

A Viennese Perspective on American Ethnomusicology

By Geoffrey Clarfield

The academic field called ethnomusicology aspires to encompass the comparative study of the world's music, both present and past, defined in a variety of ways by those who call themselves ethnomusicologists and, who mostly make their living teaching in music and anthropology departments at colleges and universities.

Byzantine Mosaic, King David and His Harp, Israel-photo by Geoffrey Clarfield



I studied ethnomusicology as an undergraduate and graduate student at York, U of T and McGill universities in Canada before

going to Africa to conduct research in this field. I did not in the end become an academic ethnomusicologist, but I have followed the ins and outs of the field for decades. I am “almost” an insider.

As a discipline ethnomusicology began in the late 19th century in Central Europe and flourished there until the Nazis destroyed objective scholarship in the German speaking

universities of Europe before and during WWII.

Then it was called Comparative Musicology (Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft) because all those newly discovered and newly recorded art musics of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia as well as both tribal, folk, and popular musical traditions from around the world were to be compared with the music of Europe, both "classical" and "folk." Many of its founders were Jewish and some of them such as Curt Sachs (mentor of Alan Lomax) and Erich von Hornbostel made it to America and England before 1939, thus escaping the Holocaust.

After the war they and their younger North American born students created the renamed field "ethnomusicology." They established the Society of Ethnomusicology in America to coordinate research and teaching.

According to its website the Society for Ethnomusicology,

"...was founded in 1955 to promote the research, study, and performance of music in all historical periods and cultural contexts...The Society for Ethnomusicology is a U.S.-based organization with an international membership of approximately 1,700 individuals dedicated to the study of all forms of music from diverse humanistic and social scientific perspectives. As a network of scholars, educators, students, musicians, activists, curators, and other professionals that reaches across countries, disciplines, and institutions, SEM serves as an inclusive forum for the exchange of knowledge about the world's music and for advocacy on behalf of musicians and their communities...The SEM [Annual Meeting](#) is held each fall, attracts over 900 participants, and features more than 350 scholarly presentations, roundtables, films, workshops, and concerts."

In October 2023, the SEM had its annual conference in Ottawa, the capital of Canada. For those unfamiliar with the structure of academic conferences, they begin with a date and a venue

and an organizing committee that issues a “call for papers.” Interested scholars then submit a short summary of the paper they would like to present and why.

Not all papers are accepted as there are always more submissions than time allows. Conference organizers are assumed to be both historians of and practitioners of their field. It is assumed they understand what may be relevant to professionally active ethnomusicologists.

And so one must assume that that was what was done to prepare for the last annual conference held in Ottawa. These conferences often reward the most innovative contributors with a “Keynote address,” a lecture or presentation which the organizers believe to be on the “cutting edge” of the respective field of inquiry

Having thoroughly vetted the submissions of all participants and above all the “keynote” address, there should be no surprises at these usual steady annual academic gatherings which characterize every academic field that is taught in our universities and institutes of higher learning. Notwithstanding, last year participants were in for a big surprise from its keynote speakers. Here is how it was displayed in the conference summary of papers:

4:15pm-5:45pm

2023 Charles Seeger Lecture: “Listen, Watch Your Step”

Trevor Reed (University of Arizona) and Dylan Robinson (University of British Columbia), with Invited Collaborators

2023 Charles Seeger Lecture Participants:

Heidi Aklaseaq Senungetuk, Emory University

Dawn Avery, Montgomery College

Sunaina Kale, University of California, Davis

Haliehana Stepetin, University of Alaska Anchorage

Dylan Robinson, University of British Columbia

Trevor Reed, Arizona State University

Although this presentation was part of an official academic conference there is no record of its full content on the Internet. Usually lectures and papers are streamed afterwards so those both at the conference and those who cannot attend, can hear what the presenters were talking about and see some visual presentations like slides. Not this time.

That is because this was not a traditional paper. It was a group presentation, and so on Saturday afternoon October 21, just two weeks after the Hamas pogrom of October 7, on the Israeli border with Gaza these participants flashed two slides which said, "From the River to the Sea" and "Free Palestine."

Of course there were immediate protests from some of the scholars in the audience and various apologies were made by the SEM conference organizers (I am unaware of any apology that came from these unconventional presenters). Emails were fired back and forth. The incident was reported by a music writer in Britain. Eight months later no recording or video of the lecture or the slide show has yet been released by the Society for Ethnomusicology. So much for academic freedom and the first amendment.

I suspect that informed Jewish participants at the conference started thinking about those Central European musicologists who fled Europe before the Holocaust and who were usually driven out of their academic positions by members of the rising Nazi party.

Incidents such as these which in more violent forms have now shown up on the campuses of Canada and the USA's most prestigious universities with their "Gaza camps," illegal occupations of University grounds coupled with verbal and physical attacks on Jewish professors and students.

This may spell the end of legitimate, institutional

ethnomusicology in North America. Its sister organization the AAA, the American Anthropological Association has already officially endorsed BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions of the State of Israel and any Israeli academic) and who knows, the SEM may do so one day.

I did go to one of their conferences in LA over a decade ago and although anti-Zionism was not yet a central theme there was a lot of post modernism on display, which as the Marxists might say is the "handmaiden of anti-Zionism." I am not sure that there is much hope for the future of the SEM.

I have read some papers in its journal Ethnomusicology in the last few years, and I find as a former English teacher that the quality of the writing is not particularly good. This should come as no surprise to those who follow the declining standards of scholarship that go hand in hand with DEI ("diversity, equity and inclusion") in our universities and colleges.

To understand this outburst of anti-Semitic anti-Zionism at the conference on ethnomusicology we must leave the woke world of North American social science and draw on European expertise to understand why this is happening. It is happening because social scientists in North America have embraced "post-colonial theory."

Only a handful of ethnomusicologists around the world have explored the pernicious nature of post-colonial theory. One of them is Professor Ulrich Morgenstern from the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna.

Breaking ranks with so many academics he has taken his analysis to the popular press for it is the taxpayer, in both Europe and the Americas, whose money funds this pernicious ideology.

On April 24, 2024, Morgenstern, and his colleague, anthropologist Susanne Schröter (an expert on Islam) published

an article in the German Newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called, "The Construction of Evil." The subtitle says, "Postcolonial theory turns scholarship into an instrument of knowledge blind activism. The Middle East Conflict shows how dangerous this is."

Morgenstern and Schröter who are both founding members of the Network for Academic Freedom (Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit) explain that contemporary social science has been overwhelmed by a movement called "post-colonial theory." Drawing on the writings of Franz Fanon and others like him from the Francophone left, this ideology declares that Western civilization is historically oppressive, and that the oppressed working classes of modern Marxist theory are really the new countries that emerged from the post-colonial world.

And so they are portrayed as not only victims of Western imperialism but of Western scholarship, both being oppressive. Therefore the activist goal of modern humanistic scholarship must be to "decolonize" the humanities and social sciences at every level.

The most exalted prophet of this movement was the late Arab American intellectual Edward Said, whose book *Orientalism* argued simplistically that all Western scholarship on the Islamic and colonial world was biased, based on the maintenance of Western "hegemony." Said provided the basis for the false idea that the West's perception of Islam was an expression of their power to misrepresent "colonized peoples."

On the contrary, those who founded modern Islamic studies such as Massignon in France and Hamilton Gibb in England or Goldziher in Hungary were sympathetic to Islamic civilization and its modernizing aspirations.

Said's argument is untrue, especially when it comes to the performing arts. He was proven wrong long ago by the growing

interest since the 1700s of Western savants in the music of the elites of the high civilizations of the orient, such as Japan, China, Southeast Asia, India and the court music of the Islamic world.

One phenomenal example comes to mind, the case of Prince Dimitri Cantemir or what the Ottomans called Kantemiroğlu. Cantemir was an 18th century Romanian aristocrat, loyal to the Czar of Russia. Cantemir was a diplomatic hostage of the Ottomans and lived in Istanbul for many years.

There he studied the intricacies of Ottoman Court Music (maqam), transcribed melodies and wrote a treatise on its melodic and rhythmic structure. Some may argue that he was the first ethnomusicologist as he tried to explore, experience, and understand a non-Western Islamic art music system from the inside out. He also later wrote a history of the Ottoman Empire and ended his career as a scholar in Vienna at the beginning of the European enlightenment.

Despite the consistent untruth in Said's declarations he successfully planted the intellectual and academic seeds of intersectionality which declares that all self-announced oppressed groups are all equally victims of Western hegemony.

So in this view Black people, Asians, women, Muslims and of course Palestinians are the victims of Western aggression. If that is the case, then in this worldview Israel must be an imperialistic, colonial state and it must be disciplined through BDS.

After the pogrom of October 7 a growing number of so-called scholars at our colleges and universities across Canada and the USA are now calling for the destruction of the State of Israel and its people, not just BDS, thus the outrage at the slides that popped up at the last annual SEM meeting in Ottawa. One of the related ideas in the field of the now oh so politically correct American ethnomusicology is the fact that

all musics are equal and therefore the notion of traditional music is suspect, another example of a Western colonial mentality that must be decolonized.

Perhaps quietly recognizing that American and Canadian ethnomusicology has been slowly going woke for some time, Morgenstern and a small network of like-minded scholars in Europe and some other countries, are working hard at maintaining the old-fashioned ethnomusicology and comparative musicology that is largely focused on an in depth understanding of particular musical cultures, without ideological blinders.

Interestingly, they often discover in the writings of their founders before WWII that many of the concepts claimed to be unique by the American ethnomusicologists after the war, had been anticipated by pre-WWII European musicologists, and even by folklorists since the Enlightenment.

So instead of engaging in harmful polemics such as BDS or decolonization, scholars like Morgenstern are networking and putting together conferences focusing on the enigmatic nature of "traditional music." So what is that actually?

In an academic musical article called *In Defence of the Term and Concept of Traditional Music*, after having gone through many former definitions of what most ethnomusicologists do, Morganstern suggests that they mostly study "traditional" music. He explains that it is characterized by a small number of major features that have emerged from more than a century of collecting and study.

First traditional music is community based, meaning a musical tradition that is shared by a community linked by kinship and residence. It is generally rooted in what can be called traditional societies, often in nonindustrial settings, that is rural and, in many cases, related to a life of farming or herding.

The next feature is that these communities value continuity, even though the nature of music and musicians is often incremental variation and innovation. The repertoires are often family based and passed down from older members of the family or neighbors, to younger members for local audiences. There are both communally accepted and widespread genres (like lullabies) and virtuosic performers (think of the Asik bards of Anatolia or preindustrial Irish harpists).

Traditional music is not only mostly peasant based, nomadic and rural but the advanced agricultural civilizations of the near east, Central Asia and Far East have art musics, that are differentiated from that of Western Europe by their modal nature and which have been passed largely in oral tradition.

Traditional music is contrasted with industrialized urban musics and modern music with their plurality of genres and the fact that they are promulgated by musicians who are not embedded in kin linked groups, such as Jazz and rock musicians or classical musicians in orchestras. They face the future, not the past, as does the Avant Garde (Think of John Lennon and Yoko Ono).

Admittedly there are exceptions to this rule, for example when there are folk music revivals of earlier genres or versions of them, or when respected carriers of traditional music become famous through broadcasting and recording. As Wittgenstein (an Austrian from Vienna) would have argued, the boundaries between genres of traditional music both geographically and sociologically overlap, and so we are really dealing with groups of music and musicians that share these major "family resemblances."

Morgenstern argues that this is and should be the main subject matter of ethnomusicology and comparative musicology. He even points out that one of the founders of modern American ethnomusicology, Bruno Nettl himself made use of his insights studying tribal and traditional music to make sense of a

modern conservatory in America. The opposite approach would have been more difficult because both historically and sociologically one emerged from the other and not vice versa.

I wrote Professor Morgenstern and asked him to send me an example of old fashioned but innovative work that is being carried out today in Europe. He sent me *Pathways in Early European Ethnomusicology – Pioneers and Discourses* published in 2024. I realized that I have much reading to do for every article is relevant to the history of both comparative musicology and ethnomusicology.

For example having listened to and been much enamored by Central Asian modal music traditions I read with interest a paper about Central Asian music before, during and after “Sovietization” by Tamila Dzani-zade.

Just to give you a taste of the seriousness and intellectual sobriety of these contributions let me quote the beginning of the abstract (*The Scholarly Discourse on Central Asian Music in the Ethno-Cultural Context of pre-Soviet Times*),

This article illustrates the scholarly discourse on Central Asian music and ethnography in the pre-Soviet and early Soviet era. It focuses on the concept of August Friedrich Eichhorn...who collected rich musical-ethnographic material in the final third of the 19th century. For Eichhorn's understanding of the musical cultures it was of highest importance of whether people were nomadic or settled.

And so the interested reader, then reads and learns much about the history of collecting traditional music in Central Asia and, how ethnicity and the contrast between the nomad and the sown established repertoire boundaries that admittedly interact but maintain their distinction.

This kind of fine tuning of approach is and was the essence of the prewar Comparative Musicology of Central European

scholars and characterized the first few decades of American ethnomusicology driven by Central European refugees, before Marxism, radical feminism, Post Modernism, and identity politics made such a mess of things on both sides of the Atlantic.

My curiosity caused me to call up Dr. Morgenstern and set up a Zoom interview to find out about the personal background of scholars like him and his growing network of colleagues in Europe, who seem to be practicing the “old science” or what Germans call Geisteswissenschaften (the study of the spirit, or human creation, as opposed to the study of natural phenomenon).

Ulrich hosted our Zoom meeting from his home office. Behind him were shelves of books and what looked like bound versions of academic journals. He also had a four-string Ukrainian balabaika on the wall. He sports a beard, wore a long-sleeved white shirt and dark vest, seemed completely at ease, and had no trace of any academic stuffiness or attitude that is common to self-absorbed scholars on both the left and right. He was relaxed and committed to explaining to me the ins and outs of contemporary European ethnomusicological scholarship, especially that stream that does not engage in woke theorizing and positioning.

Ulrich Morgenstern is a professor of History and Theory of Folk Music at the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna. He was born in West Germany to a middle-class family who as he describes it, were conventional in their behavior but unconventional in their thinking. His grandfather was a free-thinking Protestant pastor and so it comes as no surprise that his parents were practicing psychotherapists. His father was a committed Freudian.

He explained that his family upbringing was on the “liberal left,” his parents encouraged he and his siblings to think for themselves and brought in private tutors to teach them

European art music (what we call "classical music."), before they supported all their educational choices, at conservatories and universities around the world.

As a teenager Morgenstern was fascinated by the East, the Slavic world, and Central Asia. As New Yorkers dream of living in Paris, Canadians fantasize exploring the Great White North and Englishmen dream of Africa, we must remember German romantics have often dreamed of the wide-open spaces of the Slavic lands and Central Asia.

And so teenage Ulrich read many a pulp fiction novel about Mongolia, Genghis Khan and remembers well the terrible film about him with Omar Sharif. Speaking of Egyptian actors playing Russian roles, he was smitten by the film Dr. Zhivago and soon after fell into what North Americans are unaware of and which is called the German "Russland Komplex" (coined by historian Gerd Koenen) an emotional and intellectual interest in all things Slavic.

He soon after took up the balalaika and joined a stream of pre fall of the Berlin Wall German enthusiasts who were involved with popularized folk music West German style, who beginning in the 1960s, came at various traditions from the point of view of urban listeners of records and broadcasting.

And so Morgenstern was exposed to modern Irish folk music, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, (German) Yiddish folk singers before the Klezmer revival and Jewish popular singers like Theodore Bikel who sang in Yiddish, Russian and Hebrew on his albums of eclectic mixes of Jewish and non-Jewish eastern European popular music, designed for the Western European and North American "ear."

Like many an ethnomusicologist before him Morgenstern wanted to go where the music that he loved had originated and was still alive, like a Canadian folk singer who wants to go to Appalachia or Nashville. He succeeded. Taking a crash course

in Russian as a secondary school student he managed to get on a study trip that took him to Kyiv, Moscow, and Leningrad (St. Petersburg).

Upon graduating from high school he studied Slavistics, language, history, culture, and music and became fluent in Russian. He studied musicology under the Czech émigré Vladimír Karbusický (influenced by the Prague school of polymath Roman Jacobsen). All of this led him towards field work in Russia studying both the traditional and folk music revival there. He took ten years to complete his doctoral dissertation on Russian Traditional Music and then as an untenured PhD in ethnomusicology he had to make a living. He scraped out a living as a consultant translator until he got on to a tenure track position which led him to Vienna.

In our discussions he told me, "I have read widely in both European and North American ethnomusicology and folkloristics, and I am fascinated that so many of the ideas and approaches that were first developed by the Comparative Musicologists of pre-WWII Europe were reinvented or reworked by Ethnomusicologists in North America such as their emphasis on "music in culture." This was not a post War American invention."

He added, "I believe that as a scholar and a modern West German I was inoculated from the radical left and post-colonial theory that has taken over the Americas and which is still strong in Europe by my experience in Russia. There I saw the kind of anti-Semitism that was common in Western Europe before the war. And ironically when one becomes a Slavacist one is obliged to read the great 19th century Russian authors. Once you have read Dostoyevsky it is hard to take Marxism seriously."

Then he thoughtfully added, "And what amazed me about my time in Russia was even though the Marxist inspired state apparatus wanted to take over all aspects of cultural life, still among

the rural Russians their traditional song and instrumental traditions continued in an almost underground way. Traditional Russian song, instruments and dance survived the Soviet cultural onslaught and outlived the regime. That is something to consider.”

Discussing the onslaught of post modernism and Wokeism in Western Europe and the academic world he said, “It is still strong but there is a pushback. There is a growing minority of scholars like me who believe and press for academic freedom. Solidarity with Israel is part of this, because behind all the rhetoric it is the only liberal democracy in the entire Middle East and deserves our strong support.”

During our interview Ulrich mentioned several European scholars and ethnomusicologists who are doggedly working away at field work, recording and the analysis of European and Eurasian music, not to forget the brilliant, and phenomenal Vienna based Gerhard Kubik who has almost singled handedly advanced our cultural and technical understanding of the deep complexities of traditional sub-Saharan Africa music. He also mentioned some of the scholars in the books and conference proceedings he sent me.

He mentioned in passing Alan Lomax inspired American Pat Savage and the composer and expert on Bali, Michael Tenzer who is based out of British Columbia and has established a new concept of formal cross-cultural musical analysis.

When I asked him why we do not hear more about this small but healthy Europe based academic and ethnomusicological avoidance of the woke left, Ulrich told me he does not know about all of Europe, but he can say that in Vienna there is still a culture to the world of letters and academia.

He added that in the ideal situation the environment there encourages discussion and debate, but like all things Viennese, it must be done with good manners. Moderation is

supposed to be the order of the day. Morganstern is also inspired by public intellectuals like Jordan Peterson, Bari Weiss, Steven Pinker and therefore makes an effort to share his ideas in newspapers and magazines.

Despite the gloomy situation at the Society of Ethnomusicology and the horrible woke anti-Semitism that now possesses the American Anthropological Association, I take comfort in the fact that Ulrich and other non-Marxist ethnomusicologists like him have learnt the lessons of the Holocaust and who also know what the Gulag is.

They are busily, modestly and effectively exploring the cultural diversity of the music of the world, a field of inquiry that was invented in and around Vienna over a century ago and that remains a worthwhile calling.

We will be hearing more from the likes of Professor Morgenstern as the culture wars heat up. Perhaps the Society for Ethnomusicology can invite him to their next annual meeting. He could give the keynote address.

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