Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 16, No. 2 Spring, 2012

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

Keyboards in Vermillion: with John Koster

An interview with John Koster, Conservator & Professor of Music, Curator of Keyboard Instruments, and Coordinator of Graduate Studies in the History of Musical Instruments, National Music Museum.

HFP: The National Music Museum (formerly named the Shrine to Music Museum) in Vermillion, South Dakota is home to a fine collection of keyboard instruments. How did the collection originate and how did you arrive at the great range of instruments there today?

NMM: The NMM was originally formed in 1973 around a collection of more than 2500 instruments assembled by Arne B. Larson, who brought them to the University of South Dakota when he joined the music faculty in the mid 1960s. In this original collection, consisting largely of brass band instruments albeit with some branching out to other areas, there was, however, only one item that could be considered an early keyboard instrument, a Broadwood square piano of 1791. Fortunately, the Museum's Board of Trustees included a number of well-to-do members who funded the acquisitions that made the NMM what it is today, with preeminent holdings in many areas including early violins (we have, for example, ten Amatis), lutes, 17th- and 18th-century Nuremberg brass instruments, a unique 16th-century English cittern, baroque woodwinds galore, and so on, not to mention all the 20th-century mandolins and guitars.

The Museum acquired several highly important keyboards in the 1980s, including harpsichords by Jacques Germain, Paris, 1785, Joseph Kirckman, London, 1798, and Giacomo Ridolfi, Rome, about 1660-1690, each a superb example of its type. Also of special note among these early acquisitions are a *Tangentenflügel* made by Spath & Schmahl in Regensburg in the 1780s and two grand pianos with actions of the Cristofori type, one by Manuel Antunes, Lisbon, 1767, the other by Louis Bas, Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, 1781. These all came from various sources, such as a Sotheby's auction in London and specialist dealers in several countries. One of the most important of these dealers was the late Hugh Gough in New York, who, starting in England in the 1930s, had been one of the pioneers of historically informed harpsichord making and was a great influence on the young Frank Hubbard.

Shortly after I joined the NMM staff in 1991 as Conservator, Professor of Music, and at least *de facto* Curator of Keyboard Instruments, I made a list of instruments that we should try to acquire over the long term – perhaps 50 years or so – to make a truly comprehensive and representative collection of early keyboards. I realized, of course, that this might not be totally attainable, but it was an ideal goal. In fact, large parts of my wish list have been accomplished, thanks to the funding provided by the Board, other donors, and the sympathetic energies of the Museum's founding Director, André Larson, who recently retired after nearly 40 years. Thus, we now have a 17th-century French harpsichord (by Nicolas Dufour, Paris, 1683), two Ruckers harpsichords (a single of 1607 and a double of 1643, both by Andreas Ruckers), an 18th-century Viennese grand piano (by Ferdinand Hofmann, about 1795), an 18th-century English grand (by M. & W. Stodart, London, 1795), a small fretted German clavichord, one of the huge late Swedish clavichords (by Henric Johan Söderström, Stockholm, 1815), an English spinet (by Charles Haward, London, 1689), and so on. We still don't have a German harpsichord (and perhaps never will), an 18th-century Flemish one, Flemish and northern Italian virginals, or an early Italian clavichord. But to my surprise, some remarkable things I couldn't even have imagined in 1991 have materialized as if by magic – the imposing Portuguese harpsichord by José Calisto, 1780, for example, and the magnificent spinet by Johann Heinrich Silbermann, 1785, which in a way fills the role of a German harpsichord.

In the course of collecting, we've avoided one or two costly mistakes. In 1999 we almost acquired a two manual harpsichord of the newly discovered early Spanish school, but just before the deal was quite set my suspicions were aroused when I actually saw the instrument first hand and I was able to prove that the instrument was entirely a fake. I wrote about this in the February 2000 issue of *Early Music*, and as a result, I think, the entire early Spanish school just vanished from the scene. On the other hand, there's the occasional sleeper, something generally rejected as questionable but, in fact, quite real and interesting. A small, plain grand piano labelled "Frantz Jacob Spath / Regenspurg 1767" was offered at Sotheby's but didn't meet its reserve. Since I thought that, at worst, it was an 18th-century German *Flügel* of some sort, I persuaded the Museum's powers-that-be to buy it afterwards. After studying the instrument for a year or so and comparing it with other instruments of the period, including the NMM's Spath & Schmahl *Tangentenflügel*, I could demonstrate to some degree of certainty that the instrument is authentic after all, the earliest known stringed keyboard instrument by Spath, likely one of the *Pandaleon-Clavecins* he advertised in 1765. It is of great historical importance, especially as it uniquely represents the "Spath claviers" that Mozart favoured until he encountered J.A. Stein's pianos in 1777.

At this point, although there are still some gaps, we have, arguably, the most diverse collection of early keyboard instruments in the world, with some of the rarest, most historically significant, and best preserved harpsichords and early pianos in existence. Forming this collection has not been just a matter of money (although that helped!); serendipity, connoisseurship, a certain degree of boldness, and the ability to do one's own research rather than relying on common knowledge have also been crucial to our success.

HFP: My next question is really about how you manage the care of so many instruments. Do you have a tuning/maintenance and repair schedule and how does it work?

NMM: Actually, it's not all that many. Of our more than 50 stringed keyboard instruments made before about 1830, only 15 are maintained in playing condition. Having myself, before I came to Vermillion, been a harpsichord maker doing everything in the historical manner (for example, making wrest pins and wooden jacks in various early styles) and also taking care of the keyboards at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, I've had many decades of experience with the quirks of maintaining old instruments. In any case, our buildings are fully climate controlled, so the variations caused by changes of temperature and humidity are minimal. There's no set maintenance schedule. I just do what's necessary when it's necessary.

That many of our instruments are not restored to playing condition is a deliberate choice. Restoration has ruined so many historical instruments and, even with the best of intentions, important evidence has irretrievably been lost. Thus, the international community of conscientious, professionally overseen musical instrument museums has long since become extremely wary of routine restoration. Here, we decide on a case by case basis, asking such questions as "What might be learned?" and "What might be lost?"

Some of our instruments should never be restored. For example, our Nannette Streicher & Son downstriking grand piano of 1829 is in untouched original condition with its original strings, leather, cloth, etc. Some of the action parts, such as the loops of silk thread engaging springs to pull the hammers back up, are very delicate and should not be put to the strain of playing. The bass hitch-pin rail is split and would require an intrusive major repair to hold the strings. So it's best just to preserve this instrument for all time as a nearly perfect example of its makers' work – their top-of-the-line model. It's on display, and, even if it must remain silent, it is a wonderful piece of Biedermeier furniture. It's one of the instruments I'm most proud of having had a role in bringing here.

On the other hand, our grand piano by Manuel Antunes, Lisbon, 1767, which came here in nearly as good condition as the Streicher, has been restored. Its original strings were long gone, and the action cloth and leather, most of which is original, is in good enough condition to bear occasional use. The restoration involved not much more than restringing and a few adjustments. This instrument, with its original hammer leathers, provides, I think, the most reliable impression of what the early Cristofori-action pianos sounded like – entirely different to later 18th-century pianos. So something important has been learned from it.

Some other instruments came here already restored, for better or worse. For example, the Jacques Germain harpsichord had been "rebuilt" around 1950 by John Challis, who installed a new wrestplank and restrung one of the 8′ stops as a 16′. Hugh Gough, from whom the NMM acquired the instrument, reinstalled the original

wrestplank, which fortunately hadn't been thrown out, removed all of the extra internal bracing and soundboard ribs that Challis had added, installed reproduction French-style jacks, and so on. The original soundboard is in quite good condition, and the instrument sounds glorious. Actually, later this year I'm planning to update the restoration by restringing with wire closer to the original while I'm taking care of a couple of minor structural problems. Because there's nothing left of the original ephemera (strings, action cloth, etc.), this work as well as the usual tuning and regulation can be done without unduly compromising the original substance of the instrument.

HFP: Should the worst happen (flood, fire, etc.) what facilities and procedures do you maintain?

NMM: There's a disaster plan developed as part of standard University-wide procedures. Most important is to take preventive steps. Our part of Vermillion is on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, so there's no danger from such major flooding as happened recently in some nearby low lying areas. We do, however, need to guard against minor flooding from burst pipes or leaking roofs or whatever, so, for example, in any of our storage areas where there's any danger of that, we make sure everything is up on blocks and covered with plastic sheeting.

HFP: Are there certain items that are unique and need special protection above and beyond the others, and why?

NMM: As a matter of museological ethics, everything from our Strad violin to the silliest plastic ukulele receives the same basic care and protection, mainly just by making sure that optimal environmental conditions are maintained in all exhibition and storage areas. Original metal parts should not be touched with bare hands, and so on.

Now if you mean which keyboard instruments I personally regard as historically most important, that is, which ones I would risk my life, or at least risk wrenching my back, for if flames were approaching – certainly our early Neapolitan harpsichord *(See cover illustration.)* would be at the top of the list. This, I am sure, is the best preserved 16th-century harpsichord in existence. Now that it's recently been restored to playing condition in its original form with just one 8′ stop, it's revelatory – a sort of time machine back to the sixteenth century and the origins of keyboard music as a distinct art. This instrument is of fundamental importance to the world's cultural heritage, as significant in its way as, say, the reemergence of an unknown Giorgone.

If I could go back to rescue a second or third – what? – perhaps the Antunes piano or the 1767 Spath *(See cover illustrations.)* But could one leave the 1607 Ruckers behind?

HFP: How do you balance the need of researchers to measure, and players to play on the instruments, versus the need to conserve? For example, some places have player auditions and keep records of the number of hours an instrument is played by a particular player.

NMM: Fortunately, from this standpoint, Vermillion is in the middle of nowhere, so the demands of visitors are mostly self regulating. Not so many people bother coming here to measure or play the instruments, but I'm delighted when they take the trouble to do so. Most of the instruments are played for only a few hours each year, if that. Of course we have official procedures, explained on the NMM's website, for making appointments well in advance and for us to make sure that unqualified people aren't allowed to do anything they shouldn't.

HFP: I know that you have had students involved in conservation work, some of whom I have met and some of whom completed degrees under your guidance. How do you assess their potential suitability and what tasks are best given to students versus ones reserved for the very experienced conservator?

NMM: In association with the University's Music Department, we have a programme for the Master of Music degree in the history of musical instruments. It's a general curriculum covering the broad range of Western and non-Western instruments of all types, and we also cover various aspects of museum work, including conservation. As part of the programme, students work at the NMM, paid through their funding as graduate assistants. So, some routine tasks, such as removing tarnish from band instruments, can be done by almost anyone. Students have their individual backgrounds and interests, which have a bearing on what they do at the NMM and on the choice of their thesis topics. A couple of students have come to our programme after having already received degrees in art conservation elsewhere, so, in fact, were already professionally trained conservators wishing to have some additional experience with musical instruments. One

of them, now a conservator in the musical instrument department of a major art museum, restored, or rather re-restored, one of our Italian harpsichords, of particular interest because it has three 8′ stops. Her thesis was partly a normal restoration report, but she also went extensively into the history of this type of harpsichord.

We've also had several students in conservation programmes come here for periods of three to six months to satisfy degree requirements of their institutions for external internships. Of course we screen these very thoroughly, relying on academic transcripts, letters of recommendation from respected colleagues, and so on. We've always had very positive experiences.

HFP: How does the museum balance the aims of conservation versus collection, from a financial and from a staffing point of view?

NMM: There are separate funding sources for these areas. The senior staff of the NMM, including myself and several curators, are faculty members of the University of South Dakota paid through permanent budget lines. Conservation in the sense of providing appropriate facilities, environmental controls, and security are also dealt with by the University, which owns and maintains our buildings. So, basic conservational needs are part of the permanent arrangements. That includes me as the resident keyboard specialist. Although the curatorial staff sometimes solicits donors to fund the purchase of an instrument, providing funds for collecting is mostly the responsibility of the NMM's Board of Trustees, which is a private non-profit foundation organized to oversee and manage the Museum in collaboration with the University. The Board also funds several additional staff positions and the graduate student assistantships. Possibly the Board's funding of acquisitions might have to become a secondary priority over the next few years as they concentrate on a project to expand the Museum's building, doubling our exhibition, storage, and working spaces. On the other hand, the Director told me when I arrived in 1991 that the glory days of collecting were over, and that was before our two Ruckers, the Streicher, the Calisto, the Silbermann, the Neapolitan harpsichord, and so on.

HFP: Is there anything you'd like to add?

NMM: As one who has devoted more than 40 years to studying, making, conserving, and writing about early keyboard instruments, I'm especially distressed by the general ignorance of harpsichordists, fortepianists, and makers about the history of their instruments. Performers with degrees from well-regarded university or conservatory programmes in historical performance, sometimes even faculty members, will arrive here to play a concert and, for example, have no idea what a short octave is. Everyone should do their homework. One way to start would be to consult the NMM's website, at www.nmmusd.org, which includes a complete list of our early keyboard instruments, with photos and additional information about many of them.

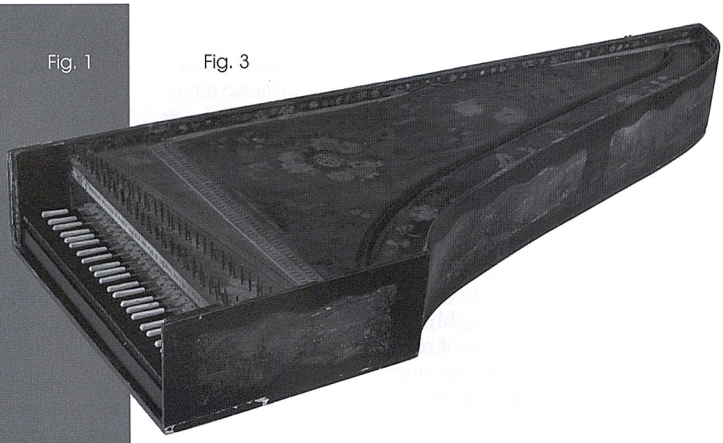

Fig. 1 Harpsichord by Andreas Ruckers the Elder, Antwerp, 1643; ravalé in France about 1730. NMM 10000; ex coll. Sheridan Germann, Boston; purchase funds gift of Margaret L. Sletwold Estate and Arne B. and Jeanne F. Larson Fund, 2000; photo by Bill Willroth, Sr.

Fig. 2 Harpsichord by Giacomo Ridolfi, Rome, about 1660-1690. NMM 4657; purchase funds given by Margaret Ann and Hubert H. Everist, Sioux City, Iowa, 1989; photo by Simon Spicer.

Fig. 3. Harpsichord by Nicolas Dufour, Paris, 1683. NMM 5943; Rawlins fund, 1996; photo by J. Koster.

Fig. 4. Harpsichord by José Calisto, Portugal, 1780. NMM 6204; Rawlins fund, 1999; photo by Bill Willroth, Sr.

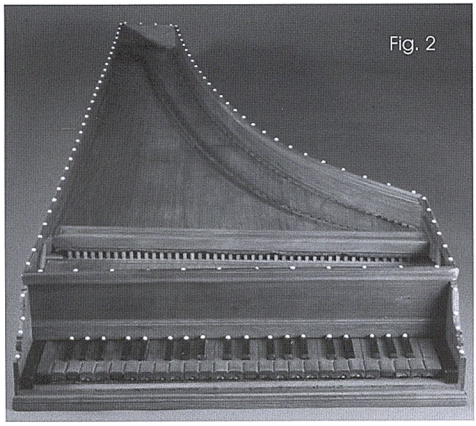

Fig. 5. Spinet by Johann Heinrich Silbermann, Strasbourg, 1785. NMM 6205; Rawlins fund, 1999; photo by J. Koster.

Fig. 6. Clavichord by Henric Johan Söderström, Stockholm, 1815. NMM 13501; purchase funds gift of Christabel Gough, New York, and friends, in memory of Hugh Gough, 2007; photo by J. Koster.

Fig. 7. Grand piano by Nannette Streicher und Sohn, Vienna, 1829. NMM 10298; purchase funds gift of Tom and Cindy Lillibridge, Bonesteel, South Dakota, 2003; photo Bill Willroth, Sr..