

Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) Report

COST ACTION FP1302

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Title: Additional archive research on the life of the 18th century violin maker
Boussu
Period: 23 May 2016 to 3 June 2016
Host institution: Archives départementales du Nord, Lille, France
Contact person: Mr Alexis Donetzkoff

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1. Introduction

Since 2009, I have been studying the life, instruments and working methods of the violin maker Benoit Joseph Boussu, who was born in Fourmies in the north of France in 1703, worked as notary between 1729 and 1748 in Avesnes-sur-Helpe, and was subsequently active as maker in Brussels in the middle of the 18th century. From January 2015, this ongoing project is performed as a PhD study at the University of Ghent and School of Arts Ghent.

The Musical Instruments Museum in Brussels preserves nine instruments by Boussu. Two of the instruments, a violin and cello, are both still in almost unaltered state, an exceptional given when it comes to historical bowed stringed instruments. These instruments are conserved in non-playable condition, since they are solely regarded as museum objects.

In the past, instruments of Boussu and his Brussels contemporaries have been studied, though not yet from the expertise of a researching instrument maker. Moreover, in my study, the latest research techniques will be employed, such as digital endoscopy and CT scanning, which, for the first time, allows for a full visualization of the internal structure of the instruments. This research will be performed in close collaboration with the Musical Instruments Museum in Brussels and other external experts. From the results, it becomes possible to derive the employed construction methods.

In addition, further research will be performed on the life of Boussu, aiming to complete my previously published results in Galpin Society Journal 2013.

The research project is intended to result in an optimal realisation of the idea of 'informed instrument building', where eventually instrument reconstructions will be built on the basis of a very broad and extensive research on instruments, methods and biography of a maker (in this case Boussu), eventually in function of the musical performance practice. The built reconstructions will be set up in collaboration with experienced performers of 18th century music, and they will be subsequently used to perform Brussels repertoire from the time of Boussu, in order to experience their playing and sound possibilities.

2. Purpose of the STSM

I have previously performed extensive archive research on the biography of Boussu. So far, this has resulted in a publication in Galpin Society Journal in 2013 entitled 'Benoit Joseph Boussu (1703-1773): violin maker and notary'. During that phase of the biographical studies, mainly baptism, marriage and burial records from parish archives were studied, and also, to some extent, notary records.

However, some essential aspects of Boussu's biography are still unclear at the moment, therefore, additional archive research is needed. Such archive research has been performed during the STSM at the Archives départementales du Nord in Lille. The archives in Lille preserve many records, both from parish registers as well as civil records such as notary, tax, legal and town council documents, from the area of Avesnes-sur-Helpe, where Boussu spent the first 45 years of his life. With this research, I hope to further complete Boussu's biography and eventually generate more knowledge about the social, cultural and economical conditions under which this maker, and probably his contemporary colleagues, worked and lived in the northern and southern Netherlands during the ancient regime.

3. Description of the work carried out during the STSM

On the first day at the archive, 24 May, an orientating discussion was held with archive staff members Mr A. Donetzkoff (conservator) and Mr H. Passeaux. As a result of this discussion, several potential new archive sources were listed, and this list served as guide for the research of the further days of the STSM. The main target sources were:

- Repertoires of notaries from the area of Avesnes-sur-Helpe from the period 1720-1780 (2 E 39 / 495-513);
- Minute acts of notaries from the area of Avesnes-sur-Helpe from the period 1720-1780 (2 E 39 / 43-491);
- Census (*dénombrement*) of people, horses and carriages (series C);
- Acts (*embrefs*) by the mayors and aldermen of Avesnes and neighbour communities from the period 1720-1780 (series XIB);
- Tax documents from the period 1720-1780 (series C);
- Documents from the community administrations of Avesnes and neighbour communities (*affaires communales*) from the period 1720-1780 (series C).

During the working days within the period 24 May and 3 June, documents included under the above mentioned categories were studied and photographs of relevant documents were made.

In addition to the actual search for new documents, a start was made to transcribe and interpret various already found notary acts and other legal documents concerning Boussu. This work was done in cooperation with archive staff member and specialist of the notary archives, Mr R. Le Gendre, in three sessions of approximately 1 hour each. During these sessions, Mr Le Gendre corrected some transcriptions I had prepared, which was very informative, since reading and understanding the formal language requires deep knowledge of the matter. Also, Mr Le Gendre was so kind to take home a number of scans of documents regarding a legal case of Boussu, and explained me the contents in a meeting the next day. Mr Le Gendre's explanation was very helpful in understanding the documents, and a motivation to further transcribe and try to interpret other documents myself.

4. Description of the main results obtained

- For the repertoire of notary Robert Boussu (father of B.J. Boussu) for the period 1715-1729, a complete inventory was made, including all the acts that were co-signed by B.J. Boussu (as witness). In addition, photographs were made of all the individual minute acts by Robert Boussu, co-signed by B.J. Boussu, for the period 1715-1729. This inventory will be further analysed in the near future, to get an overview of the presence and activities of B.J. Boussu in the area of Wignehies during the period 1715-1729;
- From studying further notary repertoires, 17 'new' acts regarding Robert Boussu (father of B.J. Boussu) were identified, as well as 8 'new' acts regarding B.J. Boussu. The individual minute acts regarding B.J. Boussu were all photographed. Selected minute acts regarding Robert Boussu were also photographed. These acts will be transcribed and interpreted in the future.

NB: due to time limitations, not all relevant repertoires could be studied. These will be studied on a future occasion;

- From studying documents from the *affaires communales* of Avesnes, one document was found, referring to a case involving the notary office of B.J. Boussu. This document will be transcribed and interpreted in the future;
- From studying the *embrefs* of the community administrations of Fourmies and Avesnes and the *Pairie d'Avesnes*, 13 'new' documents concerning B.J. Boussu were found. These acts will be transcribed and interpreted in the future.

In addition to the obtained above mentioned results, 3 previously found notary acts were transcribed by me during the STSM period, and 2 of these were checked, corrected and interpreted by Mr R. Le Gendre. Furthermore, a set of related archive documents regarding a legal issue of B.J. Boussu was read by Mr Le Gendre, and he explained the contents during one of the discussion sessions. This explanation was very helpful for understanding and transcribing further documents, and I therefore consider it an addition result of the STSM.

5. Future collaboration with host institution

During the STSM, I came to realise that the given period of the STSM (8 working days) was not enough to explore all the newly identified sources entirely. Therefore, one or more future visits have to be made to the Archives départementales du Nord for further exploration of the sources.

Regarding assistance in the future transcription and interpretation of already identified and still to be found archive documents (for example notary acts), I hope to be able to count on the help of Mr Le Gendre of the Archives départementales du Nord.

6. Foreseen publications/articles resulting or to result from the STSM

All newly found information will certainly be incorporated in my PhD thesis, which is due to be published in 2020. Additionally, this information (or parts of it) could be published in the form of an article, possibly in a peer-reviewed journal covering genealogy, violin making history, or organology in general.

7. Confirmation by the host institution of the successful execution of the STSM

Mr Donetzkoff from the Archives départementales du Nord in Lille has written a short declaration regarding the successful execution of my STSM at the host institution. This declaration is included in the appendix.

8. Acknowledgements

I hereby would like to thank the COST and WoodMusICK organisations for allowing me to do the two-week research mission in Lille. Further, I thank the staff of the host organisation, the Archives départementales du Nord in Lille, for welcoming and assisting me at their institution. A special thanks to Alexis Donetzkoff, Romain Le Gendre and Hervé Passeaux from the host institution, for their kind help and valuable contributions while preparing the STSM as well as during the actual research. *Merci beaucoup!*

APPENDIX. Confirmation letter by the host institution of the successful execution of the STSM



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Lille, le 17 juin 2016

Hereby, I declare that Mr Geerten Verberkmoes has successfully executed his COST ACTION FP1302 short term scientific mission (STSM) at our host institute, the Archives départementales du Nord in Lille, during the period May 24 – June 3, 2016. Mr Verberkmoes has worked continuously during all working days within the STSM period at our study room, and has identified a substantial number of new documents regarding the life of the violin maker Boussu.

Furthermore, he has identified new potential archive sources for future research, and has worked with our archive staff member Romain Le Gendre on the transcription and interpretation of a number of notary acts.

signature

Alexis DONETZKOFF
Conservateur du Patrimoine

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