

Instead of an Introduction: Archives as a Source of Inspiration

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Scholars from a variety of fields have reconceptualised the archive not only as a source of knowledge, but also as a site where knowledge is produced and negotiated. From this perspective, archives are seen as dynamic places, where memory is created, contested, recovered, and reinterpreted.

What is the significance of archive music collections for our ethnomusicological research?

First of all they give us a chance not only to enjoy the music of the past but also to compare it with modern traditional music, allowing us to draw inferences about the ways in which music has developed over the last century. Secondly such early recordings collections portray the truly indigenous music of Central Asian peoples: music that was not affected either by ethnic Russification or by ideological Bolshevisation. These musics and lyrics are representative of proper Sart, Kazakh, Kyrgyz or Tatar origins. There are no incursions of the Communist Party or verses devoted to Lenin or Stalin, as there are in all songs following the crucial dictatorship period of the 1930's.

When we briefly compare the music of the beginning of the 20th and the 21st centuries, for example, it is noticeable that the main feature of the musics recorded earlier is their simplicity in terms of both the music and the instruments used, smaller number of instruments involved, repetitive development of tune, restricted variations, etc. At the same time their extreme expressiveness and deep spiritual feeling are also impressive, as their texts are mostly religious and stem from the Sufi context.

Nowadays our music has become much more sophisticated. Generally a wider instrumental range is used (and more often displayed), and more variations and ornaments are added that are representative of local styles and schools of technique. In all, the modern music of Central Asia is more decorative and descriptive than suggestive, as it used to be. One can also observe that the influence of the Soviet regime was not the lone factor that has affected Central Asian music. A variety of factors have left their mark, some very significant, as for example the tendency toward globalization. The music of that region is now exposed to all kind of influences, ranging from pop music and regional exchanges in stylistic variation to the wide scale effects of the Indian, Arabic, Turkish and Iranian musical worlds. We can approach Central Asian music analytically from different perspectives, opening opportunities for the comparative study of music of Central Asia from the early 20th to the early 21st century.

In conclusion we can affirm that there are other important issues related to the situation that are of less theoretical nature. One could say that today not only the sound worlds of traditional music but even the languages themselves are endangered due to the vast harsh influences this world subjects them to. Nicholas Ostler states that today “there is nothing unusual about a single language dying. Communities have come and gone throughout history, taking their languages with them. According to the best estimates, there are now approximately 6000 languages in the world. Of these, about half are going to die out during the 21st century. This means that, on average, there is a language dying out somewhere in the world every two weeks or so” (Ostler, 1999:1; 2005:17). This speaks volumes. If this is the case with languages, it's not difficult to imagine that traditional music faces similar dangers. This emphasizes the need to think about systems which can effectively help with the task of conserving a rich cultural heritage of humankind. As for our musician recording collections, a dire need exists here as well for a comprehensive, classified catalogue to be compiled and for the majority of archives to be published in order to preserve the real sounds of the traditional music of the world and to let them be known.

For example, 25 years ago I began researching music in Northern Afghanistan using a collection of audio recordings from the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv, which covers its history from 1959 to the late 1970s. Analysis of this research spurred me on to visit the locality of Northern Afghanistan for myself, in order to meet the most prominent musicians and groups. Finally, in 2006, I had the rare chance to travel there to begin my personal collection of audio and video recordings of the most famous local musicians such as Usto Kamolliddin, Tadj Muhammad, and Sabzygul, amongst others, in Mazar-e-Sharif, Andhoy, Shoberghan, and Akcha. Afghanistan nowadays is a cultural hotspot, where the on-going war for the last thirty years has

thrown the country into a deep economic, social and cultural crisis. Since the 1970s the country has lived through a number of invasions and conflicts with various opponents - the Soviets, Mujahedin, Taliban and the Western Alliance, all of which have brought chaos and disorder into the daily life of its people. Therefore to meet few survived Afghani musicians whose performances were recorded many years ago and to make recordings with the new ones was a real advantage of the field work, of the discipline of ethnomusicology.

To close I'll recall Anthony Seeger's suggestion that archives can also be seen as storehouses of valuable cultural knowledge, preserving marginalized and forgotten voices and cultural practices. For communities that live by oral tradition like in Afghanistan then, archives can be sources of empowerment and resources for knowledge building understanding that "communities engaged in changing themselves often look to the past as a model through which to create a coherent future...archives become a resource for the recovery of history and the establishment or reestablishment of a degree of cultural autonomy" (Seeger 2002).

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