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Interrogating "Access to Waxes": Introductory Remarks on the Collections from the Arab World of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv

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Introduction

The "Access to Waxes" transdisciplinary workshops held at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin in December 2021 explored the collections from the Arab World of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv (BPhA) that were recorded by European collectors and scholars between 1900 and 1945.[1] It was also devoted to the assessment of the technical, ethical and legal aspects of an online publication strategy that would provide access to these collections.[2] Both the workshop and this resulting issue of the *world of music (new series)* are timely contributions to the ongoing critical debate on the politics and ethics of historical sound recordings, archives, acoustic memory, cultural rights, intellectual property, musical repatriation, and access. These and other issues are central to an ethnomusicology in transformation, where the field's mission, colonial legacy, research praxis, and ethics have been critically examined, and new paths are being charted toward decolonizing the field (Diamond and Castelo-Branco 2021). The aims and uses of sound-oriented research and its outcomes, including sound recordings, as well as the roles of ethnomusicologists as socially engaged scholars and activists are central to this debate. As ethnomusicologist Sooi Beng Tan points out, we need to develop a people-centered collaborative research approach where the emphasis is on dialogue, participation and action in the planning, documentation and transmission of research results, engaging traditional practitioners and young people as research partners (Tan 2021).

The processes that were involved in the making of the recordings that constitute the collections from the Arab World of the BPhA were imbricated in colonial power structures and the institutional hierarchies of the nation-state. This poses many challenges and has epistemological, methodological,

and ethical implications for both assessing the collections, and access and repatriation projects. These challenges are central to the ongoing debates on decolonizing music and dance studies that have been engaging scholars and scholarly organizations. The International Council for Traditional Music and Dance (ICTMD), for example, held a bimonthly series of online sessions throughout 2021 titled "Dialogues: Towards Decolonizing Music and Dance Studies." This series mobilized scholars, musicians and activists to reflect on the colonial legacies of music and dance research and explore pathways toward decolonizing these fields of study by decentering "[...] power hierarchies such as those between researcher/researched, academic/non-academic, university/community, theory/practice, centre/periphery, and Global North/Global South," and engaging with "[...] relations of power and socio-political issues such as race and ethnicity, class, and gender and sexuality."[3] The results of this initiative are accessible through an online multimedia publication featuring transnational debates about issues that are relevant to the "Access to Waxes" project, such as "decoloniality, praxis, collaborative ethnography, alternative pedagogy, and new ways of knowing" (Tan and Ostashewski 2022).[4]

The "Access to Waxes" initiative also contributes to the ongoing reflection on sound and audiovisual archives, their colonial histories, mission, practices and reconceptualization in postcolonial contexts, as well as the challenges and ethics of preservation, dissemination, access, and musical repatriation (e.g., Assmann et al. 2010; Ochoa 2011; Fox 2013; García 2017a, b; Ziegler et al. 2017; Gunderson et al. 2018; Ajotikar and van Straaten 2021; Hilden 2022). The International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives,[5] the major professional association focusing on the technical, legal and ethical aspects of archival practices, has long debated the politics and ethics of the recording, preservation, copyright, access, and repatriation of sound and audiovisual recordings (Assmann et al. 2010). The two major scholarly societies focusing on the transdisciplinary study of music, the ICTMD and the Society for Ethnomusicology, integrate special groups that have been reflecting on music archives. The ICTMD Study Group on Sources and Archives for Music and Sound Studies has been debating archives as sites for the negotiation, contestation or confirmation of social and political power, and for the construction of memory.[6] Critical approaches to archival practices, conceptualized "as a condition of music and dance research" and a "process

which defines a vast field of knowledge, creation and mediation," was one of the themes addressed by the 46th ICTMD World Conference held in Lisbon in July 2022. Over a dozen panels and roundtables focused on current approaches to archival practices (e.g., institutional, dialogical, decolonial, collaborative), the articulation of archives with race, migration, alterity, and political tensions, as well as digital, online and DIY archives, among other central themes.[7]

The Society for Ethnomusicology's Special Interest Group for Archiving[8] has been debating cultural rights, intellectual property, and repatriation, among other issues that have been the focus of ethnomusicological research and advocacy for over three decades (e.g., Seeger 1992, 1996; Zemp 1996; Weintraub & Yung 2009; Kapchan 2014).

Music categories and labels

The categorization and labelling of music, which is central to the archiving process, has been critically debated by music scholars from different fields (Middleton 1990; Gelbart 2007; Holt 2007; Castelo-Branco 2013). As I have argued elsewhere, music categories affect "the ways in which musical worlds are constructed, the ways musicians and listeners perceive and participate in music making, as well as the ways disciplines and fields of study are configured" (Castelo-Branco 2013:661). Taking into account the contents of the collections from the Arab World of the BPhA, on the one hand, and the genealogy of the term "Arab Music," on the other, I interrogate the adequacy of "Arab Music" as a possible label for this collection.

In her elucidative overview of the wax cylinder collections from the Arab World archived at the BPhA, its articulation with the institution's history, its collectors and their strategies, Susanne Ziegler points out that this collection "is not homogeneous" with respect to "availability, content, region, technical quality and number of cylinders" (see Ziegler in this issue). The recordings were made in a wide geographical area, from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, and are heterogenous with respect to the musical genres, practices and languages represented, including Arab and Berber songs from North Africa, Syriac and Coptic Christian hymns, Bedouin songs and Jewish music from Yemen. While classification and labelling are inherent to the process of archiving, the notion of "Arab Music" as a generic label for

these historical recordings obfuscates the diversity of its content, associating these field recordings with urban musical genres often labelled as "Arab Music" that, as Ziegler points out, are not represented in this collection, but rather on commercial sound recordings made since the early twentieth century and published by international record labels.

"Arab music" (a literal translation of al-musiqa al-'arabiyyah) is a contested term. A brief genealogy clarifies the historical context in which it emerged and its ideological underpinnings. The term was introduced by the landmark Arab Music Conference held in Cairo in 1932 (Hassan 1989; Racy 1991; Lambert 2007), replacing al-musiqa al-sharqiyyah (Oriental Music), a label that was prevalent up to then, emphasizing the then perceived contrast between the "oriental" or "eastern" and "western" worldviews and musical practices. As a discursive field (Hassan 1989; Castelo-Branco 2002:557, forthcoming (2025); Lambert 2007:2), al-musiqa al-'arabiyyah is grounded on the ideal of a common Arab musical legacy that encompasses a central group of indigenous urban musical domains that share characteristics such as melodic and rhythmic modes (maqam and iqa'), the central role of the solo singer (mutrib/ah), melodic artistry, and affective performance, ideally inducing tarab (ecstasy) (Castelo-Branco 2002:557, 2023). Al-musiqa al-'arabiyyah is also often used as a generic term to refer to music made by people who identify as Arabs. Thirty-five years following the 1932 Arab Music Conference, within the Egyptian context, the notion was redefined as being coterminous with heritage (turath), a set of musical genres and performance practices harking back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that are grounded in the ideal of authenticity that can also be read as central to what Laurajane Smith (2006) refers to as an "authorized heritage discourse" (El-Shawan [Castelo-Branco] 1984; Castelo-Branco forthcoming (2025). Taking into account the heterogeneity of the musics and languages represented by the BPhA's historical collections of wax cylinders, the use of "Arab Music" as a label for this collection seems inadequate and a broader term such as collections "from the Arab world," as used in this issue, therefore seems more appropriate.

Interrogating historical sound collections

Several articles in this volume make an important contribution toward the critical study of the wax cylinder collections recorded in Tunisia, Yemen, and Siwa (Egypt). More critical work needs to be carried out on these and other historical collections. Drawing on the conceptualization of sound archives as a discursive field of mediated knowledge, as cogently argued by ethnomusicologist Miguel García (2017a), the study of historical recordings, raises myriad questions that are central to the understanding of these and other collections and to considering repatriation and access.

Who were the "collectors/scholars" who made the recordings? What were their objectives? What was their relationship to the BPhA? What did they deem worthy of registering, and what did they leave out? What do the recorded fragments that constitute the "sound events preserved as historical sound objects" (Hilden 2022) represent? What do they mean for local communities and scholars? What ideas, conflicts, emotions, and memories do they conjure up? How can these be discussed, and reckoned with? What are the scientific paradigms, ideologies and aesthetics that undergird the collections? How were the acoustic characteristics of the recordings transformed through recording, digitalization, musical transcription, and other modes of representation? What were the political contexts and specific circumstances in which the recordings were made, and their entanglement with colonial projects? How were the recordings conceptualized in scholarly discourse by their collectors and other scholars? How were the archival collections constituted and categorized? These and other questions are being addressed by a team of scholars who are engaging in the critical study of the historical sound collection made by Brigitte Schiffer in Siwa in the 1930s,[9] considering restitution and access.

Coda

The critical study of historical sound collections should be articulated with "ethical repatriation" (Seeger 2018) to source communities and local institutions, ideally leading to the development of shared research practices with culture bearers that are embedded in "networks of forward looking reciproc-

ity" (Fox 2013:552), creating the conditions for communities to access, revitalize, and sustain their music heritage, and contributing to decolonizing music research.

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Notes

1. This contribution is a revised version of the remarks I presented at the Access to Waxes Workshop held at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin in December 2021.

2. For a characterization of the collections from the Arab World of the BPhA, see Ziegler's article in this volume.

3. Cf. the program and abstracts: https://www.ictmusic.org/dialogues2021. Accessed 19 November 2023.

4. DIALOGUES: Towards Decolonizing Music and Dance Studies can be accessed at: https://ictmusic.org/publications/dialogues-towards-decolonizing-music-and-dance-studies. Accessed 19 November 2023.

5. See https://www.iasa-web.org/. Accessed 19 November 2023.

6. For more on the goals of this ICTMD Study Group, see https://www.ictmusic.org/group/sources-archives-music-sound-studies. Accessed 19 November 2023.

7. See https://ictmusic.org/sites/default/files/documents/world%20conferences/programmes/programme%202022%20ictm%20world%20conference.pdf. Accessed 19 November 2023.

8. For more, see https://www.ethnomusicology.org/page/Groups_SIGsArch. Accessed 19 November 2023.

9. See Matthias Pasdzierny's contribution in this volume.

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