

Collecting Musical Instruments

A paper given at a Scientific Instrument Conference at the Boerhaave Museum, Leiden, 1994

What is the connexion between collecting musical instruments and collecting scientific instruments? What, for that matter, is the connexion between musical and scientific instruments?

To take the last question first, the two have often been the same. Look at any mediæval picture of Pythagoras. There are his scientific tools. What are they? A monochord; an anvil with a collection of hammers of different weights, a group of glasses containing different amounts of water.

The monochord, as well as being used to establish the harmonic series and being the main tool for calculations of pitch and frequency, was used to teach choirs to sing. It was the ancestor of the wheel-driven *organistrum*, symphony, and hurdy-gurdy in the endeavour to sustain its sound, and it was the ancestor of the clavichord, which was originally called the manichord, in the interests of convenience and use with a keyboard rather than shunting a sliding bridge to and fro.

The blacksmith's anvil has a lesser musical history than the hurdy-gurdy family and the clavichord, but Wagner, with anvils tuned to three different pitches in *The Ring*, was not the only composer to ask for it.

More dangerous were the musical glasses, for the constant vibration on the fingertips is often said to have driven many of their exponents mad. But perhaps they were nearly mad to start with, to take up so fragile, and so whining, an instrument.

So the link between the two types of instrument is long established. What about collecting them? As tools for use, of course all musicians collect some, as do many scientists, though I suspect that if you're going to use them seriously, you're going to have a pretty small collection; on the other hand, if you're Henry VIII you can accumulate several hundreds if you're going to equip all the royal bands.¹ The main excuse for building up a collection nowadays is to show the history and development of either scientific or musical instruments in general, like my own collection of nearly two and a half thousand musical instruments, or to concentrate on a specific variety, whether of astrolabes or harpsichords.

I don't think that the attempt to show history and development was a common idea for musical instruments in earlier times. The major European collections, other than those which were the detritus of playing ensembles, like the Catajo and Schloss Ambras Collections in Vienna, seems to have begun as a *Kunst-Kabinetten* or *Curiosität-Kabinetten*.² Certainly this is how the Viennese material wound up; once the instruments were no longer useful they were preserved either as curiosities or, for example with the *Tartölten* and the *Virchis cittern*, as art objects.³ Also preserved as curiosities were the fruits of explorations, for there is nothing new in the idea of the tourists bringing home armfuls of native crafts as souvenirs of their travels. Indeed today this has spawned an industry that cannot be neglected when considering third world economies, the

1 F W Galpin, *Old English Instruments of Music*, Methuen, London, 1910. Appendix 4 is a transcription of an inventory of the garderobe of 1547, taken from BL ms Harl.1419.

2 Julius Schlosser, *Die Sammlung alter Musikinstrumente*, Anton Schroll, Wien, 1920.

3 *ibidem*, A[mbras] 219-223 (p.85) and A 61 (p.60) respectively.

production of what was termed airport art.⁴

As early as 1619, this interest in the arts and crafts of other cultures was widespread enough to be featured in a book. The first major encyclopaedia of musical instruments, Michael Praetorius's *De Organografia*,⁵ has several plates showing exotic instruments, many of them geographically misattributed, but very accurately drawn, so accurately that one can sometimes recognise a specific instrument, for example an African drum in the Ashmolean Museum.⁶ Even earlier, Virdung had included folk instruments with the high art instruments with which he was principally concerned,⁷ and in the 18th century Bonanni provided something that was close to being a survey of musical instruments of the world;⁸ certainly no other book compared with it until the great organologists such as Curt Sachs began to publish early in the present century.

Musical instrument collections today can perhaps be divided into four main groups: one, such as my own, the results of the magpie instinct of the eccentric combined with, we like to think, a scholarly desire for knowledge and the wish to communicate that knowledge to others. There are also public museums of this sort, for instance the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, where the collections were deliberately built up to show variety and development.

Another is the results of a definite and specific interest, as for example that of Philip Bate in European orchestral woodwind instruments, which was the genesis of the Bate Collection in Oxford of which I am the curator,⁹ or of Raymond Russell in harpsichords and clavichords, whose collection is now in Edinburgh.¹⁰ The commercial world of trade produced similar results, for example the Hill Collection of string instruments, which was given to the Ashmolean Museum, also in Oxford, by Hill's who were once one of the most important dealers, repairers, and makers of violins in Britain.¹¹ Also of course specific geographic or cultural interests, such as, on the one hand, the Germanisches National Museum in Nürnberg, and, on the other, The Museum of the American Indian in New York.

- 4 If I remember correctly, by William Fagg, sometime Keeper of the British Museum Department of Ethnography and leading expert on African material.
- 5 Michael Praetorius, *Syntagmatis Musici, vol II: De Organographia*, Wolfenbüttel 1619; facsimile Bärenreiter, Kassel, 1958. Specifically plates XXIX, XXX, and XXXI.
- 6 *ibidem*, item 2 on plate XXX, and Klaus P Wachsmann, 'A Drum from Seventeenth Century Africa', *Galpin Society Journal* XXIII, 1970, 97-103 & plate xv.
- 7 Sebastian Virdung, *Musica Getuscht*, Basel 1511, facsimile Bärenreiter, Kassel, 1970.
- 8 Filippo Bonanni, *Gabinetto Armonico*, Rome 1723, the illustrations reprinted with new texts, which are less informative than the original, by Dover, New York, 1964.
- 9 Anthony Baines, *Catalogue of the Instruments*, Bate Collection, Oxford 1976; Jeremy Montagu, *Complete Checklist*, Bate Collection, Oxford 1994.
- 10 Sidney Newman & Peter Williams, *The Russell Collection and other Early Keyboard Instruments in Saint Cecilia's Hall, Edinburgh*, Edinburgh University Press, 1968.
- 11 David Boyden, *Catalogue of The Hill Collection of Musical Instruments in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*, OUP 1969.

A third, which might link with that last example is the result of colonialism, for instance in the old India Museum in London, which has been inaccessible for the last twenty or so years, and more reasonably with the magnificent collection of New Guinea and Indonesian instruments here in Leiden, in the Koninklijk Instituut voor den Tropen in Amsterdam, and in the Gemeente Museum in The Hague.

The fourth is, as before, the residue of the Kunst and Curiosity Cabinets, as in Vienna, Copenhagen, Berlin and many other cities.

So, ultimately, the links between our interests are manifold and, as this Conference progresses, I suspect that we shall have found very few differences between us save, perhaps, that my interests are noisier than yours.

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