

# UNESCO's World of Music

Fred Gales

The [\*UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music\*](#)<sup>1</sup> is an outcome of the aim of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to bring about, as its constitution describes, a lasting peace founded on “mutual understanding” and “the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.” It is to combat the causes of war, namely “the ignorance of each other’s ways and lives” and “the propagation of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races.” UNESCO should reach these aims through instituting international collaboration, stimulating popular education, diffusing knowledge, and protecting the world’s inheritance of “books, works of art and monuments of history and science.”

New in this constitution, adopted in 1945, is the recognition of cultural diversity, of the necessity of mutual comprehension, and of all cultures being part of a common human inheritance. With this recognition UNESCO rejected the earlier dominant and still widespread belief that Western culture was superior and would replace all other cultures. This is a way of thinking that had justified the colonial and nationalistic policies that destroyed other cultures in the name of evolution and progress.

In music, though, it was hardly possible to understand the achievements of other cultures before the advent of steam-powered mass travel and sound recording. Music is not a universal language, nor are we able to understand the music of another culture immediately. Anyone learning a foreign language knows that in the beginning one only hears a kind of gibberish without being able to discern the words and phonemes used. It is the same in music, and immersion is necessary to teach the ears and mind to hear and recognize the patterns used.

Noisy, chaotic, and out of tune were, not surprisingly, how the majority of pre-twentieth-century publications described non-Western music. Such observations were reinforced by the reigning thought that Western classical music was the most sophisticatedly developed form of music, in line with the laws of nature and God. In the mid-nineteenth century, scientists such as Hermann von Helmholtz and Alexander Ellis first challenged this conviction. They proved that the pitches, scales, and harmonies of

classical music were not nature given but a social convention. Another challenge against the early prejudice came from the opportunity—with the advent of steamships—to stage performances of “exotic” ensembles in the West. In the era of world exhibitions, for example, the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle presented such orchestras as the [Indonesian gamelan](#), which so impressed Debussy. But most of all, the invention of sound recording made it possible, for the first time in history, to immerse oneself in unfamiliar music and to compare, measure, and analyze it using objective data instead of fleeting impressions. Around 1900, sound recording finally enabled the first “comparative musicologists,” like [Erich von Hornbostel](#), to begin mapping the world’s musical diversity.

Driven by a genuine enthusiasm for the treasures they discovered and by a growing fear that these music traditions would soon disappear, the comparative musicologists became astonishingly active in founding audio archives and specialized study centers. They also tried to interest a larger public in their findings by giving lectures and broadcasts, organizing performances and exhibitions, and exploring ways to publish their recordings. [Hornbostel’s demonstration collection](#), a set of wax cylinders with short examples of all kinds of music, was the first attempt at publishing recordings to interest people in music cultures other than their own.

The record industry operated from its beginning onwards on a global scale. Although commercial recordings were manufactured worldwide, they were however hardly available outside the music’s origin community, where the target audience lived. As with the early Indonesian records released on Odeon, the usual procedure involved a team of sound technicians travelling to the main cities of the region to record a number of songs that were expected to sell well on the local market at the advice of their agent or store-owner-clients. The record company then processed these recordings in its European factory and subsequently sent the whole edition back to the community where the music was recorded—e.g., Indonesia—for sale. The only way to obtain the records outside the target market was through parallel import by acquaintances overseas, sailors, or other travelers. The correspondence of Jaap Kunst, the Dutch pioneer ethnomusicologist who lived in Indonesia from 1919 to 1934, is full of requests for these records.

It was again Hornbostel who, in 1931, persuaded Odeon to release for a Western public a set of 78 rpm records called [Music of the Orient](#). Many composers, dancers, well-to-do art lovers, and curious socialites at the time travelled to the East to discover these Asian orchestras for themselves. German painter-musician Walter Spies, Canadian composer Colin McPhee, and English dancer Beryl de Zoete all lived for extensive periods in Bali

and produced works based on the local traditions. Jaap Kunst noted in his reports a growing number of aristocrats, film stars, and dignitaries visiting his Indonesian music archives in Bandung in West Java—a sign that, by the 1930s, interest in unfamiliar music had extended beyond the initial group of comparative musicologists to a wider avant-garde and trend-setting circle.

After World War II, UNESCO's first act concerning music was to appoint in 1947 a music specialist, [Luis Heitor Corrêa de Azevedo](#), with the task of setting up an executive body in which all major NGOs, institutions, and organizations in the field of music would be represented. It became the IMC, the International Music Council, which held its first meeting in Paris in early 1950. In the same year the general council of UNESCO authorized the IMC to sponsor and publish records of music found rarely—if at all—in the commercial recording industry. According to other stipulations, these records should have the format of anthologies and should be accompanied by informative booklets written by experts.

Subsequently the IMC initiated a series of records of contemporary music starting in 1951, which included Olivier Messiaen's *Quatre études de rythme*. Music by many other composers followed. The series was ahead of its time with its publication of *musique concrète* and early electronic music.

Second, on a project basis, UNESCO sponsored the release of a large number of individual records in diverse countries. The nature of its involvement varied with each project, from UNESCO providing technical assistance and financial support to lending its name or use of its network to facilitate the publication. As there is no exhaustive UNESCO discography, it is not possible to give an overview of the extent of UNESCO's involvement, but the following examples indicate how widespread it was.

UNESCO's radio technicians recorded the album *World Festival of Folk Song and Folk Dance*, which was released on Westminster Records in 1953. UNESCO also sponsored Gilbert Rouget's recording expeditions in West Africa and the resulting 1953 publication, *Musique d'Afrique Occidentale*, on the label Contrepoint, which won the prestigious Grand Prix du Disque in 1954. In Spain UNESCO was involved with the release of *Antología del Folklore Musical de España* on Hispavox, and in Italy with the publication of an anthology of Italian music on RCA; in France UNESCO enabled Ducretet-Thomson to publish an [Anthology of Classical Indian Music](#). This last anthology created a matrix and served as a model for subsequent recordings in the [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#). It was recorded and compiled by [Alain](#)

[Daniélou](#), who later became editor of the UNESCO collection. In the 1960s UNESCO provided sound material for Sri Lankan broadcaster Christobel Weerasinghe to produce a record series on life and music in Thailand, Indonesia, Burma, Japan, India, Israel, and the Arab world. This series was published on the Desto and Wonderland labels. In the 1970s and '80s, with the UNESCO logo, Poljazz in Poland published a number of records with music from the Philippines and Indonesia, while Hungaroton, the national Hungarian record company, published records on Hungarian and Mongolian music with UNESCO's aid.

The third approach UNESCO took was to collaborate with the Archives Internationales de Musique Populaire in Geneva—founded by Constantin Brăiloiu—to publish a series of records aimed at giving an overview of the world's musics; these records would be distributed through UNESCO's network and used by national radio stations. Forty 78 rpm records were published between 1951 and 1958. They were thematic compilations comprising short pieces of music and ambient sounds like hunting calls and prayers, accompanied by booklet inserts describing the cultural context. This format suited radio broadcasting and was quickly and enthusiastically picked up by European national radio stations. The resulting programs had themes suggested by UNESCO's radio department like “songs and instrumental music of shepherds and herdsmen” and “music and magic.” They were the first to broadcast such music regularly across Europe. Reviews from the period show that these programs were quite popular. Many of them, like Henriette van Lennep's *Music of the Peoples* in the Netherlands, continued to air for decades.

A dramatic change in the way music was consumed contributed to the popularization of non-Western music after World War II. With the jazz, folk, and pop music boom, records became the main medium for music listening. New songs and genres were no longer popularized through performances, instruments, or scores,<sup>2</sup> but found their public through records. In this slipstream a niche market for world music records developed. Fan clubs were formed to promote “ethnic music.” There's London's Asian Music Circle, and in the Netherlands, the Exotic Music Society organized evening lectures and gramophone concerts. Specialized record companies like [Folkways Records](#) emerged, and the larger record companies started their own “ethnic” and “folk” music series, such as Columbia's *World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* series edited by [Alan Lomax](#). Unlike before World War II, these records were specifically published for a Western audience and, ironically, were hardly available in the area where the music came from.

After the death of Constantin Brăiloiu in 1958, UNESCO adapted its record publishing policy to the changing circumstances. It decided to release records under its own name and to contract with commercial record companies to handle the business side of the venture. The supervision of the content was eventually given to an NGO member of the IMC, today's International Council for Traditional Music. Thus began the [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#). The first partner was a German record company, Bärenreiter-Musicaphon. From 1960 onwards, it published three UNESCO series: *A Musical Anthology of the Orient*, *An Anthology of African Music*, and the four-volume series *An Anthology of North Indian Classical Music*. Starting in the 1970s Philips released the *Musical Sources* series, and EMI-Odeon the *Musical Atlas* series. One hundred twenty-nine LPs were published in these series at the end of the 1980s. When CD became the new recording format, UNESCO engaged a new label, Auvidis, to reissue earlier LPs while continuing the existing collection. The collection recently gained a new lease on life at Smithsonian Folkways, and you can read about that in the article "[From Analog to Digital](#)" in this magazine issue.

The importance of UNESCO's involvement in record publishing is evidenced by the record label Hungaroton's UNESCO album *Mongolian Folk Music*. This album was recorded by Lajos Vargyas in 1967 when Mongolia was still closed off. Without UNESCO's sponsorship he would not have gotten permission to enter the country; he would not have been able to publish the first recordings of overtone singing. A spectacular vocal technique and arguably one of the greatest musical discoveries of the twentieth century, it was hitherto little known but has since come to be practiced globally. In the same vein, [Simha Arom](#) received continuous active support from the Central African government during his two decades of research in the country because he was able to show that his recordings were published in the [UNESCO collection](#). Not only were these recordings [influential](#), but they discredited the widespread notion that polyphony was a European invention.

The UNESCO collection, not surprisingly, has some shortcomings: the policy of retaining the original liner notes upon reissue despite obvious mistakes may not be the best practice, as noted by Terry Miller;<sup>3</sup> the selective nature of its anthology format has in some cases led to the omission of important genres (for example, [Thailand: The Music of Chiang Mai](#) excludes the *saw* genre); and ethical issues and commercial exploitation of traditional music is still a problem, as documented by [Hugo Zemp](#).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#) did become, as intended, a demonstration of the world's shared musical heritage and remains an important tool for anyone who wants to get acquainted with the world's musics.

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<sup>1</sup> The collection title was formerly *UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music of the World*.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Boonzajer Flaes, *Brass Unbound: Secret Children of the Colonial Brass Band* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Terry Miller, "The Problems of Lao Discography," *Asian Music* 11, no. 1 (1979): 124–139.

<sup>4</sup> Hugo Zemp, "The/An Ethnomusicologist and the Record Business," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 28 (1996): 36–56.