

An archivist approach to provenance research

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In December 2023, the Belgian Federal Public Planning Service for Science Policy (BELSPO) launched a long-term research project (Fed-tWin MUSIM) in collaboration with The Royal Museums for Art and History/Brussels Musical Instruments Museum (MIM) and the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain). The goal of this project is the study and organisation of the archives of the MIM with the aim of publishing a history of that institution from its founding until 1992. At the time of this paper, the project has been running for almost one year and has produced a wealth of information for the curators of the MIM, researchers, and other Belgian and foreign institutions.

A house divided

In 1877 the director of the Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles, François-Auguste Gevaert (1828-1908), created the Musée instrumental du Conservatoire which later became the MIM. This branch of the conservatoire brought two collections of instruments which were already in its possession, those of François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871) and Raja Sourindra Mohun Tagore (1840-1914), under the directorship of Victor Mahillon (1841-1924). The MIM as well as the conservatoire underwent institutional changes which had a drastic and detrimental impact on the museum's archives. These changes limited all research on the MIM's collections, especially provenance research, until fairly recently.

The Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles was founded in 1832 and opened its doors in 1833 as a French-speaking institution. Under the directorship of François-Joseph Fétis, from 1833 to 1871, the institution made no efforts to be inclusive of the Dutch-speaking portion of the Belgian population living in Flanders, expelling students for not speaking French and refusing to teach courses for declamation and singing in Dutch. The tensions between Belgium's Dutch- and French-speaking populations increased. The consequence was that the conservatoire was divided into two new institutions in 1966, the Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles (CRB) and the Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel (KCB). Both the library and museum of the conservatoire would be run collaboratively between these new institutions. This, in theory, meant that both conservatoire directors and their respective administrative councils had to agree on matters such as engaging personnel, budgets, infrastructure, and the use of the collections.

As the museum was still a department of the conservatoires, they did not officially keep a separate archive. While there were occasional assistants who helped with the museum's secretarial tasks, all other duties fell to the administration of the conservatoires. Correspondence addressed to the museum's director was sent to the conservatoire and then forwarded, as evidenced from the numerous indications of 'musée' found on these sources. Four copybooks of correspondence dating from 1893 to 1905 provide copies of some of the outgoing correspondence from the first two directors, Victor-Charles Mahillon and Ernest Closson (1870-1950). In 1954, the fourth director of the museum, René Lyr (1887-1957) asked the conservatoire if there were any acquisition

or provenance records from the period of 1877 to 1936: 'I am frequently surprised to not find any documentation relative to the acquisition of instruments in the museum. Is it possible that a man such as Mahillon did not establish at the entrance of each piece, a note, or a file or even a duplicate of the correspondence exchanged with the vendor or donor?'ⁱ The administrative secretary of the conservatoire replied, '...I have never found, in the administrative folders, items which deal with the acquisitions made by the museum. I doubt that this documentation has been preserved in our archives. I am sure that Mr. Mahillon retained his personal papers.'ⁱⁱ Later in Lyr's directorship, approximately 4,000 letters dated between 1877 and 1936 were transferred to the museum. These letters remained in closed archives until the 1980s, when the director René De Maeyer (1925-2008) tasked various colleagues with researching them.

To complicate matters further, a federal law required certain institutions to transfer their historical archives to the national archives. This resulted in a large portion of the conservatoire's archives being transferred in 1959, of which a significant portion relates to the museum.

From 1966 until today, the French- and Dutch-speaking conservatoires have continued to co-exist, sharing the historic building of the original conservatoire, its concert hall, and the library collection. In 1992 the MIM became the fourth department of the Royal Museums for Art and History, officially separating from the conservatoires but remaining in its buildings until 2000. The situation of its archives is more complex.

The royal decree which founded the two new conservatoires in 1966 was vague about the archives prior to that date. The CRB has retained these archives until today. In the following decades repeated requests from researchers succeeded in providing access to a portion of these archives, placing them in the collection of the library. These relate almost entirely to the period of Fétis' directorship. In December of 2024 the planned renovation of the conservatoires' buildings presented an opportunity. As I had previously worked in the Brussels Conservatories Library, I was aware of a large collection of archival material that had remained inaccessible to researchers. When I took on my current position at the MIM, I immediately began negotiations to bring these archives to the museum during the period of construction. With the help of Saskia Willaert and Anne-Emmanuelle Ceulemans of the MIM, Olivia Wahnnon de Oliveira and Jan D'haene, the directors of the CRB and KCB, and Johan Eeckeloo and Hugo Rodriguez, the librarians of the KCB and CRB, these archives were transferred to the MIM in July of 2024. Over 170 linear meters of archival material, which had been dispersed to all corners of the conservatoire, arrived at the MIM for study. The portions of this archive, as well as that held in the Belgian State Archives, which relate to the MIM will be digitalized and added to those of the MIM.

The importance of the conservatoires' archives was immediately and abundantly clear and they form an integral part of the history of the MIM. This of course has had an effect on provenance research at the museum. Before presenting my work at MIM and how it is being utilized by its curators in various aspects of their research, including provenance, I will present the circumstances prior to December 2023.

[Victor-Charles Mahillon's *Catalogue*](#)

The first director of the MIM, Victor-Charles Mahillon, was an incredibly organized and methodical curator. The five volumes of the *Catalogue descriptive et analytique du Musée instrumental du Conservatoire royal de Musique*

de Bruxelles, which he published between 1880 and 1922, almost always mention the provenance of donations to the museum. However, this was not the museum's sole method of enlarging its collection, and the instruments in the catalogue were not the sole instruments which it owned. Mahillon was granted a budget for purchasing instruments and frequently solicited additional funds from the Belgian government if particularly interesting items were for sale. If these instruments were purchased from a dealer, no provenance is given in the *Catalogue*. Additionally, the provenance indications in the *Catalogue* usually only mention the last owner of the instrument before arriving at the museum.

The museum also maintained a 'musée d'échange'. This collection contained numerous instruments which Mahillon considered to be too similar to those in the museum's collection and thus not unique enough to be retained but rather used for exchanges with other collectors or museums. The instruments which had remained in the 'musée d'échange' were later incorporated into the museum's collection.

Mahillon's catalogue, as well as the 4,000 items of correspondence from the period of 1877 to 1936, have been the main focus of provenance research at the MIM. With the exception of this correspondence, the museum's own archives have never been organized and only inventoried in a summary manner. The archives of the conservatoires, mentioned above, were closed to all research until the present project.

ArchivesSpace and cross-referencing as tools for research

In order to deal with these dispersed and unorganized archives, the MIM launched the MUSIM project. The project chose to use the open-source program ArchivesSpace to organise and provide public access to its archives. Within ArchivesSpace, the use of agent and subject records allows the researcher to broaden their search beyond the donor name referred to in Mahillon's catalogue. By cross-referencing these terms, the researcher is able to find not only the items which directly concern the person or instrument, but additional sources which mention them in the context of other exchanges. When the source is detailed enough to identify a specific instrument in the museum's collection, the catalogue number is included as a subject record in addition to the type of instrument and instrument family.

Entering into this level of detail in an archival record is time consuming and requires a thorough review of each document; however, the results were immediate and greatly appreciated by the curators. An additional benefit has been the identification of outgoing correspondence with unidentified individuals on the basis of dates and subjects discussed. Only sources which relate from the period of 1877 to 1936 will be treated in this manner during the first phase of the MUSIM project.

Examples

Below are two examples where additional provenance was discovered using the archives in this method. As will be seen by the second example, this project has the potential to assist other collections with provenance research.

A Musical Slide Rule – MIM-4179

In 1965 the MIM received the donation of a 'règle à calcul musical', a musical slide rule, from Queen Fabiola (1928-2014). The provenance of this item in the catalogue of the director Roger Bragard (1903-1985) lists the queen as the provenance of this object with no additional information. As this item has currently not been located in the collection, the museum's databases do not contain a physical description of it nor any other information. In the archives of the conservatoire we find a series of four letters relating to this donation, documenting not only the royal provenance, but including a copy of a letter from a Mr Abrahamsohn, general secretary of the society I.M.A.N.U.E.L. in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Mr Abrahamsohn describes the importance of the object as it was a prototype created by Johannes von Martinez, the leader of the society. Thus with this discovery we have the complete history of the object from its creator von Martinez, via Abrahamsohn and Queen Fabiola to the MIM.

Victor-Charles Mahillon and Mary Elizabeth Adams Brown: The MIM and the Met

The archives of the MIM contain over 100 items of correspondence between Victor-Charles Mahillon and Mary Elizabeth Adams Brown (1842-1918), the New York socialite whose personal collection was the impetus for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's musical instruments collection. While the Met's archives only contain twenty letters from Mahillon to Brown, those of the MIM present a fairly complete picture of the correspondence between the two, thanks to copies of Mahillon's outgoing correspondence. Brown frequently relied on Mahillon's advice on matters of organology as well as the organisation, cataloguing, and displaying of her collection in the Met. His principal activity for Brown was as a procurer of instruments for her collection. This took the form of providing copies of instruments in the MIM's collection, made either by his own company or by delegated craftsmen, as well as searching antique shops and the sales of private collectors for items which would complete her collection. Using the correspondence between Brown and Mahillon we can identify the maker of the Metropolitan's tibia nr 87.4.2713 as Mr de Bruyn, who copied Mahillon's own copy in the MIM nr 416. In the case of a particularly large purchase of the private collection of Henri Van Cutsem, Mahillon was heavily involved both as an agent and a translator. Several of the letters between Van Cutsem and Brown, translated by Mahillon, mention a specific instrument which is now in the Metropolitan's collection and whose provenance is unknown. This is nr 89.4.990 an epinette des Vosges made by Fleurot.

By the use of cross-referencing in an archivist tool such as ArchivesSpace, the MUSIM project attempts to reunite the MIM's archives which are currently spread across four different institutions. This project will digitally unite and provide public access to these archives. The use of detailed subject records and cross-referencing has opened avenues for provenance research within these archives, aiding both the MIM's own researchers as well as those from other institutions.

ⁱ Letter from René Lyr to Van Straelen, 12 November 1954, Brussels Conservatoire Archives, F-3 Gestion de Monsieur le Conservateur René Lyr.

ⁱⁱ Letter from Van Straelen to René Lyr, 13 November 1954, Brussels Conservatoire Archives, F-3 Gestion Monsieur le Conservateur René Lyr.