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A staff organologist in any major museum is more than a rarity, and an organologist who is also a specialist in Pacific artefacts even more so. The Australian Museum’s collection of Pacific sound-producing devices has long awaited systematic analysis and cataloguing by someone with these dual skills, a need now filled by the 1,219 entries in Michael Atherton’s book.

Atherton uses the 1914 Sachs-von Hornbostel classification system (in _Galpin Society Journal_, 14) which, despite its age and limitations, remains the most widely-used. However, one wonders why Atherton includes the xylophone as an example of an idiophone (p. 23) when no Oceanic specimen appears in his catalogue. One further wonders why he (p. 25) eschews the term “slit drum” for the hollowed wooden idiophone common throughout Oceania on the debatable grounds that a “drum” is necessarily a membranophone, when the Sachs and von Hornbostel’s classification system he espouses uses that very term.

The inclusion of only 196 artefacts comprising six instrument types from Aboriginal Australia reflects the predominantly vocal nature of the several indigenous music cultures represented in the collections. Of those artefacts, clapsticks are the most numerous but, curiously, each one is catalogued as an individual accession, whereas the most common use is in pairs, as Atherton himself acknowledges (p. 45). Throughout Central Australia, pairs of boomerangs function identically to paired hardwood sticks, providing the rhythmic support for unison group singing. Atherton acknowledges the use of boomerangs in this manner (p. 45) but his catalogue includes no specimens, perhaps because their potential multiple use (as hunting implement, fighting weapon and percussion instrument) could not be accommodated in any single, specialised catalogue. This situation illustrates the challenges of accessioning multipurpose artefacts.

The catalogue is divided geographically: indigenous Australia, Melanesia (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Irian Jaya), Micronesia (Kiribati, Marshall Islands) and Polynesia (subdivided into the individual islands of West and East Polynesia). Using his chosen classification and a three-column format, Atherton lists each artefact by his own catalogue running number, the museum accession number, provenance and accession date (where known), and provides basic dimensions (with the unexplained exception of m107). Four instruments originally obtained by James Cook in the 1770s—from Hawai`i, Vanuatu, the Society Islands and the Marquesas Islands—are included in the collections, as is an unprovenanced collection of three
slit drum rests and an assemblage of 16 highly decorated flute stoppers from the Sepik region. A final index, listing the collections by category and catalogue number, complements the presentation. The overall appearance is clear and space-efficient. The liberal inclusion of photographs, many in colour, of individual instruments is admirable, adding to the clarity and value of the book.

By contrast, the purpose of including three pages of vernacular terms (pp. 37-39) is unclear. Not only is the list incomplete (three instrument types listed carry no indigenous names), but diacritics are also applied inconsistently (and often inaccurately), and some terms are simply wrong (e.g., the Samoan fala rolled mat is listed as “stamped tubes”, the New Zealand Māori pūtorino bugle flute is listed as a conch trumpet). Mervyn McLean’s recent publication on Oceanic instruments (2010 in *Occasional Papers in Pacific Ethnomusicology*) provides a very comprehensive list of indigenous names for musical instruments; unfortunately, it appears that his publication may not have been available to Atherton in time for consultation.

The Māori kōauau illustrated on p. 141 as m1190 is almost certainly not the described instrument having that number (a bamboo instrument 288mm long accessioned in 1895), but may perhaps be m1192. And the eight-holed 750mm long Niuean noseflute, m1172, is an instrument of extraordinary size and construction, quite unlike those in other museums from that location (Moyle 1990 in *The World of Music*, p. 32) and deserving of an illustration. The Cook Islands ka’ara slit drum is an example of an obsolete instrument revived some 40 years ago as part of a drive to relocate artefacts of distinctive national ethnicity. The Australian Museum’s ka’ara (m1177) exemplifies the additionally symbolic value of such an instrument: it is a 1990 presentation from the Cook Islands Government.

The critical comments in this review should be taken as cautionary rather than reproving. I am well aware of the unseen effort required to produce each individual catalogue entry, and Michael Atherton deserves congratulation for his labours over several years. His book is a welcome addition to the small number of museum catalogues of Pacific instruments, and will be a useful reference tool for organologists and ethnomusicologists.


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Anthropologists have brought their particular insights to social theories of modernity, challenging assumptions about its unidirectional flow and homogenous influence by acknowledging multiple and local forms of modernity. In his book on the Pacific nation of Tonga, Niko Besnier takes this critique further, showing not only how modernity is locally configured and how Tongans engage with it in diverse ways, but also “how different modernities operate and articulate with one another” (p. 231). Beginning and