

Annea Lockwood on *Piano Burning*, an interview with Irene Revell

Set piano upright in an open space with lid closed

Staple inflated balloons all over

Spill a very little lighter fluid here and light

Play whatever pleases you for as long as you can

Annea Lockwood, *Piano Burning*, 1968ⁱ

Annea Lockwood came to study at the Royal College of Music, London in 1961 from Christchurch, New Zealand. One of her earliest cycles of composition, 'Piano Transplants', began during this time in London in the 1960s. The first major work in the series was *Piano Burning*, initially performed in 1968, with the score first published in *Source* journal (1971). Others in the cycle include *Piano Garden* (1969), *Piano Drowning* (1972) and *Pacific Ocean Number 5* (1972), now renamed *Eastern Exposure*.

This interview with Irene Revell took place on 31 March 2014, at FlatTime House, on the occasion of Lockwood's visit to the UK as part of *Someone Else Can Clean Up This Mess*, a research project developed with Electra exploring the work of the women active in 1960s and 70s London.

IRENE REVELL Was *Piano Burning* the first of the 'Piano Transplants'?

ANNEA LOCKWOOD No, actually it wasn't. Two years before I did *Piano Burning*, in 1966, I was living in Chiswick, and sort of in a slump creatively. I decided to permanently prepare

a little upright and got hold of one that was in pretty bad condition, but still playable. I had a lot of fun with it for a year or so. Let's see... I had a little toy train engine that you could haul up and down several of the bass strings; I inserted slivers of bamboo into the soundboard, so that it was like a thumb piano and it resonated like crazy. Hugh Davies and I used to frequent a doll-parts' store to find odd springs and other things that we could pick up and use. There, I found dolls' eyes with eyelids that could move up and down, so I inserted a couple of those into the treble strings, and when you would trill on a couple of particular notes, it would flirt with you. And then John Lifton made a bubble-blowing machine, for which we cut a mouth out of the side of the piano and put on big Plasticine lips. Then he hooked it up so that when you played softly using the soft pedal it would blow bubbles out of the mouth like anything.

So, that was the very first, though I never labelled it as the first one, but in reality that was where I got started. And then *Piano Burning* was essentially the second. This was all with the idea that John Cage had done wonderful things with prepared piano. But he always had to be very careful not to damage the piano. So this was: what can you do when you're willing to go further?

- IR Is the premise of all the *Piano Transplants* that the piano is always beyond the point of repair?
- AL Oh yes, all the *Piano Transplants* should be done with defunct pianos – still standing, but not really repairable.
- IR To me, they seem ritualistic; there's a funereal dimension.
- AL I suppose so, though not so much to me personally. But I am sure they do for other people, certainly immolation

does. There are many arbitrary elements to these pieces; the arbitrary thing about that first experiment was I decreed that you could only play one tune on it. So when I had it in my possession only 'Lili Marlene' could be played, because it sounded like a honky-tonk. And when I left for the States I gave it to Hugh Davies, and he decreed that only a particular movement from a particular Bach *Partita* could be played on it. [Laughter]

IR So what made you think of burning a piano?

AL Richard Alston and I had worked together a couple of times by that point, and we were just brainstorming about making a piece called *Heat* in which we'd heat up the space a lot so that the audience were sweating, the dancers were sweating, everybody got really hot. For this, I needed good fire sound and I tried recording in a fireplace, but it was nothing. And so I made a bonfire in the courtyard of the house I was living in, and that wasn't anything either. So I thought: 'Well, I need to be burning something that is bound to make some really good sound.' I think it was Wandsworth Council that had a sort of piano graveyard in those days: old pianos which people no longer wanted, damaged by damp and all that sort of thing, could be dumped.

IR Specifically just pianos?

AL Yeah, yeah, a sort of specialised piano graveyard. So, Bob Cobbing and I were involved in a little festival on the Chelsea Embankment (Pavilions in the Park), which seemed like the right opportunity. So we got two uprights hauled into the festival. Harvey Matusow had microphones that were expendable and so we stuck one down near the pedals at the bottom and wrapped the cable in asbestos, which you could still do in those days [laughter]...and ran it out to a little Uher tape recorder, and Hugh Davies

helped amplify the sound. So we twisted paper with lighter fluid poured on it down at the bottom, and it starts burning rather slowly. I mean, these are supposed to be slow processes – they are not supposed to be explosive. You just let it go and it's very beautiful: layer after layer of the interior construction gets burned away in an unpredictable ordering. Once I saw a piano burn with green, violet, red and orange flames because of the variety of varnishes that were burning and that was gorgeous. It is always visually really beautiful. And that first piano – the recording was totally useless for any purposes, there were so many people gathered round and they were chattering like crazy for the length of the tape, so it was full of voices. But that first piano fell in slow motion – it really did! It was astounding. I've never seen that happen again.

IR And what else happened at the festival?

AL There was undoubtedly sound poetry, since Bob was running it, if not heavily involved. I don't remember what else was going on. Burning the second piano that night, the visual beauty of it really emerged clearly. I covered it with balloons. [laughter]...

IR What's the idea with the balloons?

AL Oh, it was just fun to see how long they would last. And sometimes they lasted a surprisingly long time. And just the popping sounds and so on.

IR And who was playing the piano in that first performance in 1968?

AL I don't know that any of us did. I don't recall. In one of the two recent burnings, which Bruce Haines (the director of the gallery Ancient & Modern) arranged in Grizedale Arts up in the Lake District, I think everybody had a go at

playing it. And the most recent, in Bangor, Wales, was phenomenal, because three people said that they wanted to play it. They were all musicians, good improvisers. Each of them, after it had already been set on fire, took a turn at playing. They'd worked out roughly what they were going to do with it, having played it before and knowing what its capabilities were. But they were playing for a good couple of minutes each, I finally got worried and shooed them away. They were fantastic and their improvisations were really beautiful.

- IR There's a video of it that can be watched online.ⁱⁱ
It's extraordinary to watch: it becomes an act of endurance, battling against the fumes.



Annea Lockwood, *Piano Burning*, enacted at Grizedale Arts, Coniston, 25 May 2012

photo: Bruce Haines, Ancient and Modern.

- AL And courage, yes. I was really moved by it. And really concerned [laughter] because I was standing behind it, since I lit it from behind, as I always do, so I could see how far the burning was progressing.

IR Have you ever tried to burn a grand piano?

AL No, because I don't see the point. For me it is about the revelation of the interior structure as it burns. And if you are watching a grand piano, you are not seeing that happening: it is happening on the horizontal, and not the vertical. It has to be vertical to be visible. And each harp is a little bit different. They are all beautiful.

IR There is something about the tension of the beauty of it and its iconoclasm. What is your thinking about that topic?

AL Yeah, true. You know, my conscious thinking was pragmatic. A piano, a defunct piano, I thought: 'we can over-string the strings; they're bound to pop if we're lucky, and they make a great sound when they pop, everything else should sound good too.' Below a conscious level, I don't know. I had grown up studying piano from an early age, from about five, six or so, and I had still been studying it while I was at the Royal College of Music, which I left in 1963, not long before doing this. And I loved studying the piano, I love the instrument. Perhaps it was a severing of a connection; but I don't psychoanalyse it. The first piano I wanted to record heat, the second piano I wanted to see the beauty of it.

IR And it's a score that anybody could, theoretically, interpret.

AL And have, it has been done many times. There are all sorts of people all over YouTube doing it too.

IR Potential, action, burnout and after-glow: these four stages are one of the aspects of fire that this issue of the journal is exploring. Do these have a resonance here?

AL Sure they do. Pianos burn in those stages, actually. Potential is the initial intention...

IR Even the score, maybe?

AL Yes, that makes a lot of sense. And just the decision to do it, because you want to see it happen, and hear it happen, or maybe I should reverse those: hear it happen and see it happen. There is the action of initiating it and *then* deliciously it goes out of your control, which I like very much, as with most fire events. Then there is the burnout, which is absolutely literal. To get to the burnout stage it takes at least four hours, sometimes five hours: it takes a long time, there is a lot of material in an upright. And the watching people have fallen into a really meditative silence after about half an hour – very focused and mesmerised. And afterglow is really the image, the reality of the harp lying on the ground, burned, or half-burned piano keys, sort of strewn around sometimes, sometimes they are very beautiful.

At first, we were burning pianos with ivory keys, and I kept some of the keys from the very first burning for years because they were graphically beautiful. Some of them were just barely shaded by the fire: it was like working with charcoal, literally. Some were quite burned and there were all the intermediate stages of grey: cream and black and grey, they were very beautiful. And then there were the ashes of the other parts, and pieces of metal, and strings, and all sorts of angles protruding from the frame.

IR Have you ever left traces in situ?

AL I always leave it up to whoever wanted to do the burning to decide what to do with what's left. So sometimes I guess people have. It takes a long time for all that metal to cool down. There's the iron frame from which the piano wires

are strung, which provides all the tension, and there are different sorts. The basic shape is harp-like, and that's pretty uniform. But the details, the decorative details vary a great deal; they're very beautiful, those harps.

ⁱ This version of the score is from 'Piano Transplants', in *Womens Work*, ed Alison Knowles and Annea Lockwood, 1975, self-published, see www.sfu.ca/cmns/courses/droumeva/2013/.../Schafer-Radical_Radio.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://sounz.org.nz/manifestations/show/14503>, accessed 13 April 2014.