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Heads of

The Orpheon Foundation Brings Ancient Instruments—and Music—to Life

OCTOBER 17, 2017

By Sarah Freiberg

Imagine entering a museum filled with historical stringed instruments, and, instead of simply looking at them through protective glass cases, you were encouraged to try them out, or perhaps borrow one for a performance or project. That scenario is not so far from reality at the [Orpheon Foundation \(http://orpheon.org/OldSite/Seiten/Abra/bienvenido.htm\)](http://orpheon.org/OldSite/Seiten/Abra/bienvenido.htm).

The brainchild of José Vázquez, the Orpheon Foundation has amassed over 200 stringed instruments and bows for use of players all over Europe. Vázquez, formerly professor at the University for Music and the Performing Arts in Vienna, has lovingly collected violin- and viola da gamba-family instruments, along with their more exotic counterparts—the violas d'amore and barytons—as well as historical bows, dating primarily from 1560–1780, and had them restored to their original playing condition. The instruments are available for

performance, recordings, and study to Orpheon Consort members, professional musicians, and European students. “Various instruments are kept in the places where my [Orpheon Consort] musicians or I reside and regularly use them: Vienna, Winterthur, Madrid, Thoiry,” Vázquez says.



The back of a 1683 bass viol by Joachim Tielke, Hamburg (left) • 1750 Johann Georg Thir five-string violone (right)

Vázquez opines on his website that “it is the living acoustical heritage—the sounds that these instruments produce for those living today—that interests us, and not their mere decorative flair as *objets trouvés* from aristocratic residences of a distant past. We wish to hear what these instruments have to say and we wish to learn from them about the manner of performance of their musical heritage from the Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical periods.” Essentially, if musicians have the chance to work with such fine instruments, set up as they were when first crafted, they can bring the music back to life “for generations yet to come.”

The collection includes approximately 40 violins, 15 violas, 15 cellos, and four violones, all dating from 1570–1780, and hailing from Italy, Germany, France, the Habsburg Empire, and England. It also contains many sizes of original violas da gamba, with a pristine tenor viol by William Bowellesse (London, ca. 1590) added just this year. Of instruments with sympathetic strings, there are also six violas d’amore and three replicas of barytons, “there being no originals to be purchased.”



ca. 1730 treble viola da gamba (left) • Head of a pardessus de viole (right)





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Violas d’amore resemble treble viols, with six or seven strings, but were played under the chin, like a violin or viola, instead of held by the legs like viol-family instruments. Vivaldi, Graupner, and Telemann composed many works for d’amores. So did Bach in an aria in his *St John Passion*. Franz Joseph Haydn’s boss, the Esterházy Prince Nicholas, played the baryton—a gamba-like instrument with sympathetic wire strings that could also be plucked by the performer. Haydn composed close to 200 works for the baryton, including 124 trios for baryton, viola, and cello.

Also included in the collection are eight keyboard instruments, all replicas, that can be used with the stringed instruments in concerts and recordings. There is also a significant collection of approximately 50 original bows, spanning from the Baroque to Classical periods—from 1680 to 1820.

“The sheer pleasure of performing on a viola da gamba by Jacob Stainer or Joachim Tielke simply defies verbal description!”

—José Vázquez

About 80 percent of the Orpheon collection is displayed in Italy. Vázquez is grateful “to my friendship with Princess Véronique and Prince Carlo Alessandro di Torre e Tasso,” he says. “Their magnificent Castello di Duino on the Adriatic Coast of Italy has hosted the collection since 2010, where it may be visited all-year round.” Since 1993, there here have also been traveling exhibitions of the collection throughout Europe as well as in Taiwan.

Vázquez, a violinist and violist da gamba, started the collection because he “wanted to form an ensemble that played on really fine instruments. Since most people don’t have access to such instruments, I decided to collect them myself.” He doesn’t believe in the idea that historical instruments should be restored for the purpose of mere preservation. “The purpose of a musical instrument is sound,” he says. “If one seals these instruments in glass cases, they can never be heard again. The avowed purpose of my museum is to preserve these instruments for the hands of practicing artists.



Treble viola da gamba by William Turner

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“I cannot deny that passion plays a leading role in my quest for historical musical instruments,” he adds. “The sheer pleasure of performing on a viola da gamba by Jacob Stainer or Joachim Tielke simply defies verbal description!”

When it comes to selecting instruments, Vázquez admits that if he sees an old gamba, no matter how beat up it might be, he will grab it: “Seldom is an opportunity to purchase a viola da gamba forfeited, simply because these, unlike violins, are so rare. The condition of the instrument is not important, since these will then be conscientiously restored by competent luthiers, in order to make them playable again.”



ca. 1650 violin by Giovanni Battista Testore (left) • Head of a bass viola da gamba, Cremona, possibly by Ruggieri (right)

Vázquez is understandably proud of his unusual museum. “The collection is unique in the world in that all of the instruments either are in their pristine original state or have been restored to their original Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical setups for the performance of the music of those periods.” His collection of violas da gamba is particularly significant, and is considered the largest in the world. “And these viols . . . are all restored and playable,” he says. “They serve their most important function, namely, render audible service to music!”

In his vision for the future, Vázquez dreams of a permanent home for his collection, with historically oriented performances on the instruments, a pedagogical department that would reach out to schools and organize workshops and courses, and a restoration and instrument-making department. He’s focusing on “crowd-funding platforms” to make this dream a reality. It will be “a special museum, which would house the collection and assure its conservation,” he says. “Unlike all other museums, however, the musicians will have the keys to the display cases!”

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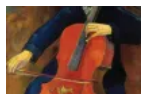
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