

# Access to Waxes – The Collections from the Arab World of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv: Between Digitization, "Repatriation," and Online Publication

Nadia Bahra, Lando Kirchmair, Matthias Pasdzierny, Albrecht Wiedmann

## How to "repatriate" intangible cultural heritage? The complex case of historical sound recordings

"Objects, having become diasporas, are the mediators of a relation that needs to be reinvented." This is how Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy open their chapter "A New Relational Ethics" in their famous and controversially discussed report *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018:39). To understand the legacy of European colonial history today as a mandate for building better, more intensive and, above all, more equal relationships – and to understand objects in European museums, for example, as mediators for this – increasingly turns into an important general guideline for scholars and also politicians in the context of the so-called decolonization of archives and collections. Discussions on this topic have gained considerable momentum in recent years, especially in Germany, where debates on this issue are being reignited time and again, not least in the context of the newly opened and highly controversially received Humboldt Forum in the center of Berlin (Hilden 2022:22f.).

Part of the collections now at the Humboldt Forum is the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv (BPhA) at the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum. It forms one of the most important collections of early audio documents in the world; the listing in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register attests to this.<sup>1</sup> Although most of its recordings and documentation have been digitized in recent years, only very few of the collections are publicly accessible today.

Recordings from the Arab regions form a particularly noteworthy part of the BPhA. They include numerous subcollections from the period between the late 1890s and the mid-1930s from Algeria, various Gulf regions (e.g., present-day Oman and Yemen), Egypt, Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia. The recordings were made by very different scholars, such as archaeologists on the fringes of excavations, but later, above all, by ethnomusicologists. Moreover, the BPhA's collections include more than 100 recordings featuring songs and spoken text in Arabic recorded in German prisoner-of-war camps during World War I. But as fascinating and valuable as these collections are – some, for example, include Arabic dialects that no longer exist today (Tilmantine 2005:338f.) – they need to be treated with care. The recordings were usually taken by European scholars, sometimes under very problematic conditions, as the example of the recordings made in World War I prisoner-of-war camps shows. In this context, the term "sensitive collections" was coined (Lange 2012; cf. Brandstetter & Hierholzer 2018). In a broader sense, the collections should also be discussed in the light of recent debates about the decolonization of European museums, archives, and collections (Sarr & Savoy 2018). While the case of illegally or illegitimately appropriated cultural property is already complex and the discussion of restitution brings up complicated legal problems and ethical issues (see, e.g., the case of the *padrão*, Deutsches Historisches Museum & Gross 2018), the repatriation of intangible cultural heritage is a somewhat different, and to some extent, even more complicated issue (see, e.g., Koch 2018:195). Especially regarding sound archives, the "absent presences" (Hilden 2022) of the recorded voices have recently been thematized, in which the imbalance in the creation of such collections manifests itself and reminds us today, like an aching scar, of the people to whom these voices belonged. It is, therefore, an urgent task not only for today's scholars to discuss solutions for an appropriate handling of such (im-)material heritage but, above all, for an appropriate form of remembrance culture in connection with such holdings in an international framework.

The questions to be reflected in this context are anything but trivial on a legal level, but, most importantly, they are equally complex in ethical, scientific-historical, media-technical, and ultimately, even epistemological terms. The fact that we are dealing with intangible heritage here is both an advantage and a disadvantage simultaneously. Is it possible to repatriate or re-

turn intangible heritage at all? If it is difficult to simply 'give back' an object which has been away for decades, how is this possible in relation to specific cultural practices? And, what terminology should we use here? The problems with the word repatriation have been discussed several times, but do alternatives – such as 'return' or 'recirculation' – really help here, especially in a context of online filesharing and communication through social media (Seeger 2018; Vapnarsky 2020)? More concretely, how should the recordings be digitized, to whom and in which formats should they subsequently be made accessible? How should one deal with the mostly imprecise, faulty, and incomplete historical documentation of the recordings – and the sound recordings themselves made with little expertise at the beginning? On the one hand, the historical documentations are sources in their own right, especially from the perspective of the history of science; on the other hand, representatives of the recorded communities would have to be involved, first and foremost, in a current review, evaluation, and re-documentation of the recordings. Who, then, would decide on the rights management of the digitized recordings: the institutions which own these recordings? They, however, are often based in countries that have a colonization background. Or, rather, should it be representatives of the communities recorded, or officials of states in which these communities live today or have lived in the past? Not infrequently, however, these officials deal in a very problematic way with the rights of the very minorities that were recorded in the first place. How can all the aforementioned projects of a decolonization of sound archives described here be financed and their results communicated and sustainably secured? Speaking of finances and becoming more abstract, is it more suitable to look for an ideal way to proceed, or should we aim for a pragmatic solution? Last but not least, how can we build, through repatriation, a new relationship, even a shared social experience (see, e.g., Diettrich 2018)? These are just a few of the many questions that arise when one embarks on the complex topic of decolonizing archives, and which are currently being discussed in many ways on an interdisciplinary and international level (cf., e.g., Gunderson et al. 2018).

To initiate this discussion regarding a certain part of the BPhA was the main goal of two international and interdisciplinary workshops held by the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin in December 2021.<sup>2</sup> The aim of the workshops

was to initiate a discussion as to how an online publication strategy for the BPhA's collections from the Arab world could be established. The question of accessibility to these collections was approached from different perspectives, such as cultural studies, ethnology, history, musicology, and law. Issues such as origin, context, and legal aspects of the envisioned publication of these collections have been part of this debate from which we would like to present a large selection of the papers given at that time as well as some additional contributions within the framework of this themed issue, which consists of two consecutive volumes of *the world of music (new series)*.

## **The history and accessibility of the collections of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv**

The BPhA, which until 1923, was part of the Institute for Psychology of the former Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Berlin, today belongs to the Media Department of the Ethnologisches Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. It comprises more than 16,000 original phonograms, which were recorded in various regions of the world between 1893 and 1943, in addition to the recordings made in German prisoner-of-war camps in World War I. This collection of so-called Edison rolls (mostly wax cylinders) represents the most extensive and significant collection in the world in the field of traditional music (Ziegler 2006). Even before the first meeting of the German Nomination Committee, the BPhA was listed as part of the UNESCO Memory of the World Program, World Documentary Heritage. In addition to the individual collections, the history of the archive itself is also an extremely exciting affair. The recordings were taken away by Soviet troops at the end of World War II and were thought to have been lost. In retrospect, it is known that the collections were in Leningrad (today Saint Petersburg) and came back to the Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic in the eastern part of Berlin in 1959 and 1961. Only in January 1991, on the initiative of Artur Simon, then head of the Department of Ethnomusicology at the Ethnologisches Museum, and Erich Stockmann, ethnomusicologist of the former Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic, were the collections reunited with the documentation of their contents, which remained in West Berlin, the end of an almost 50-year long "odyssey through Eastern Europe" (Ziegler 1995:lf., translated by the authors).

A decisive factor for the almost complete reconstruction of the archive is the method developed by Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, one of the most influential musicologists working at the BPhA and also head of the archive from 1906 until his dismissal by the Nazis in 1933. Hornbostel insisted on producing copper matrices from the sensitive original wax cylinders by a galvanoplastic process, which, in turn, could be used to make copies. This process destroyed the original recording media, but allowed a number of copies to be made from more resistant hard wax, which not only simplified scientific processing but also enabled the wider dissemination of the recordings.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the possibility of making matrices and copies increased the archive's attractiveness to other archives and scholars, which contributed to a wide international network. Although an elaborate workflow for digitizing the recordings had already been developed at the end of the 1990s (Wiedmann 2006), with some of the collections made publicly available in the form of commercially published CD recordings, the recordings of the BPhA are, for the most part, still not accessible without visiting the archive; some of them have not even been digitized to date.

The current situation of the BPhA collections results in serious problems, especially for researchers from the Global South. In our specific case, this includes researchers from numerous Arab countries, such as Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, because a research journey to Germany for colleagues from these countries is a great challenge not only for financial reasons. In many cases, these colleagues will not even receive visas for entry to Germany for political reasons, especially if they cannot clearly demonstrate why the BPhA's holdings are of unique importance to their research – which, in turn, is hardly possible as long as the holdings cannot be explored from outside. Against this background, a discussion about the accessibility of such materials is urgently needed not only from a postcolonial perspective but, almost more crucially, for specific political reasons of our time: We need to prevent the inequities in accessibility to research resources and archival materials from extending longer into the 21st century.

The questions discussed in the "Access to Waxes" workshops and this themed journal issue on the further handling of these collections could ultimately be asked regarding the entire holdings of the BPhA. The fact that the collections from the Arab world are now coming into focus as an example case, so to speak, has a lot to do with the fact that for profane reasons, such

as a chronological handling of the digitization process at the BPhA, some of these collections (e.g., the one of Brigitte Schiffer) have, so far, been somewhat left behind. Another reason is that members of the AGYA, to which three of the editors of this themed issue belong, have a particular interest in the publication and analysis of these recordings. This was a primary reason why this intensive exchange between scholars from the German-speaking countries and Arab regions was initiated to discuss the holdings of the BPhA.

## **What to expect from the collections from the Arab world of the BPhA and why are they a case at hand in the digitization and repatriation of historical sound documents? A brief run through the contributions**

While the concept of repatriation can be questioned for good reasons, we considered the term fitting to describe our approach in this themed journal issue. In the light of the Sarr & Savoy report (2018), the recordings of the BPhA are special in contrast to material objects, i.e., in our case, the wax cylinders. Historical wax cylinders are merely carriers and media of an immaterial cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. The sound recordings, which have been engraved in the wax cylinders, however, are of central interest. In contrast to the material wax cylinders, these recordings can be made available more easily through technological means. This does not make such collections any less 'sensitive,' as several scholars have rightly pointed out several times. Therefore, precisely these collections offer an excellent use case for questions that have been raised in the Sarr & Savoy report (2018) and in the form of a reply in the context of digitization and intellectual property rights of cultural heritage (Pavis & Wallace 2019).

As mentioned previously, a particularly noteworthy part of the BPhA are its collections from the Arab world. But what exactly is meant by 'Arab world'? Already at the time of the creation of the recordings, for example, in the environment of the very important Congress for Arab Music in Cairo in 1932, there were controversial discussions about what constitutes Arab music, even then with participation of specialists from Europe including Paul Hindemith or Béla Bartók (Racy 2015). Some of the collectors of the BPhA's collections from the Arab world also asked themselves this question, es-

pecially when they were researching in a strongly hybridized environment in which, for example, Arab, Jewish, or even Coptic or Berber communities lived in close quarters and influenced each other (see the contributions by Ruth Davis on the collections of Robert Lachmann in Tunisia and Palestine, by Jean Lambert on the collections of Hans Helfritz in Yemen and South Arabia, and by Matthias Pasdzierny on the collection of Brigitte Schiffer at the Siwa Oasis).

In the context of the workshops "Access to Waxes," we used a pragmatic and broad definition: In our case, it refers to recordings that were made in the territory of present-day Arab states or that contain chants or speech contributions in Arabic. Following this pragmatism, we use the term Arabic only when the actual language is meant, for example, in songs with Arabic lyrics. To refer to a broader sense, when it comes to certain groups of people, regions, or cultures, the word Arab is used, for example, in Arab music, Arab instruments or the like. This simple division, however, does not solve all difficulties. The situation becomes more complicated, and this also pertains to many of the collections referred to here, when recordings originate in what are now considered Arab countries, but also contain, for example, Coptic Christian, Syrian Christian, Amazigh/Berber, or Jewish music. Here and, for example, already in the title of these thematic issues, following the corresponding practice in the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance (ICTMD), we speak of collections from the Arab world (for further discussion on the problematic term "Arab music," see Castelo Branco in this volume).<sup>4</sup>

The introductory remarks to the first of the two volumes of this themed issue by Salwa El-Shawan Castelo Branco take up the very question of the definition of Arab music and how this applies to the collections from the Arab world in the BPhA. She also provides a well-founded introduction to the discourses, initiatives, and attempts for a decolonization of ethnomusical research, not only in both methodological and institutional terms, but also regarding the extensive (sound) archives that have been created in this discipline over the last 150 years. Susanne Ziegler, in her contribution, brings the focus closer to the collections of the BPhA from the Arab world. She provides an overview of the time and scope of these collections, divided into several periods, and presents the individual regions in which they were created. Ziegler also shares information on the creators of the collections

and the circumstances under which they were created, as well as the current state of cataloguing and which of the recordings have been digitized to date. The following three papers on specific collections (Davis, Lambert, Pasdzierny) show not only the differences but also the similarities of both the material and the questions these collections raise: All of them were made during the 1930s by young ethnomusicologists (Helfritz, Lachmann, Schiffer), who had grown up academically in the environment of the so-called Berlin school of comparative musicology with all its merits, but also with all its problems related to racist and evolutionary presuppositions (see Kalibani in the second volume of this themed issue). On the other hand, all three collectors themselves suffered persecution and violence as members of minorities, at the latest in 1933, when all three had to flee Nazi Germany. Most collections suffer from chaotic and defective documentation. This is a pity, because they show an impressive diversity, richness, and peculiarity of repertoires and cultures. Jean Lambert in his contribution is primarily concerned with showing exactly the great variety of Hans Helfritz's Yemen and South Arabian collection, the intermixture of Arab and Jewish music in these regions, and also how Helfritz wasn't exactly a colonialist in the pure sense but rather an explorer and adventurer, which brings its own problems in today's handling and scientific evaluation of his recordings. Ruth Davis in her contribution presents Robert Lachmann's extensive and detailed ethnomusicological research, starting with his activities in the World War I prisoner-of-war camp at Wünsdorf, followed by intensive field work in Tunisia and Palestine, and, finally, the founding of the "Archive of Oriental Music" in Jerusalem after his expulsion from his academic career in Germany in 1933. Lachmann's studies serve as an impressive example of the, from today's perspective, almost paradoxical ambivalence of the ethnomusicological and anthropological research of his time, which recognized and explored the diversity, richness, and hybridity of cultural spaces, such as Palestine, and, at the same time, saw in them the bare prehistoric precursors of supposedly more developed European music. While this collection does not suffer from a problematic documentation, it bears other difficulties, such as a hard accessibility for Arab researchers because it is based today in Jerusalem. The description of Brigitte Schiffer's research in Siwa by Matthias Pasdzierny goes in a similar direction. In her case, too, the hypothesis that the musical culture of the Egyptian oasis provides an insight into the musical culture of ancient Egypt,



as if through a keyhole, is a central basis of her work. In Pasdzierny's contribution, the competing remembrance cultures already mentioned – post-colonial and those in the wake of the Holocaust – also play an important role, and, as a kind of outlook, the first results but also the challenges of a recently started project for the repatriation of the recordings made by Schiffer in Siwa are presented.

The introductory remarks to the second volume of the themed issue by Dörte Schmidt ask whether the question of accessibility of materials, such as the collections of the BPhA, beyond the scientific community should, instead, be discussed on a more political and particularly diplomatic level. This impulse is also related to the mobility of the data it contains and its creators, which makes it difficult to clearly define cultural affiliation, identity, or even authorship. In this context, she refers to the recently established national research data infrastructures, which can assume an important mediating function in the future, especially in the field of cultural heritage. Mèhèza Kalibani deals in his contribution with the colonial a priori of the emergence of the BPhA generally as well as the scientific disciplines involved in it, above all, comparative musicology. He sums up in four basic theses: the influence of evolutionary and racist theories and concepts; the role of collectors and scientists as colonial opportunists driven by an agenda of economic and scientific exploitation of the 'other'; the fact that colonialism led to the institutionalization and early flowering of the BPhA in the first place; and, finally, the fact that the documentation of the collection is full of mistakes and errors. Given this background, Kalibani's contribution sharpens the view of the question of a decolonization or, at least, a sensitization regarding the colonial background of the holdings of the BPhA as a whole and not only concerning collections that originated in German colonies before 1914. He also questions the previous "heroization" of the "founding fathers" of Berlin's comparative musicology. The last three papers are dedicated to ethical and legal questions. Discussing the legal framework and ethical aspects of the planned digitization and open access publication of the collections from the Arab world, these papers take the viewpoint of international law, German copyright law, and an Arab perspective. Christian Czychowski and Lea Riechers in their paper deal with the legal framework that has to be considered when publishing the historical recordings of the BPhA's collections from the Arab world and especially the recordings from the prisoner-

of-war camps. But even though they come to the conclusion that all recordings are in the public domain today from a copyright law perspective – after also discussing questions of individual creation vs. folklore, or the usage of the recordings for scientific editions – the situation is not only a legal question but raises moral issues as well and leaves a "stale aftertaste." Against this background, the authors propose the idea of reviving some of the copyrights of the recordings on moral grounds. Souheir Nadde compares the legal framework of the BPhA's collections from an Arab countries perspective, not only between Arab states themselves but also between Arab states and European legal systems. She makes an important distinction, for example, between Arab states that have so-called folklore as part of the public domain or, in other cases, as the property of the state. She also raises the question whether the recordings of the BPhA belong to the context of intangible cultural heritage. Lando Kirchmair argues in favor of an open access publication of the holdings of the BPhA in his paper, as a pragmatic way to address both the legal and ethical perspectives. Firstly, he contends that the public international legal obligations of Germany under the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* – which requires efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage and make it accessible – are indirectly relevant for the historical sound recordings. Secondly, according to him, making the historical sound recordings accessible through digitization is – in addition to the legal perspective – a cultural-ethical imperative in the restitution debate.

## **Summary and outlook**

While we hope that the present themed issue contributes to the debate and also the goal of repatriating some of the historical sound recordings of the BPhA, many questions are still open. Who has which rights to the digitized recordings and how can they be used and licensed? What does open access mean in this context? Who determines the forms, languages, and formats of the documentation? Is crowdsourcing an option? Which data standards must be adhered to during digitization in order to ensure long-term usability? What about the necessary resources for the research, documentation, translation of the data, and the permanent hosting of the corresponding databases and publication offerings?

Furthermore, the workflows of digitization, metadata enrichment, and documentation of the collection, which were also debated during the workshops, are still open to some extent. Providing open access additionally involves intricate questions regarding which data standards should be chosen and which technical infrastructure is necessary and probably has to be developed to provide an adequate online publication platform in accordance with the FAIR and CARE data principles for scientific data.<sup>5</sup> In addition to archive and library study expertise, specialists working in the field of digital humanities are needed to successfully implement this task. Finally, instructions and insights from similar collections of early recordings from the Arab world, both in Europe and the US, as well as in Arab regions might prove to be helpful. The aim here is to discuss possible synergies and network potential between these collections and institutions, and to share experiences about previous publication strategies.<sup>6</sup>

## Acknowledgments

To realize an interdisciplinary and international project such as our workshops "Access to Waxes" and the resulting themed issue would not have been possible without comprehensive support. First of all, we would like to thank the AGYA and its team in Berlin for financial and organizational support for the workshops as well as for the publication of this themed issue. Further thanks go to the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the head of its media department, Maurice Mengel, who not only made it possible for us to hold the workshops in the newly opened rooms of the Humboldt Forum (and, thus, equally in the eye of the hurricane of current postcolonial debates in Germany) but also always generously supported us in making BPhA material accessible. The same goes for the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW), where we were able to hold a kick-off event – still under COVID-19 conditions – in a wonderful setting. We would like to thank the contributors and discussants of the workshops as well as the contributors to the special issue for their papers. Also, a big thank you goes to all the peer reviewers that have been involved in this project. Philip Saunders has acted as a wonderful and very efficient proofreader. Jasper McBride Husong helped us a lot as a student assistant to bring the manuscripts into line with the guidelines of *the world of music (new series)*. Many thanks for this

too. In order to reach a broader readership, especially in the regions where the recordings discussed here were made, it was important to us to include complete Arabic translations of all contributions, as well as French translations of the abstracts and the introduction. We would like to express our sincere thanks to our translator Sami Habbati, once again to the AGYA for their financial support for this undertaking, as well as to the editors and the technical team of *the world of music*, who made this special format possible. Finally, we would like to thank Birgit Abels and Barbara Titus as editors of *the world of music (new series)* for welcoming our publication ideas into their program and for their patient and careful supervision of the publication of this special issue.

## Funding acknowledgment

This themed issue is funded by the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) as part of the research project Access to Waxes – The Arab Collections of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv by AGYA members Nadia Bahra, Matthias Pasdzierny, and Lando Kirchmair in the framework of the AGYA Working Group Common Heritage & Common Challenges. AGYA is supported by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

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## Notes

1. <https://en.unesco.org/memoryoftheworld/registry/413>. Accessed 20 November 2023.
2. For a detailed program of the workshops, see: <https://agya.info/research/research-projects-by-year/access-to-waxes-arab-collections-of-the-berlin-phonogramm-archiv>. Accessed 20 November 2023.
3. One example is the so-called Demonstration Collection, a selection of 120 recordings from the archive that von Hornbostel compiled to sell to interested institutions or individuals.
4. See here: <https://ictmusic.org/studygroup/arab-world>. Accessed 20 November 2023.
5. Currently, also funded by the AGYA and with the participation of Nadia Bahra and Matthias Pasdzierny, a search engine called Arab Phonogram Search is being created, which will make it possible to search globally for historical sound archives from the Arab world. A beta version was published in August 2023: <https://apsearch.org/>. Accessed 20 November 2023.
6. Finally, it should be noted that in the English- and French-language texts, Arabic terms are transliterated according to the American Library Association – Library of Congress standard (ALA- LC).

## About the authors

**Nadia Bahra** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Archaeology and the Director of the History, Heritage and Society Laboratory at the University of Constantine 2 in Algeria. She is also currently a research associate at the National Centre for Prehistoric, Anthropological and Historical Research (CN-RPAH) in Algiers. Her main research interests are the understanding of prehistoric cultures in Northwestern Africa and the development of interdisciplinary approaches to the challenges of cultural heritage conservation. Since 2020, she is a member of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA).

**Lando Kirchmair** is Deputy Professor for National and International Public Law with a Focus on the Protection of Cultural Heritage at the Department of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, Universität der Bundeswehr München. In July 2020 he became a member of the Arab German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) based at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW). He studied law, business law, Spanish and Portuguese as well as psychology at the universities of Innsbruck, Salamanca and Salzburg, and his research interests include national, European and international public law; empirical and digital jurisprudence; and the protection of cultural heritage through (international) law.



**Matthias Pasdzierny** holds a joint professorship at Berlin University of the Arts and Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences (junior professor with tenure track) and is the head of the Berlin office of the Bernd Alois Zimmermann Complete Edition ([www.zimmermann-gesamtausgabe.de](http://www.zimmermann-gesamtausgabe.de)). His main research areas are the digitization, critical edition and philology of electronic and recorded music; German music history after 1945; the history and aesthetics of Electronic Dance Music; and music and migration. Since 2019 he is an elected member of the Arab-German Young Academy of Science and Humanities (AGYA).

**Albrecht Wiedmann** studied comparative musicology, musicology and media studies at the Free University of Berlin. From 2004 to May 2019, he was in charge of the audiovisual archive of the Ethnological Museum and in this capacity was responsible for the digitisation of the holdings. Since April 2019, he has been curator of the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv in the Media Department of the Ethnologisches Museum/Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.