The following comprises the text of a lecture given by Dr. Geoffrey Lancaster AM FAHA, on Friday, 12 May 2017, at the Perth Concert Hall, within the context of the ‘Connections’: WA State Heritage & History Conference.

State of the Art –
The Stewart Symonds Keyboard Instrument Collection at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, at Edith Cowan University

In his introduction to *Federation: Australian Arts and Society 1901–2001*, the curator and art critic John McDonald makes the following observation: ‘Australians reserve their highest admiration for sportsmen and women, followed by entertainers and actors. Political leaders appear well down the scale of public affection, and it is further still before one encounters any artists[, musicians] or writers.’¹ Piano makers and professional concert pianists are rarely mentioned, nor consistently celebrated.

Many Australians are unaware of the complex and pervasive pianistic history that makes up a large part of our nation’s musical heritage. During the nineteenth century, for many settlers in Australia who found themselves in what must have seemed to be a cultural wasteland,

the piano became a tangible symbol of the re-establishment of a polite and ordered society…In 1843, a traveller through the wilds of western Victoria expressed astonishment at finding ‘a piano, well stocked table and a lighted fire’ in the living room of a pioneer homestead…the piano ranked beside shelter and food in the list of colonial essentials.²

During the mid-nineteenth century in Sydney, Hobart and remote new settlements, possession of a piano ranked among the marks of social gentility. Nor was the piano an essential indulgence exclusive to the wealthy middle class. It often figured prominently in working-class aspirations. In 1892, the poet, novelist and radical commentator Francis William Adams (1862–93) observed that urban tradesmen often owned ‘a small, iron-

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framed, time-payment piano, on which his daughters, returning…from the local “public school”…discoursed popular airs with a powerful manual execution’.

In the same year, (that is, in 1892), Francis Campbell Brewer (the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* between 1865 and 1877), wrote: ‘The Australians are a very musical people, and in Sydney particularly…it is not inappropriate to call Sydney the “City of Pianos”’. (*…oh dear; how things have changed…*)

Because of Australia’s wealth in the nineteenth century, and because Australia has cultural root which lie in the fertile soil of eighteenth century British culture, twenty-first-century Australia is an ark of pianos.

Currently, however, widespread ignorance often produces a devastating reality: old pianos are thrown onto the rubbish dump, or converted into writing desks, dressing tables, bookcases or bars. Such vandalism thoughtlessly destroys a wealth of historical information.

‘In the land that is a nursery for hedonistic abandon, where nothing is taken more seriously than sport, and where spiritual pleasures are subsumed both by physical ones and the accumulation of material wealth’, awareness of, let alone concern for, the preservation of pianos that survive from those that were either brought into Australia between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, or manufactured in Australia by Australian piano makers appears to be the furthest thing from the interests of most people. The gulf between the past and the present has never been wider.

Some of you here will be aware that, last year, the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, at Edith Cowan University, (commonly referred to as ‘WAAPA’) received a truly extraordinary gift – the ‘Stewart Symonds Collection’.

This collection comprises 140 historical keyboard instruments, and includes quite a few instruments of cultural significance. By way of example, the collection includes:

1. A bentside spinet by the London maker, Furley Hawkins, dated 1736 – as far as we can tell, this is the only extant instrument by this maker.

2. A rare, undated anonymous Continental square piano. This is a lightly constructed, shallow-cased instrument, lightly strung, with a small tonal output, and several mutation stops. A ‘mutation’ – in eighteenth-century German

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6 McDonald, ‘From Gallipoli to Homebush Bay’, p. 1.

writings, *Veränderung or Mutation* – alters or modifies the timbre of the sound using a mechanical device that is incorporated into the instrument, such as a ‘moderator’;\(^8\) or, as another example, an s-shaped wooden batten suspended above and following the line of the bridge, with a teased cloth covering attached to the underside that, when lowered, rests lightly on the strings (producing a characteristically ‘pizzicato’ sound. Because the scope of dynamic nuance that can be achieved through touch is limited, the sense of dynamic shading is mostly created through changes in tone colour that result from the use of mutations. Not many of this type of square piano have survived into the twenty-first century.

3. One of the five earliest square pianos by the inventor of the so-called ‘English’ square piano, Johann Christophe Zumpe (1726–90), dating from late-1766 (the year Zumpe started making square pianos).

4. One of two surviving square pianos by the Dublin maker, Robert Woffington (fl. 1773–1823).

5. Possibly the first grand piano to be made specifically as a ‘concert’ grand, by Joseph Kirkman (b. 1752), dated 1809. This instrument has extremely long scaling.

6. Two upright grand pianos by Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), dated, respectively, 1809 and 1815. Such instruments are as ‘rare as hen’s teeth’.

7. A cottage piano, made in London by Goulding, D’Almaine & Potter. The first public piano recital in Hobart Town was given on this instrument, by Vincent Wallace (1812–65). Wallace arrived in Hobart Town in 1835, and ‘settled in Sydney in January 1836 – [He was one] of the leading violinists in the orchestra accompanying [Niccolò] Paganini [1782–1840] for his Dublin concerts in…1831.’\(^9\) On Saturday, 19 March 1836, the *Sydney Gazette, and New South Wales Advertiser* referred to Vincent Wallace as ‘the Australian Paganini’.

There can be no doubt that Wallace was the most talented and brilliant musician to perform in Sydney during the 1830s.

When Wallace gave the first public concert in Hobart Town using the cottage piano by Goulding, D’Almaine & Potter, the instrument was then owned by the colonial artist and engraver, Thomas Bock (1790–1855).

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\(^10\) *Sydney Gazette, and New South Wales Advertiser*, Saturday, 19 March 1836, p. 2.
The piano came to Van Diemen’s Land on the *Tiger*, which ran aground on a sandbank in the Derwent River. Bock’s high-quality piano had to be rescued from this precarious situation.

Remarkably, the piano comes with its original piano stool.

8. The Stewart Symonds Collection contains the largest number of post-1800 Tomkison pianos in any collection in the world.

9. A Broadwood grand piano, dated 1824, originally owned by the Irish flautist, Andrew Ashe (ca 1758–1838). Ashe was the flautist in Salomon’s orchestra for Joseph Haydn’s concerts in London.


This may be the earliest surviving piano made in Tasmania during the nineteenth century.

12. And lastly, but not least (and perhaps most significantly), the Stewart Symonds Collection contains a square piano made in 1780, by the London maker, Frederick Beck (1738–1807). This instrument is the First Fleet Piano – that is, it’s the piano that surgeon George Worgan brought to Sydney Cove on board the flagship of the First Fleet, the *Sirius*, in 1788.

Stewart Symonds, is a retired interior decorator. He is now 80 years old. His keyboard instrument collection is the result of 50 years of sensitive, painstaking and intelligent acquisition, occurring predominantly during a time when no-one was remotely interested in historical keyboard instruments – in fact, during the early 1970s in Australia, the notion of performing music composed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries using instruments of the period, was, for many members of the musical profession, virtually incomprehensible. During the 1970s, some professional musicians in Australia experienced the reinvigoration of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century keyboard music through historically-inspired performances given either on replicas of, or restored seventeenth and eighteenth-century harpsichords. Some musicians dared to entertain similar expectations in relation to the late-eighteenth century piano and its repertoire – I remember that it was an exhilarating time, filled with controversy and fervent self-defence.

Whilst it’s wonderful that the Stewart Symonds Collection has found a new home at WAAPA, everyone involved is aware that the collection carries with it an enormous responsibility in relation to conservation and use; we have to respond to the collection, with posterity in mind.
Unlike some Australian universities, who have become totally absorbed by the proliferating complexities of corporate paradigms, WAAPA intends that its passion-driven preservation of rare, and culturally-significant keyboard instruments should always demonstrate one of the moral obligations of humanity: that is, to protect the works of love – after all, WAAPA is not only a community of enquirers infused with ‘a relentless spirit of creativity’, but we also subscribe to the notion that ‘learning …[should have] no end in view except its own furtherance’.

A delicate dance therefore, needs to be done in relation both to conservation and the needs of a University that hopes to use restored, functioning instruments for performance and education. Certainly, WAAPA’s desire is that the lives of students and music lovers will be transformed by the beauty of the sound of some of the instruments in the Stewart Symonds Collection, and for this to happen, some instruments need to work.

As I’m sure you’re aware, ‘to restore, or not to restore’ has long been a controversial matter. A rich crop of exegetic vegetation has flourished on the slopes of several opposing academic mountainsides, and thinking regarding conservation and restoration has undergone volcanic upheavals – sparks of controversy fly, and consensus seems nowhere to be in sight.

The eminent conservator and piano historian, Stewart Pollens, describes the situation:

In recent years there has been a spate of articles and books decrying the restoration of historic musical instruments (Barclay, 2005; Barnes, 1980; O’Brien, 2008), and a few collections have declared moratoriums on restoring their instruments because they believe that virtually any form of intervention…[not only alters the fabric of the instrument, but also] destroys historical evidence.

Personally, as a player of harpsichords and historical pianos, I suspect that such a policy is a reaction to…[some] restorations…now…[regarded as being] ruinous, that were carried out…[during the 1960s and 70s, within the context of the enthusiasms] of the [so-called ‘]early

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music[’] revival. At the other end of the spectrum…[some tertiary sector music] departments…are…[either asked,] or…[see] it…[as] their responsibility[,] to serve [either]…as…[providers of musical] entertainment[,] or [as concert-giving] fundraising…[bodies]…Some of the most active [tertiary music] departments do not…employ a…conservator[, and rely instead on]…musicians, musical instrument makers, and…[external piano technicians] to maintain their instruments in playing [order].

…[Some tertiary sector] musical instrument collections [in Australia, will] gratefully accept virtually anything as a gift[. Often,]…such instruments [not only] arrive…[but then]…remain…in [a state of] disrepair.16

In the case of the Stewart Symonds Collection, nearly every instrument in the collection is in original, but relatively poor condition, because of the unstable environment within which Stewart Symonds stored them.

Faced with such a [complex and] discouraging situation, [I find it]…surprising that…[some experts are] vehemently opposed to any and all forms of intervention. Certainly, much can be done to improve the appearance of many of…[the damaged or] neglected instruments, and[, in some instances, such instruments can be made]…playable, with [either] minimal or no compromise to their historical integrity. [For my part,] I…[don’t] advocate[, nor do I]…disapprove of the restoration of historical musical instruments…rather, I believe that each instrument, and…[the extent of restoration, should] be considered on a case-by-case basis[,] with…[thought] given to the…needs of the collection…[and of the] owner.17

I’m adamant, however, that any intervention should be undertaken by technically skilled and historically informed…[experts] who are cognizant of their ethical responsibility to preserve original material[,] and who are respectful of the maker[’]s concepts [and aesthetic parameters].18

16 Ibid., pp. 1–2.
17 Ibid., p. 2.
18 Ibid., p. 2.
'In any collection that includes the mediocre alongside the great, there is a temptation to dwell only on the masterpieces. Nevertheless, even objects of minor musical and aesthetic relevance may be of interest to historians of society or technology.'\(^{19}\) Therefore, WAAPA plans to treat every instrument in the Stewart Symonds Collection with equal care and respect.

For any musical instrument, the voyage from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries can be a perilous one – square pianos, especially, need the buoyancy of good fortune to survive,\(^{20}\) and the Stewart Symonds Collection contains 75 square pianos.

There’s no doubt that the collection provides WAAPA with several exciting possibilities. In the telling, WAAPA’s plans seem to be quite straight-forward and simple. In reality, however, some plans may take many years to reach their fulfillment. At this stage, it’s quite clear that the collection will be used for both research and for teaching.

The nature of a large part of research will be organological, investigating issues arising from design, construction, acoustic properties, classification, history, and broader cultural context (in other words, materials, sound, and history).

In relation to materials, an overlap with technology and innovation already exists: we’re currently investigating 3D printing and replication in relation to historical keyboard instrument parts. The outcomes of this pioneering research may eventually be manifested in fresh and viable contemporary approaches to restoration and making.

One of WAAPA’s plans is that instruments in the collection should be made available to qualified people for detailed study.

Another aspect of our plans for the collection, is that it should ultimately become a repository of objects that can foster the development of skills associated with instrument conservation, maintenance and restoration. Within the context of conversations that I’ve had with eminent restorers, instrument makers, and curators in the Northern Hemisphere, I hear a consistently recurring comment: no young people want to learn the skills necessary for instrument restoration, making and conservation. Without exception, these Northern Hemisphere master remark that ‘when they die, their knowledge will vanish with them.’ The lament is pervasive.

WAAPA intends to address this problem, by creating contexts within which selected students can learn from master restorers and makers. The hope is that, eventually, we’ll be able to source expertise equivalent to the Northern Hemisphere’s best, from within Australia – this is one way that WAAPA might create a new (for want of a better word) ‘industry’ that is a focal point for an emerging need.

In relation to teaching, WAAPA plans to utilise instruments in the collection that are in playing order as teaching tools, within both pre-tertiary, and tertiary contexts.

Students will learn to develop the specialised techniques necessary to play historical keyboard instruments.

Intimately linked with keyboard technique is research into, and the application in performance, of so-called ‘historically informed performance practice’. This term refers to the conventions of performance that appear to have been prevalent among knowledgeable performers prior to our time, including those customs that were so commonly understood that they were not notated, as well as aspects of performance that were too subtle to notate. Historically informed performance practice provides ‘a vital key to our understanding...[and interpretation of the] incomplete record represented by musical notation’...[and enables a musical score to be read, understood and interpreted] in a richly contextualised way’. Issues that arise from historically informed performance practice are, for example, accentuation, articulation, tempo, tempo manipulation and rubato, ornamentation, and the use of continuously-raised dampers over many bars of changing harmony. Each of these issues is influenced both by the attack and decay characteristics, and the resonance of the sound of historical keyboard instruments. The restoration into playing order of selected instruments will establish a keyboard ‘laboratory’ within which students and professional musicians might explore the interpretative and performative ramifications of historically informed performance. In this way, musicians and audiences will be enabled to better understand the music that was written for keyboard instruments during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Restored originals in the collection will be made available to approved musicians within the context of restricted access (in other words, a restored original will not be ‘played to death’).

In order to broaden the scope of the keyboard instrument resources at WAAPA, it is envisaged that modern copies of historical instruments made by acclaimed master makers, restored originals, and instruments not found in the Stewart Symonds Collection will be acquired – ultimately, WAAPA plans to have a representative example of every keyboard instrument that has ever been (this includes pipe organs as well). The Stewart Symonds Collection will act as stimulation for further acquisition.

The collection will also act as a catalyst for educating audiences. The first step in our plans has already been taken: a few weeks ago, we brought the eminent square piano restorer, Lucy Coad, to Perth from the UK. With her help, we’ve created a list of 42 instruments; these instruments should (in some cases) never be touched – because they represent important and irreplaceable sources of information; some instruments on the list represent possibilities for restoration into playing order. At the very least, all of the

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collection’s instruments need careful cleaning, in order to remove dead insects, rat droppings, and mould.

By way of summary: in the long run, WAAPA hopes that its stewardship of the collection will result in Perth’s becoming one of the major centres for organological research and historically informed performances using historical instruments. It is hoped that the interaction between the collection and academics, musicians and music lovers will not only lead to a greater understanding of our musical heritage, but also, to new and ever-more-probing questions.23

WAAPA is now a part of the legacy of the makers of the keyboard instruments in the Stewart Symonds Collection, and of course, the story is far from over. The collection reveals a rich and worthy tradition of musical instrument making. As we all here know – and in words attributed to the composer, Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) – tradition is not worshipping the ashes, but, rather, maintaining the fire.