

SHORT STORIES: 200 YEARS OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC

Episode Five: Treasure Seekers

Natalie Steed: This is Short Stories: 200 years of the Royal Academy of Music, presented by Anna Picard. This is episode 5, Treasure Seekers.

Anna Picard: On the roof of the Royal Academy of Music, on the busy Marylebone Road, are two of the more surprising treasures of the Royal Academy. The two beehives were installed in April 2020 and produced their first jars of golden honey later that year.

In this episode, a tour through a building that is never quiet, we'll discover more treasures of the Academy: from the first printed music in England to the owl trinkets of the composer Oliver Knussen, and one of the finest Stradivarius violins in the world.

Anna Picard: But first, the Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, Jonathan Freeman-Attwood.

Jonathan Freeman-Attwood: When the Academy was formed in 1822, Beethoven is still alive. So there's this sort of sense that Britain needs a conservatoire that's going to reflect this great art form that hasn't really taken off in the ways that it has and has established itself in the continent. The English-speaking world is very conscious of this and wants to make its mark.

Although London was a great place for concerts, and a great place for making money if you were a musician and a publisher, it wasn't really a great place for indigenous creative musicians to impart their work. So the Academy was founded very much by very successful pedagogues from European countries and therefore the repertoire that was performed in the early concerts, and indeed, the first concert in 1823, you have Beethoven, Rossini, Mozart...

Jonathan Freeman-Attwood: And of course, Weber is a very important figure because he was in London in the early years. He conducted the Academy's first orchestra in 1826. He composed his opera, *Oberon*, on a table that is in the Principal's flat and was a great friend of one of the founding fathers of the Academy, Sir George Smart.

Jonathan Freeman-Attwood: It was, of course, George Smart who left the Academy the presentation copy in Mendelssohn's hand of the overture of *Midsummer's Night Dream*, which is one of our great autographs. So, for the first 50 or 60 years of the

Academy's existence, it became a place where continental music was often performed for the first time, so early Bach performances that hadn't happened anywhere other than Germany, Beethoven, Mozart. The Academy put on a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1830 with Sterndale Bennett, who was to become Principal in the 1860s, as Cherubino as a 14-year-old boy at that stage.

And so you've got this history, which is to a certain extent reflected in some of the artefacts that we have. In this room, in the Principal's office, the one that I'm most fond of is this portrait here of Sir Arthur Sullivan, who was, of course, the Sullivan as in Gilbert and Sullivan. The only reason he was a student was because he was funded by a scholarship which was set up on Mendelssohn's death. And a number of benefit concerts happened in the 1850s, where Jenny Lind and others performed to establish a fund which still exists, called the Mendelssohn Scholarship Foundation.

Anna Picard: In the Principal's office there's also Wagner's music stand, Mozart's table, and a beautiful wooden cabinet that served as Henry Wood's library, where all the scores for the Proms were kept until about 50 years ago. The treasures here include Debussy's *La Mer* and Schoenberg's 5 Orchestral Pieces, both with the composers' annotations, and the coloured pencils that Henry Wood used to mark his scores.

Jonathan Freeman-Attwood: When it comes to the scores, unlike the British Library, we don't exhibit them regularly because we have a museum and it's a very important part of our life. But it tends to be a museum where we're concentrating largely on the instruments. And so the manuscripts are used for research purposes. They're used for teaching quite regularly. We love bringing them out and inspiring students. When Andrew Gourlay was conducting the Mendelssohn I got it out of the box and the librarian very kindly trusted me to take it into the Duke's Hall and show him. I hadn't warned him, actually, so his jaw dropped and he had Mendelssohn's own hand in front of the piece he was conducting in front of the orchestra.

Anna Picard: There is something really magical in seeing a historical score in real life for the first time, a kind of connection with the composer and the world that they lived in. But dangers lurk in the dark corners...

Ian Brearey: I'm Ian Brearey from the digitisation department at the Royal Academy of Music Museum. Everywhere has got bugs. You'll find bugs in everybody's home in every room. So as long as there's not more than a handful, then it's not really a problem. The silverfish – horrible little things slithering around everywhere.

Ian Brearey: They like moisture, so if you've got a moisture problem with air conditioning or whatever you might find silverfish. They can eat through paper so it's not a good thing to find them in a library.

Anna Picard: Ian uses blunder traps, dotted around the building, to get early warning of any infestation. But his weapon of choice is keeping things dry.

Ian Brearey: With all pests... All pests need something to eat and something to drink, so if you can take one or both of those things away, then all the better. So if you've got moisture in your room then they've got something to drink, if you take that away they won't stay. They'll move on. We have an environmental control system so that all of the moisture is taken out of the air. You have to have the humidity and the temperature correct and then you're ok.

Anna Picard: Kathy Adamson was the librarian at the Royal Academy of Music for 24 years.

Kathy Adamson: As a librarian, the one thing that we want to do is to make the material available to people. We want them to be able to find what we have in the collection and then to have access to it. So one of the things that I used to love to do, and I hope it continues, is that once a year for the choral direction class, they would request the use of the *Cantiones Sacrae* by Byrd and Tallis. It's an Elizabethan publication and we would sit around the table and the teacher of the class, Paddy Russell, would tell everybody about how the publication came to be. And we sing *O Nata Lux* from it.

Paddy Russell: We're going to sing a piece called *O Nata Lux de Lumine* by Thomas Tallis, who was a great English composer of the mid-16th century. He was born in 1505 and died in 1585, known in his own time as the father of music. And the piece is taken from a published collection of 1575 *Cantiones Sacrae*, a publication which he shared with his colleague and who had been a pupil of his William Byrd.

Kathy Adamson: It's one of my favourite items in the collection because it has the whole history of music publishing in the United Kingdom wrapped up in it because Byrd and Tallis had the monopoly on printing music at the time, so nobody else was allowed to even produce music staves on a piece of paper.

Paddy Russell: We have the original part books. And the extraordinary thing is that, particularly before they were restored about four or five years ago, you could actually smell London, you could smell the pages, and you could smell wood smoke. Um, in the pages, now they've been rebound and they, you can't quite smell it the way it was, but it was extraordinary.

Kathy Adamson: Yes. You do have to be a little bit careful with the paper, although it's pretty robust. We make sure that everybody's washed their hands beforehand. And I'm also I'm sitting right there around the table with them. So to make sure that they don't turn the pages too robustly.

Paddy Russell: This particular little piece is the smallest item in this collection, and it's a setting of the first verse of an office hymn for the Feast of the Transfiguration.

Kathy Adamson: The thing that I liked was getting the originals out and having the students realise that this was something that was used at the time of the composers. So we did a similar thing with a Haydn quartet, and it was a printed copy, it wasn't a manuscript or anything, but it was published during Haydn's lifetime. So I remember one of the students saying, 'Is that like the real thing?' And I said, 'No, it's not *like* the real thing. It *is* the real thing.' Chances are, Haydn actually looked at this and declared it OK for publication.

Paddy Russell: Have we all sung this piece? No, you don't know? That's fine. I mean, can we just get on and just sing a little bit? It's just a tiny little hymn. And you really have the tune, it's a tune and a bass, essentially... with three voices adding a little bit of, a little bit of continuo in the middle.

Anna Picard: In a building dedicated to creating musicians of the future, this tangible proximity to the past, and to all the performance traditions and styles that developed in the centuries between Tallis's London and the London of today, is thrilling. And it doesn't stop with rare scores, Tudor woodsmoke and Edwardian pencils. When we were researching another episode in this series, about the brilliant and glamorous pianist Harriet Cohen, we were able to handle the gold charm bracelet given to her by Arnold Bax and Ralph Vaughan Williams, each tinkling charm commemorating a significant performance in Cohen's career.

Anna Picard: I think the first thing to note is it's actually really quite heavy. It says gold leaf engraved on both sides. But I think it's gold. The weight of it is definitely gold. And yes, without actually putting it on, I would say this stands up to the small hands statement because she certainly had a narrow wrist.

Anna Picard: Harriet Cohen was said, even by herself, to have extremely small hands.

Anna Picard: So each of the leaves represents, I think, a world premiere or perhaps just her premiere performances in those cities. And there's one that's got a typo – Helsinki for Helsinki. Quite broad double chain with a nice secure clasp, here. And these rather lovely sort of narrow-ish tapered leaves, a little bit like the leaves on an olive tree. And here we are. Holland, the Concertgebouw, Bach Concerto number two. OK, I'm looking on the reverse. Palestine Symphony. Open brackets Sergeant. Venice Festival Ah. Bax Concerto September the 11th, 1953. Or is that 1933? I can't read it. It's exquisite. I wonder how frequently, if ever, she actually wore it. You certainly could not play the piano while you were wearing this. Ah, this is the gift tag, as it were, also made of gold. 'Harriet Cohen, in admiration from R Vaughan Williams and Arnold Bax'. And this is the pleasing sound it makes. [tinkle]

Anna Picard: Maintaining the collection isn't simply a question of careful handling and storage. In the luthiers' workshop, a small team of dedicated individuals make practical magic with lathes and planes and pegs and pigments, supporting the student violinists, viola players, cellists, lutenists and guitarists in their efforts to make the most beautiful sounds.

Barbara Meyer: OK. My name is Barbara Meyer, and I'm the curator of the string instruments. And I arrived at the Academy at the beginning of 2013. And I'm overlooking the plucked and bowed string instruments.

Anna Picard: And how many instruments in total is that, Barbara?

Barbara Meyer: So probably about 300, maybe two, 350. And also a bow collection.

Barbara Meyer: Carefully brushing the instrument from the inside. We're just removing dust so we can see the wood surface and assess whether there are any problems or cracks or whatever.

Barbara Meyer: We don't use the sandpaper hardly ever. But for fingerboards. Fingerboard needs. It's called, some people call it shooting or they call it dressing a fingerboard. And it's part of a regular repair or maintenance job on every string instrument because the metal strings wear the fingerboard, even though it's ebony is very, very hard wood. And occasionally you have almost like visible grooves in the fingerboard and those need to be adjusted.

Barbara Meyer: And then we had planing of wood, which of course is a, is a regular occurrence in a workshop. And depending on the type of wood, it will sound really quite different.

Barbara Meyer: Well, you would be preparing small pieces of wood for certain repairs, or you would be preparing maybe counter forms. Sometimes we, as you can see on the instrument, we reinforce cracks or sometimes strengthen the instrument, the inside, the plates or the ribs.

Anna Picard: I was really fascinated by what you were doing with those three bridges. Dropping them on the table. Tell me about the process of listening when you're working with wood.

Barbara Meyer: It's a common way of assessing among musical instrument makers, you, even the wood, the raw planks for instruments. There are so many ways of assessing, but just gently kind of rubbing or striking you, knocking, you hear pieces of wood or small wood planks, have a certain tone. A similar way of assessing maybe the quality or the hardness of the wood. We use it for soundposts and also for bridges, as you have seen. So comparing different pieces of wood on the same

surface and just listening to what they sound like, I think it just gives you a little reading of how hard maybe the wood is and a little bit of the way it, it... how fast or how slow it grew and how, how dense the wood is. Sound is a very common parameter for musical instrument makers I think.

Anna Picard: IJmkje van der Werf is one of the luthiers working part-time in the workshop.

IJmkje van der Werf: Yeah, I think you use it together with feeling also and we, yeah, we just by doing it very often you, you get some kind of subconscious knowledge or experience and then, then you just get an instinct of if you, if you, if it's sounding bright or dark and then you, you think if this cello has really dark sound, but you want it to be brighter, you use the bright bridge, obviously.

Anna Picard: In a climate-controlled glass case, a few steps from the luthiers' workshop, is the most stunning instrument in the collection, a Stradivarius violin that was made in Cremona in 1709 and was later named after the Italian virtuoso Giovanni Battista Viotti, who moved to London in 1792. It's an instrument that the Canadian violinist and guest professor James Ehnes knows and loves.

James Ehnes: I've been lucky to see the instrument a lot and play on it a good amount, and every time I open the case, it sort of takes my breath away with just how just, beautiful it is. You know, sometimes you see those movies, you know, that the protagonist will open up the chest of treasure and it's under-lit, right? That's sort of the way it feels with this thing. It just it has an internal glow to the to the varnish that is just, kind of unlike almost anything else.

James Ehnes: I would bet that no one has played a note on this since the last time I played it, which was in November of 2019.

Anna Picard: Can you explain why you, why you think that?

James Ehnes: Well, first of all, I know the way that they take care of the collection here, but you'd get a sense of an instrument being a little bit rigid when it has not kind of flexed. You know, the, the amazing thing about the tables of these instruments is they're extremely flexible *this* way and extremely rigid *that* way. So I think basically, you know, wood sits long enough and it doesn't it doesn't vibrate and it has, or doesn't vibrate in the same way. And it has a slightly taut feeling to it that it starts to waken up and gain a little bit of flexibility as the wood is vibrating more.

James Ehnes: The table, when I refer to the table... That's basically the top of an instrument. I don't know why they call it the table, you wouldn't want to put a drink on it. But there you have it.

James Ehnes: It's like a spring, you know, if a spring has just been sitting. It's not as springy, you know, it gets a little bit more flexible as it's moved.

James Ehnes: I mean, it always sounds beautiful, but there's an immediacy that becomes, it gets quicker with the response the more that it's played.

Anna Picard: What I can't get over is the strength of that sound. It's really... it's big, isn't it?

James Ehnes: Yeah. Yeah, it's big in a, in a deceptive kind of way. I mean, violins, they're not loud, you know, the way like a trombone is, exactly. But Stradivari's, one of the things that makes him really unique, I think, is his understanding of projection was really, really ahead of his time. At the time that he was building. I mean, of course, he was building them for royalty and nobility. And he was a very wealthy man. His instruments were really coveted, but by players, it was a little bit more mixed because a lot of the top violinists of the day preferred these very sort of sweet, smaller instruments. But Stradivari was strangely focused on projection during a time where that wouldn't have seemed to have been a big priority. People were playing in smaller spaces, but this was a focus of his really kind of throughout his career. He wanted to get that mix of tonal beauty with projection that could fill larger spaces. And it was really in the 19th century when concert halls were getting bigger, people were performing for larger audiences, it was at that point that some of the really coveted German violins or instruments, even by earlier Italian makers, they... they didn't quite take off in the same way that the instruments of Stradivari and, and his contemporary or basically his contemporary Guarneri del Gesù, like those instruments, as people were sort of adapting them for bigger spaces and getting them a little bit punchier, they just... they really kind of soared to new heights. And the thing that I think is particular about Stradivari's method of, of tonal projection is that it, it tends to fill a space no matter the size of that space. And it's not that it's louder. It's just it speaks into corners of the room.

And that's why a great Stradivari, playing it with an orchestra, it can draw the attention even when the whole orchestra is playing along. Sometimes people, they're like, 'Oh, that violin was really loud.' It's like, well, I don't know that the violin was really loud, but it was what your ear was listening to. It was what drew your attention.

Anna Picard: Nearly all of the instruments and bows looked after by Barbara Meyer and her team are loaned out for playing by students and other musicians. Not the Viotti because it's such a pristine example of the pinnacle of Cremonese violin making. Sheldon Gabriel is the instrument loans co-ordinator, a sort of matchmaker between students, instruments and bows. So, how delicate a business is it fixing up a student with the right bow? How much of it is the suitability of the bow to the violin? And how much of it is the suitability of the bow to the hand of the player?

Sheldon Gabriel: I think it's all completely equal. They're all equally as important. It's amazing how different violins, violas, cellos and bows perform with different people. And I think that's related in some way to the kind of the muscle structure and the playing style of the player as much as it is the actual kind of instrument or bow like how it's constructed, the weight, the flexibility. I think all of these components are extremely important and you might find an instrument or a bow that doesn't work very well with one student may work extremely well with another, and there may be a bow that doesn't work well with a violin, a particular violin, but it might work amazingly with another one.

Anna Picard: And the longer that you've been doing this this job, I mean, it sounds like you're choreographing a sort of three-way dance: player, instrument, bow. Have you developed a kind of instinct for what's going to fit that person?

Sheldon Gabriel: So many times, like a student will come and say, 'Oh my, violin's too big, it's too small. Like, this is not correct or my bow's too heavy.' But when you look at it, it's not necessarily the size, it's something else. There's a problem, like maybe the bridge position is wrong in the set-up or like the, the sounding length of the string, or there's some other adjustments that you need to make. So it's really good to get all this information, but sometimes if you just go to try and appease them purely on one factor, you're going to head down the wrong path. That's why I've kind of learned you need to just look at the bigger picture and see what's kind of going on and just provide multiple options, really.

Anna Picard: There's one collection of treasures that is not on display to the public, and it's devoted to a man who was much loved in the Academy, the late composer and conductor, Oliver Knussen. Philip Cashian, Head of Composition, invited me to take a look.

Phil Cashian: So this cabinet has been specially built to house books about Olly Knussen's favourite composers, and we also have some scores, and a few recordings, but mainly it's just books. You know, Mahler, Stravinsky, Debussy, Stockhausen, Henze, Takemitsu and Berg, some books by Boulez about conducting, all sorts of interesting things. I think there's about seven different editions of *Moby Dick* as well. One of Olly's little quirks!

Anna Picard: And the objects which are leaping out to me from here are all these owls.

Phil Cashian: Yes, Olly loved owls. He had a real passion for them. He had stepping stones in his garden that were owls and their eyes lit up like, you know, solar powered. Yeah, he... there were owls everywhere. I think this is my favourite - this is an owl metronome... let's wind it up and see what happens. Yeah.

Anna Picard: Fantastic. I love the fact that you slide the bow tie up and down to set the tempo.

Phil Cashian: Yes! And this is a little owl's got Owl Barn Bird written on it. So it's combining one of his favourite composers with owls there. And there's also *O Hototogisu!*, the little bird.

Anna Picard: Tell us about the significance of the little Japanese bird.

Phil Cashian: Well, Olly got that in Tokyo, and one of the last pieces he wrote was *O Hototogisu!* for Claire Booth and BMG. So, yeah, that's, that's the piece. And the piece is shaped. I think he wrote the piece so it has like a structure which is shaped like Mount Fuji. That was kind of the idea behind the piece. And he quotes the bird in the piece. So and he wrote that whilst he was, was teaching here. So that's, yeah, that's I mean his last few pieces I think he wrote while he was a professor here at the Academy. And there's a few wonderful little things here as well. I think these I think he uses in a piece, I'm not sure these kind of little percussion instruments. I'm not sure which orchestral piece they were in.

Anna Picard: They're monkeys...

Phil Cashian: Yeah. Little monkeys. Oh, yeah. They're rather sweet. Two more in different pitches. Little soldiers, I suppose.

Anna Picard: Fabulous.

Phil Cashian: Yeah. So there's another owl there, they're everywhere. And the picture of Stravinsky was Olly's as well up there. But I just like to have Stravinsky up there looking down on us, making sure we're doing the right thing.

Phil Cashian: Olly was the Richard Rodney Bennett Professor of Music here for four years, and he conducted the orchestra, the Manson Ensemble, which is the new music ensemble. And he taught composition in the department, he gave seminars and was just a wonderful, wonderful person to have around and in the building.

Phil Cashian: And he was my old teacher as well. So there's a very personal connection for me. We had him in as a kind of visiting composer for a year or so, and then we created the post for him. So I think it was the last five, four or five years of his life he was coming in every term and teaching, conducting and teaching, which was which was really great.

Anna Picard: Do you think it's fair to say he was one of the most loved composers in Britain?

Phil Cashian: Absolutely. Yes. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And one of the most influential as well – as a composer and as a conductor, because obviously he really championed and really made, you know, very much part of what he did as a conductor was to champion young composers and to give lots of young composers their first probably big professional performances and to commission very young composers as well through his work at Tanglewood and just through his love for new music and young composers. So he is incredibly important since, you know, since the 1960s on really. A huge source of inspiration for us all.

Anna Picard: What was he like as a teacher?

Phil Cashian: He was an amazing teacher. What was incredible about Olly, because when I had lessons with him, when I was at Guildhall, when I was 22, 23, and I was probably just showing him rubbish, I kind of cringe when I think, you know, what I took to him, but obviously he could see something and what was wonderful was looking back, he could kind of see into the future and see what... he was showing me scores like Tippett and Stravinsky and some of his own sketches. And I think he kind of knew where I was going, even though I maybe didn't know myself. You know, and he just had this incredible ability to kind of know what it was that you needed, even though he didn't know yourself yet. I always feel when I'm composing that Olly's, I'm going to get a bit upset in a minute, I always feel Olly's kind of watching, you know, he's looking over my shoulder. And one of the great things about having Olly here when he was working at whenever I was in the middle of the day, I always rang him when I was in the middle of working because just hearing him talk down the phone was so exciting right up to the very end and so inspirational, just to hear Olly talking down the phone, it made me want to, you know, go back into the room and get composing. And so he was just incredibly, um, you know, he just was a really inspiring person and he just knew everything about music, knew every piece ever written. He's a genius, basically, and a lovely person.

Anna Picard: From owls and monkeys to bugs, bees and bows, there are more treasures in this building than those displayed on walls and in cases. The Academy's real treasures are its people. Whether writing new music, singing from a Tudor part book, poring over Mendelssohn's handwriting, flexing the glorious sound of a precious violin, or playing a symphony by Beethoven, who knew the owner of that violin, this is a living tradition, tended by a small army of experts in different fields. The past, present and future converge here, and every piece of music that was once new is made new again when it is performed by a new generation of musicians.

Natalie Steed: That was episode five of Short Stories: 200 years of the Royal Academy of Music. It was presented by Anna Picard and was produced by Natalie Steed.

The full list of music featured in this episode can be found in the episode description. To hear more short stories subscribe to our podcast or go to the Royal Academy of Music website and search for podcasts.