

A Visit to the MIM – the Musical Instrument Museum

Pete Showman

(Photos by Pete Showman except as noted)

Prompted by good reviews from Dave Barton and Allan French (Fiddler's Rag, April 2013), in April Dinah and I made a rather long day trip from Tucson to visit Phoenix's Musical Instrument Museum – commonly known as The MIM (www.mim.org).

Included with the ticket purchase is an audio guide that's triggered as you approach most exhibits, so you can proceed at your own pace and in your own order. The clips often include samples of music played on displayed instruments or by featured artists, along with descriptive information.

The museum has more than can easily be seen in one day, so we didn't catch all of it. Here's a sampling of some of what we had time to see.

Near the ticket desk is the Orientation Gallery, which mostly displays guitars and guitar-like instruments. Many are fanciful, and some looked pretty hard to play. For example I wouldn't want to have to try to keep the 23 strings of this Indian *Chaturangui* (slide guitar) in tune – but the fretboard inlays sure are beautiful. The eight main strings are fretted while



the other 15 resonate as you play – and tune, and tune.

On the whimsical side we liked this “lyre guitar” (France, ca. 1815), which seemed designed to look like a face.

Other guitars included a couple of “harp guitars” with a group of pluckable but non-fretted strings set beside the



Dinah Showman photo

regular guitar strings, a two-necked electric model, one neck with 6 and the other with 12 strings, and a narrow-bodied electric (shaped about like a backpacker guitar) surrounded by a curved bracket shaped like the outline of a regular guitar.

The Octobasse

Behind the orientation gallery is a room featuring one of the most spectacular instruments we saw, an “octobasse.” This is like a stand-up bass on steroids; at 12 feet 3 inches tall it's almost twice the size of a standard bass. Its three strings are tuned C0 (16.3 Hz), G1 and C1. (The lowest note on a regular bass is E1, about 41 Hz.) Most people can't hear notes below about 20 Hz, so they'd only hear overtones of the lowest notes. It's so tall that the player stands on a step to bow it, and levers near the neck (see inset) are used to press the strings. You can see and hear it in action here: www.tinyurl.com/OctobasseAtMIM.



Dinah Showman photo ; inset from violinstudent.com

Pete dwarfed by the MIM's Octobasse Replica

Only three were made; this instrument is a replica of one made in France around 1850. Berlioz was a fan and wrote pieces calling for it, but for some reason (!) it never caught on.

A bit of trivia we learned later: The sound of the MIM's instrument was recorded at the museum for use in the recent movie *The Hunger Games*.

The Ground Floor Galleries

The **Experience Gallery** has instruments you can try, probably aimed primarily at the young set. When we were there they were mostly percussion instruments, and being young at heart, we gave some of the gongs a try.



Dinah tries a tuned set of gongs ...



... and their big brother.

The **Mechanical Music Gallery** has a host of self-playing instruments that goes well beyond the familiar player piano.

One of the most impressive is the Apollonia Dance Organ, made in Antwerp in 1926 for use in dance halls. Operated by compressed air, it includes an organ, two accordions, two saxophones and a drum set. You can see and hear it in action at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MF1tnXpn-bA.

An instrument closer to home for us fiddlers is the Violono Virtuoso, a machine that plays a regular violin. According to the descriptive plaque, “The violin is fingered by a special type of electromagnetically driven levers and bowed by small motorized self-rosining wheels. Vibrato is created by moving the tailpiece back and forth. All four strings can be played simultaneously, allowing the violin to play four-part harmony.” They were made from 1905 to 1930 and were “popular in cafes, bars and ice cream parlors.” Quite a gadget, but not very portable. The photo below shows the rosined wheels; a few of the levers that press the strings are to the left.



The Violono Virtuoso's “bowing” wheels

There's also an **Artist's Gallery** with exhibits covering many performers such as Django Reinhardt and “Stuff” Smith. At most of them you can hear examples of the artists' music on your audio guide.

Among the mementos are some oddities, such as this violin used by Joshua Bell as a child. It illustrates why you should never back a car over a violin – even if it's in a case.



The Geographic Exhibits

The second floor of the museum comprises ten rooms, each displaying instruments from a different part of the world. We only had time to cover Europe and about half of the U.S. / Canada exhibits, and then quick-marched through the rest just to get a feeling for what we were missing.

Many of the exhibits include short videos showing some of the instruments being played, such as this one about Swedish instruments, including the nyckelharpe (keyed fiddle) shown here.



The displays for each country or region are necessarily limited, usually to a dozen or so instruments and other displays on a 10 or 15-foot segment of wall. Here are a few I found interesting:

- A funky German fiddle (geige) from the mid 19th century.
- A French accordion from around 1880, apparently for those who felt it needed more volume for people in the cheap seats above.



- A strange picture that I didn't see described. It could be titled "What the well-dressed fiddler might wear," maybe at Carnival, or on Halloween? Note the spiral bow hair.



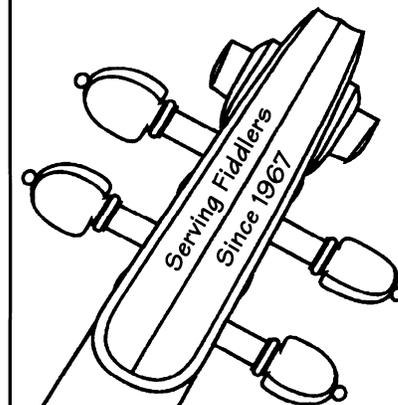
All in all we enjoyed our visit, and hope to return before long to see some of what we missed. Their website also has quite a bit of information about their exhibits. Check it out.

You can see the photos in color at www.scvfa.org/newsletter/articles/

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