

Provenance Research on Stringed Instruments

Provenance research on stringed instruments faces even greater challenges than that on works of art: The individual objects are far more difficult to identify; as utilitarian objects, they are much more frequently altered; and because a violin does not hang on the wall or lie in a safe like a painting, but rather in the player's arm, there is also a particularly intimate relationship with it.

In view of the current Swiss and international debates on looted and fugitive property in the Zurich Bührlé Collection, it has become apparent that the corresponding discourse has hardly been taken up yet in the case of musical instruments. Provenance research in relation to looted musical instruments is just as little systematised as in other fields. Researchers are confronted with numerous obstacles, not least because basic research, such as the opening and indexing of relevant archives, is still a desideratum in many places. Moreover, this special field of research requires multidisciplinary expertise.

In order to get previously taboo or simply forgotten discussions moving, the Violin Making School Brienzen, together with the University of Bern and the Bern Academy of the Arts (HKB), have now taken the initiative and invited participants to a [conference](#) in Brienzen at the beginning of April. A profitable reappraisal can only be achieved with an interdisciplinary approach. For this purpose, experts from the fields of provenance research, history and jurisprudence, violin making and instrument trade, art market and musicology as well as restoration and art technology were brought together.

First, the historical background was outlined from the three perspectives of the victims, the perpetrators and the objects: Sophie Fetthauer (Hamburg) presented the challenges of the Lexikon verfolgter jüdischen Musikerinnen und Musiker der NS-Zeit ([LexM](#)) (Dictionary of Persecuted Jewish Musicians of the National Socialist Era) with its often aborted biographies, especially with regard to the independent scene and geographically still little explored areas in Europe's east, which have again become

sadly topical today. Michael Custodis (Münster) described the Sonderstab Musik at the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg as the actual agency of the theft of cultural assets, reacting to orders by museums, orchestras, and scientists, mostly as a secret matter: a cartel of silence that can also be observed in other areas. Carla Shapreau (Berkeley) used numerous examples to show the mechanics of this mass theft against Jewish (and Sinti) people.

Robert Brewer Young (London), a violin dealer, showed how important it would be to open business books and make private archives accessible with regard to the violin trade, using the business relations of the Hill Company as an example. Jason Price from the Tarisio auction house (New York) shed light on the transatlantic violin trade during the Second World War and referred to the example of the [Cozio Archive](#). Jean-Philippe Echard (Paris) presented the efforts of the Musée de la Musique in Paris against the concealment of history and revealed how cryptography also made it possible to find out prices recorded in secret writing. The violin maker Mark Wilhelm (Suhr) used case studies from the „violin war“ to illustrate the dimension of Switzerland as a central marketplace that did not shy away from fraud, forgery and receiving stolen goods in criminal cases.

Heike Fricke (Leipzig) reconstructed the wartime losses of the Berlin collection of musical instruments with a detective's flair, while Philipp Hosbach (Leipzig) used the example of the Kaiser-Reka collection to illustrate the problems beyond classical musical instruments. Josef Focht (Leipzig) presented [musiXplora](#) to show what the digital humanities can achieve in merging and identifying holdings, also for neighbouring disciplines, when they incorporate methods of criminology such as dragnet searches. The violin maker and restorer Balthazar Soulier (Bern/Paris) took up the ball with forensic materiality research and demonstrated how the covering of traces and label fraud is often taken literally, but can be uncovered thanks to an examination of varnishes, labels, stamps, and other circumstantial evidence. He advocated that dealers and violin makers should mark their work on the

instrument itself in order to be able to clearly identify it later. Michael Baumgartner (Basel) once again proved to be an expert on identifications, misattributions, forgeries and fraud.

The conference was rounded off by the historian Pascale Bernheim (Paris) with a presentation of the activities of the [Association Musique et Spoliations](#), which she co-founded, and the jurist Sandra Sykora (Zurich), who soberly pointed out the limits of legal reappraisal and restitution and had to appeal to inner attitudes and business ethics, at least for Germany and Switzerland.

The lectures were complemented by four roundtable discussions and a solo recital by violinist Tiffany Tan (HKB), who presented pieces by composers who were ostracised, banned, deported, driven underground or into flight: Erwin Schulhoff, Stefan Wolpe, Grazyna Bacewicz, Paul Hindemith, played together with dance movements by Johann Sebastian Bach as the epitome of German culture.

Following the Brienzen conference, a complementary symposium was held in Paris: [The spoliation of musical instruments in Europe. 1933–1945](#).

The event, which was characterised by great mutual trust and was very well attended by the various stakeholders (only the musicians themselves did not come), showed exemplary ways of proceeding in this complex field: Build new networks, dare to ask others, find out more collections and make them available. Precisely because the holdings of museums and dealers are complementary to each other, cooperation between private individuals and institutions is needed, whereby conflicts of interest must also be addressed. It is also important to develop a certain lightness in order to reach people: to communicate in a lively way, to tell stories, as the press had already partly taken up.

There are already plans to expand the working group on provenance research to include a working group on musical instruments. A Bernese research project on Switzerland is also planned.

THOMAS GARTMANN

Head of Research, Bern University of Applied Science



Newsletter

May 2022 – N°13

Published by the Advisory Commission



Network of European
Restitution Committees
on Nazi-Looted Art