Muted Tones: The evolving life of distressed musical instruments

Kim Gurney

What first reeled me into the Johannesburg innercity workshop of violin-maker and restorer Svend Christensen, now relocated to Kensington, was a glimpse of the craziest looking piano you have ever seen. It stood just beyond his open doors, en route to my own studio upstairs – delightful, absurd and tantalising.

The all-glass façade above the Yamaha keyboard revealed its inner workings; the same applied to the kickboard. Yellowed lights jazzed the whole thing up like a jukebox on speed. The velvety black painted exterior revealed just a hint of sparkle. Yet the whole retro contraption held a dignified air. It made my fingers itch. So I lurked at the door and felt childish.

That is part of its allure, according to Christensen, who restored the piano with a team of collaborators. "From a distance, you switch the whole piano [lights] on, you can almost hear it playing. And as soon as someone does walk past it, even if they don't play the piano, they immediately go over to it and start playing away."

This souped-up Yamaha, like many pianos, has a fine backstory that cues a larger theme of 'distressed' musical instruments. And Christensen knows all about those. He spends much of his time repairing instruments damaged by accident, neglect, ignorance and sometimes just seasonal change. He also makes instruments and related innovations: a bespoke double bass for the University of Cape Town's music department is in production when we meet.

The "pimped piano", as he calls it, was an answer to plain calamity. Its former self fell off the back of a pickup and Christensen received the panicked phone call. He recounts the incident with characteristic good humour, alikening its compacted form to Dr Teeth on the Muppets: "It was almost a diamond shape, leaning to the side – very comical … and the flap was open."

Its original form was beyond redemption. "We pulled this piano as tight as possible and thought after all this work … let's pimp this ride! The artist in me sprang out … and we swizzled it up," he says. So how did its owner feel? "He's wild about it!" Christensen smiles. "I almost got him into the piano business because of it. I'm still working on it."

The Yamaha is in many respects an anomaly for Christensen who focuses on violins and bow-making. Professional musicians tend to come, often in crisis, for repair work to exacting and traditional standards. "Restoring an instrument is really rewarding after it's been done," he says. One happy customer is a violin player in Stellenbosch whose mother mistakenly drove over her beloved instrument and turned it "into matchsticks" but now reckons it looks and sounds even better.

Another brought in a violin painted green – not any old violin but one from the 1820s that had previously been glued together with epoxies and white glue, pried open, glued back

out of alignment and had pieces missing. Christensen says: "But you look at this thing – a delicate little scroll, such fine workmanship in the original... You can still see what it started off as once upon a time. It's almost like having 'superman eyes' through all the other layers and seeing the real thing underneath in its finished form." Removing the green paint took two weeks and the entire project two years. "That one was labour of love - to rub, polish, kiss, love and hug" the violin back into shape.

While professional musicians understandably require their instruments for performance purposes to be restored as seamlessly as possible, some are working in different ways with instruments in states of distress.

Musician and artist João Orecchia, for instance, has for several months been curating a Johannesburg innercity project called Invisible Cities, which is a year-long festival of live music, installation and multimedia art in the form of 12 once-off events in empty buildings. These have included the manipulation of musical instruments that at first glance might appear to the casual viewer destructive but are in fact best understood as poetic acts of reclamation.

In the first such event, Orecchia and his collaborators, a collective called The Skeleton Crew, bought a neglected piano from the classifieds for R500 and burnt it on an innercity rooftop to ashes – first planting handmade microphones inside it. The resulting timelapsed video includes a haunting musical soundtrack created from the process where the microphones can be heard burning up at the end. The piano falls on what is left of its face and continues to smoulder away.

Orecchia says: "It was a piano – and then for all intents and purposes it wasn't because nobody used it for years. We took it and played a different kind of music out of it, which was also very physical with the flames and the crackling and strings snapping ... [The microphones] picked up the sound of the wind rushing through the body of the piano and smoke and all of that."

The final result, he says, was a frame, strings and a whole lot of ash. "What you're left with at the end is another kind of object, which is a symbol of that transformation and life, if you can call it that, of this piano. And all of that is a symbol of the transformation of Johannesburg - not in some grand sense of gentrification and development but right here, right now. Things are happening all the time and changing all the time. There is all this space and so much of it is inaccessible. The whole impetus of Invisible Cities is just to make a contribution."

The Skeleton Crew has collaborated for Invisible Cities on cutting a guitar into pieces while plugged into an amplifier, again creating a video and soundtrack. They have similarly compacted a trumpet, sourced from a pawn shop, with an industrial press into convoluting folds until a snap ends the tension. And they have plans for more instrument manipulations: "You have to give something up to get something back," Orecchia adds. "You have a sense of sacrilege ... That's the emotional side of it. But the thing with instruments for Invisible Cities is it's not about destruction at all; it's about transformation, about taking something that's not in use and changing it into something else and in that transformation getting something valuable out of that transformation itself."

Another artist whose recent work featured the apparent destruction of a piano is Berlin-based South African Robin Rhode. Piano Chair, a video piece in Rhode's signature style of interacting with chalk two-dimensional wall drawings, was exhibited in June at London's White Cube Hoxton Square. It presents a scenario where a composer tries to 'kill' his piano by increasingly violent means – a rock, a knife, an axe, a pillow, fire and ultimately hanging it by a rope and kicking the chair away.

More recently, artist Paula Louw in November suspended an exploded view of a piano from the roof of the Circa gallery in Johannesburg as part of her redesconstructivist solo exhibition. The piano hung in painstakingly dissembled and reassembled pieces to reveal its various components in carefully considered arrangements. The overall effect was unexpectedly moving.

Louw, who has similarly exploded inner workings of other objects like a typewriter, says Piano shares the same thematics: "I'm actually talking about communication and how it creates this paradoxical situation. 'Harmony and discord' describes it all: it can create communication but at the same time it can be a barrier." This idea is reflected, for instance, by the keyboard suspended back-to-front. She adds: "Music is such an incredible communication medium... It causes such a response within us." The hammers of the piano burst out from the installation like a cloud of crotchets.

What could this apparently increased incidence of creative engagement with distressed musical instruments mean? Let's reel back to March 2010, when jazz musician Kyle Shepherd sat at Johannesburg's Gallery Momo, his legs awkwardly tucked under himself, in front of a grand piano that was effectively lying on its belly. Its legs had been amputated in a vandalism incident, ostensibly for the copper underfoot, at the premises of the Zimology Institute, which was famed as an incubator of jazz talent under the tutelage of now deceased Zim Ngqawana. The performance was a fundraiser as well as a gesture of reclamation. The emotionally charged, distorted and improvised performance still haunts my memory.

Shepherd, a former Zimology Institute student, says it was part hurt, part nostalgia and part healing: "It also served to expose what happened – people need to see the kind of ignorance that the general person has in our country about instruments and their respect for them and their value – not just their monetary value but the value it has to people that play on instruments and make music and do their life's work on instruments."

Best known as a composer, band leader and improviser, he also found the experience liberating because the piano he knew so well had a totally different personality. He says: "It was simply about opening your mind and seeing to a different kind of sound that seemingly the same instrument could produce. And of course with the mechanical limitations of a piano that has been vandalised, you really have to push yourself into a different mindspace ... You have to still make music with what you have."

Shepherd concludes: "Self-expression is not limited by the mechanics of an instrument, I really do believe that." Many artists, it would seem, agree.

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• A piano burns on a Johannesburg building rooftop during an Invisible Cities intervention comprising live music, installation and multimedia art. Photo: Koos Groenewald from Skeleton Crew