

Call for Applications:



Ashugh Jivani – the violin player (Charents Museum of Literature and Art)

Confronting Musical Diversity in Western and Central Eurasian Empires during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Max Weber Stiftung – Georgia Branch Office,
Tbilisi, 24–25 September 2026

Deadline: 15 May 2026

Throughout the history of empires, music has been an object and an instrument of both identity formation and imperial rule. At the same time, empires have been home to a particularly great diversity of musical styles and actors that mirrored the social and ethnic diversity of their population. Concentrating on the Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian, and Qajar Empires, four empires covering the large, but contiguous continental space of (North-)Western and Central Eurasia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this workshop aims to bring together scholarship on the various ways in which musical diversity was dealt with in these empires.

The four empires in focus represent a particularly fruitful framework for comparison as their histories are intensely interwoven by conflicts, trade, cultural exchange, migration, as well as shared, often mobile ethnic groups, such as Armenians or Jews. It will be a goal of the workshop to scrutinize the musical side of the (dis-)connectedness of these Eurasian empires, analyzing differences, similarities, and transfers in their dealings with musical diversity.

At least three major actors confronting musical diversity in empires can be discerned: Imperial, national(ist), and non-state actors, including those acting with commercial interest.

From the perspective of the imperial center, musical diversity could be considered both an obstacle and an asset: On the one hand, top-down strategies often attempted to make use of music as part of a colonially motivated *mission civilisatrice*, establishing opera houses or large-scale concert venues, employing Western art music to signal modernity, progress and belonging to the so-called “civilized world.” From the point of view of cultural actors aligned with the imperial center, regionally established musical practices were frequently seen as a hindrance to musical and cultural progress as they were deemed less “developed” and apt for modernizing purposes. On the other hand, diverse musical practices played a central role in collecting and mapping activities that were aimed at displaying and studying the vast array of cultural activities under the rule of the respective empires.

As national movements gained traction towards the late nineteenth century, nationalist circles positioned music as an instrument of representing a particular nationality vis-à-vis the imperial authorities or other nations. Like the imperial actors, aspiring nationalist folklorists were engaged in collecting activities, though their aim was to strengthen national consciousness. Yet the musical diversity they encountered in the field made it difficult to draw clear lines between the musics of different “nationalities” or to define their respective content, resulting in constructed and imagined notions of “national” musics. At the same time, the endeavors of nationalist musical actors, like their imperial counterparts, also very often built on the status of Western art music in order to receive global recognition as part of an imaginary “orchestra of nations”. This, in turn, had an influence on musical diversity on the ground.

A third major actor confronted with the musical diversity of empires emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century: international recording enterprises such as the Gramophone Company or Pathé. In contrast with scholarly motivated collectors of music and sound, recording companies followed a capitalist logic and recorded the music they encountered on the ground. Not directly bound to imperial or national ideologies in their dealing with the musical diversity of the empires they operated in, musical diversity represented a possibility to reach a wider and more stratified public.

By comparing specific instances of imperial interactions with musical diversity, the workshop will address overarching questions of the various functions of music in globally entangled modernization processes, its uses in specific and general contexts of imperial and colonial rule, and emerging national movements, as well as its embeddedness in globalizing capitalist networks.

Possible contributions include, but are not limited to, the following fields:

- Mapping, studying, representing the musical diversity of empires
- Western Art Music as a means of imperial “civilizing” processes
- The “globalization” of Western art music as an imperial/colonial phenomenon
- The construction of “national” musical folklore traditions
- Urban spaces as hubs of musical diversity
- Policing/Criminalization of (urban) music making
- Recording Companies as (inter-)imperial actors
- Commercialization of musical diversity
- Universal and musical exhibitions
- Music and the military/Music and conflict

- Diplomats and travellers as observers of musical diversity

Convener: Jonas Löffler (Max Weber Netzwerk Osteuropa)

The organizers will cover costs for travel (airfare up to a maximum amount) and accommodation.

Proposals should be a single PDF-file, including name, affiliation, title of the presentation, and abstract (approximately 300 words), as well as a short biographical note, and should be submitted as a single PDF file to MWS Georgia info@mws-georgia.org by **15 May 2026**. Participants will be notified until the end of May.