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Prisms of the musical past: British international exhibitions and ‘ancient instruments’, 1885–1890

International exhibitions were monumental sites of Victorian modernity and some of the most significant cultural phenomena of the 19th century. Beginning with the Great Exhibition of 1851, these vast events were intended to provide a snapshot of modern society, supposedly displaying in one enormous space all of its present products and achievements, both industrial and artistic. Music played an important role at many exhibitions, not only in performance for entertainment, but through displays of the newest musical instruments, inventions and technologies. While exhibitions were certainly aggressive paeans to industrial ‘progress’ and invention, they also sometimes engaged vividly with the past, contrasting museum-like displays of objects from previous eras with their exhibits of new industrial products. This historical impulse intersected with the exhibition of music at two late 19th-century British exhibitions, held in London in 1885 and Edinburgh in 1890, both of which included striking collections of ‘ancient’ musical instruments. These displays were received in a variety of ways and this reception of the musical past resonates with issues explored in early music studies today.

The exhibitions of London 1885 and Edinburgh 1890 were, of all the late 19th-century British exhibitions, two of the most explicitly intended to ‘exhibit’ the idea of modernity. London was unequivocally titled an Exhibition of ‘Inventions’, while Edinburgh was one of ‘Electrical Engineering, General Inventions and Industries’. I argue that the decision to display ‘ancient’ instruments in blatant contrast to the exhibitions’ themes of modern invention reveals a conceptual breach between past and present, where the conflicting reception of these objects demonstrated the ambivalence of the late 19th century’s relationship with the past. These historical displays, presented at a time when the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution were becoming increasingly apparent, were the subject of opposing interpretations. One reading saw these displays through a developmentalist paradigm, believing them to demonstrate progress over time to the increasingly ‘perfect’ instruments of the present on display elsewhere in the exhibitions. In opposition, a Romantic interpretation considered historical instruments to represent an idealized past, imbuing them with a heightened sense of cultural significance that was seen to be lacking in the nearby displays of new instruments. The temporal breach or disconnect articulated in the displays of instruments illuminates ‘a powerful act of dissociation’ that scholars including Frederic Jameson and Anthony Giddens have described as essentially symptomatic of modernity itself. The contrast created by these exhibits, then, regardless of the opposing interpretative poles appearing in their reception, powerfully emphasized the modernity of the exhibitions, and thus the present itself.

The study of international exhibitions, particularly in historical musicology, has largely focused on exhibitions held in France and North America. With the exception of the 1851 Great Exhibition, British exhibitions have been generally overlooked. The London and Edinburgh exhibitions particularly—and their displays of ‘ancient’ instruments—have received little scholarly attention. While Harry Haskell and Peter Holman have made inroads—principally addressing the performance of early music at London 1885—there is a significant lacuna
surrounding assessments of the display and interpretation of instruments, and no secondary sources relating to Edinburgh at all. The present article aims to fill this gap, and in examining these two exhibition collections of ‘ancient’ musical instruments presents newly uncovered iconographic sources. Following a discussion of representations of the past in the context of international exhibitions, the London and Edinburgh displays of ‘ancient’ musical instruments are interrogated, examining the reception of these exhibits from two distinct viewpoints: the progressive and the Romantic.

Both of these exhibitions used the term ‘ancient’ in addition to ‘historic’ to describe their instruments and objects. This first term, however, was loosely defined, and indeed stretched common understandings of the term. ‘Ancientness’ as a concept, and the notion of the present existing in dialogue with the past, developed over the 19th century, becoming ‘integral features of intellectual and cultural life’.

Yet antiquity was generally regarded to cover ‘classical Greece and Rome (and Egypt), ancient Britain, and the medieval or Gothic’. At London 1885, however, any instrument built before 1800 was considered for inclusion, while in Edinburgh even early 19th-century instruments were shown. Although the term ‘ancient’ had been used in musical contexts for some time—significantly by the Academy of Ancient Music in the early 18th century, and in the 1776 Concerts of Ancient Music—a ‘mystique’ developed around the word through the Romantic era as the fashion of ‘digging up the past’ grew. It was this character that was highlighted by the term ‘ancient’ at the exhibitions, and its use illuminated the temporal distance between the historical musical objects and the modern inventions of the rest of the displays.

**International exhibitions and the representation of the past**

Nineteenth-century international exhibitions, on the model of the Great Exhibition of 1851, illustrate what Paul Greenhalgh describes as ‘the modernizing drive of the Victorian hinterland’. Although, as much current scholarship considers, the Great Exhibition has multiple and contested meanings, a powerful strand of the official rhetoric—and one publicly promoted by its organizers—saw the Exhibition marking the ‘advent of modernity’, while promoting ‘peace, progress, and prosperity’. These narratives established at the Great Exhibition shaped the expectations of future organizers and audiences, with subsequent events collectively haunted by ‘the ghost of 1851’. As such, the values of progress and modernity, so central to the Great Exhibition’s official rhetoric, also became fundamental to the many exhibitions that followed.

Although largely concerned with showing the latest technological advances, in demonstrating modernity and ‘progress’ it was not unusual for exhibitions to engage with the past, and contrasting displays of historical objects appeared at many exhibitions. In each case, such displays presented a striking ‘disjunction’ between the past and ‘the epitome of modernity’ and ‘commitment to the values of progress’ that the exhibitions embodied. The Great Exhibition, for example, while not displaying historical objects, included a ‘Gothic’ court curated by A. W. N. Pugin containing replicas of medieval sculptures and ecclesiastical objects, and Gothic designs applied to newly manufactured industrial goods. John Davis describes this application of an historical aesthetic to new objects as ‘a symptom of the crisis which industrialization had caused in the world of design’. Though popular for its spectacle, many felt that design referencing the past did not fit within the Exhibition’s narrative of modernity and was dismissed as ‘backward and outdated’ and ‘antithetical to progress’. As one illustrated catalogue argued, the revival of older styles was ‘a mistake’ as the ‘pious but often mistaken act of laborious decorations’ in the medieval period was ‘lifeless, tame—not to say absurd—when copied in a more enlightened age’.

At themed exhibitions in London in the 1880s, small historical displays were sometimes present, including ‘Her Majesty’s state barge … in Renaissance style … built in the time of James I, and re-venerated by George II’ at the 1883 Fisheries Exhibition, and at the 1884 Health Exhibition a display of the typical dress of ‘the upper and lower classes at every change of fashion from the time of William the Conqueror to the present day’. Annual London exhibitions from 1883 to 1886 also contained a rather incongruous life-size replica of Cheapside prior to the Great Fire—known as ‘Old London’—in which it was
hoped visitors might gauge ‘progress’ in methods of building construction. A similar installation of ‘Old Edinburgh’ was erected at the Edinburgh Exhibition of 1886 (1890’s precursor). These reconstructed cities—intended largely for entertainment rather than education—as Wilson Smith writes, ‘surrounded by the exhibition’s displays of modernity, of advanced technology, industrial innovation and new consumer products … looked backwards to a popular but authentic imagining of the host city’s history.’

Many of these kinds of displays were both intended and received—in contrasting the old with the new—to emphasize the newness of the new.

This was also true at exhibitions outside of Britain, particularly the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889. Intended to commemorate the centenary of the French Revolution, the Exposition contained many retrospective exhibits in addition to the usual displays of ‘industrial progress’. These included an exhibition of historical French paintings, a display depicting the ‘History of Human Habitation’, and a collection of historical musical instruments. The instruments were shown in a room dedicated to the Histoire du Travail (‘History of Work/Labour’), with reconstructions and reproductions filling chronological gaps in the represented objects. Newly made instruments of older design were included, such as a harpsichord by Érard built in response to the ‘current enthusiasm for all that touches on things from times past’.

The concept of ‘historical retrospection’ was here used, as Annegret Fauser notes, ‘both to celebrate and commemorate past achievements, and to validate new technical and artistic developments’.

Although no international exhibition in Britain had displayed historical musical instruments prior to 1885, in 1872 the South Kensington Museum—the first permanent museum in the area, holding collections acquired from the Great Exhibition—held a Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments containing over 500 objects. Curated by noted musicologist and collector Carl Engel (1818–82), this exhibition coincided with the 1872 London International Exhibition but was not technically associated with it. However, as the Monthly Musical Record explained, a visitor to the International Exhibition, ‘after having acquainted himself … with the most recent improvements in the manufacture of musical instruments … [could] cross the road to find himself face to face with the past’ at the Special Exhibition. Press reports describe the appeal of the Special Exhibition as residing in the status of the instruments as relics of another era. The Daily News romantically described the ‘well-worn and antiquated objects which in their day afforded delight and solace to many a heart; whose keys or strings were touched by fingers that long ago “for ever grew still”’ (quoting Byron’s The Destruction of Sennacherib). While the concurrent running of the 1872 International Exhibition and the Special Exhibition inadvertently contrasted new musical instruments with old, at London 1885 and Edinburgh 1890, such a display choice was entirely deliberate.

London and Edinburgh: modern exhibitions, ancient instruments

The 1885 London International Exhibition of Inventions was the third in a series of annual themed exhibitions held in South Kensington, in the educational complex between Hyde Park and the Natural History Museum (a space that encompassed the Royal Horticultural Society gardens and the Royal Albert Hall). Such exhibitions attempted to present a single concept in depth, with the ‘Inventions’ following the 1883 ‘Fisheries’, 1884 ‘Health’, and preceding the 1886 ‘Indian and Colonial’ Exhibitions. In line with the ‘Inventions’ theme, the music division at 1885 adopted a narrative of progress, showing newly built instruments, new musical inventions and improvements, mechanical instruments, and smaller novelties such as ‘musical dominoes’, a walking-stick music desk, and a convertible violin case–life preserver thought to be ‘useful in case of shipwreck’.

There was also a separate division for music engraving and printing as well as paintings on musical themes. The Executive Committee in charge of music included John Stainer (1840–1901), Alexander Ellis (1814–90), and Alfred Hipkins (1826–1903), and its chair was George Grove (1820–1900), whose initial career as a civil engineer perhaps made him the perfect candidate for steering an exhibition at the intersection of music and industry. Musical performances were also provided for entertainment (considered a popular drawcard, rather than within the educational scope of the exhibition) by military bands, a season by Eduard Strauss's
Orchestra, and regular concerts by the Court Band of the King of Siam.

The Edinburgh Exhibition of 1890 placed similar emphasis on modernity, being staged to commemorate the completion of the Forth Bridge, 'the greatest engineering work in the world'. An exhibition 'illustrative of the present state of engineering and of the mechanical arts' was considered an appropriate form of commemoration, and the exhibition's credentials for 'progress' and 'invention' were strengthened by the presence of Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931) and John Fowler (1817–98, the Bridge's engineer) on the Executive Committee.

Electrical engineering—regarded as one of the most important signifiers of modernity—was Edinburgh's main focus, although general inventions and fine arts were also included, and, like London but on a smaller scale, new musical instruments and technologies were exhibited competitively. Press and official publications relating to the Exhibition referenced London 1885 as an explicit model, and many of the exhibits, including phonographs and telephones, came directly from the Paris Exposition Universelle of the previous year, which also featured electricity. Held in parkland in Meggatland outside Edinburgh city centre and bordered by two railway lines, the Union Canal and two tramways, the vast exhibition space held many opportunities for music-making for entertainment purposes, from bands in the grounds to a dedicated concert hall; however, many letters to the press complained that no musicians were involved in any organizing committee.

Both of these exhibitions, in contrast to their striking displays of 'inventions', had distinct historical departments exclusively related to music. At London 1885, a 'Loan Collection' lent by various institutions and individuals displayed 'ancient' musical instruments, manuscripts and related objects, filling the circular gallery at the top of the Albert Hall (illus.1). This display included three

1 John Dinsdale, 'Old Musical Instruments in Gallery of Albert Hall', Sketches at the Inventories (London: Jordison & Co., 1885)
‘period rooms’—demonstrating Tudor England, 18th-century England, and another in the style of Louis XVI—where instruments were presented among contemporary furniture and decorations, and a fourth ‘Oriental’ room showing non-Western instruments. At Edinburgh, following the successful examples of ‘ancient’ instrument exhibitions in London in 1872 and 1885, and Paris in 1889 (from which Edinburgh took many of its cues), the Exhibition’s own collection of ‘ancient’ instruments was held in a prominent position in a large room near the building’s entrance. Curated by Robert A. Marr (1850–1905, secretary to the Scottish Music Society and a respected local authority) and compiled from private and institutional collections, this display was divided into three sections: instruments, scores and manuscripts, and pictures. Whereas in London non-Western instruments had been shown in a separate ‘Oriental’ room, in Edinburgh these were scattered throughout. At both the London and Edinburgh exhibitions, the physical separation of the ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ musical displays emphasized the contrast between past and present, demonstrating an aesthetic and ideological distinction between technical innovation, and the culturally and artistically loaded history of music.

While most instruments at both exhibitions came from private collections, several important collections came from European musical institutions. In London, a notable display from the Brussels Conservatoire and its curator Victor Mahillon (1841–1924) was so vast that The Times suggested that any account ‘would alone require more space than we can devote to the entire exhibition’. Yet instruments from British institutions were limited, apart from a large collection of non-Western instruments from the Royal College of Music, and a 1726 clavichord sent by the Museum and Public Library of Maidstone, allegedly used by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) while ‘composing on journeys’. From private collections came stringed, keyboard, brass and wind instruments, grouped by type and maker, rather than historical period, with examples from Stradivarius and Amati (including the famous ‘Hellier Strad’), and the English, Venetian, Dutch and German Schools of makers. The date-range of the exhibits was also large, with manuscripts and autographs of important 19th-century composers displayed alongside supposedly prehistoric instruments.

Edinburgh’s collection—largely strings, keyboard and wind instruments—was smaller by contrast, with the majority of objects coming either from private collections or the University of Edinburgh. Instruments included a 1780 spinet by Christian Shean, a ‘theorbo lute’ by Home and Sons, and a cello by Barak Norman (1651–1724), ‘the oldest maker of violoncellos in Great Britain’. Yet there were few ‘big names’ beyond a 1736 violin by Gennaro [Januarius] Gagliano (fl. c.1740–1780) ‘alumnus Antonii Stradivarii’, a 1759 Neapolitan mandoline by Antonius Vinaccia (fl. c.1756–1784), a 1684 viola da gamba by London maker John Betts (1755–1823) and another of 1696 by Joachim Tielke (1641–1719) of Hamburg. Scottish exhibits drew particular attention with spinets by Edinburgh makers and a variety of ‘highland’ and ‘union’ bagpipes, including a 1781 set of highland pipes supposed played at Waterloo. Experimental and ‘curious’ early instruments were also prominent, including ‘singular’ examples of ‘cithers with keyboards’, and an ‘extinct species’ of lute of which the Musical World noted ‘the banjo is a fashionable but degenerate modern representative’.

Both exhibitions contained extensive collections of manuscripts and printed scores. These were lent, in London, by many university libraries and colleges including the Bodleian Library in Oxford and St John’s College, Cambridge, and ecclesiastics including the Archbishop of Canterbury. In Edinburgh, again, most came from the university. At London 1885 many copies of Masses and hymns were displayed, including works by John Taverner (1490–1545) and Thomas Ashwell (c.1478–after 1513), a 1457 Mainz Psalter lent by Lord Spencer, and several Handel scores from royal collections. The library of the monastery of St Gall sent what was believed to be the earliest musical manuscript in existence, the ‘Antiphonarium S. Gregorii’ (although The Times noted it was ‘in reality a graduale’), while elsewhere the 1473 folio ‘Collectorium super Magnificat’, thought to be the earliest printed music, was displayed. English music was represented, including the unique manuscript of the 13th-century secular song ‘Sumer is icumen in’, and Ranulf Higden’s Polychronicon, Englyshed by Syr John de Trevyse of 1495, which apparently contained ‘the
first example of music printed in this country', proving, as The Times argued, that 'England in the 15th century was an eminently musical country'.

Edinburgh's score collection was also extensive, although many items appear to have been printed editions, rather than manuscripts. For example, Mozart's 'Verzeichnüss aller meiner Werke' was exhibited, but in an 1805 edition by André. The Official Catalogue gives little detail of the musical contents of the earliest manuscripts on display, describing an 'Antiphonarium' of 'Ancient Church Music with words' lent by the University of Edinburgh entirely by its bindings and physical properties, without date or musical information. Particular Scottish interests were also represented in the display of both the Straloch and Skene Manuscripts, yet most attention was focused on the 'Dublin' copy of Handel's Messiah by J. C. Smith with many additions in Handel's hand, and Thomas Tallis's 'Song in Forty Parts' of 1575 in a copy with English words 'in praise of Charles I., and probably written about 1630'.

Both the London and Edinburgh Loan Collections were primarily considered educational and not, like the modern instruments in the exhibitions, to be assessed in terms of commercial value, practical functionality or modern aesthetic considerations. As The Times reported of the London display, it was a place in which the music student could 'examine the rarest treasures', while in Edinburgh the Musical World argued that 'no institution whose curriculum includes the art of music can be considered complete' without the 'object lessons' provided by the Exhibition. Yet these exhibits also embodied meaning beyond the educational, and an examination of their reception shows two conflicting narratives emerge—one progressivist, one Romantic—demonstrating what Elaine Kelly describes as the most significant but 'diametrically opposed philosophies' present in late 19th-century conceptions of the past.

A progressivist outlook, underscored by increasing awareness of Darwinian evolutionary theories, considered studies of the past to demonstrate 'progress over time', where the importance of history lay in its capacity to help understand the present. This progressive perspective was philosophically aligned with Hegel, who considered that society repeatedly 'manifested itself in increasingly perfect forms'. Thus, the art of the past could be appreciated, but should be understood as less developed, and necessitated adaptation 'to cater to the cultural requirements of a modern audience'. Promoting this particular interpretation seems to have been the overarching aim of most exhibitions' engagement with and display of the 'past'. Yet, a contrasting interpretative narrative also emerged, with proponents of the Romantic school appreciating the past for its own sake. In a century filled with war and bloody revolutions, and a society supposedly left increasingly materialist and morally degenerate by the Industrial Revolution, the distant past could represent a 'mythical golden age'. This frustration or despair at the present was typified in the work of the European Romantic circle of poets, including August Wilhelm Schlegel, whose assertions that 'Our future must be founded on the past! I shall not support the stifling present, I shall bind myself to you, eternal artists', epitomized such a view. In Britain, similar ideas were expounded by figures and movements such as John Ruskin and the Gothic Revival, the Oxford Movement, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood which were all, 'at heart, nostalgic escapes from a disagreeable present to an agreeable but imaginary past'. At the exhibitions, the 'ancient' instruments represented such an idealized past, full of meaning seen to be lacking in the displays of new and industrialized instruments in the exhibition proper.

**From 'ancient' to 'modern': exhibitions and the discourse of progressivism**

Perhaps the most straightforward interpretation of the displays of 'ancient' instruments, appropriate to the international exhibition ethos, was an evolutionary narrative illustrating the 'progress' of musical history. Although the museum-like showcases at both exhibitions were not chronologically arranged—grouped instead by type, maker or country rather than year—the mixture of 'beautiful' instruments 'of all ages and countries' was nonetheless considered explicitly diachronic, demonstrating 'the gradual development of art manufacture'. The displays were thus taken by some to demonstrate a 'Darwinian evolution of musical forms and techniques'—particularly in comparison to the modern instruments shown in the exhibitions' industrial divisions. Such a contrast would have been even
more pronounced when considered in the context of the exhibitions’ overall emphasis on ‘progress’.

As The Times said of the London exhibition, the ‘development of the art’ of music itself could be gauged in ‘its visible means of expression’ (that is, the instruments) through such a survey ‘from its early beginnings to the present day’.50 Similarly, the Art Journal noted the importance of the juxtaposition of a ‘collection of the latest developments in the manufacture of musical instruments’ as in the exhibition proper, with those that could ‘serve to illustrate its progressive history’.51 The manuscripts, too, were described as illustrating ‘almost the entire history of music from the early Middle Ages to the present time’.52 Thus, these displays were interpreted as progressive, showing an evolution of music, in terms of the art, instrumental manufacture and reproduction, leading directly to the modern instruments and music on display in the larger exhibitions.

One of the clearest indications of this developmentalist narrative was the inclusion of non-Western instruments in the ‘ancient’ displays.53 The London ‘Oriental’ room—alongside the other ‘period’ rooms—held many Indian instruments from the Brussels Conservatoire and Royal College of Music collections, and other non-Western instruments from British royal collections.54 Many of these, however, were labelled vaguely in the Catalogue as simply ‘percussion instruments’, ‘cymbals’ or ‘tom-toms’, without information about which musical culture they supposedly represented.55 Other instruments were presented to perpetuate violent stereotypes or demonstrate imperial power, including, for example, a drum ‘perforated by musket shots’ with ‘two human jaws attached’, emphasizing an apparent conflict (in which the British were presumably the victors) and the stereotype of the ‘savage’ making decorative use of human bone.56 In Edinburgh, non-Western instruments were scattered throughout the ‘ancient’ display, mostly lent by the University of Edinburgh, including a variety of Chinese drums, cymbals, ‘fiddles’, ‘flutes’ and ‘moon guitars’, a Burmese gong, Indian ‘tom-toms’ and sitars, and Japanese koto and flutes.57

The display of these instruments—many of which were recently built and still in contemporary use—alongside ‘ancient’ Western instruments, implied that they belonged within a linear, universal music history. Such developmentalist racism, both in curatorial approach and reception, aligned with a contemporary theoretical movement from a polygenic understanding of human populations, to one of monogenism, seeking ‘universal traits’ in human activity and productions, and implying that variation came from a culture’s relative ‘progress’ along such a linear developmental timeline.58 Displaying even modern non-Western instruments as equivalent to ‘ancient’ Western ones physically manifested a narrative common to many contemporary music histories. As Bennett Zon has demonstrated, many 19th-century texts developed ‘evolutionary paradigms’ into ‘concepts of universalism’, so that William Stafford’s 1830 A History of Music, for example, could easily group in one chapter ‘the music of the ancients and non-Western nations’, or John Frederick Rowbotham’s 1885 History of Music could situate ‘primitive music within the chronological context of ancient’.59 Thus, Indian instruments at London 1885 were described as the ‘ancestors’ of modern Western instruments,60 or at Edinburgh 1890 as the ‘obvious precursors of the products of western civilization’ where the ‘curious Chinese trumpet, or “La-pa, ” with sliding tube’ became the trombone, and the modern organ had ‘its prototype’ in the Chinese Sheng.61 The Musical World described the clear developmental lineage in the Edinburgh collection overall, ‘from the primitive tam-tam of the African savage … to the highly-developed violin made at Naples in 1736’.62 Placing the non-Western instruments at an extreme end of a developmental lineage, beyond, in some cases, even the Western ‘ancient’ instruments, further emphasized the line from ‘ancient’ to modern, and the overarching ‘progress’ of the exhibition and musical displays in all.

Making ‘noiseless things eloquent’: Romanticism in the reception of ‘ancient’ instruments

In contrast to the progressive narrative described above, others championed the ‘revival of the art of the distant past’ as a means of ‘breaking free from more recent tradition’.63 The dramatic social and cultural shifts of the 1880s and 1890s were ‘above all due to the massive advance of technology and industrialization’ of the second Industrial Revolution and, as Claus Uhlig argues, in the face of such seismic change, people commonly ‘look to history for redress of … grievances or in search of orientation’.64
This perspective was reflected in much of the 19th century’s Romantic and revivalist culture across a variety of art forms, prompted not only by ‘nostalgia for a golden age’ but ‘repulsion by their own modern times’. As such, the instruments on display at the London and Edinburgh exhibitions were both ‘evocative emblem[s] of a vanished past’ and relics of a distant and idyllic period holding greater cultural and artistic significance than the productions of modern industry. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that at exhibitions explicitly emphasizing and extolling technological ‘progress’—the very things rejected by this movement—that many writers and musicians would be drawn to the exhibits that represented the past, and that they interpreted them with a sense of nostalgia.

A particularly striking example of such an interpretation appears in Hermann Smith’s 1885 review of the London display. Rather than describing any sort of progressive narrative through the exhibit, Smith concentrates on individual objects, imagining their human history, and suggesting that their makers were capable of ‘speak[ing] to us in their works’. As Smith continued,

My eyes fall upon an instrument handled by common clay. A neglected thing of no account, battered, and broken, and black with age; a silent hurdy-gurdy, no voice, song, or sound in it these hundred years or more. Whose was it? Why was it kept? The hard brown hand that turned it, the shrivelled bony fingers that wearily earned a living for the player, gone to dust, along with Caesar’s; and this time-charred relic remains, the last testament of some one of the common folk without a name, and without a history. Forlorn as it is, someone has cherished it, and found some pathos in its remembered music, or may be—such virtue is in human touch—it has been prized for memory of another who held it dear.

A perceived contrast between an idealized, Romanticized past and the apparently unfeeling and materialistic 19th century was also highlighted in this description, as Smith asks explicitly, ‘to how many lives has it not been a joy-bringer. It lies here dumb and despised. What has the nineteenth century to do with it?’

Similar sentiments were expressed by a Musical World critic, who thanked time—‘the destroyer’—for sparing so many ‘things so fragile’ while ‘works of stone and brass have fallen to pieces and crumbled into dust’. Unable to hear the instruments, the critic stated that ‘one might in fancy call back from the land of shadows the very artists who once made these noiseless things eloquent, who made them the mediums for expressing the thoughts, feelings, and passions which agitated their restless, frail humanity’. This review concludes by quoting John Keats’s Ode on a Grecian Urn, ‘heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter’.

While Smith and the Musical World critic were enthralled by the evocation of anonymous players from a Romanticized past, for many others the most important instruments were those that evoked known, historical figures. These could be imaginary associations; as George Bernard Shaw described, in the ‘ancient’ display one might ‘fancy himself in the very room in which Shakespear [sic] read his sonnets to the dark lady’, and watched her fingers walk with gentle gait over the blessed wood of the virginals, whilst the saucy jacks leapt to kiss the tender inward of her hand. More importantly, however, instruments owned by famous musicians were displayed at both exhibitions, including pianos once played by Chopin, as well as smaller novelties in London including a cup and saucer owned by Clementi, a watch owned by Beethoven and a piece of his hair, a copy of Handel’s will and a ‘lace ruffle’ he wore, and a music desk decorated by Mendelssohn along with a cast of his hand. Such associations were considered important regardless of how tenuous such links might have been, with a violin noted for having been ‘made by the same maker as [Carlo Alfredo] Piatti’s cello’, and a cello because it was by ‘an English maker who claimed to have possessed the receipt [recipe?] for preparing the Cremona varnish’. The idea of an object becoming significant by association with its owner was not new; such veneration had prompted Liszt, for example, to acquire both a fortepiano owned by Beethoven and a harpsichord apparently owned by Mozart.

The London collection also contained many instruments once owned by European royalty, including a cello used by George IV (1762–1830), a Shudi & Broadwood harpsichord once owned by Empress Maria Theresa (1717–80), and a Clavecin Brisé or folding harpsichord ‘said to have belonged to Frederick the Great’ (1712–86). The most prominent
instruments in this respect were a lute and a virginal believed to have been owned by Elizabeth I, despite contemporary reports doubting the provenance of both. The lute was believed to have been left at Helmingham Hall in Suffolk in 1584 ‘to commemorate Her Majesty having stood sponsor’ to the infant Sir Lyonel Tollemache. The Musical Times called this ‘a very pretty story … unsupported by evidence’, they found the instrument interesting in itself as the work of luthier John Rose. The Art Journal (which illustrated the instrument; illus.2) thought the importance lay less in the ‘plausibility’ of the story than in ‘the preservation of this lute in the Tollemache family, and the tradition that has been treasured for centuries’. The virginal—described by Edmond Johnson as ‘the most famous antique keyboard of the time’—was exhibited in one of the ‘historic rooms’ (discussed below). Yet, despite the attention this instrument drew, Johnson notes that its ‘connection with the famous virgin queen appears to have been almost entirely speculative’. The ‘potency of the myth, however, was enough to give this exhibit an important place in both the Exhibition display and the public imagination. This was evidently the case with all of the instruments displayed as musical relics of historical figures—the Romantic notion of their associations were far more important than the reliability of their asserted provenance.

Elizabeth’s virginal appeared in one of three ‘Historic Rooms’ at London 1885—spaces that were an example of the ‘period rooms’ popular in late 19th-century museums with interiors reconstructed in a manner supposedly representative of a particular period or region. Instead of the common practice of grouping objects by their material, these spaces emphasized the cultural history and use of the objects by exhibiting them in context. The London Exhibition’s three ‘historic’ rooms—decorated by George Donaldson (1845–1925, the noted art and furniture dealer and collector)—contained instruments, furniture, paintings and tapestries, arranged ‘in illustration of the surroundings in which consecutive generations of our ancestors worshipped at the shrine of music’. The 18th-century room (illus.3) contained many stringed and woodwind instruments, an English spinet by John Hitchcock and a ‘quartet music desk’. The room was arranged, as the Art Journal stated, to encourage viewers to imagine ‘the conclusion of a small music party’, where ‘the chairs round it hastily pushed aside, having on them, or nearby, the instruments which have just been used’. The 16th-century room was distinguished for displaying Queen Elizabeth’s virginal, as well as a number of Italian lutes and harps (illus.4). The Louis XVI Salon contained a Dutch harpsichord ‘painted with scenes from the period of Louis XIV’ and ‘said to have belonged to Marie Antoinette’, as well as lutes, harps and guitars (illus.5).

These rooms encouraged the use of imagination, placing the instruments into physical, yet unreal space: a Romanticized, idealized context. A report in the Musical World reinforced this interpretation by describing how by placing a set of instruments in association with furniture of the same epoch the character of the music practised might even be partially divined. The old desk suggests the spinet, as the lute conjures up the high-backed chair upon
which the performer rests, and one step more brings us, as it were, within sound of the subdued strains.85

In all, the period rooms were perhaps the most marked manifestation of a Romanticizing impulse in the display of ‘ancient’ instruments at these exhibitions. Rather than displaying the instruments in the more clinical museum display case—where ‘progress’ could be gauged by quick comparison with nearby objects, all stripped of context—the period rooms were ‘at once empathetic, aesthetic, spiritual, and sensual; as their ‘human scale’ promoted a closer connection to the objects they held.86 Seeing the instruments, even though they remained silent, in a context that evoked their human usage, prompted a particular sense of nostalgia in the viewer for times now past.

3 'The English Eighteenth-Century Music Room', in 'Music at the Inventions Exhibition, 1885', *Art Journal* (August, 1885), p.231. The instruments depicted here are an 18th-century English oboe by Milhouse, Newark (on the quartet music stand, left), a 1723 viola d’amore by Johannes Blasius Weigert in Linz (face down on chair, centre), a 1610 Venetian chitarrone by Michael Atton (far corner, right) and a spinet by John Hitchcock (serial no.1630, right). (© British Library Board, shelfmark 1733.459000)
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Fundamentally, international exhibitions were intended to display the accumulated technological and artistic achievements of their era, at a time known ‘for its rejection of the past and self-conscious embrace of a newly-defined modernity’. Given that exhibitions were supposed to be at the vanguard of modernity, it may seem strange that they might also become such potent sites of representation for early musical objects. Yet the conceptual meeting and disjuncture between old and new was not an uncommon phenomenon at exhibitions in the late 19th century, and can illuminate some important aspects of that period’s relationship with the past, including the musical past. Giddens argues that ‘inherent in the idea of modernity is a contrast with tradition’. At both the London and Edinburgh Exhibitions, this idea was clearly demonstrated by the blatant contrast between the ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ musical objects at the exhibitions. The varied and ambivalent interpretations of the old objects examined in this article only strengthened their contrast. Jameson, too, explains how
regardless of interpretation (in the case of these exhibits, either a developmentalist or Romantic perspective) ‘the felt inferiority or superiority of present over past may be less important than the establishment of an identification between two historical moments’. The reception of the two exhibitions of ‘ancient’ instruments discussed here is simply another facet of this ongoing negotiation of multiple meanings presented by the explicit exploration of this disjunction between old and new, the ancient and modern.

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18. The exhibition also included a series of concerts of early music which engendered a fascinating reception, beyond the scope of this article. Holman describes the reception of gamba player Édouard Jacobs (1851–1925) who appeared with an ensemble from the Brussels Conservatoire at these concerts. See Holman, *Life after death*, pp.327–9.


21. ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.

22. ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.

23. ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.

24. ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.

25. ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.

26. ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.

27. ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.
35 ‘Historical Music at the Inventions Exhibition’, *Daily News*, 1 June 1885.
38 Official Catalogue, p.164.
39 Official Catalogue, p.163.
40 Official Catalogue, p.165. This was presumably the adaptation sung at the investiture ceremonies of Henry as Prince of Wales in 1610 and his brother Charles in 1616. It had been previously proposed that this version was sung at Charles I’s coronation. See I. Woodfield, “Music of Forty Several Parts”: a song for the creation of princes, *Performance Practice Review*, vii (1994), pp.54–64.
47 Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, p.171.
49 Haskell describes a similar paradox being reinforced by historical survey concerts of this period in *The early music revival*, p.21.
50 ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 1 June 1885.
52 ‘The Musical Loan Collection at South Kensington’, *The Times*, 25 July 1885.
53 The non-Western engagement of international exhibitions, whether in general terms or specifically in relation to music (in both the display of objects and performance) is a vast area of ongoing research, raising a range of epistemological questions far beyond the scope of this article. For further information see, among others, Hoffenberg, *An empire on display*; Z. Çelik and L. Kinney, ‘Ethnography and exhibitionism at the Expositions Universelles’, *Assemblage*, xiii (1990), pp.34–59; and Fauser’s discussion in *Musical encounters*, pp.139–251.
54 Interestingly, both these collections were donated to each institution by Bengali musicologist Sourindro Mohun Tagore (1840–1914). For more on Tagore, including his donations, see C. Capwell, ‘Marginality and musicology in nineteenth-century Calcutta: the case of Sourindro Mohun Tagore’, in *Comparative musicology and anthropology of music: essays on the history of ethnomusicology*, ed. B. Nettl and P. V. Bohman (Chicago, 1991), pp.228–43.
56 Hipkins, *Catalogue of the Loan Exhibition*, p.117.
60 ‘Music and Inventions’, *Monthly Musical Record*, xv/176 (1 August 1885), pp.169–70.
69 [George Bernard Shaw, unsigned], ‘Historical Instruments’, *Dramatic Review*, 10 September 1885.
73 Hipkins, *Catalogue of the Loan Collection*, pp.33–4. This instrument

74 'The Historic Loan Collection (Concluded)', *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, xxvi/511 (1 September 1885), pp.517–19.
75 'Music at the Inventions Exhibition, 1885', *Art Journal* (October 1885), p.308.
78 This instrument is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. See 'The Queen Elizabeth virginal', http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70511/the-queen-elizabeth-virginal-spinet-baffo-giovanni-antonio/.
88 Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, p.36.