

Data Diplomacy

"Access to Waxes" and the Need for Negotiating Spaces

Dörte Schmidt¹

¹ *Berlin University of the Arts, Department of Musicology, Germany*

Editor's note The following contribution originally results from an oral response to the presentations and discussions at the Access to Waxes Conference in Berlin in December 2021. It is therefore, especially in comparison to the other articles within this issue, to be understood primarily as a kind of fundamental positioning and has been included here for that very reason. In it, the specific example of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv's holdings and their accessibility and digitization is taken as an opportunity to draw particular attention to the connection between technical infrastructures and science diplomacy. At the level of metadata and repositories, it cannot be a matter of constructing new, finally "valid" identities, claiming ownership, etcetera. The point, then, is to enable the negotiation of these issues through access to the sources. The question is who would create and moderate a space for such international negotiations. This could be done, for example, within the framework of the German National Research Data Infrastructure (Nationale Forschungsdateninfrastruktur/NFDI) and in exchange with UNESCO.

The project of digitizing field recordings from the Siwa Oasis in the collections of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv (BPhA) and making them accessible has its genesis in a broader research context. The nexus was the temporarily Cairo-based Jewish composer and musicologist Brigitte Schiffer (1909–1986), a figure we came across in a larger project on exile from Nazi Germany and the processes of the return of people, works and ideas.¹ After encountering Schiffer in many correspondences that centrally reflected the cultural situation in the postwar period, we decided to edit some of these and do more research on her and her working contexts (Pasdzierny et al. 2017). One further step was the Arabic translation of her Cairo correspondence in order to make it accessible to the Arabic-speaking world (Hili and

Pasdzierny 2022). We hoped to learn about the specific, existential significance that music had, especially for those in exile, and how non-hegemonic ideas of art could be conceived and lived. Brigitte Schiffer seemed to be such a figure – and it was no coincidence that Ikram Hili in the opening speech for the Berlin Conference "Access to Waxes" described her as a bridge builder and mediator.²

Why is this important regarding the question of field recordings? During the workshop discussion of the Conference "Access to Waxes," Mitchell Ash rightly raised the question of provenance.³ We learn from figures such as Brigitte Schiffer that the very question of institutional provenance is itself a moving target. For Schiffer, the relationship to the institution for which she made these recordings changed several times and took on an existential dimension through exile. Provenance itself, this is obvious in such cases, proves to be highly complex because it depends on the various perspectives of those involved.

The "object" to be questioned here concerning its provenance belongs to what UNESCO calls "intangible cultural heritage" in the respective convention, defined in article 2 as "carried by human knowledge and skills."⁴ Such "cultural assets" are currently, more than ever, involved in competitions for sovereignty, which makes them as interesting as they are difficult. This is almost fueled by the fact that they are intangible, i.e., that they can, at best, be partially grasped by media. This happens frequently (also in the cases discussed at the "Access to Waxes" Conference) in the course of an interest in collecting, i.e., the medialization itself is already connected with the goal of a specific form of mobilization. This medialization never transports a "thing itself," but rather turns it from a practice into a collection item – one that can be migrated, heard, read, analyzed, handed down and detached from its practice – and, thus, the medium as a collection item not only forms its own practice, but is also inserted into new orders of knowledge and (this seems important to me here) this process will be ongoing. This raises the question of the relationships between 1) aesthetic evidence and the order of knowledge, 2) aesthetic evidence and source criticism, and 3) aesthetic evidence and political understanding.

The situation we have to discuss shares central characteristics with that process which Mitchell Ash has described as "knowledge change" and in which the entire system changes when individual elements migrate (Ash 2006, 2008). Mobile, in our case, i.e. ethnographic field recording of nomad musicians for the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, are the media, the recorders, the people who record as well as the musicians. Claims to interpretation are as difficult to pin down as claims to ownership. One could rely on the places, on the questions where from and where to. But, in the course of the conference, the decisive question was already asked: What does "Arab collections" actually mean? And for this, the figure of Schiffer is more than instructive: her exile and its geopolitical dimensions bring the existential significance of forced migration into view. Political as well as ethical questions of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms that are effective in terms of "identity politics" (which is – in fact – not limited to indigenous cultures), thus, takes on a special explosive power. In using the currently much-used term "identity politics," the focus should not be moved to "identity" for our context, but to "politics." The discussions on, for example, identity, authorship and ownership let us become part of extremely dynamic negotiation processes associated with interpretive sovereignty. Such processes cannot be fully operationalized through regulation because they combine disputes about economic, political and symbolic representations. At this point, the limits of data ethics as a shared set of regulations are also reached. We are moving from the sphere of digital humanities into the field of the political and, thus – especially under the conditions of mobility – of diplomacy.

In my view, making such sources accessible and enabling their research is primarily a diplomatic task. If research data management – and this is what we are talking about when it comes to "access to waxes" – wants to create enabling structures, it is not enough to consider the hegemonic aspects of data storage from a broader, somewhat theoretical perspective. It is also not a matter of constructing new, finally "valid" identities, claiming ownership, etc. on the level of metadata, repositories, and so on, but of enabling such negotiations through access to the sources. First of all, one has to reach agreement on this, which, in itself, might not be so easy. To do this, one must understand the mechanisms and media of such negotiations. And then the

consequences at the level of, for example, metadata and choice of repository must be discussed in very concrete terms. These are not "technical" details, but the adjusting screws for the knowledge order in which these data enter and the diplomatic possibilities that arise from access. This is a discussion that should definitely take place at the forum of the National Research Data Infrastructure and specifically in the consortium that focuses on cultural heritage data: NFDI4Culture, in Germany.⁵ The most important question is how to establish the necessary negotiation space that is accepted by and made accessible to the different participants and how to link this to transnational data infrastructures. A first step towards this was a meeting of the Advisory Council of NFDI4Culture with Lutz Möller, the Deputy Secretary General of the German UNESCO Commission, in April 2022, where these questions could be discussed using the example of the project "Access to Waxes." The conversation is open and it must and will continue, despite all the challenges.

References

Ash, Mitchell

2006 "Wissens- und Wissenschaftstransfer – Einführende Bemerkungen." *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 29:181–9.

Ash, Mitchell

2008 "Forced Migration and Scientific Change." In *The Migration of Ideas*, Roberto Scazzieri, and Raffaella Simili, eds. Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, 161–78.

Hili, Ikram, & Matthias Pasdzierny (eds.)

2022 1935–1963 رسائل من القاهرة بريحيته شيفر: [Brigitte Schiffer: *Letters from Cairo 1935–1963*]. Berlin & Abu Dhabi: falschrum books & Kalima.

Pasdzierny, Matthias, Dörte Schmidt, & Malte Vogt (eds.)

2017 "Es ist gut, dass man überall Freunde hat" *Brigitte Schiffer und ihre Korrespondenz mit Heinz Tiessen, Alfred Schlee, Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt und Carla Henius*. Munich: text + kritik (Kontinuitäten und Brüche im Musikleben der Nachkriegszeit).

Notes

1. See <https://www.udk-berlin.de/universitaet/fakultaet-musik/institute/institut-fuer-musikwissenschaft-musiktheorie-komposition-und-musikuebertragung/musikwissenschaft/forschungsstelle-exil-und-nachkriegskultur/forschung/>. Accessed 12 December 2024.
2. For the program, see: https://agya.info/fileadmin/user_upload/Research_Projects/2021_Projects/2021_WGP_Heritage_Access_to_Waxes/AGYA_Waxes_Programm_A5-Abend_FINAL.pdf. Accessed 12 December 2024.
3. See <https://agya.info/research/research-projects-by-year/access-to-waxes-arab-collections-of-the-berlin-phonogramm-archiv>. Accessed 12 December 2024.
4. See the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention#art2>. Accessed 12 December 2024.
5. See <https://nfdi4culture.de/>. Accessed 12 December 2024.

About the author

Dörte Schmidt is Professor of Musicology at the Berlin University of the Arts. She is the director of the Bernd Alois Zimmermann Complete Edition in the funding program of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, one of the founders of the NFDI4Culture Consortium, and a member of the board of trustees of the German National Research Data Infrastructure (NFDI).