Kirby Sarah

***'A mystery, and viewless, Even when present': Exhibiting Music at International Exhibitions in Nineteenth-Century Britain***

Music played a complex role in nineteenth-century International Exhibitions—some of the most significant cultural institutions of the period, with a legacy in Britain reflected in the establishment of many major museums. As supposedly universal displays of human achievement across all art and industry, Exhibitions prompted vigorous debate about the position and appropriate use of music in such museum-spaces—questions still asked by curators and museologists of music in cultural institutions today. Music’s ephemeral nature meant it lacked the permanence of displays of the visual arts and industrial products—as *The Times* argued in 1873, physical objects ‘may be seen and judged, day after day’ but music required the ‘intervention of a medium’—and such difficulties were considered with some urgency, as they called into question the validity of some of the official ‘universalist’ Exhibition rhetoric. Instruments could be displayed, but through their silence were not considered to demonstrate the art of music. Individual performances were also organised, but still lacked the permanence of the plastic arts. This paper explores the way music functioned in a late-nineteenth-century museum context through the example of the International Exhibitions held in London between 1851 and the mid-1870s. It argues—through analysis of contemporary understandings of both music as an art, and the role and significance of museum or display spaces in the British cultural landscape—that the positioning of music within the Exhibition space forced musicians, critics and the public to actively reconsider and re-evaluate its nature. These debates present a Victorian pre-empting of Roman Ingarden and Lydia Goehr’s twentieth-century considerations of the properties of a musical work as an art-object, as the Exhibitions, with their clear expectation that music should be represented in physical space, forced an examination of these theoretical problems in real terms. When tangibly confronted with this same problem, the organisers of the Exhibitions also moved towards a concept of a ‘musical museum’, but in a far more practical way.

Sarah Kirby is a PhD candidate in musicology at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne, where she also tutors and lectures in nineteenth-century music history. Her current research explores music at International Exhibitions in the 1880s across the British Empire. She is the recipient of a number of scholarships and awards, including an Australian Government Endeavour Research Fellowship.