

Italian harpsichord is now at home

Instrument unveiled at National Music Museum

By Travis Gulbrandson

travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

The National Music Museum (NMM) is now home to what may be the oldest playable harpsichord in the entire world.

The instrument was made in Naples, circa 1530, and was acquired in 2009 by the museum from its most recent owner, who lived in Argentina.

"Of the 16th-century harpsichords that I've seen, it's in absolutely the best condition," said conservator John Koster. "So, there was really very little to do, most of which was reversing some alterations that were done in the 17th century. The soundboard is perfect.

"The main thing I had to do was to make a new set of jacks, the thing that plucks the strings. The original ones were missing, and the ones that came with it didn't quite work," he said. "Other than that, it was really very minimal. Some cleaning, things like that."

The harpsichord had its official unveiling Friday, Sept. 23, with a presentation by Koster, followed by a performance of four selections by junior music major Wyatt Smith.

Assisting as page-turner was Larry Schou, dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of South Dakota.

"It's a very exciting time for this organization," said Ted Muenster of the museum's development office.

"We have a unique opportunity tonight to hear this wonderful instrument. ... It's been in the loving care of John Koster for the last year or more, and John has been working with his staff to restore the instrument, and tonight we're going to hear it play."

The harpsichord first came to the attention of those at the museum in 2002, when it was offered as an auction item on eBay.

"It didn't sell," Koster said. "Then we had a graduate student here who knew the instrument and put us in contact with the owner. We proceeded from that."

The instrument was purchased with funds from the William Selz Estate, the Mr. & Mrs. Clifford E. Graese Fund and the Mr. & Mrs. R.E. Rawlins Fund.

Koster said it is difficult to say exactly when the harpsichord was constructed, but his estimation is based in part of the age of the instrument's soundboard.

Another clue can be found on the keyboard.

"There is a date on one of the keys which is a little unclear, but I read it as 1533. That seemed to be the date of a repair," he said.

Apart from its playability, the harpsichord is notable for the fact that it exists in any state.

"There may be somewhere between 20 to 30 16th-century harpsichords," Koster said. "Very few have survived. "This one almost landed



Junior music major Wyatt Smith plays one of the National Music Museum's newest acquisitions – a harpsichord made in Naples, circa 1530 – at a ceremony the night of Friday, Sept. 23. Assisting as page-turner is Larry Schou, dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of South Dakota.

(Photo by Travis Gulbrandson)

on a junk pile," he continued. "The former owner was cleaning out his parents' estate and put it on the burn pile as a useless toy piano. Somebody fortunately said, 'Don't do that.'"

Koster described the instrument's ownership history over the course of the 20th century as "fairly

simple."

"It was sold in Italy in the 1920s, and it remained in that family until a harpsichord maker acquired it about 15 years ago, and we bought it from him," he said.

Now that it's at the NMM, it joins a collection of 12-15 other, newer harpsichords.

"We have them from the

16th century to the late 18th century, from England, France, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Germany – from pretty much everywhere they made harpsichords. So, it's one of the more complete collections in the world – certainly in this country," Koster said.

Also in attendance at

Friday's ceremony were Tom Lillibridge, chair of the NMM Board of Trustees, founding director of the museum André Larson and USD President James Abbott.

For more information about the museum, visit <http://orgs.usd.edu/nmm/>.

USD is one of 'America's Top Colleges' according to Forbes

The University of South Dakota ranks as one of "America's Top Colleges," according to Forbes. In the magazine's annual ranking of the best undergraduate institutions in the nation, the University of South Dakota ranks among the top 500 colleges and universities. Additionally, Forbes ranks USD as one of the top 200 Research Universities.

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