

OP-Incitements / Issue I

The Sound Archive as a Source of Knowledge



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The purpose of this section is to promote critical and renewing thinking on the hot topics of the current agenda of ethnomusicology, musicology, popular music studies and related disciplines. In this issue, an assertive and provocative idea proposed by the editor is commented on by outstanding researchers who have extensive experience in managing, producing or reflecting on sound recordings and archives.

The incitement

The sound archive doesn't preserve the musical past. It cannot be used as a reliable source to reconstruct the musical past of either a group or a person. This limitation stems from the fact that the archive is a construction made by multiple creators and managers, each with their own different and sometimes conflicting theoretical perspectives, desires, ideologies and imaginaries. Moreover, two other factors intervene in its creation: the ever-changing institutional policies and the state of technological development. All these conditionings bring together heterogeneous sets of sound representations commonly referred to as "archives". From this perspective, the sound archive primarily conserves another type of past: that of its own construction. It retains traces of its own history and development making it inherently self-referential. However, its history is a never-ending process shaped by the interpretations, narratives and rumors put forth by researchers. Indeed, the only kind of approach that the archive allows is an epistemological one.

The comments (in alphabetical order)



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A sound archive does not preserve the musical past in an unbiased way and is therefore an unreliable historical source if its contextualization is taken for granted. It also raises the question of what “musical past” means, confronting the conflictive conception of music as it has long been understood from a Western and colonial perspective. This includes esthetic paradigms as well as assumptions of how it may be experienced, documented and registered. It also creates the assumption that there are known conditions for guaranteeing reliable music production and circulation. However, it does not clarify whether this applies to the sound source itself –in terms of being original or “first hand”– parting from the fact that there is an ideal mediation, with the highest possible fidelity that allows for a trustworthy recreation. This cannot be expected of music as a cultural discourse that implies a succession of versions, variations and reinterpretations. Since the mere possibility of registration is already a form of manipulation of sound, this confirms that it may not be unquestionably but rather discretely reliable. Furthermore, the reliability of sound documentation and recreation depends on evolving technology.

When we equate sound archives to musical ones, we risk narrowing the scope and blurring part of this shared history of an oral origin, one that shows a strong interest in how language can be captured. Proof of this are the very first sound documentations by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville (1860) and Thomas Alva Edison (1877), both focusing not only on the human voice, but also coincidentally registering nursery rhymes and popular songs. The drive for this spontaneous preference in both cases relies on the fact that orality triggers an immediate cultural and musical memory.

Since the beginning of sound archiving, oral practices have developed as research areas for disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography, history, musicology and linguistics, each with different motives, although all sharing interest in the voice as a valuable source for study. These disciplinary

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crossings, with their respective encounters and disagreements, are exemplified by the very first German sound collections: the Phonogramm-Archiv, which predominantly consists of varied folk music, initiated in 1900 by philosopher, psychologist and acoustic researcher Carl Stumpf; and the Lautarchiv, founded in 1909 by linguist Wilhelm Doegen with the idea of creating a “museum of voices”, which consists –apart from international songs and music– of three main holdings: voice portraits of political leaders, scientists and artists of the German Empire and the Weimarer Republic; recordings made from 1915 to 1918 by the Prussian Phonographic Commission of World War I soldiers in German prison camps; and finally a selection of recordings of German dialects and speech.

The archives were regarded as complementary and initially supported by the same research commission, to the point that they were often confused with each other (Mahrenholz, 2003). The destiny of these collections passed through numerous hands and ears, in a constant reevaluation of the relevance of sound and voice research. This often pushed the use of the archives beyond the founders’ initial interests and surely beyond the recorded subjects’ knowledge.

Oral history as a practice for gathering testimonies of people has been valued by historians for documenting voices of prominent people through emblematic public speeches given at historical moments, or interviews that highlight personal profiles. In both cases their value has strong ideological weight. Aside from historical evidence, these recordings have attained a symbolic and even mystical value, signifying –beyond their semantic content– the aura of unique voices with intimate traits such as rhetoric and prosodic gestures, pitch and tempo.

For linguists, these traits are equally significant but from a predominantly phonological perspective. This explains why, aside from the “big talk” of prestigious people, these archives also included the “small talk” of people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Through this bottom-up perspective the interest in random enunciations and testimonies of hundreds of soldiers is clear: it broadens the archive through the registration of all possible voices and sounds in the widest range of languages, even when the semantic content was frequently ignored due to a lack of linguistic knowledge. However, when examining these troves, we realize that efforts were also made to transcribe and explain some of the intentions. Both from the paratextual information as well as the prosodic and performatic gestures of the recordings, we notice that its main material was formulaic genres, including verses, songs, sayings,

stories, jokes or anecdotes. These first sound archives are clearly the result of contrasting approaches and conceptual frameworks justified by different motivations for preserving the voices for posterity. And these efforts were not exempted from limitations of the people involved in both the emission and registration of the content.

Sound archives show how orality became unique archival material that, beyond being complementary to visual and written historical documents from the same period and context, is worthy of study in its own right. Each project had personal and collective biases, which afforded visionary spirits and a network of public relations to fund their autonomous creation. However, the questions today are, who can guarantee their long-term maintenance? Who has control over them? Who is responsible for their preservation and management? and What new purposes can they serve? In this light, it is no surprise that these German archive destinies turned nomadic, with distinct results: Stumpf's Edison cylinders became part of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin-Dahlem, while Doegen's shellac records were integrated as part of the Sound Department (Lautabteilung) of the Prussian State Library (Preußische Staatsbibliothek), which in 1934 became the Sound Research Institute (Institut für Lautforschung) of the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, and then the Music Research Seminar of the same university, which had been renamed Humboldt-Universität in Berlin (cf. Mahrenholz, 2003). Still in charge of this university, in 2022, Doegen's collection was finally relocated, together with Stumpf's archive, to the Humboldt Forum, which now hosts them under the same roof.

These matters are not exempted from ideological implications, partly related to the mandates of these institutions that also witnessed changing cultural and academic contexts (not necessarily coincidental with the founders' orientations), including controversial histories. Equally, we need to bear in mind that the domicile and institutional shifts occurred within a broader series of political and ideological changes of German regimes.

Even though the collections over the past century have become an international reference for sound archiving, the aforementioned movement shows an instability that could be the result of a varied appreciation of their value. Aside from the corresponding policies, financial junctures, logistics and physical space for their storage and conservation, there is information infrastructure to organize the complexity of these objects of knowledge production, which in an ideal state offers adequate cataloguing processes and practices, through which they are reappropriated and to

a certain extent transformed (cf. Göbel and Müller, 2017). These aspects are mainly linked to technological development.

Regarding the Lautarchiv, its reappraisal is clearly related to the digitalization of the records, which started in 1990 with the creation of a special modular data bank (IAMGO) and a website (<https://www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de>) that offered new visibility and developed an impulse for promotion and circulation that awakened interest in the collection. This transposition of data is more than a simple digitization and organization of material through new metadata systems; it is the reinvention of the collection through new toolkits and protocols. Digitizing also brought to light the coexistence of digital and analog sources. Although this step could be considered a security measure to prevent further wear of original recordings, through the process some of the materiality gets transformed (or even lost) and this brings us back to the question of a reliable source. While technology allows us to contrast documents and sources within a series of clicks, can we say that a simple photographic image can sufficiently recreate the material value that is often a key element of the document itself? Isn't the gap irretrievable when only accessing the digital sources? There is also the issue of the open access through the internet, which has further complications that cannot be addressed here.

We must equally question the common belief that digitization is responsible for the archive becoming a multimodal entity. The history of collections such as the Lautarchiv shows that sound and voice archiving already implied different sets of documentation that were not exclusively sound bound. Even if sometimes incomplete or unsystematic according to current research standards, the pioneers of these collections almost scientifically aspired to gather scores, transcriptions, photographs, films and other objects. Perhaps digitization only made this hybrid essence of the archive more evident and visible through an adequate form of administrating and designing the information both in the data bank and on the website. Information on these oral sources is now often restored and remediated on different levels by archivists who have become curators (Swain, 2003): through rethinking and reorganizing even the standardized metadata with improvements in classification and labeling, but also through modular forms of presentation such as complementary texts, summaries, facsimile or photographic reproductions, and transcriptions, as well as links to other data, including Stumpfs' collection. These efforts have apparently been fruitful. According to Jochen Henning, since 1990 the recordings have been used in numerous scientific projects with diverse research interests and different cultural modes of transmission and presentation.

He also confirms that the relocation and remediation of the archive caused a shift of meaning and valorization within these different contexts (cf. Henning, 2016). It is thus an example of an academic collection at the interfaces of both cultural and scientific activity that has been continually transformed.

Despite all this work and as part of the inherent discontinuities that come with an archive (Guasch, 2011), it was difficult to foresee that sooner than later digital programs and formats would need to be updated and transferred. This is happening at a speed that threatens any project of its kind to become quickly outdated or even obsolete.

Through the above examples we see that sound archives are never-ending revisionist works in progress, which illustrate how these documents also carry with them the past of their own conception and development. Keeping the history of these collections in mind gives us a better understanding of how sound archives have resulted from the relation of many people in different moments and roles, and also of the institutions. This relation develops a changing appreciation of concepts such as sound and oral poetics that awaken attention for listening.

Sound archives are also challenged by an avalanche of new material that pushes old sounds to the margins if their need and communicative strategies are not renewed. However, not all is in hands of the archivists. We as researchers and users are responsible for their activation, relistening and revaluation. With so many changes, nobody can foresee the future for these sound archives, except that they will continue to evolve according to how we decide to reinvent their use and apply new technologies. With a proactive attitude and interdisciplinary collaboration, we will keep on rediscovering in them our “audible past” (Sterne, 2003).

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Let me begin my response to the given text with situating myself: My work engages with the affordances of historical sound recordings as performative, sung, or spoken sources of colonial history, in which speakers articulate their thoughts, air critique and comments, chant and cite poetry, or give accounts, and perform songs that do not appear elsewhere in the colonial archive. With no training in musicology, I mostly work on spoken texts, their contents and genres, their intertextuality, their position in discursive formations, and engage with speakers' and singers' performative uses of voice, genre, and language.

Historical sound archives are not necessarily collections of music. In fact, even in archives that aimed to “collect” and successively compare different kinds of musical expression from around the world, like for instance the Phonogramm-Archiv in Berlin, one finds many spoken texts. The first collection I engaged with (from 2006) is held at this archive: these recordings were produced in Namibia in 1931 and given to the archive by Hans Lichtenecker. In this case the actual collection barely responded to the request of the archive to deliver “Bushman songs”. Most of the recordings document speech acts, poetry, and songs in Otjiherero, Afrikaans, and Khoekhoegowab (Hoffmann, 2009).

In response to the text offered to me to engage with here, let me say that I do agree that historical collections of speech and music, together with their written documentation, inform about projects of knowledge production, which in fact often were instances of colonial knowledge production. In the case of many collections now held by sound archives, the archive's politics of acquisition initiated and facilitated the production of recordings. Aspects of the historical aims that guided and informed the practice of recording surface in the written documentation that comes with acoustic documents, for instance on the record sleeves and the card board boxes of wax cylinders, in personal files created for each speaker (Lautarchiv Berlin), on the so-called protocols created for individual recordings (Phonogrammarchiv Vienna), in correspondences between archives and researchers who were commissioned to produce recordings (Phonogramm-Archiv Berlin). These aims also feature in collections outside of the sound archives. These are traceable, for instance in the research applications in the countries where recordings were created, in the case of the above-mentioned recordings from Namibia, which are held

by the National Archives in Windhoek. Sometimes photographs document the making of recordings, in this case these are held at the Scientific Society in Windhoek. Read together, these documents inform about aspects of the history of the given sound archive.

In sound archives themselves, there often is a readable order of things: recordings were and mostly still are grouped around the so-called collector and thus can be found under his (rarely her) name today. Acoustic recordings were, and often still are arranged according to the ordering principles of their historical production: to languages, often racialised ethnic groups, to regions and countries. Even spoken texts were, from what I have seen so far in historical collections, never arranged according to the semantic contents of the spoken texts. The reason for this is that lyrics of songs and the content spoken texts were mostly not heard as relevant for musicology and linguistics. This historical order of things has often been consistent over decades. It thus presents the manifestation of the status of examples of music and languages as epistemological documents or objects in a particular archive. These historical arrangements also speak of the aims of disciplines and archives, to their ordering principles and, mostly, of their disinterest in the textual content of songs or spoken texts uttered by the speakers and singers who were positioned as “informants”. Other consequences of the ordering principles of sound archives were the dissociation and successive re-arrangement of what once were identifiable recording situations, during which speakers, singers and/or musicians had communicated with each other performatively, as well as in terms of genre and content.

Until very recently sound archives have mostly ignored, or refrained from discussing in public the coloniality of the making and the historical arrangements of many of the recordings in their care. Archives celebrate (d) “collectors” as the makers of their collections although acoustic recordings were not collected: they came into being as sonic documents created in processes of relational knowledge production. With relational knowledge production I mean, in this case, a practice of creating collections of acoustic carriers –for instance examples of music or examples of language– that transformed ephemeral sound into stable objects for future research. In colonial settings this meant extracting knowledge that did not exist in this way in Europe at this point in time, on the epistemological terms specified by the person who recorded and/or by the archive or institution that had commissioned them. Still, what was actually performed was, in linguistic terms, not *langue* but *parole*, what was said or sung was always situated in a particular moment of production, in a specific political situation, and

often in response to asymmetric power relations in camps, police stations, and similar settings.

The collections I have engaged with over the years are of extractive nature. Many of the recordings situations were violent in several respects: Hans Lichtenecker recorded speakers in a police station in Keetmanshoop, where he also produced bodily measurements and life casts of the same people for a project of racial studies. While the recordings may have been a side-catch for the German visitor who saw himself as an artist, the singers and speakers did, with their songs and spoken texts, respond to the epistemic violence of this project of racialization and addressed the genocidal war with the German Kaiserreich (1904-8). The same can be said for the recordings that Rudolf Pöch, an Austrian anthropologist, had produced together with singers and speakers during the same colonial war in the Kalahari in 1908 (Phonogrammarchiv Wien). Again, the project was that of examining people in a racist manner. Pöch aimed to produce recordings as linguistic examples of people who were deemed to be on the verge of extinction. Two speakers commented on the ecological change that colonisation had induced in their region: the sinking of the water table, the hunting of elephants on a large scale. Their spoken texts were direct responses to a history of colonial extraction and to the research practices and the position of the travelling researcher whose project was supported by the German colonial military (Hoffmann, 2023).

The ambitious, very systematic project of recording songs and languages of prisoners of war in German camps by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission during the First World War produced thousands of recordings and a more extensive archival paper trail than the smaller projects mentioned above (Lautarchiv Berlin). Again, the recordings were produced, not collected; they came into being in a moment of asymmetric collaboration. In this case, the recordings of some of the African singers and speakers relate to their experience of war and captivity, to their temporal migration to Europe; speakers and singers spoke of missing their families and sang of the recruitment campaigns of the French Army. One of the speakers, Abdoulaye Niang from Dakar, addressed some prisoners' (then) current concerns: he spoke of their fear of being deported to another camp. Following the biography of this particular recording I found that it was not translated until Serigne Matar Niang listened to it in Cape Town in 2015. Comments on what Niang said and sung in Wolof do appear in the correspondence between members of the Commission, yet these were not deemed relevant for the project of documenting languages (Hoffmann, 2024). In the 1940s his recordings were used in a project that sought to connect

voice and race, in complete ignorance of the fact that in Wolof certain practices of speech require a change of pitch and the register of speech according to the occasion (Hoffmann, 2024).

Only in the last decade a radical re-deeming took place: the recordings of the Lautarchiv are now heard as part of the history of epistemic practices of German linguists and musicologists but were also listened to as meaningful texts (Lange, 2022; Hilden, 2022).

In conclusion, I agree that sound archives certainly do not document the history of music of a particular region or cultural formation, nor that of particular languages and genres of speech. Sound collections assemble acoustic snapshots, which can be heard as situated articulations –of music, performance, and spoken texts. They inextricably connect to the situation of their recording, to the request to speak, sing, or play music, and to the asymmetric power relations that informed their making (García, 2017; Kalibani, 2021). At the same time, they carry responses to colonial knowledge production as such, and to the political situation of the speakers and singers therein. Additionally, they may carry echoes of discursive formations beyond the immediate situation of speaking and singing. Often these are fragments of specific repertoires, which resound with the license that particular genres of speech and song grant to singers and speakers. This means that what was recorded, changes for us, as listeners, when we begin to listen closely and make the effort to understand what was said, by whom, and how (Hoffmann, 2024). Listening closely to recordings as aspects of the colonial archive allows recovering texts and musical performances, which colonial knowledge production has omitted from the historical (written) record. When we begin to combine listening to the recordings with reading the archives' documentation, these acoustic and written files speak of the conditions of their making.

As results of relational knowledge production acoustic files are double storied documents: they speak of their making, of their makers –the speakers and those who recorded– as well as of the histories of the disciplines involved. Because many recordings transmit what the speakers and singers had in mind or wanted to say or sing it would be a grave mistake to hear collections of historical sound recordings merely as references to particular practices of researchers and institutions. Reducing recordings to the history of these practices would be a continuation of coloniality's deafness, it would ignore what was actually sung and spoken, and neglect the performativity of music, together with what the human voice can communicate beyond words, even in requested examples of language and music.

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Sound archives preserve sonic fragments of the past. Unless the person who made the recording captured just him-/herself or purely natural or technical soundscapes void of people, sound archives preserve sonic fragments of human encounters in the past.

The content of these sonic fragments of the past can vary widely, even if we, as the incitement text does, focus just on music. Broadcasting services, commercial record companies, festivals, concert halls, institutions related to music education –many of them have for various spans of time recorded productions, events or other music related situations and stored the resulting documents in some ordered form, whether accessible to outsiders or not. The same holds true for archives that keep audio-visual data from research activities, such as the *Phonogrammarchiv* of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Founded in 1899, it has since then generated or ingested and preserved recordings from academic endeavours, mostly by Austrian scholars. Produced during research trips all over the world or on site in Vienna, the *Phonogrammarchiv*' collections are very diverse, following the archive's broad interdisciplinary approach of being in principle open to all disciplines. In practice, however, over the past 125 years there has developed a clear focus on ethnomusicology, folk music research, linguistics and social anthropology. This means, however problematic it may be to define the concept of and its borders to other sound phenomena in archival practice, musical recordings do make up large parts of the *Phonogrammarchiv*' holdings.

If sound archives preserve sonic fragments of human encounters from the past, they not only vary in the kind of sonic fragments they store, but also in the kind of human encounters, in which the recordings were produced. Even within archives, the range of this variation can be wide and, in the case of the *Phonogrammarchiv*, this is clearly related to its long period of existence. The *Phonogrammarchiv* started to operate in the colonial era, and for several decades, most of the human encounters that led to the production of recordings, were marked by clear imbalances in power and agency, sometimes even by outright duress and violence. This has changed in more recent decades with geopolitical and ideological shifts and –in the field of music– related changes in methodology and the perception of research counterparts in ethnomusicology. Nevertheless, human

encounters that lead to the recording of sonic fragments for preservation in the archive are still often marked by imbalances in power and economy and, when it comes to research in foreign countries, freedom of movement.

Sometimes, recordings have registered the kind of encounter which led to their production by just capturing modes of interaction or including background information; sometimes, but more rarely, those recorded directly addressed and judged the kind of encounter they were in. Generally, however, the terms on which encounters resulting in recordings have taken place can only be inferred from information that exists outside of the sonic fragment itself: written documentation such as applications, reports, diaries or publications; visual documentation such as photographs or sketches; oral documentation such as accounts, stories, songs etc. All these extras can help to embed the sonic fragments in the archive within various layers of larger events, wider politics and contemporary ideologies of the respective past.

The incitement text uses the terms and concepts of *past* and *history* as synonyms; I consider it vital to differentiate them: The past is the totality of what has happened, existed and been thought –or, to focus on music, been sung and played– from the beginning of time until today. Evidence of the past exists always only in fragments, in material or non-material form. History on the other hand is what humans make of these fragments, the stories about the past they produce based on its fragments. Both, fragments as well as history are always partial –partial in the sense that they are incomplete and in the sense that they are situated.

Thus, the partiality of sonic fragments in the archive is the nature of any evidence of the past in the present, not something peculiar to the archive. It is not an institutional limitation caused by avoidable interventions or disturbances, as the incitement text suggests. The partiality of the sonic fragment is based on decisions at the time of its capture, that is, decisions about what to single out and save from the present as a fragment of the past for making history: who chooses to record whom or what why, how, where and when –and, depending on the room available for agency on part of the person(s) recorded: who chooses to speak, sing or play what why, how, where and when for the record. One can, of course, argue that already this moment of singling out and saving is part of processes of making history, but for reasons of argument I will keep these two temporally separate moments –the moment of recording in the present and the moment of constructing history from fragments of the past– apart.

We cannot reconstruct a past, whether those of institutions or music; we can always only make history, based on the fragments of the past available to us at a given time, and shaped by our worldview, our disciplinary background, our positionality, our situatedness in space, time etc. To use the sonic fragments of human encounters from the past for making the institutional history of an archive may seem easier than making music history –at least, when speaking from within the archive. This impression, however, is based on an over-optimistic assumption about the wealth or rather density of fragments, sonic or otherwise, that archives possess and can potentially use for constructing their own institutional histories. I guess, it is the aura of continuity, order, authority, logic, diligence and tidiness that archives are usually shrouded in that leads to assumptions like this. In reality, at least in the *Phonogrammarchiv*' reality, decades of paper documentation are missing due to war losses or deliberate removal, probably for political reasons, severely complicating processes of making institutional history.

And then, if archives preserve sonic fragments of human encounters in the past, recordings are always evidence of entanglements, some shorter and looser, others longer and denser. This means, a sonic fragment can be –and usually is– part of a multitude of pasts that aligned at least once at the very moment of recording. So, whoever wants to make whatever kind of history out of sound documents in the archive, whether an institutional history or a music history, has to take this entangled nature, the potential polyvalence of sonic fragments, into account. This entails to look for other pasts that are entangled in the same sonic fragment, to engage in collaborative studies of the terms of the human encounter in the past in order to make more sense –to make history– of sonic fragments. Moreover, this approach by necessity includes a degree of epistemological self-reflexivity that can greatly enhance knowledge about archives' positionalities and practicalities in the past, which are often still underexplored terrain until today.

Thinking about the past and history –as the incitement text does and as this text has done so far– is a common focus in current discourse about archives. Umbrella terms like *memory institutions* or *heritage institutions* for libraries, museums and archives have the same backward thrust; at the same time, the concepts of memory and heritage usually come with very positive connotations. But how can we get the present and the future into the picture? And how do we reckon with the dark potential of sonic fragments in the archive? In this respect I find it useful to think of sound archives as freezers for cryonic hibernation à la *Alien* or *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as long-term dormitories for sonic fragments from the past, themselves immersed in the sounds of life-sustaining preservation through

temperature and humidity conditioning. Neatly laid to rest on shelves, they are shielded from destruction by intricate systems of fire extinction, waiting to be resurrected from their hypersleep by digitization. But what happens, if they are unlocked –or maybe unleashed– back into the world? Whose are they, what do they do –and to whom? They can be long missed and dearly loved ancestors, doing good after their return from decades or even more than a century of well-protected stasis. They can be unsettling revenants from darker times, thought long gone by, disturbing intruders with voices haunting their descendants. They can also become just irrelevant noise, a petty nuisance. And they can be all of that at the same time –to their various descendants, among whom, whether we like it or not, will always also be us: the current archival staff as their cryonic hypersleep engineers.

As much as I find this analogy useful for bringing the future into a picture that is dominated by the past, it comes with the downside of giving sonic fragments a kind of anthropomorphic agency, which they clearly do not have. They can become a tool, however, for effecting change, for better or worse, in endeavours to make history –and to make futures.



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The incitement put into question sound archives. Probably, they do not meet our expectations today. The statement that sound archives do not preserve the musical past evokes the question if such demand is required and would be a prerequisite for the archive. My counter question is: for what purpose have these archives been established?

To begin with, let us have a short look on the very first sound archive, the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences: The idea of the founder, Sigmund Exner, was to use the boosting invention of sound recording for scientific purposes and to preserve those early sound recordings, comprising speaking or music making, for future research (see Exner, 1900, p. 1). This technical innovation changed the interests, e.g. on cultural phenomena. It was then possible to record acoustically what before only could be described from a personal point of view. Thus, archivists addressed sound recordings as primary sources vis-à-vis explanations or verbal descriptions. Only 100 years later we can ask whether sound archives preserve the musical past or not. On the one hand sound recordings are fixed moments of reality, on the other hand there does not exist any other kind of document giving an idea of a past acoustic liveliness (see Exner, 1900, p. 3). Therefore, sound recordings stored in archives are not classified as “perfect” items to understand the musical past, but nevertheless, they comprise a kind of history.

Archives in general, e.g. public record offices, national or regional archives, comply with legal claims what has to be delivered to the respective archives and has to be stored and preserved. Such rules did not exist for sound archives for a quite long time. Sound archives had been dependent on persons who made sound recordings and then handed over these recordings to the sound archive. Researchers, collectors and cultural activists were driven by manifold ideas, focused on personal, national or global interests.

Archives’ constructions arose from different perspectives, desires (of the actors), ideologies, politics etc. Various institutional policies and developments of technology have led to the situation we are confronted with. Primarily, the idea of preserving those sounds on wax which fade away when being played back many times, was essential. Is “keeping” the sound, a marker for creating history?

Audiovisual archivists exercise a profound power and responsibility. They define the places and structures in which the “acoustic memory” is kept, they decide what has to be saved or discarded (cf. Edmondson, 2004, p. 66). In other words: Archives are places to preserve information for the future, they are custodians and content creators, they decide what should be kept and what deleted, thus, they “make a history”.

Considerations

Audiovisual archives and their development were and are shaped by methodological changes and technical progress. The elaboration of the technical preservation and written documentation was a prerequisite since the very beginning. “Keeping” the sound, i.e. making copies of the original sound, was a challenge in the dawn of sound archives. In the digital era original and copy become blurred, but the idea behind is the “safety” of the items. The written documentation had been of outstanding importance, not only to describe the contents of the recording (which was essential as long as the sound quality was very weak) but also to document the genesis of the sound recording (who, when, where, why, ...).

Ever-changing institutional policies were and are led by particular leadership or e.g. eligible projects. Such circumstances have influenced the collection and preservation policies. Thus, heterogeneous sets of sound representations were created depending on varying interests. On the one hand the archives have been depending on the sound documents which were deposited and, on the other hand, they decided in their self-perception about accepting or discarding. Such selections were customary and created the “past” of archives. Generally, past takes place by itself but our perspective on the past varies and changes in respect of knowledge (also a factor of time), political estimations and bias towards mainstream research.

To what extent the contents of an archive are more or less homogeneous depends on the focus of an archive: songs’ archives (maybe even a special kind of songs) probably will be more homogeneous than sound archives comprising any acoustic feature, such as noises, animal voices, various languages or vocal and instrumental music. Linked to this observation any archive has its own construction, depending on the character and emphasis of the institution, e.g. national audiovisual archives, university or research archives, thematic specialized archives, regional, city or local archives, private archives (in the net), etc. (see Edmondson, 2004, pp. 31-33).

To come closer to the history, an archive can be analyzed with regard to its construction over time; it can also be analyzed in respect to its contents and recording situations, in respect to the field researchers and their goals; all in all, in respect to any feature appearing in the documentation file. Many of those analyzed items mirror not only the technical changes but also the changes in the working process.

Thinking about the musical past preserved in sound archives, it would have been the best to fully document any musical event; in the beginning the technical prerequisites did not allow for a complete documentation, and today we in fact document more completely but biased by our eyes. A special kind of project has to be mentioned: since the reel tape technology was used systematic recording tours, mostly in the field of folk music research, were conducted, led by national ideas to preserve or save traditions. Such undertakings could be seen as cornerstones for preserving the musical past.

Is there anything else than an archive (in the widest sense) to preserve musical past? Sound recordings comprise past and what we hear was created in the past; they should be deposited in sound archives, should be accessible to everyone and should be documented as transparent and informative as possible. In my opinion the history and the critical review of the archive's construction represent the basis respectively background to understand the archive's contents; the two aspects, history and collection strategy, are closely entangled and therefore, the archive's policy and the required documentation intertwine. Keeping this ambivalence in mind it might be possible to envision a kind of musical past.

Due to this long-time observation, the archive has become a topic of (not only) ethnomusicological discourse. Research questions changed and historical approaches gained interest accompanied by the new technical possibilities (digitization, easy access as well as computer aided examination) which promised a new "age" in ethnomusicology and other disciplines.

Now it became evident that archives house millions of items, centralized on various platforms, which had not been of interest for a long time. Handling such huge amounts of items ask for new technologies as special data bases, software, artificial intelligence etc. But exactly those technologies reveal that archives are not homogenous in documentation practices, their sources are not as compatible as it would be expected, and this additional fact points out the complexity of preserving cultural past.

Concluding remarks

The archive as humanistic invention or concept generally means knowledge “for all” –in case of sound the record of the present represents a document for future. Only when looking back for a longer time period we ask if any musical past would have been preserved in the archive.

We should not erase the “old” archives, but we have to rethink them and we have the chance to considerate new ways of archiving and archival goals. The question is: what are the goals today? Do we need archives like those we discuss? Which role does the internet play and how will the digital era change those concepts of a library, an archive or museum as they are inherited from antiquity (cf. Edmondson, 2004, p. 4)?

Knowing about the fast changes in this field within one century (“from the wax to the cloud”) performers, researchers and archivists (see Seeger and Chaudhuri, 2004, pp. 71-77) came across some progressions which needed reflection, discussion, and critical judgment. Inadequateness as mentioned in this incitement became visible due to general discussions about power relations within organizational structures, the request on democratization of knowledge, and the demand for complete accessibility of archival holdings.

Archives are invented by people, organized by people, and discussed in retrospect. A lot has been done and some mistakes occurred. It is specific for humans to force amendments, but also to follow different solutions to proceed –a never ending process. Today we agree that the history of an institution with their employees and the collections refer to each other. An extensive discussion has started what archives represent, what they present, what is missing, etc.

Based on the enhancement of technical instruments and digital support we trust in the epistemological approach to pursue such questions. Is it the claim for the archives or the users? Or does it mean: “We are what we keep. We keep what we are” (Cook, 2011)?

What history respectively musical past can be gained from archives? According to different approaches it could be the colonial impact, the exclusion of music or performers, the relevance for the performers or the researchers, the liking or disliking and belongings, the musical markers for social statements etc. These topics are urgent in a broad discourse

about the past and present of music and presuppose preserved documents in any kind of archive.

We need archives to experience the past, to evoke and arrange memory, to create a “picture” of musical past. Being aware of the pros and cons of an archive, it is (still) worth to collect and preserve musical impressions of a distinct time, and it is necessary to document the genesis, the content, the performers and creators of the recording. Nevertheless, only the critical approach promises some valuable and appropriate information. It is up to any person in charge and user how to deal with the findings. Moreover, the acquaintance with the item determines the results.

UNESCO’s “memory of the World” program has put archives and museums to the fore. Their statement that the world’s heritage belongs to all, should be fully preserved and protected and should be permanently accessible without hindrance, has given a strong input. Meanwhile, collaborative (field and documentation) work is state of the art. Archives are meeting places for discussion on eye-level and exchange of all experiences.

As a metaphor for (future) archives I would like to introduce the *Glass Room*, a novel by Simon Maver (2009), displaying the 20th century’s eventful history on the example of a family’s fate. The glass room (the archive) represents transparency, mirrors actions and documents, and is an ideal democratic location open for discussion and safe for storage. “The house exists, fixed in time and space like a fossil” (p. 396) could be read as “The archive exists, fixed in time and space forever”.

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I struggled mightily to engage with this incitement, and it took me a long time to realize it is because I agree with both the premise and the conclusion, but disagree with most of the reasoning in between. I'd argue that appreciating the fundamentally epistemological nature of archives is crucial for accomplishing a crucial goal of archives in the present day: amplification of the voices of Indigenous peoples and other communities in the description and interpretation of their cultural documentation. Archives are themselves manifestations of Western epistemology, while many of those archives are full of recordings, photographs, and ethnographic documentation from communities and cultures who have completely different ways of understanding the world and structuring knowledge about it. It is at precisely these intersections of epistemologies where archives have their most important and meaningful work ahead of them.

Sound archives do not preserve *the* musical past. They preserve *a* musical past. In addition to the contingent factors mentioned in the incitement (multiple collectors, differing theoretical perspectives, institutional policies, and the state of technology) archives require and are limited by resources. Any archival repository must face the practical realities of stewarding and providing access to collections of materials, which leads to policies narrowing that particular archives' scope. Collecting policies, curatorial discretion, and the sheer practicalities of managing bodies of content –analog or digital– in a manner that ensures longevity and usefulness through discovery and access all constrain what archives have the opportunity to do. Insofar as these constraints define the archive itself, it is true that the archive is a record of its own construction. Practical realities circumscribe the world the archive describes. The narrow, focused version of the past that can be reconstructed from the examination of any particular archive is literally what its curators and archivists curate. In and of itself, this is not terribly insightful.

The story gets more interesting when we consider that the epistemological and colonial natures of archives cannot be disentangled. Archives embody the Western knowledge system that places authority in systematic scholarly research, documentation, and evidence. At the same time, much of that research, documentation, and evidence is of peoples who understand the world, organize knowledge, and define authority in completely different ways

—many different ways. The challenges facing archives today are rooted in the colonial reality that the knowledge system of those doing the documenting has been imposed upon those being documented. 21st century archival practice begins with the recognition that this imposition is harmful and that stewarding collections with respect for communities' knowledge systems is an acknowledgement of their sovereignty and authority over their cultural heritage. Meeting these obligations is challenging for both conceptual and practical reasons.

Let's begin with the conceptual tension between archival practice and many Indigenous epistemologies. As an archivist, I personally reflect often on an observation Vine Deloria, Jr. made in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, "...no tribes had complex writing as did white society. Winter counts and stories memorized by the favorite storytellers served to perpetuate the great events in tribal history. Other than that, there was no concern for recording events. Life thus had a contemporaneous aspect which meant immediate experiences of life, not continual analysis and dissection" (Deloria, 1970, p. 219).

Deloria's point is that White society and Indigenous societies have very different relationships with information and authority. In Indigenous knowledge systems, information is often limited to privileged individuals or groups, and authority rests with elders or other people who have a religious, cultural, or experiential connection to that information. The oral nature of knowledge in these communities may have made it easier to limit access to it. In Western knowledge systems, authoritative sources are typically documented, and that record in turn supports the Western value that information should be freely available to all. In oral traditions, the lessons of the past may manifest themselves in behaviors, norms, or traditions long after the specifics of their origins are forgotten or transformed into myth. In societies with written records, the past can be revisited and scrutinized endlessly. The interpretation of the historical record may be contested, but the value of the record itself is practically unquestioned.

Archives are inherently colonial constructs because they are manifestations of Western epistemologies, but their colonial nature has been deeper and more insidious than simply that. To demonstrate this, we need to understand archives in their context. I'll use North America as an example, but the power dynamics, pressures, and outcomes have occurred in other settings, as well. Many archives and museums built their collections between the middle of the 19th and 20th centuries, during times of immense societal pressure on Indigenous communities. In the United States, these pressures

included the disruption of orally transmitted culture by means of the removal of children to boarding schools. In the United States and Canada, governments set about systematic campaigns of forced assimilation by removing children from their communities, where they would be immersed in their culture and language, and sending them to schools where they were strictly forbidden to speak their languages or practice their cultural expressions. At the same time, communities were being dispossessed of their land and material resources, creating a power dynamic that allowed anthropologists and others to acquire tangible and intangible cultural treasures for archives and museum collections at bargain-basement prices.

Ethnographic documentation has shaped Western ideas about Indigenous peoples since the moments of contact, but the salvage anthropology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a crucial component in the program of cultural displacement described above. Into the gap created in the generational transmission of culture stepped ethnographers, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists. They recorded elders and tradition bearers, and obtained astonishing cultural treasures, filling museums and archives with objects and knowledge that would otherwise have been conveyed to the next generation according to community-specific ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge. It was at this point that academics asserted authority over Indigenous cultural knowledge, and they had the scholarly research and documentation to support their claims of authority. This documentation then vanished into the halls of academia, and in many cases orally transmitted cultural knowledge was lost to the next generation of community members while living on in archives far from home.

In the incitement, I reacted most strongly to the statement, referring to an archive, that “...its history is a never-ending process shaped by the interpretations, narratives and rumors put forth by researchers”. This is certainly true, but part of the work of archives today is to reevaluate whose interpretations and narratives should be considered authoritative, and to recognize those whose voices have often been missing. Many of the rumors floating around the historical record are the result of misinterpretations by scholars who were not cultural authorities.

Archival practice now strives to reconcile the Western epistemological model that values documentation, evidence, and knowledge as a universal right with the many different Indigenous epistemologies that have widely different values. The goal is to return to communities the authority that Western culture has vested in the archives themselves.

The tension between epistemologies has ongoing, real-world impacts for Indigenous peoples. As noted earlier, archives are created with curatorial philosophies that define their scope, perspective, and priorities. This is one reason why documentation of specific Indigenous communities is spread across many archives –each has its own curatorial focus. It is at this point that the conceptual tensions mentioned above become practical obstacles for communities attempting to reconnect with their belongings and knowledge. Descriptive practices, institutional policies, and mundane procedures differ from one repository to the next. Idiosyncratic cataloging and the privileging of collectors in many archival collection titles make it very time consuming and labor intensive to locate cultural documentation spread across many repositories. Changing these practices and making archival collections easier to locate is some of the first work repositories must do to meet their obligations to Indigenous communities.

It will not be easy for large repositories with wide-ranging collections to do this work. Western epistemologies are embedded in the cataloging systems, databases, taxonomies, and other technologies and methods archives use to describe and provide access to collections. Bending these systems so they can record expertise from many different knowledge systems is going to take a great deal of creativity and effort. Stewarding collections in repositories while respecting the spectrum of knowledge systems represented will also be a great challenge. These challenges can be overcome, but only through true collaboration between communities and archives, which takes time, patience, sustained commitment, and deep respect for different ways of knowing.

Finally, are archives changing the ways previously strictly oral traditions are now transmitted? Does the permanent nature of the archives impose a fixed authority onto previously dynamic oral traditions? In one sense, of course they do because so many interrupted traditions live on in archives, waiting for communities to be reconnected with them. On the other hand, many (though certainly not all) of the people recorded or documented were themselves cultural authorities, so a positive interpretation would be that archives are a means for cultural knowledge to be shared across generational interruptions. Whether this is simply an academic question or truly a matter of concern is something each community will work out for themselves, in accordance with their unique knowledge systems.

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The initial thought that arises when considering a sound archive is not necessarily epistemological. Individuals from diverse backgrounds, including musicians, and researchers interested in sound and music studies, such as ethnomusicologists, who intend to use archival sources for various purposes, perceive a sound archive as a repository where they anticipate locating pivotal sources pertinent to their respective work. It also encompasses a specific organizational framework that enables users to locate their desired materials. This sophisticated system serves as a repository where sources are kept in suitable conditions tailored to their nature. All of this is done under the supervision of a professional archivist, for whom a sound archive is not merely an epistemological concept but a tangible reality.

Indeed, the epistemological approach stands out as a crucial perspective, probably the most stimulating for those delving into archival research. On the aftermath of the archival turn, epistemology became crucial to understand the archive phenomena and gave rise to concepts like archivization, archivalization, archiving, and even anarchiving and anarchivism (García, 2023). Yet, this perspective has also fostered an expansive interpretation, extending the label “archive” to encompass everything but the physical space and the anticipated organized collection of materials –indispensable components for a comprehensive epistemological discussion. The seminal proposals by Derrida in *The Archive Fever* and Foucault in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, addressing archives as *places of memory* and as *sets of statements*, respectively, have sanctioned the dematerialization of the archive through the lens of epistemology.

Drawing on my experience of writing and researching archives through an epistemological criticism, and concurrently engaging directly with institutional archives –specifically, sound archives created by a university– I often find myself in a contradictory and uncomfortable position. My concerns frequently diverge from those of the institution, particularly in tasks such as classification, safeguarding, or accessibility, where the institutional language and mine become nearly unintelligible. The same challenge arises when interacting with professional archivists. In fact, when considering an archive created by a university, the variables at play include funded resources, donors, institutional policies, archive sciences policies, the work of archivists, and the contributions of academics who

also conduct research in and about the archives. My question at this point is how to integrate archivists, who dedicate their work and expertise to organizing sound archives, into an epistemological framework. Are they willing to be perceived as merely a fragment of the complex equation that “brings together heterogeneous sets of sound representations commonly referred to as ‘archives’?”

Eric Ketelaar (2001) truly addresses the role of archivists in shaping memories and the narrative of history, moving away from the traditional view of archivists as neutral custodians. His approach aligns with the notion that archives can reveal more about the archivists and the archival process than about the subjects of the archives themselves, supporting the perspective that sound archives primarily preserve the history of their own construction. This supports the claim that they are inherently self-referential. And in this approach the archivist is part of the archive construction. An archive is not a representation of a previous reality; instead, it is constructed through action or in action primarily driven by the archivist. Ultimately, this process is a matter of practice.

The practice of archiving, especially within institutional archives organized under a public mandate, involves a network of agents and mediators who influence the direction of the archive. In this text, my aim is to advocate alternative approaches to the archive, ensuring the inclusion of the significance of the archivist and their practice, without neglecting the validity of the epistemological approach. Over the past 30 years, the skills and competencies of archivists have advanced significantly, particularly with the adaptation of archives to Digital Humanities. In light of the fact that many archives now inhabit virtual spaces, archivists must be well-versed in documentary and communication sciences. They need to adeptly navigate digital platforms and embrace classification methods that align with a global framework established by standards set by external institutional bodies. These standards –namely, the rules and measures of classification and organization– play a pivotal role in shaping, controlling, and disciplining the archive, as Foucault suggested regarding other institutions. In doing so, they reinforce their own power and authority, as well as that of those who control them (Foucault, 1995, p. 177).

Today, there is a nearly universal expectation that on the path of defragmenting archives, any archive should have an open data repository accessible through internet platforms (<https://www.unesco.org/en/open-science>). Consequently, archives must be interconnected, requiring archivists –the custodians responsible for handling documents– to be

proficient in systems of preservation, classification, and accessibility. The contemporary archivist is a highly versatile professional, mandated to possess expertise across diverse domains such as sources, laws, digitization, preservation technologies, communication technologies, information science, and electronic systems adhering to a consistent logic worldwide. This is why the epistemological approach to the archive might appear conflicting or even disrespectful to the archivist's viewpoint. To the archivist the archive is a quite practical reality, not an epistemological one. Their actions are genuinely demanding and adhere to a form of work that necessitates daily disciplined involvement with a set of concrete knowledge, albeit frequently challenging to objectify.

To maintain connectivity among archives, archivists must utilize similar tools, regardless of the archive's location. The expectation is that employing these uniform tools will facilitate a dialogue among archives, significantly contributing to their defragmentation. Consequently, the same source was intended to be classified uniformly, irrespective of its archival place. However, because archive practices require action, they are also the result of numerous individual decisions influenced by human interactions, leading to diverse realities. As Vilem Flusser emphasizes, "the concept of 'decision' demands rethinking" (2011, p. 50). This explains why identical sources may be categorized, organized, or represented differently in various archives –they reflect human decisions, regardless of the use of similar technical or electronic tools, which, in our era, are governed by electronic algorithms. I'm referring to norms produced after the Dublin Core Metadata Element Set or any other recommendations from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). It can be asserted that archivists find themselves in a double algorithmic condition: they must adhere to algorithms inherent in the realm of digital humanities while simultaneously participating in a practice characterized by a sequence of reasoning, instructions, and operations designed to achieve a goal, with the requirement that the steps be finite and conducted systematically. This implies that their practice is, in a certain way, also algorithmic.

Despite its inherent ontological ties to mathematics and information sciences, the concept of algorithm has increasingly come under scrutiny due to its dependence on cultural processes. Many authors have emphasized that some of our daily routines and working practices can be viewed as algorithmic processes (Banovic, Mankoff, and Dey, 2018). Anthropologist Nick Seaver proposes a paradigm shift in how we approach algorithms, suggesting we consider them not merely "in" culture but "as" culture. This entails recognizing algorithms as integral components of the broader

patterns of meaning and practice that can be empirically engaged with. According to Seaver, algorithms represent the culmination of numerous human decisions, evolving in response to changes made by people. This approach encourages an understanding of algorithms that encompasses their social and cultural contexts, acknowledging their susceptibility to human values, biases, and choices. He contends that algorithms should not be perceived solely as rigid, procedural formulas or merely as technical constructs but as integral components of broader patterns of human practice and culture.

In his ethnographic work, Seaver delves into algorithms in practice, arguing that algorithms are multiples: “not singular technical objects that enter into many different cultural interactions, but are rather unstable objects, culturally enacted by the practices people use to engage with them (2017, p. 5)”. If we acknowledge that a sound archive is embedded in and shaped by human practices, decisions, and cultural contexts, can we also perceive it as being subject to an algorithmic condition influenced by decision-led practices? If that is the case, would epistemology be the most effective approach to comprehend this process?

In the realm of sound archives, decisions on how the archive is structured, which sounds are included or excluded, and how they are categorized and made accessible are all products of human practices –essentially, a rethinking of practices in the face of algorithms (Flusser, 2011). These decisions not only mirror cultural values, historical contexts, and technological developments but also the priorities of the individuals or organizations responsible for the creation and maintenance of the archive, like the archivist itself. Therefore, delving into a sound archive involves an exploration of the practices, assumptions, and cultural meanings embedded in the archive’s creation and usage. Once again, this argument raises questions about whether epistemology is the only valid approach to archives. If an archive is a practical reality, dependent on human decisions and shaped by cultural processes, wouldn’t ethnography be a more valid approach to understanding the archive?

Ethnography has been applied in unexpected contexts to elucidate how digital and electronic tools, reliant on algorithms designed to shape normative realities, are, in fact, influenced by culture and human practices, multiplying reality. Annemarie Mol, within the field of medical anthropology, introduced an unconventional approach emphasizing the significance of practice in her ethnographic and philosophical work, which she terms “praxiography” (2002). Mol contends that reality doesn’t

precede practices but emerges because of them. In her framework, actors don't interact with pre-existing objects; instead, they bring these objects into existence through a process she labels "enactment". As she puts it, "objects come into being –and disappear– with the practices in which they are 'manipulated'. And since the object of manipulation tends to differ from one practice to another, reality multiplies" (Mol, 2002, p. 5). Ethnography stands out as the most adept tool to comprehend these processes. As Mol argues, epistemological normativity dictates the proper way of knowing. In contrast, the normativity associated with ethnographic descriptions adopts a different approach, offering guidance on factors to consider when seeking to understand and appreciate various practices. In the case of sound archives, characterized by the coexistence of multiple practices and decisions related to objects, sounds, and technologies, ethnography is likely the most effective approach to grasp how "reality multiplies" (Mol, 2002, p. 5).

When approaching an archive solely from an epistemological perspective, we underscore our endeavor to comprehend the foundational elements necessary for acquiring knowledge about it. However, this approach also unveils a pivotal aspect: an archive is in a perpetual state of flux, continuously molded by a multitude of concurrent practices. This consciousness leads to the understanding that the true essence of an archive resides in its inherent inconsistency –an "unstable reality" characterized by its ever-changing nature, contingent on algorithms rooted in human practices and decisions. Indeed, sound archive operates based on algorithms that facilitate the preservation and accessibility of evidence and memory (Cook, 2013). Nevertheless, all the evidence and memories it preserves, including self-referential memory, are shaped by individuals, primarily the archivist, through their practices and decisions. Consequently, regardless of the norms intended for standardizing the archive, a sound source does not remain identical in different contexts, similar to the classification of a sound, which varies across different archives. This inherent variability transforms the sound archive into a multiple reality, providing it with significant potential for an ethnographic approach.

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The incitement is thoughtful and logical. If one starts in an epistemological frame of mind, of course the result is that epistemology is the only thing that matters. I do not take exception to the observations about the unreliability of archives for the reconstruction of performances or the effects of multiple epistemologies operating in most archives. Unlike an animal clone reconstructed from a strand of DNA, an entire performance cannot solely be reconstructed from a recording of a song or a dance. Between the choices made by someone at the moment of deciding to record something to its distribution much later by an archive are many preconceptions and epistemological positions that shape many audiovisual archives and the materials stored in them, accessed by others, and disseminated broadly through publications or online resources.

Rather than discuss the whole statement, most of which I agree with, I will focus on the first and last sentences in it. These are: “The sound archive doesn’t preserve the musical past. It cannot be used as a reliable source to reconstruct the musical past of either a group or a person” and “Indeed, the only kind of approach that the archive allows is an epistemological one”.

“The sound archive doesn’t preserve the musical past”.

First the words “the sound archive”. The provocation we were asked to respond to grows out of Miguel Garcia’s work with wax cylinder recordings from 1907-1923 in the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv and later recordings from a collection of Argentine collection of regional music. The cylinder recordings in Berlin certainly demonstrate the impact of multiple managers and multiple institutional frameworks. The regional recordings reveal the biases of the original collector. But there is no singular “sound archives” in 2023. There are many kinds of audiovisual archives, with differing amounts and kinds of epistemological shaping. Some are very different from the Phonogrammarchiv; they are created by Indigenous peoples using their own recording devices, systems for organizing materials, languages, and strategies for the protection of their knowledge. Anne Gilliland, a theorist of archiving, argues that we live in an “archival multiverse” in which archiving and knowledge are de-centered or and multiple (Gilliland, 2017, p. 32). New archives “are increasingly emerging around the globe in physical, digital, and hybrid forms due, in part, to a compelling contemporary mix of political, professional, and technological factors that go far beyond these earlier

forms of community heritage and documentary efforts” (Gilliland, 2017, p. 19). By reducing the vast ferment and variety of audiovisual archives today to “the sound archive” the provocation fails to address archives in their full contemporary variety.

“The sound archive doesn’t preserve the musical past”. Has the purpose of any audiovisual archive been to enable the reproduction of the musical past? I don’t know of any. Most archivists know they only have fragments of performances. Elsewhere I have discussed this fragmentation using the children’s rhyme about an egg-like figure in children’s literature named Humpty Dumpty as a metaphor of how performances are documented by researchers (Seeger, 2022). A popular English-language nursery rhyme goes “Humpty Dumpty [a human looking egg] sat on a wall/Humpty Dumpty had a great fall [and broke into fragments]/All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty together again”. If we consider the unbroken egg as a metaphor of a complete performance on top of the wall and the fragments of it lying on the ground containing documentary fragments of that performance, we will have a situation similar to what happens when researchers study an event. What they collect is only fragmentary. Researchers cause the fragmentation. We have fragmented performance through our limited technologies, disciplinary identities, theoretical perspectives, archival institutions, and shortsighted objectives. The pieces of the egg that survive are the sound recordings, journal entries, photographs, informal anecdotes, and class lectures. These are often stored in different locations. Certain memories of the performance may be held in the minds of those recorded. The rest –things that cannot yet be recorded like aromas, physical sensations, and emotions– metaphorically sink into the ground and disappear. My hope for the future is that multiple fragments of performances can be brought together, linking sound archives with print archives, photo archives, print publications, and new collections created by members of the communities where they were performed. This will provide a better, though still incomplete, understanding of the original performance. Should members of a recorded community seek to revive or create something new using elements of an earlier performance, having more than just sound to work with will be useful. The fragments of performance found in audiovisual archives cannot recreate historical performances, as the incitement states. But even single songs or stories from an archive can be sensorial sparks that ignite inspiration and creativity in those who hear them as well as useful information for historical musicologists. They don’t have to reproduce the musical past; they can learn from its fragments.

“The *only* kind of approach that the archive allows is an epistemological one” (italics mine).

Absolute statements cry out for criticism and it is in its final sentence that I think the incitement oversteps the rest of the paragraph. Epistemologies certainly are part of the shaping of archives and most other human activities and thus worthy of discussion. But archives are more than epistemological. They look different when you are an archive user or director. In those positions there is much more to talk about than epistemology. For all their shortcomings, archives can be sources of joy, inspiration, and creativity. They can also be sources of disappointment, discouragement, and anger. I have served as director of two archives and curator/director of a vast audio collection and record company. These experiences taught me that even fragments of music can change lives. But I wasn't sure of that at first.

When the Dean of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University appointed me director of the ATM in 1982, I decided I should begin by considering whether the archive should continue to exist. Or was it an historical artifact of the development of ethnomusicology that served no contemporary purpose? If I was going to devote myself to improving the ATM, I thought I should consider what social scientists then called the “negative hypothesis”. I decided I needed to disprove the statement that the ATM should be closed and its collections stored offsite. The newly available space would then be devoted to the creation of new music and dance rather than archiving recordings of earlier performances.

Why fetishize the past?

An important part of my rejection of my negative hypothesis, and conversion to being a passionate advocate of audiovisual archives, were the responses of ATM users to what they heard there. The archive had a large collection of recordings of artists from the State of Indiana in the U.S., where the ATM is located. The excitement and joy of a grandchild hearing her grandfather's voice and instrument for the first time was also a joy to watch. The astonishment of a singer-songwriter at hearing some other recordings led to their creative reworkings of old performances onstage and on their recordings. The excitement of students hearing a unfamiliar musical styles was frequent.

The most convincing proof of the importance of the ATM was when we received a form letter sent to many institutions from an Indigenous group in the U.S. They wrote that they wanted to perform a ceremony

last done by their grandparents but had forgotten the lyrics of some of the songs. They knew that some researcher had recorded their grandparents's performance but did not know the person's name or where those recordings might be if they had survived. As it happened, the ATM had the original wax cylinders. We copied them onto a more accessible format –audio cassette– and sent it to the letter-writers. They later thanked us and reported they had done the ceremony. In this case, despite the provocation, the archive did provide a reliable source for the satisfactory reconstruction of a musical past. The recordings from the ATM provided fragments of the melody and lyrics. The group apparently knew the dances, ornamentation, and context of the performance. These were not drawn from imperfect transcriptions of outside researchers, but from the mouths of their grandparents themselves. This experience disproved my negative hypothesis. Audiovisual archives do have important roles to play, even if they are different from the ones for which they were originally founded. They are frequently the sources of the joy of remembering, the inspiration for creativity, and the righting of some part of historical injustices. In this case that was the insistence by the dominant social groups in the U.S. that Indigenous groups abandon their languages and many of their religious activities.

This experience happened in 1983. Since then, the process of what is variously called “repatriation,” “recirculation,” or “bringing it home” has become an important part of ethnomusicological practice and of applied ethnomusicology in particular (Landau and Fargion, 2012; Gunderson, Lancefield, and Woods, 2019; Xiao, Mu, and Yu, 2018). It has also validated the usefulness of even fragments of performances.

So much for the joy. What about disappointment, discouragement, and anger? These emotions arise regardless of the epistemologies of archives. They are frequently expressed when an archive does not have what someone is looking for. They increase if the archive had the recordings but the sound has been lost to decay or accident. It is even more discouraging when the archive has the recordings but cannot allow someone to access or to use them for the purposes they desire. Archives at institutions or organizations concerned about lawsuits are especially constrained by copyright legislation, contracts with both the people recorded and also the depositors, and other ethical issues. The materials held in audiovisual archives generate powerful emotions, both positive and negative.

To summarize: There is not one “sound archive”, but many kinds of sound archives. There are also other kinds of archives and private collections that

hold manuscripts, photographers, memoirs that are related audiovisual collections. Clarifying the epistemological aspects of audiovisual archives is an important thing to do. But it not the only kind of approach to archives. Flawed as they may be from some perspectives, audiovisual archives are also sources of reflection, discovery, joy, awe, and inspiration as well as a variety of negative emotions. A song cannot provide the DNA to recreate a whole performance, but a song or sound can be a spark that ignites profound changes in the understandings, creations, and actions of those who hear them. But they can only do this if the archives have done their job adequately, knowing their limitations but also proud of their potentials.

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Biographies

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