Making a Case for The Stearns

What would a 19th century collector do with some 900 musical instruments? As you can see, Frederick Stearns hung them on the walls of his home. In 1899, he donated the instruments to the University of Michigan. The collection had grown to some 1400 instruments by 1912 when Hill Auditorium was built. It then became home for the collection where the University packed the instruments rather forlornly in cases on the second floor lobby. There they baked and flaked for decades. The situation improved when the collection was moved to the Stearns building on Baits Drive in 1972. Since 1986 it has been made accessible in a modern gallery environment within the School of Music Moore Building.

Today, thanks to the generous support of Virginia and Cruse Moss, the Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments has achieved another grand step forward in its march toward improved public appreciation of the collection through new display potential. This progress began with the completion of the Virginia Patton Moss Exhibit Case in November, 1990. Situated across from the Vesta Mills Room in the lower gallery, this state of the art exhibit case has a number of marvellous features.

While always beautiful and interesting, past exhibit resources relied on only the visual aspects of the collection to educate and inspire our visitors. The irony lay in the fact that the beauty of musical sound was inaccessible to the Stearns public. Not any more! Now, at the touch of a button, you, the visitor, have access to an audio tape containing information on and musical sounds of the exhibit currently on display. In the absence of a tour guide, such exhibit technology allows for a more complete experience of the aural beauty of our instruments. In addition, a sophisticated track lighting system enables a more detailed illumination of our instruments' aesthetic beauty. Credit for the artistic arrangements of this Stearns exhibit goes to Stearns Assistant, Paula Survilla: "This new case presents an entirely new and exciting range of possibilities for the future Stearns exhibits. The Stearns staff of the future will benefit tremendously from this kind of technology, as will Stearns audiences of the future. The museum experience will be more satisfying, richer, and more complete from now on."

The current display, “All Trumpets Big and Small” features instruments from all over the world including a:

- didgeridu from Australia
- 19th century bugle from Italy
- 19th century natural horn from France
- winterhorn from Netherlands.
- dung-chen from Tibet
- conch shell

You can even see one of the dragons that inspired the design of our logo. What do all these instruments have in common? Come see and HEAR for yourself!

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New Clarinet from Old

Written by Paula Survilla with Eric Wachmann

The Stearns offers many opportunities for gaining knowledge of various musical cultures. For example, the collection provides resources for a more specialized investigation of instruments and their era of performance. One method of such research involves the construction of copies of historically significant instruments. In the last year Eric Wachmann, clarinetist with the Windsor Symphony and graduate of the University of California School of Music, has done just that.

Three joints and barrel before turning and shaping.

I asked him why he chose to pursue this project: "I was interested in the ancient performance techniques and, by extension, the instruments which in many ways dictated the limits of performance." Mr. Wachmann also explained that it was his intention to use the replica in performance. This approach is quite common as many historical woodwinds are too fragile to be played today.

After investigating the collection's holdings he settled on one instrument in particular: "I chose a clarinet made by the renowned instrument maker Heinrich Grenser (1763-1813). The Stearns' Grenser clarinet was in good condition and therefore I could be assured the most accurate measurements for my research. Also, Grenser was a very significant instrument maker of the early 19th century, and as such his reputation guaranteed the quality of the instrument that I wanted to reproduce."

The Grenser was constructed of boxwood, a wood commonly used in ancient instrument-making because of the combination of dense grain and light weight. While ideally this would have been Wachmann's choice, boxwood was hard to find. He finally chose maple, another common wood of that period. Even this choice presented some problems as the material for the bell (the lowest joint of the instrument) had to be imported from Canada. The ivory rings of the original were duplicated using an imitation ivory plastic.

Throughout the entire construction process Eric was guided by the skilled hand of Dr. Robert Vernon, Conservator for the Stearns Collection. Over the years Dr. Vernon has researched and developed many techniques for restoring instruments, including the construction of missing parts (See Stearns Newsletter—Winter 1988, Vol. 3, No. 2). In many cases the original construction techniques are not readily known. Vernon modified and developed modern tools in order to better restore historical musical instruments. Wachmann spent a good deal of time learning the "feel" of the lathe (machine for turning wood), and hammering brass for the reproduction of the Grenser's six keys and springs. Even though Wachmann is highly skilled in a workshop, it was decided that he would produce two copies of each section of the Grenser, "the first as a learning tool and hopefully the second as a working product. This was a good idea because certain construction problems only became evident once there was no turning back. In having two chances, we could modify our approach the second time around."

The most important initial process was measuring every bump and undulation on the instrument. These measurements were transferred to schematic drawings which became the blueprints for the copies. Every minute cut, spin of the lathe, or hammer stroke had to be verified, measured with Vernier calipers, and checked against the blueprints. These measurements not only included the visible parts of the instruments but the size of the inner bore. This was especially important because the bore size dictates the tuning of the instrument.

Copy of second joint beside original.

After one year of work Wachmann has one step left in the construction of his Grenser reproduction: that of drilling the 8 tone holes and 6 key holes on the instrument. He says, "Once completed, I intend to use the instrument, not only in performance, but as a starting point for further research into the construction techniques and troubles of ancient clarinets."

2 + 2 + 2 = 2 p.m. on the 2nd Sunday of the first 2 months of each semester
Treasures from Thailand

Instrument-making is alive and well in Bangkok, Thailand, as demonstrated in our current exhibit in the School of Music lobby. Music shops are off the beaten track, but their artisans create instruments played by professionals and amateurs alike. Families of craftsmen specialize in making different kinds of instruments—one shop forges gong kettles (for the instrument called khaung wong, literally 'the gong circle'), another is known for its beautiful zithers (called cakhe, or 'crocodile'), and still another specializes in elaborately carved bodies for xylophones (ranat ek and ranat thum).

The ranat ek and pi nai on display were made in 1988 and are excellent examples of the high quality of craftsmanship from Bangkok. Both these instruments and the tapnon (two-headed drum) on display are part of the piphat ensemble, an ensemble of xylophones, drums, and gongs that commands a sacred repertoire of some two hundred musical pieces used in dance drama and ritual. Photographs on display with the instruments show dance masks, dancers, and a tapnon player absorbed in ritual preparations before performing these pieces.

The photograph seen here is a typical instrument shop in Bangkok. The tiny showroom is stacked high with instruments, but the actual workshops are in the back of the building. This shop is known for its suspended gongs, seen in proliferation at the top of the picture. A large khaung wong is seen on the left (hung on the wall), and several pairs of ching chap (hand cymbals) have been strung through the left side of the khaung wong. On the upper right, a khlui (vertical flute), two khaen (mouth organs) and a cakhe (zither) have been suspended from the ceiling.

Also on display are examples of other instruments, including a khaen, beside a photo of a contemporary khaen maker from northeastern Thailand and a beautiful plucked lute known as the kracappi, now nearly extinct in Thailand. With instruments both old and new, the case is a window on the vast spectrum of Thai instruments.

(Photograph and notes by Deborah Wong, doctoral student in ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan)

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Become A Friend of The Stearns

With your help, additional instruments may be restored, played, displayed and appreciated by the musical public. Friends receive The Stearns Newsletter, invitations to the 2 + 2 + 2 lecture series and announcements of upcoming exhibits and performances. Your contribution will help support all activities of the Stearns Collection.

Membership in the Friends of the Stearns Collection is available in the following categories:

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Stearns on the Move

Between December 5, 1990 and February 1, 1991, the Art Center of Battle Creek, Michigan, extended the reach of the Stearns. Visitors to the center were treated to a series of exhibits called “Variations on a Theme.” The series featured instruments from around the world and the primary source for these instruments was the Stearns Collection.

The Arts Center staff were led by Professor William Malm, the Stearns Director, on many fascinating expeditions into a storehouse of some 2,000 musical instruments. It was like traveling through some international version of King Tut’s tomb. Eventually 47 were chosen for the exhibit. Musical performances and workshops at the Center enhanced the two months showing. The galleries opened with a performance of traditional Japanese music for the Battle Creek Japanese business community played by American students in the University of Michigan Japanese Music Study Group. The Stearns also provided several hands-on displays, including the Malay drum in the photo below. All aspects of the event were enjoyed by young and old alike. Look for Stearns-related events in your area!

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