

CONFLICTING AUTHENTICITIES IN THE MUSEUM: THE EXHIBITION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

The transformation of the status of the objects that come through the doors of the museum has long been an important topic in museum studies. This transformation is characterised by the idea that the objects that enter the museum space lose their original function to acquire a symbolic one, and will then stand as »witness to beauty, identity and civilisation«¹.

Philosopher Krzysztof Pomian describes how, by banning their usefulness definitively, this transformation allows collection objects to fully reveal their signification². This change in the status of the object is most evident in the museum, and through its various activities such as the selection, preservation and presentation of objects. Museologist Georges-Henri Rivière argues that the museum object can evolve into a »symbol-object« able to represent a specific time period or an entire culture³.

In this context, musical instruments that become part of a collection are no longer played and acquire a symbolical signification instead, representing, for example, a technique of fabrication, a specific period in musical history or a music style. Once exhibited, the status of the object is fully transformed, as this process makes it possible, through installations such as showcases, to fully establish the necessary condition of distance between subject and object. Museum objects are disentangled from any »vital process«⁴, abstracted from the »concrete realm of life«⁵ and no longer valued for their functionality. The emergence of the exhibition is thus seen as conditioned by the forming of a new relationship to the art object and to the natural object⁶, one that is, however, disembodied and deprived of selfish motivations.

In this paper, I will use the specific example of musical instruments to analyse the way in which this transformation of the object in the museum is actually conditioned by the transfer of the idea of the »authenticity« of this object from its functionality to its materiality. I will then examine the way in which this conceptualisation of the authenticity of the musical instrument in the museum conflicts with the visitors' perspective, thereby revealing the artificiality of this transformation. This analysis builds on field research conducted in two different museums for musical instruments, one in France (the Musée de la Musique) and the other in Germany (the Grassi MusikInstrumentenMuseum der Universität Leipzig).

INSTRUMENTS AS ACCESS TO AUTHENTIC MUSIC

The quest for authenticity is indeed one of the main motivations at the origin of the creation of musical instrument collections. It is, however, interesting to observe that the authenticity which was continuously coveted by these enterprises has been subject to profound evolution throughout the past century. This phenomenon can be clearly identified in the way the practices of conservation and restoration of musical instruments in museum collections have changed over time.

As the end of the 19th century approached, the movement later termed »early music revival«, which was driven by the desire to rediscover forgotten musical repertoires, was developing in Europe⁷. Private collectors of musical instruments were creating early music ensembles, performing on the instruments in their collections in order to revive repertoires that had fallen into disuse. They wanted to resuscitate this music

in a manner that would be close to the original, as authentic as possible. They were therefore performing these repertoires on the instruments for which they had originally been composed, and for them this practice justified putting these instruments back into playing order, regardless of the nature or the importance of the restorations and modifications this might imply. The instruments were indeed mainly regarded as a way to access music. In Leipzig, for example, the musical instrument collector Wilhelm Heyer (whose collection was later sold to the city of Leipzig and presented in the Grassi Museum) explained that his »efforts did not only concentrate on the mere collecting and accumulation [of objects], but on the contrary and above all on the possibility of a practical use of the instruments, since their sound specificity can only be recalled if they are in playing condition«⁸. He therefore saw the early music performances that he regularly organised with the instruments of his collection as one of the main motivations at the origin of his collecting practice.

While this trend was burgeoning within the amateur milieu, it began to take hold in the museum as well, and public collections were used in turn as tools contributing to the rediscovery of the music of the past. In Leipzig, historical concerts were organised in the Grassi Museum after its opening in 1929. In this context, it appears to be rather symptomatic that Otto Marx, who was the instrument restorer hired by Wilhelm Heyer to take care of maintaining the instruments of his collection in playing order, was »transferred« to the Grassi Museum in Leipzig together with Heyer's collection when the latter was bought by the city of Leipzig. Otto Marx therefore continued to carry out the same type of restorations on the instruments even after they became part of a public collection.

The early music revival movement was not the only motivation for the restoration of musical instruments. Many restorations of musical instruments from the collections of the Musée Instrumental in Paris (which later became the present Musée de la Musique) can be traced back to a time when the intention to have them played in the framework of a concert was not formulated. This can be observed, for instance, at the end of the 19th century, a period characterised by the »monopoly of luthiers and piano makers« over the museum collections⁹. Although the curators of the Musée Instrumental did not yet intend, at that time, to organise concerts at which the instruments of the collection would be played¹⁰, they still handed these instruments over to instrument makers and repairers. These craftsmen treated the instruments as if they were »active« instruments belonging to musicians, basing their work on their usual techniques and habits. With the early music revival movement, however, this practice of putting collection instruments back into playing order became much more common. It can therefore be considered a catalyst for the major shift that occurred in musical instrument museums' conservation policy.

FROM FUNCTIONALITY TO MATERIALITY

It is indeed in the context of the increasing activity of the early music revival movement that the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Musical Instruments (better known as CIMCIM [Comité international pour les musées et collections d'instruments et de musique]) was created, in 1960, as part of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The founding of this committee initiated critical changes in the way the instruments of museum collections were to be conceptualised and therefore handled. It was the result of a palpable desire among museum workers in contact with musical instruments to have a discussion forum where ideas and opinions about conservation matters could be exchanged¹¹, and through which they could feel part of a professional body. During the first meeting of CIMCIM, the members voted a plan of action, underlining the pressing need to create »a guide-treatise on restoration and conservation, and to

formulate provisional recommendations for the conservation of musical instruments«¹². The third motion, entitled »Conservation and restoration of musical instruments«¹³ stated that »concerning restoration, two specific and contradictory problems arise, namely«:

- a) the necessity, when making a thorough study of a type of musical instrument, of carrying out integral technical restoration of instruments which may be incomplete or in a bad state of preservation, in order to restore them to a condition in which they can be played;
- b) the danger involved in restoring such instruments of impairing forever their value as historical documents by too much guesswork or too many repairs.

Some years later, CIMCIM published instructions on the conservation and restoration of musical instruments in public collections¹⁴. This document discouraged the practice of modernising historical instruments (something which the early music revival movement had rendered commonplace) and underlined the importance of documenting all interventions carried out on the instruments. The stated aim was described as follows: »In the years to come, non-scientific restorations are to be avoided, and it is with this goal in mind that the experience of international specialists and the outcome of the most recent research are to be made accessible, in order to establish a method both rational and meticulous to restore the instruments«.

This publication was followed by a noticeable evolution in the conservation and restoration practices of the museums in charge of musical instrument collections. One noteworthy manifestation is the progressive replacement of external professionals (instrument makers and repairers) as carers for museum instruments by in-house restorers. The change in perception regarding the instruments in public collections did indeed give birth to a new type of profession. Museum restorers would be trained to understand the specificity of the status of the musical instrument as a museum object and would work according to a clearly defined deontology. In Leipzig, for example, a training facility opened in the museum in 1966 and quickly acquired renown in the German Democratic Republic. According to the programme, the graduates of this specialised curriculum had »the right to call themselves musical instrument restorers«¹⁵.

Two additional CIMCIM documents concerning the conservation and the restoration of musical instruments were published in 1985 and in 1993. The modifications they contain reveal that during these years, attention shifted from the aim of rediscovering the authentic music of the past with the help of historical instruments to the perceived necessity of preserving the original substance of their materiality. In the 1980s, the deontology proposed in the CIMCIM recommendations published in 1967 appeared deficient. It confused the two practices of conservation and of restoration, which suddenly seemed to contradict one another. While proposing criteria for a »scientific restoration« (that is to say following a rational method), it did not protect the instruments from all risks, and might even have been causing new ones. Around this time, the idea was indeed emerging that the musical instruments of a public collection should primarily be considered to be documents. Correlating with this idea was the conception that any physical contact with (and evidently any restoration on) the instruments should in fact be avoided as it could result in an irremediable loss of information. The recommendations published in 1985 therefore gave instructions on how to »regulate the access to musical instruments of public collections«¹⁶. It advised drastically limiting the situations where the instruments would be touched by anyone other than the qualified museum professionals, with the exception of those cases where it would serve an attested scientific purpose. The document published in 1993 referred directly to the first version of the recommendations, stating that »[s]ince 1967, the science and goals of conservation have [...] progressed«. The term »restoration« had disappeared from the title of this document, replaced by what was now the only acceptable practice, namely conservation (i. e. the practice of preventing the instrument from deteriorating, with a minimal intervention approach). This evolution of the terminology reflects the transformation of the status of the musical instrument in the museum. From an intermediary or tool that could produce the au-

thentic music of the past, it has become an end in itself, whose materiality crystallises, and therefore documents, the authenticity of the past. This transformation also implies the creation of distance: as a museum object, and according to the ideals of museum conservation, the instrument should no longer be touched.

In the 1980s, in the context of the evolution of the deontology of the conservation of musical instruments, museums started using copies of musical instruments¹⁷ more frequently, in order to avoid giving access to the functional identity of the original instrument, or to rediscover the original version of a historical instrument that had been restored – all of this without touching the original substance of the historical instrument. I would argue that copies play an important role in asserting the authenticity of the original instruments, especially from this stage on when, in the 1980s, they were used more frequently in order to protect the original instruments. The copy does not seem to really exist for itself, but only through the original, and therefore does not have the same legitimacy as the original in the museum. This difference can generally be observed in the way copies are exhibited. In the Musée de la Musique in Paris, for example, copies of instruments are exhibited with a museographic vocabulary that differs from the one used when original instruments are exhibited. They are presented in a lower showcase, set somewhat aside, and it is necessary to lean over the case in order to look at them. An explanatory sign also ensures that they will not be confused with original instruments. The director of the museum in Paris indeed explains that these instruments »identified as facsimiles, are shown in a way [...] I wouldn't say less noble, but different, because we wanted to mark the difference. To show that one is actually in front of a different type of instrument, that doesn't have all the aura that the historical instrument has«¹⁸. The copy therefore enhances the value of the original and reinforces its aura – and this notably because it is impossible to create an *exact* copy of an original. Moreover, it is because the copy authorises proximity (it can be touched and played) that it makes it possible to maintain a »distance« from the original, which, according to Walter Benjamin's definition of the »aura«, is the seal of authenticity¹⁹.

CONFLICTING WITH THE USER'S VIEW

According to the development observed here, historical instruments that are part of a museum collection are now primarily valued as documents whose materiality crystallises the authenticity of the past and they should, therefore, ideally cease to be touched. As part of my research²⁰, however, I also interviewed museum visitors. These interviews reveal that this understanding of the authenticity of the musical instrument conflicts with the visitors' perception. One of the most common reactions that I observed was indeed the frustration visitors felt at being forbidden to touch the exhibited instruments. The transformation of the instrument into a defunctionalised symbolic object inside the museum, and the consequent enforcement of a distance from it, is perceived as a groundless fetishisation. The reactions observed were of various types, from real empathy for the position held by the museum despite the disappointment felt at not being able to touch the exhibited instruments, to extreme – and more rare – reactions based on strong feelings about musical instruments, in which the idea of apprehending musical instruments only visually was truly difficult to accept. As an example, one visitor explained:

»It really annoys me when I see that really good instruments are behind glass cases and cannot be used. I always feel the need, when I see a good instrument, to take it in my hands and to try it. And it is not possible there [in the exhibition of historical instruments]. I still pressed a couple of keys of a piano [*his wife, who is also taking part in the interview, laughs and nods, clearly embarrassed*] but I was scolded at once. [...] It is

not possible to do it differently, I can see that of course... but it's... There were multiple times when I would have liked to try [and thought] »how does this sound?«.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we observe two conflicting conceptualisations of what makes an instrument authentic as a museum object. On the one hand, the evolution of conservation practices in the museum has led to the idea that the authenticity of the past is encapsulated in the materiality of the instruments and that this original substance should therefore be preserved untouched. In this way, the musical instrument fits the definition of a museum object – characterised by the loss of its function and the acquisition of a symbolic value in its place. On the other hand, many visitors value the instrument above all for the sound it can produce and have trouble apprehending it only visually. They therefore oppose the conceptualisation of the instrument put forward by the museum by challenging the rules of the museum, sometimes consciously crossing barriers and walking over podiums – among other obstacles – in order to reach the instrument.

Notes

- 1) Jeanneret 2011, 121.
- 2) Pomian 1987.
- 3) Rivière 1989.
- 4) Deloche 2010, 27.
- 5) Chaumier 2010, 1.
- 6) Davallon 1992, 106.
- 7) See notably Fontana 2008; Gétreau 1994/1995.
- 8) Heyer 1910, 5.
- 9) See Gétreau 1993, 147.
- 10) Concerts on historical instruments were organised only later in the Parisian museum, starting when Paul Brunold became curator (from 1942 to 1948). The movement of the »early music revival« was, however, only fully active in the museum when Geneviève Thibault was appointed as curator, in 1961 (see Gétreau 1993).
- 11) It was in this same spirit that the Galpin Society had been created in 1946 in the United Kingdom.
- 12) CIMCIM 1960, 18.
- 13) CIMCIM 1960, 19.
- 14) CIMCIM 1967.
- 15) Schrammek 1969, 103.
- 16) CIMCIM 1985.
- 17) On copies and reconstructions of ancient musical instruments and their status in the museum, see notably the contribution of P. Pouloupoulos, published in this volume.
- 18) Phone interview with museum director, 1 July 2009.
- 19) See Benjamin 2000, 280.
- 20) See Dehail 2017.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary

Konfligierende Authentizitäten im Museum: Zum Ausstellen von Musikinstrumenten

Am Beispiel von Musikinstrumenten beschäftigt sich dieser Artikel mit dem Wandel des Status von Objekten im Museum. Anhand einer Analyse der Entwicklung deontologischer Prinzipien zur Konservierung und Restaurierung im 20. Jahrhundert soll gezeigt werden, wie dieser Wandel durch die Verschiebung der Vorstellung von »Authentizität« des Objektes von der Funktionalität hin zu seiner Materialität bedingt wurde. Danach wird untersucht, inwiefern dieses Konzept von Authentizität von Musikinstrumenten im Museum im Widerspruch zur Besucherperspektive steht, wodurch auch die Künstlichkeit dieses Wandels deutlich wird.

Conflicting Authenticities in the Museum: The Exhibition of Musical Instruments

Using the specific example of musical instruments, this paper focuses on the transformation of the status of the object in the museum. Drawing on an analysis of the evolution of the deontological principles of conservation and restoration in the 20th century, it intends to show how this transformation is conditioned by the transfer of the idea of »authenticity« of the object from its functionality to its materiality. It then examines the way in which this conceptualisation of the authenticity of the musical instrument in the museum conflicts with the visitors' perspective, thereby revealing the artificiality of this transformation.