Double bass

Place of origin: Italy (made)

Date: ca. 1680 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Sawed and purfled [bordered] sycamore, with engraved brass

Museum number: 487&A-1872

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

This giant double bass was owned by Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846), a flamboyant virtuoso from Venice, who settled in England in 1794. Known as 'il Drago' (the Dragon), he enjoyed great success and his playing of this instrument was likened to 'a tame lion, which having lost its ferocity retained all its strength and grandeur'.

Dragonetti collected snuff boxes and dolls, and he was notorious for his very poor command of English, even after having lived in the country for many years. In about 1830 Dragonetti presented this instrument to the 3rd Duke of Leinster (1791-1874), who in turn presented it to this museum, following the 'Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments', in 1872.

Dimensions

Length: 288 cm total, Length: 200.5 cm body, Width: 105 cm maximum, Depth: 30.5 cm

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Object history note

Extract from a lecture by V&A conservator Reg Dee “Restoration of musical instruments 1964 – 68” at the UKIC/ V&A Christmas Symposium on Early Musical Instruments, 15th December 1983:

"For example, the huge, approximately 9ft high, 17th century Double Bass (487-1882) presented quite a challenge. Attributed to the Italian, Gasparo de Salo, this instrument formed part of the collection of the celebrated double bass soloist, Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846) who presented it to the Duke of Leinster. In 1872, the Duke presented it to the Victoria and Albert Museum. By 1964, the Double Bass was in urgent need of restoration since it was, quite literally, beginning to fall apart at the seams. The structure (the back and ribs) was made of sycamore and the belly of pine. Shrinkage had taken place, particularly on its back where a long strip of sycamore had been added to make up the 3/8" gap. This strip was removed during restoration. Prior to closing the gap, other splits running along the ribs were closed by pressure from clamps after the application of Scotch glue. The corner blocks also were temporarily removed to enable the clamps to close these splits on the ribs and, once the rib joint had been re-aligned, one-inch linen tape was applied internally to strengthen the joints. For the crack along the back, I found that a simple, and inexpensive, method of fixing and holding a long split in position was to use a 1" linen tape to criss-cross the instrument to form a soft cage. Padded blocks could then be inserted under the tape at various points to apply pressure where required in order to hold the re-aligned and glued area of the instrument in position. This proved very effective. It took three months to take this double bass apart and put it together again, which is the longest time I spent on any one instrument. It is now on display at the entrance to the Musical Instruments gallery (Room 40A; via the Costume Court)."

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O58642/double-bass-unknown/