



Interview / Entrevista / Entrevista

## Gisa Jähnichen. “*Each Haircut One Phở*”

by Matthias Lewy (Universidade de Brasília)\*

Prof. Dr. Gisa Jähnichen, born in Halle (Saale), Germany, currently working on musicology, anthropology, and audiovisual archiving, has been researching for over more than 25 years in South East Asia. She obtained her Magister (Bachelor’s & Master’s degrees) in Musicology and Regional Studies on South East Asia from Charles University, Prague (Czech Republic); PhD in Musicology/Ethnomusicology from Humboldt University, Berlin (Germany); University lecturer thesis (Habilitation) in Comparative Musicology from Vienna University (Austria). Extensive field researches led her to Southeast Asia, East Africa, Southwest and Southeast Europe. In co-operation with the Berlin Phonogram-Archiv, she built up the Media Section of the National Library in Laos. She is teaching at various universities in Europe and Asia. Additionally, she is regularly teaching at Humboldt University, the Research Centre for Popular Music and at Vienna University. Being author and editor of many internationally discussed publications, she is an active member of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) and its Study Groups on Maqam, Musical Instruments, Music and Minorities and Performing Arts of South East Asia, the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), and the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research (CHIME).

**Matthias Lewy:** How did you get in touch with Ethnomusicology? What brought you to Astana in 2015.

**Gisa Jähnichen:** I studied musicology in Prague. Before I went to Prague, I was trained in a special school for music education in Wernigerode (Germany). I did my A-level there, and at the same time I was educated as a choirmaster, a pianist, and a singer. At that school in Wernigerode you could choose between a lot of different subjects. However, usually the final goal was to become a music teacher. But I was very much afraid of that career. I did

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not want to become a music teacher, so I did hard work to prevent that career. I wanted to study something else, for example musicology. I could then apply to study abroad, meaning I could not apply to study at a specific university or where I wanted to. I could only apply to study outside Germany, to be correct, not in East-Germany. And then there was a special board choosing universities in the world, well, in the accessible world to us. They put some students here and there if they were good enough. So I was seemingly good enough and I was chosen to study in Prague. I could only say yes or no. I said yes, because I thought everything might be better than studying at home, which was kind of true. At that time, I already knew all the places, actually only two, Halle or Berlin. And I had seen and experienced the outcome as students coming from there had been all my music teachers in the past. I did not want to become one like them.

**ML:** Which time are we talking about?

**GJ:** It was from the late Seventies to the beginning of the Eighties. I went to Halle and there I had one last year to finish my A-level plus studying the Czech language up to a degree that I could speak and write in that language. I went to Prague and started with musicology. After one year of studying musicology I felt somehow slightly bored, because I had already had a special education at the mentioned institution, so most of the things I already knew. And I was not really feeling fulfilled. And of course the first year of practicing another language was nice but also not really demanding. As I would be transformed into another Smetana or Dvořák specialist excavating their letters or speculating about their contribution to the national independence... anyway, I decided that I needed to see more of the world. I thought there was much more music outside than in this part of Europe. And also, I found it a bit arrogant how Europeans in general dealt with music from other places; places, they had not experienced.

At that time I also joined a music club. I liked to do music that was not from Europe though I did not understand much of it. Then, one day, other German students, who studied philosophy at the same university as me, were forced by the German Educational Ministry to take up a second subject because they had not enough credit points. And we were sitting in the evening together chatting about what we could do and I said: "I go for South-East Asia". And they said: "Yes, let's go for South-East Asia". And we made big plans how to go to South-East Asia and to the jungle and beat the last Americans out of Vietnam. Then, the next morning after everyone had thought it over again, they said: "Oh no, in the jungle there are mosquitos and stuff like that, I will better do 'drama studies'". Another one said: "I will study 'the German language', that I know best". (Later, she was not good at it, because studying the German language in a foreign University is not as easy as one may think). But I went on and I stuck to South-East Asia though I was not forced to increase my credit points.

**ML:** When was that?

**GJ:** In 1981. Only one year later I found myself in Hanoi as a student, in the capital of Vietnam. I studied Vietnamese for one year intensively and at the same time I went to the Hanoi Conservatory to study all the traditional instruments and some basic knowledge on Vietnamese music genres. I also collected material for my master thesis. Anyway, I wrote later about that and I finished my studies in Prague. First I finished musicology and a year later South-East Asian studies with the focus on Vietnamese language. After that I went to Berlin to teach there. I became a full-time assistant of Professor Jürgen Elsner who was the director of the institute and at the same time the only professor of ethnomusicology at Humboldt University. Some of my early colleagues also wanted to do a sort of conventional ethnomusicology, but they were not really successful as there were not many possibilities to do field work. I was one of the few who could really do field work as I had the chance to usefully travel somewhere. But it was very hard to live in Vietnam at that time. It was still a time of hunger. We did not have much money; well, there were really difficult living conditions in a normal student college together with all the other students. You cannot imagine how Vietnam looked like after the war. So, there I started and then I came back and after that I did again field work for one more year there. I wrote my dissertation about South Vietnamese composers and what they did to their own tradition. Actually, also in a rather negative sense, honestly, I was a bit happy that I was able to defend that thesis after the wall was gone. Before that, it would have been quite a fight to get through. That thesis contains many critical aspects as it was all about this revolutionary romanticism in music. For example, how composers imitated choir singing and marching bands and all that.

**ML:** Who was that?

**GJ:** Vietnamese composers, such as Luu Huu Phuoc, Phan Huynh Dieu or Xuan Hong, wanted to imitate this socialist, communist type of mass music known from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. That was the topic of my thesis. Because as I grew up with choir singing, I was a specialist in that.

**ML:** When you studied in Wernigerode you became a choir specialist?

**GJ:** Yes. That was even before the Eighties. I finished studying in 1985, 1986.

**ML:** Singing as well?

**GJ:** Singing, too, this was in Wernigerode. Actually this school was made to house the only one professional Youth Choir of East Germany –*Der Rundfunk-Jugendchor Wernigerode*– it was quite a famous choir. We did a lot of recordings, and we traveled a lot. That was also interesting. I had this fortunate voice category Alto two; this means I could sing Tenor, Alto as well as Soprano (Soprano would have been quite limited). Therefore, I could practically explore the entire score, and I liked it. We had a lot of interesting repertoire and we had to sing by sight reading. So, everything you have heard in East Germany, which was sung by a mixed youth choir was from our school –all these exciting broadcasting items. And we had these funny Christmas TV-recordings for which we were dressed up nicely in the middle of July. We were these nice angels you could look at on the year end TV screen.

**ML:** I will search for them...

**GJ:** You have to search for that...

**ML:** I am going to Schönebeck after the congress...

**GJ:** Oh, that is not so far, we had some concerts in Schönebeck as well.

**ML:** Let's go back to Prague, which University did you study at, what was the name?

**GJ:** Univerzita Karlova, Charles-University. This university was quite famous for aesthetics and philosophy. Actually, that was what I enjoyed most; I had a big interest in aesthetic studies and philosophy. Those became then my strong sides. I would not like to have missed that. Now, I feel that the knowledge I could gain there helps me the most in anthropology and sociology and related areas. Before those times, I had a very basic knowledge of how human society works. And it is definitely not to understand by just reading something "modern" in that field. Of course, my professor was very good.

**ML:** So you had philosophy in Czech language?

**GJ.** Yes, I learnt Czech and in Czech language I learnt Vietnamese. And for the other classes, I needed the Czech language. Well, I had to write two master theses, one in musicology and one in South-East Asian studies. So later on I wrote a PhD thesis and a habilitation, so I did everything twice and I also have two children; and all of that during my PhD time. After 1990, I tried to get another job and I was employed by a new institution called the German East Asian Institute. Well, it was a very funny institution as it was invented by diplomats who returned from the countries where they served the former East German government. They thought that they wanted to do business out of their special knowledge.

**ML.** Was it working?

**GJ.** No, it was not. It existed only for two or three years.

**ML.** Where was that?

**GJ.** In Berlin.

**ML.** So it was a job after your assistant job at Humboldt University?

**GJ.** Yes, it was actually quite close to that and I was not a day unemployed that time. I was working there for a year or so, and then I received a fellowship from DAAD for my lecturer thesis project (habilitation) that I did in the following three years. Then I started to work on projects in Vietnam, and I went to Laos establishing an audiovisual archive. This project was initiated by a professor of the University of Applied Sciences in Emden who found it entertaining but could not do the work herself. I spent a long time there. After that I came back, starting to work as professor (in positions of professors that were not yet nominated) in different universities. I also taught at Free University, just for fun. It was not for the good pay.

**ML.** I remember you as my teacher, so it was not for money?

**GJ.** Yeah, it just covered the ticket to the university. Well, I was working in a museum.

**ML:** At the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin? At the Phonogram-Archive?

**GJ:** Yes, at the Berlin Ethnographic Museum at the Phonogram-Archive. A colleague died in a car accident and she left her Namibia collection. It was not my special field but I was a good friend of hers as well as of her family's and I knew all the circumstances how this collection came into being. So, I was the one who archived this collection and did the descriptions. It was also a project supported by the German Embassy in Namibia and some other organizations, so I came into the archive business, which helped me a lot. Without that I wouldn't be what I am. So yes, I attended this "practical school" and could start an audiovisual archive in Laos later at the National Library. That was not at a University.

**ML:** You worked in an archive at the National Library in Laos?

**GJ:** I started actually an audiovisual archive; I went with the staff to all provinces and remote areas and we collected data and then, as samples, I described them and I did some small research about the outcomes. I was introducing more or less music research to that country, conducted by themselves, by Lao people. For that I had to learn Lao language, which is completely different from Vietnamese.

**ML:** So finally, how many languages did you learn? You should speak Malaysian as well...

**GJ:** In Malaysia you have to learn a few languages... as they are "multicultural". Honestly, if I learn one language I am forgetting parts of the other one. So, you cannot exactly say how many languages I speak or something like that. Languages come just along that way. Well, I also speak Russian.

**ML:** So you have no communication problems here in Astana. Well, I have two main topics I want to ask you. One deals with scholars. So do you have a favorite scholar and school in Ethnomusicology? You just told me about your time with Elsner and ethnomusicology in East Germany. Well, I am afraid to ask as I know from myself how annoying the question is –"What was better? The time before the wall came down or after?" I am just asking, as I was surprised that Tiago de Oliveira Pinto was very impressed by the Humboldt University in Eastern times. Not only because of Christian Kaden and Jürgen Elsner, even Margaret Kartomi from Australia was there.

**GJ.** Yes, with the same professor as me.

**ML.** So what was ethnomusicology or comparative musicology in the GDR (German Democratic Republic)?

**GJ.** Just a name or something they did not really know what it was. Or let's say, something that others wouldn't do. It was also something revolutionary, because it was cleaning up the imagination of what musicology has to be. And there was always a fight between West and East. And they wanted to be better. And the other side was strongly criticized. Of course, Elsner was quite open. He had his favorites. He knew who was good in which area and who was good for a well done analysis and so on. He had a lot of colleagues in Russia. He could be compared with his western colleagues. He was writing, he edited books and articles, he did reviews. Elsner was able to compare both sides (Eastern and Western), and he criticized both sides, the one was too superficial because of the difficult conditions, the other was too much into structuralism, or unhistorical phenomenology.

**ML.** In the Eastern part?

**GJ.** No, in the Western. Elsner said (and still says) that many did not see the big picture, and they forgot about the people. That was his complaint. And on the Russian side, they drew too nice a picture, simplifying and generalizing. And also the references were not well done. I learnt a lot from Elsner's critical views; he introduced me to that kind of editing business. I learnt to distinguish which article is good and which one is bad. What should be in, what not; what should be done one day. Well, he could not do all the work by himself, so I had to help (laughs). In that way, I got in touch with the people who were in the large circle. I knew all his friends and enemies. I was introduced like a "daughter". When I meet his Russian colleagues today, such as Alexander Djumaev, they know me as the academic daughter of Elsner. And they treat me like that, so they have no problem talking to me very openly. That is a good position for me as an editor. They do not hide things or they have no concerns how they look, either stupid or not. Anyway, they do not care. They just tell me what they think. So it is good for me, and, on the other side, sometimes it is hard to gain respect. So I had this burden to have a big personality behind my back –in this area, it is about Maqam, the Arabic world and all that. That was not so much my area as I was specialized in another field. But of course with Elsner you were automatically in it.

**ML:** What did you edit those times?

**GJ:** Well, there were conferences or meetings and the papers were collected and edited, then reviewed and criticized, later on sent back and all had to be copied. Editing means you have to rewrite the text into English, or to do a translation into German from Russian. Then you have to set it into a framework, check the references (if they really exist or not), footnotes, well, you know...

**ML:** Was that a special journal?

**GJ:** Well, it all was published by the Humboldt University.

**ML:** What was the name of the series?

**GJ:** One is "Studies in Ethnomusicology", it has only four or five numbers because Elsner and me went off and all finished by 1990. But it was all handmade. It was hard business as we even signed the pages by hand. It was copied with an old Xerox copy machine. Another was the proceedings of the ICTM Study Group on Maqam. Well, in Berlin I learnt the basic skills like archiving, museum issues, editing and field work, and all these challenges made me up. I had only a temporary contract with Humboldt University and it was clear from the beginning that I was not taken over after that.

**ML:** Even in Eastern times?

**GJ:** Yes, even in Eastern times, never ever did I have a permanent contract. The only one I have in my life is with my husband (laughs). Everything in my life was with temporary contracts, also when I went to Malaysia.

**ML:** When was that, we talked about Laos.

**GJ:** Laos, well, then I went to Paderborn (Germany), Frankfurt (Germany), so I was traveling around, sometime I felt like in a circus waking up in the morning and did not know where I was. I had two half professorships, 50% in Paderborn and 50% in Frankfurt. And after that I went to Malaysia. There I had a contract for three years, which was extended for



two years and now I have something running in China.

**ML:** Who influenced you in mentoring?

**GJ:** When I did my lecturer thesis (habilitation), I was working with Josef Kuckertz in his last days. Many people criticized him but I have to say, as a teacher he was not bad. Or better to say he was a good coach. He instantly read what you sent him. He called you on the phone when he was ready with reading, so you had to come and he was sitting with you running through everything personally. He took his time and did everything very carefully, which I did not want to miss.

**ML:** He controlled musical transcriptions, I remember.

**GJ:** Indeed, but who is doing that today? If he considered your work as ok, you could be sure that it was ok.

**ML:** So you did your habilitation with Kuckertz?

**GJ:** Well, he sadly passed away one week before I finished so I went to Vienna to work with Franz Födermayr and I finished with him. He was obviously happy that he had not much work with me. I am also working in Vienna, which is my only safe foot I have in Europe having also students there, so I am allowed to examine any postgraduate student. In Malaysia it is a little bit different; you must have students so you are allowed to review others. If you did not graduate any postgraduate then you are not allowed to review another student. But I was the only one who could do that, when they started. Therefore, they needed me urgently, because I did it in other parts of the world. I had 17 students in that short time, all Masters and PhD candidates.

**ML:** So you controlled everyone?

**GJ:** (Laughs) Yes, in the way Kuckertz did, I was always quite quick. They never had to push me to read it and to have time for them. Now, when having short contracts I cannot have students. I cannot encourage anyone. It would be troublesome for the students to find me. Or they would be happy about the support and then three months later I would have to

say: "sorry". I do not want that. Just coming back to East Germany, there were only a few really good scientists in the field. There were the Stockmanns, the couple, Doris and Erich Stockmann. Christian Kaden always said he was an ethnomusicologist, but I did not consider him as an ethnomusicologist. It was not what I think ethnomusicology does, he was very into structuralism and generalism. Later on, he wrote things, which were more in the field of ethnomusicology but he did not declare it as ethnomusicology when he worked about sociological aspects. He did not say it was ethnomusicological, because he had in mind that you have to do field work or, at least, to stay with a "folk" to become a "folklorist". But I think that this is nonsense. Elsner also had his problems with authenticity. He was always complaining about what happened to this and that music. He was against modernization and commodification and all that. But on the other side, he was keen to build up the Popular Music Research Center at Humboldt University. It was at that time when Elsner was the director, he was able to found such a Research Center and Peter Wicke was the first professor in it. And he is the one who always supported me at Humboldt –Wicke. I have some student cooperation going on with him. And I teach when I am there.

**ML:** So you are not teaching only Ethnomusicology?

**GJ:** I do popular music too; it is also field I work in. I did my lecturer thesis on strictly ethnomusicological aspects. But I have published more than a hundred articles, nine books and 16 editions. So there is a bit left for other things. Also, I do not want to be put in a box as a pure ethnomusicologist... and in the meantime, I started to have a problem with the word "ethno".

**ML:** Why?

**GJ:** I do not think that it is one main criterion to put people into a category. It is just one of many, like one cultural feature you have. The people's identity is constructed by many other features. Everyone is unique having a little bit more of this feature and a bit less of that. "Ethnic" does not say anything. If you have a look at urban musicology, there it makes no sense. It is an emblematic outside, but it is not what people really think when musically behaving. After we get rid of all this "folk" in ICTM, then, in the future, "ethno" will also disappear because there is only one musicology. And all music has the right to be. Of course, historical musicologists think differently about it, but who cares? (Laughs). Well, in Asia I see, it is reflected that classical, historical and traditional musicology is still the high class musicology. But Asian colleagues are different in a way that they think that music research should also consist in "folklore"; means they do not know that it is not necessary to

make a distinction. I realize that when students tell me that they want to study the "folk music" of this and that people, I reply that if you have a folk song, you must have songs which are not folk songs, so which are... what? Then they cannot find anyone and so far every tradition becomes "folk". If you cannot tell me, what a "folk song" is, you should not study folk songs. Then they are also "songs" and the same will happen again. But back to the term "ethno", what is "ethnic"? What is ethnic music? I mean music is ethnic at any time everywhere.

**ML:** Well, as far as I remember I can state Kuckertz here, when saying the term "ethno" was used by the Greeks to denominate the Barbarian people –the one who cannot speak, only "Blabla", the reduplication "Barbar" comes from it, so it is finally a racist term in its historical connotation. That's why we should use the term Comparative Musicology, among other reasons.

**GJ:** Comparative musicology also has two sides. One is that bad side with the historical nonsense they produced but on the other side the term makes a lot of sense. For instance you have comparative linguistics as well. Why should not we have it for music or dance or drama? It makes real sense to me.

**ML:** What was the name in East Germany? Elsner designated it as Ethnomusicology you said?

**GJ:** First *Musikethnologie* and later on it was *Ethnomusikologie*. I do not know why they changed the name as they did not change the contents. I think it was only to be with the fashion.

**ML:** Which other persons influenced you?

**GJ:** Stockmann was important for me. Once he was a reviewer of my thesis and also he tried to support me, what he did not do with everyone. He had his clashes and some arguments with other colleagues, but I was not involved in such things. I had his full support. Whenever I met him, he was nice to me and yes he was very generous with his knowledge and also giving me books I was not able to receive, because I could not go to Western libraries.

**ML:** Was that a problem to (conceive) obtain literature for your thesis at that time?

**GJ:** Well, in my field it was not such a problem, the few books of Tran Van Khe, fortunately, I could get all in Vietnamese language and I could read them. Also, I was the first from outside in that field.

**ML:** Was there an institution like the DFG (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*) to look for funds?

**GJ:** For the habilitation I had a scholarship. Before that, I had a full time job at Humboldt University.

**ML:** And the DAAD scholarship you had for your habilitation, so you went to Vietnam after the wall came down.

**GJ:** Also before.

**ML:** Ah right, in 1981..?

**GJ:** 1981 was Prague.

**ML:** ...and then Humboldt University.

**GJ:** Well, in 1985 I started full time at Humboldt University and I finished in 1991. In that time I went for one year to Vietnam, which was paid by Humboldt University.

**ML:** Ah, ok, the Humboldt University had a budget that time.

**GJ:** Yes, actually the embassy had to give me a fellowship and it was quite little money, because they thought of prices from before the war. It was a big fight and German fellows had to wait until a big "animal" (official) from the political cast came over to correct the prices.

**ML:** And what did you do in the meantime?

**GJ:** There was another student of linguistics with me. And we did some funny things like cutting hair.

**ML:** Cutting hair, your hair?

**GJ:** No, other people's hair. Each cut one 'phở' (noodle soup).

**ML:** (Laughs).

**GJ:** You should not laugh; that was my income.

**ML:** Ok, ok, I am not laughing.

**GJ:** You are still laughing. I can do haircuts. I cut the hair of all my family members. And it was hard to get into the haircut business. You needed a tree, a mirror, a pair of scissors and a seat.

**ML:** A tree? Outside haircuts?

**GJ:** Yes, a tree. You put the mirror on the tree. And there were other hairdressers. I was a little bit begging that customers come to me to see how I was doing that. But people were also afraid that I could not do it as a white strange girl. I remember that there were these two Japanese students who offered to be the first victims. So I did it very nicely and then I had a good income. I had to make appointments as I was an attraction –a white hairdresser! (Laughs). And I am still famous there for that.

**ML:** Ok, but you had time for field research as well?

**GJ:** Of course, I asked everything during the haircut. I did a lot of interviews. And it was

very good to get in contact with the people. You are never afraid of a hairdresser. You can tell him your whole life story, even the bad things.

**ML:** This is a very intelligent method.

**GJ:** Well, you keep yourself low then people are more open to you.

**ML:** That was your first time in the field, right?

**GJ:** That was a first time I learnt to cut hair. And a second time, I made use of that ability.

**ML:** So, next to cutting hair you started your first ethnomusicological research. What equipment did you use that time?

**GJ:** It was a *Mira*, a cassette recorder. Before that I did not have anything, just paper and pencil. But I worked also in a broadcasting station. I had a friend, a female friend, who was a sound engineer in Hanoi and she took me into the studio and then we copied on reel tape. And I was researching about composers so I took notes. I had the copies on reel tape, and finally a lot of interviews with the composers.

**ML:** And you used the recorder?

**GJ:** No, I took notes by hand.

**ML:** Live transcription?

**GJ:** Yes. I know you cannot do that, but I can.

**ML:** You are right. I cannot do that.

**GJ.** (Laughs)... you need a camera.

**ML.** Yes I need a camera, even for recording an interview text.

**GJ.** I did once some very nice graphics and I had to draw all the musical instruments I have seen, and someone asked me which software I was using and I said: "paper and pencil". The answer was: "Oh, where did you get that?" I just answered: "in any stationery store". Everyone laughed. Drawing is important to me. When I see things and I have to draw them I get an imagination about size and functional relationships and so on. I have a very good optical memory and I will recognize things after I have drawn them. When I have only seen the things, it can be difficult. Once you have drawn a thing, you will remember very clearly.

**ML.** Well, I was traumatized by my educators in kindergarten.

**GJ.** (Laughs) Well, I always teach to my students that they should draw things by hand, that makes the brain work better... of course not everyone can do that. (Pause). Doris Stockmann was very interested in seeing me as well, because she was into that sociological field and she had a lot of very interesting questions. Besides, I was very well prepared due to my studies in Prague. I knew all these anthropological questions from Gadamer to Geertz.

**ML.** All this literature was available at the Prague Library?

**GJ.** Yes, sure, they had all this. It was a very stimulating time. Sometimes we had seminars on the Vltava River. So we took a boat or two boats and some bottles of *Staropramen* (beer) and we had a discussion about aesthetics. A wonderful time I do not want to miss it.

**ML.** That sounds great. And cigarettes?

**GJ.** No, I was a non-smoker. I started smoking in Vietnam later, because of my other class mates. I always stayed with them not to be bitten by mosquitoes, so they offered a cigarette and I started smoking and it was so difficult to get away from it. But now I am a

non-smoker again. Do you still smoke?

**ML:** Mmm, well, sometimes.

**GJ:** Oh no, I am not. I am very afraid of smoking now.

**ML:** Anyone else you would like to mention as your favorite scholar in Ethnomusicology?

**GJ:** Margaret Kartomi is a favorite scholar actually. She is like a sister to me.

**ML:** Did she teach in Berlin those times?

**GJ:** No, she did not teach in Berlin. But we have a very good friendship. And I was nearly the last at Humboldt University before she left, so we have a distance of a generation. We are still in contact.

**ML:** Sorry for intervening, but in Eastern times you had restrictions or advice how to behave in science?

**GJ:** No, there was nobody telling you what to read or not to read. Actually, they were very happy having literature, which is under discussion "worldwide", so the discussion was the aim. Ok, sometimes I had the feeling that they wanted to push you in a special direction or let's say another direction as you were thinking of going, so they told you that you were on the "wrong track". But if you did it in a clever way, they let you go.

**ML:** So even if you wanted to work with Geertz' symbolic anthropology, it was ok?

**GJ:** Yes, that was not a problem. Nowadays I have the problem when planning an ethnomusicological foundation in an area, which means I have to collect music, I have to know what that music is about, how the music is constructed and what the structures are like, then you hear that you are old fashioned: Transcriptions? Who is doing that and what for? You should work about whatever, symbolic interactions or other fashion stuff. But that



is not yet the time, because first you have to find the material and you have to prepare the field to do such research by analyzing what can be found there. And this foundation thing you can't do anymore. It is impossible; you can do it as an archivist which is also not very welcome. It is too much work for most of the people and the basic research is completely out of focus and I miss it.

**ML:** You mean doing transcriptions and finding structures?

**GJ:** No, not only that. I mean also explaining what these whole music cultures are about, how they are related to each other, how the songs are related to whatever, what they interpret and generate. Now, the fashion is to look into that non-musical field around the real thing, the music. Finally, many do musicology without music, sometimes. That I do not welcome, honestly. I try to educate the students by telling them where they are coming from. They come from the field of music and they should stick to music. Sometimes, I even do music with them. I compose music. We play, we sing together. For me, all answers are in the music, you only have to be clever enough to find it. Not a few of us want to add another field, but they are no sociologists, they do not know all the background, they have not studied that. And they are not anthropologists or biologists. But everything needs to be put there, just to be "modern". But I think that it is not necessary. We can draw a line there, but we should not bite into these other fields. We should stay with the music and what we can find there. Actually, if you can read it, if you are able to decipher it, then you will find all answers. And it is not so difficult. The more often you do it, the easier it becomes. Therefore, I also do not encourage people to stay with one subject only, as if you are a "nerd" only specialized in one thing. Well, but it is very fashion nowadays. You do your thesis and you stay the whole life with that subject. And finally, everything is reduced to that very special field.

**ML:** Like the "typical anthropologist" does, these are "my people", my "area" –do not touch!

**GJ:** Well, I think you should study a large field and be able to compare and connect.

**ML:** So do you think there is a very special methodology or theory of musicology, not adapted from any other area?

**GJ:** No, I just said that you can draw lines. You can do it, but please do not take music as

an alibi. I have a colleague who is doing consumer studies. She puts music as a subject to be sold or to support marketing campaigns. It is not musicology in my opinion. You can do the same thing with colors, or I do not know what, temperature or taste, whatever you can fit in. But that is not what I mean, for me that is just fun lacking an essential musicological theme.

**ML:** What is your opinion then?

**GJ:** I do "study in music", and you need to care about the music you study. You should know what that means. I do not only want to hear information like: "it starts with an introduction and there is a stanza and finally, a coda". That is not enough to me.

**ML:** This is a lot today when talking about analysis... (Smiles).

**GJ:** Mhm. I would like to know what is introduced, how they introduce and how they remember the piece, well, and all these things. I do not want a pure musical transcription. You can transform it into a spectrum image, why not, if you can read and explain it. Today, we have the opportunity to make things easier, and I want students to be able to distinguish between well received examples and the bad ones. I want them to know that. But most of the students and even researchers do not do it. They put it on a CD and they say some words as it appears to them, but for me, that is not musicology. It is just something else. So for my students it is compulsory to show analytical skills.

**ML:** What is it, a musical transcription?

**GJ:** Well, they should be able to draft a scheme, and that can be any scheme. It can be a transcription, a flow, or a spectrogram; whatever shows the essential characteristics of that music. So you should have the capability of notating something or use a pulse meter analysis, or Chinese cipher notations; you should only have an understanding of that. You should be able to depict what you are talking about. Also you should not abuse all the Western terminology for description, something like "it is a little bit lower than a third", or such things.

**ML:** You mean that you should be able to perceive structure transmitted into a kind of cultural perspective?

**G.J.:** You should find a terminology that fits the culture you are talking about. And even musical transcriptions are not that easy. Sometimes pitch is not important but movement, so you should find a way to present that cultural topic and how it may change over time.

**ML.:** Could you tell me more about your time in Malaysia and your experience, maybe in comparison with the other places you worked in the world?

**G.J.:** Malaysia I liked a lot because I wanted to work a long time in one place, not just one year. I really wanted to be a mentor for students, going more into details. I also had plenty of time for writing. It was quite an intensive time as well, as my family was not there. So, I travelled a lot and they came to visit me. I also felt a kind of freedom that I could decide about my time. I was not committed to any housework or educational goals as driving to sports clubs or somewhere else, washing clothes, shopping. I can satisfy my basic needs very easily, it do not need much time. I spent that time to write. Well, writing was the work that should be done; I do not want to glorify it too much. I also learnt that you cannot teach colleagues, you can only teach students. Well, I did not really want to teach them, I only tried to show them what else they could do. And the more I was active with writing, editing a book series from different papers as well as inviting speakers and organizing conferences and so on, my colleagues felt pushed, I think because they did not want to do all that exhausting stuff. In the end I felt a bit like an academic *Gastarbeiter*.

**ML.:** What is that edition or series you organized in Malaysia?

**G.J.:** It was the UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia) Book series on music research; it has seven numbers, which were published yearly. The other one is a continuation of *Studia Instrumentorum Musicae Popularis*, which means the "study of folk musical instruments", which is published once in two years. And the publications of the Maqam ICTM study group. I still do it with Elsner who looks mainly through the contents, and, if everything is fine, all the additional work is left to the "daughter".

**ML.:** Ah, but there is a continuity from Eastern times to now then?

**G.J.:** Yes, sure, it is still going on. I am just now working on an edition of the Maqam study group symposium last year in Ankara and, well, at the same time I am working on the mentioned ICTM study group publication "Studia Instrumentorum Musicae Popularis",

Number IV. I also want to write a few other things for other editions, not mine. That is actually more relaxing to me, writing for other people. That kind of feeling to be relaxed about writing I think no other people can perceive like me. Because when you edit a lot you feel so free when you "only" have to write. You do not have to push anyone to change something in the text and so on; you can just concentrate in what you want to write.

**ML.** Well, I prefer writing as well, but I still have not edited so much.

**GJ.** Yes, editing is a hard job. You have to jump into the other person, understanding how they feel, what they would like to say.

**ML.** So finally, you are a researcher, you work about archives, you are a professor at universities, and you are an editor. We have not spoken so much about your archive work.

**GJ.** I still do that. I go once every year back to Laos recording at new places as well as to places for a second or third time re-collecting data.

**ML.** Re-collecting, how does that work?

**GJ.** You have to do that in a certain frequency. I record continuously on the same places and sometimes even the same people. So we have a lot of material that is not only relevant to a place but to history. And I want people to come there and do that, students who want to write a thesis, who want to be challenged. Well, I can help to produce material but life is too short for everything, and this is a huge project. From time to time I go to the Berlin-Phonogram Archive leaving a full set of the recent copies of the Lao Material. I look back on a quite long lasting cooperation.

**ML.** You have a fund for that?

**GJ.** No, but I think it is necessary for people to have access to that material in Berlin as well and that in Berlin there is a backup just in case something happens. I am in IASA (International Association for Sound and Archives) in the training and education committee. We are also taking care of small archives all over the world at universities and in communities. We have a conference every year and I am the secretary of that T&E

Committee. I also cooperate with the South-East Asian and Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association who are taking care of the archive in Laos as well. They are really nice people, not so much competitive as academicians and more practical. I enjoy a lot to be a member of that association.

**ML:** Do you think that our branch has been getting more competitive over the last years?

**GJ:** Well, if you see all the youngsters even here at the World Conference in Astana, I realize that they have a strong motivation to show up, and some of the papers sound like that.

**ML:** You mean that something has changed over the years?

**GJ:** Yes, it has become more competitive. For me there are three or four kinds of participants. There are people who want to spread knowledge; they are the best. Then there are the ones telling you "I am still alive and I still know something", and finally there is the group of presenters saying "I know something very special that you do not know" (laughs).

**ML:** Well, that is me (laughs).

**GJ:** (Laughs) And then there are the youngsters who want to show how different they are. They come to conquer the world. Ok, they are a bit overconfident. However, that can be good. But mostly they are disappointed if they don't have an expected outcome. These world conferences are not for finding a job or a career or something like that. Sure, you can meet a lot of people and network. But for me, the center of attention should be questions like: "What is that knowledge we gain and how does it work for humankind? What is the essential outcome of our work?" That is, for me, the main topic. If there is nothing more to say than we just know, then we do not need to come here. This year, for example, there was much more on sound studies in which I am interested because I recently worked on integrating music as a specific sound into a specific environment. It needs to be mentioned that there are really interesting developments in that field. And that is what I like here. You find people who are as weird as you are...

**ML.** When did you attend your first ICTM conference?

**G.J.** Berlin 1987, one month before I delivered my son. And I gave a speech. And at the same time I was an interpreter for a Vietnamese colleague during the entire conference, which was hard work, I remember –but I loved it as much as I always do.

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### **Biography / Biografía / Biografia**

Matthias Lewy grew up in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) where he collected his first experiences of musical and political practices. From the middle of the 1990's he studied comparative musicology and cultural anthropology at Free University Berlin (Germany) where he also obtained his PhD. At the moment he is a research fellow in ethnomusicology at the University of Brasília (UnB), Brasil. His research focus is on Amazonian and Mesoamerican sound ontologies, ritual theory, music and language, music and politics, world music, sound in museum practice as well as in re-interpretation and re-contextualisation of historical ethnomusicological sources and archives in the field.

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