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R O Y A L
C O L L E G E
O F M U S I C
London

Engaging an audience: Storytelling Resource - Objects

RCM Sparks is the Royal College of Music's learning and participation programme.
To find out more and get involved visit www.rcm.ac.uk/sparks

1. Sebastian Erard and the shipwrecked Harp Museum Objects: Pedal harp by Sebastian Erard (1800, London) & Erard company stockbooks (accounts)

- Sebastien Erard was a French instrument maker and inventor who specialised in making pianos and harps, inventing a pedal system which substantially increased the number of notes harps could produce. He was commissioned by Marie Antionette (the last queen of France) to make her a beautiful harp.
- In 1789 the people of France began the French Revolution, Erard who had made harps for the country's elite was concerned about his association to the regime and migrated to London.
- Erard was extremely organised. He made hundreds of harps and numbered them all. Every time he sold one, he put would put the buyers details down in his stockbooks.
- A team of scubadivers exploring a shipwreck 9 miles off the coast of Eastbourne found a piece of a musical instrument. On bringing this to the surface they realised that it was part of harp and cleaning revealed a distinct engraving: Sebastien Erard, 18 Great Marlborough Street, Serial number 5331.



2. Benjamin Flight's Barrell Organ

Museum Objects: Portrait of Benjamin Flight & Chamber barrel organ by Benjamin Flight (1820, London)



- Before the invention of recording technology, mechanical instruments made musical performance possible without the need for a musician. Anyone could play pre-set tunes on a barrel organ simply by turning a handle. Cranking the handle sets in motion a bellows which pumps air into the pipes and a wooden barrel into which thousands of metallic pins and staples are set
- Organ grinders would crank out the organ's tunes, often accompanied by a monkey to add to the entertainment, in return for a few pennies. Although, contemporary reports suggest that they were sometimes paid to keep quiet rather than to keep playing, with the barrel organ described as an instrument of torture by some.
- Benjamin Flight was an English organ builder famous for constructing an 'apollonicon' which took 5 years to make. It was an automatic playing machine with about 1,900 pipes, 45 organ stops and 5 keyboards meaning it could be played by multiple players at any time. They claimed it could reproduce the sounds of an entire orchestra.
- This portrait of Benjamin Flight is quite unusual. In the musical world, it was common for composers and musicians to have formal portraits painted, but portraits of musical instrument makers are very rare.

3. Apollo and Pan: A musical competition

Museum Objects: Virginal by Giovanni Celestini (Venice, 1593)

- A popular instrument during the late Renaissance and early Baroque period, the virginal is a keyboard instrument. Part of the harpsichord family the virginal is smaller and simpler, constructed without legs and placed on a table for playing.
- Popular amongst amateur performers, they would be as much a work of art as they were functional musical instruments. This virginal is decorated with gold and ivory designs, and has three miniature paintings on the soundboard that depict moments in three Greek myths.
- This instrument depicts the Greek gods, Apollo and Pan sitting on rocks playing instruments for King Midas, who is judging their competition. Pan, god of nature, challenges Apollo, god of music, to a music competition! Everyone in the forest gathers to watch.
- Pan played on his pipes and Apollo in his lyre. King Midas was so struck by Pan's raw and rustic music that he declared Pan to be the winner, which angered Apollo. Apollo was so infuriated that he gave King Midas donkey ears for the rest of his life.



4. The Dancing Masters Pochette

Museum Objects: Pochettes (variety) - 16th, 17th and early 18th century

- Pochettes are miniature violins that can be carried around in a long coat pocket. Most have a thin, boat-like shape, although some are made to look the same shape as a violin and are played with a small bow.
- Pochettes were usually played by dancing masters who would travel between wealthy, noble households teaching the latest dance steps. It was useful for them to be able to play a melody whilst also having the freedom to move around. In most pictures of pochettes they are played by balancing one on a person's hip rather than on a shoulder like a full-size violin
- Dancing masters would try to make themselves stand out by decorating their pochettes with expensive materials like ebony, ivory and sometimes even mother-of-pearl.
- They would simply pull a cord, and the fan would pop out and open. Perfect for cooling down after an energetic dance lesson. It would have seriously compromised the sound however (as it took up space for resonance)!

