

# The Listening Gallery: Integrating music with exhibitions and gallery displays

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The Listening Gallery is a collaboration between the Royal College of Music (RCM) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the UK's National Museum of Art and Design. Stemming from recent research in music, art, design, and technology, the project connects objects in the V&A's collections with music that shares their rich and distinctive pasts. Specifically, new and existing recordings of music have been integrated into the V&A's spring 2009 exhibition, *Baroque 1620-1800: Style in the Age of Magnificence*, and into the museum's newly renovated *Medieval and Renaissance Galleries*. The impact of the project has been far reaching, as a novel approach to music in museums is achieved: the choice of pieces is underpinned by musicological research, performance follows the practices of the time, the instruments used are originals or faithful copies, and the provenance of the pieces is described. This article focuses on four new recordings that were made for the project. The objects with which the music is associated are briefly described, the connection with the music is explained, and details of the recorded pieces are given.

*Keywords:* museum; performance practice; medieval and renaissance art and music; recordings; historical instruments

Music has played a central role in popular and elite culture throughout European history, spanning sacred and secular spaces and representing private and communal experiences. Yet there was, until now, no museum of art and design that connected music and its performance with other art forms and objects in interactive and historically meaningful ways.

The Listening Gallery is a project in which new and existing recordings of music have been integrated into two major exhibitions at the V&A:

- *Baroque 1620-1800: Style in the Age of Magnificence*, a temporary exhibition in Spring 2009, which has subsequently travelled to other international venues
- *Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, a series of eleven newly refurbished permanent galleries, which re-opened in December 2009

The exhibitions provided an opportunity to incorporate music into galleries covering sacred and secular, northern and southern European art, between 1100-1800. The unparalleled variety of musical styles, genres, and instruments covered across this period required musicological knowledge drawn from a wide range of sources (e.g. *Medieval*: Testi 1969; *Renaissance* Gallico 1978, Fenlon 2002; *Baroque*: Fortune 1987, Bianconi 1991). In addition, the input provided by performers for the recording of new works proved essential, particularly for the earliest works where hands-on music making is often the best means of addressing interpretative questions (Nutti 2007).

The Listening Gallery demonstrates how the past, so clearly portrayed in the V&A's galleries, is to be discovered in music as well as other arts by providing music appropriate to the objects on display. Historical events, patronage, and fashions all contribute to changes in style that are reflected as much in music as they are in art and sculpture.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION

The expertise in music, history, and art that the project has brought together has given rise to *new* knowledge on performance. The examples of new recordings provided below are presented under separate headings, either *Baroque 1620-1800* or *Medieval and Renaissance Europe*. The rooms in which the music is heard, as well as the objects with which the music is associated, are briefly described in order to place the music in context.

### Baroque 1620-1800

The magnificence and splendour of Baroque, one of the most opulent styles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was the subject of the V&A's 2009 spring exhibition.

*A recording of Davide Perez (1711-1778), Domine Deus, from the Messa con 5 strumenti, c.1750*

The *Sacred Spaces* section of the exhibition was dedicated to religious devotion and the ritual of Mass. Displays included Portuguese artefacts made in

Rome, for consumption in Portugal, during the reign of John V. The *Model of the Chapel of St John the Baptist in the Church of São Roque, Lisbon* (Rome, 1742-44), by Giuseppe Palmes, after drawings by Luigi Vanvitelli (1700-73), is a testimony to the characteristic of artefacts built in Portugal during this period: the influence of Italian style and artists. This became the focal point around which the music was chosen.

In 1743-44, the Portuguese king John V ordered a team of artists based in Rome to build, decorate, and fit out a royal chapel for the Jesuit church of São Roque in Lisbon. In 1751, John V called the Neapolitan composer Davide Perez to Lisbon. Under his influence, Portuguese music—both sacred and secular—became entirely dominated by the Italian operatic style, as is immediately apparent upon hearing this recording.

The music associated with this splendid altarpiece highlights the stylistic influences between Rome and Lisbon, felt as strongly in music as in art and architecture, and the influence of Italian opera in Portuguese music post-1750, including sacred music.

The manuscript of Perez's Mass is held in the RCM Library, MS 977. The *Domine Deus* was recorded in the RCM Studios in February 2009, with the orchestra and five soloists directed by Ashley Solomon. It is the only existing recording of this piece.

#### *Domestic music for spinet and other instruments: A recording of RCM MS 2093*

As well as the music for great religious occasions and occasions of state, the baroque period enjoyed performance of more intimate music for the delectation of a smaller audience; lesser households, too, could command music as integral to that richness of lifestyle.

The *Secular Spaces* section of the exhibition, in which the recording of music for spinet and other instruments could be heard, focused on the most intimate part of a household: the bedroom and closet. Beyond the “public” rooms of a house, in which guests were welcomed, the bedchamber was open only to the select few. Into the inner sanctum of the dressing room and closet was packed a level of furnishing and luxury unseen outside. The exclusivity of these rooms and their relative lack of ceremonial function also made them the setting for influential innovations in furniture and interior decoration. Among the objects that would have been found in these most intimate rooms is the spinet, a small keyboard instrument of the harpsichord family.

The main instrument used in this recording was built in London in the 1680s by Stephen Keene, preserved in the RCM Museum of Instruments

(RCM 179). The instrument's case is made of walnut wood, and there is a special decorative laburnum wood veneer on the panel above the keyboard.

The music in this recording is taken from a single, late-seventeenth century English keyboard manuscript belonging to the RCM Library, MS 2093. Although its ownership is uncertain, the manuscript is typical of the "virginal" books used to tutor players, especially women, at the time. It is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, its contents are divided into two collections, one of preludes and the other of fugues. Secondly, it preserves pre-civil war music by Byrd, Bull, and Weelkes, alongside later Baroque composers such as Locke and Blow.

The recording of RCM MS 2093 was made in the RCM Museum in February 2009, with RCM students of harpsichord, violin, and recorder performing under the direction of Terence Charlston. This is the first recording of the manuscript, an important exemplar of virginal music of the period, as well as a testimony of the intimate type of music that would have been heard in a seventeenth century English home.

## **Medieval and Renaissance Europe**

*Medieval and Renaissance Europe* is a major re-interpretation of a series of eleven permanent galleries in the V&A that opened in December 2009. The galleries will have a minimum lifespan of 25 years. The museum's collection is one of the finest in the world and covers European art and architecture from 800 to 1600.

### *A Missal from St Denis, Paris, c.1350*

A missal is a book that contains the texts and music needed by a priest and choir to celebrate Mass. This highly decorated missal was probably made around 1350 in Paris for use at one of the altars at the royal abbey of St Denis. Research into the service books and the liturgical life of the abbey (Robertson 1991) led to the identification, performance, and recording of the Dionisian sequence *Salve Pater Dyonisi*, which would have been performed on the Feast Day of St Denis.

Many recordings of Gregorian chant are available commercially, yet this is the first recording to be made of *Salve Pater Dyonisi*, or indeed any part of the St Denis Missal. There are seven verses that praise St Denis and his two co-martyrs, St Rusticus and St Eleutherius. The words are sung in Latin to a tune that was borrowed and adapted from pre-existing pieces to create a fresh and new work. The recording was made in June 2009 at the Parish Church of

Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Simon Stock, London. Five male voices were used, under the direction of Jennifer Smith.

### *Notation knives*

“One of the rarest sixteenth-century objects on display in the new Medieval and Renaissance Galleries at the V&A is both a knife and a piece of music. On one side of the broad blade of this hybrid exhibit is a clear, perfectly notated musical inscription of a blessing of the table, to be sung before a meal; on the other, a prayer giving thanks, to be sung when the meal has ended. Although we do not know where or for whom this curious object was made, it reveals a fascinating relationship between music and the material culture of the table during the sixteenth century, and represents the important formal role played by music in the rituals of dining” (Dennis in press).

As part of the project, the beautiful Grace and Benedictus engraved on this unusual notation knife were transcribed and recorded. It is the only existing recording of these blessings, or indeed—and surprisingly—of any of the music that is not infrequently found on Renaissance household objects such as cutlery and maiolica plates.

Four singers were recruited to sing *a cappella* for this recording; RCM students, under the direction of Giulia Nuti, recorded the notation knives in June 2009 in the RCM Studios.

## IMPLICATIONS

The Listening Gallery has far reaching implications. The most obvious and immediate benefit has been for visitors to the V&A. The music performed on the four recordings discussed above originates from precisely the same years, from the same cities, and is chosen from works commissioned by the same patrons who commissioned artefacts on display in the exhibitions. The recordings of Perez and RCM MS 2093 are contemporary with their corresponding objects and have the same provenance; in the case of the missal and the notation knives, the music is actually written on the objects.

Much of the music associated with the objects in the Galleries was recorded for the first time for this project. Much of the music can now be heard via the V&A's website, with annual online traffic of approximately 15 million people. For further information on the pieces discussed above, see [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk) and [www.listeninggallery.rcm.ac.uk](http://www.listeninggallery.rcm.ac.uk).

The project has demonstrated that music and musical performance were central to the domestic and public life of those periods and how the experience of music and art reunited reveals much about Europe's geographi-

cal and cultural diversity. The objects on display, together with the worlds they represent, have been experienced today as they would have been in the past.

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