

10-7-2019

The Basel Museum of Music: Instrumental History

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Recommended Citation

Hutton, Elaina V. (2019) "The Basel Museum of Music: Instrumental History," *Musical Offerings*: Vol. 10 : No. 2 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.15385/jmo.2019.10.2.4

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol10/iss2/4>

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Abstract

Basel, Switzerland thrives with a rich musical culture and history, and the Museum of Music at the Basel Historical Museum is truly a rare gem demonstrating the influence of instruments in Swiss cultural development. The museum houses an exquisite collection of instruments which beautifully encompasses an extensive timeline of musical and instrumental diversity. Unique beauty of the uncommon and the experimental is showcased in a manner that educates and inspires. The span of genre and style demonstrated by the array of composers and instrument builders recognized imparts just how important a role music plays in Basel. For one museum to weave so many different threads of musical significance into one magnificent tapestry is a significant achievement both musically and culturally. Following is a brief synopsis of a few select instruments from the collection. This discussion includes a harp built by renowned French musician and master craftsman Sébastien Erard. An overview of Erard's inventive contributions to the musical world and the functions of his harp offers a greater understanding of the significance and capabilities of this instrument. Also included is a closer look at the fascinating harp-guitar. Following the development of this unique troubadour instrument through history offers a glimpse at a lesser-known side of the strings family. Finally, the museum houses a beautiful memory of the medieval: the remarkable strings and keys of the nyckelharpa. The range of sound and song this instrument is capable of producing is given a brief highlight at the end of this discourse. Basel's Museum of Music offers a priceless gift of music, history, and insight, illuminated by a few of the exquisite instruments in the following offering.

Keywords

Musikmuseum, harp, harp-guitar, nyckelharpa

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Basel, Switzerland: the home to an abundance of rich historical and cultural significance. One jewel set among countless treasures is the Basel Historical Museum—specifically, the Museum of Music. Unique musical history adorns every crevice of the small three-story building in which the museum is housed. The following discussion serves to detail the background and significance of a select few of the remarkable instruments displayed in the Museum of Music.

Housed in the museum is a beautiful collection of harps. Among the most notable instruments of the museum's curation is a magnificent harp built by renowned harp maker Sébastien Erard. The French musician and master craftsman played a significant role in the development of the harp as a modern instrument in the eighteenth century. Erard greatly improved the structure of the instrument, correcting tuning errors and structural instability that created difficulties in performance situations.¹ Witnessing Erard's handiwork is a rewarding experience, and observing the detail he incorporated into the instrument allows for a deeper appreciation of the harp and its development. An interesting element in models of early eighteenth-century English harps is that, in addition to the seven pedals controlling pitch, many also possessed an eighth pedal, which was intended to control a mechanism that caused a sustained pitch on the lower strings, similar to the effect achieved by the sustain pedal on a piano (Figure 1).

¹ Lee-Fei Chen, "The Emergence of the Double-Action Harp as the Standard Instrument: Pleyel's Chromatic Harp and Erard's Double-Action Harp," (PhD diss., University of Miami, 2008): 18–19.

https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations/109.

While this method is no longer utilized in today's further improved harps, it was an important element of experimentation as the development of the harp progressed. The exquisite example of harp construction and the history of the man largely responsible for much of this change is a remarkably valuable aspect of the Basel Museum of Music.

While the harp is certainly a key element of the musical recognition obtainable at the museum, it is by no means the only permanent string collection on display: the Museum of Music boasts an astonishing assortment of historical plucked and bowed instruments. Another unique and special endowment to musical history in the museum's possession is the striking yet curiously elegant harp-guitar (Figure 2).

This unusual hybrid instrument is a fairly modern musical contribution, dating back to the early 1700s.² The instrument had six stopped strings on a guitar neck and six unstopped strings with pitch-changing levers extending laterally on the neck of a harp attached to the same body, which is hollow like a traditional guitar. Free strings and a curved neck are not the only harp components related to this instrument: the first records of this evolution on the European troubadour tradition can be traced back to François-Joseph Naderman, one of the most influential harpists of the eighteenth century.³ Unequivocally renowned as a performer, composer, teacher, and harp-maker, Naderman's influence continues to permeate the classical harp world today. While his interest in harp-hybrids is a lesser known aspect of his career—indeed, the instrument itself is not widespread in public knowledge or performance—Naderman certainly played a significant role in shaping musical traditions of more than one plucked string instrument.

Yet another fascinating stringed instrument restored by curators at the Basel Museum of Music is the nyckelharpa (Figure 3). While the body of this bowed instrument is similar in shape to a violin, it is much thicker, and the neck and body are made of one single piece. The origin and use of this instrument can be reasonably traced to medieval times, although

² Tim Brookes, "The Harp Guitar's Floating Strings," *NPR Music* blog, August, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13924188>.

³ Robert Hartman, "History of the Harp Guitar, a Synopsis," Larson Brothers Creations, 2003. <http://www.larsonsc creations.com/History.htm>.

it has developed much since then.⁴ The nyckelharpa has sixteen strings: three melody, one drone, and twelve resonance strings. Because of this blend of properties, it is in the same family as the vielle and the hurdy gurdy and can achieve characteristics of both. Even more intriguing, this instrument possesses thirty-seven wooden keys on the neck and fingerboard, which are designed to slide underneath the strings and are responsible for changing pitches. These stops have been compared to movable frets and provide the instrument with chromaticism and a greater octave range. The instrument is bowed and fingered simultaneously, played rather like a violin and a guitar at the same time.⁵

Basel is alive with rich musical culture and history, and the Museum of Music at the Basel Historical Museum is truly a rare gem demonstrating the influence of instruments of Swiss cultural development. The unique beauty of the uncommon and the experimental is showcased in a manner that educates and inspires. The span of genre and style demonstrated by the array of composers and instrument builders recognized imparts just how important a role music plays in Basel. For one museum to weave so many different threads of musical significance into one magnificent tapestry is a significant achievement both musically and culturally. Experiencing the gift of these priceless instruments and the history in which they are so deeply submerged leaves one with a more complete appreciation for the gift of music and the force with which it is shaping the world.

⁴ Bart Brashers, "A Brief History of the Nyckelharpa," *American Nyckelharpa Association*, 2014.

⁵ Gunnar Ternhag and Mathias Boström, "The Dissemination of the Nyckelharpa: The Ethnic and the Non-ethnic Ways," *STM-Online* 2, no. 1 (1999): n.p. http://www.musikforskning.se/stmonline/vol_2/Bost_Tern/Bost_Tern.pdf.



Figure 1: Sébastien Erard's eight-pedal harp (on right), 1817.⁶



Figure 2: Harp guitar, 1932.



Figure 3: Nyckelharpa, 19th c.

⁶ All photos taken by Elaina Hutton at the Musikmuseum in Basel, Switzerland. March 2019.

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