

A perfect marriage of art and music

A conservation case study: while The Royal Society of Musicians is mid-way through a two-year project to refurbish its new offices, Julia Korner restores eight of its portrait busts



The Royal Society of Musicians' impressive collection of busts following their conservation by Julia Korner

As many in Britain contemplate life outside the European Union for the first time, it is easy to lose sight of the extent to which Europe was informally and loosely united before world wars and multilateral agencies created and formalised a new order for the continent. George Handel, whose work is jealously guarded as a British treasure, was of course German-born. But how fortunate we are that he spent so much time in London, becoming a British citizen in 1727. Without him, our nation would undoubtedly have been culturally the poorer. For not only might he not have composed the music we love so much, but also he might not have provided the invaluable support that enabled his favourite charities to survive. One of these, the Foundling Hospital, was the brainchild of Thomas Coram who campaigned for 17 years for a Charter to permit the establishment of a haven in London for abandoned babies. Hogarth, the artist and social commentator, was a founding governor and Handel

incorporated the Hallelujah chorus from *Messiah* into the *Foundling Hospital Anthem*.



George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

Attributed to William Hogarth (1697–1764) (circle of) and reproduced by kind permission of The Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain

Equally dear to Handel's heart was The Royal Society of Musicians, in whose foundation in 1738 he played a significant part. The RSM, the oldest music charity in the UK, was originally named the "Fund for Decay'd Musicians" and, as that name indicates, its worthy objective was, and still is, to look after musicians who have fallen on hard times. Originally conceived as a sort of insurance policy with financial assistance provided from membership dues, the Society nowadays is even more philanthropic and assistance is available to professional musicians throughout the UK, who are unable to work, owing to accident, illness or old age, whether or not they are members. Not that membership is expensive. At a modest £25 per year, it's significantly less expensive than replacing the strings on your cello.



Gioacchino Antonio Rossini (1792–1868)

Attributed to the French School and reproduced by kind permission of The Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain-

In addition to providing funding for musicians unable to work, the Society operates a Fine Instrument Scheme through which exceptionally talented musicians are offered the loan of top quality instruments normally well beyond their usual means. Current beneficiaries of the Scheme include three

members of the Sacconi Quartet and cellist Guy Johnston. The Society welcomes loans or donations of fine musical instruments from members and non-members alike and, over the coming years, the Society's intention is to build a collection that will assist the very best of young British talent whilst, at the same time, adding to the financial stability of Britain's oldest musical charity.



The Royal Society of Musicians' new home at 26 Fitzroy Square in London

If that were not enough, the Society's archive is a genealogical goldmine since members, upon application, were obliged to produce birth, marriage and baptism certificates.

Coincident to its move to new premises in Fitzroy Square, the Society has been giving a facelift to some of its more venerable artefacts. Beethoven, Chopin, D'Oyly Carte, Gounod, Handel, Haydn, Mellon and Parry have had their busts painstakingly conserved at the Chiswick-based studio of Julia Korner. An average of 50 hours of careful cleaning, fixing, stuccoing, retouching, waxing and polishing has been lavished on each bust and the results will be on view in the ground floor reception rooms of 26 Fitzroy Square, once it is inaugurated from the summer of 2017.

The provenance of the busts is varied but all have an interesting story to tell. Take Beethoven, for example: the bust measures 70 x 39 x 28cm and is a plaster copy of an 1827 original by Johann Nepomuk Schaller (1777-1842). It is one of seven such copies commissioned by the Philharmonic Society in 1870 to celebrate the centenary of Beethoven's birth. Other recipients included the Royal Collections of Queen Victoria, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the Royal Academy of Music.

In the words of Julia Korner:

"Of the eight sculptures on which we had the privilege to work, Beethoven was particularly rewarding. The bust responded fairly well to having nine layers of paint removed by using a combination of chemicals and scalpels which enabled us to lift and chip away the larger shards of pigment and to avoid putting any stress on the layers beneath. As we neared the original layer, finished by the artist, we found a charming inscription written in sepia pen within a tapering spandrel, verso. Although

largely illegible it might be possible, with further research, to unveil what it says."



Rear view of Beethoven bust with inscription just visible on spandrel

The Society also owns a number of important portraits and anyone wishing to see them or to consult the Archive, will be able to do so once the new premises are inaugurated at the end of 2017. Please apply to: archivist@royalsocietyofmusicians.org

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