

PRESS KIT

MUSIC MECHANISMS

MARCH 15 – AUGUST 17, 2025



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Music Mechanisms

Geneva, March 2025 – Discover the charm of mechanical music, held in fascinating and multifaceted objects whose principle was invented in Geneva at the end of the 18th century. Let yourself be carried away by the melodies of Verdi, Rossini, Wagner and the popular tunes that filled salons in the past, observe the precise choreography of vibrating blades, plates, cylinders and pins. Admire the subtlety of the mechanisms designed by watchmakers and art mechanics, whose craft is now inscribed on UNESCO's intangible heritage list. An invitation to explore the ensemble bequeathed by the Geneva expert Jacques Antoine Horngacher, known as Etienne Blyelle (1929-2013), in dialogue with musical and sound pieces of the MAH's collection. An exhibition for anyone curious about music, history or unusual objects.

At the end of the 18th century, a Geneva watchmaker noticed the resonance properties of steel and imagined enriching with notes the bells and chimes associated with domestic timepieces since the 16th century.

In 1796, Antoine Favre (1767-1828) presented to the Société des Arts de Genève “a carillon without bells playing two tunes and imitating the sound of the mandolin, enclosed in the top of a snuffbox of ordinary size”.

From 1802, Isaac-Daniel Piguet (1775-1841), a watchmaker from the Vallée de Joux who settled in Geneva, developed the invention by introducing these tiny musical movements developed by Antoine Favre into rings, seals and watches, to which he added animated figures.

To garnish flat objects such as watches, the cylinder is replaced by a small disc called a “plate”. Ornated with pins on both sides, it increases the number of notes. Towards the middle of the 19th century, larger movements were placed in snuffboxes, boxes made of wood, horn, tortoiseshell or precious metal, or pendulum bases. These mechanisms are associated with art objects. But their musical potential is of its own interest: they are housed in simple boxes of fruit wood, hence their name “music box”.

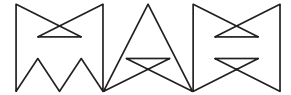
The principle is always the same: a spring activates a metal disc or a cylinder equipped with spikes which, as they pass, raise and then release steel blades arranged in a comb in a defined order.

The first mechanisms producing music were thus manufactured in the city of Calvin. There was an immediate craze for watches, snuffboxes, stamps and other objects from which melodies escaped.

From the second half of the 19th century, the music box, an annex branch of Geneva watchmaking, gave way to that of the Sainte-Croix or Beaucourt region. Workshops and factories bring together dozens of trades (melody arranger, pin fitter, tuner, cabinetmaker, automaton, etc.) join forces to build bridges between art and mechanical technology.

The repertoire expands, as does the size of the boxes, with the cylinders becoming removable, therefore interchangeable. Metal records appeared in 1885, prefiguring the phonograph and gramophone, which marked the decline of the music box.

After a loss of interest in the 20th century, these fascinating objects have come back to life in the age of streaming and adopted new, sculptural forms, thanks in particular to the artists of Sainte-Croix who ensure the transmission of their craft. The recognition of watchmaking and art mechanics on the UNESCO list of intangible heritage in 2020 is a testimony to the strength of their community's efforts.



1. Mechanical music in Geneva's heritage

The MAH's collection holds clocks with chimes, flute stops, organs, carillons, tympanons, automatons and songbirds, the manufacture of which developed in the 18th and 19th centuries. The collection also includes watches, singing bird and musical boxes, housed in a beautiful variety of cases.

This ensemble demonstrates the constant association of sound mechanisms with time movements, the juxtaposition of melodic chimes with the chimes marking the passage of time.

Mechanical music really makes it possible to produce tunes, and not to reproduce them, as phonographs or records do. In addition, the proximity of its specialised trades to watchmaking distinguishes it from the production of musical instruments.

2. From private to public

Created in 1955 by Jacques Antoine Horngacher, known as Etienne Blyelle, also known as Manou (1929-2013), the Conservatoire autonome des boîtes à musique was intended to save objects that had become obsolete and threatened with disappearance.

Its founder is known for his taste for collecting, his passion for mechanisms and his technical skills. He calls himself a "music-loving scientist". Trained in Geneva as a mechanic and watchmaker, he was passionate about melodies escaped from wooden boxes. Author of expert theories, he became a reference in the field, in Europe and the United States.

As he got older, he decided to merge his collection with the watchmaking domain of the MAH : his bequest increased the museum's collection of musical objects, distinct from that of musical instruments.

The boxes selected by Jacques Antoine Horngacher can be recognised by the first names that he christened them with and that you find on each one of them: Henriette, Marjorie, Régine, Hermann or Manou... so many accomplices whose mandolin effects or solemn prayers he loved. He chose them all, patiently acquired them, listened to, restored, often transformed them.

Today, these operatic or dancing arias, popular songs, military airs, religious music, reflect the taste of their time, like the passion of an original being.

3. Scenography

The podiums arranged along the two lengths of the hall present a chronological line that sheds light on the golden age of the music box legible by the accumulation of 19th century production. Are these pieces, at once complicated and refined, musical instruments, goldsmiths, mechanics, or watches all at once?

The fusion of the collection of the MAH with that of the Conservatoire autonome des boîtes à musique is illustrated in the scenography, with the central showcase that hosts the development of the art of mechanical music.

From miniature formats to very large pieces, from short melody to complete opera arias, the dimensions increase. The variety of Geneva's refined productions, the legibility of bare and exploded movements, the accumulation of tuning accessories, evoke the evolution of the sophisticated mechanisms designed to produce ringtones, whistles and melodies.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, the music box industry separated from watchmaking, to establish itself in Sainte-Croix, where art mechanics, including the creation of automatons and songbirds, continue to develop today.



Inert and silent, the objects show the diversity of their forms and decorations. When the mechanisms come to life, thanks to expert hands, the magic of their inner secrets seduces: faces light up and a charm tinged with nostalgia operates.

a. Biographical notes: Jacques Antoine Horngacher

In 2014, the MAH's collection was enriched by some 135 music boxes bequeathed by Jacques Antoine Horngacher, known as Etienne Blyelle, known as Manou. Born on May 5, 1929, he was born in Geneva and was the son of Hermann Gabriel and Ketty Gaidan.

At 10 years old, Jacques Antoine Horngacher built a carillon with bicycle bells, wire, and a mechanic's box. In 1941, he received his first music box, a Jaccard stamp type made in L'Auberson and given to him by his aunt. The 7th song played by the box named "Henriette" in homage to his aunt, is *Jour et la nuit* by Charles Lecocq. He would later say that it was the first aria he understood: "Through it, in 1941, I understood the *raison d'être*, the melodic beauty, the perfect "compensation", the charm and naturalness of music".

In his autobiography, he describes himself as "a music-loving scientist". In a class photograph of his watchmaking school (Ecole des Arts et Métiers), around 1945, he refers to himself: "Passionate about music boxes, because of mechanics and music; inventor; loves science and its history; not very friendly but useful. Don't like girls".

Jacques Antoine Horngacher founded the Conservatoire autonome des boîtes à musique in Geneva in 1955. From 1955 to 1972, he lived between Paris, Geneva and Brussels.

In Paris, he perfected his skills in mechanics and studied mathematics at the Sorbonne, befriended students for philosophical discussions and the writer Robert Crottet. At the 1958 Universal Exhibition in Brussels, he met Dorothée, a student of art history.

His entire life was devoted to developing knowledge of the origins, development and typology of music boxes, cylinders or discs, as well as their mechanisms and functioning. His collection was enriched by acquisitions made in both Europe and America: each item introduced into the corpus was given a name.

Jacques Antoine Horngacher died in Geneva in 2013 surrounded by his music box collection.

b. Répertoire of tunes

The cylinders correspond to a limited number of melodies, usually 4-6-8, sometimes more. The increase in the diameter of the cylinder, from 1820 onwards, made it possible to transcribe opera overtures, works of one to four minutes or variations on arias usually arranged to last one minute. Most music boxes display a list of tunes played attached to the inside of the lid.

Among the composers most represented in the corpus, we can distinguish: Johann Strauss, Giuseppe Verdi, Charles Gounod, Gaetano Donizetti, Carl Millöcker, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Franz von Suppé, Jacques Offenbach, Robert Planquette, Friedrich von Flotow, Gioachino Rossini, and Georges Bizet.

Among the most frequent tunes (in descending order) listed among the 225 different tunes :

William Tell, Prayer, Rossini
La Murette, Barcarolle, Auber
Les Cloches de Corneville, Waltz, Planquette






The Sicilian Vespers, Mazurka, Verdi
 Martha, The Last Rose of Summer, von Flotow
 Carmen, March, Bizet
 William Tell, Tyrolean Song, Rossini

The inventory of the tunes chosen allows us to observe that the choice was strongly influenced by the technical possibilities of these mechanical musical instruments. In fact, the music box is an instrument created for mechanical playing: it is not the mechanisation of an already existing instrument.

“An example of a great rescue, and a happy re-nesting. Manufactured in Geneva, small series, mid-19th century. The repertoire of very well-arranged expressive tunes is the reason for its inclusion in the collections of the CABAM. »
 (Note from the collector, about: Cylinder music box, Langdorff et Fils, Fabrique de Genève, Geneva, circa 1850. Inv. H 2024-0017)

Sensitive to expressive tunes, music boxes seduced Jacques Antoine Horngacher mainly for the enhancement of the melody, without the pomp and circumstance of harmonic effects. He considers that “the music box, by its timbre, its accents, its softness, is really an original instrument”.

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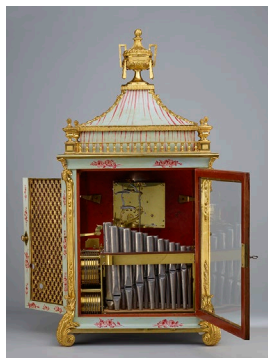
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Striking clock and flute playing

Pierre Jaquet Droz (1727-1790), Josué Robert (1691-1771), watchmakers, clockmakers
La Chaux-de-Fonds and Geneva, 1783

Brass movement, verge escapement and three-quarters of an hour striking on a bell, date display, days and months

Organ with 18 metal pipes playing 8 melodies on a cylinder with pins

High. 236 x width 56.8 x depth 36.5 cm

Purchase, 2022 inv. H 2022-0449

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Songbird mechanism for cane pommel (without the bird)

Rochat Frères (former workers at Jaquet Droz)
Geneva, between 1780 and 1820

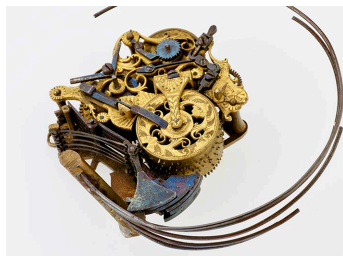
Brass, steel

Chain rocket movement, songbird automaton mechanism

Diam. 3.6 cm, high. 3.1 cm

Archival collection, 2011; inv. H 2011-0138

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photo: B. Jacot-Descombes



Cylinder music mechanism, hammers and spring gongs

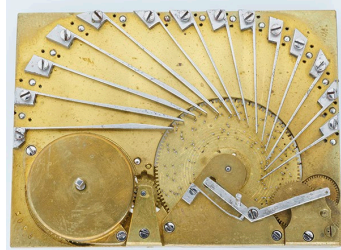
Switzerland, or France, between 1750 and 1780

Engraved brass, gold-plated, steel, blued steel
Shaped movement, skeletonized, with engraved bridges and chain fusée, made between 1750 and 1780 and later transformed

Diam. 6.6, 1.5 cm thick

Inv. H 2014-0007

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Music movement for snuffbox

Place of manufacture not determined, circa 1825

Brass, steel

Tray music, two fans of 14 individual blades (front and back)

Long. 52 x width 3.8 cm

Archival collection; inv. N 0550

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Repeater and music pocket watch movement

"Isai Del Jaquet in Geneva"

Geneva circa 1820

Brass, steel, blued steel

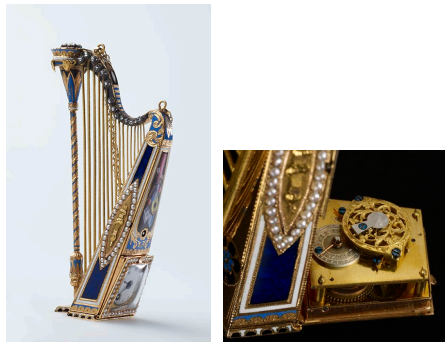
Sold in Strasbourg: /MUSIC / 12 HOLES IN RUBY / IN STRASBOURG

Diam. 5.6 cm

Archival collection, inv. N 0278

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Harp watch with music mechanism

Bessière and Schneider, box makers

Geneva or Switzerland, circa 1810

Gold box, champlevé and painted enamel, pearls, white enamel dial, steel hands

Bridge calibre, verge escapement, music mechanism with pin barrel and tuned teeth

High. 8.4 x width 5.4 cm

Purchased in 2005; Inv. H 2005-0028

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Clock, automata, chime and music

Guangzhou (China) and London (movement), circa 1800

Ormolu, paillonné enamel, carved and painted ivory, gouache on silk and glass, glassware

Brass and steel movements, with two gears. A separate mechanism, triggered every hour or on demand by the chime, activates a chime of nine bells, the elephant automaton and the theatre's scrolling stage.

High. 90 x width 38 x depth 33 cm

Purchases, 1952 and 2003; inv. AD 0431 and H 2003-0099

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Repeater and music pocket watch

Piguet & Meylan (1811-1828)
Geneva, circa 1820-1830

Guilloché gold case, engraved and gilded brass bowl
3/4 platinum movement in gilded brass and steel,
platter music (26 blades), quarter repeater on request
by pusher, on two spring gongs, cylinder escapement
H 7.45, diam. 5.35, thickness 2 cm

Inv. N 0755

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Snuffbox for music, known as the Sonnenberg snuffbox

View of Geneva and Mont-Blanc, from Pregny (You have conserved it)

Jean Louis Richter (1766-1841) and Aimé-Julien Troll (1781-1852), enamel painters; Isaac-Daniel Piguet (1775-1841), music maker, attributed to Geneva, circa 1815

Gold engraved by savings, guilloché and chased, enamel painted on gold, under-fondant
Music mechanism with vibrating blades, composed of 63 blades in blocks of 3, bass on the right and a 6-blade steering wheel. Swiss patriotic tunes, *Le Ranz des vaches (Les Armaillis des Colombettes)* and *Enfants de Tell soyez les bienvenus*

Long. 9.3 x W 6.2 x H. 2.7 cm

Purchase, 1979; inv. AD 3690

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Pocket watch with music and quarter repeater

Louis Duchêne & Fils, watchmaker; D. Mottu, box maker
Geneva, between 1815 and 1819

Guilloché pink gold case, polished, white enamel dial, Breguet steel hands

Gilded brass and steel movement, cylinder escapement, three-arm annular balance, flat balance spring, blued steel screws, platter music mechanism, on request, quarter repeater, in passing
High. 7.6, diam. 5.68, thickness 2 cm

Purchase, 2012; Inv. H 2012-0022

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Cylinder music pocket watch, known as a "music regulator"
France, circa 1900

Blackened steel case
Cylinder music movement,
High. 9.04, diam. 6.42 cm
Purchase, 2008; Inv. H 2008-0078
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photo: B. Jacot-Descombes



Songbird Box
Jacques Bruguier (1801-1873)
Geneva, circa 1868

Vermeil box engraved and chiseled in high relief,
champlevé enamel, enamel painted under fondant,
hummingbird feathers and ivory
Cam set mechanism
Signature engraved on the bate: *Geneva, Jacques
Bruguier Paquis A 68, Geneva*
Long. 9.82 x W 6.3 x H. 3.4 cm
Purchase, 2008; Inv. H 2008-0134
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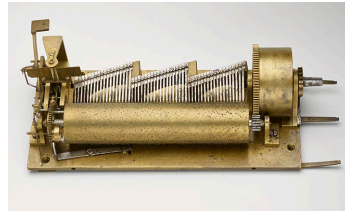
Music box with cylinders and bell gongs
Edouard Jaccard, attributed to
Sainte-Croix, after 1850

Inlaid wood, decal, brass, steel, printed paper
Cylinder music, 57 blades and 6 bell gongs
8 arias by Georges Bizet, Charles Lecocq, Gaetano
Donizetti, Johann Strauss, Edmond Audran, Emmanuel
Delorme
50 x 23.7 30 cm
Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0237
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Plate music movement
Geneva, 1825

Brass and steel
Box: Width 8 x high. 3 cm,
Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0272
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photo: B. Jacot-Descombes



Music Box Mechanism

Switzerland (?), 19th century.

Gold-plated brass, steel
 Rare "Cartel 1st Era" type music mechanism equipped with a cylinder and a keyboard of 64 individual blades in three blocks of 18 juxtaposed blades
 Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0284
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Music Box Mechanism

Manufacture L'Epée
 France, 19th century.

Wood, brass, steel
 Cylinder music, 56 blades, 3 tunes
 Long. 17.5 x high. 8.5 x 13.5 cm deep
 Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0292
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Cylinder Music Box

Bovet Frères & Cie (broadcaster)
 Fleurier, circa 1850

Wood (spruce), brass, steel, paper
 Mechanism known as "old Holy Cross", with 4 tunes:
Sinfam, She uhr Sua ming, Quot Chong and Siang Seang-long
 Long. 42.8 x High. 13.4 cm
 Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0218
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Embroidery set containing a music box

Vergiss mein nicht

Henry-Daniel Capt (1773-1841) manufacturer
 Geneva, 1820-1835

Wood, gilded metal, engraved mother-of-pearl, steel beads, glass, velvet, textile, mirrors
 Small cylinder cartel, 104 blades.
 Long. 27 x Width 13.5 x H. 18.5 cm
 Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0212
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Cylinder Music Box

Langdorff and Sons
Geneva, circa 1850

Wood, Fir, Walnut, Metal, Brass, Ivory
6 arias by Giuseppe Verdi, Joseph Labitzky, Friedrich von Flotow
Long. 51.5 x W 14.5 x H. 21 cm
Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0300
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Cylinder music box

Mermod Frères
Sainte-Croix, after 1850

Wood, metal, brass, steel, glass, cardboard
Music for cylinder, 102 blades, 6 arias per cylinder
Arias by Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Jules-Emile-Frédéric Massenet, Jacques Halévy, Charles Gounod, Gaetano Donizetti, Arthur Sullivan, Franz von Suppé, Robert Planquette, Philipp Fahrbach, Carl Joseph Millöcker, Edmond Audran
Long. 84.5 x height 36 x depth 36 cm
Bequest, 2014; inv. H 2014-0332
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Plerodiene Music Box

Charles Paillard, Paillard & Cie
Sainte-Croix, 1885-1900

Wood, metal, textile
Five interchangeable cylinders; 8 arias by Frédéric Chopin, Gioachino Rossini, Giuseppe Verdi, Vincenzo Bellini, Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, Giacomo Meyerbeer
Long. 138 x High. 77 x depth 50 cm
Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0273
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Music Box

"Piccolo Mandolin - Fortissimo"
Mermod Frères, Sainte-Croix, circa 1890

Wood, brass, steel, glass, printed and manuscript paper
Cylinder music, 93 blades, 4 arias by Gioachino Rossini, Franz von Suppé, Friedrich von Flotow
Long. 54.5, high. 17, depth 24.8 cm
Bequest, 2014, Inv. H 2014-0245
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Stella home music box, record box

Mermod Frères, Sainte-Croix, circa 1900

Wood, glass, stained glass, brass, steel
Interchangeable vertical disc music, 140 blades (two
70 combs)

Long. 79.5 x high. 117 x depth 58.5 cm

Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0317

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photo: B. Jacot-Descombes



**Station Music Box,
"Zither Expressive Mandolin"**

Fabrique Cuendet

L'Auberson; Sainte-Croix, circa 1895

Oak-veneered spruce wood, metal, brass, steel, glass,
printed paper, textiles

Arias by G. Donizetti, Franz von Suppé, Johann

Strauss, Friedrich Zikoff, Emma Kate Simmons Length.

84 x height 71.5 x depth 46.5 cm

Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0325

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Perforated band music box, "Libellion"

Schützhold & Werner or Frederick Adolphe Richter &
Co, Germany, circa 1900

Wood, metal, brass, steel, perforated cardboard

Arias by Giuseppe Verdi, Johann Strauss, Louis James

Alfred Lefébure-Wély, Friedrich von Flotow, Carl

Joseph Millöcke

Long. 71.5 x High. 29 x prof. 59 cm

Bequest, 2014; Inv. H 2014-0333

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