



Available online at  
**ScienceDirect**  
[www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Elsevier Masson France  
**EM|consulte**  
[www.em-consulte.com/en](http://www.em-consulte.com/en)



Wooden Musical Instruments Special Issue

## Perception of old musical instruments

Stéphane Vaiedelich<sup>a</sup>, Claudia Fritz<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Cité de la musique–Philharmonie, équipe conservation recherche, Musée de la musique, 75019 Paris, France*

<sup>b</sup> *Sorbonne Universités, UPMC Univ Paris 06, CNRS, UMR 7190, Institut Jean-Le-Rond-d'Alembert, 75005 Paris, France*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 18 December 2015

Accepted 10 February 2017

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Musical instrument

Old instrument

Perception

Museum

### ABSTRACT

Defining what is an old instruments is complex. In a general way, we can distinguish two categories of old instruments. On one hand, there are the instruments which are not or barely in use nowadays. Due to a period of abandonment, those instruments are representative of an epoch different from ours and can be relatively easily dated. On the other hand, there are the instruments which are still being played despite having been made a few centuries ago. Time and use have usually given them a patina, so they are perceived as old in terms of visual aspect, but they have usually been modified as well and so they can be perceived as contemporary in terms of sound. Do we understand an old instrument by hearing it? Do we actually even need to hear it to understand it? This article is meant to provide some thoughts on these questions, to highlight the links between sight and hearing in our perception of a musical instrument and to illustrate how documentation and scientific knowledge can influence this perception.<sup>1</sup>

© 2017 Elsevier Masson SAS. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

For most thinkers – from a Western society at least – the musical instrument seems to have to be defined, a priori, through its sound production function. In this way, it is defined as a device/an artificial machine/a human material product, allowing the supply of “sound objects”, considered to be musical by the culture within which the instrument is used [1]. Thus, whether the instrument is in a playing state or not and is submitted to scientific scrutiny as a whole or a fraction, the study and documentation of this musical instrument cannot leave out the analysis of its functionalities and their relationships with the material object itself.

Encountering a musical instrument never leaves one indifferent and usually arouses a feeling of curiosity close to admiration towards this alloy of matter, form and sound. Though it always seems to be conceived and produced in order to be listened to, the stories that it can tell are numerous.

An instrument can be a simple object in appearance or a clever assembly of tools and sound materials. It can be entirely conceived and designed as a new object or it can result from repurposing an artefact from its primary function (musical stone, washboard, musical glasses, ...).

The perception of an old musical instrument is complex. Its forms and plasticity as they appear to us nowadays are sometimes a very distant reflection of what they were originally. Its sound, when it still exists, has suffered as well due to ageing. Some instruments do not have a sound anymore because they cannot be played, or because the playing technique or the musical practice are lost. Therefore, the perception of this material and sound object relies on different senses, among which the sight is probably the most important. The involved senses provide the audience member the informations, on which they shape an identity to the instrument that is presented to them. Starting from a definition of the old musical instrument, we propose here, through chosen examples, to show how the input of sciences (both natural and human) allow the supply of factual elements which provide the instrument, beyond its sound, with a common sense based on “objective” documentation, that can be shared by a large audience.

## 2. The old musical instrument

### 2.1. Attempts towards a definition

Identified within a culture, a musical instrument is the product of an era to which it seems sometimes difficult to constrain it. It is indeed common that an instrument, like the guitar or the harpsichord for instance, that was thought to be forgotten was actually reused at a later time, in quite different musical ways, showing sometimes potentialities which were unexpected at the time of its original conception. The notion of old instrument is therefore

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33144277306.

E-mail address: [claudia.fritz@upmc.fr](mailto:claudia.fritz@upmc.fr) (C. Fritz).

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, perception refers not only to the processing of sensory information but also to the understanding of the instrument in societal, historical and cultural terms.

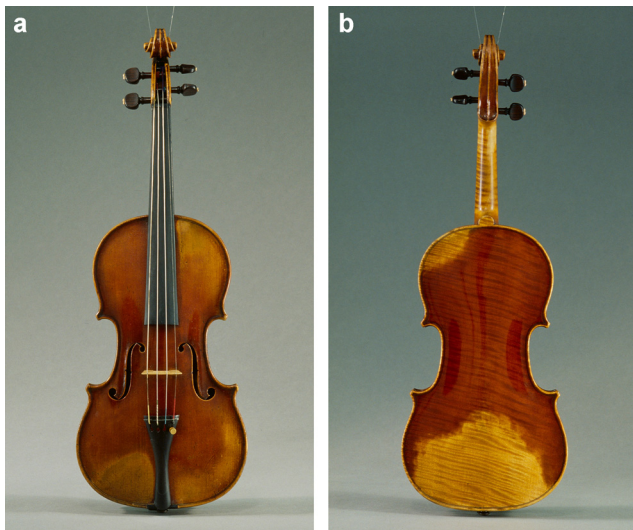
difficult to define. Is it about an instrument newly made from an old template? Is it about an instrument that we can show, by an analysis of its material (dendrochronology if it happens to be in wood [2]), that one part or the whole instrument dates from an old time relative to the observer and on which it would not be possible to play a contemporary repertoire?

When a relatively long period of no use exists in the history of the instrument, the definition becomes easy. This period of abandonment, comparable to the period of burying of an archaeological object, is the guarantee of the testimony of another time. It places objectively the instrument in a time period, based on which the observer (scientist, musician, curator, general audience, . . . builds the mental image of a temporal distance. In this case, the evocative power of the instrument is not constrained to a “simple” auditory dimension, as the passage of time has stamped the whole object with various and complex significations and dimensions. Listening, seeing, touching, playing such a musical instrument is an open door to the time as highlighted by Robert Barclay: “Historic musical instruments have a very special place in modern society. They are touchstones to the past to an extent that other artefacts are. Playing music upon them allows us briefly to bridge the gap between the here and now and the over and done with” [3].

On the other hand, when such abandonment period does not exist, defining the epoch of an instrument and thus defining what an old instrument is becomes very complex, as we will see in the particular case of the violin.

## 2.2. Particular case of the violin

Since its first appearance in the 16th century, the violin did not have to suffer a period of abandon and has been continuously played. It possesses, even now, a very privileged place in the European instrumentarium. Numerous are the musicians who are specialist in contemporary repertoire but play on instruments with a famous signature from the 18th century. The famous third partita for solo violin (BMW 1006) composed by Johan Sebastian Bach in 1720 was played on the violin made by Nicolas Lupot in 1803, kept in the collection of Musée de la Musique in Paris (Fig. 1), during



**Fig. 1.** Violin made by Nicolas Lupot (E.996.10.1, Collection of Musée de la Musique – Paris [13]). Sometimes called “The French Stradivari”, Lupot was very active in Paris at the beginning of the 19th century. His instruments are largely inspired by Stradivarius models, which he was able to access thanks to his reputation as a repairer. The label inside the violin reads “Nicolas Lupot luthier rue de Grammont à Paris l’an 1803”. Its neck was changed at least once and its set-up is typical of the first half of the 20th century, as indicated by its “Émile Français Paris” iron-stamped bridge. Copyright Cité de la musique – Philharmonie de Paris.

the opening ceremony of the new museum in 1995. A few years later in 2002, the same violin allowed to hear the piece for solo violin written by Ianis Xenakis in 1950, in a tribute concert to this composer. From which period really is this instrument? Is it even from a precise period? What is the real signification of the manufacture year still visible on the authentic maker’s tag inside the instrument? What do we hear in each concert: a violin from 1995 or 2002, date of the concerts? An instrument from 1720 or 1950, dates of the creation of the pieces? Or an instrument from 1803 which has the incredible capability of being used for both music written way before and way after its fabrication?

Defining an old violin is not easy. The transformations, that the instrument has necessarily undergone during successive maintenance to be kept in playing condition, make it change era. During the 19th century, Parisian instrument makers were particularly active in the development of conservation techniques, some of which are still being in use. The study of technical treatises written by luthiers in the 19th and 20th centuries shows how the definition of an old violin can be ambiguous [4]. For them, it is an instrument which body (mainly the exterior and visible elements of it) has kept traces of its origin. These traces are magnified by the patina, a mark of regular and continuous use, representing the time passing but mainly the continuity of the instrument’s existence, certainly old, but eternal as the instrument belongs to the past as well as to the present. Thus, the transformation of the neck and some other functional elements, which are well known to play an important role in the tone quality, are swept away like details as soon as they do not modify this immediate and mainly visual perception. “*Le rearrage des tables et le changement des poignées étant des réparations et non des modifications, ces instruments sont donc tels qu’ils ont été construits*” (*Changing the bracing of the plates and the neck being repairs but not modifications, these instruments are thus as they were made*) wrote Laurent Grillet in his famous work *Les ancêtres du violon et du violoncelle* [5], talking about some famous violins of his time. Beyond the fact that this argument can be seen as weak in the light of the so called Theseus paradox (a thought experiment that raises the question of whether an object that has had all of its components replaced remains fundamentally the same object), it still shows an interesting change in paradigm as braces of the plates and neck would nowadays be considered as constituent parts of the instrument (rather than secondary accessories in Grillet’s time).

## 3. Perception of old instruments induced by visual inspection

Before it even sounds, a musical instrument is seen, as a material object. Whether the observer is expert or novice, the visual examination which is conducted leads to a quick categorisation in function of his/her degree of expertise. “This instrument is obviously old, juts by looking at it!” “This instrument seems to come from Asia, its decorations are typical of Chinese lacquers from the 18th century.” “The decorations of the papers show that it is a Flemish harpsichord.” The documentary and material approaches to identify the origin of a musical instrument and thus certify its authenticity are mostly guided by sight (rather than by hearing) and often only question the initial hypotheses derived by an initial visual perception. When the instrument belongs to different epochs or different places because of different organological modifications (for instance, a Flemish harpsichord from the 17th century which underwent a large renovation in France in the middle of the 18th century), there is often a conflict between the visual perception and the multiple origin of the instrument. When these modifications are subtle, discrete and frequent and the instrument has always been used in the instrumentarium, then it belongs simultaneously to many epochs. This is the case of the violin, which has been shown

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5112716>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5112716>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)