

GRANT O'BRIEN

Grant O'Brien retired as Curator-Director of the Raymond Russell Collection in 2004. Here, Friends' Chairman, Martin Hillman surveys Grant's work during his association with St Cecilia's Hall and his contribution to keyboard instrument research and construction.



Grant O'Brien's house is a little like an outpost of St Cecilia's Hall, which is only appropriate. It has an historical feel, thanks to the wonderful stone-flagged floor. There's the gallery, where the instruments are kept in darkness in a controlled atmosphere, and there's the workshop. The gallery is actually the drawing room of the flat, and the workshop is the dining room, being used when I visited to make curtains and accommodate much of the life of the house. It has to be said that the gallery contains - whisper it - a modern instrument, built by Grant and his Italian collaborator, Graziano Bandini.

This is no ordinary modern instrument - there are no technical drawings or "after an instrument by my eighteenth century hero" being employed here. Grant and Graziano have gone back to first principles and used the techniques of the original builders.

It can hardly have been what his pupils would have imagined for their young Canadian physics teacher when, as he puts it, "I came over in 1966 to teach Tony Blair at Fettes College." His MSc paper the same year was *The 2-2-0 Positron Decay State in Promethium 146*. Seventeen years later; his PhD thesis at Edinburgh University was *Ruckers: A Harpsichord and Virginal Building Tradition*. He returned to his old job at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton but in his two years at Fettes he had become very attached to Scotland. "I felt incredibly homesick for Scotland. I had that empty feeling that you get when you're really not happy where you are."

"I had met John Barnes [then Curator of

the Russell Collection] in 1970 so I wrote to him and said 'Can I come and work for you for nothing?'" he remembers. He was back in Scotland by 1971 and, after about a year working for John Barnes, he set up as a self-employed harpsichord builder and restorer. "John was doing some restoration work in Rome and didn't much like Italy. I spoke Italian and loved the place so I finished off his restorations for him."

Those were the golden years of the Russell Collection

Grant became assistant curator of the Russell Collection in 1974 and curator-director in 1983, when John retired as curator. He joined the then music faculty of the university in 1988. There were other illustrious names involved, in addition to John Barnes: Peter Williams, then Professor of music, and Rhodes and Thomas, the Fife researchers, restorers and builders whom Grant sees as fundamental to modern understanding of many aspects of early keyboard instruments - Rhodes, like Grant, had a scientific background. "Those were the golden years of the Russell Collection. People even coined the phrase 'The Edinburgh school'," says Grant. "There were all of us writing, publishing papers, publishing books and giving lectures."

A glance at the list of Grant's publications shows that the Ruckers connection remained strong, culminating in his 1990 book, with the same title as his PhD thesis. More recently, though, his eye has turned southward.

The baseboard of an instrument in the Hague by the Neapolitan Onofrio Guarracino, whose building career lasted from 1651 to 1694, has been taken off the instrument. It still exists, with the position and size of many features marked out on it. From this, Grant worked out the unit of measurement used to design and construct it, the Neapolitan oncia and corrected the instrument's attribution.

From there, for Grant at least, it was a short step to emulating Guarracino. He and Graziano made measuring sticks like those that would have been used at the time to construct an instrument, and with them, they have now made four harpsichords - and sold all four. "When you know what the unit of measurement is, the design of the instrument is extremely simple," he says. Indeed, the oncia used by Guarracino is incredibly consistent throughout his career, but slightly different from that used in the anonymous Neapolitan instrument in the Russell Collection - curious but not important. If you know the unit, you can use the Pythagorean proportions to set the string lengths, and that is what Grant and Graziano have done.

There is still something of the schoolmaster about Grant. Glance at the beautiful reproduction decoration on a harpsichord case in his house - oh yes, that's Perseus rescuing Andromeda from the sea monster, an allegory of Spain saving Naples from the evil Papal States in 17th century Italy. Show interest in the building methods he and Graziano use and you let yourself in for quite a detailed explanation. Any aspect of building an instrument gets the same detailed description, implying astonishingly painstaking craftsmanship.

Go to the website www.claviantica.com



Neapolitan-style harpsichord made by Graziano Bandini and Grant O'Brien. The stand resembles that of the Anon. Italian harpsichord in the Russell Collection.

and you find an even more technical explanation. You also find that the site was built by Grant - patience and hard work with new technology as much as with old - and that it has had about 90,000 visitors in two years and a bit. It's worth a visit just to see Grant's name fade away and then shimmer back into view at the top of the home page.

The detail on the site is phenomenal and schoolmasterly. One page reveals "The 13 steps to a revolutionary method of constructing harpsichords". But don't be fooled, these are not bullet-point steps - number seven amounts to more than 100 words, and for most of us, quite a few preparatory sub-steps would be necessary - learning the vocabulary, for instance.

The result of all the research and expertise and craftsmanship and painstaking work, the new instrument in his "gallery", is a beautiful thing. It is also a pleasing collaboration: Grant claims that Graziano always lets him do the difficult mitre joints, but basically they share the work. Grant's partner, Johnny Bell, did a lot of the metalwork, and a St Cecilia's stalwart, Willie Hendry, cut the astonishingly detailed soundboard rose.

"When I did the restorations for John Barnes in Rome, two of the four harpsichords I restored were Neapolitan." Grant says. "I didn't know that then, when I couldn't have distinguished a Neapolitan harpsichord from a Venetian harpsichord, but I was

overwhelmed by the fact that these harpsichords sounded so beautiful and evenly over the whole compass." Grant believes his own attempts using the same methods come decently close to emulating the original. "They certainly have the clarity and evenness across the compass that a Guarracino has," he says.

This return to first principles does not necessarily please his fellow instrument-builders. When lecturing on his methods, he has met hostility from the copy-from-drawing tendency. But he continues to spread the word. As well as being a member of the teaching staff of Edinburgh University, he has held posts in Italy and been involved in colloquia and symposia, and he has had a steady and continuing stream of publications.

As a young man, Grant planned a book on the physics of the harpsichord. It never materialised "It was half a chapter in the Ruckers book," he says. "I'm working on a new book just on stringing which involves quite a bit of acoustics and the physics of soundboards the metallurgy of strings

A bit of Dolmetschery...

Not all restorers of early keyboard instruments agreed about aims and methods, and Grant was prompted to show off yet another skill, versification, by the views of John Barnes, whom he succeeded as curator of the Collection, on Arnold Dolmetsch.

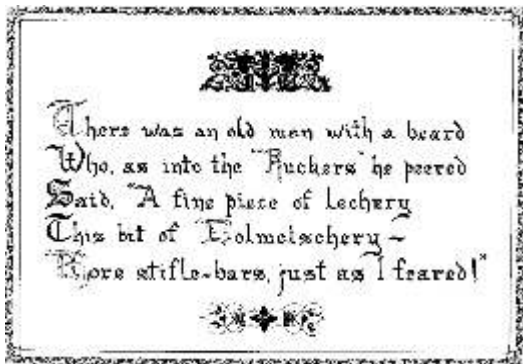
The anecdote comes from *A History of the Harpsichord* by Ed Kottick, who adds: "The term 'stifle-bar' was coined by John Barnes, who was, in fact, 'the old man with a beard', and who was responsible for the reverse restoration of many instruments that had been 'Dolmetsched'."

and the physical properties of strings so I'm going to get slightly closer."

He has won prizes and awards: in the US in 1993 for his Ruckers book from the American Musical Instrument Society (AMIS), Italy from the Athaneum in Brescia, and from the Galpin Society in the UK. Now, a year after he retired as Curator of the Russell Collection, Grant's work has been recognised again. He has won the Curt Sachs award, given annually by AMIS for promotion of the study of musical instruments, which was won by Peter Williams in 1996. Of all places available, the prize is being presented in Las Vegas. Grant is not going to the presentation, even though the city has a Venice just like the one where artisans once built beautiful harpsichords.

For the future, he and Graziano are building four bigger, five-octave instruments using their revived Guarracino techniques. But the world will have to wait a while yet until they get round to a mighty Wurlitzer of an instrument fit to be played among those bright lights in the middle of the Nevada desert.

[Photographs: Grant O'Brien]



Graphic of limerick composed by Grant O'Brien. "Stifle-bars" were soundbars or ribs put under the bridge by early restorers and somebuilders until the late twentieth century. They were intended to stiffen the soundboard but they spoiled the sound.