Beginning from the second half of the 20th century people all over the world started to take an interest in playing traditional and folk music on the so-called authentic instruments. This created the necessity for making duplicates or reconstructions of instruments. Therefore it is only natural that people turn also to museums where this kind of instruments can be found. Unfortunately, very few musical instruments have been preserved in the world dating from the Middle Ages and earlier Renaissance period in Europe; yet, abundant iconographic material can be found about them – paintings, sculptures, miniatures, stained glass, and so on. Written records are also available.

As concerns folk instruments, in Estonia they started to be collected at about the beginning of the 20th century, yet, many of them were known – although with slight peculiarities – also elsewhere in Europe already in the Middle Ages and even earlier (for instance, bowed harp, hurdygurdy and hupper). Therefore, considering the direct connection of many a folk instrument with medieval ones, it is possible to use the specimens preserved at the museum at the reconstruction of some earlier instruments. Also, when investigating the finishing of a museal, we can get an idea about the tools that were used at making them. Generally we speak about reconstruction in the case when an object does not exist any more or has been preserved either partially or is hopelessly broken. In a number of cases it is also possible to make an instrument after the pieces that have been preserved – this depends on the amount of the preserved information.

As more often than not the reconstruction can only follow an illustrative example in the form of a painting or a sculpture, we cannot speak about a precise duplicate of an instrument. Logical and proportion faults are very frequent to occur in the depicted instruments, as most probably the author of the work was not able to play the instrument themselves. However, in some cases its shape may be taken into account that the then playing technique considerably differed from the modern one, which gave rise to an absolutely different technical solution. Therefore it is essential to consult a musician-specialist in the music of that particular era, in order to find the correct style for the instrument together.

If we duplicate a folk instrument that has been preserved at the museum, many of the abovementioned problems do not arise at all. Now it is the time to ask about the idea of making such copies. One of the practical aims is certainly search for the original sound and also playing technique. For ethical – preservational reasons we cannot often use instruments from museum collections. The instrument has been carved out of a maple trunk, with a lion’s head on its top. The instrument will have five double strings and a belly made from sprucewood.

Sethu kannel

The instrument made by me (Photo No. 7) is based on the one from a private collection (Photo No. 8). Sound holes have been added by me. Differently from the original instrument, which was made from pine, the body of my instrument was made from maple, the fingerboard, string-holder and tuning pin are from pear-tree. The string is made of gut.

Fiddle

I have made my fiddle (Photo No. 5) by the example of the one depicted in a painting by Hans Memling (c. 1435-1494), an artist from the Netherlands; the fiddle is held by an angle (Photo No. 6). The instrument has five strings and resembles a guitar by its shape. This fiddle has been glued together from parts, although in the Middle Ages they were also made in one piece; it has six to seven strings or even more, in earlier times they were made from gut or horsehair, later on from wire. In the upper end of the body the cover had a board-shaped extension, the so-called blade. This enabled a better support to the left hand and improved the sound of the instrument.

Reconstructing and making replicas of musical instruments from the conservator’s/ instrument maker’s viewpoint

Roland Suits

Estonian National Museum

Photo No. 1

Photo No. 2

Photo No. 3

Photo No. 4

Photo No. 5

Photo No. 6

Photo No. 7

Photo No. 8

Photo No. 9

Photo No. 10

References