

WEEKEND ARTS MUSIC

Ancient sounds comes back to life

LONDON

E.U. program helps experts recreate long-lost instruments

BY ALEX MARSHALL

Peter Holmes, a 76-year-old former aircraft engineer, was standing in his tidy living room in North London recently holding a four-and-a-quarter-foot-long Scandinavian war horn. When asked how the instrument, known as a lur, is played, he said: "I've no idea. No one's played it for 3,000 years."

With that, Mr. Holmes put the lur to his lips and blew. Rather than an angry bellow that might transport a listener to a lonely fjord among Viking warriors, it sounded more like a bugle played by someone with a lisp.

Mr. Holmes, an expert on ancient music, built the lur and other long-forgotten instruments in his cluttered garden shed and at the University of Middlesex's engineering department, where he is designer in residence.

He is also a central figure in the European Music Archaeology Project, or EMAP, a 4-million euro effort started in 2013 to recreate the sounds of the ancient world.

The project will unveil the results of its work this year, starting with a concert in Glasgow, Scotland, on April 9, followed by a touring exhibition that opens on June 6 in Ystad, Sweden.

The classical record label Delphian is also releasing a series of albums as a tie-in with the project, starting with works of ancient Scottish music in May.

Ancient instruments are important because they offer a different perspec-



GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/ART ARCHIVE/THE PICTURE DESK, VIA AFP



tive on the past, said John Kenny, a trombonist from Birmingham, England, who also plays the carnyx, an Iron Age horn. "I've witnessed the most extraordinary skills used to reconstruct buildings, clothes and language," he said, "but those don't put you into the imaginative world people used to live in. Only music does that."

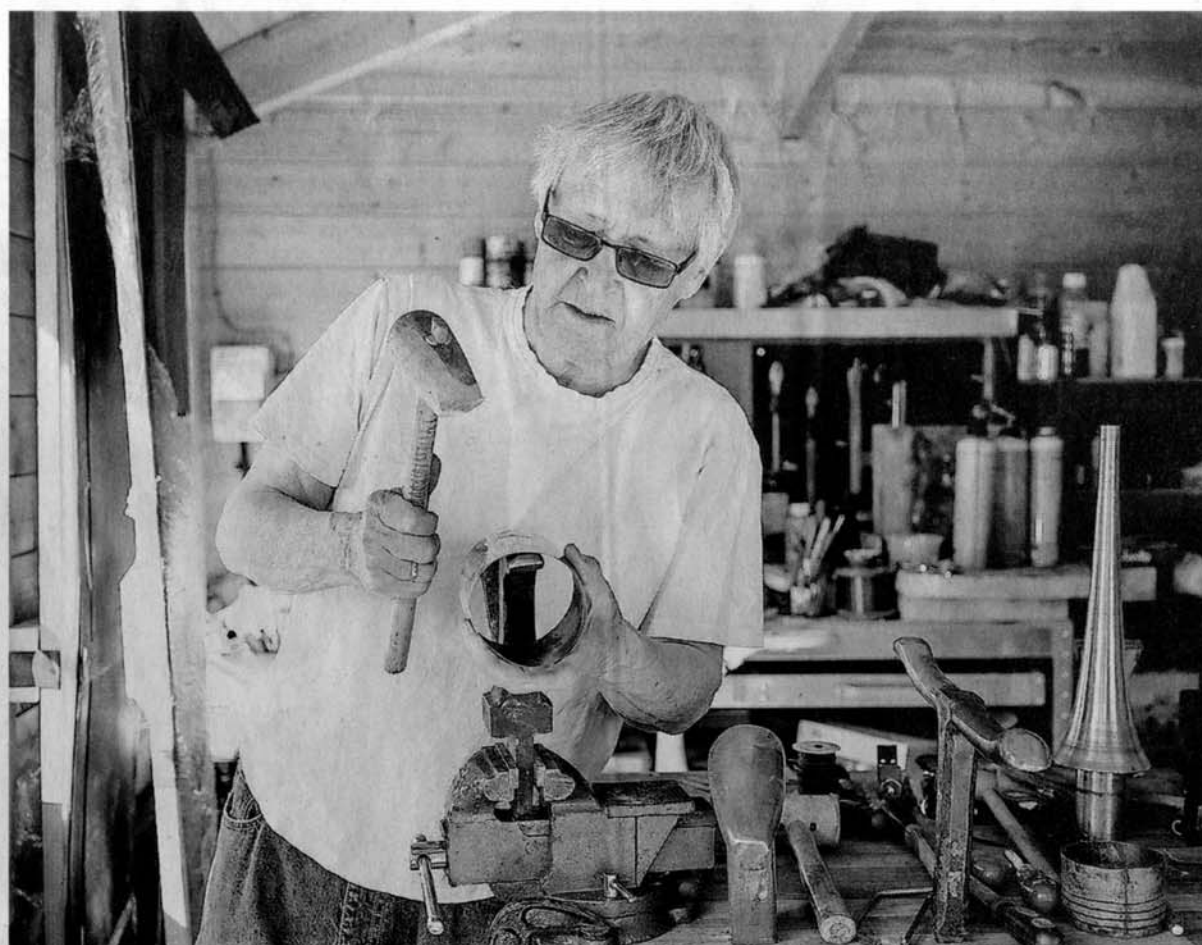
"If you reconstruct a sword," he added, "no one apart from a homicidal maniac could use it for the purpose intended. But reconstruct an instrument and anyone can experience it."

The project, half funded by the European Union, with the rest coming from an assortment of institutions and state agencies, spans the Paleolithic era to around 1,000 A.D. and the Dark Ages.

Calling on the skills of archaeologists, philologists, acousticians, metal workers and others, it has brought back to life everything from ancient bagpipes to 30,000-year-old vulture bone flutes (although some say those are merely vul-



John Kenny, a trombonist from Britain, blasting a carnyx on a beach in Tarquinia, Italy. Left, a flutist portrayed in a fifth-century B.C. marble relief, top; a lur, below left, built by Peter Holmes, below, in his workshop in North London.



TOM JAMIESON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES, ABOVE AND LEFT

ture bones that some poor animal has chewed holes in).

Engineers and enthusiasts like himself have been recreating ancient instruments for decades, Mr. Holmes noted. His own forays in the area came about because his love of the trumpet led him to trace its origins further and

further back until, in 1962, he found himself reconstructing an antecedent to the instrument that had been found in Tutankhamen's tomb.

"It used to be just a few of us enthusiasts doing it," he said, "but now it's become a lot more professional. We're using high-precision engineering tools, 3D

printers, all sorts of things."

Mr. Kenny, 59, was introduced to the carnyx in the early 1990s when a Scottish musicologist, knowing of his interest in early music, knocked on his door and told him he was needed to help reconstruct one that had been excavated in 1816 at a farm near Deskford, in

northern Scotland, but was languishing in a museum storeroom. A carnyx towers six feet above the player, and is topped by a serpent or boar's head — its mouth sometimes able to flap open and closed to mute the sound.

The first reconstruction sounded like "a fart in a bottle," Mr. Kenny said. "It wasn't a human instrument. It had no inner life, and I was sure that was because we didn't use the original techniques to make it or the original alloys."

A second version, which cost 28,000 pounds to make, about \$40,000, and required a craftsman to hand-hammer metal for 400 hours, fortunately soared. Mr. Kenny has been playing it ever since, on a long-term loan from a charitable trust, even though he occasionally knocks the head off.

The EMAP exhibit will feature the Deskford Carnyx as well as recreations of ones found at a tomb in France and at sites in the Italian Alps and England (the last made by Mr. Holmes).

Mr. Kenny initially played the carnyx as a war instrument, influenced by that striking head. But, he said, he soon realized it "was just like a human. If you shout all the time, you lose your voice. So I decided to explore its other voices, and the minute I did I realized it could produce the most enormous amount of colors — far more than a trumpet or trombone."

That range is evident on his album for Delphian, due out in September, a record that at some points sounds like a dragon awakening, at others like avant-garde jazz.

Another EMAP member, Barnaby Brown of Cambridge, England, plays reconstructions of the Greco-Roman aulos, a kind of double oboe you play by sticking one in each corner of your mouth, a bit like someone using chopsticks to impersonate a walrus. Unlike the carnyx, its music is only ever soulful and intimate.

"It's become a lot more professional. We're using high-precision engineering tools, 3D printers, all sorts of things."

It was "the most popular instrument of the Greco-Roman world," Mr. Brown said. "You couldn't have a sacrifice without it. You couldn't have fun without it. You couldn't have a party, a wedding, a funeral."

The aulos requires a technique called circular breathing, and when Mr. Brown plays it, his cheeks puff out and his eyes bulge.

The goddess Athena was said to have invented the aulos but thrown it away when she realized how ghastly she looked while playing it.

"It looks far worse than it is," Mr. Brown said. "The only thing that's hard about it is the breathing requires musculature in the lips and, right now, I can only do it for about six minutes."

"In Greco-Roman times they used to play all night and had to wear a leather strap" called a phorbeia "so they could keep going," he added.

Mr. Brown said that musical archaeology was often misunderstood as recreating the music of the past; instead, he said, it is also another way of creating new music for today.

"The reason I'm most excited by playing these instruments is I get to compose," he said, "because the original music doesn't survive. We have a few bits of Greek music, but that's it."

"It's a complete fallacy when people say, 'You're hearing the music of the Stone Age,'" he continued. "What rubbish! You're hearing the music of the person playing the instrument. Does that ruin it? No, it makes it even more thrilling."