

A Guide to the *UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music*

by Rob Sevier

Sprawling across a half-dozen labels (GREM, Auvidis, Philips, Bärenreiter, EMI-Odeon, and Poljazz), issued in disparate countries, and largely out of print now for decades, [the series of recordings sponsored by UNESCO](#)—it would be fair to say—is a challenge to access for even the most diligent collector. Until recently, there was a clearer path to your average UNESCO World Heritage sites¹ than to the UNESCO recording titles.

As a record collector who spent over a decade assembling a nearly complete collection, I learned that many titles proved to be exceedingly rare by any standards. Even the mighty UCLA and IU (Indiana University, where the Society for Ethnomusicology is based) libraries didn't retain complete sets. The simple, unassuming packages have always been physically overshadowed by the domineering Ocora records (whose early series were all hardbound!) and the unusually thick [Folkways Records](#) jackets. But the content more than held its own. The original lead curator of the [UNESCO collection](#), [Alain Daniélou](#), was like the Ahmet Ertegun of ethnographic recordings (making [Moe Asch](#) the Rick Rubin? Charles Duvelle the David Geffen?). He quietly became a giant in his field, and built the foundation for an almost unbelievably dense and intimidating catalog.

So how does the dilettante music lover find a foothold? I hope to have removed some of the guesswork here. I have no musicological background, only the capacity to endure lengthy eBay auctions on Shop Victoriously and patiently await overseas parcels. I have enjoyed collecting and listening as maybe only an untrained ignoramus can in the last decade or so. Here are ten easy entry points to the [UNESCO collection](#) and an attempt to cover divergent locales and peoples.

[Argentina: Tritonic Musics of the North-West](#)

So disassociating and hypnotizing, the vibrations and breathing and rattling and dense atmosphere heard on this recording are more compelling than the musicianship, which, as the tritonic name implies, is direct and concise and pummelingly repetitive. Highlights of the CD are the percussion and aerophone ensembles on the first three selections. Rafael Parejo's vivid recording methods make even mundane passages seem fascinating. Pay special attention to the mildly nausea-inducing vocal layers on the track titled "[Tonada de carnaval](#)." The haunting vocal and *caja* (hand drum) ballads balancing the back half of the collection are a bit more challenging to engage but are completely rewarding and powerful in their fragility.

[Bahrain: Fidjeri: Songs of the Pearl Divers](#)

It's not difficult to romanticize the *fidjeri* vocal repertoire: it was created by and for lungs made unnaturally powerful through the now antiquated task of machine-free underwater pearl retrieval. Beyond such rigorously cultivated abilities, mythology held that the *fidjeri* was taught to the divers by superhuman demons, or Djinn. By the time of these 1976 recordings by [Habib Hassan Touma](#), however, the art of pearl diving was fairly quaint in this oil-rich nation; its pearl harvesting market had been cornered by Japanese companies with sophisticated technology. The performers featured here had been pearl divers, and their boundless capacity for breath still remains, though not for long before such abilities would be lost to modernity.

[Bulgaria](#)

The sheer virtuosity heard in these selections is the most immediately apparent attribute of Bulgaria's folk repertoire. Whether it's in the deft, rapid-fire [kaval flute](#) execution or the doom-laden *gayda* bagpipe playing or the thrilling (if not a tad shrill) [zurna shawm](#) work, each player—mostly nonprofessionals—displays a unity with his instrument, a distinct sense that his mastery accompanies a lifetime commitment to his craft. Even the vocal style has an intense rigor to it—observe the difficult polyphonies of the female group performing the "[Lazarus Day Song](#)" and the harvest songs. These recordings come from Bulgarian National Radio but are no more commercial than the other entries here.

[Canada: Inuit Games and Songs](#)

These brief vocal pieces are so physically intense that they are almost exhausting to listen to, and in fact a component of some of these performances is that pairs of women attempt to exhaust their partners. Approach the album like a hardcore punk record; this is a litany of quick and extreme songs. A mouth harp and a violin make brief appearances too, but the purest thrills are in the *katajjait* or “throat games.” A myriad of recordists all contribute to this diverse set of consistently compelling sounds.

[Central African Republic: Banda Polyphony](#)

Few recordings of anything can match the ebullience of the Banda Linda and Banda Drukpa ensembles captured by [Simha Arom](#) during his prolific residencies in the Central African Republic. During a first listen, the conflagration of eighteen horns (called *ongo*) seems dissonant, but within a few tracks the polyphonic logic starts to become irresistible. On [track four](#), a lament, the ways in which the Banda Linda ensembles inspired (in very direct ways) the work of avant-garde composers like György Ligeti and Luciano Berio are completely transparent. And somehow the Banda Linda are simply more enjoyable than their studious protégés. I like Ligeti, but I’d sooner share a blissed-out Banda Linda recording with a new initiate to difficult music.

[Chile: Hispano-Chilean Metisse Traditional Music](#)

A recording naturally provides an element of mystery and surprise that a video does not, and the fourteen minutes of “[Song of the Alféreces and Dances of the Chinos](#)” offers a genuinely disorienting experience, partly due to the listener’s inability to visualize the scope of what is happening that makes these supernatural sounds. It turns out to be a centuries-old tradition that is as much Spanish as it is indigenous. But this theatrical experience is worth a “no previews” approach. The rest of the compilation, recorded by musician [Jochen Wenzel](#), is beautiful and contains some remarkably warm guitar playing, although the jarring first side could have already thrown off anyone’s compass for “normal.”

[Laos: Traditional Music of the South](#)

The collection includes numerous pleasant *khène* solos to slowly immerse you in the music of southern Laos. The orchestras are cacophonous and stimulating, if not totally engaging. But nestled amongst enjoyable but straightforward Laotian recordings is the completely unique “[Music for the ceremony of the buffalo sacrifice](#),” a wild display of trance-inducing performance that seems to have no beginning or end. Recorded in a remote highland village, the album leaves no doubt that veteran recordist [Jacques Brunet](#) has brought his vast experience to bear. (Whether or not a buffalo was sacrificed isn’t revealed in the notes, and squeamish listeners, fear not, no visceral sounds are captured here.) Music scholar Dante Carfagna has noted more than once that this particular recording uncannily reminds one of The Incredible String Band.

[Madagascar: Spirit Music from the Tamatave Region](#)

The *maro tady* does not appear to be easy to play, but the blistering speed at which the players here manage to move their fingers across industrial cable repurposed as strings is impressive in and of itself. The emotions they derive are powerful, and it’s hard to imagine a listener not being deeply moved by the melodies. The antidote, perhaps, is the breakneck *gorodora* (accordion) playing. This extraordinary document made in the 1990s by Ron Emoff is an improvement over the Ocora recordings made decades earlier, which focused more on the *valiha*, the two-dozen-stringed zither closely associated with Madagascar. (There are of course some appearances of the *valiha* here, but they are largely drowned out by more interesting sounds).

[Mexico: Music of Pre-Columbian Origin²](#)

This collection is particularly special to me as it surveys material from the massive archive of indigenous Mexican records housed at the INI (Instituto Nacional Indigena). The focus here is musical traditions that have remained intact since pre-Columbian times, and judging from this record, it must’ve been a wild scene then. The free jazz scene would’ve loved to approach such “free” sounds as those explored, usually with trumpets, flutes, and frame drums. For an especially invigorating starting point, check out the Tarahumar jam on side two, apparently intended as preparation for battle. It’s impossible to escape an intense sense of impending doom while experiencing the

selection. The album serves as a worthy preparation for the rest of the out-there sounds of ancient Mexican cultures.

Switzerland: Zäuerli, Yodel of Appenzell

Zäuerli is the grizzled, bearded, *bier*-addled counterweight to the more common caricature-esque Swiss yodeling records often seen in record store bargain bins. The cliché of yodeling as a chipper vocal style prone to ludicrous, ostentatious pyrotechnics is not borne out here at all. The performances here are laid back, unadorned, often subtly polyphonic, and frequently eerie. The occasional percussion is dissonant and undisciplined, and the environmental textures remain in the backdrop. Regardless of one's preconceptions, *zäuerli* is an unexpectedly transportive experience. The album is courtesy of master recordist [Hugo Zemp](#), who is probably better known for his seminal work in the Solomon Islands.

Rob Sevier is a co-founder of *The Numero Group* (numerogroup.com), a record label that specializes in discovering the most obscure archival recordings. He has produced projects for numerous other labels, including *Drag City*, *Locust Music*, and *Now Again*, and written for publications like *The Wire* and *Sound Collector* and the *Smithsonian Folkways* [blog](#). He has also been invited to play his records in numerous venues in the US, Canada, UK, and Europe. While doing all of the above, he has amassed a considerable collection of ethnographic recordings on LP, CD, and cassette. Special thanks to Josh Bearman, Dante Carfagna, Bryan Leitgeb, and Michael Klausman.

¹ [UNESCO World Heritage List](#).

² This LP record, originally published on EMI-Odeon in 1982, is not currently in the Smithsonian Folkways catalog.