



Michael Atherton

**Musical Instruments and
Sound-Producing Objects
of Oceania**

The collections of
the Australian Museum

This book contributes to our knowledge and awareness of musical

instruments and sound-producing objects in the region called Oceania. The author uses principles of organology to describe a research project at the Australian Museum. He explains the classification, provenance and cultural significance of diverse objects that were individually examined and measured.

Four main sections are reflecting the regions of Oceania: Indigenous Australia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical instruments and sound-producing objects reveal a great diversity, as do the instruments in the Melanesian section, in particular Papua and New Guinea; some objects being exquisitely designed and crafted. The Polynesian section includes objects collected on the voyages of Captain James Cook, as well as different types of flute. By combining introductory essays with quality photographs and a numbered catalogue of basic nomenclature, vernacular names and dimensions, the book constitutes a valuable resource.

Michael Atherton is a Professor of Music at the University of Western Sydney. He is a composer, multi-instrumental performer and ethnomusicologist with expertise in Australian musical instruments and Asia-Pacific musical identities. His numerous recordings include creative realizations of ancient Egyptian music, cross-cultural collaborations, film scores, and electro-acoustic improvisations.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
AND SOUND-PRODUCING
OBJECTS OF OCEANIA

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MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND SOUND-PRODUCING OBJECTS OF OCEANIA



Left – Making panpipes and baler shell idiophones for public performances (1998).

Right – Author playing a baler shell idiophone for an Australian Museum Open Day (1998).

Lower – A copy of a *burral* (end-blown flute from the Torres Strait Islands) made by the author.

INTRODUCTION

In 1993 I was artist-in-residence at the Australian Museum (AM), where I developed and led public events featuring musical instruments from the collections of the Museum and, where appropriate, submitted initial findings to the Anthropology Department. The aim was to bring the public into contact with the music of Oceania. I had an idea about hands-on experience to bring the public closer to the use of found objects as instruments. So, thinking of the Pacific Islands and the widespread use of shells – in jewellery, as artefacts, as tools, as drinking vessels, and shells as rattles and trumpets (the conch), even as currency; I wanted to use shells for percussion and to surprise people. I asked the Museum to provide me with a large number of shells from an offsite repository. These shells had no specific provenance and were unlikely to be displayed.

I acquired northern baler shells (*Melo amphora*) of different sizes and pitch when struck with rubber covered mallets made from dowel; and I was able also to devise several shell percussion idiophones. In addition, the Museum provided twenty large conch shells (*Charonia tritonis*). I adapted these for blowing by making embouchure holes according to specifications from Polynesian conch shells in the Pacific collections. To augment this instrumentarium, I made panpipes from seasoned bamboo, as well

as transverse and end blown flutes. The instruments were featured in improvisation sessions that I devised for Museum visitors, assisted on different occasions by friends and colleagues, Victor Monasterio, an Andean music specialist, and Rodney Berry, a sound artist. The performances were interspersed with brief explanations of specially chosen items from the collections. Most of these were for viewing only, and therefore were handled carefully, according to AM conservation protocol, using white cotton gloves.

In addition to presenting public events, I spent time documenting aspects of the collections. It was then I came into contact with several collections: Indigenous Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities), South East Asia, the Pacific Islands and Africa. As a result of this investigation I noticed that minimal scholarly attention had been given to music making, and that the extent of the collection and details of its contents remained unpublished. This provided the impetus to assist the Australian Museum. Fortunately, I was destined to return to the Museum in March 1998 to continue my investigation, with the award of a fellowship donated by the widow of the late collector and benefactor, Leo Fleischmann. My aim during this residency was to research the collections and gather data for the AM and its communities, focusing on Oceanic musical instruments and sound-producing objects.

The initial findings were published in an internal report to the Director and followed up with a published article (Atherton 1999). The report was influenced by organology – the science of musical instruments and their classification. The word ‘organology’ is derived from the Greek (ὄργανον – ‘organon’, instrument and λόγος – ‘logos’, study.) It was also aimed at encouraging the Museum to invite cultural owners to come and select and comment on objects from the collections, and when possible, present public performances.

An emphasis on taxonomy remains central to this text, offering the Museum a more systematic classification and naming of instruments. Nothing, however, can better the sound of an instrument in the context of the cultural values held by the people who play it. On a personal level, this is always paramount. However, at this stage, the voices of those cultures represented by the objects I researched are yet to be heard. And my intention remains steadfastly to assist the AM to develop exhibitions and performances to enable these voices to be heard (Downer 1997). The research process is described below and augmented with ethnomusicological considerations.

Examining the collections

Granted three months leave from the University of Western Sydney in 1998, and supported by the Leo Fleischmann Fellowship, I accepted an invitation from Head Scientist, Dr Jim Specht, to base myself in his Division of Anthropology. My first task was to draw up a timeline for the many hours I would need to spend in the closed collection stores. My essential tools, thanks to advice from distinguished ethnomusicologist Dr Richard Moyle, were a laptop computer, measuring devices and a camera.

Daily contact with the collections began in March 1998. I inspected the Museum's registers and all its large and small card indexes, coming across some incorrectly identified objects, some that were mis-named and others that were misplaced. Twenty-four hours per week were spent in the different climate-controlled storerooms, removing items temporarily from their shelves for examination, measurement, description and photographic capture. I called on the Museum's conservators for advice and made recommendations about the condition of some objects. Museum malacologists and botanists provided me with answers about materials. I also made good use of the excellent research library.

Between March and June 1998 I examined over 1400 instruments in the Pacific collection. Approximately two thirds of these were

from Papua New Guinea. Each object was checked and re-checked against the registers and card collections. I made basic measurements and wrote simple descriptions using a classification template:

Type

Register prefix – A, B, E, H, A.U.R., and P.U.N. – followed by a number;

Provenance – place, village, region, state;

Description – language/name/type/material;

Dimensions – height (H), length (L), width (W), diameter (D) or (De), circumference (C);

Collection – date collected, if known;

Registered – date registered.

Measurements were taken in millimetres. Closed tubular flutes and panpipes were measured between nodes or between a node and the open end. Tube diameters were measured for the internal bore. The same approach was applied to hollowed log idiophones: depths were measured to the internal edge of the slit. The recorded length of the object did not include any projections. Vessel flutes and gourd objects were measured at the circumference and for length. The diameter of a round finger or vent hole was measured (D), or lengthways (W) if ovate.

Issues and Problems

Examining the collections, spending hours alone in climate-controlled storerooms, handling hundreds of objects, using white cotton gloves, I contemplated the silence of these instruments, each one a ‘detemporalised end-product...abstracted from the circuits of exchange’ (Thomas 1994:117).

The act of collecting and housing objects in a museum is a particularly Western habit. Is this because we live in a ‘museum culture, clinging on to the artefacts of the past’? (Mellers and Martin 1989: viii) Does collecting reflect the colonial past? And does the process of decolonization render objects as having assumed a political importance unrecognised at the time of removal from their cultural

context? (Bonshek 1996:270) Lots of questions arose for which there are many points of view.

The acquisition of material culture, which includes musical instruments, covers all types of objects, ranging from the purely functional through to the purely decorative. It encompasses all items of historic, aesthetic, sentimental and monetary heritage. The Australian Museum is deeply committed to providing assistance and access to a wide range of enquirers, including community groups, researchers and the general public.

Anthropology staff have always promoted the involvement of Indigenous peoples whose cultural heritage are represented in the collections. Close relationships with Indigenous people, within and beyond Australia, are paramount, and this includes the training and employment of Indigenous people where relevant and desirable.

Collection management, scientific research, public programs, commercial ventures and policy development are the major functions of the Museum. There is an Indigenous outreach program to provide advice, services, loans and training to Aboriginal communities and cultural centres throughout New South Wales. While collections cover most of the Pacific Islands region, the acquisition program concentrates currently on material from Melanesia, particularly contemporary items and women's work, largely under-represented in the collections.

A search of Museum registers, which date back to the 1880s, reveals that objects were mainly collected by 'traders, missionaries, plantation owners, government officers, explorers and museum staff, who may have been natural scientists or non-specialists' (Bonshek 1995:265). Today, Museum policy is less object-oriented *per se* and more concerned with cultural identity. Cultural owners of objects have a role to play in their interpretation and maintenance. For example, policies relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are well-developed and implemented.