

To Fix or Not to Fix

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Review of Watson, John R. *Artifacts in Use: The Paradox of Restoration and the Conservation of Organs*. Richmond, VA: OHS Press, 2011. xvii, 249 pp.

IMAGINE THE PROCESS OF RESTORING an unplayable historical harpsichord. During one painstakingly careful episode, the longest plank of its baseboard is taken out. Loose parts of the inner construction that lie about inside the case are re-attached in their original positions. Soundboard cracks are methodically shimmed and some of them patched with strips of linen. Glue joints are inspected and repaired; some woodworm damage receives treatment; and some non-original, ill-fitting parts are replaced with functionally more suitable ones. After closing up the baseboard again, the disorganized modern strings are replaced by adequate ones, following the original gauge numbers. The action is cleaned and re-aligned. The non-original, too thin, but otherwise functional jacks are adjusted with paper strips to better match the slots in the registers; some broken or missing parts are replaced. Plectra are fitted.

Suddenly a new voice makes itself heard in the workshop. Lively and fresh on the one hand, multi-faceted and headstrong—sometimes erratic like a weathered prima donna—on the other, it testifies to a lifetime of 246 years; equally, it is the symbol of a fresh start.

I am speaking of the famous two-manual harpsichord from 1728 by Christian Zell, one of three surviving harpsichords by that maker. Its new voice was to transform the harpsichord landscape of the 1980s.¹ Beginning soon after its restoration in 1974, it was used for a substantial number of widely disseminated recording projects (predominantly of J. S. Bach's works), and thus familiarized musicians and audiences with what was soon to become something of a new standard: the now-ubiquitous two-manual German harpsichord.

¹ The technical details of the restoration are taken from the restoration report, Martin Skowroneck, "Das Cembalo von Christian Zell, Hamburg 1728, und seine Restaurierung," *The Organ Yearbook* 5 (1974): 79–87.

To be sure, this model was not embraced as a new option because of its (un-eventful, some would have it) disposition of two 8' stops, a 4', and a buff stop. Rather, it was very much the sound of the Zell that spoke to listeners' imaginations. Its spectrum between mellow and belligerent, its unique way of handling polyphony and projecting sound, its silvery buzz but also its crankiness and unforgiving rattle when played aggressively: all these became embedded in our minds as parameters that somehow helped to explain Bach and Handel anew.

When a unique historical artifact regains the capability to serve as a tool that can convey historical values, inform performance practices, and excite our sense of beauty, our emotional response is strong. Consider, then, the following example.

The Stadsmuseum in Gothenburg, Sweden houses a claviorgan by the organ and piano maker Johann Andreas Stein from 1781.² It is unique for four main reasons. First, it is the only known combination instrument by Stein that brings together a grand piano and a small organ. Second, the piano part has the first known surviving German hammer action. Third, it is the only surviving grand piano by Stein with a short bass scaling. Fourth, its case construction differs in some ways from Stein's later pianos.

This instrument may have been altered marginally when it was in active use, but many of the original features are preserved and could be re-established to their original state. However, some strong arguments speak against such an attempt to put the instrument back in order. Among the more obvious ones is that ephemeral materials like leather would have to be replaced at a rather larger scale than advisable. A less obvious argument is that the pattern discernible through its damaged parts, and the manner in which it was repaired over time—however inexpertly done in some cases—contain important information about both Stein's development and an early part of the instrument's history that would be irretrievably destroyed in an attempt to regain full functionality.

A restorer of this instrument would, for example, have to stabilize Stein's famous design flaw—a weak and self-destroying wrest plank attachment. This would, however, mean an intrusion into what restorers and conservators would call the *form* of the object, that is, the object's original shape as envisioned and crafted by its maker. The restoration would also have to take care of the open-ended wooden hammer Kapsels (a German term for the fork-like device in which the hammers are hinged in a German/Viennese piano action), some of which have split where the hammer axle is fixed in the wood. (In this design,

² Inventory no. GM: 4478.

the hammer shanks turn freely on felt bushings hidden between two fork-like Kapsel ends). A comparison of Stein's surviving instruments reveals that Stein himself soon became aware of this problem, and closed the Kapsel ends in some subsequent instruments with glued-on lids, in order to prevent their splitting.³ Shortly thereafter, he turned the setup around, fixing the axles in the hammer shanks instead, and moving the bushings to the Kapsel ends on either side. This reduced the pressure between axle and wood, and prevented the Kapsels from splitting, enabling Stein to leave out the lids once again. To carry out a satisfactory restoration of the Kapsels in the 1781 claviorgan, one would not only have to re-glue them but also to stabilize them to prevent further splitting down the road, most appropriately by adding lids in Stein's own style. This would be perfectly functional and in style; it would, however, also falsify the evidence, and the story of Stein's learning process would get lost.

Finally, a restoration to the instrument's original state would destroy any evidence that documents the practical use and treatment the instrument received after its arrival in Sweden. For example, several layers of hammer leather were added over time to the original ones (which are still in place); there are odd traces of detaching and re-gluing the original layer, together with the whole package of added ones, in a number of instances where cuts at the hammer's sides made to trim non-original hammer leathers into shape coincide with some noticeable, not-trimmed (and therefore later) glue squeeze-out from under the original leathers; and various attempts were made to adjust and patch the hammer beak leathers because of wear on the original ones.

Traces like cuts to trim the leathers and glue squeeze-out belong to the *substance* of an artifact, a term that addresses any surviving evidence of the work process itself. A professional conservator, guided by the principles dictated by her profession and by the policies of her employer, would preserve such evidence at all costs, even at the cost of the instrument remaining mute in the future. Even in this example, emotions tend to run high in the case of violations. A loss of historical substance through deterioration is a worrisome reality in the museum professions anyway, and any intervention that would add to such a loss is typically ruled out.

How, then, are historic organs to be addressed? The title of John Watson's stellar book about the "paradox of restoration" puts the problem squarely: organs are, most of the time, "artifacts in use." Organs cannot simply be left alone in their locations as monuments of the past, unplayable, and in a state of

³ Such as the piano from 1783 in the Ringve Museum, Trondheim, inventory no. RMT 771.

“mummification that extends [their] existence without also extending [their] life” (p. 188). On the one hand, there is too much general interest in them to let them fall into disuse: “Unlike many museum artifacts, historic organs and their period music enjoy a popularity that demands their use” (p. 189). Organs are also “site specific, and carry rich social associations” (p. 7), not unlike architecture, and their utilitarian value for their local everyday users cannot simply be neglected. On the other hand, organs are, after all, historic artifacts, to which rigorous preservation standards should apply.

Since the historic organ’s status, in many ways, is therefore more complex than that of most other museum artifacts, its treatment, too, needs to be approached in a special manner. In organ restoration, the goals of preserving material and preserving utility, of conservation and restoration, need to find a balance.

The book’s organization mirrors the path toward such a balance. In part one, the author spends considerable time and care explaining the philosophical foundations of organ conservation. In parts two and three, he then proceeds to more detailed discussions from two perspectives, with the twin aims of informing the organ specialist about the principles and ethics of museum conservation, and bringing the conservation specialist up to date with the organ restorer’s purposes and techniques. The ultimate goal, outlined in the rather shorter fourth part, is, as the title of the section says, “a team approach to major conservation projects.” Cooperative strategies are in fact discussed throughout the entire book, so this part serves mostly as a summary.

Watson thus guides specialists from different disciplines, with their contrasting ethical codes, toward viewing their differences as an asset that ultimately serves to solve the task of a “restorative conservation” better than any more single-minded approach. His well-supported and open-minded call for negotiations is an especially gratifying aspect of the book. The somewhat rigorous structure of the individual chapters, moderated and enhanced by Watson’s beautifully clear language, serves as an effective tool to keep the reader’s emotional responses at bay, and to suggest, again and again, analytical techniques that permit better access to the topic.

No stone remains unturned during Watson’s exploration of his topic. Whenever, for example, ethical codes are mentioned, they are discussed in detail and carefully referenced; if the “evidence-collecting methods” during the “pretreatment investigation” require practical examples, the reader is treated to several pages of illustrated discussions of raking light and ultraviolet light testing methods of great informative value (pp. 113ff.). Not only organ specialists, but

in fact anyone who is interested in the assessment, preservation, maintenance, restoration, or use (or non-use) of a musical instrument will draw great benefit from the level-headed and systematic approach demonstrated here.

Arguably the heart of the work is a small table in its very middle (p. 103, explained in detail during the entire following section), which outlines, for the organ specialist, the “elements of conservation.” “Accessibility (making artifacts understandable), durability (helping artifacts survive), integrity (protecting historical evidence) and practicality (economic and safety considerations)” form together one axis. They mesh, on the other axis, with “investigation, intervention, prevention and communication,” leading to sixteen text boxes that provide direct guidance for an informed action.

So, to take an example, the intersection of “integrity” and “investigation” results in the recommendation to “investigate historical evidence & treatment alternatives to preserve evidence.” The combination of “practicality” and “intervention,” meanwhile, draws attention to the necessity to “fit intervention to time and cost constraints.” While, at first, none of these recommendations seems earth-shattering, the crucial twist is that they all appear on one and the same hierarchical level. In a large organ restoration project, concerns of documentation, conservation, accessibility, and economy need to be balanced against each other, and no step, viewed alone, is inherently better or worthier than another.

This twist is what makes Watson’s model of a team approach possible in practice, as outlined in the final section: “the important thing in planning restoration” with a specialized conservation team “is to have all values sympathetically represented.” An “awareness of special authority of various experts” should guide the negotiations, which would, then, never have to deteriorate into mere “vote counting” (p. 196). “Stewardship” should take precedence over “egos,” and not the other way round.

Four appendices accompany the work. The first provides information about the accompanying web resource, which supplies photos in color, additional information, errata, and links to further resources, and the last provides a list of photos, credits and notes. Appendix 2 lists six short restoration reports on various small and medium-sized organs; the “Guidelines for Conservation” of the Organ Historical Society are reprinted in full in Appendix 3. The impressive bibliography belies Watson’s humble stance at the outset, when he describes his role as “that of a journalist or ethnographer,” who reports on the contrasting cultures of organ builders and conservators respectively (p. xiii). Not only is this book an amazing example of a difficult topic well-treated, but it also sup-

plies a wealth of information for further studies about the respective fields. It is a first-rate resource for the shaping of future restoration projects—not only of organs, but of any musical instrument that, for one reason or another, is deemed to be an artifact in use.