

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

INTERVIEW:

Maintaining Original Instruments and Allowing Access

With Andrew Lamb



Fig. 1: Andrew Lamb, in a whimsical moment in the Bate Collection Office

Andrew Lamb is the Curator of the Bate Collection in Oxford. For many years it has housed a range of instruments from winds to strings to of course early keyboards. In recent years a bequest has added some modern reproduction keyboards and the collection has sought to expand access to the local community, but the responsibility to look after the original instruments

continues unabated. Any collection must balance the competing demands of public access versus the need to preserve the items that are rare and irreplaceable.

The clavichords include the (possibly) Deckert (1772-1844) clavichord, the Dolmetsch 1894, and the famous Hass 1743. There are some non-playing clavichords by Jean

Maurer after de Zwolle, and a 1473/4 Urbino intarsia; and then copies by Stephen Saunders (for loan), a John Rawson copy of a triple fretted German, and the Michael Thomas clavichord that has been restored by a team of volunteers- but more on that later.

The harpsichords are numerous, including a Goermans, Schudi-Broadwood (recently restored), William Smith (the one associated with Handel), and the famous Joseph Tisseran 1700. Then we have spinets by Baker Harris, John Harrison, Slade, and Hitchcock which are worth a mention. There are also copies by Michael Thomas, Saunders and others.

Pianos include squares by Adam Beyer 1779, Longman & Broderip 1790, Aston & Horwood 1818, Broadwood 1830, and an item (available for loan) by Froschle 1772.

A handlist can be seen at the Bate Collection website www.bate.ox.ac.uk/Clavichord&Fortepiano interviewed Andrew with particular reference to the early keyboards in the collection.

H and F: I noted that you have an instrument that has been restored by volunteers, a copy that was made by Michael Thomas. It's great that volunteers can be involved in such a project- this is certainly the first I've heard of this.

AL: Yes, having a group restore a modern instrument seemed a worthwhile project. It was a joint effort by volunteers and students on work experience. This does take a bit of management, so we can't always do this, but it did work very well. It was reported on in the Galpin Society Newsletter. We have also introduced families to hands-on work with the gamelan.

H & F: How do you keep up the maintenance of the original instruments?

AL: David Law comes once a fortnight and we keep a list of the most needed repairs.

H & F: Are all the instruments in playing order?

AL: Most are. There are some that can be played on by anyone with minimal risk of damage, especially if they are modern copies, whereas the unique ones are played less by fewer people. That said we do encourage access. For example we have a volunteer who plays regularly and he brings students. Some students from the Faculty of Music use instruments to give recitals such as in



Fig. 2a



Fig. 2b

Fig 2a and b. The "Cuneo" clavichord is worked on by volunteers including Amy Friary (work placement student, Gosford Hills School) using an endoscope; and David Millard setting up listing.



Fig. 3

Fig. 3: Amy Friary examines the keyboard from the Sheldonian Theatre's organ.

the Denis Arnold Recital Hall. We do have loan instruments, which helps students.

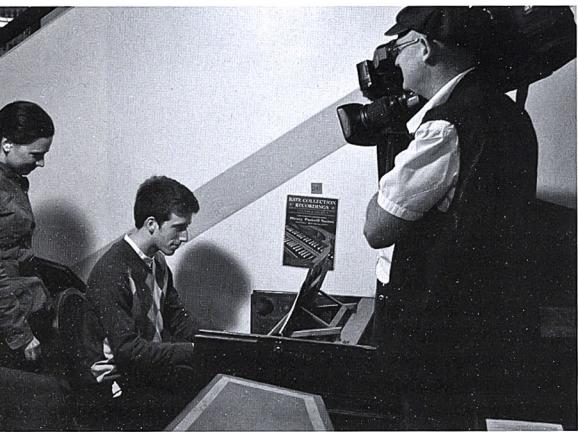


Fig 4. Students play while the BBC documents their visit.

H & F: Can you tell me more about the loans?

AL: There are three clavichords available for loan. One is out on loan at the moment. There is also a modern copy of a spinet that we loan. Students can have them out for an extended period, provided a deposit is made.

H & F: Obviously there are things that a student at the Faculty of Music can do which a primary or secondary school student cannot. Can you tell me more about your outreach and education programmes?

AL: We have a schools programme for age 9-18 and workshops for secondary school students to link to the curriculum. We have one-off events such as gallery talks featuring instruments, and we run family fun days with demonstrations and education sessions for families during half term. We have done hands on work with a local folk festival. And we've done study days for adults too, with the British Clavichord Society, for example.

H & F: This seems a unique example of collaboration with the community.

AL: That's the idea. We have a hands-on philosophy. The cognoscenti can detect differences in instruments, subtleties of tuning, tone, handling, and playing. A casual observer will not necessarily benefit so we have a range of instruments available to match the user; we are here for the broadest spectrum of museum visitor.

H & F: Have you many recordings of the collection instruments being played?

AL: We have some 60 recordings in our Audio Guide and hope to add more. This has been a really exciting project. Research visitors, students, members of the Friends and others were asked to play instruments as and when this became possible. The advantage of this approach was that the sounds comprise an honest representation of the instruments concerned. They have not been enhanced or given any professional gloss.

H & F: How did you set up the project?

AL: We began with funds from the Friends of the Bate Collection. Tara De Fabrizio, a work-experience intern from the museum studies course at University College London, helped to source the equipment, and Kristopher Kooi, an exchange student visiting Oxford from Cornell University in the United States, helped record and master the samples, which were played by students and volunteers. The method is based on "A Sound Sample System".

Other museums have rather high tech arrangements, but with limited funding we have gone with a "Tour Mate" handset, which allows the visitor to choose which sound samples to experience.

H & F: How has the audio guide been received?

AL: The large majority of casual visitors make fullest use of the system. The reception has been uniformly positive. While it's not every instrument in the collection, it's a good start. Our forward plan includes further recording. On Wednesday afternoons, volunteers come in to work on our sound engineering project, and in addition to this we hope to amass a series of CDs of archival quality that we can sell to visitors.

H & F: How do you decide whether people should just listen to audio guides or actually play? We know that some collections limit access. For example Fenton House keeps a record of the hours spent by each player at each instrument in quarter hour increments. The Royal College of Music in London often does not allow playing but uses audio guides instead.

AL: Yes and the Royal Academy has to restrict access as well. The Bate Collection does not have the same pressure on it as these institutions, so we can strike a balance. In addition museum visitor numbers are an important measure in



Fig. 5a

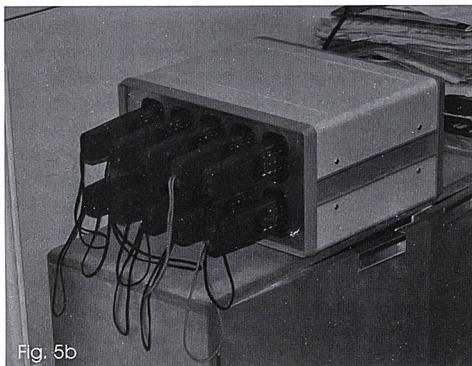


Fig. 5b



Fig. 5c

Fig 5a. The recording device used:

a Zoom H4 Handy Recorder

Fig 5b: Tourmate charging station

Fig 5c. A museum visitor using a Tourmate Handset

securing continued funding, so we have reasons to encourage access. We do have audio guides because it would not be practical to have every instrument taken out and played for each visitor but we also welcome the playing of instruments if people know their way around them.

We have an "Active Care" programme whereby we assess the uniqueness of the item, the risk of it being damaged, and its condition on a regular basis. One cannot have a unified field theory for treating all items. Each is treated on its own merits. We don't have enough information to know exactly what the effects of use will be; we can test where cracks are likely to happen but cannot predict when.

H & F: With such priceless items, I have to ask. If the worst happens, how do you decide which to save first?

AL: The medieval double pipe is unique and heads the list. In addition there are several recorders (including by Bressan) and flutes, and the Galpin, Staneseby and Richter oboes. If you are thinking of keyboards, we must preserve the one-of-a-kind keyboards such as the Smith harpsichord (because of its association with Handel) and the harpsichord by Joseph Tisseran.

H & F: So you have a list?

AL: Yes, the collection keeps a list of those instruments that are unique, fragile or worth saving above all others, and these receive priority should the worst befall. We keep a "Disaster List" of those instruments that must be kept safe first. We also have plans for their storage. In emergencies, of course, the first consideration is the safety of people, after which we inform the appropriate staff and personnel and take action regarding instruments. In the case of a fire, once the fire officer allows access, instruments can be moved to Pembroke College Chapel nearby. This is not an idle concern. We had some pipes that burst not too long ago, and it turns out they were fitted under concrete. How to get at the pipes without disrupting everything is not an easy task!

H & F: Many thanks for taking the time to speak to us.

1 Andrew Lamb, "A Sound Sample System: Enhanced Access for the Academic Cognoscenti" will appear in *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals From the Practical to the Philosophical*. (published by J. Decker, Alta Mira Press).