

Musical Museum

RACHEL BENOIT tours the Field Museum's Sounds from the Vaults.

Do not touch”—it’s a familiar admonishment in a museum’s austere hall of glass cases. But what about an exhibit of musical instruments? Should they really be seen and not heard? When sound installation artist Bruce Odland visited Chicago’s Field Museum’s anthropology collections, which include more than 6,000 musical artifacts, he says he “felt there were voices in these instruments that should be heard. And I knew there was the technological possibility to let people hear and play them without damaging the artifacts.”

For Odland’s brainchild, a team of sound design and multimedia experts and a dozen Chicago musicians selected and played 50 instruments, some of which had been silent for more than 100 years. Kerry Leung, a Chinese master flute player, blew new life into the museum’s pair of 300-year-old white jade flutes, and Lop-sang Thapkey, a Tibetan monk from Madison, Wisconsin, manipulated a rare 12-foot Tibetan trumpet. Leddie Garcia, percussionist with Poi Dog Pondering, played more than 20 rhythm instruments for the recording sessions.

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Found sound: visitors use a touch-pad station to hear the tones of one of the Field Museum’s venerable instruments.

Despite their extensive expertise, the performers were often challenged to master arcane instruments. “There was a friction block that none of us could get to make a sound,” says Garcia. “It was shaped like a bean with little cutouts and you rubbed your hand across the top. I rubbed it until my hands were blistered and I was just about to give up when all of a sudden the room filled with this amazing ‘oohlu lu luh’ sound.”

In addition to viewing traditional notes, field maps, and films on the history and use of each instrument, visitors can use a touch-pad computer interface to “play” the Javanese bass drum, an African agogo bell, or a ceramic Mexican whistle, the oldest item in the collection, which dates to 900 A.D. When multiple pads are activated, the instruments in the room burst, together, into Odland’s “Vault Groove”—a digitally created cross-cultural jam for 32 musical artifacts brought to life.

The Field Museum of Natural History is located at Roosevelt Road and Lake Shore Drive. For information call 312-922-9410, or for a solo jam session, tour a virtual sampling of the exhibit at www.fnmh.org/sounds.