

Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum
Monday 23rd May 2022

SCHEDULE AND ABSTRACTS

Part 1: 11am-2.30pm. Online: <https://www.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/2022/may/middle-east-and-central-asia-music-forum>

Part 2: 3.30-8.30pm. Music Department, City, University of London, College Building, St John Street, London EC1V 4BP

PART 1

Chair: Vanessa Paloma Elbaz (University of Cambridge)

11am-11.40am Abigail Wood (University of Haifa): “‘Ordinary’ musicians? Discourses of Prestige and Musicianship among Palestinian Arab Wedding Musicians in the Galilee Region’

11.45am-12.30pm Cayenna Ponchione-Bailey (University of Sheffield) and Mohsen Saifi (Kabul University): ‘The Orchestras of Afghanistan’

BREAK

Chair: Rachel Harris (SOAS)

1pm-2.30pm Lauren Braithwaite (University of Oxford): ‘Musical Diplomacy in Kabul’s “Green Zone”’

1.45pm-2.30pm Payam Yousefi (Harvard University): ‘Awakened Hearts in Europe: Principles of *Remembrance* and *Listening* in the Contemporary Sufi Music of the MTO *Shahmaghsoudi Zende*h Delan Ensemble’

PART 2 (in person at City, University of London)

3.30 to 6pm, Room AG09 (ground floor, College Building). No sign up needed.

Film Screening, followed by Q&A with filmmaker Richard K. Wolf (Harvard University): *Two Poets and a River*. <https://filmfreeway.com/TwoPoetsandaRiver>

7-8.30pm, Performance Space (lower ground floor, College Building). Concert performance by the London Silk Road Collective <https://www.apostrophe.audio/the-soas-silk-road-collective>
Free entry but sign up required: <https://www.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/2022/may/silk-road-collective>

The Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum has been running since 2007 and is open to researchers, students and anyone interested in the music and culture of the region. In the spirit of fostering dialogue and interdisciplinarity, we hope that the issues discussed at the forum will be of interest to a broad audience, including musicologists, ethnomusicologists and other researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences. In addition, we welcome those working on other aspects of Middle Eastern and Central Asian culture broadly speaking (dance, visual arts, media, film, literature, etc.). The Forum convenors are Professor Laudan Nooshin (City, University of London) and Professor Rachel Harris (SOAS).

ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

1. Abigail Wood (University of Haifa)

'Ordinary' musicians? Discourses of Prestige and Musicianship among Palestinian Arab Wedding Musicians in the Galilee Region

Appearing before hundreds of guests every night during the summer wedding season, Palestinian Arab wedding musicians in northern Israel perform music associated with stars considered central to Arab music aesthetics, command substantial incomes, and draw significant crowds at local events. Yet, musicians consistently express ambivalence about the wedding scene and the musicianship it demands. Drawing upon interviews conducted during 2016-2021 with forty past and present musicians and on work by Booth, MacLeod and others, this paper will consider how this ambivalence is discursively constructed in contrast with other more prestigious models of musicianship, how it is refracted in the particular skills needed for wedding performance and qualities of musicianship invoked in the moment of performance, and how individual musicians accept or seek to transcend 'ordinariness' within their individual career trajectories, while negotiating the socio-spatial limitations imposed by their status as Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel.

Abigail Wood is senior lecturer in ethnomusicology at the Department of Music, School of Arts, University of Haifa and is a former editor of *Ethnomusicology Forum*.

2. Cayenna Ponchione-Bailey (University of Sheffield) and Mohsen Saifi (Kabul University)

The Orchestras of Afghanistan

Since the mid-twentieth century, the orchestras of Afghanistan have taken numerous forms and contributed significantly to the diverse landscape of musical activity within the country. Some ensembles were formed entirely of traditional Afghan instruments while others included a mixture of Afghan and Western classical instruments, with the term 'arkestar' employed to describe relatively small musical groups of less than 10 musicians up to much larger ensembles of 30+. One significant factor in the mid-twentieth century which supported the proliferation of these large ensembles, was the establishment of radio and television services within the country which created a demand for such groups. Largely disrupted by the Soviet invasion of 1979 and completely silenced by the Taliban in the late 1990s, after the American invasion of 2001 the past two decades have seen a resurgence in the development of these large ensembles in part due to the influx of visitors and musicians, greater access to musical influences through the internet, and the development of music schools and institutions such as the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, Kabul University Music Department and the Aga Khan Music Initiative. Currently, musical activity in Afghanistan is silenced again under the present Taliban authority. Although aspects of the history and recent activities of orchestral music-making in Afghanistan have been written about by scholars such as John Baily, Ahmad Sarmast, Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, Islamuddin Feroz, Abdul Wahab Madadi and Gillian Howell, there remains a dearth of research about orchestral practices specifically emerging both from within Afghanistan and from the international musicological community. This spring, a diverse group of music scholars and practitioners from Afghanistan, including former Kabul Music Department Lecturer Mohsen Saifi, has joined Dr Cayenna Ponchione-Bailey to collaboratively research and document the historical and contemporary orchestral practices of Afghanistan. In this talk, Mohsen Saifi and Cayenna Ponchione-Bailey will discuss the work of the research group to-date as well share insights into a commissioning project that brings new Afghan orchestral music to the stage in London this July.

Mohsen Saifi. Originally from Kabul, Afghanistan, Mohsen Saifi is an academic, guitarist, conductor and composer now based in Germany. As a Lecturer at the Kabul University Music Department since 2012 until the abrupt closure of the department by the Taliban in August 2021, he served as the department's programme manager and conductor of the orchestra. In this capacity, he conducted ensembles including his own compositions and arrangements for the official programs of the erstwhile government of Afghanistan and the US Embassy. Mr Saifi's research is dedicated to the development of composition in Afghanistan and the preservation and circulation of the music of Afghanistan throughout the globe. He is currently a member of the Orchestras of Afghanistan Research Stakeholders' Group and has been commissioned by the Spitalfields Music Festival to orchestrate a traditional Afghan song to be performed in July by a chamber orchestra of master Afghan musicians and members of the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra.

Cayenna Ponchione-Bailey is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield, Director of Performance at St Catherine's College (University of Oxford) and a Conducting Fellow of the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra. Dr Ponchione-Bailey's research is focused on the social-psychological and socio-political aspects of orchestral music-making with a current focus on the orchestras of Afghanistan. Publications include 'The Body Orchestral' (2018), a book chapter exploring the cognitive mechanisms underpinning co-performer communication and 'Technologies for investigating large ensemble performance' in *Together in Music* (2021). Dr Ponchione-Bailey holds masters' degrees in orchestral conducting, percussion performance, and musicology, and a doctorate in music from the University of Oxford.

3. Lauren Braithwaite (University of Oxford)

Musical Diplomacy in Kabul's 'Green Zone'

During the past two decades, institutional music education in Afghanistan was used extensively by both Afghans and the international community as a vehicle or site for cultural diplomacy. Founded on the contested notion of the universality of music as a language which can transcend cultural, linguistic, ethnic, political, religious, and even physical borders, musical diplomacy played a central role in the national and international activities of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM), a co-educational specialist music school which operated in Kabul until August 2021. Focussing on a series of collaborative music workshops and concerts involving United States Army Bands and students from ANIM, this paper critically examines the ways in which foreign governments engaged with institutional music education in Afghanistan for wider diplomatic purposes. These events took place deep within Kabul's former 'Green Zone', a hyper-militarized walled-off enclave home to a high concentration of foreign embassies and newsrooms, with audiences made up mostly of US Embassy staff and Afghan Government officials. Drawing on Born's (2012) theory of social mediation, this paper explores the ways in which various stakeholders viewed and experienced the musical collaborations and how their perceptions were mediated by wider institutional and geopolitical processes. I demonstrate that while the collaborations afforded musical exchanges between US and Afghan musicians and valuable educational experiences for the students, the events were also framed by the US State Department as political performances which could be used as optics to promote positive US-Afghan relations. When cultural diplomacy practices are analysed and understood critically within their socio-political contexts, certain unequal power relations are brought into sharp relief. In the context of post-2001 reconstruction Afghanistan, the interplay between educational programs and broader political agendas underscores the importance of reflecting upon ethical pedagogical practices, especially when there are political and military implications.

Lauren Braithwaite is a DPhil candidate at the University of Oxford, UK, where she is researching the place and use of institutional music education during Afghanistan’s peacebuilding era, funded by the Oxford Carolyn and Franco Gianturco Graduate Scholarship. As a researcher and educator, she has worked on several music education projects across the globe and is currently involved in the TORCH-funded project ‘Diversity and the British String Quartet’. Lauren previously spent three years as Head of Woodwind at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music and in 2017 became Artistic Director and co-conductor of Afghanistan’s first all-female orchestra, ‘Zohra’. Lauren’s orchestral arrangements of Afghan folk and popular songs have been performed by the South Asian Symphony Orchestra (India) and the Norrköpings Symfoniorkester (Sweden). Lauren holds degrees from the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge.

4. Payam Yousefi (Harvard University)

Awakened Hearts in Europe: Principles of *Remembrance* and *Listening* in the Contemporary Sufi Music of the MTO *Shahmaghsoudi Zendeh Delan Ensemble*

The soft Sufi chant of ‘*hey bele hey boo*’ calls to the beloved and washes over an eclectic musical texture including the traditional melodies of the *tar*, the classical sonorities of the cello, and the harmonic clusters of the guitar. This is the sound of the musical fusion heard in the 2022 *Melodies of Unity* album by Zendeh Delan—a Europe-based contemporary Sufi music group within the MTO Shahmaghsoudi School of Islamic Sufism. Approaching the Zendeh Delan group as a case study, this paper explores contemporary Sufi music in the West. Drawing on dialogic ethnographic research, I examine the continuity of Sufi practices within these new forms of musical expression, showing how insider principles of remembrance (*zeker*) and listening (*sama*) are paramount in both shaping the process of music making and its musical outcomes.

Methodologically, this presentation explores the meaningful distinctions articulated in Zendeh Delan’s creative practice. First, I highlight the meaningfully distinct concepts rooted in the practice of Sufi chanting (*zeker*) such as, *presence of heart, listening, harmony, the individual, and unity*. Second, I examine how these concepts are applied to the group’s collaborative music making processes. Last, I present an analysis of how these concepts embrace the diverse musical backgrounds of the ensemble’s members, fostering a creative space that creates potential for individual growth and the harmonious blending of unique selves. These concepts are discussed through examples of the group’s remote recording sessions across four countries during the pandemic. I further explore the larger entanglements of musical meaning with style, tradition and innovation through the example of contemporary Sufi music—specifically looking at how Zendeh Delan transcends stylistic strictures while staying loyal to specific principles and practices, locating meaning not in the material culture but the underlying intentions of practice.

Payam Yousefi is a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at Harvard University. His primary research interests include the classical, regional and sacred musics of Iran. More broadly his work focuses on affective musical communities, women’s vocality, transmission, and the intersections of music and power. Payam’s current research centers on the politics of style in classical Persian music—critically examining the exclusionary aesthetics of competing musical styles while highlighting how creative practices strategically mediate the semantics of style to project subversive notions of self, nation and global membership. Whether he is playing the *kamancheh*, making ethnographic films, writing, or teaching, Payam is entangled in the endless pursuit of unravelling the many meanings of music.

Two Poets and a River. <https://filmfreeway.com/TwoPoetsandaRiver>

Using the Oxus river as a topos, this film explores themes of love and loss through the lives and musical poetry of the two most prominent and innovative Wakhi musicians in Central and South Asia. In the 19th century their Wakhan homeland became a buffer zone between Czarist Russia and the British Empire and the river Oxus became a border. The condition of being separated by a river grounds the poets' discussions of love and loss in their own lives as well as in their musical arts. Richard Wolf shot the film over 2.5 years (2012-2020). In Wakhi, Tajik and Dari with English subtitles. Running time 75 min.

Richard K. Wolf, Professor of Music and South Asian Studies at Harvard University, has conducted research widely in South and Central Asia over the past 40 years. He is the author of two monographs, editor of three collections, a performer on the South Indian *vina*, and an ethnographic filmmaker. His work has concerned social-cultural 'style' in South Indian music, music and space-time in Kota tribal society, music in Islamic contexts in India and Pakistan, theory and analysis of rhythm, and emotion. Among recent honors, Wolf was the recipient of a Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and was named the Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation Fellow at the National Humanities Center in 2018-19.