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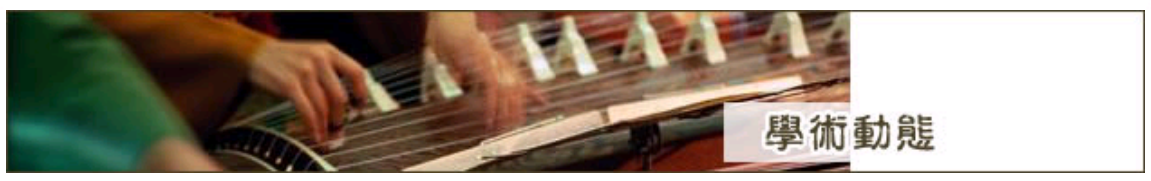
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Making Musical History Through Instruments, the story of Musical museums in the UK

Helene La Rue

“Noah was the first collector, Adam had given names to the animals, but it fell to Noah to collect them: In Noah, the art of collecting up that which had been created and was doomed became inseparable from the creation of a new and better world. In the myth of Noah as ur-collector resonate all the themes of collecting itself: desire and nostalgia, saving and loss, the urge to erect a permanent and complete system against the destructiveness of time.” So begins the introduction to “The Cultures of Collecting” (Elsner and Cardinal)[1], and this model of collecting can be easily applied to the collection of the whole world of musical instruments.

Indeed musical instruments in a museum can be seen as symbolic of times past and of musicians long silent. The collecting and organising of them can also be understood to be a way of holding onto and organising that past just as the music is also categorised, listed and placed in a canon which may have more relevance to the needs of our contemporary world than to its first audiences. The historic instrument played is centre stage of this world. Not only the music chosen to represent the past but also the past heard through the instrument which first played it. No where is this more powerful than in those instruments which belonged to the [2]most famous of composers.

In his article, ‘The System of Collecting’, Jean Baudrillard argues that “ any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized or it can be possessed[3].” He argues that these two functions are mutually exclusive ‘The first function has to do with the subject’s project of asserting practical control within the real world, the second with an enterprise of abstract mastery whereby the subject seeks to assert himself as an autonomous totality outside the world.’ Collections of musical instruments provide us with a particular point of tension within this paradigm. This may provide us with the answer to the tension between using or not using a musical instrument. Here, in my own world, we have the logic between the unplayed instruments in the Pitt Rivers Museum and the played instruments of the Bate Collection. I shall seek to examine this through a brief survey of collections of musical instruments.

Any fascination with musical instruments, their creation, their design, and their history leads inevitably to museums. It is in a museum that instruments become

available for scholarship and for study by makers, designers and musicians. Yet the museum is not a completely comfortable place for musical instruments, of all the muses it is that of music which finds itself least at ease or at home there. Thomas Hardy expressed this powerfully in his poem: "Haunting Fingers a Phantasy in a Museum of Musical instruments", the English author Thomas Hardy's main theme is of nostalgia and loss.

"Are you awake,  
Comrades, this silent night?  
Well "'twere if all of our glossy gluey make  
Lay in the damp without, and fell to fragments quite!"

"O viol, my friend,  
I watch, though Phosphor nears,  
And I fain would drowse away to its utter end  
This dumb dark stowage after our loud melodious years!"

And they felt past handlers clutch them,  
Though none was in the room,  
Old players'"' dead fingers touch them,  
Shrunk in the tomb.

Here he indulges in morbid gloom on viewing musical instruments in a museum, reflecting on the death and loss of their musicians. He allows instruments to speak for themselves, and in doing so gives us his version of collecting. Once central 'actors' in many human lives his instruments are now unplayed. Each instrument's story is tinged with the sadness of memory; each now but reminders of Times Past; worlds lived and lost and the sadness of silence.

It seems that there is something for some particularly powerful, for others, irritating about an instrument, unplayed in a museum display? The used collections may enable us to 'assert the practical control' of knowing how the instrument sounds or functions. Those in which the instruments remain silent enable us the 'autonomous totality' of a vision of the world as expressed through instruments. But, simple as this theory sounds it would then pre-suppose that all collections that are used have the practical reason that the owner, or collection creator, wishes to know how the instruments sound and this is not actually the case. Nor is it the case that an historic instrument, restored to playing use even sounds as it did when it was first heard. Indeed, it has been argued that a restored instrument may well tell us more about the modern restorer than its original maker and that the process itself destroys the original historic record leaving us with far less of the original evidence of the early luthier's art .

Returning to Hardy's poem, some instruments are kept just for sentiment. But are these always but a reminder of death and loss? As though their mute place in the museum case is merely a testimony to the loss of the musicians? As we shall discover instruments have been treasured because of their artistic, or decorative merit. They were first made to be not only producers of music but also to be objects of beauty, and even in some cases to be a symbol of their owner's wealth. There are those, amongst museum visitors, curators and scholars who feel that as the prime purpose of the creation of musical instruments is to make music they should continue in that task. This may be more relevant in the case of those instruments which were made for players, and which are recorded by writers of their day as being by the most highly regarded makers. Others may well, in the case of certain instruments, see modern use as an insult to a musician's memory. Particularly when this use involves radical rebuilding of an instrument to enable it to be played. I hope, through an examination of the history of the collecting of instruments to discuss these issues.

""Cello, good mate,  
You speak my mind as yours:  
Doomed to this voiceless, crippled, corpselike state,  
Who, dear to famed Amphion, trapped here, long endures?"

Hardy's poem, which I shall use throughout this paper as a 'ritornello' links instruments with the music once played. He links them in particular to those aspects of human life with which they were associated. It may help to start by trying to understand those many rich and evocative associations which resonate for us through instruments of music. Let us begin with a definition. It may be surprising to learn that the meaning of the term 'musical instrument' in English was only first proscribed in 1929. This appeared in the publication "Anthropological Notes and Queries" in its section concerning the collecting of music and musical artefacts in the course of anthropological field work published by the Royal Anthropological Society in London. In this Henry Balfour gives us the first description in English of a musical instrument: this is deemed to be 'an object, used to produce a sound whether musical or not'.

This description was written to aid those anthropologists working in the (usually) foreign field amongst musical traditions unfamiliar to them. Balfour very carefully tries to steer the reader away from the word 'music' realising the (to quote Blacking in *How Musical is Man?*) 'one man's music is another man's noise'[4]. There is also the problem of knowing whether an instrument observed by a visitor to be used as a signal, may be also, at another time, be used in a musical context. Of course such a broad definition as this means that such collections as are found in anthropological museums such as the Pitt Rivers, Oxford, or the British Museum, London include a far broader range of types of sound producing objects such as bells worn on clothes which might not otherwise be considered as a musical instrument in a typical conservatoire collection. These collections set out to fulfil the second part of the paradigm, that of viewing the totality of the world collected. In this case the totality of the musical world through all historic periods and in all countries.

"Gayer than most  
Was I," reverbed a drum;  
"The regiments, marchings, throngs, hurrahs! What a host  
I stirred---even when crape mufflings gagged me well-nigh dumb!

In the course of writing the Museums of Music report and the consequent research I was to learn that there were very few museums that do not possess instruments. Military, agricultural and local history, archaeological, national, decorative, personal collections, toy, and even botanical collections all possess examples of musical instruments. It is tempting to suggest that all museums have instruments as music is so inextricably bound up with each and every facet of our lives. It may be the musicians conceit to believe so, but there is, I suggest more to it than that. Here Hardy starts with a drum, the instrument of war and also the instrument used at funerals for those who fought, hence the crape which was used to cover the drum at such times.

"Once I could thrill  
The populace through and through,  
Wake them to passionate pulsings past their will." . . .  
(A contra-basso spake so, and the rest sighed anew.)  
And they felt old muscles travel  
Over their tense contours,  
And with long skill unravel Cunningest scores.

Here the poet evokes memories of musical performances. The music of other events, of street, parks and gardens, of fairs and festivals. This leads us in our history to the collection of instruments concerned with public performance. More often than not the eighteenth collections of this type of material were those of artistic recreation.

The reasons for musical instruments in such a variety of collections has much to do with the (to coin a word) 'aboutness' of musical instruments. Just as the history of museums has shadowed the current intellectual and social milieu in which things develop. So has the collection and incorporation of musical instruments in them. Traditionally musical instruments have been collected for as many reasons as there were prevailing intellectual pursuits, or social fashions. The music room of a great house might contain instruments, or, as in the case of Norfolk House be the room in which music was heard (the musicians playing in a room alongside) but have musical decorations.[5]

Norfolk house was famous in its days for the lavishness of its decorations and the events which took place there. It was a popular place for the fashionable set. There they would meet to play cards, gossip about politics and listen to music. The music room was then empty except for a card table at each end, giving plenty of room for the guest to circular and talk whilst the musicians played close by. The instruments in the music room are not a collection in our modern museum meaning but are an artists recreations. On all sides of the room, between mirrors and windows are trophies of every type of instrument. The music may be being played in another room but here the music is of representation and here instruments are music. For the first visitors to the newly decorated room the se trophies are what would have told them this was the music room rather than the presence of musicians and actual instruments.

"The tender pat  
Of her aery finger-tips  
Upon me daily---I rejoiced thereat!"  
(Thuswise a harpsicord, as ""'twere from dampered lips.)

"My keys'" white shine,  
Now sallow, met a hand  
Even whiter. . . . Tones of hers fell forth with mine  
In sowings of sound so sweet no lover could withstand!"

And its clavier was filmed with fingers  
Like tapering flames---wan, cold---  
Or the nebulous light that lingers  
In charnel mould.

Instruments do survive in their original homes from that day to this and can still be seen in domestic interiors of great houses such as Hever Castle and Knowle in Kent. To this day the music room still houses the harpsichord and harp that have stood in the same place since they were acquired for the daughter of the house in the eighteenth century. Keyboard instruments were always closely associated with young girls, hence the reason for the name 'virginals' which was given to any keyboard instrument through the sixteenth until the early eighteenth century irrespective of the type of keyboard instrument being so named.

Many of the first collections were to be found in the home, even if some of these homes were on a grand scale. In the context of English social history the first collections of instruments would have been those used within a great house; the chests of viols etc. Not only may these instruments be for the family of the house to play but they would also stand ready for any visiting professional

musicians. In time as the instruments in these collections became 'old fashioned' they assumed the characteristics of 'curiosities' and may well have been preserved for this reason, as well as for the sentimental connections with the memory of those who played them. A famous example of a group of instruments such as these are the Chester recorders. Antiquated instruments may also have been kept because of their beauty or intrinsic value. One such example is the 'Warwick castle gittern' now to be seen in the British Museum. In the sixteenth century there is a growing literature concerning musical instruments, and it may be that the works of Virdung and Praetorius themselves being 'book collections' of instruments could have inspired some of the actual collecting of musical instruments. At least it may have given such an activity a touch of 'respectability' wherever the writings were known.

Objects collected by sailors on journeys of exploration and science and then sold when their ships reached English ports would find their way into the Cabinets of Curiosity kept in the larger English houses such as Claydon House in Buckinghamshire. In designing Claydon House not only was a room set aside for this but special cabinets were built. The house collections included fossils, corals, dried plants indeed all objects natural and artificial. Some could have been acquired through the purchase of material on sale in London but much would also have been brought back by members of the family from overseas travel. An important instrument in this collection is the fine early gamelan which had been brought back to England by Raffles. The Verney family of the time were so enamoured of the exotism of the orient that they also had a whole room decorated in the Chinese style.

The seventeenth century saw the formation of more collections in Europe. The two earliest were those in Leiden, in the Netherlands and Oxford, England. The latter were the collections of the gardener and plants man Tradescant later acquired by Elias Ashmole and given to Oxford where they formed the nucleus of the Ashmolean Museum. Both of these major collections included amongst their various objects musical instruments from Europe and from wider lands overseas.

Collectors in the seventeenth century vied to show their classical learning by arranging their material according to the three main groupings described by Pliny in his *Historia naturalis*. These three groups were antiquities; stones, minerals and earths, and corals, shells, animals, fruits, etc. To quote Shelton's summing up of these:

This meant that 'giants bones' were considered to be antiquities, while mummies, musical instruments, paintings, clocks and Indian shoes qualified as minerals or earths.' [6]

The eighteenth century was the great century of exploration. For Europeans in particular this was the great period of discovery and trade. Amongst these voyages of discovery were the three voyages of Captain James Cook. These voyages led to the acquisition of many 'curiosities' as objects acquired during the voyage were seen as the means of raising capital when they were sold on their return to England. In the second voyage, the Forsters, father and son, amassed a collection of artefacts some of which were sold to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford on their return. Remarkably their journals and inventories survive until this day. Among the many artefacts are musical instruments. This voyage was even to inspire a musical entertainment on their return, making use of melodies and instruments acquired during the voyage.

As well as the great voyages of exploration the nineteenth century was the period of foundation of many learned societies in Great Britain: the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the Royal Anthropological Society, The Royal Musical Society for example. In this century there was also the growth of interest in public

museums and exhibitions. Collecting was an expression of many different theories and interests, many different ways of recording and showing the world. In 1851 The Great Exhibition set out to demonstrate Industry and excellence and was a magnificent showcase for industrial developments and manufacturing tools as well as the best of the worlds decorative arts. In the Great Exhibition instruments were shown as much for their elegance and beauty, or for their ingenuity of design as for their excellence for the production of music.

The Collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum were established as a result of the Great Exhibition. For this museum musical Instruments were collected because of their decorative qualities, as Anthony Baines writes in their catalogue:

In every type of musical instrument this is evident, either in the calculated beauty of form alone or, more often, in conjunction with decoration that is not essential to the instrument's musical function. And conversely, therefore, musical instruments may be legitimately considered in the light of their contribution to the study and enjoyment of the decorative crafts as well as to the world of Music.

Regional learned societies not only brought men of antiquarian interests together to share knowledge but these groups also made collections of books and objects of local interest. Here archaeological finds would have their place, both described in learned publications and on show. Such collections grew over time until they formed the founding collections of many of the great civic museums. Morpeth in the County of Northumberland, still the home of the collection of the Antiquarian Society of Newcastle houses material relating to the local instrument the Northumbrian bagpipes.

In the twentieth century new technologies first developed in the previous century enabled music itself to be collected on a grand scale and the sound archives of the Smithsonian, Vienna, Berlin and London to name but a few. It was also a time of reflection and consolidation of knowledge. In the field of musical instruments the century began with the publication of a new scientific classification published in 1914, written by Hornbostel and Sachs. This system was designed to enable the scholar to described instruments as scientifically as they might described a collection of plants or animals. At last music, and the objects of music, were to be seen to be able to be described in terms as scientific as other learned studies.

In the twentieth century, as well as the great collections which were attempting to collect and record every technology of producing sound, or every type of instrument which ever existed, there were the first Personal Shrines, museums created in the former homes, birth places or places of work of great musicians and writers. Museums such as those of the author Jane Austin, or the musician Franz Liszt contain many personal effects, including books and manuscripts as well as the instruments they used in their lifetimes. These museums were to be become places of pilgrimage and of nostalgia. In them the past was to be revisited and the homes of great musicians became temples to their work. The public visitor encouraged to imagine that the great musician may just have slipped out for a moment but would be soon back. For many it seems that there is even more the magic and vitality to the evocation of the past when instruments in these venues are played. How much this music costs the historic instrument, or the integrity of its representation of the past is rarely questioned by the museum visitor.

The importance lies primarily in our ability to control and organise the worlds of past luminaries such as these, and to recreate past worlds in these venues to our own satisfaction

Personal collecting has more popular as people grow more affluent. The contribution of the last twenty years has been the revolution in computer

technology. Now we can all build our own virtual museums, or our web page dedicated to exhaustive notes about one instrument, or one musician. This gives us a cheaper, even space saving, option.

It is interesting to see the difference between personal and public collecting, it is rare for the private collector not to play his (and almost all private collectors of musical instruments in the United Kingdom are male) musical instruments. Most museums do play a part of their collection, but museum theory is aware of the problems of use and tries to limit it. Or so this is the theory – but is it as much that for the personal collector their collection is of items (to return to Baudrillard's thesis) for 'asserting practical control within the real world'. Some collectors would argue though that they were acting assert themselves 'as an autonomous totality outside the world' and able, through their collection to organise and explain that world.

So we can see that our passage through time has underlined the many different reasons for keeping and collecting musical instruments. As a part of their original use, as examples of technology, of exploration, of exotism, as science and learning or for sentiment. Each one of these reasons gives rise to collections of a different character, each with its known memory of times past, of "desire and nostalgia, saving and loss, the urge to erect a permanent and complete system against the destructiveness of time."

To give the last word to Hardy is to visualise historic museum instruments as symbols of loss and past life. His image of the ghostly musicians, once truly the life and soul of the party, now relegated to memory is perhaps one which strikes many a music museum visitor.

"I faced the sock  
Nightly," twanged a sick lyre,  
Over ranked lights! O charm of life in mock,  
O scenes that fed love, hope, wit, rapture, mirth, desire!"

Thus they, till each past player  
Stroked thinner and more thin,  
And the morning sky grew grayer  
And day crawled in.

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[1] Elsner and Cardinal, eds., 1994.2

[2] *ibid* Baudrillard, *The system of Collecting*, 8

[3] *ibid*, Baudrillard, *The system of Collecting*, 8

[4] Blacking, *How Musical is Man?*

[5] Norfolk House, London, was sadly demolished in the early twentieth century but the interior of the music room has been reconstructed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[6] Shelton, A.A., *Renaissance Collections and the New World*, in Elsner and Cardinal eds., 1994. 182

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