

International Music Festivals in Interwar Europe: Questions of Aesthetics, Diplomacy, and Identity

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After the establishment of Bayreuth in 1876, music festivals underwent a significant expansion in Europe, especially after the First World War. Motivated by the ideal of universal fraternity, these events were meant to “help to achieve perpetual peace”—as Hugo Von Hoffmannsthal claimed when inaugurating the Salzburg Festival (1920)—and overcome the traumas of conflict. However, for the festival organizers, it was also a matter of enabling the public to discover varied repertoires: from the premières of contemporary works organized by the London Contemporary Music Centre, to the folksongs of the Fêtes des Nations in Nice. The festivals were creative spaces as well as places for the discovery of musics from elsewhere. They give the scholar a privileged perspective to observe the circulation of works, musicians, and musical genres in interwar Europe.

Nevertheless, this cosmopolitanism only accounts for one aspect of the festivals; they reveal many issues concerning aesthetics, diplomacy, and identity. They also gave nations the chance to display their best musical achievements in a sort of cultural one-upmanship. Festivals organized by the International Society for Contemporary Music often reinforced national borders and distinctions rather than promoted transnational accord. Similar observations may well apply to folk music festivals, such as the Fêtes des Nations (Nice, 1932–33) and the First International Folk Festival

(London, 1935). Moreover, festivals served as a springboard to nascent cultural diplomacy in Europe. The logic of soft power explains the diversity of the actors involved: from musicians and musicologists to diplomats and international organizations associated with the League of Nations. While encouraging international openness, festivals participated in power relations between nations and fostered the affirmation of national imaginaries. These ambiguities also developed in the field of musicology, particularly during international events such as the First Congress of Popular Arts (Prague, 1928).

Bringing together three musicologists and one historian, this panel aims to focus on the history of international music festivals in order to shed new light on the links between both art and folk music, nationalism and transnationalism in the interwar period.

Festivals of Contemporary Music in Interwar Paris and London

Barbara Kelly (Royal Northern College of Music / Keele University)

This paper considers initiatives to promote international cooperation and exchange in music in the aftermath of the Great War after a period of limited contact. It focuses on contemporary music festivals in Paris and London, which showcased new musical developments in Europe with the purported aim to encourage dialogue across national borders. The festivals also gave nations the chance to display their best musical achievements in a sort of cultural one-upmanship. Recent research on the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) has shown that festivals often reinforced national borders and distinctions rather than promoted transnational accord. Drawing on archival materials in the U.K. and France, this paper focuses on selective festivals in the 1920s, including Walter Straram's *Quatre concerts de musique moderne internationale* (1923), Henry Prunières' *Concerts de la Revue musicale*, Edward Clark's *Contemporary Music Concerts* (1921), and the London Contemporary Music Centre.

Promoted by entrepreneurial activists committed to ideals of internationalism, they faced the task of finding audiences receptive to challenging music. Prunières's strategy was to nurture an elite audience, which sought proximity to world-leading musicians and craved the thrill of new cultural experiences. Clark admitted that the ISCM's task of attracting the general public to new music had required twenty-five years of "arduous spade-work."

The French Section of the ISCM articulated its motivations with clarity: "The French section aims to promote the knowledge and diffusion of foreign music in France and French contemporary music abroad by all possible means." (*RM*, June 1923) In Britain, Granville Bantock expressed a renewed desire to develop closer connections with France. The critic Leigh Henry portrayed London musical life as equally vibrant as its continental counterparts. Reflecting on Clark's international

concerts, which included Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Milhaud, Falla, Bliss, and Vaughan Williams, Henry described them as “extraordinary . . . one feels that London has definitely developed into the hub of present-day musical life.” (*The Chesterian*, June 1921). Thus, festivals of new music served the important purposes of asserting the identity and vitality of national traditions in an international arena.

Folk Music and Cultural Diplomacy:
The Political Ambiguities of Nice’s “Fêtes des Nations” (1932–33)

Martin Guerpin (Évry-Val d’Essonne University)

In 1932 and 1933, Nice welcomed two “Fêtes des Nations.” These international events gathered students from more than twenty different European and American countries. These events were organized by three public administration departments: the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education; the city of Nice; and the “Renaissance Française” association, which was founded by Raymond Poincaré in 1915. During the Fêtes, folk music, songs, and dances from every country represented were performed almost all day long in the context of a Festival. Although the Fêtes des Nations have never been studied, they deserve close attention: they reveal the ambiguities of the political mobilizations of folk music in democracies in the early 1930s.

First, these ambiguities concern the cultural and political meanings attributed to folk music. The Fêtes booklets presented it as the incarnation of the spirit of the nation in sound (according to a conception borrowed from Johann Gottfried Herder’s writings); as the expression of regional diversity of one nation; or as a trace of transnational links uniting different peoples.

Second, these ambiguities focus on the diplomatic role of folk music. On the one hand, the organizers of the Fête des nations conceived it as a way for students better to understand the historical traditions and mentalities of each nation. The stated goal was to prevent the risk of confrontation, according to the principle of “collective security” and the internationalist-pacifist ideal championed by the First Congress of Popular Arts organized by the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (Prague, 1928). On the other hand, folk music was used to affirm individual identities and reinforce the legitimacy of nations that had been recently recognized by the Treaty of Saint Germain (1919). The Fêtes des Nations also provided the occasion for France to display its own cultural richness and to affirm its international reach.

This paper draws on a reconstruction of the Fêtes musical program and administrative archives, which are available at the Archives Nationales and the City of Nice Archive; it aims to contribute to the study of the role played by folk music in cultural diplomacy in the interwar period.

“Creating an atmosphere for world peace”:
The First International Folk Festival, London, 1935
Anaïs Fléchet (University of Versailles / Paris Saclay
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“The impression grows that an understanding of world folklore will go far to strengthen the tangible bonds of racial understanding and ultimately aid in creating an atmosphere for world peace.” As the U.S. delegate Gertrude Knott asserts, the participants of the First International Folk Festival were unanimous in praising its success. Held in London 14–20 July 1935, the festival was organized by the English Folk Dance and Song Society and the British National Committee on Folk Art (a body affiliated with the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation and the League of Nations). Combining indoor and outdoor performances, lectures, and conference, the festival was aimed to “promote understanding and friendship between nations” (*Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 1935). Eighteen European countries participated, and delegates were sent from India, Egypt, and the U.S. But its political significance was much more ambiguous: patronized by Queen Mary, the event was supported by the Foreign Office as a tool for British cultural diplomacy. Moreover, while claiming the “annihilation of trans-continental distances,” the festival reaffirmed a conservative and nation-based conception of folklore against the dangers of “modern cosmopolitanism.”

Four years after its first and only iteration, the outbreak of World War II demonstrated how utopian the festival had been. However, the failure was not complete: in 1947, a new conference on folk song and dance was held in London, giving birth to the International Folk Music Council. Today it is the International Council for Traditional Music, a non-governmental organization in formal consultative relations with UNESCO, which aims to further the study, practice, and dissemination of traditional music and dance of all countries.

Drawing on archival materials from the English Folk Dance and Song Society and the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, this paper explores the history of the First International Folk Festival and discusses three major issues: 1) the role of festivals in shaping the new international musical scene; 2) the importance of music in cultural diplomacy; 3) the uses of notions such as “nationalism,” “internationalism,” and “cosmopolitanism” in discourses on music during the interwar period.

The International Congress of Popular Arts (Prague 1928)
and the Politics of Folklore

Philippe Gumpłowicz (Évry Val d'Essonne University / Paris Saclay)

Since the first collections of popular song (*Alte Volkslieder*) were produced in the Baltic countries by Johann Gottfried Herder at the end of the eighteenth century, the

need to preserve “folklore” took hold in the musical imagination of Europe. With the exception of a notable governmental project initiated by the French Second Republic, most of the initiatives that aimed to collect fragile popular expressions of oral traditions for preservation or for artistic uses were the results of personal initiatives. They were led mainly by musicians, folklorists or archivists.

The trauma of the Great War provoked a change of pace: the regional or nationalist understanding of folklore (as the rejection of modernity and “a means to repair the assaults that oppression had inflicted on national feeling” according to Bartók) seemed to give way to the transnational ambition of the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IICI), an offshoot of the League of Nations, which was responsible for promoting exchanges between scientists, academics, artists, and intellectuals worldwide.

Under the auspices of the IICI, an International Congress of Popular Arts was called in Prague in 1928. The participants, including Belà Bartók, shared a feeling of urgency: “Most popular songs and melodies are in the process of disappearing . . . The Congress advises governments to start recording them as soon as possible.” This preoccupation was part of a renewed attention to popular expression, such as the publication of Arnold Van Gennep’s *Le Folklore* (1924) and the formation of a “French Folklore Society” (1927), which had its own journal (*Revue du Folklore français*). This movement relied on the remarkable burgeoning of the phonograph, and its mission, backed by ethnomusicologists, was to “establish archives of musical recordings of ‘primitive’ peoples.” By the same token, the festivals were responsible for creating specialized record companies (Folkways in the U.S., the first recordings of Alan Lomax, 1933).

The Prague Conference shows how folk music became a key issue in the political agenda of the IICI. The paper considers the extent to which it had a place in cultural diplomacy and explores the aesthetic and political representations.