



REVIEW ESSAY OF
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INSTRUMENTAL LIVES: MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, MATERIAL CULTURE, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA. URBANA & CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

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Abstract:

This short review essay focuses on the recently published collection *Instrumental Lives: Musical Instrument Material Culture, and Social Networks in East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Helen Rees and published by the University of Illinois Press. The essay engages with the volume's core themes, particularly its reimagining of musical instruments as dynamic, culturally embedded entities shaped by human-nonhuman interactions. Bridging ethnomusicology, anthropology, and museum studies, the anthology advocates interdisciplinary engagement with instruments' lifespans, agency, and socio-political embeddedness.

Keywords

Book review, musical instruments, editing, multi-focus research, organology

Instrumental Lives (short for *Instrumental Lives: Musical Instruments, Material Culture, and Social Networks in East and Southeast Asia*) provides a multi-dimensional perspective on musical instrument ethnography, bridging the material culture studies and critical issues involved in recent topic to the relationship between instruments and humanity. This well-structured volume contains seven chapters by experts from diverse countries, encompassing music scholars from diverse interest backgrounds. Drawing on Helen Rees's experience managing UCLA's collection of instruments in 2013 and her sustained engagement with Chinese music traditions, these chapters, undeniably, focus on non-western regions, including Mongolia (Chapter 4), Japan (Chapter 1), China (Chapter 3), Thailand (Chapter 6), and others, to decenter European narratives in organology. Each chapter employs case studies to reframe organology-unravelling what it means to the life of the instrument and how they embody cultural society, which is mostly distinguished from other volumes referring to Organology.

In her introduction, the editor, Helen Rees, clearly outlines not only the historical development of organology in the 21st century but also the academic landscape of organological studies in East and Southeast Asia. Rees establishes the volume's critical lens through a set of conceptual frameworks that guide the volume's critical perspective such as human-nonhuman dualism, slow event, personhood, and entanglement (p. 34). Central to her argument is that instruments are not passive artifacts, but dynamic entities with life trajectories that are shaped by materials, environments, human engagement, and time. Based on this conceptual foundation, the volume is structured into three thematic parts: Part I, 'Instrument categories'; Part II, 'Individual Instruments'; and Part III, 'Instrument Collections'.

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Part One, *Instrument Categories*, consists of two chapters, each illustrating a different form of disappearance. In Chapter One, *The Aesthetics of Koto Strings: Materiality and Physical Sensation in Performance*, Terauchi Naoko explores how ecological sustainability and traditional aesthetics have influenced the material transformation of the koto's strings. Drawing on the auditory and tactile impressions of six professional koto players, she compares silk strings with Tetoron (a synthetic fiber), concluding that the instrument itself is a living entity, which means it is sensitive to even subtle changes in material (pp. 68–69). Once a koto adapts to Tetoron, she argues, it may no longer respond to silk in the same way, raising a pressing question: how can traditional aesthetics survive in an ecologically shifting world? Chapter Two, *The Călâpitâ Past the 'Dull Edge' of Extinction: A Shaggy Dog Story of Repatriation and Refusal in Bali* by Tyler Yamin, presents another kind of disappearance: deliberate forgetting. Yamin's ethnography focuses on the loptia, a Balinese clapper that has fallen out of cultural memory. Rather than celebrating revival or resilience, Yamin challenges the dominant term of vitality. He attempted to repatriate the loptia was met with pointed refusal by Balinese practitioners, forcing us to confront a question: is being alive always desirable or meaningful for an instrument? And how, we define the end of an instrument's life? This case reveals the conflict between Western ethics, which advocate for the preservation of everything, and Balinese cultural sovereignty, which may consider the disappearance of certain elements as reasonable and self-determined. This prompts us to reconsider whether "extinction" could be an expression of indigenous agency rather than merely an absolute loss.

Perhaps some answers to these questions can be found in part two, *Individual Instruments*, which contains two chapters, each offering a full life history of a particular instrument. It is worth noting that while Bell Yung's case study centers on a renowned instrument in China, even all over the world, Jennifer Post focuses on a relatively obscure end-blown flute in West Mongolia. Despite these differences in visibility and cultural prominence, both authors illuminate what it means for a musical instrument to have a life. In Chapter Three, Yung traces the life trajectory of his qin, spanning from its creation in the late Qing dynasty to its current state. By examining physical markings such as inscriptions, seals, and notes left by former owners, he constructs a biography of the instrument from the qin's own perspective. Through this lens, the qin emerges not just as a material object but also as a witness to Chinese history and a symbol of shifting cultural identity. By contrast, Chapter Four, *Making and Growing End-Blown Flutes in the Mongolian Steppes* by Jennifer C. Post, takes us into a different context. Focusing on an instrument known as shoor or tsuur or sybyzghy, Post engages with Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Gold's theory of "making and growing" (p. 189) and Tim Ingold's conception of "correspondence" (p. 190). Through extensive fieldwork in five areas of Bayan-Ölgii (Deluun and Ölgii, Tolbo, Altansogts, Besbogda, and Oygor), she illustrates how these flutes are not static artifacts but are shaped by a network of human and nonhuman actors (p. 229). Her ethnography reveals how the lives of these instruments are co-developed by makers, players, environmental conditions, and social dynamics, thereby emphasizing their embeddedness in both past and present cultural realities.

Taken together, the two parts illustrate different conditions of instruments in the contemporary world. The first part takes a broad perspective and focuses on the current status of instruments, exploring whether they are being replaced, forgotten, or at risk of disappearing. In contrast, the second part adopts a more detailed and localized view. Through rich fieldwork data, it traces the full life journey of a single instrument, from its making to its present use. In doing so, it shows how instruments, like people and other objects, are deeply represented in social structures, aesthetic values, and historical change.

Part Three, *Instrument Collections*, shifts our attention to museums considered static or archival. Yet in this volume, they emerge as dynamic arenas where instruments are not simply preserved, but reactivated, recontextualized, and even reanimated through human interaction. Chapter Five, by Marie-Pierre Lissour, focuses on the exhibition *Voices of the Wind*, which featured traditional wind instruments from some minority groups in Laos. In this case, museum display becomes a mode of reverse cultural transmission, as these instruments travel back to their communities, sparking intergenerational engagement and musical revitalization. In Chapter Six, Supeena Insee Adler recounts how a forgotten Thai instrument collection at UCLA was rediscovered during conservation efforts. The process of cleaning and restoring these instruments not only returned them to functional use but also

affirmed their continued cultural relevance. Finally, in Chapter Seven, Helen Rees puts these within a broader context, linking them to questions of policy, identity, and institutional relationships. Through these three chapters, the museum is no longer portrayed as a site of termination, but rather as a space of transformation. Furthermore, instruments do not die in collections, and they migrate, adapt, and reemerge with new significance.

In sum, *Instrumental Lives* is the first volume to systematically address the question of what constitutes an instrumental life. It engages with key topics such as actor-network theory, and material culture studies, situating musical instrument research within an interdisciplinary paradigm. The volume moves beyond traditional organology's focus on physical attributes, instead emphasizing instruments as dynamic "social actors" embedded in relational networks. This collection is highly recommended not only for students and scholars of Asian studies and ethnomusicology but also for practicing musicians and researchers across broader fields of music studies.