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St Cecilia's Hall. Wikimedia

What I discovered inside Edinburgh's museum of musical instruments

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You can't often travel around the world, traversing six centuries in just ten paces. But that's the offering at Edinburgh's Musical Instruments Museum, one of the world's leading collections of its kind. Situated just off the Royal Mile in the Scottish capital, it reopened on May 11 after three years of refurbishment.

The museum is housed in St Cecilia's Hall, the oldest purpose-built concert hall in Scotland. This Georgian grande dame of British music history has just completed a £6.5m redevelopment project. I arranged a sneak preview of the collection ahead of the opening to see what it has in store.

The study of musical instruments, known as organology, is an often overlooked branch of music. Yet in the age before sound recording, nothing can get us as close to the musical soundscapes of Mozart and Bach as the actual tools of their time.

St Cecilia's Hall consolidates a collection it previously shared with another building. Spread over four

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galleries, it displays a selection of some 6,000 instruments (there's also an online repository of sounds [here](#)).

Peacocks and sax appeal

Stepping from the entrance vestibule into the Laigh Hall gallery on the ground floor, you are whisked from the Renaissance to the 21st Century, from North America to Asia and back again. A small violin with no sides, made before the shape we know today became the norm, is by the Bassano family – a famous group of Italian instrument makers employed at the court of Henry VIII.

A few paces to the right is the visually enticing Indian mayuri. From the 19th century, and also probably from a courtly setting, it is carved and richly decorated to look like a peacock to represent Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of music.



The 19th-century mayuri. University of Edinburgh

Through into the Wolfson gallery, you are accosted by a four-and-a-half-foot serpent: a wind instrument. Originally devised in the late 16th century, it was meant to be used for church music, but was also included in orchestral works by composers such as Mozart and Wagner. This oversized example, known technically as a contrabass serpent, is a more recent creation made around 1840.

Keeping the serpent company is a quartet of saxophones from the workshop of Adolphe Sax, the Belgian who invented them in the 1840s. Like the serpent's influence on the bass range of the

orchestra with the ultimate creation of the tuba, Sax's invention had most impact on jazz and pop. Behind these somewhat clunky originals is a sad story, however: Sax died in poverty in 1894 at the dawn of jazz.

At the other side of the gallery, a selection of plucked and bowed western instruments display a variety lost to 19th-century orchestral standardisation. An English guitar by William Gibson from 1772 sits beside an electric Fender Telecaster: the former used mainly by women to display their talents and attract an eligible husband, and the latter vice versa two centuries later.

A tiny dancing-master's fiddle from the mid-17th century, known as a pochette, was used to accompany dance lessons in preparation for the frequent balls and assemblies – essentially an early form of speed dating.

There's also a clutch of *violas d'amore*, or violas of love. As well as the name and eye-catching design, additional resonant strings create an unusual sweet and enveloping sound that would undoubtedly have been used to woo the opposite sex.

Ebony and ivory

The two upstairs galleries house countless keyboard instruments, many still frequently used in concert. Dressed in slightly unsympathetic red leather panels, the Binks gallery exhibits instruments from the famed Ruckers workshop of Antwerp, the Stradivari of the harpsichord world.

Beside these examples of perfection sit fakes and forgeries, such as the Goermans harpsichord of 1764, altered in the 1780s by the French craftsman Pascal Taskin. Taskin made the instrument appear not only a hundred years older, but to also hail from the Ruckers family. That Goermans was still making harpsichords in Paris at the time just a short walk from Taskin's workshop raises questions of his complicity.

Next door in the 1812 gallery is a clavichord made in Hamburg by Johann Adolph Hass, one of the best makers of his generation. Made in 1763 – the year St Cecilia's Hall was built – it would effectively be impossible to reproduce today with its use of tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, rosewood, kingwood and ivory.



Ye olde Gibson. University of Edinburgh

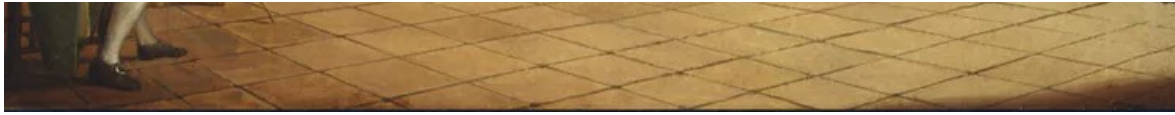
Mozart and Hass clavichord - recording K397



There is also a dinky harpsichord known as an octave spinet. Reminiscent of Schroeder's toy piano in Peanuts, it could be easily transported for use during travel, or moved around the home to accompany singing – quiet instruments such as spinets and clavichords were designed for domestic use.

It sits next to the Burkat Shudi harpsichord of 1766, an impressive instrument with two keyboards. It had a variety of stops to vary its tone, which was used before the more versatile piano became the parlour mainstay. Believed to have been owned by the Duke of Hamilton in Naples, the below painting by the Italian artist Pietro Fabris places the duke and Kenneth MacKenzie, 1st Earl of Seaforth, at a concert party with Mozart and his father Leopold.





Pietro Fabris: Kenneth Mackenzie at home in Naples.

The Hamiltons were musical, and it is noted that the Mozarts visited their home in 1770 and that Hamilton's first wife, Catherine, performed on the harpsichord for the great composer. She is likely to have played on this Shudi, which raises the possibility that Mozart himself may have passed his hands over its keys. The instrument is still playable today, so it is possible to briefly inhabit Mozart's Neapolitan soundscape on a visit to the museum.

In sum, Edinburgh boasts a thrilling collection of bygone instruments. Most museums let us passively observe history, but the musical palettes on display here are a chance to truly step back in time. It shows how organology can improve our understanding of the past from a more cultural perspective than most museum artefacts. This is not just a collection of musical instruments, it is a snapshot of who we were before.



Scotland **Peanuts** **Jazz** **Edinburgh** **Wagner** **musical instruments** **Henry VIII** **Pop** **violin**
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart