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The Piano at The Elms

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The Elms' drawing room, featuring Euphemia Maxwell's Broadwood grand piano. The portrait to the top left of the photograph is of Euphemia in later life.

Photograph by Michele Pointon, with kind permission of The Elms Foundation

Just before the bustle of the Tauranga business district begins, beyond a sprawling overpass junction, there is a tranquil haven of serenity enclosed by a white picket fence. I push open the gate and wander down a curving shell path which admits me to the faithfully preserved historical precinct that is The Elms. When I step into the parlour a shaft of morning sunlight illuminates the gleaming rosewood case of an 1855 grand piano. The wood is polished to a high gloss, the grain apparent beneath the veneer, golden tones alternating with rich brown. Two octagonal carvings decorate the side of the instrument, a pattern repeated on the scrolls framing the brass pedals. Three tapering, but sturdy, circular legs end in a simple castor, but begin with wing-like carvings that attach them to the sinuous curves of the body. To the twenty-first-century New Zealand eye the spiral at the centre of each 'wing' resembles a koru. The top of the piano is shut, the lid a repository for a display of ornaments and knick-knacks. A Chinese plate, the photograph of a woman in Victorian dress, a small leather card case and a lorgnette rest on a cream cloth painted with flowers, ferns and mushrooms. Such is the mirror-like lustre of the wood that the photograph is reflected in the piano's surface, as are the faces of the family portraits on the wall behind.

I lift the cover to reveal the keys beneath. The ivory of the white keys is faded and slightly yellowed in places, where the fingertips of generations of pianists have left their mark. An inset panel above middle C reveals the instrument's origins: 'Patent Repetition Grand Pianoforte, John Broadwood & Sons, London'. I sit down on the piano stool, its leather seat cracked in places but its shiny surface, like the wood of the instrument, testimony to loving and careful preservation. I raise the ornate music stand. My fingers depress the first, haunting notes of Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata'. The bass notes sound, rich and resonant. The treble joins in, clear and true. A couple of keys stick a little and the instrument is not completely in tune, but I am content. The music transports me back through time, connecting me to the lives and stories of those for whom the piano was a treasured object and a familiar friend.

The first performer to sit at this keyboard was Euphemia Maxwell and the story of her relationship with the instrument is one of romance, tragedy and resilience. In the late 1840s Andrew Maxwell, a young Scottish divinity



LEFT *The rosewood lid of the piano is polished to a mirror-like gloss.*

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RIGHT *Piano keyboard with the manufacturer's name-board declaring that the Patent Repetition Grand Pianoforte was crafted by John Broadwood & Sons of London 'Manufacturers to Her Majesty and the Royal Family'.*

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FAR RIGHT, TOP *Euphemia Maxwell and her husband, Reverend Andrew Maxwell.*

The Elms Collection, Tauranga, reproduced with kind permission of The Elms Foundation

RIGHT *The harp-shaped pedals are decorated with octagonal carvings, a pattern that is repeated on the sides of the instrument.*

Photograph by Michele Pointon, with kind permission of The Elms Foundation

student, visited the home of an affluent Aberdeen banker, James Johnson. Invited into the drawing room, Andrew fell instantly in love with Johnson's youngest daughter, Euphemia, who was playing the piano. According to family legend, his wooing consisted not only of declarations of love but also of vows to buy 'his Angel' her own instrument should she consent to be his wife.¹ This consent was eventually granted and the couple married and emigrated to Australia in 1853. Nine years later Andrew honoured his promise, ordering a Broadwood grand to be sent to Melbourne from London.

When Andrew died in 1865 Euphemia was left with four children and little money. She travelled to New Zealand to stay with her brother, Alexander Johnson, a Supreme Court judge. In spite of her straitened circumstances her piano accompanied her. A year later, assisted by her brother, Euphemia bought a house in the Wellington hill suburb of Wadestown. The only access to the area was a bridle track following the Kaiwharawhara Stream, along which the carriers refused to transport the piano. Undeterred, Euphemia hired two bushmen to cut a new track. Her great-nephew writes that 'using quite good judgment she



ABOVE *The revolving leather piano stool bears the honourable marks of generations of pianists.*

Photograph by Michele Pointon, with kind permission of The Elms Foundation

picked out reasonable grades, avoiding big trees and had smaller ones felled.² She then hired a bullock team and sledge and, as her daughter Alice recalled, ‘with the true pioneer spirit of refusal to be daunted by difficulties ... loading upon it the piano and her other furniture, proceeded herself to pilot the team up the steep and rugged hillside.’³

Once the Wadestown house was safely reached, it was discovered that the piano was too big to fit in the rooms, but Euphemia remained undefeated and built an additional room to house the piano, complete with its own fireplace to keep the instrument warm, dry and in tune. When, in 1887, Euphemia inherited The Elms in Tauranga from her sister, Christina Brown, she reluctantly uprooted herself yet again. On this occasion more affluent circumstances ensured that both Euphemia and her piano could travel in style to their final resting place in a specially chartered boat.⁴

Euphemia’s Wadestown and Tauranga parlours were focal points for the social life of their respective local communities. Alice Maxwell remembered that the first religious services in Wadestown were ‘held in my mother’s drawing room and the first Sunday school was organised by my sister Edith, the hymns being accompanied on the piano.’⁵ Friends and visitors also gathered for musical entertainments and dinner parties. Much of Euphemia’s collection of sheet music remains intact at The Elms and is indicative of the type of music she performed at the piano. The collection includes Franz Schubert’s sonatas and Johannes Brahms’ waltzes, but mostly consists of piano and vocal duets. The latter range from Mrs Felicia Hemans’

moralistic ‘The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers’, to the operatic duet ‘Là ci darem la mano’ from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, to the Scottish ballad, ‘My Love She’s But a Lassie Yet.’⁶

Colonial music-making could be both improving and fun. The hymn-singing and Sunday school services in Euphemia’s parlour reflect a commitment to bolstering and spreading what Lady Martin, wife of New Zealand’s first chief justice, termed the ‘divine work’ of ‘civilisation.’⁷ Yet, for the Maxwells, the piano was also a central form of entertainment. Impeccably dressed, Euphemia hosted soirées and musical afternoons, her guests, including Sir George Grey, undeterred by the steep climb to her home. The music played by this ‘unusually fine pianist’ was a decided attraction and possession of a piano ensured that the Maxwells enjoyed a stimulating social life.⁸ The words and phrases chosen to describe piano playing in colonial diaries, letters and reminiscences reinforce this association between the instrument and fun: ‘treat’, ‘fabulous’, ‘en-chanted’, ‘great time’, ‘pure joyousness and good humour.’⁹

Euphemia’s Broadwood grand is also the embodiment of the meticulous craftsmanship and technical innovations so fundamental to the piano’s early history. Craftsmen and manufacturers were determined to make their instruments look, as well as sound, beautiful. The piano is the perfect object to showcase both the natural splendour of the chosen wood and the possibilities for carving, marquetry and embossing. Euphemia’s grand is a simple statement about the majesty of wood.

Broadwood pianos were among the most sought after in the nineteenth century because of the manufacturer's technical innovations to improve sound quality, such as introducing a divided bridge to assist the bass tone and increasing the keyboard range to seven and a half octaves.¹⁰ For settlers such as Euphemia the patented Broadwood bolted iron frame was particularly significant as it ensured the piano stayed more easily in tune, vital for instruments making jostling journeys through temperature extremes to find a home in a young colony where piano tuners were scarce. Euphemia's advanced and expensive instrument avoided the worst of the tuning problems that plagued instruments such as Sarah Selwyn's square piano, which reached its Waimate destination in 1842 with its keys 'much loosened' and the treble 'in a bad state'.¹¹

The continuing story of The Elms piano is one of preservation, as the instrument receives regular tunings and repair. This reflects the way in which Euphemia's daughter Alice and great-nephew Duff saw themselves as caretakers of a past stretching back to the 1830s: Duff wrote of his 'duty' to 'preserve' The Elms 'as a whole'.¹² Euphemia's piano nestles in a setting where it seems naturally to belong. Alfred Nesbit Brown and his first wife Charlotte, who arrived in Tauranga in 1838 to establish a Church Mission Society mission, built The Elms. Passed on to the Maxwell family by Brown's second wife Christina, Euphemia's sister, The Elms is a relative rarity in New Zealand, a heritage site that was a beloved family home from 1847 to 1992 before becoming a museum.¹³ Not only the structure but also the furnishings remain intact.

This was, and is, a home filled with music. Before Euphemia's arrival the 1835 William Allen square piano in the dining room entertained the family and helped the Browns in their mission. Brown's daughter Celia 'played very nicely' and used her skill to teach the Māori children in her father's mission to sing hymns.¹⁴ This piano is also associated with a poignant occasion on 28 April 1864. Several military officers from the 43rd Regiment, including Lieutenant Charles Hill of HMS *Curacoa* and Captain John Hamilton of HMS *Esk*, were invited to dine at The Elms on the evening before the Battle of Gate Pā. After dinner and prayers, Christina Brown sat at the piano to play, everyone joining in to sing 'Abide With Me'.¹⁵ By the next evening all the officers were dead; only the surgeon, Dr W.G.W. Manley, survived.¹⁶

These stories of heartbreak, courage and romance haunt me as I sit at the keyboard of the Broadwood grand. I am no longer the onlooker, the researcher, but part of an enduring tradition. I play Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert from Euphemia's dark-green piano books, embossed with the gold letters 'Music'. My fingers caress the keys of a 158-year-old instrument that has survived sea crossings, bush journeys, the deaths of three owners, the ravages of time. Above all, the music itself forms a continuum between then and now, a union of performers and music lovers. The emotive, intense music of the Romantics seems most truly in keeping with the imposing physical presence and dynamic range of a grand piano. As the C# minor bass octaves and treble triplets of the opening adagio sostenuto to the 'Moonlight Sonata' quietly fill the air I am transported.