Journal of the

American Musical Instrument Society

AMIS AT FIFTY

SUPPLEMENT TO VOLUME XLVI • 2020/21

Public/Private Ownership and Collecting of Musical Instruments

Darcy Kuronen

Collecting musical instruments has never attracted as many enthusiasts as other functional objects, such as historical furniture or classic cars, let alone paintings, prints, decorative arts, and other antiques. The survival rate for instruments is proportionately low, given that they often get "used up" over time, or are discarded when they fall into disrepair or become outmoded. Given this rather limited supply, very few dealers exclusively handle old musical instruments. One major exception to this, however, is sellers of vintage plucked-string instruments, such as guitars, banjos, and mandolins, where many buyers are seeking playable examples. Bowed-string instruments likewise fall into this category, as there has been an active trade in violins, violas, cellos, basses, and bows since the sixteenth century. Moreover, these types of instruments tend to stand apart from others, due to the exceptionally high prices they often command.

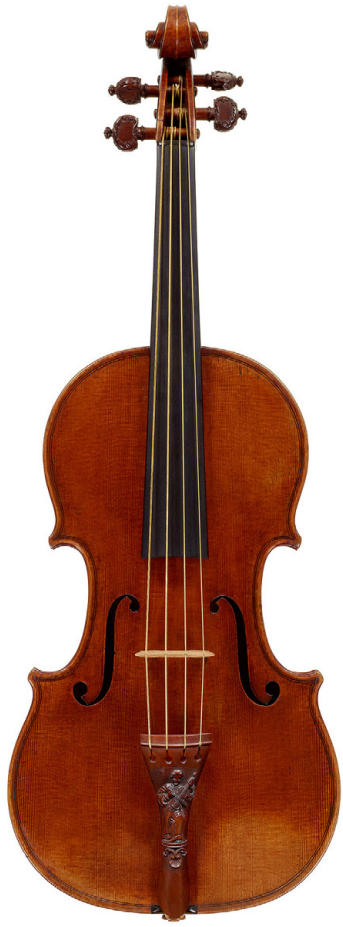
For those who collect almost any kind of instrument made during the past 250 years (other than violins), the cost of doing so can be surprisingly modest compared with other artwork and antiques, which means that such collecting can often be done on a limited budget. The very best and rarest instruments will always bring high prices, driven by their limited availability. But more plentiful instruments, such as English and American flutes or square pianos from the early 1800s have, for the most part, long been relatively inexpensive. Instrument collecting has also tended to fall into two broader categories: those seeking pieces associated with the European/American tradition of art music, and those who take an interest in non-Western instruments. Dealers and auctions tend to cater to the former group, though there are exceptions. When looking for "ethnographic" instruments, one is more likely to find them in sales or shops that specialize in regional artifacts. For example, an authentic antique drum or arched harp from the Congo region is most likely to turn up in the inventory of someone who specifically deals in art from central Africa. When acquiring instruments from outside one's own country, however, it has become increasingly important to exercise caution regarding examples that have cultural restrictions and/or incorporate materials that are

legally protected because they come from endangered species, including animals, birds, and plants.

As in other fields, collectors of instruments have occupied a broad spectrum, from discriminating buyers, who gather together examples with specific goals in mind, to those with a more casual interest (and smaller pocketbooks), who are enthusiastic about providing homes for almost any kind of instrument that strikes their fancy. A certain amount of hoarding can take place with lesser-value instruments, as with collections of any sort. Another factor in the marketplace for old instruments has been the early music movement, which began to surge in the 1970s. But whereas a musician during that time might have been able to procure a baroque-period viola da gamba, have it restored, and play it professionally, those who perform on historical woodwinds soon found that their instruments were at too much physical risk if played too often. They thus generally switched over to playing good modern replicas of those same flutes, oboes, clarinets, etc.

Fifty years ago, far more dealers specialized in antique instruments. Today, however, many outlets offer instruments for sale online, sometimes specializing in certain types of instrument, but often (like eBay) listing anything that an individual seller has to offer. Auction houses, especially in London and New York, once offered old and collectable instruments in their catalogues, with sales typically taking place twice a year, in the fall and spring. But such sales have declined precipitously in the past decade, and much of this activity has likewise shifted to online sales. The prices of many collectable instruments have risen steadily since the 1970s, though this varies greatly by instrument type, and certain areas have shown volatility in prices within a few years.

This has been especially true of the vintage guitar market, where the trend of what's "hot" at the moment can change considerably, irrespective of the intrinsic value of a given instrument. Sales of twentieth-century guitars have risen dramatically since the 1980s, driven by increased interest in popular music of the time, fascination with guitar types favored by famous musicians, and a desire by baby boomers to own artifacts they could not afford during their childhood years. The exact type and date of an instrument played by a celebrity guitarist is desired, even if an actual guitar owned by a rock star is far out of reach for most buyers. In auctions of guitars and other instruments once owned by famous rock-and-roll era musicians, hammer prices have been hard to predict. As in any auction, it only takes two determined buyers to bid up the purchase price of an



The "Lady Blunt" violin by Antonio Stradivari. Wikimedia Commons.

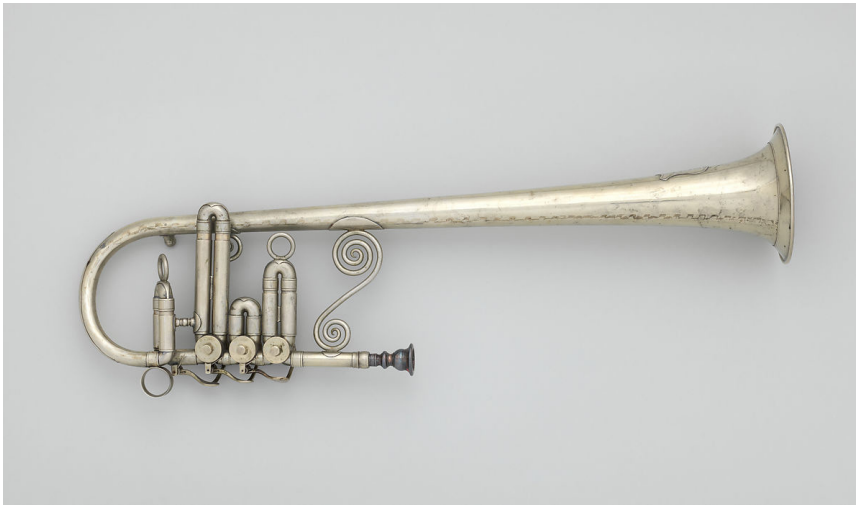
object beyond what might seem logical or justifiable.

The prices of rare and notable violins have soared even more since the 1970s, though this sector of sales has always been harder to track, given that many deals are handled privately, with no public record of the purchase price. One relatively well-documented example of this price inflation, though, is a violin made in 1721 by Antonio Stradivari, known as the "Lady Blunt." The instrument sold for $84,000 in 1970 but fetched a then-record price of $16 million in 2011. That astounding figure, however, was bested in 2019 by the "Lord Wilton" Stradivari, which sold for a new record high of $22 million. Prices for such instruments have climbed steadily over the past fifty years, even accounting for inflation,

but the number of examples on the market has dwindled greatly, even while demand has remained steady. Sales of such violins, formerly dominated by buyers in Europe and the United States, have gradually shifted to other locales, including Russia, Japan, South Korea, and most recently China. Prices of these near-mythical violins, made in northern Italy during a "golden age," are now regrettably out of reach for even the most successful professional player, who must hope to borrow an instrument from a private owner, a group of investors, or the instrument library of a well-heeled orchestra. The good news for those seeking a student-quality violin is that much better examples are available from China, where in recent decades craftsmen have been creating instruments superior to most vintage European instruments of the nineteenth or twentieth century, and much more affordable.

In a niche area of collecting—brass instruments dating from the era of the American Civil War—interest and prices have risen considerably over the past half century. Any example with the period's quintessential rotary valves is sure to garner attention, and even more so if it's configured for the over-shoulder playing style prevalent during the time. Into the 1970s, brasswinds of this type could often be found languishing in antique stores, at flea markets, or in estate sales. But a surge in the formation of bands wishing to perform music of this period, often in conjunction with reenactments of Civil-War battles and other events, gradually drove up the prices for such instruments, always depending on rarity and condition. The finite number of Civil-War brasses that still exist has further affected the supply-and-demand equation. A good-quality cornet from the 1860s, signed by a respected maker, could have been had for a few hundred dollars in 1970, but might easily bring $2,500 now (though, accounting for inflation, this is only an increase of about 100 percent). The average price of these instruments reached a peak around 2004, but has since dropped to a more reasonable level, as most ensembles requiring them have now acquired all that they need for their purposes.

Just as sales, auctions, and dealers of instruments have dwindled over the years, so too have the number of private collections of organological artifacts. Many of these collections have happily found permanent homes in museums, where there is typically a better environment for their long-term preservation, as well as staff to oversee and interpret them. But some institutional collections have changed considerably in their nature, location, and even existence. As a handful of new instrument museums have arisen over the past fifty years, some existing collections have



Over-the-shoulder soprano horn in E-flat by John F. Stratton, ca. 1880. The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889, 89.4.2295. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

become more visible within their institutional settings. The number of museum-based instrument collections worldwide remains small, however, and many have struggled over the years to attract funding, visibility, and general recognition of their cultural significance. Staff reductions have created further challenges for maintaining and working with many institutional collections. Even as a few older museum collections have been moved to improved physical spaces, others have come under threats (sometimes governmental) of displacement, as a building is repurposed for other, seemingly more important, uses. The most publicized of these was a decision in 2010 to reduce the number of instruments on display at London's famed Victoria and Albert Museum. A few of this collection's rare and beautifully decorated instruments are integrated into displays in various parts of the museum, and others are now loaned to the Horniman Museum. Still, the lack of a dedicated space for this renowned collection within one of England's national treasure houses is quite unfortunate. In other museums, planned renovations of spaces for instrument collections have forced their musical artifacts into storage facilities for long periods, where they often are inaccessible to scholars. In the saddest situations, some collections may be compelled to maintain this kind of storage arrangement going forward.

The landscape of instrument collecting and collections in the future will likely be much different than when AMIS was founded in 1971. Mu-

seums are increasingly trending toward a more outward-facing mission that places greater emphasis on innovative and engaging public displays of their holdings, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But this strategy, which gives priority to temporary exhibitions—always presenting something new to the museum-going public—competes with another worthy goal: acquiring new and important pieces for a collection, especially rarities in need of an appropriate home. One likely and welcome development in museum collections, already begun in earnest at several institutions, is increased awareness and collecting of significant instruments from the twentieth century, especially examples of electric and electronic instruments. Enough time has passed to clarify which instruments from the early to mid-century are critical to our understanding of music from the period, including popular forms like jazz and rock. These electric instruments bring with them challenges regarding how best to preserve them, and what risks are involved in trying to restore them to playing condition. Whatever happens with organology and collecting going forward, we can be sure that future generations will continue to study, interpret, and be fascinated by musical instruments of the past and present, in their own new and imaginative ways.