Greetings and Reports from a New Director
By Joseph S. C. Lam

Greetings! I am Joseph S.C. Lam, your director of the Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments since September 1997. I am delighted to inform you that, after a break of more than two years, we are now finally able to publish the Stearns Newsletter again. From now on, the newsletter will be published biannually: the spring issue will be sent around the second week of April, and the fall issue, around the second week of October. Please make sure that you and your friends receive copies of the newsletter promptly.

There are many things that I would like to report to you, but let me begin with a few words of gratitude to friends of the Stearns Collection and to a number of special colleagues at the University of Michigan School of Music. Last November, I sent out a letter to request support for the Stearns Collection; many friends responded with generous donations. Thank you very much; your support allows the Stearns Collection to continue to operate. Kudos to Professor Margo Halsted, the former director. Enthusiastically, she guided the Stearns Collection for almost three years (Jan. 1995-August 1997), arranging interesting exhibitions and organizing informative lectures. She introduced to me many obvious and not-so-obvious facts about the collection and its various activities. Kudos to Professor William Malm, the director emeritus: he taught me things only he, someone who devoted many years of time and effort to develop the Stearns Collection, would know. Finally, I would like to thank Dean Paul Boylan and Professor Judith Becker of the School of Music. They invited me to join the University of Michigan, and offered me the directorship, a honor and an opportunity for me to grow as a music scholar—I studied music in Hong Kong, Japan, and America; my interest in musical instruments goes back to the days when I learned to play the piano and was fascinated by its organological marvels.

The Stearns Collection has been busy. In addition to the Virginia Martin Howard Lectures (see featured article), acquisition of new musical instruments, exhibitions, and tours, we are making plans for various activities in 1998-99 academic year. In 1999, the Stearns Collection will be one hundred years old, and we will celebrate (see below). Frederick Stearns

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Virginia Martin Howard Lectures, 1997-98

For the academic year of 1997-98, the Virginia Martin Howard Lectures series presented five lectures. On October 12, 1997, Professor William Malm, professor emeritus of the University of Michigan, and former director of the Stearns Collection, gave a lecture entitled “Percussive Paths to Enlightenment in Japan.” He explained and demonstrated the use of various percussive instruments—gongs, bells, clappers, and so forth—in traditional Japanese music. His analysis of Japanese Shinto aesthetics and rhythm pinpointed the ways music embodies religious thoughts and practices.

On November 9, 1997, Dr. David Sutherland lectured on the identity of an illustrious harpsichord in the Stearns Collection. With fascinating details, he identified the maker of Stearns 1332, a harpsichord, to Giovanni Ferrini of Florence, an apprentice and long-time assistant of Bartolomeo Cristofori, the great 18th century keyboard maker of Italy. (See abstract of Dr. Sutherland’s lecture on page 2 of this newsletter.)

On February 8, 1998 Professor James Borders of the University of Michigan, a former curator of the Stearns Collection, gave a riveting lecture. Titled “Fakes, Forgeries, Frederick Stearn, and the Man Who Died Twice,” Professor Border’s presentation not only traced intrigues in the early history of the Stearns Collection

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offered his collection of 904 musical instruments to the University of Michigan in the fall of 1898, and the University’s Board of Regents formally accepted the collection in January 1899. A hundred years later, the collection has grown to include more than 2200 pieces of intriguing musical instruments from all over the world, a precious resource that the University of Michigan School of Music uses to advance not only organological scholarship but also multi-cultural understanding of music.

To celebrate the first century of the Stearns Collection, and to implement its mission, the Advisory Board of the Stearns Collection decided to give a centennial birthday party, and publish a celebratory volume. Tentatively, the party is now scheduled sometime in late April 1999, and all present and future friends of the Stearns Collection are invited to come and have fun. Entitled The Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments: the First Century, 1899 to 1998, the celebratory volume will feature formal and informal histories of the collection (see Call for historical notes), pictures of many of its precious musical instruments, and scholarly discussions of a few of them. Should you be interested to know more about the party and the celebratory volume, please feel free to contact Joseph S.C. Lam, Director, Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments, School of Music, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1372; tel: 734-764-4276; fax: 734-764-1557.

In the fall of 1998, the Stearns Collection will join the International Computer Music Conference (September 30 through October 6, 1998) to mount an exhibition of 20th century musical instruments. To be housed in the Vesta Mills Gallery of the Stearns Collection in the School of Music, the exhibition will feature the Green Theremin Hornet, the first commercially sold Moog synthesizer, and various kinds of musical instruments that played significant roles in the development of distinctive sounds and timbres of 20th century music. The exhibition will be open on September 30, 1998 and remain open until further notice. Please come and see the musical instruments. For information about the conference, please contact ICMC98-Conference Management Services, 600 E. Madison, Room G-121, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1372; tel: 734-764-4276; fax: 734-764-1557.

Most of the instruments of the Stearns Collection are housed in a warehouse in downtown Ann Arbor. The facility is adequate but updating is needed: a more efficient system of temperature and humidity control is desirable. Because of old age and use, quite a few of the musical instruments need repairs, and more protective cases and shelves are needed. These needs will be addressed as soon as funding and appropriate staffs are located. Any donation to support these updating efforts will be appreciated.

Stearns Harpsichord Identified as a Work of Giovanni Ferrini of Florence

“As far as I’m concerned it’s a lock,” says local instrument maker David Sutherland. Stearns 1332 — a large Italian harpsichord purchased by Frederick Stearns in or around 1902 — was made by Giovanni Ferrini of Florence, apprentice and long-time assistant to Bartolomeo Cristofori, and successor to his shop. Probably right around 1750. “If I’m right about this — and trust me, I am — then Stearns 1332 is only the fourth of his instruments to have survived. It is a real treasure.”

Giovanni Ferrini never achieved fame equal to that of his teacher, Bartolomeo Cristofori, which rested on the invention of the piano, but he was a great master in his own right. Apart from Stearns 1332, his only surviving grand instrument is an impressively large two-manual cembalo combining harpsichord action on the lower manual with piano action on the upper. Signed and dated 1746, it is part of a collection of keyboard instruments belonging to Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini, the leading Italian scholar-performer in the field of early keyboard music. Of the four pianos from the Cristofori/Ferrini shop still in existence, this one is in the best condition. With only modest restoration it has been returned to playability. “It’s a spectacular musical instrument,” says Sutherland. “The harpsichord action on the lower manual produces a majestic ripieno that serves as a foil to the suave and elegant solo voice of the upper manual piano action.”

It is the 1746 piano/harpsichord which reveals the identity of Stearns 1332. While Sutherland had long been aware of strong affinities between this harpsichord and Cristofori’s instruments, the publication of a detailed description of the piano harpsichord provided the specific details upon which the identification rests. The central evidence is found in Tagliavini’s catalogue of his collection, compiled with John Henry Van der Meer, Clavicembali e Spinette dal XVI al XIX Secolo, Bologna, 1987. The case framing of the two instruments is very similar, the soundboard design (position of the bridge, cut-off bar and ribs) nearly identical. Of the many other shared characteristics, three especially stand out: the identical (and unusual) method of mounting the jack-rail, the cap molding which in both cases was probably made with the same cutting tool, and an unusually elaborate decorative scheme employed in the key well of both instruments.
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—a trompe l’oeil mimicry of the traditional seventeenth-century arrangement whereby a thin-cased keyboard instrument, having approximately the dimensions and weight of a large cello or small double bass, was protected in a close-fitting outer case. The appearance of double-case construction became an important theme in the decoration of eighteenth-century Italian keyboard instruments, but rarely is it carried out so meticulously as in Steams 1332 and the 1746 piano/harpsichord.

In 1977 Sutherland restored Stearns 1332, and for several years thereafter its exceptionally beautiful voice could be heard by visitors to the collection. In 1984 the instrument developed a serious structural failure, and was repaired, only to fall silent once again. Due to extensive woodworm damage and other ravages of time, it now seems inadvisable to subject Stearns 1332 to the stress of functioning as a musical instrument. Nevertheless, this masterpiece by Ferrini gives us a new view of the workshop in which the most important physical development in the history of European music in the 18th century —the invention and first perfecting of the piano— took place.

Do you know any stories about the Stearns Collection?

To contextualize the Stearns Collection in the histories of America, Ann Arbor, and the University of Michigan School of Music, I would like to collect anecdotes, personal memories, and stories related to the Stearns Collection. If you have any of these materials, please send descriptions of to Joseph S.C. Lam. I plan to publish some of these materials in the celebratory volume described in the report on page 1. The address may be found in the featured report on page 1.

Become a Friend of the Stearns

With your help, additional instruments may be restored, played, displayed and appreciated by the musical public. Friends receive The Stearns Newsletter, invitations to the Virginia Martin Howard Lectures and announcements of upcoming exhibits and performances. Your contribution will help support all activities of the Stearns Collection.

Membership in the Friends of the Stearns Collection is available in the following categories:

- Benefactor $1000
- Patron $500
- Sustaining $100
- Friends $30
- Student / Senior Citizen / Beyond 200 miles $15

I (We) want to support the Stearns Collection of Muscial Instruments.

I enclose my check for $____________ made payable to: The University of Michigan Stearns Collection

Mr. / Mrs. / Dr. / Miss / Ms. Please circle title(s) and print your name above as you would like it to appear on donor lists.

[ ] I want to become a member of the Advisory Board of the Stearns Collection?

The Advisory Board of the Stearns Collection is a group of volunteers who work with the director to implement the mission of the Stearns Collection, and to raise funds for its activities. If you join, you will not only serve a worthy cause, but also have a lot of fun working with a group of people dedicated to music and culture. The Advisory Board regularly meets after the Virginia Martin Howard Lectures. Two slots are open for the term of 1998-2000.

[ ] Do you want to become a member of the Advisory Board of the Stearns Collection?

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Please mail this form with your check to:
Friends of the Stearns Collection, The University of Michigan School of Music, Moore Building, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

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Close-up of the right side of Stearns 1332, showing “Cristofori” keywell Gracket.
The Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments is located in the Margaret Dow Towsley wing at the south end of the Earl V. Moore School of Music on Baits Drive in the University of Michigan North Campus area. Enter through the doors nearest to the parking lot. The MacIntosh Vocal Arts Center is just across the hall and to the right of the entrance. The Stearns galleries are down the stairs at the end of the hall to the right.

ADMISSION: Free at all times.

EXHIBIT HOURS: Thurs., Fri., & Sat. 10-5.

GROUP VISITS AND TOURS:
To arrange for group visits or guided tours by members of The Stearns Collection staff, please call (313) 763-4389.

PARKING: Metered parking is available south of the entrance doors.

On March 22, 1998, Professor Bell Yung of the University of Pittsburgh and Hong Kong University introduced to Ann Arbor the scholarly tradition of Chinese seven-string zither (guqin) music. Entitled “Celestial Airs of Antiquity: A Venerable Instrumental Tradition from China,” Professor Yung’s presentation captured the tradition at a cross-road. Throughout the centuries, the tradition of guqin have changed minimally. Now, this most refined and venerable tradition is being challenged to adjust to the contemporary world of jet travel and computer technology.

Professor Yung also performed two pieces of guqin music: their clear tones and exquisite melodies enchanted the audience. On April 3, 1998, the China Found Music Workshop, a group of performers and composers from Taiwan, gave a seminar on traditional Chinese musical instruments and contemporary Asian music. The audience was fascinated by the performers’ demonstration of traditional performance techniques and their use in avant-garde compositions. The Taiwanese group of /// /// algo gave a concert of traditional and contemporary music on April 5, 1998.

Though tentative, the Virginia Martin Howard Lectures for fall of 98 have been scheduled. On October 11, Mr. Mike Montgomery will speak on the march band music of the University of Michigan, and on November 1, Professor Bonnie Wade of the University of California, Berkeley, will lecture on Indian musical instruments.