

AN AID TO INNOVATION IN INSTRUMENT-MAKING: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH BETWEEN WORKSHOPS AND RESEARCH LABORATORIES

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ABSTRACT

The economics of French instrument-making consists almost entirely of very small handicraft enterprises. Faced with strong international competition, they are positioned on the top-end and concert musical instruments market, while learning instruments are rather manufactured on an industrial basis. This observation may certainly be applied more generally at European level, and even at international level.

The craft industry production of musical instruments is the result of a long process of learning know-how and optimising the instrument-making stages. The development of traditional instruments is an ongoing process that occurs in response to the needs of musicians and composers (both contemporary and old ones), or is imposed by constraints on the supply of protected materials, such as certain types of exotic wood. Consequently, the use of alternative materials, the modification of structural elements, and improvements made to intonation or acoustic instrument radiation is therefore now carried out using scientific tools. While this approach is widespread for industrial applications, this is seldom the case within handicraft enterprises.

The issue, therefore, is to develop tools for characterising instruments suitable for use in a workshop so that instrument-makers may have the means at their disposal for innovating in order to keep their production quality one step ahead and keep their handicraft enterprises competitive.

How is a response to be provided to the geographic and thematic dispersal of the craftsmen? The objective of this paper is to present the initiatives taken in France over the last few years in order to bring instrument-makers and research laboratories closer together in a structured, sustainable way, and create a joint working dynamic. This illustration is provided based on two complementary projects – *Lutherie tools* and PAFI (Instrument-Making Aid Platform) – which are intended to provide *low-cost* tools suitable for workshop operations and concrete responses to situations involving the innovation of musical instruments. What makes the projects original is the fact that instrument-makers are involved in all the development stages, from defining the specifications through to testing the prototypes.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to present a original approach to scientific and technical collaboration between a collective of craftsmen, manufacturers and repairers of musical instruments, a grouping of four research laboratories, and a technology transfer and support structure for enterprises; Itemm, “Institut technologique européen des métiers de la musique” (Figure 1). This paper does not, strictly speaking, have a scientific aim; instead, it outlines the environment and the special conditions which led to this experiment. The issue of innovation as a part of instrument-making is by no

means specific to the French context and does seem to have the capacity for general application at international level. So what is involved here is a presentation of examples of technology transfers that contribute to maintaining craft industry production of high-quality musical instruments, by providing instrument-makers with tools for innovating and improving instruments which are suited to their needs, and which are the outcome of scientific research over the last twenty years, particularly in the field of musical acoustics.



Figure 1: Itemm, an instrument-making resource centre.

2. ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Nowadays, in addition to the cultural industries and now the leisure industries (technically speaking, engineering and broadcasting of musical signals) which, by their very nature, require in-depth analysis of “musical sound” and the mastery of the cutting-edge technologies associated with it, instrument-making, by rights, constitutes one of the renowned economic sectors drawing directly on the results of scientific research, and particularly research in the field of musical acoustics and materials sciences.

2.1 The music industry

The advent of electronic and digital technologies is bringing about far-reaching, drastic changes in the music industry and, consequently, instrument-making, to the extent of deliberately using electronic accessories, and even computers, as fully-fledged musical instruments. Historically speaking, the starting point for this change was the recurring issue of amplifying instruments which, over the last century, have been the outcome of new cultural practices related on the one hand to the growth of Afro-American music and then electro-acoustic music and, on the other hand, to the change in places where performance are provided and music is listened to, which applies to all types of music.

A consequence of this technological and cultural revolution has been a change in the landscape in terms of instrument-making. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, the mass-manufacturing of musical instruments gradually moved from Europe to the United States, Japan, South-East Asia and now, China. This distribution is also to do with an industrial mode for instruments development (electro-acoustic and electronic instruments, among others) which began in the United States and was applied to electric guitars. It now impacts on all the instrument families, where a few major brands dominate the market, particularly in the case of electronic instrument-making. Computer-assisted music and sound synthesis technologies provide examples of this perspective.

Along with the expansion of amplified forms of music, music-making being made accessible to all and worldwide cultural intermixing have also brought about this change in the manufacturing sites for traditional acoustic instruments on the beginners' and learners' markets. For example, only instrument-making that provides high added value has been retained in Europe, with a few "specialities", like the piano industry in Germany and the wind instruments industry in France.

2.2 The craft industry sector

Although in this case the presentation is restricted to the typology applicable to French instrument-making, it seems that the clear distinction between international industrial companies on the one hand and a network of very small handicraft enterprises on the other hand, reflects the situation in many countries.

It is quite difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the French instrument-making sector. An overview of its economic activity leads to a current assessment of the number of companies involved as being between 2,500 and 2,800 (the manufacturing, restoration, repair, maintenance, tuning, servicing and marketing of musical instruments), providing a pool of about 10,000 jobs [1]. These figures tell us a great deal, because in order to fully delineate this instrument sector, all of the actors involved in the *technical field* must be taken into account: industrials, craftsmen, distributors, and music stores of a general or specialised nature with a repair workshop.

Musical instruments production, which is positioned solely at the top end of the market, now constitutes the output more or less solely of very small handicraft enterprises with fewer than twenty employees, two-thirds of which are sole proprietorships. What is actually entailed in the sector is no longer just craft-industry or semi-industrial manufacturing, but the existence of structures engaged in "mixed" technical and commercial lines of business, offering repair and maintenance services along with customer advice and direct selling. Pools of rental instruments, which consequently require regular technical maintenance, are becoming increasingly important within this context (markets for learning instruments, particularly for young people receiving musical training).

The standard profile for a craft industry workshop, to a varying extent depending on the instrument speciality, is thus oriented towards a service offer ranging from the manufacture and repair of instruments (sometimes to a very high level of technical quality and know-how) through to marketing and maintenance, and even, increasingly, the finishing and adjustment of imported unfinished instruments, within the learning instruments market niche. The estimated number of companies with a repair workshop is between

1,600 and 1,800. The estimated number of enterprises with a recognised manufacturing line of business is nearly 800.

3. TECHNOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

From a technical perspective, the basic characteristic of instrument-making is the multidisciplinary nature of the skills which, quite often, are held by the *same person* within the company:

- Use of multiple materials (wood, metals, skins, textiles, composites);
- Mastery of related types of know-how (design, assemblies, finishes);
- Varied technical and scientific knowledge (of a mechanical, acoustic, or electronic nature, or relating to computer-integrated manufacturing);
- Various types of cultural knowledge (music, organology, instrument playing);
- And, of course, company management (supplies, inventory, trading, communication).

And this is not to mention the advent of electronic instruments and computer music technology. It goes without saying that the international economic context is now imposing ever-greater integration of technological innovation, which handicraft enterprises are far from being exempt from. Quite to the contrary, keeping ahead in terms of quality demands (both on the products and the services that they offer) or, in other words, in relation to both "top end" and "customised" items, involves the intense development of appropriate technical solutions and their quick implementation within the enterprises, following the example of the developments noted over the last twenty years in mass-production units in all sectors. The benefits derived from this are also the same:

- *Reduced costs and shorter design and execution timeframes* (virtual prototyping, selection of materials, reproducibility, production monitoring and control, etc.);
- *Capitalising on knowledge and practices* (products traceability, the optimisation and development of models, etc.);
- And, a key advantage for small enterprises; *adaptation to customers' needs* (response to specific demands, responsiveness, service quality, etc.).

Moreover, as is the case in a number of other business sectors, instrument-making is also confronted with changes to standards and new regulations concerning workplace health and safety, or which relate to the themes of procurement and sustainable development. By way of an illustration, one of the major issues currently relates to the natural materials normally used for manufacturing musical instruments. Going above and beyond just the framework of restoring instruments that are collectors' items, international agreements for protecting flora and fauna concerning certain endangered species (CITES; the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora [2]) are now adversely affecting the production of new instruments: the pernambuco used in modern bows and the rosewood used in guitars and percussion instruments. In the medium-term, the precondition for maintaining a competitive craft industry production of high-quality musical instruments is not only seeking alternative high-performance materials (wood essences and/or composites), but also determining appropriate dimensions for their use in instrument-making.

Thus, *combining the maintenance of traditional know-how and the use of innovative methods and means* currently lies at the heart of the challenges to be taken up by the instrument-making sector [3]. In order to provide an effective response, we need to

overcome the isolation of craftsmen and provide solutions that are of common interest to each family of instruments.

4. INNOVATION AND INSTRUMENT-MAKING

The relations between science and music go back a long way. Instrument-makers have continually sought to understand how the instruments that they make work so that they can improve their performance and adapt their characteristics to what musicians want. Moreover, advances made in research have already enabled significant spin-offs in terms of the characterisation and sizing of instruments, and prediction and prototyping tools. Currently, instrument-makers even have products dedicated to instrumentation such as BIAS and VIAS, developed by IWK [4]. The projects presented here are not positioned as competitors to existing tools, but rather as complementary tools. What is original about them is the collaborative approach adopted in defining them, which involved the instrument-makers themselves.

4.1 *Lutherie tools* project

Lutherie tools is an experimental device that consists of various equipment items (vibration and force sensors, signal conditioning box) and analysis software (Figure 2). It is intended for stringed instruments and is organised into specialised modules: the guitar, harp, quartet and bow. By measuring transfer functions, it enables instrument elements, and even whole instruments, to be characterised and sized. The objective here is not to provide details of the system's various functionalities, but rather to present the project's development approach [5].



Figure 2: Pilot *Lutherie tools* device.

4.1.1 *Craft industry/research dynamics*

Since 2001, annual meetings between luthiers and scientists have been organised by the Itemm with the support of one of the main French professional associations, the UNFI (National Instrument-Making Union). These meetings devoted to stringed instruments, which are held over a two-day period, provide the opportunity to exchange information via specialised lectures devoted to musical acoustics, as well as tutorials applying vibrations and acoustics measuring equipment. These simulations provide an educational framework within which scientific ideas and concepts can be discussed, criticised, understood and adapted to the specific features of the instruments. This educational support provides a structure for the exchanges and enables instrument-makers' needs to be expressed.

Of the various examples of tutorials carried out, the following in particular may be cited: identification of the initial resonances of guitars using vibration measurements or by determining the characteristics of luthier's wood based on the resonances of the sticks that bows are made from. From 2001 to 2007, a number of experiments were designed and presented. Their design and development involved numerous students from the acoustics training courses offered by Le Mans University (France); over sixty in total. This potential enables the concrete issues raised by craftsmen to be responded to.

4.1.2 *Individual support*

After six years of collaborative effort, the closer links between luthiers and university staff resulted in the development of a pilot metrology tool called *Lutherie tools*, developed by the "Laboratoire d'Acoustique de l'Université du Maine" (LAUM) and the "Pôle d'innovation des métiers de la musique" (music professions innovation centre¹), Itemm. This system is made available to craftsmen free of charge, in exchange for feedback about using the tools. Above and beyond being a tool with predefined functionalities enabling a response to the needs identified, the main purpose of *Lutherie tools* is to provide luthiers and bow-makers with guidance concerning their thinking and their approach to characterising their work.

Lutherie tools has an open design in order to respond to the issues specific to each instrument, and to enable developments of the various functionalities to be oriented according to the feedback obtained. One of the major advantages of the system is its low cost when it comes to ensuring broad dissemination within workshops. While some of the system's functionalities are already to be found in commercial products used in the field of mechanical engineering, nevertheless they are only available piecemeal and their complexity requires a level of expertise that most instrument-makers do not have.

Ten or so copies of the initial prototype of the device were produced in 2007, and then twenty or so in 2009 for the second version. The systems are loaned at professional meetings for a one-year period. Modifications are made based on the critical feedback provided. These loans are extended by being associated with a personal applied research project, formulated by each of the instrument-makers involved in the dynamic. Each individual project is supported and monitored over the current year and forms the subject of a presentation of the results at the next professional meeting.

4.2 The PAFI project

The PAFI (French acronym for Instrument-Making Aid Platform) project, drawn up over a four-year period, began in December 2008, and may be seen as the general implementation of the *Lutherie tools* approach to all the families of instruments: plucked and bowed stringed instruments, wind instruments (woodwind and brass) and, on an exploratory basis, percussion instruments. The objective targeted is the implementation of a hardware and software platform for supporting the design and characterisation of musical instruments. The major stake involved is to ensure the compliance of this platform's functionalities with the concrete needs of instrument-makers and their seamless integration into their everyday activities.

4.2.1 *Partners and objectives*

The Pafi project forms part of an ambitious collaborative approach involving four scientific partners (LAUM, GSII-

¹ The name "Pôle d'innovation" (innovation centre) is awarded subject to a French Ministry for the Craft Industries quality label granted to an establishment for developing an economic and technological support mission for a business sector. The Itemm, one of the main instrument-making training centres at European level, is in charge of technology transfers for companies within this field in France.

ESEO, LTCI-Télécom ParisTech, and STMS-Ircam²), the music professions innovation centre (Itemm), and a group of instrument-makers co-ordinated by the UNFI (National Instrument-Making Union). The project's strength lies in this combination of skills. What is involved is not just the isolated approach of a single craftsman, but a shared dynamic aimed at the whole of the professional sector.

Currently, top-end instruments are manufactured on a craft industry basis. The difference in assessments made by musicians and instrument-makers from one instrument to the next relates to the aspects of sound rendering, expressiveness, ease of playing, and the manufacturing quality: the finish, sturdiness, staying in tune, etc. This complex concept, referred to using the qualifier "quality", turns out to be tricky to assess. The multitude of factors which contribute to the development of a successful instrument make it difficult to seek ways to improve it. Indeed, the ideal instrument, as a target to be achieved, does not exist, and does not constitute an unequivocal concept regarding which musicians, instrument-makers and music lovers might agree on. On the other hand, certain aspects of instruments can be deduced by measuring them, such as improving the range, or optimising the accuracy, even though they are linked to judgements based on perceptions. In terms of applied research, the plan of the PAFI project is to identify particular indicators which, by using objective characteristics for the instruments, make it possible to categorise and discriminate between instruments using automated methods. For example, these indicators come out of mobility measurements at the bridge in the case of stringed instruments or input impedance measurements in the case of wind instruments. For each of these two families of instruments, this work is carried out by two students completing their doctoral theses. It also involves seeing in what way the results obtained may be integrated into the craftsmen's various activities: checks on the reproducibility and quality of a manufacturing process, characterisation for the purposes of replicating a reference instrument, design support for a new product, the selection of materials and sizing, etc.

4.2.2 Organisation and expected results

Each laboratory specialises in a field – in musical acoustics of course – as well as in instrumentation for the equipment items (force, vibration or acoustic sensors) and in signal processing (traditional Fourier analysis and high-resolution methods). Three engineers were hired to ensure the developments and provide support for enterprises. Indeed, the distinctive feature of the PAFI project is that it integrates craftsmen right from the time of the design of the products intended for them and the definition of specifications, through to the testing and development of prototypes. Ten or so "pilot craftsmen" representative of all the various types of instruments were thus selected. Very small instrument-making enterprises do not have either the human or financial resources to purchase and adapt laboratory measuring tools. One of the major constraints of the PAFI project once again is to find robust technological solutions *at the lowest cost*. It is not the purpose of these tools to find answers to everything, but rather to facilitate innovation within very small enterprises.

The organisation of the PAFI platform will be structured based on modules: a general module concerning signal analysis and synthesis (for listening educational purposes), and specialist "sector" modules within each family of instruments. The whole lot will be linked to a database and a collaborative workspace on the Internet enabling information to be exchanged by the various users of the system. This pooling is intended to make it possible to provide a response to the isolation of craftsmen and create a dynamic that promotes innovation and the maintenance of know-how. Simply making such a device available is not enough, and it is foreseen that craftsmen will be trained via training courses organised by the Itemm from 2013 onwards, when the products are marketed.

The PAFI platform is intended to be upgradable and open so that it can be used as the basis for future complementary work. For example, in light of the fact that the scientific results have already been published, it is foreseen that the analysis and calculation software will be published subject to a free licence or on an "open source" basis. The aim is to be able to easily integrate new functionalities and to establish a common purpose that may be developed more largely.

5. INTERIM ASSESSMENT, PROSPECTS

This paper presented collective initiatives for technological support to the very small enterprises involved in instrument-making currently under development in France. By 2013, upon completion of their development, it is possible that these experiments may serve as the basis of work for the general implementation and continuation of this dynamic at international level. Indeed, in light of the general typology of handicraft enterprises and the open, upgradeable nature of the PAFI project, this prospect may be envisaged and is even desirable for maintaining the craft industry production of high-quality musical instruments.

6. REFERENCES

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² LAUM, Laboratoire d'acoustique de l'Université du Maine ; GSII-ESEO, Groupe Signal Image et Instrumentation de l'École Supérieure d'Électronique de l'Ouest ; LTCI-Télécom ParisTech, Laboratoire Traitement et Communication de l'Information de Télécom ParisTech ; STMS-Ircam, Sciences et Technologies de la Musique et du Son de l'Institut de coordination Acoustique-Musique.