

# Why do I collect instruments?

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Why do I collect instruments? Well, it really took off back in 1961. I did a year at the Horniman Museum as curator of instruments, while Jean Jenkins had a year's leave. While I was there, I became aware that organology, the study of musical instruments, was a worldwide thing and that all instruments were connected in one way or another, historically, developmentally, sociologically, and of course typologically. And through the kindness of the Museum's Director, Dr Otto Samson, I became a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, where I met other ethnomusicologists.

And then, I was asked to give a public talk there. It was a disaster – some instruments, some slides; lights up to see an instrument, lights out to see a slide, the audience was blinking and rubbing their eyes; some slides were upside down; some of them had a large thumbprint on them, and so on. Never again, I said. Either slides (controlled by me, and not by someone up in the balcony), or instruments – never again with both.

So that was when I really started to collect. At that stage, this was to illustrate lectures, which I did all over the country, at music clubs in the evening, and at schools in the day. I laid out a hundred instruments in a line, and talked and demonstrated the Development of Instruments from one end to the other.

And twice I was asked to put on temporary exhibitions, once by an University and once for a Festival, in Sheffield and Durham respectively, and you can only do that if you have a collection to exhibit.

The first few instruments had been acquired much earlier. When I was in the Army, back in 1947, I was in the Canal Zone based in Port Said. I liked the funny noises that I heard in the streets, and was intrigued by the instruments that produced them. I even managed to buy a couple. This interest in ethnographic

instruments was in abeyance for many years, but it was strongly revived in that year at the Horniman.

Next was that I'd been a horn player at school, and when after I was demobilised from the Army, I went on to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama to study conducting, with the horn as my second subject. I realised that the horn I was playing was not the instrument that Beethoven and Mozart had written for, and I found my first handhorn in a shop in Wisbech in 1951, during the Festival of Britain. That was a Besson with a full set of crooks plus a two-valve alternative tuning slide. Later I got a Bohemian one, and it was only by playing them that I could recognise the great difference between them, one French, the other Austro-Bohemian, and for that matter how different each of them was from my German valve horn. That's a very important aspect of collecting that I'll come back to.

And the third starter was that I had become a professional musician, not a good enough horn player to be a professional, but as a timpanist and percussion player. Because percussion players mop all the things that the ladies and gentlemen of the orchestra are too posh to play, whether it's whistles or saws, one accumulates a good deal of non-percussion as well as all the normal drumming kit. And once I was asked to play an alphorn for a charity concert.

Film composers do like exotic sounds, especially when the subjects of the films are in exotic locations. So that is also another aspect of my collecting, and provided that one is a competent performer, as I then was, on a number of the instruments that I had collected, drums and horns of all sorts, and if one has the knowledge, as I had as an ethnomusicologist, of what some local sounds were like, one gets booked for recording sessions of film soundtracks. Once I was asked to produce a chromatic scale of conch trumpets to represent the Alien's voice, which had meant collecting shells and sawing the ends off or knocking holes in the side to cover all the pitches required. I've also used all sorts of other things on other films, such as a squeaker for a thievish spider. Another was to imitate the sounds of a bereaved whale – it was a terrible film! And then there was an Arthurian epic for which I was fool enough to lend some of the instruments we'd played on the recording sessions. Of course they damaged one (I never lent again), and the

compensation added a few other instruments that filled some gaps in my European woodwind history.

Civic lecturing, those music club lectures that I mentioned earlier, expanded into university work. An American visitor who'd asked to see my collection, already by then fifteen hundred or so instruments, asked me if I'd ever thought of lecturing in America – I said 'Invite me' and he did. That led to a visiting professorship at Grinnell College in Iowa, thanks to Jim Wyly, which was very productive in adding to the collection – I went out with a lot of slides and about half a dozen basic instruments for demonstration, and came back with over 150 – travel by sea made this possible! Gwen had to meet me with a hired van at the Southampton docks.

By then too I was lecturing for Bob Dart at King's in London and later at Goldsmiths for Stanley Glasser, on World instruments. It wasn't easy to take instruments to those institutions so I had to use slides, so after the series of lectures I used to invite the students home to see the collection.

In the mid-1970s I wrote three books, the 'World of' series. When it came to the second, *Baroque and Classical*, I was able to save costs by including photos of some of my own instruments – I'd not been able to do anything much in *Mediæval and Renaissance* other than percussion – I had been the first person to make reconstructions of mediæval percussion instruments to play with Musica Reservata back in the late 1950s. And I could put quite a lot into the *Romantic and Modern* book. Of course I'd only have been able to do that because I'd been collecting.

Then, in 1981, I was appointed here, to the Bate, and one must remember that under the terms of Philip Bate's gift, the Bate position was a lecturer/curator. I gave three series of eight lectures a term, one on the history of our instruments, one on those of the rest of the world, and the other on whatever Faculty Board asked for or that I thought might interest our students. Most of those lectures I illustrated with my own collection – it was really easier to bring down a trunkful each week from home than it was to take instruments off display and then put them back before we opened to the public at 2 o'clock, and anyway the only ethnographic instruments in the Bate, were my own on loan.

Another very useful aspect of collecting is illustrating the further books that I've written since I retired. When one publishes a book of the sort that I write, one is given, as part of the negotiations for the contract, an approximate page or word figure, and always a fairly tight limit of the number of illustrations. If one has to depend on getting photos from museums, one can very seldom get more than one instrument in a picture. But with a collection like the one I've built up, I can line up a row of flutes from Renaissance to Boehm, with a dozen or so flutes in one photo. And with instruments like bassoons, where a lot of keywork goes on with the thumb side as well as with the finger side, I can photoshop fronts and backs into the one picture. So I was able to show many hundreds of instruments of whatever types I wanted to illustrate in an allowance of only 120 plates, as I did in my *Origins and Development* book. And much the same applied to a number of the plates in my *Timpani and Percussion* book, and some of the others.

And as well, nowadays that I've got fed up with publishers, I write about them on my website, even putting free books about them up there, thanks to my son's skill in setting them up there.

But I think perhaps the primary purpose of collecting is to get to know the instruments. Yes, one can wander round museums, looking at things in the show-cases, and one can make appointments in many of them to look at an instrument in detail, and I have many hundreds of pages of notes on instruments that I've seen in museums, but one really only gets to know them when one can handle them to one's heart's content, try to play them, feel what they're like in the hands, see how they're made, what they're made of, and so on. Once upon a time museums used to allow visitors to do a lot, even all of this – I have especially fond memories of the Göteborg Ethnographic museum back in the 1960s, and of the old India Museum (which was in accessible storage under the ægis of the V&A) where I was able to blow Tibetan human thigh bone trumpets and other things, and Fijian conch trumpets. Nowadays such behaviour is all-but impossible (though the Bate is still an exception). A museum curator can do a lot of this, of course, as part of the job, though some tactile connexion is lost when one is wearing gloves, but the ordinary person can't do that nowadays.

With my own instruments I can do what I like with them. I can handle them in all these ways. I can take any of them off to play in a concert; I can take them to the studios and play them there, and if there is need for multiples I can hand them round. I can and do let any of you who are interested, come round to my home and I can let any of you handle them, play them if they're playable, photograph them, and so on, and if by any mischance an instruments get damaged by playing or handling in this way, well it's my instrument, and it's my fault, and too bad. Anyway it hasn't happened yet! And while you're here for this conference, you're very welcome to come and look at it, though I may have to limit handling if there are too many other people at the same time. You can always come back! All it needs is an appointment by email. The collection is always accessible at any day and any time that I'm at home. What's more, I've often learned quite a bit about the instruments from visitors like you.

And one final point – I often lend an instrument to a player, even if it's only those that are robust enough to stand up to professional playing. Anneke Scott has one of my instruments now, and she plays it in their Prince Consort Band and so on, and others have done so, too. I only do this to people whom I know are reliable, of course, but various things do go out from time to time. Even while I was still at the Bate, some students wanted to recreate a nineteenth-century brass band, and I put in a number of my instruments, and for some of them I had to have low pitch slides made for them, and others I got restored in one way or another, which I'd have hesitated to do for Bate instruments. As I've said before, I can do what I like with my own instruments, sometimes doing things that I'd never have allowed to be done with Bate instruments.

If you have your own collection, there's a lot that you can do with it, as well as just looking at it or being a magpie.

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