

Conservation and Restoration¹ of a Tielke-School Guitar Soundboard
c.1600's (part 1)



PLATE 1: External surface



PLATE 2: Internal surface

Abstract

The soundboard from an original baroque guitar of the Tielke school, c. 1600's was presented for potential restoration, conservation² and re-installation on the original instrument. The original guitar was restored and altered several times in the distant past to reflect changes of use, fashion and function. It was restored most recently by a professional studio that retained most of the original structure, but the old soundboard was considered too deteriorated for use and so a facsimile copy was created and fitted to enable full professional playability.

The guitar's current owner tracked down the old original soundboard (Plates 1 & 2) and proposed its restoration and re-fitting.

Restoring and reinstating an object that has undergone deterioration, repair and alteration over several centuries presents obvious practical challenges and there are historical, scientific and ethical considerations. This project explores the various complexities and the applied case-specific solutions.

Introduction

Studying objects created by our ancestors helps us to understand many aspects of human history, evolution and cultural development. Musical instruments embody multiple human endeavours: craft technologies, creative design, artistic expression, manufacturing production practices and materials science to name a few and not forgetting the actual application of the instruments in the musical arts. How we treat, use and study old instruments is therefore important for the expansion of our knowledge.

Restoring old instruments to playing condition was previously a common practice with museum items. It became apparent that such interventions made irreversible changes or had unknowingly employed unstable or even harmful repair materials and methods. Sometimes 'restored' objects did not appear or practically function as they originally did due to lack of data about earlier states, or to the lack of scientific understanding about the consequences of the applied restoration treatments. Minimum intervention is current museum policy, enough to preserve and stabilise objects for the longest foreseeable time period. Special care and preparation is usually applied when objects are feature exhibited or loaned, but storage, display and monitoring in environmentally controlled spaces is the norm and very few museums have working instrument collections. The Bate Collection in Oxford, England is one notable exception.

Several authors (see bibliography) have discussed the appropriateness or otherwise of restoring old instruments to playing condition and some of their considered ideas and comments are relevant to this project.

Ethics and practical limits of restoration

The ethical issues and practical challenges and limitations of restoring an old soundboard were made known and discussed with the owner. This conservator indicated that the soundboard could be 'restored' to function and made apparently cosmetically complete, but that its original acoustic state³ was irrecoverable. In the restoration process, some historical information embodied in the object would be irretrievably lost. Broader ethical issues and current conservation practice and policy were also outlined for consideration.

Ethical conservation codes⁴ suggest that any applied treatments are as reversible as possible and that the original object is not depleted or permanently altered by those treatments. This includes compromising any so-called 'intangible' features such as religious or important cultural significances. This reasoned ethical code postulates that the current state and condition of an object may be more valuable historically or scientifically if left undisturbed. For example, if there are unusual provenances, materials, manufacturing techniques, repair methods or earlier historical changes that merit preservation for future study. Note that even simply cleaning an object can irreversibly remove potentially significant information⁵. Conservation ethics require some flexibility⁶. There are no absolute principles because objects and their states and conditions are complex and vary infinitely. Their proposed use, values and possible treatment regimens are often unique, so that no universal rules can apply. American Institute of Conservation (AIC)⁷ have attempted ethical conservation guidelines that are widely referred to and applied to the extent possible, but anyone who has attempted to write a universal Code of Ethics will quickly understand that it is impossible.

Historical musical instruments are particularly vulnerable to compromise as they are maintained, modified and repaired over centuries and previous care applied was not always the best⁸. For example, if a modern-day player/owner wishes to play a 200-year-old instrument using modern strings and modern playing techniques they might seek restorations and modifications to enable that. The result would be a different instrument to the original, possibly so far removed that it could no longer be considered 'original' in any real sense. Old master violins have undergone many and varied repairs and modifications over time such that often very little of the original instrument exists. The claimed 'originality' perpetuates the romantic notions of a great violin's sound and the legendary maker's craft and elevates them to mythical status. Although little or none of the original instrument may exist the *idea* of a great object is preserved and some argue that this is just as valuable as preserving a tangible object. The example of the sailing ship of Theseus is often cited⁹. After Theseus retired, his old boat was preserved as a designated object of cultural value and admiration. Constant repair and renewal meant that eventually none of its original structure remained. The iconic transport of the hero used during his historical epic adventures was still revered.

There is a common misconception that 'restoration' actually re-instates an object to 'as it was' at some point in history. Even if we deploy the finest craft techniques, the most authentic materials and state-of-the-art scientific methods, an object such as an historical instrument can never be returned to a previous state. That would imply reversing time, which is impossible except in sci-fi movies. The best we can achieve is a more or less accurate *re-creation* of an earlier state and a slowdown of any active deterioration processes to stabilise and preserve what remains of the original for as long as possible.

The decision

The owner decided and committed to a restoration of the soundboard after debate and discussion. The service to art, education, culture and appreciation of historical

instruments, music and performance among the wider public was considered important enough to balance some of the ethical and practical challenges. Seeing and hearing a totally original instrument of this age would be an impressive experience for any audience and very likely a unique and unforgettable one. The commercial aspects were of importance; the owner could claim and advertise performances of early music on a unique original historical guitar as a means of generating professional income. Gathering new information during and after the conservation offered academic and research value. Accomplishing the project aims would need novel ideas and techniques. The integration of traditional craft processes with modern concepts, methods, materials and conservation ethics, would inform future projects of this type. Unavailability of safe storage or display¹⁰ meant that one could not guarantee the long-term safety of the soundboard separated from its guitar. Although objects like this do exist in museum storage facilities ¹¹ complete and functioning instruments of this age and provenance are extremely rare.

End of part 1

Chris Egerton. April 2019

Part 2 of this article (forthcoming) outlines the practical approach and observations made during preliminary examination and research

Select bibliography. Other relevant sources will be cited in future parts of this article series.

Barclay, R. L.

'The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments: Display Case and Concert Hall' Earthscan, London 2005

Pollens, Stewart

'The Manual of Musical Instrument Conservation'. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015.

Rivers, Shane. Umney, Nick

'Conservation of Furniture'. Routledge. London 2003

Munoz-Vinas, Salvador

'Contemporary Theory of Conservation'. Routledge. London 2004

NOTES

¹ Conservation and restoration activities co-exist to varying degrees in the practical interventions of old objects. Robert Barclay discusses conservation, restoration and currency maintenance as applied to musical instruments: Barclay R. *The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments...* pp 19-22 and Table 2.1

² American Institute of Conservation (AIC) offers one definition of conservation: 'Conservation encompasses all those actions taken toward the long-term preservation of cultural heritage. Activities include examination, documentation, treatment, and preventive care, supported by research and

education'. <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/what-is-conservation>. Accessed 7/4/2019

³ The term '*state*' refers to an object's actual configuration at a given point in time and will include for example historical repairs, alterations and changes due to deterioration processes or changes in cultural values.

In contrast, the term '*condition*' focusses on the active deterioration processes present, their nature, risks, and the possible remedies to halt or alleviate their consequences.

⁴ Several attempts at formulating ethical codes for conservation have been made. The AIC has a list of 13 codified ethics as well as additional guidelines for practitioners:

<https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/code-of-ethics>. Accessed 7/4/2019

⁵ '*Cleaning is obviously not reversible; the exact material removed cannot be replaced. It is therefore vital that the conservator be sure that the material being removed is not original to the maker of the piece or important to any historic use of it, or that any information that such material can provide is not lost during the process.*'

Barbara Appelbaum '*Journal of the American Institute of Conservation*' 1987. Vol 26, No 2. pp 63-75.

⁶ Munoz-vinas, Salvador. '*Contemporary Theory of Conservation*'. p 202. Routledge. London 2004.

⁷ See 3 above

⁸ Inanimate objects do not have rights or values other than those ascribed to them by human owners or stakeholders.

⁹ Cohen, S. Marc. '*Identity, Persistence, and the Ship of Theseus*'

<https://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/theseus.html> Accessed 7/4/2019

¹⁰ Objects made of organic materials such as wood ideally need to be stored or displayed in controlled Relative Humidity (RH) conditions as well as under controlled light exposure and pest management conditions to ensure long-term deterioration risk management.

¹¹ e.g. Royal College of Music. An 18th Century 'cello neck. Inventory number RCM0049

<http://minim.ac.uk/index.php/explore/?instrument=9184> Accessed 7/4/2019.