

Media Release, 21 October 2021

A new exhibition at the Musikmuseum: animalistic! – The Sound of Animals

Basel Historical Museum's new exhibition *animalistic! – The Sound of Animals* opens at the Musikmuseum on 22 October 2021 and will run until 25 June 2023. Visitors will be piloted through the exhibition by two fundamental questions: Are animals musical? How do we use animals for instrument-making?

The internet is full of videos of animals either making music themselves or loudly joining in our own music. It was this behaviour that 200 years ago prompted some bird fanciers to play their birds popular songs on a barrel organ. Songbirds are still popular pets even today; but is their warbling really «song»? The jury is still out on this question. What is not in doubt is that our culture is full of toy animal musicians: clockwork monkeys that play the violin, for example, or Ilp, the elephant-hero of a children's book famed for his trumpeting.

But it is not just in our imagination that animals «make» music. Built into musical instruments, they make it in the literal sense, too. From ivory key caps and gut strings to animal-skin drumheads – the variety of animal materials in musical instruments is astonishing. Their use serves many purposes at once. Precious elephant ivory enhanced the value of an instrument and pianists tend to prefer the touch of ivory keys, as a mechanical finger-exercise device with ivory keys proves. Another intriguing aspect of this exhibition is thus the glimpse it affords us of long forgotten trades: the gut-string stretchers and parchment-makers who remind us of the warm, authentic sound of animal products built into string instruments and drums.

Their specific properties make animals a much sought-after source of raw materials. Thanks to our heightened consciousness of animals' capacity for suffering, however, what used to be a matter of course has become controversial and sparked a search for alternatives. So the exhibition also invites visitors to ponder the question of animal rights and the possible soundscapes of vegan alternatives.

The exhibition is aimed at animal- and music-lovers of all ages. The hands-on objects give visitors a feel for the haptic properties of materials such as tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, gut string and horsehair and there are hidey-holes where young children can discover the animal stars of their favourite nursery rhymes. The museum has also compiled a dossier with which teachers of all age groups and subjects can focus their visit to the exhibition on the themes of their choice. Included in the dossier are quizzes intended to animate schoolchildren to study certain objects in greater depth and to discuss the questions raised by the exhibition. The show also provides plenty of material for students of Human-Animal Studies or the History of Culture in general.

The exhibition will be flanked by a programme of tours and events throughout its entire duration from 22 October 2021 to 25 June 2023. This programme can be viewed at www.hmb.ch and www.tierischbasel.ch. Standard guided tours will alternate with Wednesday matinees and creative workshops. The programme will be geared to the “animal of the month” and a collection of songs about each of these animals provided by the museum. There will also be expert talks on subjects such as the ivory trade, birdcalls, and how the musicality of animals might be measured.

animalistic! – The Sound of Animals is part of the project *animalistic! One Subject – Four Exhibitions in Basel* now showing at the Antikenmuseum Basel, Basel Historical Museum, the Museum der Kulturen Basel and the Pharmacy Museum of Basel University. A joint publication bearing the same title has been published by Hatje Cantz and is available for purchase in either German or English both online and at your local bookstore.

Basel Historical Museum – Musikmuseum
Im Lohnhof 9
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Wed–Sun 11 a.m.–5 p.m.

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Visual material:

<https://www.hmb.ch/service/presse/>