

Centuries-old lute manuscript saved from export

27 October 2022

The 400-year-old manuscript will be acquired by the University of Edinburgh thanks to £73,100 funding from the National Heritage Memorial Fund.

A rare manuscript

This rare volume is one of the most important surviving sources of music for the lute, a very popular instrument in the 1600s and 1700s. It was made in Bavaria in about 1620 and is still in its original binding.

Written in French lute tablature – an early notation with similarities to modern guitar tabs – the music is international, including pieces by French, Italian and British composers. There are 320 works, 89 of which are not found in any other manuscript.

The manuscript was once owned by Arnold Dolmetsch, one of the founders of the Early Music movement, and has been important to lute scholarship for over a century.

Saved for the UK

At risk of being sold abroad, but the UK Government imposed an export bar on the book to give UK institutions the chance to secure it. Thanks to NHMF funding, the rare volume has been saved for the UK.

Sharing and understanding its music

The manuscript will be conserved, catalogued and digitised by the University of Edinburgh, ready to be used in research and teaching. Its music will be performed in concerts held at St Cecilia's Hall. Built in 1763, St Cecilia's is Scotland's oldest concert venue. Audiences will hear the music from the manuscript as it might have been performed by travelling musicians across the UK and Europe.

There remains much to be learned and this lute manuscript will provide an ongoing rich resource for uncovering more fascinating insights into Early music and our wider history.

Eilish McGuinness, Chief Executive of the NHMF

Eilish McGuinness, Chief Executive of the NHMF, said: "We are delighted to have awarded a grant to the University of Edinburgh to secure the future of this significant and rare musical manuscript. The manuscript had been at risk of export but now will be cared for in the university collections in perpetuity.

"It is so thrilling to think that John Dowland's beautiful piece, Lachrimae, is contained within the manuscript, showing the importance of British music and musicians and the influence they had on their contemporaries on the continent. There remains much to be learned and this lute manuscript will provide an ongoing rich resource for uncovering more fascinating insights into Early music and our wider history."

Other funders

Total funding came to £214,200. Support was received from the National Fund for Acquisitions and the Friends of the National Libraries. The university also drew funding from its own reserves and from donations, including from the Friends of St Cecilia's Hall.

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