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Harpsichord builder Ken Tyrell checks out one of his latest creations.

ACOUSTIC IN AUSTRALIA: SHADES OF A PROMISING PAST

SOMEWHERE AMIDST THE flashy festivities commemorating 200 years of European settlement in Australia, one low-key exhibit honors a small but important part of the country's history. At the Powerhouse, a new museum in Sydney, visitors view a Beale player piano, one of 30 instruments in the museum's collection. What distinguishes the Beale is that it was built in Australia; today it is a tribute to fine workmanship, as well as a sad reminder of an industry whose days in this country appear to have passed.

Barclay Wright, owner of the Mastertouch Piano Roll Company in Petersham, New South Wales, explains the history of the now-defunct Beale Piano Company. "At the beginning of the twentieth century, Octavius Beale made his first piano in Australia; it was a copy of a German instrument, so it was called the Hapsburg Beale. Beale began building instruments with imported machinery, but as the business grew he began making his own machinery and manufacturing every component of his pianos, including the cast iron frames. Eventually Beale started copying American styles of lacquering and building player action mechanisms, so extensively that his plant was referred to as 'the American factory.'"

For many years Beale was the largest piano manufacturer in the British Empire, building affordable no-nonsense uprights and small grands as well as player pianos. He also manufactured at least four full-size grands; one can be seen in Government House in Sydney, and another is in the prime minister's residence in Canberra. Business boomed to the point that the company built its own timber mill near Dorrigo. Beale used Australian timber whenever possible, casing many pianos in wood from the camphor laurel tree, which is similar to Hungarian walnut.

Due to the havoc that Australia's hot and humid climate plays with tuning, Octavius Beale patented his own tuning system. He did away with the wooden wrest plank, replacing it with an all-iron tuning system that was cast as a unit with the frame. The pins were inserted through the iron, with a locking nut on the other side, which offered greater stability than wooden pins.

Beale's undoing may have been his desire to sell pianos to buyers without much discretionary income. To keep prices down, he only gave dealers a 10 percent finder's fee for each sale. Not only did this policy do little to generate dealer enthusiasm for Beale; it encouraged retailers to spread rumors that the iron system damaged the piano's tone. Despite the fact that there was no negative impact, Beale was eventually forced to revert to the old wooden designs, selling these instruments under such names as Empire, Hood, and Singolo.

In the 1950s Beale's Palings factory in Waterloo, New South Wales, was purchased by Music Houses of Australia, a division of EMI. By the early '70s, all piano manufacturing in Australia had come to a halt. The only Australian acoustic keyboards being built nowadays are precursors of the piano—harpsichords, virginals, and fortepianos, crafted by less than a dozen cottage builders, two of whom work near Sydney.

Hugh Jones (27 Probert St., Camperdown, New South Wales 1050, Australia) studied metalworking and woodworking in England, then apprenticed to an organ builder before becoming a full-time harpsichord maker. He frequently uses wood from King William conifers on the small Australian island state of Tasmania for his soundboards, relying on other Australian timbers for the cabinetry. Most of his instruments, which retail between $7,000 and $25,000 in Australian dollars, are purchased by individuals, although two-manual models usually go to music schools and conservatories. "I use French, Flemish, and Italian patterns," Jones explains, "but I combine ideas from each of these to make my own designs. People want versatile instruments, so I frequently make them with more than five octaves, which allows artists to play a wider repertoire."

Another harpsichord builder, Ken Tyrrell (10 Hydrae, Revesby, New South Wales 2212, Australia), created his first instrument in 1974 by copying an English-made Kirckman harpsichord in a local museum. Although his instruments are based on small Italian harpsichords, no two are exactly alike, except in that they all have soundboards made of imported Sitka spruce. The soundboard, which is thickest around the soundhole and tapers out to about 2½ to 3 millimeters, floats on a thin rim attached to the inner sides of the cabinet. Tyrrell hand-makes as many of the harpsichord's parts as possible, including the jacks which are used in the string-plucking mechanism. "I haven't gotten to the stage of using turkey or crow quills for the plectra, as some other builders do," he laughs. "I'm quite happy with Delrum plastic. I buy it in sheet form, half a millimeter thick, and I cut my own plectra out of that. They're all shaped by hand, and fitted individually into each jack."

As long as precise craftsmen such as Tyrrell and Jones are on the job, quality workmanship will survive in the Australian musical instrument industry. In a landscape often bathed by the high-tech glare of Fairlight, it's good to know that traditional standards of excellence persist too.

—*Nancy S. Grant*