

Piano conservation the preserve of the few



COLIN MURTY

Geoffrey Lancaster, at Perth's Edith Cowan University, sits with the historic First Fleet piano, the first piano to arrive on our shores

EXCLUSIVE

VICTORIA LAURIE

From renowned keyboard soloist to piano whisperer, Geoffrey Lancaster says he can't think of any greater privilege than to play and conserve Australia's largest collection of historic pianos, coaxing each one back to playing perfection.

Lancaster has already achieved a remarkable coup in securing this important collection of 18th and 19th-century instruments. Eighteen months ago, Sydney collector Stewart Symonds

donated 140 pianos to the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Perth's Edith Cowan University.

The "Founding Pianos" collection includes the historic First Fleet piano, the first instrument to arrive on our shores in 1788; a piano owned by the flute player in composer Joseph Haydn's orchestra; and several of the last surviving pianos made by Europe's greatest master makers.

"I have moved to heaven," says a beaming Lancaster, who took up his academic role at WAAPA three years ago as one of Australia's most respected classical keyboard artists and teachers. "We

are already regarded as one of the world centres for early keyboard art and performance.

"But we want to build a complete collection — our vision is to acquire over time a representative example of every keyboard instrument that has ever existed. It's not a pie in the sky notion."

Word of the piano whisperer's ambition is drawing interest and offers from around the world. "We have already acquired another 50 pianos from the 19th century, and one of the world's most famous collections of instruments in New Zealand, the Mobbs Collection, has been bequeathed to us as well."

But the next goal is to secure the future of these fragile instruments. Lancaster has the university's blessing to establish a centre for keyboard research, where master restorers will come to teach the next generation.

"We're all unbelievably excited by it," says Lancaster, who has won ARIA and Gramophone awards for his recordings and still travels internationally to perform and teach.

"Everywhere I go, the master makers of instruments and museum curators make a consistent lament. They say 'there is no one to take on the knowledge we have about the restoration of

instruments — when we die, that knowledge will die with us'. At WAAPA, we felt we could do something about it. We've already got interest from students in the northern hemisphere, because the only other course in the world, in Nuremberg, is showing signs of closing."

Later this month, British master restorer Lucy Coad will arrive to advise WAAPA on restoring its rare square piano, or small piano-forte, that dates to 1765.

Lancaster says Australia is poised to provide a world-class centre to breathe life into the art of piano restoration. "We want these instruments to be heard."

Video artist Mesiti has last word on Venice