

Sensational discovery of Renaissance instruments in Freiberg Cathedral

For the first time, a complete set of musical instruments dating from around 1600 has been scientifically examined and exact copies produced giving a unique insight into how such instruments were constructed and what they sounded like at that time. This exceptional cache of renaissance instruments had been used to decorate a crypt in Freiberg Cathedral. The instruments were previously discovered in the early 1950s, but no research was carried out on them, mainly because playing old music on original instruments had not yet become popular. Also, removing them from their original site at that time would have been financially impossible, as Freiberg is in Saxony, part of the former German Democratic Republic.



"Angelic music" in the Cathedral.

Whether or not the Italian Architect Giovanni Maria Nosseni was familiar with Martin Luther's exclamation "Angelic music from Freiberg Cathedral" is uncertain. However, in planning the crypt for the House of Wettin in Freiberg Cathedral he might well have been inspired by it. Thirtz golden angels stand on a ledge about 40 feet above the floor and all hold musical instruments in their hands. Twenty-one of the instruments are not models, but genuine, and probably all originate from the same school of instrument makers in Saxony, which makes this discovery a real sensation! The fact that the instruments have survived so long is a wonder in itself.

Recently, a thorough renovation of the crypt made it possible to remove the instruments from the hands of the angels and have them thoroughly examined in an interdisciplinary research project at the University of Leipzig. Music specialists and instrument makers, together with scientists such



Freiberg Cathedral - main door.

as radiologists and acoustics experts, participated in the project which was co-ordinated by Veit Heller from the University's Museum of Musical Instruments. The aim of the project was to build 1:1 working replicas of the original instruments, thus realising Heller's dream of recreating long-lost instruments such as the renaissance cornetto and reviving forgotten sounds and compositions.

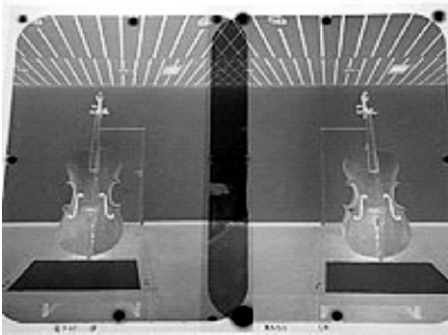
The research involved the use of endoscopic examinations, x-rays and taking samples which revealed the fine craftsmanship of the instruments and identified which of the instruments were genuine. Close study of a harp, for instance, immediately showed it to be expertly and carefully made, a finding which led Veit Heller to believe that from the start it was intended that the instrument should be played and that it was not a fake.



Project co-ordinator Veit Heller examines a lute.

All of the instruments were made in workshops in the Erzgebirge region, most of them by Georg Klemm zu Randeck whose signature can be found on five of them. The harp, along with a small violin, four lutes, three shawms (wind instruments) and various other instruments were gilded and placed in the hands of golden angels between 1585 and 1594 when the choir of the Cathedral was turned into a crypt for the House of Wettin. Diagnostic radiologists from Leipzig University, scientists from the Dortmund spectrochemical department and wood biologists from Hamburg University were invited to contribute their expertise during the refurbishment work.

In order to return the instruments to Freiberg Cathedral undamaged, Heller and his colleagues developed a system of "examining without touching" and now have highly detailed photographs of the interior of the violins or the lutes which reveal the most minimal of traces left by the instrument-makers' tools. These photographs show, for example, how the interior of a cover was formed. In addition to the signatures of various instrument makers, the scientists discovered traces which prove that they were actually played before becoming part of the crypt.



Stereo photographs enable the scientists to take exact measurements not only of the dimensions, but also the degree to which, an instrument's form has changed through time.

Music-lovers were able to see and hear the copies of the instruments being played for the first time at the Michaelstein Monastery in the State of Sachsen-Anhalt. The instruments will also form part of the State Exhibition at Castle Hartfels in Saxony.



Both the form of the instrument and the bow are completely different from their modern counterparts.



Golden angel with violin.

This work has encouraged experts to investigate such varied questions as the import of wood from the Alps for instrument making and the import of Italian instruments to the Court at Dresden. Further analysis of the remains of metal strings which were found on some of the instruments may enable a set of them to be reproduced. Different types of lacquer which were used have been examined and even dust, fine wood shavings and particles of lacquer, which could so easily have been lost, have all been carefully stored away for future scientific research. No other European school of musical instrument production has been so thoroughly examined and previously held ideas on how music around 1600 sounded may need to be redefined as a result of the project's conclusions.

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Jeanne Robertson is a native of Haddington and kindly translated and compiled the information and photographs, previously published in Germany, which form this article. A baroque music enthusiast, Jeanne is a teacher and has lived in the vicinity of Heidelberg for many years.



Angels with bass viol and "cister" (a kind of lute).