

Something magical happens when a piano is played repeatedly, keys struck by a particular set of fingers just so, over and over. It won't sound quite right until one day, suddenly, inexplicably, it finds its voice.

"After a year, they just come to life. You play and play and they take the sound you put in. It sounds odd but the wood kind of knows how to vibrate. It's very weird and people say it can't possibly be so but it is ... It's quite a world of inexplicable stuff."

Geoffrey Lancaster would know. He is the "grand old man of fortepiano" – a boy from Dubbo drawn inexorably into a Woollahra antique shop by an old piano and set on a lifelong journey.

And so it was not to a museum but to Geoffrey, now a professor at the WA Academy of Performing Arts, that Sydney collector Stewart Symonds entrusted his breathtaking collection of 140 pianos from the 18th and 19th centuries, after a near-fatal heart attack prompted him to look for a worthy beneficiary. If these instruments could talk, they could tell myriad stories, particularly of the early days of Australian settlement.

Geoffrey points to the collection's most famous piece – a small square piano, made in 1786 and brought to Australia on the First Fleet (an antique dealer discovered it in a farmhouse laundry in 1965, when the owners hoped to sell it to buy a new washing machine).

Across the room, the softer, muted notes from an 1802 Viennese piano – "drop-dead gorgeous, isn't it" – is what Beethoven intended when he composed his Moonlight Sonata.

An English version of the harpsichord bears the words "Furley Hawkins London Made Me 1736"; it is the only one left in the world by that maker. There's the first piano to give a public recital in Hobart Town and the square piano given by the French government to Lord Richard Casey, who went on to be Australian governor-general.

The pianos may be historic but what WAAPA plans to do with them is thoroughly modern – it will spend upwards of \$60 million on a sophisticated performance and research space, funding elite technicians and teachers, scholarships for talented students and paying to replicate, conserve and restore these rare instruments. The first sod for the Centre for Piano Performance, Culture and Innovation is due to be turned in 2020, and it is hoped it will attract international students, teachers, performers and researchers.



Perth's piano men are playing for keeps. Katherine Fleming discovers their forte.

Key notes

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How this ambitious plan came to be involves a serendipitous aligning of people in the right place at the right time – Geoffrey, the charismatic force of nature, master piano technician Paul Tunzi, whose quietly spoken demeanour belies that he is desperately trying to save his craft from extinction, and Steve Chapman, the chemist turned vice-chancellor who sees the transformational opportunity the pianos present for his university.

“It’s a big responsibility but we are all incredibly joyful about it,” Geoffrey says. “We all feel as though we are in the middle of a miracle.”

UNDER THE LIGHTS IN THE MUSIC auditorium at WAAPA’s Mt Lawley campus, Geoffrey is going from piano to piano, fingers flying, talking in rapid-fire about the differences in sound. Modern pianos sing, he explains, whereas these early instruments, known as fortepianos, are designed to speak – the pianist has control over where the note ends. Some have a glow about the sound, some are plummy, while still others can create what’s called pianissimo, a softened music that sends a shiver up the spine. Geoffrey grins. “It just goes to show that you don’t need volume to have drama,” he says.

For him, this passion for pianos goes back to his childhood in country NSW. The young Geoffrey, who remembers being entranced by the “unique and inspiring stillness, the cathedral-like silence of the bush”, was given a toy piano and began playing songs he heard on the radio.

His parents “recognised there was something there and made huge sacrifices to ensure I got very good teaching”. Years later, as a young music student walking along Sydney’s Queen Street, he noticed a piano in an antique shop owned by aficionado William Bradshaw.

“He said ‘Please come in, you can play any of the instruments I have’ ... I sat down and played an instrument from 1834, which had just come from Warwick Castle, by the English maker Broadwood,” Geoffrey says. “I knew then and there that this was to be my life’s work. I was 21.”

In those days, Geoffrey says, there was nothing in Australian methods of training or playing piano that acknowledged the famous early composers wrote for instruments of their time – which sounded vastly different to the modern piano.

So when Geoffrey sought out fortepiano training, he was “basically mocked” by people who assumed anyone wanting to play early pianos must not be able to play modern ones. Undeterred, he built one from a

kit and taught himself, successfully auditioning for an Australia Council scholarship to study in Holland.

He was the first Australian to win an international Mozart competition at the Festival van Vlaanderen in Bruges, which propelled him into a career in Europe. Now a celebrated pianist and conductor, he still vividly recalls conducting at the Schwarzenberg Palace in Vienna.

“In that room, Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn had given the premieres of many of their most wonderful works,” he says. “I was just about to give the downbeat when my eyes glanced across the gilded chandeliers and the beautiful paintings and I thought to myself ‘This is not bad for a boy from Dubbo.’”

His home country was never far from his mind. “I always felt convinced that I should give back to the country that had helped me in so many ways develop as a musician, especially through scholarships and tertiary training,” he says. “It would have been an easier thing to live in Europe but I felt at peace only when I decided that Australia was where the need was and that was where I should be.”

“We all feel as though we are in the middle of a miracle.”

So Geoffrey returned home and, as he says, “chipped away”. Today, historically informed performance is a normal part of the industry.

After decades spent performing and teaching, Geoffrey found himself in need of a new job after budget cuts at the Australian National University – and the door at WAAPA “very glaringly opened”.

He started in 2016 and found “an educative paradise”.

“Because the east coast doesn’t know what’s happening in Perth and Perth isn’t interested in the east coast, people don’t understand how extraordinary a place, culturally, that Perth is. It sounds parochial but it’s true. I find Perth consistently to be a city of surprises.”

The move west also came with another great drawback – his old friend and collaborator Paul Tunzi, who he describes as “a treasure”. Paul, a gifted and in-demand piano technician, has been at WAAPA “more or less since the beginning”. He, too, had been enchanted with the piano as a young boy, albeit with its mechanics, as much as its music.

“My mother taught at my school and they would wheel one in so someone could play the national anthem. The piano was quite old and decrepit and the tuner came along and gave a little sermon about how the piano needed some work,” Paul remembers.

“Later, being a naughty, industrious 10 year-old, I copied him and pulled the piano to pieces. After I got a clip on the ear because I hadn’t watched how to put it back together again, my mother decided not to ring the piano tuner to come back and fix it, but to see if I could go down to his workshop after school and learn how to put it back together myself.”

This led to a music scholarship at Churchlands high school and by the time Paul was 12, an apprentice position waiting for him when he turned 16 at the famed piano workshop, Snadens.

He spent years learning from master technicians. Still, his decades of experience didn’t prepare him for what came after he received a phone call from Geoffrey, then a stranger touring on the east coast, 20 years ago.

“He was playing an instrument that, at that stage, I had never seen, let alone heard or tuned – the fortepiano,” Paul says. “He had run out of technicians on the east coast and called to ask if I would be interested. I had to tell him that I knew absolutely nothing about them to which he responded ‘Perfect. You’re teachable.’”

“I had been tuning for 20 years. I already had my masters certificate in Yamaha and concert experience. I thought I was on that path. He flew me over there, plonked me behind this piano, which didn’t sound anything like a modern piano, and took 20 minutes to explain a tuning method that was very foreign to me, talking about colours and mood.

“I nervously tuned the piano and then listened to the performance from the back of the hall. I cried my eyes out from the beginning to the end because I was sure I was a miserable failure, that my career was at an end and they had wasted their time and money getting me over there. The instrument sounded obnoxiously out of tune.

“Once the audience had dissipated and the performers were mostly gone, except for Geoffrey and the violinist, I sheepishly went up to the stage to more or less apologise. They embraced me and said ‘We have found our early keyboard technician at long last’. They said I just got it, which I didn’t at all, but so began the next 20 years’ journey with Geoffrey, where I prepared almost all of his CD recordings, many different performances on many different instruments throughout Australia and Europe.” »

Play it again Geoffrey Lancaster (seated) and Paul Tunzi with some of the historic pianos.

feature

« Paul says he has learnt something every day since, from the man who “used a toilet brush in my brain and opened me up to a world that has gone backwards”. But he admits to feeling “nervous and intimidated” when he learnt WAAPA was receiving the Stewart Symonds collection.

“We are talking about instruments that were built before Europeans even thought of coming here,” he says. “My first thought was ‘Who is going to look after them in 20 years?’ The UK just disbanded two of the greatest collections it owned and, apart from economic reasons, one of the reasons is loss of people adequately skilled to maintain them.

“In Perth, the state of crisis is this – within the next five years, elite technicians will be in three categories. One, too busy, which we already are, flying all over the place. Two, too old and three, too dead. We have three established, respected concert technicians but the other two are approaching 70 and I’ve already reached saturation point.”

Paul yearns to teach the next generation, to “replicate the knowledge I have, both modern and historical” but he knows time is against him. “We have to be very selective, so not to sound obnoxious, but we have to find the right person. In the 1970s and 80s, we would go through up to 12 technicians before we found the one with the right skills. We need to replicate that but we don’t have time.”

So Paul assembled Australian Piano Artisans – four gifted technicians, including Brent Otley, David Kinney and Ara Vartoukian – who will run masterclasses and symposiums at the new centre to identify and train talented new technicians. “We have been tasked with the challenging job of literally saving our trade within the next decade,” he says.

The last puzzle piece came when Paul was granted a Churchill Fellowship; he is in Europe until next month, visiting significant collections and learning from masters of conservation and restoration on how to treat the WAAPA collection. Some pianos can be rebuilt and fixed, others are too rare to risk touching.

Again, those skills are dying out with the craftsmen who practise them, so there is an urgency to Paul’s work. The centre will also offer PhD scholarships in piano restoration, so students can document the craft while learning.

“I’m still pinching myself that in my time, in Perth, we will be one of the international hubs for all things keyboard oriented,” Paul says. “That would have been a ridiculous statement 10 years ago and it still seems that way now. It’s been a meeting of the right people at the right time. It’s amazing to have these instruments but they are just dead wood that will look beautiful as pieces of furniture – they need people to keep them alive.”

Achieving their goals also relies heavily on a third person, who admits he is not in the least bit artistically inclined.

“I’m a chemist, OK,” Edith Cowan University vice-chancellor Steve Chapman says with a laugh. “The previous university I ran was basically science, engineering, business – we didn’t really have performing arts. This is completely out of my comfort zone but that’s why I’m interested in it. I know how to



Sweet sounds
ECU vice chancellor Steve Chapman (left) is right behind the mission to create a world-class piano centre in Perth.

particular piano, why wouldn’t you want to do that? It’s not just the collection, it’s what it brings in terms of our ability to attract international students, our profile around the world and our ability to do research no other place in the world can do. We will have the greats of Harvard and Cambridge and Oxford desperate to get their hands on this, whereas if it was in London or Paris or Vienna, you wouldn’t bat an eyelid. That’s where you expect it to be but Perth?”

For Geoffrey, Perth might be the perfect place. “Australians are inherently an incredibly musical people and somehow, it seems to me that a city like Perth has to generate its own culture because it’s on the edge of the desert ... We have an incredible store of people here who have come from Europe for the blue sky and brought incredible cultural sophistication and musical skills with them, many of whom are on staff here,” he says.

“Perth is a surprisingly active place which looks to the left to Asia and Europe, never to the right. It is, in a sense, a very exotic and unique and somehow appropriate place for this to happen because there is no political distraction within the art itself. We can just get on with it.”

And true to form, he’s already thinking bigger. “It has to keep growing,” he says. “Within 50 years, it is reasonable to assume that we will have achieved what we set out to achieve, which is to have a representative example of every kind of keyboard instrument to have ever existed. That includes pipe organs from the churches around Perth, so we can be a little like the Sorbonne, where the campus reaches into the community. Once that’s going, we will move onto the stringed instruments, like violins, guitars and cellos from the 18th and 19th centuries, which are sitting in people’s cupboards.

“There is a lot to do and we are all musicians here, we are not museum people, so we are learning as we go and moving very methodically and slowly so we don’t make a mistake. I’ve been told by some of the great curators in Europe that they all know what we are doing and what we want to do and they are waiting for us to make a mistake. We are definitely not going to do that.” ■

Selected instruments from the Founding Pianos collection will be on show at The Mark, at the State Buildings, September 16-21. For more details, call ECU on 6304 2792.