
Panagiotis Poulopoulos’s book covers an important topic that is often a source of interesting conversations but very little published: the reuse or recycling of musical instruments. The title of the book (New Voices in Old Bodies: A Study of “Recycled” Musical Instruments with a Focus on the Hahn Collection in the Deutsches Museum) doesn’t give a full account of the contents or at least is slightly different from what one could expect when reading the table of contents. The first two chapters are devoted to an in-depth analysis of the Hahn Collection at the Deutsches Museum in Munich, and the third one (“Musical Instruments as Changing Artefacts”) focuses on the first part of the title, the recycled musical instruments.

Beyond this formal observation—and I believe that the book would have benefited by having the last chapter at the beginning—the publication is a must-have for anyone interested in stringed instruments but also anyone interested in getting a wider look at the musical instrument object as a fluid product of human immaterial and material culture.

The book “presents the first results of the author’s ongoing research concerning the authenticity of historic musical instruments, which began in 2012, and aimed to investigate various alterations on musical instruments that can be regarded as a form of ‘recycling,’ by studying representative case studies of instruments in the collection of the Deutsches Museum and by undertaking a parallel review of the relevant literature” (p.12). The use of the term “recycling,” explains the author, is not utilized in the original meaning of “using old material to build a new object” but in a broader, and increasingly more popular, sense of “material and immaterial change and reuse.”

While some recent literature on recycling is available for keyboard and bowed stringed instruments, not much has been published on plucked strings, and the knowledge has always been confined to a level of oral transmission, mainly among makers and restorers.

As previously mentioned, the book is divided in three parts: the first part examines, as a case study, a particular “guitar” in the Hahn collection, analyzing and describing in detail the actual state of the instrument, proposing a hypothetical reconstruction of the original state, and discussing the effects of the modification and the reasons behind that choice. It finally compares the case study...
to similar instruments of the same collection. The Hahn collection, composed of 181 objects, was acquired by the Deutsches Museum in 1906 and can be considered the founding collection of the musical instrument department.

The second part examines the history and the provenance of the instruments, focusing on the cultural fabric of that time and the specific circumstances that brought it to acquisition. It becomes clear how the mission of the institution as a museum of science and technology influenced the birth of the musical instrument collection, where objects were considered not as works of art but as scientific objects, witnesses of a specific historical and technological milestone or part of an evolutionary path. Some of the objects were part of a “wist-list” compiled by Oskar Fleischer, Professor at the Berlin Musikhochschule, that included various types of instruments, including mechanical ones, in order to represent their chronological (and technical) evolution based on a synchronic approach.

The third part of the book analyzes the concept of recycling musical instruments, contextualizing this practice in a wide sociocultural and historical context. The formation of European and North American musical instrument collections is reviewed and shows an initial consistent trend at the beginning of the 20th century, with public institutions accessioning entire private collections. Later in the chapter the reasons and the modalities of reuse are discussed, highlighting the differences between historical and modern practices.

In the conclusion, Poulopoulos summarizes the history of the Hahn collection, contextualizing more of the practice of museums acquiring whole private collections and how his study highlights the purchasing mechanism of the Deutsches Museum, and its relationship with dealers and experts of the private sector, a practice that was common in other institutions.

The third chapter of the book, two sections, that are a perfect example of in-depth and painstaking curatorial work, could constitute an independent essay and a perfect interdisciplinary reading for historians, art historians, and anyone interested in material and cultural history.

Poulopoulos’ discussion provides an interesting bibliography on all aspects of recycling, analyzes the life-cycle of musical instruments and the cultural reasons that encouraged this practice. A practice that, I have to add, is still very popular in the violin market, where very historically significant instruments are still recycled to satisfy the demands of buyers.

Poulopoulos’ merit is his ability to discuss a very specific topic using an approach that is very understandable, even to the non-musical instrument expert; he provides a wide cultural context that helps to comprehend the cultural fabric and evolution in considering the musical instrument object.

—Emanuele Marconi
National Music Museum
Vermillion, South Dakota

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