Musical Instruments Article – Draft 28/04/2017

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It is not often you can travel around the world, traversing six centuries, in just ten paces. Opening today following a [£6.5m redevelopment project](http://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/museums-and-galleries/musical-instrument-museums/sch), St Cecilia’s Hall—a hidden gem just off Edinburgh’s iconic Royal Mile—is a Georgian grande dame of British music history, housing one of the world’s leading collections of musical instruments as well as retaining its status of the oldest purpose-build concert hall in Scotland.

The study of musical instruments, known as organology, is an often-overlooked subcategory of music. In an age before sound recording, nothing can get us as close to the musical soundscapes known to Mozart and Bach as the actual tools of their time. The instruments can also be read, telling us about their wider social context and purpose. While most museums offer us a chance to passively observe our history, St Cecilia’s Hall facilitates the embodiment of a bygone musical palette. It makes history tangible.

Spread over four galleries, St Cecilia’s Hall consolidates a collection previously housed between two separate buildings, and presents it in a way most suited to a 21st century audience, but still retaining much of the building’s original charm. Stepping from the entrance vestibule into the Laigh Hall gallery, we are whisked from the Renaissance through to the 21st Century, North America to Asia, in a series of small exhibits. A small violin with no sides, and that would appear a crude creation to the untrained eye, is by the Bassano family—a famous group of Italian instrument makers employed at the court of Henry VIII—and made before the shape we know today became the norm. A few paces to the right, the visually enticing Indian mayuri [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/73m56v)] from the 19th century, and also probably from a courtly setting, is carved and richly decorated to look like a peacock to represent Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of music.

Through into the Wolfson gallery, you are accosted by a four-and-a-half-foot serpent [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/1296y0)]: a wind instrument originally devised in the late 16th century to be used for church music, but was also included in orchestral works by composers such as Mozart and Wagner. [This oversized example](http://collections.ed.ac.uk/mimed/record/18242?highlight=contrabass+serpent), known technically as a contrabass serpent, is a more recent creation made around 1840. Keeping the serpent company, a quartet of saxophones from the workshop of Adolphe Sax, the inventor of the instrument in the 1840s, represent a fundamental shift in music towards greater versatility and volume. Like the serpent’s influence on the bass range of the orchestra with the ultimate creation of the tuba, the impact of Sax’s invention is most evident in jazz and popular music. These original, somewhat clunky examples speak melancholically of a time when Sax would never know of the influence he would have on the future of music: he died in poverty in 1894, at the dawn of jazz.

At the other side of the gallery, a selection of plucked and bowed western instruments display a variety lost to 19th century orchestral standardisation. An English guittar by William Gibson of 1772 [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/8o9061)] sits beside an electric Fender Telecaster: the former used mainly by women to display their talents and attract an eligible husband, and the latter vice versa two centuries later. A tiny dancing-master’s fiddle, known as a pochette, by Jacques du Mesnil [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/9tdk69)] from the mid-17th century, was used to accompany dance lessons in preparation for the frequent balls and assemblies—essentially an early form of speed dating. Beside the pochette, a clutch of violas d’amore [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/416zo2) or [image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/yyewt8)], or *violas of love*, further add to our social understanding of musical instruments through the name, eye-catching design, and unusual ethereal tone created by additional resonant strings: something that creates a sweet and enveloping sound would undoubtedly be used to woo the opposite sex. A 1696 viola da gamba from the Hamburg workshop of Joachim Tielke [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/4drg95)] tells a story of premium mass production and shrewd business sense pre-industrial revolution. The instrument’s rich decoration was there to be displayed and to impress. These instruments are not just objects of sound, they are musical peacocks fanning their tail feathers.

The two upstairs galleries house a vast array of keyboard instruments, many still in working order and frequently used in concert. The tantalizing Binks gallery exhibits instruments from the famed Ruckers workshop of Antwerp: the Stradivari of the harpsichord world. Highly sought-after in their time, the instruments display quality and wealth through not only their richly-decorated and embellished casework, but also their superior tone and balance. But beside these examples of organological perfection sit fakes and forgeries, such as the Goermans harpsichord of 1764, altered in the 1780s by Pascal Taskin [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/mj9dow)]. Through numerous additions and modifications, Taskin made the instrument appear not only a hundred years older than dated, but to also hail from the Ruckers family through the sly editing of Goermans initials. That Goermans was still working in Paris at the time of this alteration, just a short walk from Taskin’s workshop north of the Seine, raises questions of his complicity in the deception.

Next door in the elegant 1812 gallery, the [Hass clavichord](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJyTjttTrGc) made in 1763—the same year St Cecilia’s Hall was built—would be impossible to reproduce today with its use of tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, rosewood, kingwood and ivory. A dinky octave spinet, [reminiscent of Schroeder’s toy piano](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schroeder_%28Peanuts%29#Schroeder.27s_piano), could be easily transported for use during travel, or moved around the home to accompany singing; quiet instruments such as spinets and clavichords were designed for domestic use. Beside the little spinet sits the Burkat Shudi harpsichord of 1766 [[image](http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/b2y2w2)]: an impressive double-manual (two keyboards) instrument with a variety of stops to vary its tone, used in the days before the versatile piano became the mainstay of the parlour. Believed to have been owned by the Duke of Hamilton in Naples, [a painting places the Duke](https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/8220/kenneth-mackenzie-1st-earl-seaforth-1744-1781-home-naples-concert-party-1771?subjects%5B30475%5D=30475&search_set_offset=31) and his fellow expatriate, Kenneth MacKenzie (1st Earl of Seaforth), participating in a concert party with W. A. Mozart and his father, Leopold. The Hamiltons were a musical family, and it is noted that the Mozarts visited their home in 1770 where Hamilton’s first wife, Catherine, performed on the harpsichord for Mozart. It is highly probable that the harpsichord was the Shudi, and is therefore plausible that Mozart would pass his hands over the keys of such an impressive instrument. As the instrument is still playable today, we can briefly inhabit Mozart’s Neapolitan soundscape.

These musical instruments offer a glimpse of bygone eras. They paint not just the music once played, but also the social, cultural and historical milieus that formed our modern world. By shedding light on a multiplex of subjects, the lens of organology can be utilised to further our understanding of the past from a different, culturally-ingrained perspective. St Cecilia’s Hall is therefore not just a collection of musical instruments, it is a snapshot of our heritage.