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Lightning talk: Stop, Collaborate and Listen... Developing a framework for the treatment of musical instruments in the National Museum of Australia's collection as functional objects

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ABSTRACT

Musical instruments often sit firmly within the paradigm of functional and time-based objects, as we cannot fully appreciate their significance unless they are played and/or heard. Through facilitating recording and use, conservators can preserve both the physical and ephemeral qualities of these instruments, thus deepening our understanding of, and ability to interpret, musical instrument collections. Although there have been performances using instruments from our collections in the past, the musical instruments in the NMA collection have stood silent for some time. A request from a musician wishing to play a violin made by his great-great-grandfather, now in the NMA collection, highlighted the opportunities afforded by such events. It also highlighted the need for flexibility and procedural improvements to accommodate future requests and maximise their benefit.

Conservation staff are keen to facilitate the use of these instruments where appropriate and possible. To this end, we have developed a framework to streamline the treatment of musical instruments as functional objects. This involved defining the scope of the functional instrument collection/s: what should be played/recorded, by whom and how regularly. This framework also identifies procedures for collaborating with allied professionals, musicians and an array of NMA staff to build interest in this unique collection and to ensure that each instrument and its sound are accurately preserved and documented.

At the same time, this program of work develops the potential for the voice of each instrument to be experienced and appreciated by a wide audience. Collaboration with specialist instrument conservators, restorers, musicians and communities guides us in ensuring that treatments and performances are appropriate and historically informed. Through advocating for the use of musical instruments in the NMA collections we aim to strengthen the NMA's understanding of, and ability to interpret and preserve, these instruments and share this with the Australian public.

BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Brian is an objects conservator at the NMA. She has previously worked in preventive and objects conservation at the AWM, in objects at the ANMM and as conservator at Parliament House. She is passionate about the conservation of musical instruments and facilitated use/recording of instruments from the AWM collection.