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Correspondence should be addressed to the

Administrator

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Public History Research Unit (PHRU)

History Programme,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences *Te Tari Tumu Korero*,

The University of Waikato, *Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*.

Private Bag 3105

New Zealand

Or by electronic mail to: phruadmin@waikato.ac.nz

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Introduction

Instrument or Object?

The New Zealand Piano on Display

The piano is rather a unique display item in the museum or the historic house. Firstly, whether an upright or a grand, the piano is an imposing, substantial object that occupies significant space within a setting and immediately demands attention because of its proportions. This object has a history, a story to tell that, where the provenance of the piano is known, provides a direct, tangible link with the past. Secondly, the piano is an aesthetic object, finely crafted and giving pleasure to the eye through the grain of the wood, the sheen of the polish, the black and white chessboard of the keyboard, the intricacy of the carved legs or marquetry inlay, the elegance of its shape and design. Finally, it is a musical instrument designed to produce sound and thus has the potential to delight the ear as well as the eye. Indeed, sight and sound are not the only senses to be satisfied by the instrument. The musty perfume of old wood and the sharp tang of lacquer entice the nose, while the satin wood and cool ivory keys please the fingers. It is through touch, the interplay between the body and the instrument, with hands on the keys and feet on the pedals, that a piano is given voice.

I believe that it is possible for the piano on display to engage the public on a number of sensory and intellectual levels and this paper explores some of these possibilities and challenges by considering the case of the colonial New Zealand piano. During the course of research for a book on the colonial New Zealand piano I have had occasion to visit museums and historic homes from Kaitaia to Invercargill and have encountered many different forms of the piano on display, or, on occasion,

hidden pianos.¹ I entered these heritage sites in some ways as two different people, with very different agendas, needs and responses. My declared and overt reason for visiting New Zealand's museums and historic houses was for research. This required my academic training and analytical skills to be at the fore, as I raided archives, questioned curators, and took copious notes. Yet, I also entered these heritage sites as a member of the public and a pianist, keen to reach out and touch the past. To see, and on occasion hear and play, beautifully preserved instruments filled my heart with joy, sensory excitement, and a profound sense of immediate, personal connection to the pianos I encountered.

Indeed, as I reflect on my interaction with the pianos in New Zealand's museums and historic houses, I would have to say that my personal, musical self was always to the fore in these spaces. Such was my delight in the pianos I saw and played, that I sometimes failed in my academic task of careful note taking, frequently having to make a second, more strictly research focused visit. This paper reflects that sense of more personal connection to the museums and historic houses that I visited. Much of this is written as a personal narrative, recording my feelings and reactions to the pianos I responded to because of their aesthetic beauty and melodious sounds. However, I am also an academic, and therefore want to locate my experiences within public history discourse, meditating on and analysing my responses. The voices which therefore intertwine in this paper are perhaps best described by Wordsworth in his 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads', when he wrote of 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...recollected in tranquillity'.² This paper is a dialogue between feeling and reflection, sensory engagement and academic analysis, the pianist and the researcher, the member of the public and the scholar.

My experiences of the piano on display connect with three inter-linked strands of public history discourse and practice: material culture, sensory engagement with the past, and the role of heritage sites. Constance B Schulz writes that one of the 'common *themes* in public history' is an 'insistence that the primary

sources for understanding the past are not limited to the written word but encompass buildings, sites, landscapes, artifacts, orally transmitted memories, visual materials, and most recently, electronic records'.³ Thinking about and accessing history through the medium of the piano is thus consistent with growing interest in material culture as a focal point of historical research. American historian Simon Bronner writes that:

Material culture is made up of tangible things crafted, shaped, altered, and used across time and across space. It is inherently personal and social, mental and physical. It is art, architecture, food, clothing, and furnishing. But more so, it is the weave of these objects in the everyday lives of individuals and communities. It is the migration and settlement, custom and practice, production and consumption that is...history and culture. It is the gestures and processes that extend ideas and feelings into three-dimensional form.⁴

During the past two decades prominent New Zealand historians have emphasised that material culture is a necessary and profitable avenue of intellectual enquiry. In 1990 Jock Phillips wrote that 'that gaps in the history of material culture are large. We know so little about our ways of life, our popular culture – the way we have dressed, the foods we have eaten, the sounds we have inhabited, the games we have played.'⁵ Likewise, in his influential 2003 essay Peter Gibbons declared that 'material culture is the appropriate primary focus for macrohistorical investigation: the histories of what New Zealanders have consumed, histories of the availability of goods and histories of the means to acquire goods'.⁶ Several major studies, such as Barbara Brookes' investigation of the New Zealand home, Caroline Daley's analysis of the New Zealand body at leisure, Bronwyn Labrum, Fiona McKergow and Stephanie Gibson's discussion of the cultural significance of fashion and Bronwyn Dalley and Bronwyn Labrum's collection of essays on aspects of social and cultural history as diverse as gardens, textual museums and the surveying and naming of landscape, have demonstrated the nuanced possibilities of the history of material culture.⁷ This meditation on the piano on display in New Zealand museums and

historic homes is likewise grounded in a belief that objects have a significant role to play in attempting to access the lived experiences of the past.

The opening section of Fiona McKergow's analysis of dress and material life in 1940s and 1950s New Zealand is particularly pertinent to my discussion:

Artefacts – those fragments of material life from the past – have the power to fascinate by the way they look, feel and sound, even by the way they smell. The pleasure of working with artefacts is in their ability to satisfy an urge for historical immediacy. The appeal is both imaginative and experiential.⁸

My consideration of the piano on display in museums and historical houses reflects a similar belief that the 'examination of material evidence...enables the historian [or the museum visitor] to "step inside" the past' by tapping into the senses.⁹ The senses have increasingly become an object of cultural and historical enquiry. Commenting on what he terms the 'sensual revolution in the humanities', David Howes argues that 'the senses are the media through which we experience and make sense of gender, colonization and material culture' and that research into the senses provides both 'evocative accounts of corporeal life' and insight into 'social ideologies'.¹⁰ Because it is first and foremost a musical instrument, the piano is particularly suited to considerations of sound, a medium through which historians can attempt to answer Bruce R. Smith's question: 'How to listen to history?'¹¹

Museums and historic houses are particularly rich sites in which to 'step inside' the past in a variety of sensory ways, possessing what Gavin McLean terms 'street level chemistry', the capacity to create a symbiotic bond between past and present through the enduring power of material forms and historical resonances and memories.¹² Public historian and curator George W. McDaniel writes that heritage sites such as museums and historic houses can 'bring history to people in both tangible and abstract ways and thereby meet a deeply felt human need.'¹³ Of particular relevance to my discussion is McDaniel's emphasis on the willingness of

curators and custodians 'to develop site interpretations that appeal to a range of senses in addition to the intellect'.¹⁴

Because the primary purpose of the piano is to be played, the instrument can offer visitors to heritage sites a hands-on, interactive experience. If the instrument has been carefully preserved or lovingly restored, visitors to a museum or historic house can enter the aural world of the past through listening to the piano being played or by actually producing the music themselves. Such experiences are relatively rare in New Zealand because they are dependent on so many variables. The delicate inner mechanisms of the piano are threatened by damp, dust and age and require regular attention and tuning, and thus considerable expense, to continue to fulfil their primary purpose. Understandably, some museums and historic houses with functioning instruments are consequently reluctant to allow visitors to touch pianos. Should the museum or historic house be generous enough to allow the visitor a hands-on experience, there is then the question of the ability of the visitor to produce music, rather than just random sounds, from the instrument.

Three particularly memorable experiences of being transported back in time through playing a beautifully preserved instrument stand out from my piano travels and research. In the dining room of the Elms Mission House in Tauranga sits a William Allen square piano. Since its creation in 1835, this gleaming mahogany instrument has been a treasured possession of the Brown and Maxwell families, and, thanks to the recent ministrations of Peter Downey, its keys still release delicate, harmonious sounds. Visiting the Elms in July 2008 I was honoured to be given the opportunity to play the instrument in its original setting. The piano is associated with a particularly moving and well-documented occasion on 28 April 1864. Several military officers from the 43rd Regiment, Lieutenant Hill of H.M.S. *Curacoa* and Captain Hamilton of H.M.S. *Esk*, were invited to dine at the Elms on the evening before the Battle of Gate Pa. After dinner and prayers, Christina Brown sat at the piano to play, everyone joining in to sing 'Abide With Me'.¹⁵ By the next evening all

of the officers were dead, only the surgeon surviving.¹⁶ Seated on the leather stool I too played the haunting melody of the hymn and in that moment not only understood the past with my intellect, but experienced the past viscerally.



Figures 1 and 2: William Allen Piano, 1835,
Elms Mission House, Tauranga.
Photographed by K. Moffat with kind
permission of the Elms.

In 2009 I was fortunate enough to go on a tour of Olveston House in Dunedin. Entering the drawing room my eyes were immediately drawn to the gleaming Steinway grand given to Dorothy Theomin by her parents as a birthday gift in 1906, placed in the sweep of a bay window from which the stained glass faces of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Tennyson smile benignly. Visually, the piano is an aesthetic delight. The rich, brown mahogany case is polished to a mirror-like finish and reflects the deep red of the brocade curtains, the twinkle of the French crystal and silk chandelier, the intense green of a jade Cantonese sceptre and the many works of art that adorn the walls, such as Frances Hodgkins' *La Robe Rose*. The curving body, scroll-craved legs and ivory and black keyboard likewise please the eye with their lines and interplay of colour. At a visual level the graceful, ordered room, with

everything perfectly in its place, made me think of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra. As a 'show room' which deliberately recreates the atmosphere of early twentieth century gentility without any of the clutter of actual inhabitation, a book left open, a tea cup half drunk, the room has become a carefully staged artifice, a 'hypereality' which 'substitut[es] the signs of the real for the real'.¹⁷



Figure 3: Steinway Grand, 1906, Olveston House, Dunedin.
Photograph kindly provided by Olveston House.

Yet, as with the Elms' dining room, my experience of Olveston was not limited to the static and the visual. In accordance with Dorothy Theomin's final wishes, the piano is kept perfectly in tune. I was allowed to sit at the keyboard. I smelt that distinctive perfume of wood, laced with the faint aroma of lemon polish, the signature of a well tended instrument. My hands caressed the satiny wood and cool keys. I started to play Franz Liszt's *Consolation 3*. The first deep D flat resonated around the room. The bass arpeggios effortlessly supported the treble melody. Each note rang out, pure and true. The music connected me, through time, to Dorothy

Theomin's eighteenth birthday in 1906, when she played her parents' gift to her to a room filled with friends and family sipping champagne.

Not all heritage sites are fortunate enough to possess an original instrument in its original setting. Yet there is also a charm in playing a piece of music on a more recent addition to an historic house. Here the music acts as the conduit between past and present, providing a link between generations. Of all the pianos I played while researching the instrument's place in the cultural life of colonial New Zealand, the one that touched my emotions the most was the Robert Meissner instrument in the Butler Point homestead, which I played in March 2008. Unlike most historic houses, such as the Elms and Olveston, this house is not a simulacrum. It is a home which continues to be lived in and enjoyed and has a consequent naturalness and warmth. Situated on the shores of Mangonui Harbour, the house was built by the whaler Captain Bulter for his wife Eliza. The home was a haven of refinement and culture to those coming ashore after months at sea. Eliza Griswold Williams, the wife of the captain of the American whaler *Florida*, stayed in the house in 1860 and recorded in her diary: 'I enjoyed myself very much while I was there. They are a very nice Family, extremely kind and affectionate...They all sing, dance and play on the piano.'¹⁸

Eliza's original piano is no longer in the homestead, but the current owners, Dr and Mrs Ferguson, have ensured that music continues to live on in the house. A square piano manufactured by Lyon in ca. 1820 and brought to New Zealand in the 1840s by the Haines family of Albertland sits in the dining room. Its elaborately carved central pedal, dark wood, and fretted front panel through which red brocade gleams is of a similar period to the instrument Eliza Butler played. But my greatest joy was playing the Miessner instrument in the front parlour. Manufactured in Leipzig in ca. 1890, it has been in Mrs Ferguson's family since the 1890s, originally owned by her grandmother Gertrude Bell, née Robinson. The instrument is a work of art, with ornate brass candelabra, inlaid front panels embossed with flowers and

bows picked out in pale gold and dark red, and side panels carved with scrolls and birds. Kept perfectly in tune, the piano's ivory keys ring out clear and true as I depress them. Looking out at Mangonui Harbour I could almost hear the rippling melodies and toe-tapping rhythms of the songs and dances Eliza Butler played on her cottage piano to entertain visiting whalers and their wives and the grand opening chords of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* stuck by Gertrude Robinson. Vicariously I was living the history I was researching and bringing to life.

For me, the most poignant and emotionally involving experiences occur when I am able to play beautifully preserved instruments. Here I am not just an onlooker, absorbed in the visual dimensions of an object or cast in the more passive role of listener and audience, but a performer, experiencing the past through my tactile interaction with the instrument. The performative and aural possibilities of the piano on display are particularly well understood by the proprietors of Whittaker's Musical Museum on Waiheke Island. Mr and Mrs Whittaker certainly practise what Bronwyn Labrum describes as the curatorial ability to 'think visually', but they add to this a capacity which I term 'thinking aurally'.¹⁹ The pianos in their museum do delight the eye and visitors are welcome to stroll through the museum admiring their beauty. Indeed, many of the instruments are visually compelling. An 1881 upright crafted by Dreaper of Liverpool is a piano made for display as much as performance. Heavily influenced by the 1880s British craze for Egyptian architecture the ebony case is decorated with inset Egyptian symbols, gold sphinxes and temple pillars for legs. However, the underlying purpose of these instruments is to be played, many of them lovingly restored by Mr Whittaker, and once a day the Whittakers also perform an hour long show on their instruments, interweaving commentary on the pianos, organs and woodwind instruments with musical interludes.

The stately grand 1897 Bechstein concert grand that was reputedly brought to New Zealand in 1904 by the touring Polish pianist Padereski immediately captured

my attention. This nine foot instrument is gleaming black with an elaborately carved music stand. When Mr Whittaker's fingers ripple over the white keys the rich, sonorous voice of the instrument emerges as the long, thin strings, strung at high tension, resonate against the opened lid. A 1925 Collard and Collard seven foot grand combines the prestige of the grand with the mechanical advances of the early twentieth century. If the performer lacks the skill to play, he or she pumps the pedals attached to the pianola motor causing the roll of music to turn and the keys to play. While Mr Whittaker made Rimsky Korsakov's *The Flight of the Bumblebee* sound effortless, my own attempt was sadly lacking, my pedaling so slow and erratic that my rendition had more in common with a jerky record. As in the Elms, Olveston and Butler Point, the Whittaker's generosity in allowing visitors to play the instruments adds an additional, experiential dimension to the heritage experience.

Not all pianos in New Zealand museums and historic places are able to engage with the public in the multi-dimensional, multi-sensory way of the Olveston, Elms, and Whittakers instruments. The enemies of time, neglect, and damp have damaged some instruments beyond repair. Yet these pianos still have stories to tell and they continue to delight as things of beauty and statements of craftsmanship. One such instrument is to be found in the Broadgreen House in Nelson. Visiting the historic house in January 2008, I was enchanted with the beauty of this Broadwood cottage piano, the dark tones of the mahogany wood relieved by the red and gold cloth panels above the keyboard and the gold scrolls around the manufacturer's plaque.²⁰ I was told that the instrument was brought to Nelson in 1842 by the Saxton family and that I could find out more about the piano and its owners by visiting the Nelson Provincial Museum. The Museum yielded a treasure-trove of information in the form of John Waring Saxton's diaries. I copied out many of the extracts and went back to Broadgreen House to read over them in the presence of the piano, the instrument forming a tangible bridge between my world and that of a mid-nineteenth century settler:

4 September 1849: 'Overtures to Masaniello, Bohemian Girl etc. Mr Bell was surprised when he found me play the bass at sight. The duets passed off brilliantly during which he and Mr Duppa were in such raptures that it was quite absurd and I could scarcely parry the outrageous compliments.'²¹

Viewing this piano was also the catalyst for a new research direction. Many of the pianos in historic homes belonged to and were performed by women. The Elms, Olverston and Butler Point pianos are cases in point. A perception that the domestic piano was essentially a female recreation dominates the historical record. Charles Hursthouse's advice to 'any fair emigrant to take a piano with her as part of her battery of charms' in his 1861 *The New Zealand Emigrants Bradshaw* is typical of the nineteenth century association between women and the instrument.²² Recent historians concur, Caroline Dayley's research on gender in Taradale highlighting that girls were encouraged to play the piano because it 'reinforced the feminine values of being domestic and decorative'.²³ Yet, my research, inspired by Saxton's piano and journal, has revealed a long history of masculine piano playing in New Zealand domestic contexts.²⁴

My investigations also challenge another prevailing myth of the piano, that, as Max Weber contended, 'in its whole musical essence the piano is a domestic instrument of the bourgeoisie'.²⁵ Humphrey McQueen went even further, interpreting the popularity of the piano in settlers colonies such as Australia as symbolic of the triumph of middle class values and the 'oppression of the lower orders'.²⁶ Once again it was the story behind a piano on display in a museum that was instrumental in provoking me to question this perception, aided by New Zealand historian Claire Tonybee's assertion that by 1900 'a high proportion of working-class homes put a strong emphasis on musical entertainment', often around the piano.²⁷

When I visited the Wanganui Riverboat Centre in September 2008 I was captivated by the Broadwood upright piano on display. Its keys may be chipped and worn with use, and it may only be able to produce a discordant muffle, but its wood

is still glossy and the scrolling vine fretwork on the front of the instrument remains testimony to the skillful craftsmanship of the most prestigious of British manufacturers. As with the Saxton piano, this instrument has a clear provenance and an engaging story to communicate. Rather than the pathos of a last supper or the grandeur of a birthday ball, the Broadwood is a tangible reminder of the tenacity of the New Zealand pioneering spirit and the appeal of the piano to New Zealanders from all classes, backgrounds and economic situations. When Oswald Bartrum transported his wife's piano to their home in the remote Mangapura Valley in 1917 he had to call on the assistance of friends:

I think that must have been the oddest load that ever went up the track. We got two strong poles and eight of us set off with it, four of us carrying and four waiting to take their turn when the others got tired. I remember Pat Mowat could play the piano, too, and when we got near anyone's camp or passed a gang of navies, we would come to a halt and Pat would pound away at the keys and give us some music. We sure had fun.²⁸



Figure 4: Broadwood Cottage Piano, c.1880, Wanganui Riverboat Museum.
Photographed by K. Moffat with kind permission of the museum.

A returned serviceman and struggling farmer, Bartrum could not afford many luxuries for his family. But the family piano was of such importance that he ensured its safe passage up the Whanganui River and refused to sell the instrument even when the family were forced to leave their profitless farm several years later. A letter to the editor of the *Evening Post* in 1887 commented approvingly on the 'well furnished' homes of 'working men', noting, in particular, that there was a 'piano nearly in all', while manufacturers' hire purchase agreements from the 1890s-1920s likewise illustrate that the piano was a beloved companion of New Zealanders from all walks of life, from nuns to publicans, miners to schoolteachers, waitresses to farmers, factory workers to politicians.²⁹

Not all pianos on display have such a clear provenance as that of Bartrum's instrument, but, perhaps controversially, I contend that pianos with an apocryphal rather than literal back-story can fulfil an important myth-making function. Purists may argue that to attach a story to an instrument without such provenance is a distortion or corruption of the historical record. I argue that we need symbols and myths to attach us to our past. Such symbols may stretch fact, but in so doing may point to deeper or wider historical truths. As I write this, I am thinking, in particular, of a piano on display in the Dargaville Museum. In a recreation of a colonial parlour, sits an oak upright piano with brass candelabra, elaborately carved legs, and an inset marquetry design above the keyboard. The name of the manufacturer is not on display, but a note claims that 'Katherine Mansfield used this piano when learning to play'. A sepia tinted photograph of Mansfield adorns the top of the instrument, next to a bowl of paua and a red-bound edition of *The Nation's Music*. The museum does not possess any documentation to prove that the instrument was actually Mansfield's, it may or may not be her actual instrument. But part of me asks whether this matters? Mansfield was a pianist and many of her stories reflect her love of music and consciousness of the symbolic potential of piano playing, such as the magical evocation of the haunting strains of a piano played in the 'spring, when

Bengel's violet patch just inside the gate was blue with flowers', that opens 'Weak Heart'.³⁰ Mansfield lived, she wrote, she played the piano. Let the imagination be excited into allowing a connection between Mansfield and this piano.

Likewise, the French piano that is the focal point of the entrance display in the Cromwell Museum features not because of its Central Otago provenance or its individual story. Rather, the piano acts as a signifier, the physical emblem of a collective history of socialising round the piano in hotels and pubs. The elaborately carved 1867 instrument, manufactured by Her. Alexandre and Co, 30 Rue Marie-Antoinette, Paris, stands to the right of an old-fashioned wooden bar lined with bottles of John Quin and Co Guinness and Stout, Cromwell Brewery Beer, Thomson's Genuine Hop Ale, Queen Anne Scotch Whiskey, Superior Pale Ale and the Castle Brewery Hop Bitters. An enlarged advertisement on the wall next to the bar display promises that the Cromwell Hotel 'combines all the comforts of the home with the conveniences of a hotel' and that patrons will be able to enjoy billiards and pool, and 'Balls, Concerts and Theatrical Performances'. While there is no archival evidence to suggest that the Alexandre piano was the actual instrument located in the taproom of the Cromwell Hall, again the display points to a wider historical truth: the centrality of the piano to public and well as private amusements.

The Cromwell Museum display is of particular value and significance because it points to an aspect of the piano's history that is often ignored by heritage displays which focus on the domestic instrument: the presence of the piano in a variety of public spaces, some of them refined, cultural spaces and some of them rowdy, social spaces. The kind of bar entertainment, lubricated by a generous intake of beer or gin, that may have taken place in the environment conjured up by the museum display is evoked in an 1870 column in the *Otago Witness*. In Dunedin's Jolly Dogs' bar, as in the Cromwell display, music and alcohol are the two forms of entertainment:

Most there were smoking, all were drinking...that's part of the amusement...Presently a young gentleman, in a cheese-cutter cap and a muffler, rose, and signified that he would oblige the company with a song. 'Ring the Bell, Watchman,' he'd give 'em. 'Ear! 'ear! 'ear! – Rattle, thump, stamp, stamp, stamp, and a grand opening crash on the piano.³¹

The Alexandre piano in the Cromwell museum is also representative of the many pianos devoid of archival records regarding who bought, played and loved the instruments. However, these pianos still speak to those who care for them in museums and historic homes, and to those who view them in these heritage spaces. They speak through their craftsmanship, the grain of the wood, the aesthetics of their design. The careful preservation of many pianos is in itself testimony to the important place they occupied in people's lives, both as examples of what Pierre Bourdieu terms 'cultural capital' and as beloved objects that provided performers with pleasure and emotional release.³² However, the stories that pianos without provenance communicate are not about those who owned the instruments. Rather, these pianos speak of those who designed and crafted these enduring examples of material culture.

One such instrument is the Charles Begg piano on display at the Otago Settlers Museum. Visiting the Museum in February 2008, my eyes were immediately drawn to the glowing rimu casing of the instrument, crafted by Begg in 1863. A plaque next to the display informs the visitor that the piano won the Bronze Medal at the first New Zealand Exhibition, held in Dunedin in 1864. The piano is aesthetically striking, with the swirls and knots of the heart rimu creating a dappled patina on the casing and a sense of layers and depth. Begg did not employ elaborate carvings, but let the wood speak for itself. For this instrument represents an early experiment in creating a local piano out of indigenous timbers, rather than relying on instruments imported from Australia and Britain.³³

Prior to his arrival in Dunedin in 1861 Begg had run a successful piano manufacturing business in Aberdeen that produced several hundred pianos each

year. Attracted to New Zealand timbers, particularly rimu and kauri, he experimented with these woods, although he struggled to construct the case without a veneer-cutting machine. In spite of his success at the New Zealand exhibition, Begg concluded that the lack of appropriate equipment made the enterprise too difficult, time-consuming and expensive and he 'decided to relinquish manufacturing and devote himself to the importation and sale of pianos and musical instruments in general'.³⁴ The early history and challenges faced by piano manufacturers is contained in and evoked by this tangible, material object.

On occasion, less is known about the production history of a particular instrument. Yet, even without textual records, much can be gleaned about the manufacture of an instrument from the object itself. In December 2010 I spent a delightful afternoon at the Te Awamutu Museum. Part of a display evoking aspects of domestic life in New Zealand, a Hoffman and Sons piano, ca. 1905, takes pride of place beside a Baby Daisy vacuum cleaner, an ornate fireplace and a delicate white nightdress. The Museum archive contains the record of the gift of the instrument to the Museum, but nothing of the piano's earlier history.³⁵ Like many aging pianos, this instrument is only capable of producing a thin, discordant thunk when the keys are depressed. Yet it can communicate in other ways.

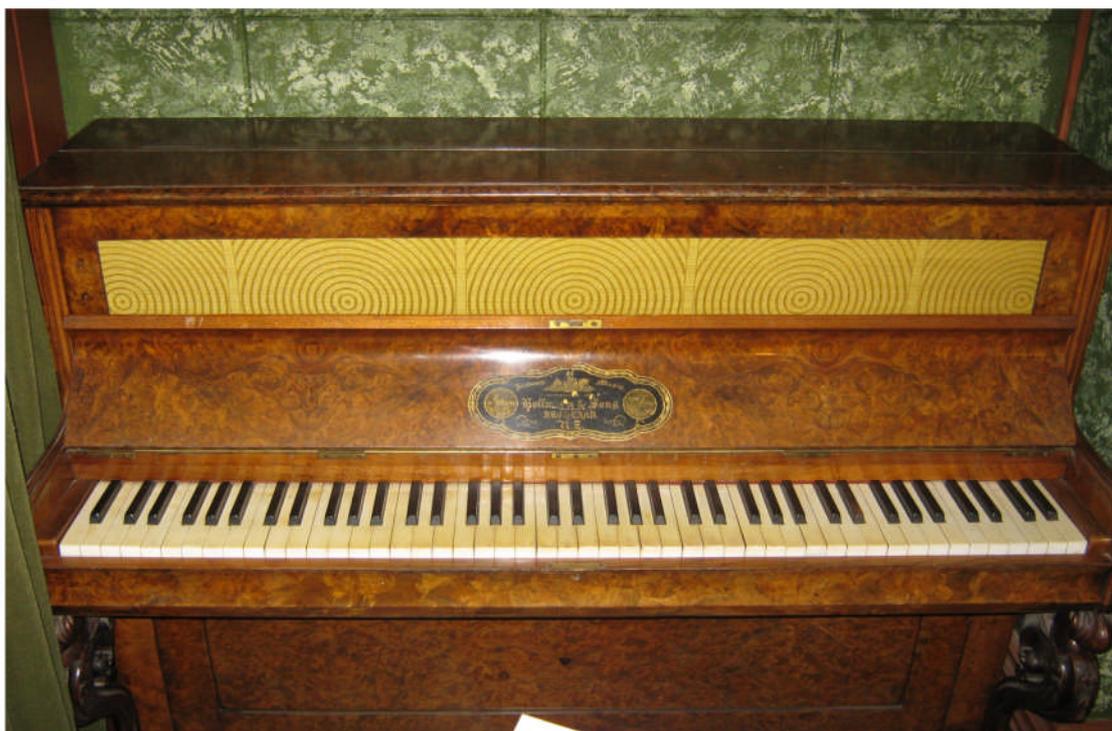


Figure 5: Hoffman and Sons Upright Piano, ca 1897, Te Awamutu Museum. 20

Photographed by K. Moffat with kind permission of the museum.

The rich, mottled kauri casing, polished to a high gloss, the ornate, curved legs carved with leaves, and the concentric circles embroidered on pale gold fabric in the panel above the keyboard speak of the designer and manufacturer's aesthetic vision and craftsmanship. In particular, the manufacturer's label on the inside of the keyboard lid reveals something about the hybrid nature of the piano in colonial New Zealand: both an imported instrument redolent of British cultural traditions, and yet also an object that New Zealand manufacturers increasingly wanted to make their own. Gold letters on a black background proudly declare that Hoffman and Sons of Auckland, New Zealand, was established in 1897. The manufacturer claims old world credentials through a declared association with the Academy of Music (located in London) and an embossed Royal Cipher of a lion and a unicorn. Yet, either side of these markers of British affiliation and expertise are two circular images which proclaim a different lineage for the instrument. To the left, two cloak-clad Māori figures pose in front of a cone shaped volcano, its size and shape reminiscent of Mount Taranaki. To the right, a Māori canoe paddles down a river lined with ponga trees and ferns, while in the background a puff of volcanic ash drifts from the top of the mountain. Hoffman utilises not only native timber but also a series of cultural clichés to give his piano a New Zealand 'flavour'. Māori were certainly interested in the musical possibilities of the piano, with Mrs Tautari (herself trained by an English governess) teaching the pupils of Taumarere school for Māori children to play the instrument in the 1870s and 1880s and Kuini Te Tau recalling that her family home in Waikouaiti was the centre for family and community gatherings in the early twentieth century because 'we had the piano, you see'.³⁶ But Hoffman's association of Māori reverts to Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage in an exotic environment.

My love of pianos, as instruments, aesthetic objects and enduring witnesses and links to the past is evident in this paper. I thus lament that not all of my encounters with pianos in museums and historic houses were with treasured objects

on display. Perhaps my most unusual encounter with a piano was in the Alexandra Settlers Museum, where I saw a shiny black Mignon upright piano, thought to be the first instrument brought to Earnsclough, in the women's bathroom, sandwiched between two organs. I must confess that I found this interaction rather humorous, reflecting with some sympathy on the difficulties of storing such a large, cumbersome object. At least this instrument was still visible to the public, albeit in a way that highlights that pianos are not always regarded as historic treasures, but as unwieldy, bulky nuisances.

My deepest sympathy is reserved for the shrouded ghosts that inhabit the bowels of museum basements or storage units. Their music long gone, these pianos do not even retain the ability to please the eye. Such is the current fate of the first piano to be brought to New Zealand, Elizabeth Mair's Broadwood square piano, which arrived in Pahia in 1827.³⁷ In 1962 the instrument was donated to the Treaty House at Waitangi.³⁸ Restored in the Auckland War Memorial Museum, the piano was displayed for a while in a recreation of Mrs Busby's drawing room.³⁹ However, it now resides in storage at the Waitangi National Trust Archive. Its ivory keys may no longer release tuneful melodies, but the glory of its mahogany and rosewood casing, tapered legs and ornamental fretwork, featuring scrolls and fleurs-de-lis, remain as aesthetically pleasing as ever. Yet these beauties are perpetually hidden by layers of thick cloth.⁴⁰ The realist in me rationalises that such careful storage is necessary for the preservation of an object perhaps too large to exhibit. The romantic in me wants to fling back the covers and put the instrument back on display so that Elizabeth Mair may be celebrated, beyond the grave, through the power of memory invested in a tangible object.

My personal journey through New Zealand's museums and historic houses confirms the insight and relevance of public history discourse regarding the multiple ways in which the past can be accessed and understood. The heritage sites I visited were themselves living reminders of the past, spatial history books that I was able to

'step inside' in order to experience McLean's 'street level chemistry'.⁴¹ Just as Schulz, Bonner and McKergow articulate, I was likewise able to connect to the past through material culture. The pianos I encountered, as enduring artifacts that had been played and loved and preserved through time, are visible markers of the past that endure in the present and that conveyed to me a profound sense of the immediacy of history. As a musical instrument, the piano likewise stirred my senses. I could literally 'listen to history', to use Bruce Smith's phrase, in the heritage sites in which colonial pianos have been preserved and restored.⁴² My eyes delighted in the shape, design and wood of the instruments, while my nose inhaled the aroma of lacquer and polish. Most memorable of all, at times I was able to sit at the keyboard and play, interacting with the past in a powerful sensory and emotive way.

KIRSTINE MOFFAT

NOTES

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- ⁷ Barbara Brookes, ed., *At Home in New Zealand: History, Houses, People* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2000); Caroline Daley, *Leisure and Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900-1960* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003); Bronwyn Labrum, Fiona McKergow and Stephanie Gibson, eds., *Looking Flash: Clothing in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007); Bronwyn Dalley and Bronwyn Labrum, eds., *Fragments: New Zealand Social and Cultural History* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000).
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- ¹¹ Bruce R. Smith, 'Tuning into London c. 1600', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Bruce R. Smith (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p.128. See also: *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004); Mark M. Smith, ed., *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Ros Brandt, Michelle Duffy and Dolly MacKinnon, *Hearing Places: Sound, Place, Time, Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007).
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- ¹³ George W. McDaniel, 'At Historic Houses and Buildings: Connecting Past, Present, and Future', in *Public History*, p.234.
- ¹⁴ McDaniel, p.245.
- ¹⁵ Bradney Williams, Interview with Alice Maxwell, 'Memories of a Mission House: The Eve of Gate Pa,' *Bay of Plenty Times*, 24 November 1942, p.6.
- ¹⁶ E. Maxwell, *Recollections and Reflections of an Old New Zealander* (Dunedin: Reed, 1937), p.181.
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- ³⁰ Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp.501-2.
- ³¹ *Otago Witness*, 6 August 1870, p.18.
- ³² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1984), p.69.
- ³³ My research suggests that that honour of crafting the first New Zealand piano goes to Alfred Bowring, who arrived in Auckland in 1856. Bowring was a cabinetmaker by profession, but in 1860 expanded his area of expertise, a jury list from 7 February 1860 listing him as a 'piano forte maker'. One of his instruments was for sale at an 1861 exhibition of articles of Auckland manufacture. A review in the *Southern Cross* noted with 'pleasure...a pianoforte, by Mr. Bowring, Wakefield-street. The case is rimu. This is a well finished and creditable piece of workmanship' (10 December 1861).
- ³⁴ Otago Settlers Museum Archive, *Begg's Jubilee Souvenir*, 1861-1911, p.6.
- ³⁵ The piano was gifted to Te Awamutu Museum by Mrs Trevor Hollister in 1982.
- ³⁶ Kay Boese, *Tides of History: Bay of Islands County* (Whangarei: Bay of Islands County Council, 1977), pp.77-78; Alexander Turnbull Library, Oral History Centre, Kuini Te Tau, OHInt-0015/05, Tape 1, Side 2.
- ³⁷ Mrs J. Howard Jackson, *Annals of a New Zealand Family: The Household of Gilbert Mair, Early Pioneer* (Dunedin, Wellington: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1935), pp.27-29.
- ³⁸ Jackson, pp.27-9.
- ³⁹ Auckland City Library, Auckland Research Centre, 'Improvements Planned for Waitangi,' *New Zealand Herald*, 9 September 1964, New Zealand Scrapbook, February 1964, p.272; 'New Look for Old Treaty House,' *New Zealand Herald*, 2 January 1962, New Zealand Scrapbook, September 1962, p.228.
- ⁴⁰ Waitangi National Trust Archive, WNT 1962/1/2, Material relating to Mair piano.
- ⁴¹ McLean, p.213.
- ⁴² Smith, p.3.