

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by Andrew Tait

2006 Churchill Fellow

The Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Frank New Churchill Fellowship to study advanced techniques in the art of double bass building and restoration – U.K., Italy.

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Signed ANDREW TAIT

Dated 27th November 27, 2006

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INTRODUCTION

The fellowship allowed me to travel to London in order to work and study under the supervision of Roger Dawson, an eminent Luthier with an international reputation for excellence in double bass building, restoration and maintenance.

It also enabled me to travel to Italy where I had the privilege of measuring and photographing several very old and rare double basses owned by the National Instrument Museum in Rome.

I extend my appreciation to the Churchill Trust and in particular to Mrs. Patricia New who sponsored my Fellowship and made possible this life changing experience.

I cannot thank Roger enough for the generosity he displayed with his time, knowledge and experience which he imparted with great skill and humour. As a teacher and mentor I could not have sought better.

.I would also like to thank Stuart Smith for my introduction to Mr. Latanza (Director of the National Museum of Musical Instruments) and Mr Latanza for his assistance with my studies.

Of course this experience would not have been possible without the support and blessing of my wife, Wendy and two children, Ian and Phoebe.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Double Bassist: West Australian Symphony Orchestra
Double Bass Maker and Restorer

The fellowship travel was undertaken between the 4th September and the 13th November 2006.

The primary focus of the trip was to acquire skills and knowledge with specific reference to Double Bass building and restoration from Roger Dawson who has learnt his trade through a traditional apprenticeship at a firm that began in the early eighteenth century.

Also of great value was the opportunity to study first hand, very old, rare and important instruments that have influenced makers throughout the last two hundred years.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Working with Roger in an environment filled with exceptionally beautiful instruments and learning the methods of the old masters as they had been passed down in an unbroken chain from one generation to another.
- Completing a major repair on a beautiful old instrument, meeting its owner and listening to it being played in The Philharmonia.
- Being lent one of Rogers instruments to practice on during my stay
- Meeting a large number of the London Double Bass community, discussing instruments and attending concerts.
- Building a new top for a badly damaged double bass, in the traditional way and having the satisfaction of playing it before the end of my stay.
- Having lessons from the most influential players who are at the forefront of their art in their particular field (Orchestral , solo and early music practices for the double bass)
- Studying the double basses in The National Museum in Rome

IMPLEMENTATION and DISSEMINATION

I have already met with local maker/restorers and will continue to pass on relevant information. I plan to attend the next Australian Violin Makers Conference to pass on my overseas experiences.

I have a commission to build another double bass for a colleague in WASO and will implement all that I have learnt immediately.

I have also been invited to undertake restoration work on the Double Bass collection of the National Museum of Musical Instruments in Rome.

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

4th September – 5th November 27, 2006 London, UK

-Worked and studied at Roger Dawson's workshop
"Faircharm Trading Estates", Deptford.

Attended Concerts and Rehearsals of:

- London Symphony Orchestra
- Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
- Philharmonia
- Early Music Ensembles

5th November – 11th November 27, 2006 Rome, Italy

- Studied Double Bases at National Museum of Musical
Instruments
- Visited local double bass maker, Mr.Ottaviani

13th November 27, 2006, Returned to Perth, Australia.

MAIN BODY

To describe in detail the full list of topics covered and lessons learnt would require the writing of a book, which I believe is not the purpose of this report, so I will attempt to give a detailed account of some of the work I completed through point form.

Working alongside Roger I witnessed a great many projects from beginning to end and learnt through observation.

Another valuable source of learning was that gained by actually playing a great number of beautiful old (and new) instruments. By measuring these instruments, taking patterns and photographing them I was influenced in my concept of what constitutes a successful double bass for either solo, orchestral or chamber music.

Given the large variation between size, shape and style of construction of the double bass I was surprised to discover a remarkable amount of similarity between the English makers who were working in London in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (makers such as John Lott, Simon Fendt, Dodd, Panormo, Betts and Kennedy).

A great many of these instruments had a flat back with a break at the top, a very similar form (being the outline of the front) and similar internal features of construction.

Catalogue of some of the work completed in Rogers Workshop:

1. Repairing a bassbar crack on the belly of an old J'Anson
 - Remove old top
 - Remove half of old bassbar
 - Clean out crack of old glue
 - Cover area with warm water and clamp overnight to reshape belly
 - Reglue crack after closed and belly back in shape
 - Remove rest of bassbar
 - Place cleat over base of crack to support area while it is worked on
 - Remove wood to accept inlaid cleats
 - Fit and glue cleats (shape flush to inner surface)
 - Fit, glue and shape a new bassbar
 - Add cleats on upper part of bassbar that support a crack running parallel
 - Reglue top and set up instrument
 - Play and adjust soundpost

2. Making a new neck and grafting on the old scroll

- Saw old scroll of original neck
- Cut out wood to accept new neck
- Mark out shape of new neck
- Fit scroll to new neck and glue
- Cut out shape of new neck
- Fit and glue fingerboard to neck
- Glue neck onto bass
- Finish shaping neck and cut out pegbox
- Refit tuners after reaming out pegholes
- Make new nut and bridge
- Varnish new neck to match body
- Oil neck and string up to play (check position of “D” on neck)

3. Making a new top for a damaged double bass

- Repair bass carcass with spruce cleats
- Reshape carcass so that surface to accept top is flat
- Brace body to stabilize shape
- Prepare centre joint for gluing on a planer
- Perfect fit with hand plane
- Glue centre joint with sash clamps
- Cut out rough shape and add wings
- Remove large quantity of wood with carba-tech tool
- Finalize shape and thickness edge platform
- Carve exterior arching
- Thickness top and cut out “F” holes
- Glue in bassbar
- Shape bassbar
- Glue top onto carcass
- Cut grooves to accept purfling
- Fit and glue purfling
- Gouge out channel along inside of purfling
- Round off edges
- Cut a bridge and soundpost
- Make a new saddle and glue in Place
- String up and play

CONCLUSIONS

I have learnt that there can be a productive blend of tradition and technology in the building of double basses but that the most valuable part of the equation is the knowledge of traditional techniques and skills.

A great deal of this knowledge can be learnt from books and trial and error, but the most valuable lessons are those that are passed on from master to pupil through hands on experience and observation.

One cannot describe in a book the amount of flexibility needed in a top to assure a good working instrument or which techniques and tools are best applied to a given situation. This practical assimilation of specialized knowledge takes time and application.

As there are no schools of violin making in Australia (and those that exist overseas don't teach the art of double bass making) there is a great need for opportunities such as are provided by this Churchill Fellowship.

Particularly as there are a very different set of skills and techniques applied to double bass making and restoration as there are to violin making and restoration.

There is a substantial need for a school of stringed instrument making in Australia (the only one being run by Harry Vatiliotis at Sydney University between 1980 and 1984) as the demand for top quality hand made instruments is increasing proportionately with the number of students entering the musical tertiary education systems.

Through my Churchill Fellowship I was able to broaden my knowledge in many areas that have influenced me not only as a maker and restorer of double basses. I became aware of the importance of the relationship between the player and the maker/restorer and how that relationship influences both the evolution of instrument making and restoration as well as playing styles and performance technique.

This was particularly evident when I had the unique opportunity to examine the double basses in the National Museum of Musical Instruments in Rome. Not only were these instruments important historical specimens of double bass making dating back some three hundred plus years. They had not been restored for well over one hundred years, so they were a time capsule of both double bass making and restoration techniques as well as a glimpse into past performance practices and styles.

In Rogers workshop I gained the knowledge and skills to be able to build a superior instrument in a far shorter time and approach double bass restoration in a more practical and efficient manner.

I am in a unique position, being both a maker/restorer and a player of the double bass, to be able to disseminate this information. My day to day contact with playing colleagues gives me ample opportunity to pass on the knowledge that I have gained directly to the players and teachers of the double bass community through out the country.

As a maker/restorer I am in constant contact with colleagues in Perth and Sydney and plan to attend all national conferences of the violin makers association of Australia.

Arthur Robinson is endeavoring to set up a teaching workshop for stringed instrument making in Perth and I am happy to support and assist his efforts, with the view to passing on my experiences through such an institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a consequence of my Churchill Fellowship trip to Rome I have been invited to set up a workshop at The National Museum of Musical Instruments to restore and conserve their remarkable collection of double basses.

I believe this project will aid in understanding the early development of the double bass of which very little is known.

This collection of instruments is unrivalled worldwide in both its quality and quantity. But what makes it so valuable as a source of historic documentation is the fact that there has not been any restoration work carried out on the collection for a very long time. The instruments are literally falling apart in ones hands.

These instruments can teach us a great deal, not only about the early techniques of construction and restoration but also about the way instruments were altered to suit the evolving playing styles throughout the last three centuries.

My involvement in this project will bring knowledge and skills back to Australia that are unique and historically valuable.

I plan to continue my association with Roger Dawson as a mentor and spend further time working in his London studio. Contact is also maintained via email so that the Australian double bass community can continue to benefit from his knowledge.

The experiences and opportunities that I encountered during my overseas travel are simply not available in Australia and would not have been possible without the support of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia.

Therefore I see it as vitally important for such opportunities to continue to be available and that an institution or association be set up to disseminate the results.

Such an institution is in the process of being set up in Perth by Arthur Robinson in the form of a teaching workshop. A process that I am involved in and will continue to be involved in once it is set up.

I am actively looking forward to applying the knowledge and skills that I have acquired during my fellowship and to fulfilling the opportunities that have arisen as a direct result of it.

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia has afforded me a life changing experience for which I am deeply grateful.

