE RESTORATION :

AN INTERVIEW OF BEN MARKS AND LUCY COAD

Ben Marks has been working with Lucy Coad Square Pianos www.squarepiano.co.uk, with the help of the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust www.uest.org.uk

1. How did you become interested in early keyboard instruments and restoration?

Lucy: My first encounter with an early keyboard instrument came when my family inherited a square piano that had reputedly belonged to George Bernard Shaw. It was always considered to be a very special object and an interesting talking point. I took up piano lessons at the age of ten, which is perhaps when the little square piano began to appeal more.

I was a practical and creative youngster. I loved crafts that involved using my hands and I spent time in my grandfather's workshop using tools to make things out of different materials. When I left school at 16 I knew I wasn't going to be going down the same academic route as my siblings and I saw an opportunity to combine both my practical and musical interests in the form of a course in modern piano technology, which at the time was run by the London College of Furniture.

In our final year, Tim Hamilton, a restorer of historic keyboard instruments, came and gave a series of lectures on early pianos. Following this, and perhaps as a result of the curiosity I had always had for my parents' square piano, I became very interested in the subject and found myself drawn to the history and the inspiring level of craftsmanship in these beautiful instruments. I was keen to explore the field further and this included the nature of restoration and conservation work in terms of the practical methods and techniques employed. I was very fortunate to be given the opportunity to train with Tim when I left college, and this led me to eventually establish my own business specialising in square pianos when he emigrated to the U.S.A.

Ben: My parents tell me that long before I could walk, let alone play the piano, I was somehow drawn to this particular musical instrument. Although my family did not own a piano until I began lessons at the age of seven, I apparently found any piano a source of great curiosity and delight.

My real enthusiasm for early pianos came about as a result of my fascination with both history and early music. Having grown up with a furniture conservator for a stepfather, I had developed an interest in the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage, particularly in relation to historic furniture. I was aware of some of the antecedents of the modern piano, and this awareness, along with an interest in the family of plucked keyboard instruments, grew as I became more attracted to the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was not until I left college and later home that I seriously considered the possibility of combining these various interests and developing them further.

When I was 15 I used some of the money I had saved up from my Saturday job at a local antiques shop to purchase a very lovely Clementi square piano of 1807 at a country sale. To me an historic musical instrument, as a tool for human expression can bring the past into greater relief and establish more of a connection between then and now, so the honour of owning such a tangible piece of history spurred my desire to learn more about the history of the instrument I played every day.

I was very fortunate to receive the generous assistance of Derek Adlam during my first cautious attempts at conserving my square piano. With Derek Adlam's advice and my stepfather's guidance I was able to return the instrument to playing condition with minimal intervention. My passion grew steadily as I became increasingly interested in the social as well as the technical history of the early pianoforte and its various schools of development, both English and foreign. My desire to embark on a career in restoration and conservation was already fixed in my mind and following two weeks of work experience at Lucy's workshop in the summer of 2006, my desire to enter the field of historic keyboard instruments was fixed also.

2. Are there any special techniques employed that are specific to keyboard restoration?

Lucy: Much of our work uses skills and techniques also to be found in cabinetmaking. The research that is now available and which explores the manufacturing processes used by the early makers has aided our understanding and approach even when it comes to restoration. We are able to make individual yet identical replacement parts and components "en masse" and relatively quickly by following the same or similar manufacturing principles and processes used by the early makers. Many of the jigs and templates which we use to do this have been made by us and are specific to keyboard restoration.

We wind our own bass strings for square pianos in the workshop. For this we have to source the correct gauges and alloys of wire and calculate these according to a tension graph for each individual piano.

Although choice of temperament is perhaps the personal concern of individual players and owners of historic keyboard instruments, an ability to tune at least one temperament and to set different pitches is necessary if you are responsible for re-stringing an historic keyboard instrument which is to be maintained as a playing instrument.

In some cases where we have to recover pianoforte hammers (usually to replace previously inaccurate replacement covers) it is necessary to source leathers of the correct type and tanning. It is also very important to apply the leather in a specific fashion and to tone it accordingly.

3. Ben, what are the most valuable things you have learned during your time at Lucy's workshop?

Ben: With Lucy's patient guidance I have learned a vast amount, both practical and methodological, during the course of the past two years. Perhaps the single most valuable aspect has been to appreciate the importance of attention to detail during the restoration process with respect to historical accuracy, not only in terms of the materials used, but also in terms of the various methods of production that involve the use of specific hand tools. In fact, one of my first tasks was to learn how to sharpen chisels. The aim of the exercise was achieved: I have certainly learned to respect my tools, not simply in recognition of their usefulness, but with regard to the sheer amount of time spent preparing them and keeping them sharp!

In addition I have come to better understand the nature of the materials that we work with,

namely wood, leather, and metal. A greater awareness of the properties of these materials and the ways in which they deteriorate has enabled me to work with them much more easily and allowed me to produce much better results.

4. Lucy, Many people say apprenticing someone means twice the work. What was your motivation to take on an apprentice and what expectations did you have when you decided to do this? (What would you say to other restorers/makers/ workshops who might be concerned about taking someone on in this way?)

Lucy: I have always enjoyed working with other people in an otherwise solitary profession. Calvin Talbot has worked with me for eight years and so companionship is definitely a motivation. On another level, having more than one head when it comes to problem solving and decision making is very useful. I have always been open to new ideas and new ways to approach the challenges we face in our work, and it is always good to keep abreast of new developments in conservation and restoration practice. Having another person to bounce thoughts off is undoubtedly an advantage.

I am not aware of a specialist college course that teaches specifically the conservation and restoration of historic pianofortes, so it is necessary to teach individuals yourself and besides, I'm also in the lucky position that I have a great deal of work at the moment, so it seems greedy not to share it! It is also lovely to pass on knowledge, especially to a younger generation; I have always thought that square pianos are worthy of our care and respect and hope that this will continue in the future.

Having been trained as an apprentice myself, I understood the need to be patient. As with any new job or experience, it takes time to find your feet. Ben started working with us on a part time basis, which meant that I could apportion my time between teaching him and concentrating on keeping the restorations moving forward.

My initial uncertainties centred upon how things might work out on a personal and practical level. When working so closely with other people it is important that personalities are, to a degree, well matched. Ben also came with a good grounding in the basic principles of woodwork and conservation practice, which has helped a great deal; he is also learning much more as regards woodwork from Calvin, who is a highly skilled cabinetmaker. A particular asset has been Ben's keen interest in the history of early keyboard instruments and their technological development. What



is nice is that between us we each bring a different angle to the business so that almost all aspects of our specialisation are covered.

As part of his Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Ben has been able to pursue a number of personal projects including some of the more involved restoration work to his own instrument which has enabled him to apply and hone some of the skills and methods that he has learned here. The scholarship has also allowed time for personal study and the attendance of day schools and short courses, which has obvious benefits for us both, in addition to taking some of the teaching responsibility off my shoulders.

5. Did it take you time to create a schedule for work? How do you divide up which tasks?

Lucy: I have always found that each piano is individual in the sense that every instrument which comes into the workshop demands a very different set of requirements, so it can be difficult to create a universal schedule of work to cover all instruments. There is of course a natural process and order to the restoration of any keyboard instrument, and this we follow at all times.

During his first year Ben was very much my assistant, being guided by me and learning the same processes and methods that I was taught by Tim. Increasingly, I have been able to divide the work between the tasks that Ben has done before, and those processes with which he has less experience. As my apprentice, Ben is taught the same methods, techniques and procedures that I was taught, however, I encourage and have been happy for Ben to develop these to suit his own way of working.

Ben: From the moment I arrived at Lucy's workshop I felt that I fitted in, both with the people and our working environment. I love working closely with individuals and feel very privileged to receive one-on-one tuition from Lucy. Now into my third year I feel more confident to use my initiative and work more independently, which has been welcomed —it is great to have the encouragement and support as well as the Trust to do so! There is always a programme of work and I am very fortunate to be given the opportunity to choose what I want to do (providing that I already know the processes etc.). On a personal level I think that the aim now is to take that step further and to choose some of those more challenging aspects which until recently I have lacked the confidence to approach.

6. Are there any personal qualities one ought to have in this field?

Lucy: A genuine interest in the field helps, but this is not a necessity.

A degree of patience is certainly beneficial in most forms of restoration and conservation. Some stages in the restoration process can be particularly laborious and have to be completed before the restoration can move on as a whole. A lot of time can be spent researching and sourcing suitable materials and on occasions even tools so as to enable us to achieve the best results.

Conservation and restoration have a long craft tradition, which in recent times has benefitted from the advances of science, so a strong practical understanding and ability is very important.