

An Australian soundboard

by Carey Beebe

While our native timbers can be very beautiful and useful for many purposes musical and otherwise, they are not considered appropriate for the best harpsichords: Players demand that these be made using the traditional European woods. Of course, Australia has gum trees and kangaroos amongst its wealth of colorful flora and fauna. As the Flemish insisted on filling their soundboards with a profusion of flowers familiar to them, why shouldn't a modern Antipodean harpsichord maker do likewise?

Time constraints prevented my 2003 Ruckers Double harpsichord being able to be decorated during construction because it was urgently required for two performances by *Les Arts Florissants* for the opening of Singapore's Esplanade Theatres on the Bay. It was a pleasure to have such an auspicious debut for an instrument, and this harpsichord has been one of my most popular hire instruments since. It was always in my mind to proceed with the decoration when schedules permitted.



Diana Ford and Carey Beebe with the soundboard in progress

As a graphic artist, Diana Ford began her career painting celluloids in the Australian animated film industry, before going on to work in London for a period on the Beatles' animated feature film *Yellow Submarine* with her husband Cam. After founding their own studio, Cinemagic Animated Films, back home in Australia, some of her subsequent work included another animated feature *Footrot Flats*, and memorable animated TV commercials, like the Orchy orange vine growing into the kitchen, the Flintstones for Amber Tiles and the creation of the "Ferdie bird" for a Sydney car dealership. Di was one of my earliest customers, and we soon became good friends. She began assisting by offering to do the nameboard calligraphy on my 1984 English Bentside Spinnet which she liked so much she later bought. Two decades, two more nameboards and almost a dozen soundboard paintings later, we still enjoy our collaboration.

Her most recent project has been the soundboard decoration of this instrument using Australian flowers and fruits rendered in the style of early Ioannes Ruckers. The Ruckers dynasty lasted a century from the 1580s, and exported highly-prized instruments far from their Antwerp base. Several survive from this particular period, including the 1612 Ruckers owned by Queen Elizabeth and kept at Fenton House in London. In this style of the early Ioannes Ruckers painter, the profuse foliage is painted all the same color no matter what the flower, with black outlines, some centre veins and hatching. The rose is surrounded by a wreath of intertwined leaves with a few buds and flowers—just asking for the simple substitution of gum blossoms and nuts, and the Australian conversion had already begun.



Ruckers Double harpsichord soundboard view

The Flemish butterfly already looked suspiciously Bogong moth-like, and there was no better bird than the Willy Wagtail for some of the dumb-looking originals.

All the flowers chosen are found in various parts of Australia, and many will already be familiar to foreigners. All are endemic, except the weed *Tradescantia albiflora* which originated in South America.

Also characteristic of this soundboard style are the blue arabesque explosions from the scalloped borders, filling in the blank space between the floral motifs. These are individual and roughly symmetrical, and painted thickly to give a raised dimension to the board.

After several weeks research, the strings were removed in early January 2008 and Diana completed the soundboard in her Southern Highlands studio in three weeks. The strings were replaced in time for a tour to Brisbane, Newcastle and Sydney with violinist Nigel Kennedy and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, running through early February.

Our next collaboration is on a French Double Harpsichord for the Qasr Al Alam Guest House, Oman.

CODE	SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMON NAME
1	<i>Sollya heterophylla</i>	Bluebell creeper
2	<i>Crowea saligna</i>	Willow-leaved crowea
3	<i>Gymnostachys anceps</i>	Settler's flax
4	<i>Ceratopetalum gummiferum</i>	New South Wales Christmas bush
5	<i>Anigozanthos manglesii</i>	Red and green kangaroo paw
6	<i>Patersonia glabrata</i>	Leafy purple-flag
7	<i>Wahlenbergia gloriosa</i>	Royal bluebell
8	<i>Burchardia umbellata</i>	Milkmaids
9	<i>Callistemon salignus</i>	Willow bottlebrush
10	<i>Acacia verniciflua</i>	Varnish wattle
11	<i>Blandfordia grandiflora</i>	Large Christmas bells
12	<i>Crinum flaccidum</i>	Darling lily
13	<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i>	Willie wagtail
14	<i>Acacia longifolia</i>	Sydney golden wattle
15	<i>Syzygium oleosum</i>	Blue lilly pilli
16	<i>Actinotus helianthus</i>	Flannel flower
17	<i>Grevillea alpina</i>	Mountain grevillea
18	<i>Tradescantia albiflora</i>	White-flowered wandering Jew
19	<i>Thelymitra venosa</i>	Blue-veined sun orchid
20	<i>Hakea bakeriana</i>	[no common name]
21	<i>Clianthus formosus</i>	Sturt's desert pea
22	<i>Ptilotus exaltatus</i>	Pink mulla mulla
23	<i>Acacia implexa</i>	Hickory wattle
24	<i>Eucalyptus sp</i>	Gum
25	<i>Cymbidium sp</i>	Orchid
26	<i>Callistemon linearis</i>	Narrow-leafed bottlebrush
27	<i>Syzygium leuhmannii</i>	Lilly pilli
28	<i>Podolepis jaceoides</i>	Showy Podolepis
29	<i>Exocarpus latifolius</i>	Native cherry
30	<i>Eucalyptus sp</i>	Gum (nuts)
31	<i>Telopea speciosissima</i>	New South Wales waratah

AUTHOR NOTE

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