

***MCFI CONFERENCE 2023 –  
THE DOCUMENTATION, CONSERVATION,  
AND RESTORATION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS,  
PRAGUE, NATIONAL MUSEUM –  
CZECH MUSEUM OF MUSIC,  
18–19 OCTOBER 2023***

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On 18 and 19 October 2023 I had the opportunity to take part in the third conference on the documentation, conservation, and restoration of musical instruments at the Czech Museum of Music in Prague. The speakers included core employees of the Czech Museum of Music, but most of them were external collaborators – professional conservators of historical musical instruments and researchers specialising in the subject.

The conference was held in the lecture hall of the Czech Museum of Music (CMM) in Karmelitská Street in the Lesser Town of Prague. Unlike last year, participants were welcomed in Prague by the first frosty morning of autumn; the cold was suitably dispersed by warm refreshments, prepared by the CMM.

The conference was opened by Tereza Žůrková, head of the museum's Department of Musical Instruments and the main organiser of the event. Her warm welcome heralded the friendly mood that permeated the gathering throughout the two days. She presented the museum's ongoing work on a terminological dictionary of musical instruments, the possibility of studying specialised literature in the museum's study room, the present state of work on expanding the catalogue of instrument makers, which built on extensive past work by the musicologist Jindřich Keller. She also mentioned progress made on the processing of catalogues of musical instruments published after 1813. This last activity was to be the focus of a separate lecture later on. This ushered in the main programme of the conference.

The very first contribution was somewhat surprising. It was given in Slovak. The ethnomusicologist and ethno-organologist Bernard Garaj spoke of changes in the development of folk musical instruments in Slovakia caused by the transformation away from a pastoral way of life since the end of World War II. This issue had been previously explored by the Institute of Musicology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences as early as 1953. At the time, it had focused on developmental tendencies and endeavoured to map both the living makers

of these folk musical instruments and the active users of their products. By the 1960s it was reckoned that the production of some folk musical instruments was endangered. Specific regional characteristics were being dropped in favour of a unifying trend modelled after the Detva style and later (1970s) also according to available literature, especially in the case of the fujara. Further developments were influenced by the nationwide Folklore Festivities, which included meetings between musicians and instrument makers. This allowed ongoing changes to be more closely observed. The lecture might well have evoked nostalgic remorse among Czech ethno-organologists. The only Bohemian folk instrument still in use to any noticeable extent are the bagpipes. Moravia is somewhat better off in this regard, but even there, folk instruments have been replaced with their modernised variants.

The next speech – on the development of a concert copy of a historical wind instrument (bassoon) – was given by Ondřej Šindelář, who is an active historically informed performer of music for this instrument. The desire to perform the works of old masters on historically appropriate instruments has become quite commonplace. Musicians strive to replicate both the technique of play and the timbre to create an authentic interpretation of the composition. Music is timeless, but musical instruments are not. The seemingly straightforward solution – to build copies of historical instruments – is complicated by numerous pitfalls. The speaker walked us through the issue. His aim was to make a copy of a bassoon from Bach's era. As his template, he chose an instrument built by Johann Cornelius Sattler, tuned to 421 Hz. He found it was not enough to simply measure the individual components of the instrument. The sound is influenced by a practically unmeasurable variable, namely, deformations in the shape of the wood caused by its drying, which stem from the specific structure of the wood of each component of the instrument. Despite averaging the collected measurements, the calculated dimension is inaccurate. The result is an “exact” loose copy. The lecture showed that much more work is still required in this area, which is open to substantial advances in research.

Following a break, the CMM conservator Adam Bitljan gave a presentation on the conservation and restoration of an 1834 hook harp in the CMM collections, built by the České Budějovice harp maker Johann Krammer. The harp was restored to serve as a permanent exhibit, not for musical performances. The conservator gave a detailed description of the state of the instrument at the start of the project. Attempts had previously been made to keep the instrument in a playable state using repairs that were not always suitable and substitute components, and the harp had also suffered from damage common to wooden musical instruments that are not actively in use and are often stored in imperfect conditions. This results in the corrosion of metal parts, cracks in the wood, loss of sections of the intarsia and frequently only fragmentary preservation of the strings. The lecture was richly supplemented with photographs documenting the individual phases of the restoration.

Prokop Szegény had already shared his fascination with more modern types of instruments at last year's conference. These are mostly electrophones. He presented the development of such instruments in the context of the post-war trends in instrument making in Czechoslovakia under the Communist regime, which strove to institutionalise everything and place it under state control. Efforts to match Western trends led to the development and production of instruments that ended up being actually exported abroad. The organisation of production lines led to curious situations, like when the wooden bodies of electric guitars were manufactured at a specialised organ factory in Krnov. However, the experimental development of these instruments brought about a number of surprisingly high-quality results, comparable with their international counterparts. Present-day organology has shown little interest in these musical instruments so far. This is related to the lack of interest in acquiring such instruments for museum collections, as noted by the author of the lecture.

Another CMM employee, Jan Kříženecký, presented the museum's ongoing digitisation of the historical catalogues of makers and retailers of musical instruments, as they are discovered by the museum's employee in various archives, libraries, etc. These catalogues are as-yet undervalued sources of information about the names of then-newly created and marketed instruments, as well as period terminology. They often help determine the author and the approximate usage timespan of instruments newly developed by makers. Many of them failed to perform well in practice and are now regarded as curios and collectors' items. Sales catalogues also reflect competitive strategies among both instrument makers and retailers. Some excerpts from the catalogues quoted during the presentation brought smiles to the audience.

The pianist and research in the field of historical piano construction Jan Jiraský spoke of the meagre level of current knowledge about the specific types of piano for which major composers wrote their works in the past. He highlighted the now-universal understanding that present-day pianos are not suited to play everything. However, historical pianos cannot be used to play all early music either, if the performance is to be truly historically informed. Jiraský brought attention to the fact that unless a historical instrument is prepared for active play through knowledgeable restorative intervention, a properly "historical" performance is not possible. And yet another condition is that the musician knows how to correctly respond to the action mechanism of a restored historical instrument. The many errors that abound in this field can only be rectified through a system of dialogues between performer and conservator, organologist and conservator, and organologist and performer.

Following another break, the CMM conservator and luthier František Kůs informed participants about the intriguing repair, reconstruction, and restoration of a 1/16 violin from the collection of the theatre department of the National Museum in Prague, which has a primarily commemorative value.

It comes from the estate of the composer Oskar Nedbal. He is said to have learnt to play the violin on the instrument as a child and to have maintained an almost pathological attachment to it throughout the whole of his life. He took the minute, manufactured instrument with him almost everywhere. This was reflected in its condition. Before repairs, the violin had a broken neck, a punctured rib, and was missing part of the scroll (the whole volute). The client had requested that the instrument be restored to a displayable state while retaining signs of the damage, including the punctured rib. This musically almost worthless instrument was to be saved by a conservator who works on the finest master violins. A humorous anecdote, one might say. The instrument was put into a playable – and of course displayable – state, though not without a number of complications, such as making and grafting a new scroll or obtaining a miniature bridge, pegs, and strings from the period. The question that might have been asked is why was a project like this not entrusted to an apprentice luthier, perhaps as part of their final examination. The cost of the conservator's work was several times greater than the price of the instrument.

The final lecture of the first day of the conference was given by Ondřej Mucha, a harmonium player and collector who co-founded a private exhibition of the instruments with Jan Tomanek. They managed to assemble a remarkable collection of these instruments. The aim of this specialised private “museum” is not only to save endangered harmoniums, but also to bring this musical instrument back into public awareness and onto concert stages, from which it had been discreetly removed. The speaker's soft Moravian dialect introduced listeners to the instrument's history and its basic types, along with a number of anecdotes related to the acquisition of some the specimens in the collection. He concluded with a performance on a Packard harmonium built in the US in 1895, which is owned by the CMM.

The second day was marked by cold, wet, and gloomy weather. However, this did not dampen the mood of participants, who received another warm welcome from the organiser of the conference, followed by the first lecture of the day by the organologist Daniela Kotašová, a curator of the collection of musical instruments of the National Museum in Prague. She expanded her presentation on the CMM harp collection from last year with further information about the irreplaceable role of private collections of musical instruments assembled by music aficionados, instrument makers, and musicians, which have made their way into the museum's collections throughout its existence. This historical foray guided listeners through the museum's approach to acquisition management from the moment of its founding, then as the Patriotic Museum, in Bohemia in 1818 and throughout the nineteenth century. A number of major acquisitions (mostly by donation) of sets of musical instruments date from that period; most had been private collections. The donors' motivations for creating their collections and then gifting them to the museum would make for a separate study. Some of the collections have already been assessed

and provided with publications, others are being processed. At present, work is ongoing on the collection of the eminent Prague luthier and collector of musical instruments Karel Boromejský Dvořák. The lecture showed the necessity of evaluating all such collections individually in the context of when they were founded and what motivated their founder.

The next contribution, titled “A Proposal for Discussion on the Creation of Standards for Technical Drawings of Historical Musical Instruments”, was given by Jiří Arnet. He distinguished between two basic types of documentation. The first depicts the actual condition of the instrument and serves as the starting point for uncovering the instrument’s original form. This documentation allows for the copying of a specific musical instrument. The second type of documentation is commercial (for sale); it is available to amateurs in a simplified version, while the full version is intended for instrument makers, who could use it as a template for the serial production of the given instrument type. The rest of the lecture was largely informative. A comparison was made between the old documentation standards from the past and the present possibility of creating visualisations through technological means (X-ray, CT, and other types of scanning). If the discussion was to be directed towards the creation of an acceptable museum standard, then this aim was unfulfilled. Few museums are equipped with the necessary specialised staff and technological capacity.

After a break, Jiří Čepelák gave a very engaging talk on the development of the structure and usage of the Baroque guitar. Using vivid visual illustrations, he pointed out the differences between different types of guitars according to the country in which they were developed and used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He explained why only very few actively used instruments have been preserved to this day and why, on the contrary, the instruments that are widely admired today were generally created as status symbols for their owners, and as expensive artistic artefacts they received better care. Excessively decorated instruments may be objects of admiration, but more for the eye than for the ear. Their beauty helped them survive to this day, whereas the performance instruments were gradually phased out and replaced with more modern versions.

The following speaker was the Moravian luthier Tomáš Pospíšil, based in Ostrava. He corrected the common perception of Ostrava as a city with a purely industrial, mining past, without any significant legacy of instrument making. His research in North Moravia enabled him to gradually gather information about violin makers, both professional and amateur, who worked in Ostrava during the twentieth century. Some of them are unknown to the broader scholarly community. Pospíšil has yet to publish his discoveries – a pity.

The conservator of stringed keyboard instruments Jan Bečička presented his conservation work on a clavichord from the collections of the Regional Museum in Olomouc. The fretted clavichord from the start of the nineteenth

century, built as a purely “practical” instrument, was successfully identified as the work of Tomas Wokurka of Kutná Hora. The unadorned instrument with a rectangular body on four tapered faceted legs was well-worn and marked by some less-than-ideal handling. Bečička’s contribution was a practical continuation of Arnet’s discussion on the documentation of historical musical instruments. The speaker showed how he had documented the individual steps from before, during, and after his intervention. His professional documentation could be used to build an accurate copy of the restored clavichord. It was clear that he knew exactly what information was important and needed to be recorded in the documentation. He uses an endoscope, X-ray, and scanner to find the cause of specific damage. When the cause and extent of the problem is known, he disassembles only those parts of the instrument as are necessary. Bečička supplemented the lecture with a chronological series of images with detailed descriptions of the what, how, and why of each intervention. Special attention was given to the sound board and how to remove it using hot steam, how to repair it and then replace it inside the instrument. The presentation was concluded by a musical performance, courtesy of Tomáš Flégr, on a clavichord restored by Bečička.

The final contribution to the conference was presented by two luthiers, Dominik Matúšů and Pavel Celý. They reported on the restoration of a double bass from 1731 by the Olomouc luthier Johann Strobl from the collections of the Regional Museum in Olomouc. The work was undertaken by Matúšů, while Celý prepared the documentation and conservation report. The curator had requested the instrument be restored to a playable condition. Unfortunately, the instrument was badly damaged by wood-destroying insects, especially in the area of the neck and scroll. The renovation uncovered inscribed bands of parchment, which had been used to repair cracks in the body of the instrument. This method was historically quite common and popular mainly among organ makers, who paste strips of parchment over small cracks in the wood or to seal gaps between joints. The conservators were admittedly uncertain about the best approach to conserving the carved scroll and the peg box, which is not merely an aesthetic feature but must be able to hold the strings in tension. Time will tell whether the implemented solution of reinforcing the wood with Paraloid was sufficient. The double bass was newly equipped with a suitably styled endpin and an appropriately shaped “period” bridge. The neck of the instrument had already been replaced in the past (the original scroll had been grafted before) and because the newer components were so badly affected by woodworm, a new neck had to be made and the scroll grafted again. Finally, gut strings were attached and the instrument was returned to the museum’s depository for occasional use in performances of early music. A more thorough response would have been appreciated to the question of when a non-functional instrument can still be reasonably “resurrected” for actual play and when this requirement necessitates interventions that lower the item’s historical value. Where is the border between repairing and restoring? It is also

important to determine the conditions for a passive instrument (collection item) and for active performance practice, including the frequency of switches between the two states.

Possible answers can be discussed at a prospective future edition of the CMM conference, if it is not discontinued. This year's success follows on that of the previous year, and the organisers are to be heartily congratulated on a job well done!

Translated by Adam Prentis