Knock on Wood: Wood, Craft, and Knowledge in Instrument Making marked the fourth installation of the lecture series “New Approaches to a Cultural History of Organology”. This series was initiated in October 2017 by the research group “Materiality of Musical Instruments” in cooperation with the Department of Musicology of the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich. Knock on Wood brought together musical instrument experts from diverse fields represented by curators, musicologists, instrument builders and performers, all engaged with a common material: wood.

The two-day programme (January 17–18, 2019) opened with a guided tour of the musical automata collection at the Deutsches Museum led by Silke Berdux, Curator of the Musical Instruments Collection, who offered insights into the Museum’s upcoming, new permanent exhibition.

Following that, the secrets of violin making were uncovered: speaking from first-hand experience, violinmaker and acoustician Martin Schleske shared the knowledge – both tacit and scientifically reproducible – required to achieve the “perfect” violin sound. Also taking a practical approach to the topic, conservator Brigitte Brandmair discussed the significant influence of varnish on the sound of Cremonese violins.

Then came the musical highlight of the evening: the lecture recital of Ingolf Turban, Violin Professor at the University of Music and Performing Arts, Munich. The audience was presented with the rare opportunity to compare the fine differences in timbre of four prized violins: an Amati (1630), a Stradivarius (1721), a Lupot (1808) and a Schleske (2009). Turban stressed the necessity of employing different violins for particular repertoire, going so far as to apologize to his beloved Amati for the “offence” of playing Ravel’s Tzigane on this “delicate” violin.

Day two of Knock on Wood featured presentations which addressed historical aspects of musical instrument making. Musicologist and organologist Erich Tremmel mapped out the networks and infrastructure which facilitated musical instrument making in the 16th and 17th centuries. Picking up on the unifying theme of the programme, Professor at the Westsächsische Hochschule Zwickau for instrument making Gunther Ziegenhals tackled the question of why we still continue to build bowed and plucked instruments out of wood. Organologist and researcher at the Deutsches Museum Panagiotis Poulopoulos presented the case of the pedal harp as an exemplification of the innovative utilization of wood in instrument making while Silke Berdux and organ builder Alexander Steinbeißer elucidated and...
demonstrated the Deutsches Museum’s reconstruction of Wolfgang von Kempelen’s speaking machine, whose speech synthesizing capacities drew astonished reactions from the audience.

Later in the afternoon, young scholars were given the opportunity to present their research within the framework of the German Musicological Society’s Organology Study Group Session. The diverse topics ranged from the socio-cultural meanings ascribed to instruments to the ecological impact of wooden instrument making. The methods employed and goals were similarly as varied: from iconographical to empirical studies and from the restoration of physical instruments to the preservation of sounds in digital format.

The lecture series “New Approaches to a Cultural History of Organology” has pushed forward the argument for broader approaches in the study of musical instruments. The rich diversity of issues addressed in each of the four sessions of the series is a reflection of the fertile ground for interdisciplinary research afforded by organology – it is indeed time we “listen” more carefully to musical instruments.

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S. Lichtenberg highlighting the tension in preserving both the Brazilian rainforests and the immaterial cultural heritage of traditional Cremonese violin-making practices