

Revealing the maker's hands

Curator John Watson finds the humanity in additions to 'Changing Keys'



HEATHER BRIDGES PHOTOS

John Watson is the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's conservator emeritus of instruments and mechanical arts, as well as associate curator emeritus of musical instruments. Here, he stands with the only surviving organized upright grand piano in the world.

BY HEATHER BRIDGES
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At 9 feet tall and 7 feet wide, the piano is a sight to behold, looming over 27 other keyboards in the "Changing Keys" exhibit at DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum.

The piano is striking for more than just its appearance.

"This is the only surviving organized upright grand piano in the world," said John Watson, a retired conservator with Colonial Williamsburg, standing in front of the piece he worked to restore. "And it was right here in Williamsburg. Isn't that amazing? It really, really is."

This organized piano, one of three additions to Colonial Williamsburg's "Changing Keys: Keyboard Instruments for America, 1700-1830," has finally found its way home.

Crafted in London, the piano first arrived to Williamsburg in 1799, purchased by St. George Tucker for his daughter, Fanny.

"When this arrived," Watson said, "I'm pretty sure this would've been the largest, most complex domestic musical instrument in America."

Watson said the instrument likely started its life as an upright grand piano, a type of piano in which the strings run vertically and was built during the period. Soon, it was "organized," combined with a six-stop organ of 265 pipes.

At the time, Watson said square pianos outnumbered grand pianos 50 to one — another addition to the exhibit is a much smaller organized square piano built in 1801 and organized in 1803.

After Fanny Tucker married, the grandiose instrument resided in multiple homes throughout the years — Shirley Plantation, Castle Hill and Richmond. The instrument was actually offered to Colonial Williamsburg twice but was turned down because its history and rarity were unknown, Watson said.

When Watson later heard about the instrument, he decided to track it down. Two months prior to the opening of "Changing Keys," Watson said he received an email about an organized piano in a Richmond warehouse. Two months later, the organized piano was back in Williamsburg, and the restoration has taken three years.

Nearly three-quarters of a million visitors have passed through "Changing Keys" since it opened in November of 2012, according to a Colonial Williamsburg news release.

"Changing Keys has proven to be one of the most popular exhibitions presently on view at the Art Museums," Ronald Hurst stated in the



A harpsichord ordered by George Washington, and on loan from Mount Vernon, will be displayed in the exhibit until the end of 2017.

release. Hurst is the foundation's vice president for collections, conservation and museums.

Watson, the driving force behind the exhibit, recently retired after 28 years with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation as conservator of instruments and mechanical arts and associate curator of musical instruments. Watson is one of few other keyboard instrument conservators in the country.

He described the paradox of his work.

"I'm serving two masters. I want to preserve it untouched, but I also think the music is important," Watson said. "That really gave rise to working out this kind of tricky solution to a paradox — how do we restore it without destroying it as a historical document?"

Watson's answer lies in the art of "restorative conservation," an approach to restoration that doesn't sacrifice the object's historical evidence. Adding to, rather than stripping, an instrument's finish, for example.

"You turn it into a good musical instrument," he said, "but you're very aware of that historical evidence, and you step over it, you preserve it, you document it."

It's an approach that has characterized Watson's career, and he will actually be crafting a reproduction of the last of three additions to "Changing Keys": a harpsichord purchased by George Washington in 1793, on loan from Mount Vernon, where the instrument has remained since 1858.

Washington ordered the harpsichord from London for his step-granddaughter, Nelly Parke Custis, and this was a time when harpsichords were nearly obsolete and pianos gained popularity.

"The harpsichord makers were

Changing Keys

When: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily

Where: DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, 326 W. Francis St.
Museum single-day tickets are \$12 for adults and \$6.49 for children ages 6-12. Admission is also included in Colonial Williamsburg passes. For more information, call 757-220-7724 or visit colonialwilliamsburg.com.

trying to change the way they made harpsichords so that they worked for the new music, the changing taste," Watson said.

The complexity of Nelly's harpsichord captures many of these adaptations, including a "Venetian swell" that allowed the harpsichord to do something it traditionally could not do: crescendo.

Once harpsichords became obsolete, the instrument was closed up. It became a "time capsule," Watson said, the inside never restored.

"It's like I'm going back to 1793 and visiting the workshop that made this instrument and I'm seeing their work exactly," he said.

That's what Watson loves. His role inherently involves study of the object, but the object reveals its maker's hands.

"It's going back in time and walking through 130 years of really fascinating history. You see change. You see changing taste. You see changing technology. You see changing music. Changing ideas about what is beautiful," Watson said. "And you get to know them very intimately. You kind of get to know the makers."

"It's really fascinating to see the humanity in the objects, and the closer you look, the more they reveal."

WEEKEND

10 Painting on the River — An evening of painting with local artist Elizabeth Lester. You'll walk away with your own work of art. 6-8 p.m., Monday. Watermen's Museum, 309 Water St. \$30, call 887-2641 to reserve a spot.

9 Berret's 26th Annual Crab Races — The crab races return as a benefit for the Tom Austin Culinary Scholarship Foundation and Beyond Boobs! 6-7 p.m., Sunday. 199 South Boundary St. \$10-\$50 to compete, free to watch. Call 253-1847.

8 Summer Breeze Concert Series — U.S. Army TRADOC band performs in the final concert of the series. 7-9 p.m. Wednesday. Merchants Square. Free.

7 Food Truck Frenzy — Features three food truck favorites, live music, two freshly tapped beers and free brewery tours. Noon to 9 p.m., Saturday. Virginia Beer Co., 401 Second St.

6 Thunderbirds: Jewelry of the Santo Domingo Pueblo — See examples of jewelry and explore jewelry-making techniques from the Santo Domingo Pueblo in New Mexico. 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., daily; exhibit closes Monday. Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, 326 W. Francis St. Included in museum admission.

5 Annual Bruton Parish Book Sale — Browse books, CDs, DVDs and puzzles. Proceeds benefit the church's mission and outreach. There will also be jewelry and accessories for sale. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday-Sunday. Parish House, 331 W. Duke of Gloucester St. Free.

4 'Chasing the Dragon' — SpiritWorks Foundation hosts a screening of "Chasing the Dragon," a documentary about opiate addiction, followed by a discussion. 6:30-8:30 p.m., Wednesday. 5351 Richmond Road. Free.

3 Soundworks — JCC Rotary Club presents an evening with Soundworks a cappella chorus. 7:30 p.m., Saturday. Kimball Theatre, 424 W. Duke of Gloucester St. \$18, call 757-565-8566.

2 Symphony Under the Stars — Virginia Symphony Orchestra presents an outdoor program with a maritime theme. 7:30 p.m., Thursday at Lake Matoaka Amphitheatre; 7:30 p.m., Saturday at Riverwalk Landing. Free.

1 Bier Fest at Busch Gardens — More than 200 years of Oktoberfest traditions come to life at this all-new event. 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday-Sunday, and 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday. 1 Busch Gardens Blvd. Included in park admission.

AFTER DARK

Wednesday
Cogan's Deli & Sports Pub: Skinner Box, 7-9 p.m.
Water Street Grille: Something Different Duo, 7-10 p.m.
Triangle Restaurant: Liana Dagmar and Friends, 7:30-10 p.m.
Waypoint Seafood and Grill: LCV Project, 6-9 p.m.

Thursday
Berret's Taphouse Grill: Timeline Jazz Quartet/Ardent Craft Ales, 5-9 p.m.
The Corner Pocket: Bossa Vehla, 7-9 p.m.
Triangle Restaurant: TBA, 7-10 p.m.

Friday
Berret's Taphouse Grill: Joe Heilmann, 7-10 p.m.
Daddy's Tavern: Flash Point, 8-11:30 p.m.
Aromas: Jack Enea, 7-9 p.m.