

Appendix K

The First Harpsichord Brought to Australia: An apocryphal tale

Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century sources discussing or depicting music-making at Sydney Cove are meagre. As a consequence, it is not always possible to arrive at conclusions with certainty. Myths abound, some of which have been repeated reverently by eminent researchers as truth. One such myth concerns the first harpsichord to be brought to Australia.

According to the Australian harpsichordist Elizabeth Anderson, Australia's first harpsichord arrived with its gentleman-convict owner John Grant (1776–?) on the convict ship *Coromandel*¹ in May 1804.² McQueen supports Anderson's view, stating that 'at least one convict, John Grant, brought a harpsichord with him into exile'.³ The evidence supporting the arrival of Grant's harpsichord is, however, spurious, at best.

John Grant had been sentenced to death for shooting Spencer Townsend—a family solicitor and the guardian of the finances of Miss Anna Maria Ward, the daughter of Viscount Dudley and Mrs Anna Maria Ward—'in the hams'.⁴

In a preview of her book *This Beauteous, Wicked Place: Letters and Journals of John Grant, Gentleman Convict*,⁵ Yvonne Cramer provides an account of events associated with Grant's conviction:

Grant was a young London merchant obsessively in love with the daughter of Viscount Dudley and Ward. In order to gain the family's approval to marry his beloved he attempted to make a quick fortune by speculating on cargoes from the West Indies, but was ruined when his ships were lost at sea.

Following Grant's bankruptcy, Ward's lawyer [Spencer Townsend], hoping to turn Miss Ward against her lover, told her that Grant ['wanted

1 In the mid-1820s, the *Coromandel* was established as one of four infamous prison hulks at Ireland Island, Bermuda. See W. Branch-Johnson, *The English Prison Hulks* (London: Christopher Johnson, 1957), pp. 165–73.

2 See www.elizabethanderson.org/grant.html.

3 McQueen, *A New Britannia*, p. 112.

4 That is, in the buttock. See W. S. Hill-Reid, *John Grant's Journey: A Convict's Story 1803–11* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 8.

5 Y. Cramer, 'Preview: This Beauteous, Wicked Place: Letters and Journals of John Grant, Gentleman Convict', in *NLA News*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (March) (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2000).

men and not women'.]⁶ In a frenzy of frustration and rage Grant filled two pistols with swan shot⁷ [in order that no-one be seriously injured]⁸ ... and accosted the lawyer [on the steps of his home in St James's Place]⁹ ... threatening to shoot him unless he apologised and 'corrected this gross calumny with Miss Ward'.

When Townsend's apology was not forthcoming, Grant discharged his swan shot into Townsend's coat,¹⁰ inadvertently wounding him in the buttock.

Grant was seized, tried for attempted murder and convicted. The trial [held at the Old Bailey in May 1803] was widely considered to be a disgraceful travesty of justice¹¹ and ... [38] eminent businessmen signed [Grant's own] ... petition to King George [III] pleading for [his] ... life.¹² Grant's sister Matilda wrote a beautifully-worded petition to the king's daughters seeking their intervention on behalf of her brother.¹³

Twelve hours before [Grant] ... was due to hang, his death sentence was commuted to transportation to the colony at New South Wales¹⁴ ['for the term of his natural life'].¹⁵

In October 1803, after spending five months in Newgate Prison, Grant was transferred to the *Coromandel* as it lay at anchor at Portsmouth. Grant later remarked that he was displeased to find himself amongst the '199 abominable villains whom the British Government [had] ... given [him as] companions'.¹⁶

In 1803, at the time of the *Coromandel's* scheduled departure, England was at war with France. 'The Convoy Laws of 1798 stipulated that no ship was to leave

6 Ibid., p. 7.

7 Swan shot is made by pouring molten lead through a mesh or screen into a cooling medium, such as water. The shot often hardens with a small tail on each pellet, and is irregular in shape rather than round like regular shot.

8 Cramer, 'Preview', p. 7.

9 See 'St. James's Pla.', in Cary, *Cary's New and Accurate Plan of London and Westminster the Borough of Southwark and Parts Adjacent*, Map Reference 35.

10 Cramer, 'Preview', p. 7.

11 The trial is scrupulously reported in the *Sessions Records*, housed in the Guildhall Library, London. See Hill-Reid, *John Grant's Journey*, p. 9.

12 This petition is housed in the National Library of Australia: MS 737; and mfm 462: *Papers of John Grant*, Item 9.

13 The petition is housed in the National Library of Australia: MS 737; and mfm 462: *Papers of John Grant*, Item 10.

14 Cramer, 'Preview'.

15 Hill-Reid, *John Grant's Journey*, p. 16.

16 Cramer, 'Preview', p. 28. 'Grant's letters and journals were discovered by W. S. Hill-Reid, a banking historian, in the vaults of a London bank in 1955, where they had lain for some 150 years.' N. S. Lynravn, 'Grant, John (1776-?)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University) [First published in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 1966], Vol. 1.

a British port without convoy.¹⁷ Consequently, the *Coromandel* remained at anchor at Portsmouth for three months whilst a convoy of military and merchant ships was formed to protect it on its voyage to Sydney Cove.

While the ship lay at anchor, Grant went ashore 'a number of times on little forays for newspapers and for coffee'¹⁸ at the India Arms in Portsmouth, and busied himself carefully stowing 'food, seeds, wines and his furniture'¹⁹ as well as other personal effects into the small cabin he was to share with a young and penniless Dr Fielding, who was sailing to New South Wales in the hope of restoring his fortunes.²⁰

Yvonne Cramer remarks:

A possible explanation for Grant's apparent freedom and casual attitude while waiting to sail from Portsmouth was his family's connection with Mr. Lane, one of the owners of the *Coromandel*, and with Vice-Admiral John Hunter [1737–1821], who had been the previous Governor of New South Wales. Hunter provided Grant with information and advice concerning the young colony, and letters of introduction to prominent men there.²¹

Just before his departure from Portsmouth for New South Wales (on Monday, 5 December 1803), Grant may have reflected upon how fortunate he was not to have been forced to endure an extended period of incarceration in Newgate Prison. In 1777, John Howard's book *The State of Prisons in England and Wales: With Preliminary Observations, and an Account of Some Foreign Prisons and Hospitals*²² painted a devastating picture of the reality of prisons, 'and brought into the open much of what had been out of sight and out of mind to genteel society'.²³ Howard concluded that disease and the lack of sanitation in prisons resulted in 'more prisoners [being] ... destroyed ... in gaols than were put to death by all the public executions in the Kingdom'.²⁴ The inmates of English prisons were usually 'malnourished, debilitated, cold, inadequately clothed, and infested with disease-bearing lice ... cells were a happy home for typhus ... [During] the 1780s ... gaols went into crisis each winter and generally staggered through until spring providing nothing terrible happened'.²⁵

17 Cramer, 'Preview', p. 19.

18 Ibid., p. 13.

19 Ibid., p. 13.

20 See *ibid.*, p. 28.

21 Ibid., p. 13.

22 J. Howard, *The State of Prisons in England and Wales: With Preliminary Observations, and an Account of Some Foreign Prisons and Hospitals* (Warrington, UK: William Eyres, 1777).

23 Hill, 1788, p. 9.

24 Howard, *The State of Prisons in England and Wales*, pp. 8–9. Quoted in Hill, 1788, p. 9.

25 S. Rees, *The Floating Brothel* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2006), p. 43.

The appalling conditions found in prisons were amplified on prison hulks. John Howard declared:

I think it will be admitted that the mode of confinement and labour in the hulks is too severe for the far greater number of those who are confined in them. At the same time, there is no proportion of punishment to the several offences, and consequently no distinction of guilt ... such an assemblage is entirely destructive to the morals of young convicts: the profaneness of the prisoners is not properly checked; and some of the guards set them a bad example.²⁶

In a letter dated Friday, 2 December 1803,²⁷ written by Grant to his mother only three days before he sailed from Portsmouth, he intimates that the furniture he brought aboard the *Coromandel* may have included a harpsichord:

I had almost forgot to say, the Screws to my Lock with hinges on [the] Harpsichord Box are too large for [the] holes, but we make them do; but three small Screws are wanting to fasten [the] Hasp on [the] Lid and I cannot do without some. Pray send me a few of different sizes, some very small.²⁸

A passage from the same letter, however, brings into question the supposition that Grant brought a harpsichord with him. Grant wrote: 'there were only 2 Parcels for Mr. Fielding in [the] Harpsichord Box, but he expected something more I believe.'²⁹ We do not know the size of these two parcels.

It may be 'that the "Harpsichord Box" in question was being used as a convenient storage space for general luggage rather than an instrument itself'.³⁰

It may also be that the term 'harpsichord box' was used to denote a specific type of box. Either the design and function of the harpsichord box were directly connected with the storage and protection of a harpsichord or the design and function of the box were not directly associated with any type of musical instrument at all. Perhaps it was simply a large box (possibly one with an unusual shape).

Earlier in the same letter, Grant writes: 'The 2 boxes [of] seeds are packed away. It leaves me much room in [the] large box, which now having [a] lock on, will for

26 Quoted in Branch-Johnson, *The English Prison Hulks*, p. 29.

27 National Library of Australia: MS 737, Item 11.

28 Y. Cramer, *This Beauteous, Wicked Place: Letters and Journals of John Grant, Gentleman Convict* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2000), p. 18.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

30 D. Irving, 'Early Music Performance in Australia: Cultural and Historical Perspectives', in *Aesthetics and Experience in Music Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), p. 58. Irving takes the quotation from: B. Ralph, 'This Beauteous, Wicked Disc', [Review of *The Convict Harpsichordist*], in *Early Music*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (February) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 169–70.

years be of infinite utility.’³¹ It is not clear whether or not Grant’s large box is his harpsichord box or another large box. Nor is it clear whether the two parcels for ‘Mr. Fielding’³² in the harpsichord box were the two boxes of seeds.³³

Grant reveals that, following the arrival of ‘two ... boxes [of] valuables of all kinds’,³⁴ the ‘large one, after being altered, was fitted into the recess’. Grant does not reveal to what extent the large box was altered in order that it could fit, presumably, into his cabin.

If the altered large box was Grant’s harpsichord box, he makes no mention of it containing a musical instrument. Instead, he lists some of its contents as being ‘black sattin waistcoats and breeches ... shirts [and a] ... white hat’.³⁵ If the large box was Grant’s harpsichord box, and it contained a harpsichord, this would explain why his white hat was ‘rather squeezed, as well as [the] box which contained it’.³⁶ Alternatively, and given appropriate dimensions, the box need not necessarily have contained a harpsichord for Grant’s white hat to have been ‘rather squeezed’.

Even if John Grant did travel with a harpsichord, and it was in the form of an English bentside spinet—one of the harpsichord’s cheaper and smaller incarnations³⁷ (Plates 423 and 424)—it is unlikely that his cabin would have been large enough to comfortably accommodate the instrument.

Not much is known about the maker of the bentside spinet shown in Plates 423 and 424. He may be the ‘Furley Hawkins’ described in *The London Gazette* of Tuesday, 13 May 1755 as being one of the unfortunate ‘prisoners for debt in Ludgate, in the City of London’, having been ‘formerly of the Parish of Christ Church Newgate Street, and late of Black Swan Court, in the Parish of St. Gregory, Joyner’.³⁸

31 Cramer, *This Beauteous, Wicked Place*, p. 16.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

37 An English bentside spinet could be purchased for between £5 and £10. This was substantially less than a large harpsichord, which could be purchased for £70 or more. During the 1780s, the usual top price for a Broadwood harpsichord, for example, was £73 10s; an instrument with elaborate case decoration could be almost £90, whilst at the opposite end of the spectrum, a plain single-manual instrument could cost as little as 15 guineas. See Burnett, *Company of Pianos*, pp. 16, 47.

38 *The London Gazette*, 13 May 1755, p. 13. On Tuesday, 20 November 1714, Furley Hawkins was apprenticed to the harpsichord maker Thomas Barton (1685–1731). See L. Whitehead and J. Nex, *Sun insurance policies 1710–79, A to D*, fn. 24. Barton had learned his trade as the penultimate apprentice of the master spinet maker Stephen Keene (ca 1639–1712). See P. G. Mole, *The English Spinet with particular reference to The Schools of Keene and Hitchcock*, PhD dissertation (The University of Edinburgh, 2009), p. 86.



Plate 423 Bentside spinet by Furley Hawkins (fl. ca 1725 – ca 1747) (London, 1736). This is the only extant spinet by Furley Hawkins.

Source: Stewart Symonds Collection, Sydney. Photo by the author.



Plate 424 Bentside spinet by Furley Hawkins (fl. ca 1725 – ca 1747) (London, 1736).

Source: Stewart Symonds Collection, Sydney. Photo by the author.

The dimensions of a bentside spinet, or of a single-manual English harpsichord—let alone a double-manual harpsichord—would have precluded such an instrument being housed in John Grant's cabin. It is also unlikely that the novel presence of a bentside spinet or a harpsichord on board ship would have gone unmentioned in any of the documents linked with the voyage; concerning the presence of a harpsichord, extant documentation remains silent.

Grant's social position, business contacts and engaging personality, together with presumed financial influence of his family and friends, ensured his privileged passage to New South Wales. During the voyage Grant was befriended by Captain George Robinson and invited to share the Officers' Mess [ward room]. He kept five logs for the Captain and occupied himself with learning navigation.³⁹

Grant was 'invited to share the Officers' Mess'.⁴⁰ Did sharing involve the use of the officers' ward room for the storage of his spinet or harpsichord? The small dimensions of the officers' ward room would have made housing a bentside spinet (or a harpsichord) both difficult and inconvenient.

Following a six-month voyage, the *Coromandel* anchored at Sydney Cove in the late afternoon of Monday, 7 May 1804. 'Grant leant towards the mildly radical politics of the English Whigs and was totally incautious in his enthusiasms.'⁴¹ In May 1805, a year after his arrival at Sydney Cove, Grant

wrote attacking Governor Philip Gidley King for his lack of justice and was deported to Norfolk Island next month ... it was for his outspoken criticism of Captain John Piper that, after other drastic punishments failed to curb him, he was finally banished to the uninhabited neighbouring Phillip Island. Here, after four months of isolation and near starvation, he broke down physically and mentally, and was brought back to Norfolk Island. He was returned to Sydney in 1808 completely subdued and with his health restored; for a period he obtained a post as chaplain in Newcastle. He was later pardoned by Lachlan Macquarie.

Grant's persistent championing of his fellow sufferers was courageous and praiseworthy but it was done recklessly and with an entire lack of finesse, and the punishments he incurred were severe. His utter foolhardiness suggests an unbalanced mind.⁴²

If Grant did bring a harpsichord with him to Sydney Cove, it is not known what became of the instrument upon his arrival. Had a harpsichord been brought

39 Cramer, *This Beauteous, Wicked Place*, p. 14.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

41 Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788–1840*, p. 106.

42 Lynravn, 'Grant, John (1776–?)'.

ashore, there can be little doubt that someone would have made a comment about it. There is no documentary evidence describing the offloading of a harpsichord at Sydney Cove, nor can any mention of a harpsichord or spinet be found in Grant's own journals. In fact, there is no mention in any source of there being a harpsichord anywhere in the fledgling colony.

The only conclusion that can be reached with certainty is that John Grant's letter of 2 December 1803, written prior to his departure for Sydney Cove, contains the first use of the word 'harpsichord' written within a context that is strongly connected with a defining period in Australian history.

This text is taken from *The First Fleet Piano: A Musician's View, Volume Two*, by Geoffrey Lancaster, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.