

Sent by email 12/13/2021 from Edward Cipullo, <cipulloe@gmail.com>

Dear editor,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing about the latest issue of *American Recorder*. In one article, *A World Class Collection*, the author positions ivory instruments as completely praiseworthy objects but does not consider the problematic provenance of the material or how the material contributes to the instruments' meaning. The author writes adoringly of 'acquiring ivory instruments' and calls them a 'pinnacle' of collecting. The photographs in the article emphasize and even heighten this attitude. Close up, high resolution shots give glamorous views of these ivory objects, views which dazzle the looker's eye into seeing nothing but glasslike outer finishes and carvings. I concede that the instruments are devastatingly beautiful, but tight angles - mouth watering as they are - prevent us from seeing the larger picture.

The main European importers of ivory from the 17th to the 18th centuries were slave trading companies. The Royal African Company of England and the Dutch West India Company of the Netherlands monopolized both markets and imported staggering amounts of ivory during the period. Ivory traveling to England often sailed parallel to slave ships along the 'triangular trade' route, and was sold at auction in plantation areas of the Americas; Dutch ivory went directly to the Netherlands. One article which lays out the breadth of the African-European ivory trade is Harvey M. Feinberg and Marion Johnson's "The West African Ivory trade in the Eighteenth Century: the '... and ivory' complex" for the 1982 issue of *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* (Volume 15, Number 3). The authors point out that the two trades were so closely related that, among other things, the slave trade is what allowed ivory to continue passing into England during its war with Spain at the beginning of the eighteenth century; the slave trade, deemed a 'necessity' by the government, kept the triangular route open for ivory to pass through. From these companies and others like them, ivory made its way throughout Europe, and it is no surprise that it went to areas familiar as centers for ivory instrument making, like Nuremberg, where Johann Gahn carved the recorder pictured in the article.

It seems reasonable to assume that the physical labor of enslaved people was integral to transporting ivory within Africa and to the West Indies. At the very least, the 19th century ivory trade's exploitation of slave labor - which sustained the production of piano keys - is well documented; NPR did a piece on this. This understanding should shade our opinion of what we are looking at when we examine these musical instruments. Perhaps it is not surprising that the same merchants who trafficked enslaved people are the same ones who made it possible for the Netherlands to import the ivory of 'no less than 12,298' dead elephants between 1706 and 1720, and England to do the same to the amount of 4000 dead elephants a year (see Feinberg & Johnson).

If we are interested in these recorders, and wish to learn about them fully in their capacity as objects, we should be interested in this disturbing history too. If we do not do this, we rip the instruments out of their historical context and risk fetishizing them.

We also risk preventing ourselves from learning how the use of ivory contributes to the meaning of these instruments. For instance, it is very possible that the context of colonialism and exploitation would have been *part* of the object's value in the 18th century. If anything, the intricate carvings seen in the article, particularly the curving lines reminiscent of the ocean waves which facilitated the ivory's passage to Europe, (which could have been intended to reference the material's 'exoticism'), testify that these recorders were meant to be seen publicly, and in the hands of a someone who wished to communicate a message of far-reaching wealth and power. It is difficult now to imagine the explicit message of domination and destruction communicated by ivory, but at the height of the trade it could have either been obvious or taken for granted. The intended consumer of the carved recorder by Nikolaus Staub may even have been the kind of individual who owned stock in one of these companies.

Glossy portrait photos of carved ivory draw attention to immaculate, smooth textures, and encourage us to appreciate the carefully worked surfaces that testify to the European maker's skill. But that's not enough; good history should dig beneath the surface as well.

I acknowledge that there are no easy answers to problems such as this. I also wish to add that the author of the article is not particularly culpable on this issue, not more than myself or others who work with historical instruments and copies of them. It is probably possible to appreciate them in an ethical way, too; my concern is only that the article's tone left me feeling like the author's objective was only to appreciate, and not to understand.

Ultimately, I mostly want to emphasize how important it is *that* these objects are made out of ivory, and that our conversations about them could be more meaningful if we considered them more fully. To the late 17th or early 18th century consumer, the carved ivory recorders seen in the article would have been imbued with a message that went beyond the gleam. If we do not acknowledge this, something of these instruments' original meaning is lost, and we fail to learn the most that we can about the people connected to them.

References/Further reading: (also Feinberg&Johnson above)
<https://www.britannica.com/place/central-Africa/Exploitation-of-ivory>
<https://www.npr.org/2014/08/18/338989248/elephant-slaughter-african-slavery-and-americas-pianos>