This summer, the NMM celebrated the 200th birth anniversary of the great Belgian musical-instrument maker Adolphe Sax (1814-1894). Sax created not only his masterpiece the saxophone but many other extraordinary inventions, changing the course of music history. The NMM took part in the worldwide Sax celebration with an exhibition of some of the finest Sax instruments (made by his hand, by his father, his son, or in his workshop). “Celebrating the Saxes” ran through Labor Day.

Among the NMM instruments displayed: Adolphe Sax’s popular saxhorn and the short-lived saxotromba, as well as masterworks like his soprano ophicleide, a grand-parade trumpet, a valve trombone in B-flat with six independent valves, a trumpet in F with six independent valves, and a petit saxhorn (soprano flugelhorn). One of the highlights of the NMM’s permanent collections is an Adolphe Sax bass saxophone — one of only five bass saxophones the master made — and which was part of his personal collection.

This privileged look into the NMM’s Adolphe Sax collection would have been a draw alone. But the Museum’s deep instrument holdings extend also to the other brilliant craftsmen of the Sax family: Adolphe’s father, Charles-Joseph (1790-1865), and Adolphe’s son, Adolphe-Edouard (1859-1945). The Sax dynasty reigned in Brussels and Paris from the early 1800’s to early 1900’s. Their work reflects their historical era, the Industrial Revolution, with the introduction of modern instrument production, complex metalworking methods, and valve technologies. And the sheer beauty of their instruments make them objects of art in their own right.

“Celebrating the Saxes” chronicled the fortunes of the Sax family. As a boy, Antoine-Joseph, “Adolphe,” frequented his father’s instrument workshop in Brussels. NMM visitors saw a cornet à pistons and a keyed bugle in B-flat by Charles-Joseph. By 24, Adolphe had patented a design for the bass clarinet. By 29, he had opened his own workshop in Paris and was engineering the instruments that would bring him acclaim. But his success was dogged by controversy, rival lawsuits and patent challenges. In spite of towering achievements, Adolphe died bankrupt. His youngest son, Adolphe-Edouard, still forged on, reviving the Sax workshop. A soprano saxophone and a flugelhorn (contralto saxhorn) by Adolphe-Edouard were part of the NMM exhibit.

By 1928, the Sax dynasty and brand had come to an end. French manufacturer Henri Selmer purchased Adolphe-Edouard Sax’s business. The Selmer era begins a new story — also well-attested to in the NMM’s historic instrument holdings.

"This NMM exhibit was ‘everything you wanted to know about Sax’. A battle of the Saxes!” — NMM curator Deborah Check Reeves.
Photographing royalty

In June, student paparazzi from the University of South Dakota's Oscar Howe Summer Art Institute (OHSAI) took their best shots of the world's oldest cello, the NMM's prized Amati 'King' (mid-1500's).

Photo credit: Patricia Bornhofen
A German immigrant story
By Michael Suing, Associate Curator of Musical Instruments

The 1800’s brought booming German-immigrant populations to American cities, in turn creating career opportunities for accordion players like Constantin Wettering. Born around 1832 in Mecklenburg, Germany, Wettering and his wife Agnes immigrated to the United States in 1857, beginning their journey in New York, moving on to Ohio, and settling in Chicago. In U.S. census records between 1857 and 1889, Wettering listed his occupation as professional musician. Nothing indicates he had a supplemental income. But if he could play his strikingly complex accordion [shown here] to its full capacity, and live solely off his performance pay, he must have been an accomplished musician. His unique instrument was also very versatile — capable of being played in different keys for all kinds of ‘gigs’ — ensemble or solo.

Known as a diatonic button accordion, the instrument pre-dates the chromatic piano-type accordions of later popularity. Typically, early diatonics would play in only a few keys. But this example, probably custom built, played in eight different keys, each activated in turn by wooden pull knobs on the treble casing. Of eight original knobs, six survive, but four of them are strictly decorative. They may have been added by the manufacturer to introduce symmetry or to make the instrument appear more expensive and specialized.

Also unusual is that each key has a dedicated row of buttons, resulting in 70 buttons arranged in four rows. While this may be useful for switching from key to key, it seems unnecessary and overly complicated. The bass (left-hand) configuration of the instrument has 16 chords, each activated by a spatula-shaped key. The large size alone of this instrument is remarkable, given its relatively early date of manufacture.

This accordion was most likely designed to the specifications of a professional musician like Wettering who was pushing the boundaries of chromaticism available with diatonic instruments. While chromatic piano-type accordions had been made elsewhere in Europe by 1858, they were not common. As a professional entertainer, Wettering must have found financial advantage in showcasing his expertise with such a sophisticated accordion. His music career spanned at least three decades in the United States.

A green paper label adhered inside the treble casing indicates the accordion was manufactured in Germany by J. Pomm. Located at various Berlin addresses between 1848 and 1875, but predominantly on Kurze Strasse 19-20, Pomm is listed in city directories as a ‘harmonica maker.’ It was common for manufacturers of free-reed instruments to offer a range of instruments — harmonicas, accordions, melodeons, and harmoniums.

NMM founder Arne B. Larson acquired the accordion in Chicago in the 1950s and subsequently donated it to the Museum in 1979, along with the rest of his collection of 2,500 instruments that became the nucleus of the museum’s collections. The accordion has been exhibited since 1976 alongside other European folk instruments.

Curation is a process of continual discovery, finding pieces to unfinished puzzles, mining and refining the history of an object. Case in point: For over 35 years, the elaborately engraved name ‘Constantin Wettering’ on the exterior of the accordion had led NMM curators to assume that Wettering was the instrument’s manufacturer. But recently, during a closer examination of the accordion, NMM curators discerned the maker’s label inside bearing the name J. Pomm. That revelation, along with access to now-digitized census records and other archives on the internet, are helping to set the accordion story straight.
‘Matriarch of the NMM’ would be a suitable term of endearment for Dr. Margaret (Peggy) Downie Banks. Peggy’s title as Associate Director and Senior Curator of Musical Instruments cannot encompass the many roles she has filled for the NMM over the past 36 years.

In addition to being a tenured Professor of Music at the University of South Dakota, Peggy is the brain trust of all things NMM. She oversees the collection of more than 15,000 musical instruments and the museum’s extensive archives, as well as the projects of the curatorial staff. She has conducted research, lectured, and published extensively in the fields of organology and museum studies, with an emphasis, of course, on the NMM’s holdings, as well as on bowed stringed instruments and American musical instruments.

Peggy team-teaches graduate-level classes in museum studies and the history of musical instruments; mentors students in the NMM’s Master of Music program with a concentration in the history of musical instruments — the nation’s only terminal-degree in organology; oversees NMM internships; facilitates independent studies; and advises on thesis research.

She is also the doyenne of the Museum’s strong internet presence, having designed the NMM website in 1996 and managed it since. She is the force behind much of Museum’s social media — with fact-filled daily Facebook postings, as well as Pinterest and other-site contributions. She also recently headed the Museum’s partnership with the Google Cultural Institute, generating rich content for the NMM’s virtual gallery. [See article, p. 2]


She earned a B.S. in music education/piano from Skidmore College and an M.A. in musicology from the State University of New York at Binghamton. In 1978, she began her expansive career in Vermillion and earned her Ph.D. in musicology from West Virginia University (1981). From 2011-2012, following the retirement of NMM Director André P. Larson and transitioning through the appointment of current NMM Director Cleveland Johnson, Peggy served as Interim Executive Director.

In the interludes Peggy has been working on a book about the C. G. Conn Musical Instrument Manufacturing Company and its flamboyant founder, having researched the firm for over thirty years. In 1994, she presented a sesquicentennial exhibition of Conn instruments at both the NMM and the Midwest Museum of American Art in Elkhart, Indiana, authoring the catalog Elkhart’s Brass Roots. She has worked to secure many Conn musical instruments, archival documents and ephemera for the NMM. In 2008, she worked with Conn-Selmer, Inc. to negotiate the acquisition of the corporate records and 500 related historical musical instruments from the Leblanc (Kenosha, WI) and Holton (Elkhorn, WI) factories upon their closing.

Photos by Tony Jones

Meet our NMM staff
Dr. Margaret ‘Peggy’ Downie Banks

New NMM souvenirs and gifts!

We’re expanding our National Music Museum merchandise, with an eye to one day having a complete gift shop. Current popular items include our NMM T-shirt, our new Amati ‘King’ cello and goldfish-harmonica bookmarks, as well as instrument-shaped magnets (miniature sax, electric guitar and violin). Visit our online gift shop too, at http://orgs.usd.edu/nmm/GiftShop/giftshop.html
Don’t underestimate the small things. What would the tone of a guitar be like without the right pick (or ‘plectrum’ — as few people call them)? The fingers of countless musicians owe a great deal to these tiny, usually no-larger-than-an-inch-sized objects.

As musician and author Will Hoover says — and he should know — after collecting over 8,800 picks, which he donated to the NMM in 2004: Many picks are “miniature works of art” and “engineering marvels.”

Plectrums date to the beginnings of stringed instruments (think feather quills and tortoise shells). The Hoover Collection covers twentieth-century pick production — plectrums for the masses — with exceptional examples from the ‘Golden Age of Celluloid Picks,’ the 1930’s and 40’s. Over 90% of the Hoover picks are made of celluloid, the first commercial plastic, a semi-synthetic, known best perhaps as the former material for motion-picture film. “Because of its beauty, strength, composition and ‘memory’ (the ability to bend and return immediately to its original shape), celluloid has long been regarded by musicians as the superior material for picks” [Hoover, 4]. Celluloid, though, is an increasingly ‘endangered species,’ long surpassed by less costly and less volatile thermoplastics. The “finest all-around pick material” [Hoover, 19] — except for being notoriously flammable and degradable, celluloid does not stand the test of time without special care. [See inset story.]

The NMM’s Hoover Collection contains vintage celluloid picks of all imaginable shapes and designs, representing the quest for the perfect plectrum. Some are like small mosaics, stained-glass windows, or abstract paintings with their kaleidoscopic color. Others are experimentally and ergonomically shaped — designed for better grip or better contact with the strings. Some mimic the exotic and expensive materials they were meant to replace — like tortoise shell, ivory, and ebony. (The Hoover Collection contains picks made of those precious materials too, as well as picks of metal, stone, glass, fiber, felt, rubber, coconut shell, horn, and wood — to name some.) The historic pick manufacturers represented are many: Wurlitzer, D’Andrea, Herco, Jim Dunlop USA, Jadee, Gibson, Pearse, Skyline, Legend, and others.

All photos here are of NMM/Hoover Collection picks. Quotes are from Picks! The Colorful Saga of Vintage Celluloid Guitar Plectrums, by Will Hoover. San Francisco: Miller Freeman, 1995.

Care and feeding of picks

In his book Picks!, Will Hoover quips that “No one knows where old picks go to die” [Hoover, 5]. He ensured that some would not die though, by presenting his exhaustive collection to the National Music Museum. Celluloid picks, in particular, must be protected in cool, dry, dark and well-aerated micro-environments. Former assistant conservator Ana Sofia Silva developed an improved system for preserving the NMM’s Hoover picks — loosely suspending them on polyester sheets within a special ventilated storage unit and special absorbent papers.

Photos by Tony Jones

The pick of the picks: the NMM’s Will Hoover Collection


Cornet by Z. Albert Meredith, Marion, Ohio, ca. 1910. Rare, patented, open-tone model. Gift of Everett Fidler, North Platte, Nebraska. NMM 14787.


Recent NMM acquisitions


NMM wins TripAdvisor Award of Excellence!

TripAdvisor.com, one of the Internet’s most respected travel sites, has recognized the National Music Museum with a 2014 Certificate of Excellence, “for destinations and attractions that have consistently earned outstanding feedback from TripAdvisor travelers.”

The award is based on the quality of reviews and opinions earned on the TripAdvisor website over the last year. (You can read them at http://goo.gl/fCaKIF). The NMM received numerous five-star ratings and ravings: “This is a must see for anyone who wants a look back at the history of their musical instrument” (traveler/reviewer from Naperville, Illinois). “No matter what type of music you enjoy, there is something for everyone” (traveler/reviewer from Overland Park, Kansas). “This museum is the equal or better of anything found in New York or Vienna. You will be surprised and amazed by the scope and variety of this beautiful jewel” (traveler/reviewer from St. Paul, Minnesota).

Says Museum Director Cleveland Johnson, “This honor is particularly gratifying because it is a ‘people’s choice’ award — visitors from all walks of life who’ve experienced our collection up close and were so impressed that they took the time to write about it.”
World music at NMM Live!

In the final four NMM Live! shows of the 2014 USD academic year, audiences were treated to a musical globe trek — with the sounds of a Guatemalan marimba, early American country music, Celtic folk music, and the Javanese gamelan.

A big thank you to NMM monthly Free-Friday sponsors Sanford Vermillion (April) and the Vermillion Chamber and Development Company (May) for their support. The NMM’s public programming is underwritten by the USD Student Association and the South Dakota Arts Council, the support for which is provided with funds from the State of South Dakota, through the Department of Tourism and State development, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

In the coming year, the Museum plans to experiment further with NMM Live! — reaching out to an even broader audience, with more varied event times and types.

NMM is a Travel Channel ‘top pick’!

The Travel Channel recently ranked the National Music Museum among South Dakota’s top attractions. We’re honored to be on the list alongside the likes of Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Memorial.

http://www.travelchannel.com/destinations/south-dakota/photos/south-dakotas-must-see-attractions
NMM Live! ‘A little summer night music’

A tempestuous start to the season didn’t stop the trumpets from blazing at NMM’s live summer-music series. The award-winning Kentucky Baroque Trumpets (KBT) ensemble took the stage indoors at USD’s Farber Hall, when rain threatened, on Friday night, June 27. KBT’s 7-member touring ensemble played courtly 17th-century pieces and modern blockbusters like the Olympic Fanfare and the theme to Rocky: KBT’s concert for the NMM also featured a 400-year-old Bendinelli composition transferred for the first time to modern musical notation by KBT’s Don Johnson and international trumpeter Friedemann Immer. A special guest on KBT’s summer tour, Immer was a powerhouse presence.

On Friday, July 4th, a beautiful evening broke out, as the NMM hosted the South Dakota Brass Quintet in the Museum’s courtyard. An enthusiastic lawn-chair-toting crowd enjoyed spirited American compositions played by area and University of South Dakota musicians Rolf Olson and Scott Olson on trumpet, Gary Reeves on horn, Jonathan Alvis on trombone, and Chuck Dibley on tuba.

Thanks to NMM’s generous monthly sponsors, the concert-goers could also tour the Museum for free before the Friday-evening shows. First Dakota National Bank (June) and the South Dakota Arts Council (July) are among those who make the Museum’s free Friday-admission program possible.

Note from the Museum Director

What will your legacy ‘sound’ like? The National Music Museum houses many of the treasures it does today because someone unique in the past remembered us in their estate planning. Those passionate benefactors are acknowledged in our gallery names, exhibit labels, publications, and in the quality of our collection. These people are not absent, because their legacies are alive.

Affirm your own future legacy with the NMM. By designating your donor-advised fund, retirement plan, IRA, or life-insurance policy to the eventual benefit of the NMM, your support of the NMM’s mission is made loud and clear today. Inclusion in the NMM’s revered Amati Society is reserved specially for estate donors like you.

Our upcoming fall edition of this Newsletter will include the current membership of all NMM Lifetime Giving Societies, as well as of the Amati Society. We would be grateful to inscribe your name there or in a future listing. Your legacy will be appreciated by generations of music lovers and museum-goers to come.

For more information on how estate giving might work for you, feel free to contact me at Cleveland.Johnson@usd.edu or 605 / 677-5306.

Thank you –

Cleveland Johnson

Director Cleveland Johnson
Photo Credit: Tony Jones
Simple way to support NMM: Shop via AmazonSmile!

Are you an Amazon shopper? If you’d use http://smile.amazon.com whenever you want to go to the Amazon site, Amazon will donate 0.5% of your eligible purchases to the NMM. Sign up at http://smile.amazon.com, then select the National Music Museum as your charity (type ‘National Music Museum’ in the dialog box). AmazonSmile is the same Amazon you know — with the added benefit of supporting charitable organizations like the NMM. Thanks for your help!

Staff notes

Ms. Sheets goes to Washington

The National Music Museum’s Arian Sheets, Curator of Stringed Instruments, made the international Associated Press newswire and C-SPAN television coverage when she testified June 24th before the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans, and Insular Affairs in Washington.

Speaking on behalf of the NMM and the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM), Sheets explained how current extreme regulations on ivory transport and trade are adversely affecting museums and musicians.

Many museums, like the NMM, own objects that were legally made with ivory long before African elephants were declared an endangered species. (The NMM strongly supports the conservation of endangered species, while also recognizing that ivory use was an important, and indelible, part of our cultural past.)

As Sheets said to the AP: “We’ve been kind of caught up in the clampdown that’s designed to prevent the extinctions of these [elephant] populations but we’re not the ones causing the problem.” Among unintended but possible repercussions: tightened federal laws would restrict travel with antique (pre-1914) and vintage (1914-1989) instruments — making it hard for the NMM to loan instruments for external exhibition — and possibly even result in the seizure of items.

The comprehensive ivory bans could also affect the Museum’s ability to receive donations of certain rare historic musical instruments or to purchase them for preservation and study.

Student notes

Matthew Zeller was awarded a master of music degree with specialization in the history of musical instruments in May, after successfully defending his thesis The Violin-Family Designs of Andrea Amati: Reconstructing the Original Outlines of the “King” Cello and “Propugnaculo” Viola. An NMM Graduate Research Assistant from 2012-2014, Zeller also saw his research on the types of wood in the NMM’s “King Charles IV” violin bow (attributed to Antonio Stradivari workshop) published in The Strad Magazine (April 2014), as the article “Unweaving the Rainbow.”

Graduate Assistant and master’s degree candidate Chesley Peabody was awarded a Graduate Student Research Grant travel grant from the University of South Dakota Office of Research to attend the Paper & Book Intensive Workshop in Ox Bow, Michigan, in May. Her thesis research, underway, is on the use of paper in the construction and conservation of musical instruments.

Photo credit: Tony Jones
Historic keyboards come alive at HKSNA 2014

“The theme of our 2014 HKSNA meeting, *Four Centuries of Masterpieces: Keyboards and Their Music*, could be realized at the NMM as it could be nowhere else,” says NMM’s John Koster. “Seventeen of the NMM’s historical harpsichords, clavichords and pianos, ranging in date from the early sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries and spanning Europe in origin from Naples to Lisbon, Stockholm, Vienna, Paris, Strasbourg, and London, were heard in performances of music by masters chronologically and geographically associated with each instrument,” says Koster, NMM Curator of Keyboard Instruments, Conservator, Professor of Music, and this year’s on-site coordinator for the Historic Keyboard Society of North America Society meeting.

Conference attendees, most themselves historic-keyboard experts, concurred: “The opportunity to hear so many of the museum’s keyboards made this a highlight of all such meetings I have attended.” “It was a unique opportunity and a thrill to hear the best choice of instrument, player, and music all coming together in a favorable acoustic not once, but time after time for three days.” The meeting, May 14-17, brought almost 100 people — many international — to Vermillion and the NMM.

So, what does the world’s oldest playable harpsichord sound like?

Watch a video of keyboard *maestra* Catalina Vicens’ performance at the NMM: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0z9j4lWiz3U.
NMM staff captured two of the three prestigious American Musical Instrument Society 2014 awards at the 43rd annual meeting of the society, in Huron, Ohio, May 28-31.

The Society’s highest honor, the Curt Sachs Award, given to “those who have made important contributions toward the goals of the Society,” went to Margaret Downie Banks, NMM Associate Director and Senior Curator of Musical Instruments: “in recognition of her professionalism and leadership since 1978 in establishing the Shrine to Music Museum, now the National Music Museum […] in improving the size and quality of its collections, and in defining the scope and content of its academic programs within the broader context of the University of South Dakota.” The award also recognized the “perseverance and exactitude she has exhibited as the author of scholarly works in the field of organology, particularly those relating to the firm of C. G. Conn.”

Of 31 recipients of the Sachs Award, Banks is only the 5th woman. And the last time an NMM staff member was honored as such was in 1990, when André P. Larson, now retired NMM Director, was acknowledged. As reported in NMM’s spring 2014 newsletter, Sabine K. Klaus, the NMM’s Joe and Joella Utley Curator of Brass Instruments, received AMIS’s Nicholas Bessaraboff Prize for her Trumpets and Other High Brass (Volume 1, 2012). No stranger to recognition by the Society, Klaus won the 2000 Frances Densmore Prize for the most distinguished article-length publication written in English that year. Nor was this the first time an NMM faculty/staff member received the Bessaraboff Prize. In 1997, NMM Conservator and Curator of Keyboards John Koster took the award. Just last year, Koster was also awarded the Densmore Prize.

Byron Schenkman played works of Henry Purcell on the NMM’s spinet by Charles Haward, London, 1689.

NMM ‘shakes up Shakespeare’ with summer series for kids

“Play on!” wrote music-lover William Shakespeare. The Elizabethan era saw the introduction and development of many musical instruments. Lutes, flutes, fiddles and keyboards, horns, drums, and more were the ‘soundtrack’ of court and city life. Shakespeare shook up his stage too with musical instruments (and references to them in his dialogues).

This June, NMM Curator of Education and Woodwinds Deborah Check Reeves presented the NMM Discovery Series “Shaking up Shakespeare.” Sessions were calibrated to student’s ages – first through third grades and fourth through sixth grades. Students explored the music history of the Shakespearean era, making their own Elizabethan-style instruments. They even performed a mini-concert for family and friends.

A bicycle as a musical instrument? Johnnyrandom shows NMM audiences how

At the NMM, we’re not only fascinated by instruments of the past, we also have our ears tuned to the new. What does the ‘new’ sound like? — sound artist and viral-video musician Johnnyrandom’s song “Bespoken,” composed entirely from bike-component sounds. Johnnyrandom was the NMM’s Open House feature during USD commencement weekend, May 9th-10th. Using two high-end bicycles provided for the event by Sioux Falls merchant Two Wheeler Dealer, Johnnyrandom (aka Stephen ‘Flip’ Baber) demonstrated how tires, spokes, frames, chains, disk-brake rotors, and more could become original percussion, ‘strings,’ and new categories of found sound — aided by special mics, amplifiers, digital recorders, and post-production editing. The ‘Bike Music’ presentations went on throughout Friday and Saturday. One curious Sioux City cycling club even biked to the event.
Become a member of the National Music Museum and help us preserve and share the world’s finest musical instruments.

Membership privileges

Membership in the National Music Museum offers the tangible benefits of this NMM Newsletter; special invitations to previews and receptions, concerts and other events; gift shop discounts; and research services. It offers the intangible rewards of being associated with a unique institution, one of the greatest of its kind in the world.

Membership dues and contributions are tax deductible, within the limits provided by law, and directly assist in supporting the many public services of the National Music Museum. See our website – nmmusd.org -- under “Support us” for full list of benefits and tax-deduction amounts.

If you’re considering donating non-cash gifts, such as instruments or archival material, please consult our web page first: http://orgs.usd.edu/nmm/gifts.html.

Become a proud NMM Member via our website at www.nmmusd.org or use the mail-in form below.

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- Amati Society $100,000,000 +

Estate planning

(_contact Museum for details)

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