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Conference

Global Music History and Northern Europe in the 18th and 19th Centuries, 15–16 May 2026

What often passes for “global thinking” in music history scholarship has been problematized in recent years to include more critical perspectives that move against desires to present cross-border cultural exchange in terms of supposedly “neutral” processes such as industrialization or globalization. Instead, scholarship increasingly recognizes that the planetary dissemination of musical cultures cannot be decoupled from what Aníbal Quijano calls *the coloniality of power*.¹ To confront such legacies, Mikkel Vad and Jens Hesselager hosted a conference at the University of Copenhagen on 15 and 16 May of 2026. The conference, titled *Global Music History and Northern Europe in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, reassessed musical historicity by implicating those who shaped past cultural archives and epistemes, while also critically engaging with our own contemporary roles as scholars in these processes.

The conference started with a panel on *musical colonizers*. Phill Dodds spoke on Swedish and Scottish missionaries who traveled to South Africa, mapping soundscapes from their myopic white lens, while Kanav Gupta presented on the everyday lives of British settlers in colonial India in the mid-nineteenth century and their attitudes towards Hindustani musical idioms. The accounts of the colonizers in both narratives echoed a fascination with what they called “strangeness” and the “incomprehensibility of primitive sounds,” other times they served as a wholesale rejection of “subaltern art” by labeling it as “disorderly” or “ridiculous.” The seemingly quotidian practices presented during this panel illuminated that, as Edward Said posits, the projection of the Western gaze unto the colonial world constitutes an expression of a *will to power, knowledge, and governance*. Such practices are emblematic of modernity’s will to categorize and thereby control time and space. Thus, we witness, as Said writes, that “the transition from a merely textual apprehension, formulation, or definition of the Orient to the putting of all this into practice in the Orient did take place.”²

The second panel examined *travelling musicians*, starting with Pete Yelding’s presentation on the *Lucknow-Shahjahanpur Gharānā*’s earliest journeys to Northern Europe,

1 Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000) 216.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978), 95–96.

where their music was recited at colonial exhibitions that featured so-called “human zoos.” Within such spaces of subjection, their travel accounts revealed that spaces of agency and musical innovation were nevertheless found in these highly exclusionary realms. Holly Lawson followed with a paper on the German contralto Felicita Vestvali and her time in the US, where Vestvali utilized Shakespearean plays to formulate feminist critiques of dominant gender norms through the performance of roles typically associated with patriarchal masculinity. With the odds stacked against them, the people central to both stories nevertheless formulated new dimensions of personhood, democracy, and artistry. To echo Michel-Rolph Trouillot, this was deemed “unthinkable” by the dominant classes at the time, and it therefore changed the very “frameworks” through which Europeans conceptualized race and gender in relation to the arts.³

The first day ended with a keynote by Katherine Schofield, who presented her ideas regarding the challenges related to critically assessing the silences in the archives in the *paracolonial world*. Focusing on the lineages and soundscapes of the Eastern Indian Ocean’s cultural geographies, Schofield attempted to disentangle the colonial power relations caught up in the process of archiving, juxtaposing records produced by colonial institutes with those springing from “subaltern knowledge.” Prioritizing regional voices of the (formerly) colonized and critically reappraising what passes as an “archive” means revaluating embodied practices and oral histories hitherto silenced in the collective consciousness on account of epistemic injustices that deemed such knowledge-production inferior.

The second day commenced with the *cultural encounters* panel, opened by Matthew Madeley’s paper on composers John Foulds and Maud MacCarthy’s time in India. The couple’s fascination with Indian music and philosophy sprung from their adherence to Theosophy, which offered at once liberatory tenets while appropriating exoticized representations of philosophies and the arts in the colonized “periphery.” This mirrored their attempts to study Indian music “authentically” for their own spiritual enrichment, more concerned with self-actualization than cultural exchange. We witness parallels here between the extractivist logic employed in administrative colonialism and that same logic applied to a cultural appropriation of an ersatz cultural product that exists and is formulated primarily in the white imagination. Such appropriation took place within the context of systematic white supremacist structures, driven by the ability of white people to claim citizenship and property both material and intellectual by virtue of their whiteness.

The closing panel on *ethnographic imaginations* featured Patrick Burke’s paper on the musical instrument collections in Norway’s ethnographic museums. He presented a narrative on travelers in the nineteenth century who appropriated instruments during their colonial exploits: instruments that were then classed in organologies according

3 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), 82.

to racial hierarchies. This led to notions of “primitive music” that underscored larger, national ideologies of racial supremacy in Norway. These panels all demonstrated how music and its scholarly accounts have shaped the archives to push narratives of Northern European nation-building, often coupled with *epistemicide* and other violent practices in the “peripheries,” all while retaining an adherence to the supposed beauty of artistic creation. But as Saidiya Hartman reminds us: terror and joy are not incommensurable in such contexts. An obsession with the “primitive,” however romantically expressed, then “conceals the affiliations of white enjoyment and [...] subjection and the affective dimensions of mastery and servitude.”⁴

Conferences such as these compel us to engage with our own positionalities in broader academic conversations regarding the deeply entrenched eurocentrisms of our fields. Such a dialogue cannot flourish if it continues to rely on modernity’s proclivity for theoretical segregation and techno-rationalism, but would benefit from incorporating a more planetary perspective that recognizes the need for a holistic, inclusive, and interdisciplinary approach that implicates both the author as well as the institutional baggage they carry. As a rule, this can and probably ought to be an uncomfortable endeavor for it could lead to backlash, and it might mean reconceptualizing perspectives on music and its scholarship that have become almost commonsensical. Though these narratives require further research, this conference was one more step in attending to the reconceptualizations mentioned here.

Thomas Overdijk

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4 Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 64.