The history of the Haitian banza is tied to the history of the Musée du Conservatoire de Musique of Paris. The original idea for this museum was born of the French Revolution: in August of 1795, the French National Convention decreed that “a collection of antique or foreign instruments” should be created, with the goal that they could “through their perfection serve as models.” The museum, in other words, was meant to serve as an archive but also an inspiration, offering examples for those who built instruments in the present. The project had enthusiastic boosters – one dreamed of a museum that, alongside those celebrating the Sciences and Arts, would celebrate the “sublime riches of this art – and a beginning collection of 316 instruments. But the project for a museum took second place to the project of building a Music Conservatory itself, and most of the instruments were eventually sold to pay for the teaching mission. And in 1816, twenty harpsichords, deemed “debris,” were burned to keep students warm during their classes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It was only in the mid nineteenth-century that the original vision of the Museum was finally fulfilled. The French State purchased a collection of 230 instruments from the composer Louis Clapisson as the basis for the collection, and then officially named him the curator of the new institution – “in order to spare him the pain” of no longer seeing his cherished objects, as his successor put it. Officially opened in 1864, the collection grew under the management of Gustave Chouquet, who was in charge from 1871 to 1886. Under his watch the collection, composed at it’s original almost exclusively of European instruments, became more global in scope thanks to large donations from two individuals: the celebrated Indian musician Sourindro Mohun Tagore, and the French abolitionist and traveler Victor Schoelcher.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The latter collection was described by one contemporary as “a very interesting collection of savage instruments.” There were 41 objects in all, which he had collected during his global travels between 1840 and 1850 in the Caribbean – including the French colonies of Guadeloupe and Martinique and independent Haiti – Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Africa, and Mexico. Schoelcher’s collection, according to one contemporary, was a kind of extension of his political passions. Schoelcher, he wrote, was a consistent “defender of the black race” who held “inflexible principles of honor and liberty.” “At once a democrat and an aristocrat,” he “dined on a plate of carrots, but on a silver plate.” His commitment to abolitionism and racial equality probably drove him to see a value and interest in objects others might have overlooked, such as the Haitian banza he collected. The large donation he made to the museum in 1872 (which included this instrument), was supplemented later by instruments he brought back from Algeria and Cambodia. Schoelcher wrote proudly of the instruments he had contributed, noting that the instruments were notable for their “rarity,” most of them “having never been seen before in Europe.” And his gift became an inspiration for others who had collections of instruments, including many from outside Europe, who in the next decades made similar gifts and so expanded the collection considerably. The instruments in the museum, including several of those given by Schoelcher, received the care of luthiers who repaired cracks and broken bows.[[3]](#footnote-3)

By 1884, the collection itself was made up about a thousand instruments, about three quarters of them from Europe. The instruments donated by Tagore and Schoelcher were part of a group of “non-European” instruments, whose position in the Museum was shaped by the broader understanding of musical progress that dominated histories of music. “In this Museum,” Chouquet wrote in 1884, “we have reserved the place of honor for instruments that are the highest expression of modern art, and relegated those instruments of uncivilized nations or those that are foreign to our musical system to the background.” The catalogue he published, similarly, started – “for the same reason,” Chouquet explained – with European instruments, and then went through those of Asia, Africa, America, and Oceania.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The description attached to the Haitian banza in the catalogue first produced in 1874 was simple. Under the title “Banza d’Haïti,” it read: “Cette sorte de guitar, montée de 4 cordes et d’une forme très pittoresque, est d’un usage general parmi les nègres de Saint-Domingue.” “This type of guitar, mounted with four strings and with a very picturesque form, is in general use among the negroes of Saint-Domingue.” As was common in texts of the time, there was a slippage between the name “Saint-Domingue” – that of the old French colony – and “Haiti,” the name for the independent country born in 1804. But the observation, gathered from Schoelcher presumably, that this instrument was in “general use” is a valuable one, suggesting that the instrument was collected as an example of a relatively widespread instrument in the country when Schoelcher had visited in 1841.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. Florence Gétreau, “Gustave Chouquet, Léon Pillaut, Et L’unique Catalogue Du Musée Instrumental Du Conservatoire De Musique De Paris,” in *Le Musée Du Conservatoire De Musique* (Geneva: Editions Minkoff, 1993), 5–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gustave Chouquet, *Le Musée Du Conservatoire De Musique* (Geneva: Editions Minkoff, 1993), xi–x. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Florence Gétreau, *Aux Origines Du Musée De La Musique: Les Collections Instrumentales Du Conservatoire De Paris : 1793-1993* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996), 135, 205–206, 234, 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chouquet, *Le Musée Du Conservatoire De Musique*, xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)