



Conductor Māris Kupčs

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# TREASURES OF RIGA



The collection of the Rīga Museum of History and Navigation (RVKM) contains around 400 musical instruments, some of them dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Specialists say that some of these instruments are rarities at the European level. Visitors can examine folk music instruments, as well as outstanding examples of classical music instruments. Ancient music scholars and experts from Germany and the United States have praised the rarities, in particular the RVKM trombone collection, expressing the desire to study them in depth, but also to establish partnerships to organise exhibitions and concert performances with the historical instruments.

To be sure, not all of the instruments are on display. Most of them are carefully warehoused. The ancient music expert, conductor and *Collegium Musicum Rīga* director Māris Kupčs occasionally examines them, tests their sound, and awakens them. Māris is a knowledgeable and convincing guide at the museum, and he has researched the collection for some 20 years. It seems that he could approach every stand that is dedicated to music with his eyes closed, though the stands are separated by the large rooms of the museum and by other objects that characterise the lives of the people of Rīga – dishware, apparel, jewellery, weapons, candelabras, sewing machines, books, etc.

It is down to the city of Rīga that people can view rare and historical instruments at the museum today. For many centuries, the local government ensured that musicians would have the best instruments from Germany, and no cost was spared. Many of the treasures are in excellent condition even today. When the *Collegium Choro Musici Rīga* and the *Collegium Musicum Rīga* orchestra performed Claudio Monteverdi's *Vespers of St Mary* at the Church of St Mary Magdalene on Easter in 2015, the authenticity of the sound was boosted by one of the instruments from the museum's collection – a sackbut or Baroque trombone. Documents accompanying the instrument note that it was manufactured during the early period of Classicism by master instrument builder Johann August Crone in Leipzig. It was the brass instrument builder and trombonist Vairis Nartišs who brought the three centuries old instrument back to life after a period of silence that perhaps lasted for 150 years.

Sadly, there are few opportunities to play the precious instruments from the museum, and Māris Kupčs is a bit disgusted about that. Instruments must be played if they are to survive without damage, but the museum has very strict rules about what can be done with its exhibits. On the other hand, these rules also allow us to evaluate these Rīga treasures and to brag about them.

One of the stands at the museum features brass instruments from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the aforementioned sackbut and others. Also in good condition is a German-manufactured French horn from the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which the museum received in 1895 from the administration of the Church of St Peter in Rīga. Another very rare set of instruments is made up of Russian horns, which speak to musical performances during the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each horn is of a different pitch, and each was used to play a single note. It is said that the set in Rīga is complete, though only some of the horns are exhibited. Russian horn performances were entertainments for rich people in the Russian Empire, and the horns were probably played by peasants. Each had his own horn to perform a single note, with the entire ensemble quickly performing the most respected melodies of the day.

## Trombones

The collection of trombones and French horns at the Rīga Museum of History and Shipping is more extensive and probably better than those in the home down of the master builder Crone, Leipzig, or, perhaps anywhere else in the world. The museum has a full collection of concert instruments from Crone, including a bass trombone, a tenor trombone and an alto trombone.

The collection features instruments from the periods of Baroque, Early Classicism and other eras. Visitors can observe the evolution of instruments from the past to the present, looking at how their form, the thickness of their materials and other nuances have changed over the course of time.

The trombone was not an orchestral instrument until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead it was used for church needs, usually replacing a missing voice in a choir. Trombones were also played from the steeples of churches to announce important events or emergencies. They were also played to greet guests to the city. The city of Riga bought the high-quality collection of 18<sup>th</sup> century trombones from Leipzig at the recommendation of the conductor and composer Georg Michael Telemann. Georg Philip Telemann's grandson, who was trained by his grandfather to become an outstanding musician, arrived in Rīga in September 1773 to become cantor of the Cathedral School. Soon, the younger Telemann was also the organist and accompanist of the Riga Cathedral. He was a universal musician who did almost everything, including the organisation of concerts and the direction of music for church celebrations. Telemann, like those who preceded and succeeded him, often wrote to the Rīga City Council with complaints about a shortage of good instruments and vocalists. Eventually the city authorities agreed to expand the range of instruments. The year that is engraved on the instruments of the Crone collection suggest that the city could not afford to buy all of the instruments at once, so that was a gradual process.

### Wagner? Which one?

The Hall of Columns at the Riga Museum of History and Shipping, one of the most outstanding public rooms in the style of Classicism in Rīga, was originally built to house a library. The excellent acoustics of the hall often ensure concert performances. Māris Kupčs' *Collegium Musicum* has filled the room with jewels of Baroque music more than just a few times. Two display cases in the Hall of Columns feature a selection of instruments, including a French horn, two bass trombones manufactured in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century by the master builder Hoffmann, a trumpet that may have been used by the guards of Rīga and is known at the museum as a heraldic trumpet, several traverse flutes and a trombone.

It might be added that traverse flutes were high-quality instruments, but as the standard height of concert pitch changed, the instruments were adapted to the new sound, and so they can no longer be used as authentic late –18<sup>th</sup> century instruments. The trombone, for its part, is in very good technical condition, and a bit of cleaning would allow it to be played even at the level of 440 Hz.

Most intriguing at the Riga Museum of History and Shipping is a fairly heavy, but also elegant conductor's baton that is in the next display case, with a little white hand featured on the part of the baton that the conductor clutches (a typical symbol of the Freemasons). The annotation states that the baton belonged to one R.H. Wagner. According to legend, it was Richard Wagner, who worked at the Riga City Theatre for two-and-a-half seasons from 1837 until 1839, but it is more likely that the baton belonged to someone else whose surname was Wagner.





### Musicians and others in Rīga

"We will find the names of city musicians in Rīga documents most often – complaints, requests, instructions, court documents, treasury documents, City Council minutes, church registers and petitions," Zane Gailīte has written in the book *On Music and Comedy in Rīga*. "They are everywhere." Musical instruments, in turn, talk to the habits and morals not just of musicians, but also others in Rīga.

One display case features a small pocket fiddle or *pochette* (French for "little pocket") – an instrument that could be carried around in a pocket. This is evidence of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when richer Latvians in Rīga began to observe "Ornateness Rules" that were dictated by the Germans.



The *pochette* is also seen in a representation of a public dance, with an elegant dress, shoes, purse, parasol and other treasures, including the little instrument that was used by the dance teacher.

There are two types of *pochettes* – the *rebec*, which is similar to a violin and was played under the chin or on the shoulder, as well as the zither-type *pochette*, which was held vertically. Careful observers will note that the re string of the Riga *pochette* is bound in a thread, which speaks to the techniques of Venetian performances in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The *Collegium Musicum Riga* orchestra has tested this nuance, and some musicians still use it. It is said to be a matter of taste, but the thread supposedly makes it easier to control the thickest string. The zither and bow are very elegant and high-quality in line with violin building traditions from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the instrument is engraved with the year 1781. One might think that violin builders seldom manufactured these

toy-like instruments, but that is not really true. Dance teachers were in much demand at that time, and the small fiddles were used to teach dance steps, as well as court etiquette.

### Even earlier

The exhibition "Rīga Under the Rule of Poland and Sweden (1581-1710)" includes a sculpture of a Swedish military drummer that is 1.6 metres high and can be operated with a special mechanism. The annotation states that "Rīga had a city musician from the 15th century. The City Council hired educated musicians who played chorales from the steeple of the Church of St Peter each morning and each evening with four apprentices. During the night his job was to stand in the steeple so as to warn the people of Rīga about any approaching dangers. The city musician and his apprentices also took part in various public events, including weddings and other celebrations. Other ensembles of musicians began to emerge in Rīga during the 17th century. Musicians most often used brass instruments, but audiences in Rīga were also familiar with string instruments such as a viola, lute and, later, harpsichord. The most highly educated musician in Rīga and the director of musical life in the city was the cantor of the Cathedral School, and he also trained young musicians in the city."

The 17<sup>th</sup> century stand features a bass trombone, a French horn and a long trumpet which, it turns out, is not really a trumpet at all. In fact, this instrument was once a trombone. The bass trombone features signs of welding, which suggests how long and frequently the instrument was used.

### Rarities in Rīga

During the Swedish period, metal instruments were bought in Nuremberg, and that was a sign of quality at the time. From 1730, French horns and trombones were delivered from Leipzig, where they were manufactured by the most respected instrument builder in the age of Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Heinrich Eichentopf (1686-1769). The period of Early Classicism, in turn, is represented by instruments from the aforementioned Leipzig-based master builder Johann August Crone. Nowhere else in the world you can find a full set of his trombones. On the basis of one of the Crone masterpieces at the museum, one of today's most outstanding masters of brass instrument builders, Rainer Egger, produced a copy, creating a model of an alto trombone that he has sold successfully. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, too, the city of Rīga continued to purchase the best instruments in the world, including ones produced by the master builder Hoffmann from the period of Viennese Classicism. Among the 19<sup>th</sup> century musical instruments, of importance is a saxophone that was manufactured by the inventor of the instrument, Adolf Sax (1814-1894).

Another instrument that is in the collection is particularly rare and admired by Māris Kupčs. We do not know who built the instrument or brought it to the museum, but it is a viola da gamba from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, with delicate and beautiful ornamentation on the neck and body of the instrument.

Visitors might think that the museum only has instruments manufactured abroad, but that is not true. French horns, trombones, flutes, violins and other instruments were also manufactured in Rīga. After years of research, in 1988, the organist Roberts Hansons and the oboist Elmārs Zemovičs (a long-time employee of the Museum of Music) prepared an index of Latvian instrument builders, including 76 piano manufacturers and joint ventures, 114 organ builders and joint ventures, 11 builders of harmoniums, 37 manufacturers of violins, five builders of brass instruments, as well as four factories where musical instruments were produced. We are proud of instruments that were built as far back as in 1774 in Rīga.