

Round Table: A ‘Musical League of Nations’? Music Institutions and the Politics of Internationalism between the Wars

Introduction

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This round table grew out of two gatherings in 2018–19 that endeavoured to bring musicologists into dialogue with recent revisions in the history of international relations.¹ Our specific focus was the interwar period, more often discussed in terms of nationalism – or perhaps at best transnationalism – than within the context of internationalism, a principle that lay behind the foundation

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¹ The conference took place at the Institute of Musical Research, Senate House, London on 29–30 June 2018; Giles Masters’s conference report can be found at <https://www.rma.ac.uk/2018/09/30/conference-report-a-musical-league-of-nations-music-institutions-and-the-politics-of-internationalism-london-29-30-june-2018/>. A two-day reading workshop was held in Oxford in January 2019. Publications discussed in the workshop included Guido Adler, ‘Internationalism in Music’, trans. Theodore Baker, *Musical Quarterly*, 11 (1925), 281–300; Annegret Fauser, ‘Some Challenges for Musicological Internationalism in the 1930s’, *The History of the IMS (1927–2017)*, ed. Dorothea Baumann and Dinko Fabris (Basle: Bärenreiter, 2017), 20–4; Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Anne C. Shreffler, ‘The International Society for Contemporary Music and Its Political Context (Prague, 1935)’, *Music and International History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 58–92; Christiane Sibille, ‘The Politics of Music in International Organizations in the First Half of the Twentieth Century’, *New Global Studies*, 10/3 (2016), 253–81; Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and Waqar Zaidi, ‘Liberal Internationalist Approaches to Science and Technology in Interwar Britain and the United States’, *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the Wars*, ed. Daniel Laqua (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 17–43. The research activities associated with this project were supported by the British Academy and Leverhulme Trust, with additional conference support from the Royal Musical Association and the Institute of Musical Research.

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of elite governmental organizations such as the League of Nations, the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization and others. As the historians Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin have shown, the construction of objects of global governance by these organizations ran alongside a broader sweep of non-governmental groupings that forwarded the interests of indigenous, working-class, anti-colonialist, anti-slavery and feminist causes.² What role or roles did music play in these contexts? The case studies that follow illustrate the far-reaching implications of internationalist policies for musical institutions, groups and individuals.

A few general observations might be made to frame the discussion. There are challenges of definition, and it is important to be alert to how interwar internationalism and the concept of 'international society' (as well as its manifestation in new intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations) are distinct in many ways from the related notions of cosmopolitanism, transnationalism and the global – a point that is discussed by a number of the contributors to this round table. It is also important to recognize the basis of internationalism in an ongoing commitment to national self-determination and national sovereignty. Equally, as is so often the case when using music as a lens through which to consider political movements, the aesthetic implications of internationalism across liberal, socialist, communist and fascist ideologies are inconsistent. It is erroneous to assume, for example, that conservative politics is by necessity linked with conservative stylistic outcomes in music, or progressive politics to progressive aesthetics. Finally, it is important to make a distinction between *discursive* and *institutional* internationalisms in music, not least because of the tensions between the political function of international music institutions, on the one hand, and claims about the apolitical nature of music (namely the idea that a shared sense of 'feeling' transcends political concerns), on the other.

Many of the musical institutions discussed in the round table were formed in the aftermath of the Great War to promote international musical exchange after the strictures and relative cultural isolation of the war period. The jazz pianist and composer Jean Wiéner described his thirst for 'musical salad', while for Ravel, openness to music from other traditions was essential for the health of national traditions.³ This type of relationship between the international and the national was reflected at an institutional level by the close alignment between international and national musical societies. In the case of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), for example, a desire to participate on the international stage was a motivating factor for individual nations, such as Britain and France.

However, there was often a highly selective understanding of what internationalism meant during the interwar period. It was uncritically Eurocentric by our current standards, and even *within* a European context, there were fundamental tensions over what was meant by the idea of the 'international', as this round table shows. Guido Adler's view of the natural dominance of Austro-German musical traditions was challenged by persisting wartime anti-German biases. This tension is evident in the diplomatic activities of figures like Edward Dent, Edwin Evans, Henry Prunières and others, who saw the military defeat of Germany as a cultural opportunity to redefine and challenge engrained hierarchies. The process of redefinition included not only institutional but also rhetorical shifts, such as in interwar debates about the nature and scope of

² For a good introduction to this type of historical revision, see *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*.

³ See Barbara L. Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913–1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), 73; and M. Robert Rogers, 'Jazz Influence on French Music', *Musical Quarterly*, 21 (1935), 53–68, respectively.

‘contemporary music’.⁴ The increasingly important place of the USA within various institutions and repertoires was another factor in the evolving conceptualization of the international during the interwar period. These changes were manifest at the level of institutional policy, but it is important also to recognize the role of personal friendships and affinities in shaping the agenda and scope of international musical organizations; the actors involved were often interconnected through multiple musical networks, as several of the round-table contributions illustrate.

While the focus of this round table is primarily historical and scholarly, it may be relevant to mention that the discussions from which it emerged took place under the shadow of two upheavals of 2016 that were widely perceived to represent direct threats to the future of international cooperation, namely the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum and the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA. These political events loomed large over many academic gatherings in ensuing years regardless of subject area, with logistical challenges surrounding visas to attend conferences in the UK, employment implications for EU nationals working in UK Higher Education institutions, and the future of access to EU research funding and partnerships all joining a broader sense of uncertainty and concern over the tendencies of populist movements globally. While it would be too much to claim that the following round-table contributions were devised in response to these two events, their shadow gave a new meaning and urgency to many of the themes raised in these discussions. Subsequent political upheavals, from the reassertion of Taliban rule in Afghanistan to the war in Ukraine, have only intensified that sense of history repeating itself, with many seeking refuge, and long-standing research cooperations having been interrupted, if not dismantled altogether. How best to support academics at risk remains a major concern of organizations such as the International Musicological Society (IMS) and the RMA.

Masters’s examination of the performance of international diplomacy in the General Assemblies of the ISCM; Boyd-Bennett’s spotlight on the relationship between localism and internationalism in the working-class experience through proletariat song in Italy; Guérpin’s study of the international standardization of the notion of European jazz in the interwar period; Pace’s study of fascist international cooperation in the musical sphere between Nazi Germany and Italy, Bulgaria, Japan, Romania and elsewhere; and Bowan’s revelations about the role of personal relationships in shaping transatlantic relations within the ISCM – these case studies all speak to an intensified scholarly desire to recover a more fine-grained account of the conflicted agenda at play in internationalisms historically.

The timing of the initial discussions surrounding this round table with respect to global political shifts, and its alignment with recent revisions in the field of the history of international relations, means that questions associated with the UK, EU and USA are more prominent in what follows than an engagement with parallel disciplinary concerns associated with the problematic legacy of internationalism. These disciplinary concerns include what Tamara Levitz has called the ‘nationally-oriented model of internationalism’ that shaped the origins of the discipline of musicology, and call for the interrogation of this model at a deeper structural level rather than imagining that the act of diversifying repertoire and curriculum alone will address it.⁵ The round-table contributions use the assumptions and problems that have come to

⁴ See Sarah Collins, ‘What Was Contemporary Music? The New, the Modern and the Contemporary in the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM)’, *The Routledge Research Companion to Modernism in Music*, ed. Björn Heile and Charles Wilson (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 56–85.

⁵ Tamara Levitz, ‘The Musicological Elite’, *Current Musicology*, 102 (2018), 9–80 (p. 14). Levitz debunks the idea that historical musicologists ignored non-Western and popular musics in the early

be associated with interwar internationalism – including its problematic link with colonial activities and with strategic consolidations of geopolitical power – as a starting point for their case studies; in other words, internationalism is their subject rather than their method.

Performing Internationalism: The ISCM as a ‘Musical League of Nations’

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After the First World War, some musicians embraced ‘international’ identities in novel ways, requiring novel strategies.⁶ During the 1920s, internationalist initiatives were launched in musicology, music education, folk music and more, joining a more general proliferation of institutions devoted to cultural internationalism.⁷ In the domain of Western art music, the most high-profile internationalist organization of the era was the ISCM, founded in Salzburg in 1922.⁸ The ISCM’s principal activity during the interwar period was to organize an annual contemporary music festival. This peripatetic event, hosted in a different European city each year, served two intertwined ambitions: to promote contemporary music and to further international cooperation. The latter aspiration gave rise to an unofficial nickname – the ‘musical League of Nations’ – encapsulating the ISCM’s perceived affinities with other, heftier internationalist endeavours.⁹ A ‘musical League of Nations’ was, however, an ambivalent and

history of the American discipline and locates racialized power instead in the way in which the discipline organized itself over the course of the twentieth century, casting a range of decisions and manoeuvres at the level of professional bureaucracy as an instantiation of just the type of interwar European internationalism that will be examined in this round table. These manoeuvres served not only to exclude certain figures from participating in the discipline on the basis of status and character, but also to ‘subjugate or objectify peoples of the global south’, according to Levitz. Internationalism is cast in this way as an original sin of the American Musicological Society, an organization founded in 1934, seven years after the IMS.

⁶ I am grateful to Heather Wiebe, Roger Parker, Flora Willson and the editors of the round table for their feedback on this article. I would also like to thank Melita Milin for sharing her expertise on Ljubica Marić, and Henry Balme and Sasha Ockenden for their advice on translations.

⁷ Sibille, ‘The Politics of Music in International Organisations in the First Half of the Twentieth Century’; Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order*, 51–90. The harbinger of the initiatives of the 1920s was the Internationale Musikgesellschaft (1899–1914), the predecessor of the IMS (1927–).

⁸ As Anne C. Shreffler notes, ‘In spite of the fact that the ISCM had no real authority and few resources of its own [...] there was no other institution of comparable legitimacy and scope’; Shreffler, ‘The International Society for Contemporary Music and Its Political Context’, 61.

⁹ For an extended riff on this trope, see Paul Stefan, ‘Ein Völkerbund der Musik’, *Atti del primo Congresso internazionale di musica, Firenze, 30 aprile–4 maggio 1933* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1935), 233–9. The League of Nations itself made some tentative steps into the musical sphere through its International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC): meetings were organized, proposals drafted and questionnaires circulated, but little was achieved in the way of practical action. See Christiane Sibille, ‘La musique à la Société des Nations’, *Relations Internationales*, 155 (2013), 89–102, and Sibille, ‘The Politics of Music in International Organisations in the First Half of the Twentieth Century’, 265–72.