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The music beckons...

Bengal can claim a very proud role in the establishment of one of the most unique museums in the world - the musical instruments museum - now called MIM. It is one of Brussels' oldest and most unusual attractions. A donation of over a hundred Indian traditional musical instruments by the late musicologist Raja Sourindra Mohan Tagore from his personal collection was one of the two major contributions that formed the initial collection for the museum founded in 1877.

The MIM is housed in a beautiful old Art Nouveau building that originally belonged to the department store 'Old England' at the corner of the Place Royale and the Rue de la Montagne de la Cour.

The collection that began in 1877 was formerly housed in a very small building, but moved to the present building in the year 2000. It is huge — over 1500 instruments are on display and more than 700 documents add to the information given on the boards. You can follow an Asian, African or Russian trail; or the one dedicated to Mozart or strings. The instruments are displayed under 90 themes. Every instrument is carefully labelled in French and Dutch with detailed descriptions.

Visitors to the museum are provided with infrared headphones — when standing beside an instrument, they can listen to a piece of traditional music typical to that instrument. For example, a Finnish kantele will play traditional Finnish tunes; a sitar will play a Hindustani piece. One can listen to over 200 recordings, dating as far back as to the music of the ancient Greeks and understand the instruments in the basement's interactive sound lab. The Museum was created with two collections of instruments — one belonged to the celebrated Belgian musicologist Francois-Joseph Fetis (1784-1871), bought by the Belgian government in 1872 and put on deposit in the Conservatory where Fetis was the first director. The other was a collection of over 100 Indian instruments offered to King Leopold II in 1876 by Rajah Sourindro Mohan Tagore (1840-1914).

The first curator

Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841-1924, the first curator enriched the museum considerably. By the time he died in 1924, the MIM boasted of

3666 musical instruments, and a detailed methodology of classification that is followed worldwide even today. A collector and maker of wind instruments and a noted acoustics expert, Mahillon exhibited an enthusiasm far beyond his honorary duties. In 1877, Mahillon created a restoration workshop in the MIM to restore damaged pieces and to make copies of instruments from other public collections of which no original examples existed in Brussels. Through friendly relations with Belgian diplomats in foreign posts, he managed to procure unusual pieces of great historical and organological value from as far as China and Mexico.

Bowed stringed instruments constitute the most interesting part of the collection, for the sheer variety of violins, violas, violoncellos, double-basses, kit-violins, treble violas, violas d'amore, violas da gamba and guitars from around the globe. With the growth of the collection, the place got so cramped that a major donor, Louis Cavens, threatened to withdraw his instruments. After moving the exhibits around several places, the present location was built up. There are four floors displaying instruments: Basement: mechanical instruments, music boxes, barrel organs, pianolas and so on.

Ground floor: traditional wind, string and percussion instruments from around the world. Of special note are the giant Chinese stone chimes. This set of hanging stone 'bells' is believed to be the only instrument that uses stone to make music.

The first floor: The development of modern orchestral instruments. Of particular interest are the two schools of instruments that were based in Brussels itself. Here is housed the famous Rottenburgh Alto recorder. In the 19th century, Brussels was the home of Adolphe Sax, and there is a good selection of instruments invented by him, including saxophones, saxhorns and other more unusual instruments.

The second floor: While string and keyboard instruments are well represented on the other floors, here you will find clavichords, spinets, virginals, organs and pianos, among others. You'll also find all sorts of violins, mandolins and guitars, as well as a violin maker's workshop.

There is also a concert hall, a somewhat expensive rooftop restaurant with panoramic views of Brussels, a research library and a gift shop.

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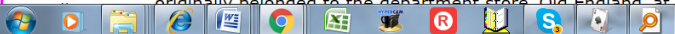
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