

ICOM MUSIC *Bulletin* September 2026



CONTENTS

MARIE MARTENS:	
Chair's message	3
SARAH DETERS:	
ICOM MUSIC 2026 Annual Meeting in Edinburgh	5
ANA ESTER TAVARES:	
Harmonia das Virtudes: Iconographic study and renaming of a tapestry at the Museu Nacional da Música	6
MATHIAS ØSTREM, MORTEN HAUGDAHL:	
How Do You Collect Fandom? Public Participation and Exhibition Development in WE<3YOU	8
ZAMI RAVID:	
The Music Box of Zami Ravid. A private museum, destroyed and rebuilt	12
MILAN BARBÉ:	
Low-cost photogrammetry for organology: a reproducible workflow for 3D documentation of historical musical instruments.	14
MIMI WAITZMAN:	
Musical Bodies at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	19
JAYME KURLAND:	
Olympic-sized ambitions at the V&A East Storehouse	21
ROBERT ADELSON:	
In the Music Museum: Seeing, Hearing, and Understanding Historical Instruments	23
PANAGIOTIS POULOPOULOS:	
New book: Unsound Supplies: Noisy Matter and the Making of Modern Soundscapes. Edited by Fanny Gribenski, David Pantalony and Viktoria Tkaczyk	24
ELIZABETH WELLS:	
Lance Whitehead (1964–2026) In memoriam	25

Cover: Visitors at the Wolfson Gallery in St Cecilia's Hall, Edinburgh.

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT BULLETIN: 09 November 2026 | Submissions to the editor: jonathan.smb@ed.ac.uk

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The exhibition points towards a confident and necessary direction for museums: one in which the distinctiveness of individual communities, identities and histories are recognised with care, while the shared expressive capacities of art and music are used to build deeper forms of connection. The work of acknowledging historical injustice, validating marginalised voices and confronting existential threats to creative expression is ongoing and essential, especially in the current political climate. Yet *Musical Bodies* also demonstrates that this work, at its best, can lead towards cohesion, empathy and mindful action. Together with the other collections and encounters I experienced in New York, the exhibition has reinforced my belief that musical instruments and sound cultures are exceptionally powerful tools for shaping narratives that can activate positive change.

Mimi Waitzman's study travel was made possible with Art Fund support.



Brazilian beatbox duo engaging the audience

Art Fund_

Full reference for *Musical Bodies*: Strauchen-Scherer, Bradley, *Musical Bodies* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2026).

Jayme Kurland OLYMPIC-SIZED AMBITIONS AT THE V&A EAST STOREHOUSE

Many museums have come under public scrutiny over the ethics of having large parts of their collections inaccessible in off-site storage facilities, especially in light of issues of repatriation and looting. If museums are not willing to repatriate objects, especially those which are off view entirely, what is the point of maintaining such large collections which require dedicated staff and substantial financial resources to manage and store them?

In the last two decades, museums have begun to address some of these issues by showcasing their collections in storage. In the U.S., the Henry Luce Foundation has funded visible storage projects at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (DC),

Brooklyn Museum, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art (NYC), and many other museums have begun showcasing their previously off-view collections in a similar vein. While many, if not most, museums utilize off-site storage warehouses for the majority of their collections, these spaces are almost always closed to the public, aside from researcher requests.

In May of 2025, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London opened its new public storage facility, called the [V&A East Storehouse](#). In a repurposed press building from the 2012 London Summer Olympics, the V&A invites museum visitors into its large-scale storage facility. Guests drop their bags and coats in free lockers on the main floor and are directed into the Museum's visible storage building



New V&A East Storehouse

upstairs. Beginning on the second floor, there are 3 additional floors of visible storage. Guests can wander down halls with collection objects, some obscured by plexiglass, and others high enough to be unreachable. Large booklets are available for guests who want to know more about a particular object, and many objects have associated QR codes to learn more.

While the V&A closed their musical instrument galleries in 2010, I was pleasantly surprised to see musical instruments featured prominently on its storage shelves, albeit not displayed in particularly exciting ways. A [19th century English harp](#), the collection's [1521 Jerome of Bologna harpsichord](#), a [giraffe piano by Van de Does](#), a beautifully carved [19th century British upright piano](#), and a [vina donated by Tagore](#), among many other instruments were on view.

The storehouse is also the home of the David Bowie Centre, a comprehensive archive of instruments, documents, and costumes. Of note was the way the museum made this archive accessible. On the walls, small exhibits highlighted materials from the collection, but on the side of the

space, surrounded by archival boxes and storage shelves, visitors were invited to sit at a long table and open a facsimile archival box, which had copies of the collection's archival holdings—really inviting guests to experience working with archives firsthand! While I was there, people appeared to engage deeply with these materials.

The most remarkable part of the V&A Storehouse was not necessarily the objects on display. Rather, the expansive and open space offers the public a glimpse into the museum world. Knowledgeable staff are stationed throughout the floors of the museum, answering questions not only about objects, but about how museums operate. Visitors see museum staff accessing these collections and are even able to see researchers working with archival collections. While I did not see staff moving objects while I visited, based on the floorplan, guests would be able to see how carefully art handlers work with industrial equipment to move objects. It is rare for people to see the variety of behind-the-scenes labour which takes place in museums. Perhaps this opportunity could have a waterfall effect, giving the public a greater understanding of what museum work looks like, which might help justify its public funding?



The Museum's "Giant" double bass can be identified in the booklets placed around the Storehouse

Having visited the Storehouse, I did wonder how the day-to-day operations of collections staff have changed, as working in museum storage was once a private experience, now made public. Is it harder to retrieve objects for conservation and loans? Do staff, especially those in the visible conservation lab,

feel as though they are on view? Has their workflow changed? How productive do museum staff feel when they are on constant view? That said, I was impressed by the facility, and hope that this attempt at making the invisible visible may help our publics understand all that goes into museum work.

Robert Adelson IN THE MUSIC MUSEUM: SEEING, HEARING, AND UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL INSTRUMENTS

Oxford University Press, 2026. Hardback, 432 pages, 164 photographs. ISBN: 9780197804681; £91.00; also available as an e-book

Further information: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/in-the-music-museum-9780197804681?cc=gb&lang=en#>

In the Music Museum presents an alternative view of Western classical music, as heard through historical instruments rather than musical works. It provides a fascinating guide to 150 instruments preserved in 80 collections around the world. The instruments include the earliest or most representative examples of specific models or shed light on musical practice in a unique way. Some tell a particular story through their connection with individual musicians, famous or otherwise, while others are controversial or difficult to interpret.

The chapters give readers the analytical tools needed to look at, listen to, and think about historical instruments and to understand how this knowledge can in turn help us better appreciate music. The analysis of each instrument begins, as in a music museum, by looking at it: noting how to relate what one sees with the sounds produced by an instrument, and how those sounds influenced the way music was played. From a prehistoric seashell horn to an eighteenth-century clavichord, historical instruments are the objects that produced the music of the past, and as such they are of fundamental importance. The extensive companion website has recordings and videos that showcase many of the instruments that are illustrated and discussed in the book.

