

Treasure trove

An Edinburgh-based online project is seeing the musical instrument collection of museums around the world placed a few mouse clicks away from all of us, writes **David Kettle**

There is a place where Stradivari violins rub shoulders with Pleyel pianos, where Indian gourd fiddles, Japanese mouth organs and Nepalese horn drums all jostle for your attention. They're all free to look at, examine, listen to and read about, and best of all, you don't even have to leave your own home to do so.

The ambitious Musical Instrument Museums Online (MIMO) project has spent the last two years making the collections from 11 European institutions in the UK, Germany, Belgium, France, Sweden and Italy available on its new internet database and exhibition, and all of its 50,000 exhibits are now awaiting your examination. Alongside the techni-

cal documentation you might expect – size, age, place of origin, description – there are zoomable photos, sound files and even videos of the instruments in action.

The project began almost by accident in the perhaps unlikely surroundings of the Edinburgh University library. Norman Rodger, projects and innovations manager for Edinburgh University Collections, and subsequently MIMO project manager, explains: 'We'd been looking at a project about rare early books in Scotland, and we were trying to shoehorn it into the aims of the European funding objective, but it just didn't match. I discussed this with a colleague from the university's collection of historic musical



Violino-harpa (experimental violin), by Zach Thomas, Vienna, 1873 – Musical Instrument Museum, Brussels



Double-headed barrel drum of the indigenous Newar people in Nepal – Ethnological Museum, Berlin

instruments, and she suggested I work with them, as it was the kind of thing they'd been trying to do for years. We realised this was a far more appropriate use for this source of money.'

With EU funding agreed, Rodger set about bringing other museums and universities on board: 'I fired off an email to about 30 different places, and of that about 16 expressed an interest, which in the end came down to the 11 who were able to go ahead. There was some scepticism about whether we'd even get it to work, certainly from museums outside the project, but even from some inside the project who didn't really appreciate what was happening. It wasn't until we completed the project that people really began to understand the value that it brings.'

That value comes primarily from the

Clavichord, Italy, 16th century –
Cité de la musique, Paris



sheer scale of MIMO, and the fact that each of the institutions involved has its complete collection available online. ‘That includes instruments that were in reserve, rather than just the ones on public display,’ says Rodger. ‘So a lot of these instruments have never been seen publicly in the museums before.’

For many of the museums and universities, getting their entire collections online meant a whole lot of fresh documentation and hundreds of photo shoots. For one, though, it involved some painful discoveries. ‘At the University of Leipzig’s instrument museum, they hadn’t realised how many instruments had been lost or stolen during World War II,’ says Rodger. ‘They had the instruments listed on their records, but they had long gone. In many cases like that, the project enabled museums to build up a far more accurate database of their own collection.’

Paris’s Cité de la Musique was quick to get involved, and was already well prepared. ‘We knew the goal was to build a kind of virtual museum at a European level,’ says the Cité’s director of education, Marie-Hélène Serra,

‘but here we had already built similar things on a national level – we already had links with other institutions in France, which have come into the MIMO project through us.’

For the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, it was a case of out with the cameras. ‘We had only photographed about a fifth of our collection,’ says Frank Bär, curator of the museum’s historic instruments. ‘It required plenty of organisation to get the rest completed. And of course the things we had to discuss with the photographer were very different from what we are used to dealing with as musicologists – reflecting surfaces, size, whether an instrument can stand on its own, lie down, or needs a support.’

The sheer quantity of photographs wasn’t the only concern in Nuremberg. A huge collection of pianos and other keyboard instruments had lain for years in the museum’s basement, gathering dust. ‘In fact, the entire staff who worked on photographing and moving those instruments got ill because of toxins and chemicals that had been used when the instruments were put into storage,’

remembers Rodger. ‘Of course, you never take that kind of thing into account when you’re planning this kind of work.’

Thankfully, challenges elsewhere revolved less around health, and more around the pedantic but necessary issues of standardisation and consistency. These were Bär’s responsibilities: ‘In photography, for example, some standards already exist: violins and pianos are always photographed in the same way, for instance. But what about a flute – should it be seen vertically, horizontally, diagonally? We had to make a decision as to what to do.’

Language was also a concern in a project that took in six countries speaking as many different tongues. One of the project’s more unexpected outcomes has been a linguistic standardisation of instrument terminology. ‘We had to have a multilingual search,’ explains Serra, ‘so that if someone is looking for bagpipes, say, it will also search for *cornemuse* in French. So we had to develop a common vocabulary for these instruments and agree on it in the six languages.’

At the moment, there are two ways to access the exhibits, reflecting the twin audiences who are anticipated to engage with the project. The MIMO database itself is an unfussy information source aimed at curators, academics, makers and students, which presents the entries in a straightforward if not particularly enticing way. In the EU’s vast

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Europeana online project, however, it's another story. Here the MIMO musical instruments are linked in with millions of other items reflecting Europe's cultural heritage in an all-singing, all-dancing, multilingual experience. 'Look up Pleyel, for example,' says Serra, 'and you'll see not only his instruments, but also portraits, scores, books, and all kinds of other items associated with him. It's like having a cultural object that you can view from many different perspectives.'

The Europeana site also offers a virtual exhibition, 'Explore the World of Musical Instruments', showcasing highlights from the MIMO project – everything from sumptuously decorated harpsichords to a dragon-shaped trombone. The difference here is that the instruments are selected and there is a commentary on them. 'Virtual exhibitions are exactly what we should be doing now,'

says Serra. 'What we have to do is to describe the history and cultural context of the instruments, so that the collections are alive, not dead.'

It's perhaps bringing this enormous wealth of culture and history to a broader audience that's the greatest challenge for MIMO now that the database is up and running. Academic research has already started – Serra points to the Brussels Musical Instruments

Museum using MIMO to research a forthcoming exhibition on Adolphe Sax, and Bär is using MIMO resources in a research project on square pianos at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. But it's

not all scholarship: Serra singles out schoolchildren as frequent users. 'In France it's very

common for youngsters to do homework on musical instruments, and they are using this database. And also for people who have old instruments at home, who don't know much about their history or value – we know there are many of them who are using MIMO too.'

And the project managers even made some discoveries themselves. 'Some of the African material was quite surprising, certainly some of the more obscure stuff – instruments made from human skulls and that kind of thing,' says Rodger. He was also sometimes surprised about individual institutions' perspectives on their own collections. 'When we did the virtual exhibition, for example, the people in Stockholm never thought of including the Abba keyboard, because it wasn't a serious instrument, whereas from a public perspective we felt it was hugely important.'

The project has now reached the end of its two-year launch phase, but everyone involved is keen to develop the site further. 'Our aim is very much to expand and bring in as many museums as possible,' says Rodger. 'We've got two more institutions who are close to coming on board, and we've also had a lot of interest from several museums in the US.' Wouldn't US involvement go against the European slant? It seems it's not an issue. 'The Europeana site wouldn't cover US content, but we'd build our own MIMO global portal to cover everything,' says Rodger.

'It's also an opportunity to share ideas,' adds Serra. 'American museums have very different views on certain things, and it's good for MIMO to have to adapt.' For Bär, expanding internationally simply reflects the global music scene: 'I'd like to have all public and perhaps even private collections on it. The musical instrument scene is so connected worldwide, and always has been. It's never been a purely national thing, so this really must happen. I'm very optimistic.'

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Django Reinhardt's guitar, by Henri Selmer, 1940 – Cité de la musique, Paris