

Joanna's Stodart, an English Square Piano by Andrew Lancaster



Stodart 1823 Joanna's favourite piano - Music Room, Shute

This square piano was made by Stodart in the early 1820's. Stodart, with John Broadwood, had been apprenticed to the harpsichord maker Burkat Shudi, and like Broadwood, Stodart saw that the harpsichord was on the way out, and the piano was in the ascendant. He, again like Broadwood, set up his workshop in London's Soho, where he made many very fine pianos; mainly squares, but a significant number of grand pianos too. His square pianos are slightly more masculine, slightly larger, than the square pianos of the same period by Broadwood.

When I first bought this particular Stodart square, it was in good

condition case-wise, but many (most, in fact) of the strings were broken and dangling out from under the lid. Internally the piano, though in need of full restoration, was in sound condition and all of the hammers and dampers were present. Joanna Leach saw the piano in its unrestored condition and seemed very doubtful when I told her that it was going to be an exceptional instrument, but once all of the hammers had been re-hinged and the top leather replaced, the dampers re-clothed, all underhammers re-hinged, strings replaced and the whole instrument put back into fine playing order, Jo tried it - and fell in love!

The instrument has a fine, even and responsive action, with a very wide dynamic range. The tone is vibrant and exciting; it can convey the subtleties of a Field nocturne wonderfully well, and can equally convincingly portray the dynamic, Iberian timbres of a Scarlatti sonata. Jo was able to make this instrument sing, and the tonal qualities which she could coax from the it made it as suitable for playing Mozart as it was for Soler.

While it did not replaced her beloved Steinway in Joanna's affections, it added a whole new range of tone colour and interpretations to her palette and she adored playing and recording on it. The term "piano" misleads to some extent; it encourages one to compare the sound of a square piano to the totally different one of a modern piano, when it is actually an instrument in its own right; an instrument with a beguiling personality and immense charm. Listening to music composed at the time that the square pianos were being made, hearing the sound that the composer was expecting to hear, is almost time travel, and a fascinating journey it is.