

MORE MUSEUM MADNESS ...

by Carey Beebe

I am grateful to Ian Watchorn to read of the other side of museums in JAAMIM June 1987. My experience is limited to the public side of such institutions with many often enjoyable hours I have spent in museums and collections on four continents.

Perhaps because of traditional British politeness I have invariably received replies to my letters from museums in the UK. I have always rolled up in the States following a simple phone call. But on a past European trip (reported in JAAMIM February 1986), I only received one reply from a museum on the continent (this by surface mail arriving home months after I did). Whether this is because of European museum understaffing, bad business practice, or my reluctance to have my simple requests translated into the appropriate native languages to cover the main European collections, I do not know.

If museums are unable to reply to a simple written request, it is impossible to organise an appointment. Am I being too harsh? While I can sometimes cope face to face, I am not competent to communicate over the phone in anything other than English. And so, on my latest jaunt I decided to measure success by rolling up with no prior appointments. In all, I fared no worse than last time.

All my trips have had the same aim of becoming familiar with a wide

variety of instruments in different locations, collecting what printed matter might be available, and adding to my slide collection of historic instruments. Unfortunately, most of my journeys have been undertaken in limited time, with no specific research project in mind.

This year, I was able to spend three months in the States again staying at the Stonington Zuckermann headquarters, taking in the Boston Early Music Festival, and tuning for Malcolm Bilson's Fortepiano Summer School at Cornell before returning home through Europe, South Africa, Perth and Adelaide. The southern part of continental Europe was covered with the help of a 15 day Eurail Pass. The itinerary involved train travel to a new city each day, finding a bed for the night, then searching out the museums. (This was planned so I didn't arrive in town on the day I knew the museum not to be open!)

Generally the museums of southern Europe don't seem to have the setup of their northern counterparts. Often there is no documentation available on the museum itself, let alone their exhibits. But this lack of commercialisation has its charm. Also, beware the siesta, and the fact that museums in this part of the world often do not reopen to the public when other businesses do for the afternoon.

Here follows brief annotations on each of the main locations I visited after leaving the States in September:

LISBON

The collection once housed at the Conservatorio is now at the Biblioteca Nacional and features wall to wall clavichords, and a few other curiosities. Strong in instruments of Portuguese origin. 1620 Ruckers mother, fake(?). Nicely exhibited.

MADRID

No collection known at the Conservatorio, so I went to the Palacio Real. Don't traipse through the rooms on a guided tour if you dislike the decadent rococo. You will only glimpse a square piano! The music and medals museum is separate. Arrive right on opening time, and the guide may feel obliged to get you started by yourself. You will have to listen to the commentary about the library and all the medal collection before arriving in the music salon. I was able to spend much longer in the salon because of my solo tour. Several Strads built for the Royal Court were attractively displayed on shaped perspex stands behind glass. A few elaborate early c19th pianos. And some harpsichords supposedly elsewhere in the Palace, never seen.

VALENCIA

I don't know of instruments here, so I skipped the museums and spent the afternoon swimming near the Mediterranean instead.

BARCELONA

Museu de la Musica has a well-planned collection over three floors. Three German harpsichords including Zell and Fleischer, several pianos, and an interesting six octave clavichord. There is another music museum in town which apparently features manuscripts.

MARSEILLES

One keyboard instrument here in the Musee Grobet-Labadie. Italian early c19th, sadly butchered so it resembles a Steinway inside. Lovely case, though. Music room on the second floor has a harps, a musette, a display case of some other instruments. A museum of the most splendid

furniture and decorations. Well worth a visit for the polite and helpful staff; they were the only natives who would tolerate more than a sentence of my pig French. In fact, they kept me there engaging me in conversation and showering me with complimentary postcards!

FLORENCE

Conservatorio di Musica Luigi Cherubini collection is now apparently at Palazzo Vecchio. Catalogue seems especially rich in strings and bows, a few keyboards. Unfortunately, the music section at the Palazzo is closed and nobody could tell me when, if ever, it would open again. At Museo Bardini, at least one harpsichord is used for public concerts; there are probably more there, but never on show.

NAPLES

Museums had nothing, but a chat to some students at Conservatorio San Pietro A Majella using whatever words we knew in common from several languages revealed the find of the journey - access was granted to the 1783 Stein vis-a-vis: Double manual harpsichord one end, fortepiano the other.

ROME

Museo Nazionale Strumenti Musicali is well worth a visit. Don't expect to pick up a catalogue at the museum - try at Ricordi's in town instead. Rich in keyboards, but plenty of other things as well. Cristofori's 1722 instrument, 6 baby virginals in a lovely glass case, Ruckers transposer, Koenicke fortepiano, and many Italian keyboards. My photographic whims were approved by the helpful director at a moment's notice, and a kind guard accompanied me to make sure I didn't slip a pic of something I shouldn't.

BOLOGNA

The museums have no keyboards on show, but a beautiful catalogue of the large collection of instruments by Tagliavini was published here a year ago.

PADUA

No keyboards in sight here.

VERONA

Originally I was anticipating the possibility of seeing the Stein vis-a-vis. This didn't eventuate, but I wasn't disappointed because I had seen the one unexpectedly in Naples. No keyboards in sight here, but a splendid exhibition of wind instruments through the ages in part of the Teatro Filarmonico.

MILAN

The Castello Sforzesco museum was closed for a month. Apparently all the museums are so short staffed, one is always closed in rotation. However, contacts enabled me to see Maria Theresa's Taskin, now kept in Chiesa San Maurizio. This church was used solely by a closed order of nuns, and has been empty for 150 years. Lovely c16th organ by Antionati. La Scala Museo Teatrale has some interesting rooms with Rossini's tuning hammer, a Steinway used by Liszt, a few old virginals, and what seems like endless Verdi memorabilia. I put on my best smile for the staff, they waived the strict ruling and allowed me to take some photos.

CHARTRES

The Musee des Beaux-Arts almost won the prize this time for the most inconsiderate staff, even though they were probably acting under orders. I had asked at the entrance if photos were permitted - they were - and after just having begun a hopefully heavy session in the harpsichord room, a guard came swooning in and wanting to remove the film from my camera. No signs, or anything to indicate that photos in this part of the museum were forbidden! Just as I thought I was destined to squiggle in my notebook from behind the heavy guard rope, this museum managed to turn into one of the success stories of the trip. Along came a chance meeting with French-Canadian harpsichordist Kenneth Gilbert who keeps his collection of fine instruments at the museum. A personal tour of his instruments followed an introduction to the staff, and I was welcome to stay to play and photograph as long as I wished.

LONDON

I had to revisit the Victoria & Albert because of a malfunctioning film last time. This visit, the museum had a few rooms closed, and they now herd the public through the cash registers at the entrance and make you feel guilty if you don't pay the "Suggested Admission" of 2 quid. Well worth it, though, even if almost everything is behind glass.

GOUDHURST

The marvellous Finchcocks where mildly eccentric Richard Burnett runs Sunday soirees. All shapes and sizes of keyboard instruments in a charming Georgian country mansion. And a brilliant display of the construction of keyboard instruments.

JOHANNESBURG

The 13th floor of Witwatersrand University houses a collection of interesting instruments bequeathed by Hans Adler including a Franciolini clavictherium, a German c16th(?) harpsichord once owned by Landowska, and a cute travelling piano. Here I also managed to pull apart a good Viennese fortepiano, much to the delight of one enthusiastic lecturer who told me he was itching to get inside the instrument himself.