

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AS PART OF OUR MUSICAL HERITAGE

Jeannine Lambrechts-Douillez

Emeritus Curator of the archeological museums of the city of Antwerpen

INTRODUCTION

Within the theme on "bridging the gaps" this paper presents a concise survey of several initiatives during the 2nd half of the 20th century that can be regarded as the growing consciousness of the need for preserving our national and international heritage and as a change in attitude towards treatment of musical instruments. Each action should be regarded in the context of its time; every generation has a different approach to the problem of preserving that particular part as a result of the evolution of new techniques.

1. WHO IS INTERESTED IN HISTORIC MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND FOR WHAT REASON ?

Amongst the visitors to a collection of historic musical instruments one gets several requests:

In general the visitor is fascinated by the mystery of how they sound. If keyboards or strings are within the range of the common visitor they are tempted to touch them. Playing is the more specialized request of musicians to verify if the sound and technique is satisfying according to their taste. The instrument-maker wants to produce something different commonly known as copies by taking measurements. Musicologists are happy with a photograph to illustrate an article on contemporary compositions. Organologists want to have a better knowledge of the different materials and techniques that promoted a specific sound. Sometimes you get requests by mail from visitors who want to "see" the instrument. It is obvious in most cases that in general requests have only one purpose and is only meant to satisfy their own curiosity or how to produce something different from what is commonly known.

In the midst of these requests the main task of the museum curator is to protect the intrinsic values of the instruments as sound producing device so that future generations could also formulate their own opinion thanks to newly developed techniques. Their task is not always that easy. Drawings were made available by museums; in many cases these drawings can no longer be reproduced by the lack of adequate scanners and photographs on a reduced scale are not the solution. Nobody is happy with the provided information. It has been proven recently that measurements taken of the same subject independently by three people have different results. However those in charge of musical instruments don't always have the proper training for a wide range of disciplines and have not the adequate equipment at their disposal. It is easier to work together when you don't care who gets credit. Obtaining a proper sound can only be organized as a multidisciplinary task putting one's ego aside by working together like an orchestra.

2. WHAT MOTIVATED THE COLLECTOR OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS ?

As collector's items musical instruments were very often acquired for their similarity to fine furniture or as a decorative item in an adequate surrounding. Very often the proper sound device was discarded and replaced being adapted to changing tastes and needs of one strong personality within certain communities as music schools, churches, orchestral ensembles. Some "unplayable" instruments found shelter together with outdated files in the basements or attics of the institutions.

In the introduction to the catalogue (1894) of his collection of 1.145 items César Snoeck [1] formulated his intentions as follows: "un instinct naturel, un caprice, l'idée qu'il est utile, pour un simple amateur de connaître le maniement et l'emploi des divers instruments de musique, afin de mieux comprendre leurs fonctions dans un ensemble et de pouvoir mieux apprécier le talent de ceux qui en jouent...L'envie me prit alors d'apprendre quel parti on avait put tirer autrefois de ces vieux engins" César Snoeck had collected these instruments out of interest for these devices "ces engins" so that he could better understand the talent of those that played them. There was no consideration for the esthetic concept of the instrumentmaker.

The general public is only interested in attending concerts and musicians are supposed to know best how to deal with it. Recreating music from early days requires research in libraries and archives: this should be taken care of by musicologists. In this process no attention was given to the musical instrument as a very important component of this new rediscovered music. Instruments were only considered as appliances and not as entities of a certain period with intrinsic qualities, created by instrument-makers serving esthetically the music of their time. They were not considered an important factor in a better understanding of the interpretation of music. The consequence was that music was performed on available instruments and if needed new materials and techniques were adapted to historic instruments, as the best result of technical evolution. Two examples amongst so many can illustrate this tendency: certain piano-companies starting producing harpsichords with the plucking device adapted to the piano concept. Many historic organs were destroyed by adapting them to the newly devised concept.

In 1970 the situation is clearly summarized in a publication by Martin Skowronek, prominent scholar and instrument maker: **Zu welchem Zweck und Ziel, mit welcher Absicht werden historische Musikinstrumente restauriert?** [2]

Es mag seltsam erscheinen, wenn ich ausgerechnet hier vor Ihnen eine solche Frage stelle. Sie klingt primitiv und überflüssig. So überflüssig dass sie - wie es mir erscheint - sehr oft gar nicht gestellt wird. Unsere Arbeit an historischen Saitenklaviern ist eingebettet in ein allgemeines und unverbindliches Gefühl von kulturell wertvollem Erhalten und Pflegen von Kunstwerken. Die fragen, die uns ernsthaft beschäftigen, sind eher technischer als grundsätzlicher Natur.

Und doch hängen beide, grundsätzliche und technische, untrennbar zusammen.

About the lack of interest for the problem by musicologists J.H. Van der Meer [3] summarizes the situation as follows : Organology has always been looked at slightly askance by many musicologists, who seem to feel uncomfortable in the presence of organologists, in some cases display an unbelievable ignorance of the field and very seldom see its problems, its results and its connections with other fields of musicology....I have tried to demonstrate in the first place that there are, indeed, connections with musicology and in the second place that some musicological conclusions can only be made from organological facts.

3. LET US NOW CONSIDER THE DIFFERENT STEPS TAKEN FOR ESTABLISHING A BETTER PROTECTION OF THE INTRINSIC VALUES OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.

In 1946 ICOM (International Council of Museums) was founded as a department of UNESCO, after the end of World war II in 1945. The United Nations are centralized in New York replacing the League of Nations. ICOM (UNESCO) is located in Paris; it was in Europe that hostilities were conducted by force implying economic sabotage between countries.

Although enlightened amateurs had contributed immensely to saving unprotected and endangered artifacts, it was evident that after World War II the protection of our cultural heritage needed a more professional approach; being a museum curator became a recognized profession for scholars with an historical training. It was no longer a honorary occupation, where people are appointed for granted services. Unfortunately technical and museological training was and still is exceptionally provided for. Within the several specialized international committees different aspects of museum training are considered for specific problems. Today ICOM has 30.000 members representing 137 countries

Also in 1946 the Galpin Society was established promoting the study of history, construction, development and use of musical instruments. Within this association collectors tried to promote exchange of information about how to deal with the different aspects of musical instruments. The access to collections was often denied; those in charge did not have an open mind. Within museums the situation was certainly not better and the musical instrument collection of f.i. the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was a subdivision of furniture and consequently treated as such.

By establishing the International Charter of Venice in 1964 it was the intention to protect architectural monuments and their environment; the general guidelines could also be applied to other parts of our national heritage: "The preservation and restoration of cultural properties determine a discipline that has to consult different natural and human sciences and techniques that can help with the study and preservation of the cultural property. Elements that are part of the monument such as sculpture and paintings can only be removed when this is the only way of preserving them".

In 1983 the Icom International Committee for Conservation formulated a definition of the profession since everybody could call himself Conservator-Restorer without specific requirements. Important was the observation that:

Today the conservator-restorer must work as part of a team. Just as the surgeon cannot be simultaneously radiologist, pathologist and psychologist, the conservator-restorer cannot be an expert in art or cultural history, chemistry, and or other natural or human sciences. Like that of the surgeon, the work of the conservator-restorer can and should be complemented by the analytical and research findings of scholars, whose collaboration must be accessible at the proper time. In short, interdisciplinary dependence is of paramount importance.

In 1986 The Canadian Group of "The International Institute for Conservation" formulated Code of Ethics and Guidance for practice for those involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada:

1. Balance between needs of society on one side and preservation on the other
2. Claiming respect for the physical, historic and esthetic integrity.
3. Demanding highest standards in training, examination, treatment, research and documentation.
4. The recognition of ones limitations
5. Sharing information and experience with colleagues in order to promote a knowledgeable profession
6. Respect for the integrity of fellow conservators.

Respect and integrity are important requirements. Restorations were very often performed by only one person, adapting to modern needs certain techniques and no information was available about these alterations to the authentic situation.

In 1960 (Comité international pour les musées et collections d'instruments de musique) within ICOM(UNESCO) was founded; contacts with other International Committees f.i. the International Conservation Committee became easy and their expertise was very valuable. In 1970 a colloquium was organized in collaboration with the Ruckers Genootschap in Antwerp on "Restoration problems of Antwerp harpsichords". The importance of this meeting has been confirmed by Robert Barclay [4] saying that for the first time not only museum directors were invited but also musicians, technicians and instrument-makers. Such meetings are widely accepted today promoting lively discussions on materials and techniques.

CIMCIM produced two major publications:

In 1986 Recommendations for regulating the Access to musical instruments in Public collections. By publishing it in ICOM news in English, French and Spanish it reached thousands of members

In 1993 Recommendations for the Conservation of musical instruments: an annotated bibliography mentioning the following statement:

To a great extent, destruction of the intrinsic value of musical instruments by over- restoration results from an inability or an unwillingness of individuals to share responsibility and expertise. Preservative or restorative treatment of any object is the province of a wide range of specialists, from curators and conservators to historians and instrument makers. Decisions concerning large and complex treatments, which may significantly alter historical objects, should be taken only after extensive consultation with appropriate specialists.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion to this survey let me submit the following thoughts:

Milestones in our cultural evolution cannot be measured by the form in which these ideas are created but by its content.

Those responsible people involved in maintenance of our heritage should always put their ego aside and bare in mind that they are only the temporary caretakers: the objects will survive them and tell the future generations how they accomplished their task.

5. REFERENCES

- [1] Catalogue de la collection d'Instruments de musique anciens ou curieux formée par C.C. Snoeck. Gand, 1894.
- [2] Skowronek, M. Zu welchen Zweck und Ziel, mit welcher Absicht werden historische Musikinstrumente restauriert? Colloquium Restauratieproblemen van Antwerpse klavecimbels, Museum Vleeshuis, 10 tot 12 mei 1970. Ruckers Genootschap, Antwerpen, 1971, pp.28-35
- [3] Van der Meer, J.H., The Keyboard String Instruments at the disposal of Domenico Scarlatti. Galpin Society Journal, VOL.L, March 1997, pp.136-160.
- [4] Barclay, R., The preservation and use of Historic Musical Instruments; display and concert hall. London, 2004