

OBITUARY

HÉLÈNE LA RUE (1951–2007)

Hélène La Rue, Curator of Music at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Curator of the Bate Collection of Musical Instruments, and University Lecturer in Ethnomusicology and Organology at the University of Oxford, died on 13 July 2007 aged fifty-five. Although only briefly a member of the Museum Ethnographers Group—she said her field straddled the interests of so many groups that it was simpler to join none, although she clearly relented a little for MEG—she always supported it: generous with her time, helping with identifications, advising on classification and collections management, giving papers, publishing in its journal (numbers 2 and 19), and contributing to museum visits. She was a curator and musician of enormous talent and distinction.

Born in 1951 in Croydon of British and French-Canadian extraction, a background of which she was very proud, she studied at the junior Royal College of Music as a flautist and pianist and then read music at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. As an undergraduate she developed what became her life-long interest: the study of musical instruments, especially beyond the classical domain. Her D.Phil. thesis, completed under Anthony Baines in 1978, was entitled ‘English Popular Musical Instruments from the Middle Ages until 1800’. Whilst a doctoral student she started working with the music collections at Pitt Rivers, often revisiting and reinterpreting the work of the museum’s first curator Henry Balfour. In time she became the museum’s Curator of Music, before being appointed in 1995 to a complex post in which she was also Curator of the Bate Collection, University Lecturer in Ethnomusicology and Organology, and Fellow of St Cross College.

Although she may have appeared slightly quaint to some who didn’t know better—with her cats, Morris Minor car, her wonderful plaits coiled around her head, and her highly individual dress sense—she was always ahead of the game. Her unique exterior hid a curator and scholar of innovative imagination, strength of purpose, rigorous standards, and astonishing breadth of knowledge. In 1984 she started the education service at the Pitt Rivers Museum, single-handed and with little support, insisting that children were the museum’s seed-corn—even, or perhaps especially, in a university museum. She told stories about the museum, about objects, about music. She encouraged children to make music in any way they could, with tin cans, hosepipes, and bits of string. Believing that musical instruments should be heard, she organized a programme of performances and workshops by



Hélène La Rue demonstrating the Northumbrian pipes to children in the court of the Pitt Rivers Museum during the 'Victorian Welcome' special event on 30 April 2006; from a photograph taken by Simon James (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 1998.356.23.6). Courtesy and copyright, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

groups of visiting musicians, a key part of the thinking that led to the development of the museum's Balfour Galleries, now sadly closed. Above all, she believed that music of all sorts, and of all traditions, could cross the boundaries of age, class, race, ethnicity, and gender. It was the potential of the Bate as a 'playing collection'—rare amongst institutional collections—that had particular appeal for her. When Anthony Baines died she organized a concert on Bate Collection instruments in his memory. I shall never forget the spine-tingling sound of the Beale Trumpet, made by Oliver Cromwell's own trumpeter who had played it at the latter's funeral. One of Hélène's proudest moments was when, in 2003, she finally acquired the instrument for the Bate Collection where it had been on loan.

Another innovative strand of her work came to the fore in the early 1980s when she was among the very first curators in the country to invite artists into the museum to make works in response both to the collections themselves and to the culture of the museum. Working with Chris Dorsett of the Ruskin School, Hélène developed exhibitions that involved such innovative and creative artists as Brian Catling and Rachel Whiteread. It was through Hélène's creative curatorship that the Pitt Rivers was the first anthropology museum in the United Kingdom to do such a thing—now, of course, it is *de rigueur*, indeed commonplace, but then it was daring and unheard

of. But then Hélène was always modestly ‘uncareerist’ about her achievements, to the extent that others too often took the acknowledgement and won the prizes. Much of what she quietly initiated—or not so quietly for anyone who has memories of the Saturday afternoon musical Pitt Stops, as she called them, a name that continues to this day—has now become accepted as normal practice in anthropology museums.

Though she did many other things, Hélène also believed in solid object-based scholarship, and that knowledge of the collections came first and foremost in any curator’s duties. She always fought her corner. She was much angered during one round of the government’s Research Assessment Exercise to be told that a catalogue raisonné of a museum collection was not a scholarly publication. She immediately contacted the Higher Education Funding Council for a ruling, the answer coming back that such a catalogue was undoubtedly a scholarly publication of the first order, thus helping to get museum-based research taken seriously. She continually enriched the collections at the Pitt Rivers, collecting musical instruments wherever she found them, whether at St Giles’ Fair in Oxford or in south-east China where she worked with local colleagues. Indeed her definition of ‘musical instrument’ raised eyebrows on occasion—I remember one long debate about the status of a singing kettle.

The last years of her too short life were dogged by personal tragedy. Yet she soldiered on, bursting with ideas and new projects and full of her usual enthusiasm. The frustration was that, with increasing administrative workloads and bureaucracy, and pulled as she was by four sets of demands—from the Pitt Rivers, the Bate, the Faculty of Music, and the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, she never managed to publish as much as she would have liked to, despite an impressive list, including substantial contributions to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and a number of major contributions on music curatorship for the Museums and Galleries Commission and the International Council of Museums. She had wanted to write about the concept of ‘the authentic’ as it related to musical instruments, to address some of the stereotypes of certain classes of musical instrument, and was excited about her new role as co-director of the ESRC-funded major research project ‘The Other Within: An Anthropology of Englishness’ at the Pitt Rivers Museum. Her last publication, about music in museums in general and in the Pitt Rivers in particular, appeared in the previous issue of this Journal.

To the end she had a wicked and irreverent sense of humour. Her puns were famous—simultaneously hilarious and groan-worthy. She could say the most outrageously funny things, which certainly cheered up policy meetings, but they always went to the core of the matter, clarifying strategies or puncturing pomposity. She also did mad and wildly silly things—such as her St David’s Day dinner for Welsh friends, in which each course contained leeks, the *pièce de résistance* being ‘leek, lemon and lime delight’. Then there were the long-running jokes. Hélène and I had a bond in that we both specialized in fields, ethnomusicology and photography, which we sometimes felt were not always taken as seriously at Oxford as they might be, and sometimes we felt marginalized. Hélène came up with the solution: we

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would found our own college, St Rita's and St Jude's (the patron saints of lost causes and hopeless cases), which would accommodate disciplinary misfits such as ourselves. She was to be the Unprincipaled [*sic*] and I was to be Vice-Mistress. It is for this sheer sense of fun amongst the daily grind, as much as for her professionalism and scholarship, that she will be missed by so many.

But in the end, it was more sensible than that, and the joke stopped. As her illness took hold, with a commitment to her field of scholarship and to education that characterized her career, her selflessness, and her total commitment to her students, who loved her dearly, she established a scholarship in ethnomusicology to bear her name at her college St Cross. Typically, rather than just talk about it, or even joke about it, she did something about it. St Cross, with its strong eclectic and international tradition, is a place where her vision will flourish.

In H el ene the museum world in general, and museum ethnography in particular, has lost a great character and a great, even maverick, curator. Her enormous knowledge, energy, generosity, and vision for the place of music in the ethnographic museum will be impossible to replace in quite that productive combination. The gap left was brought home to me very simply when a couple of weeks after her death a photograph of a mystery carved whistle was circulated on an internet discussion list for identification. 'H el ene will know instantly,' was my instant reaction, 'in case she hasn't seen it, I'll just send it on...'. It's very quiet without her.

ELIZABETH EDWARDS

Donations to the H el ene La Rue Scholarship Fund may be sent to: The Bursar, St Cross College, St Giles, Oxford, OX1 3LZ. Cheques should be made payable to 'St Cross College (H el ene La Rue Scholarship Fund)'.