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By Arnold Myers
Museums

Who Does Our Heritage Belong To?

An issue which sparks controversy inside and outside the museum community is the private ownership of historic objects. Of course, individuals have been collecting musical instruments alongside museums for as long as there have been museum collections of musical instruments. Sentiments range from "something as important as this ought to be in a museum" to "let's keep this out of museums where things are locked away in the basement and no one can ever play them again."

There is clearly a problem for historians if important items are inaccessible in someone's personal hoard, but in practice many collectors are historians themselves or are hospitable to scholars who wish to study instruments in their collections. A few private collectors (such as the owner of The Brass Player's Museum in Springfield, Massachusetts) advertise their collections and open them to the public on a regular basis like a museum, and other private collectors place their collections on deposit in a museum where access can be supervised. However, museums are increasingly reluctant to take in objects on long-term loan. On one hand, loans frequently become permanent; a large part of many museums' holdings are former private collections rather than items acquired "in the field" by museum staff. Loans can add variety to displays and exhibitions without indefinite commitment. On the other hand, managing, storing, and displaying items is expensive and may seem to museum managers to be a waste of time and money if the items are at risk of subsequently removal.

Private collectors have several advan-

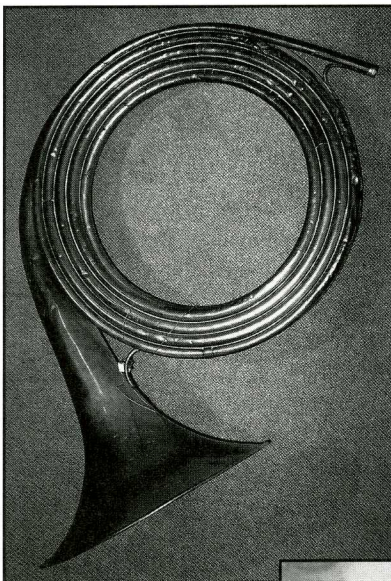


Figure 1. Trompe de chasse contrebasse in D (Millereau, Paris, 1879-98). The 28-foot tube length of this instrument, built to be played with large groups of French hunting horns, is possibly the longest unbroken length of any brass instrument in regular production. Private Collection, Paris.



Figure 2 Above. Trompette de cavalerie contrebasse in E-flat (Lefevre, Paris, after 1900). This monster was built for use in large groups of natural trumpets, mostly in 6-foot E-flat with some bass trumpets of 13-foot tube length. Private Collection, Paris.

Figure 3 Right. Trompette contrebasse hélicon in E-flat (Couesnon, Paris, 1926). An alternative form of contrabass trumpet of 26-foot tube length. Private Collection, Edinburgh.

tages over museums, for example the freedom to bid at auction without consultation or fundraising. A big bonus of being a private collector is that the quality of a collection can be raised incrementally. If a museum buys or accepts an object, and at a later date is offered a similar object in better condition or with a stronger provenance, it is difficult (usually impossible) to de-accession the first to make room for the second. But private collectors replace items all the time, and their collections increase in quality as well as quantity. A private collector can also invest in items whose interest and ranking in quality are doubtful, just in case they turn out to be more important than at first realized. If they prove to be of little interest over time, they can be disposed of. The pictures show three large brass instruments currently in private ownership which might fall into this category. Would we be the poorer if these models had never existed? The contribution made to the world of music by the instruments shown here is surely negligible. A museum with a policy of acquiring instruments which represent models which have influenced the course of musical history might not consider them worthy



of the space they would occupy (not a trivial consideration).

However, in private collections these three monsters are at least being preserved for a future generation, which can make up its own mind on the value of these objects. In rare cases when a museum curator is also a collector, there is a need

for professional integrity to be maintained and to be seen to be maintained. The *Code of Ethics for Museums*, formulated by the International Council of Museums, requires professional staff to abstain from dealing (buying and selling for profit) in the cultural heritage. It would clearly be a conflict of interest if the same person

were to negotiate purchases for the museum and to act as a dealer in the same kinds of object. Museum staff who also collect are generally required not to compete with their institutions for particular items and should abstain from selling items from their collections. ♪



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