

NEWS – ZPRÁVY

New Approaches in Music Archaeology (ISGMA, Vienna, 17–21 November 2025)

The thirteenth symposium of the International Study Group on Music Archaeology (ISGMA) took place from 17th to 21st November 2025 at the Austrian Archaeological Institute of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW), situated in the historic centre of Vienna. This biennial conference (for the previous meeting, see *Chroustovský 2023*), which boasts a steadily expanding membership, was structured across a full week. The programme comprised fifteen thematic sessions, two parallel workshops, and the evening concert performed by the participants themselves. In keeping with the platform's tradition, the chronological and geographical scope of the meeting was exceptionally broad; contributions reflected periods ranging from the Palaeolithic to the present day.

The presented papers reflected the current state of scholarship in the fields of archaeology, history, iconography, and ethnomusicology, as well as organology, acoustics, and linguistics. Historico-linguistic research included the refinement of terminology regarding Mesopotamian lutes (D. Shehata), Ancient Greek instruments (M. Kotyl), and Shang Dynasty bronze bells (L. Xiǎotóng). Significant attention was also devoted to the reinterpretation of Hurrian hymn notation (D. L. Gibson), the symbolism of the sistrum and the serpent during the reign of Tutankhamun (H. Köpp-Junk), diacritics in Homeric writings (T.-L. Altunin), the meaning of the term organon in Greek philosophy (F. Aguirre), and reflections on the perception of sounds associated with intense movement in satyr plays (L. Gianvittorio-Ungar). Regarding non-European regions, recent finds of bamboo slips (P. Huang) were presented, alongside a description of the journey to the underworld in Taoist China (W. Tiān – Z. Yǔ). The synthesis of textual and archaeological evidence was represented by a reconstruction of the instrumental inventory on the *Limes Romanus* (F. Leitmeir).

Inferences regarding playing techniques and the role of instruments in past cultures were drawn from iconographic sources, such as Greek vase painting (A. Gandossi-Boshnakova), Mayan reliefs (M. Ciura), and paintings and sculptures in Chinese royal tombs (W. Xīdān – W. Ruòyáng – Z. Míng). The social role of specific instruments and their players was discussed through cases such as Assyrian harpers (B. Bellucci), Hellenic ithyphallic lyre players (C. Romero Mayorga), the status of the tympanum in Ancient Rome (M. Mungari), the sistrum as evidence of the Isiac cult in mainland Greece (S. Perrot), and the Indian dappu drum (D. Gupta). Ethnomusicological projects, which are instrumental in reconstructing conceptions of the musical past, focused on the dance music of Mayan descendants (M. Howell), acoustic measures accompanying lunar eclipses in Andean cultures (A. Gruszczyńska-Ziółkowska), and the role of percussion in the vanishing traditional societies of the North China Plain (R. Tóng – Y. Hóngbīn).

Experimental studies continue to play a vital role in the archaeology of music. Presentations in Vienna included: use-wear analysis and the acoustics of Upper Palaeolithic bullroarers (M. Praxmarer); the replication of conch-shell horns using stone and metal tools (L. Chroustovský); the replication of a unique Early Bronze Age whistle (J. Bátor – B. M. Pomberger); the use of horn as a raw material for chordophone bridges in Ancient Greece (M. Sciascia – F. Aguirre); the reconstruction of ancient zithers in Sri Lanka (I. Dehideniya); new acoustic research into the famous Wicklow pipes (S. O'Dwyer); and the reconstruction of a medieval bone flute in England (L.-A. Taylor). The potential of virtual modelling was demonstrated by the digital reconstruction of prehistoric rattles (I. Czajka – K. Tatoń), the presentation of chordophones in China (Z. Yǔ – W. Tiān), and the digital replication of Indian double-headed drums based on textual sources (A. R. Kondi). Furthermore, papers presented laboratory tests on the music-therapeutic effects of Iron Age metal idiophones in Central Europe

(800 BC – AD 800) in reducing psychological and physiological stress (M. Foramitti), and an unusual collective experiential-acoustic project involving horns and shields in the Danish landscape (E. Fock). Modern acoustic research was represented by two Scandinavian projects focusing on the connection between natural sacred sites and local folklore (G. Kolltveit – R. Rainio; J. Shpinitzkaya – R. Rainio).

Regarding specific organological categories, aerophones (15) traditionally predominated, followed by chordophones and idiophones (10 each); membranophones (5) were the least represented. Among the aerophones, the aulos (tibia) was the dominant subject, appearing in the context of current research projects (Pompeii: E. Rocconi), new finds (Iberia: R. Jiménez Pasalodos – S. Hagel), reinterpretations (the double silver tibia from Pompeii: K. Wysłucha – S. Hagel), and general surveys of Egypt (M. Sciascia – B. Brown) and Archaic Greece (L. Isotalo). Additionally, presentations covered finds of carnyces in La Tène Europe (A. Kocánková), Avar double flutes (or reed instruments, P. Rozs), wind instruments of Germanic societies (S. Réto), and musicological and acoustic analyses of specific flutes from pre-Hispanic Ecuador (J. Pérez de Arce).

Chordophones were discussed in terms of their representation in the funerary contexts of Hellenic Greece (M. Stamatopoulou – Ch. Terzis) and Anglo-Saxon elites (G. Lawson). The programme also included an overview of arched harps in Central Asia (G. Currie) and studies dedicated to idiophones—Caucasian specimens in the Natural History Museum Vienna (B. M. Pomberger – S. Makhortykh), bronze bells in Ancient China (S. Yíméng; W. Yǒuhuá) and the Malay Peninsula (M. Yuè), and the history and contemporary status of Andean lithophonic rock blocks associated with rock art (C. M. Muñoz). The acoustic character of Roman ornaments was also considered (A. Zangrando – E. Braidotti – A. de Franzoni). In the field of membranophones, promising new Upper Palaeolithic sites in the USA were introduced, yielding the oldest known frame-drum beater found to date (R. M. Gramly).

Among the more theoretical contributions was a proposal for a new archaeological terminology for aerophones based on the neutral characteristics of material finds rather than musicological interpretations of function (B. M. Pomberger – M. Hackl). Other papers included an overview of recent research in China (D. Jingyí) and a critique of the colonialism still present in the study of Ancient Egyptian music, where an *a priori* assumption of continuity from antiquity leads to the misinterpretation of historical notations (W. Sherbiny).

The programme was complemented by two workshops focusing on the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean and the Near East. R. Gehler, N. Thym, and D. Shehata presented experimental approaches to the tuning of stringed instruments in Mesopotamia (see *Goodnick-Westernholz et al. 2014*). M. Mungari shared practical experience in playing frame drums across various cultures, including their relevance to the interpretation of ancient iconography (e.g. *Mungari – Wysłucha 2021*).

The public concert held on Thursday in the ÖAW theatre hall opened with wind instruments: a La Tène carnyx (S. Hagel), a bronze horn from Loughnashade (K. Wysłucha), a Palaeolithic flute, and the silver pipes of Ur (B. Brown). This was followed by a demonstration of the sonospheres of the European Palaeolithic and Neolithic (M. Praxmarer, L. Chroustovský, A. Kocánková, J.-L. Ringot). Music from Bronze Age to Early Medieval Europe was performed by the ensembles ArchäoMusik Vienna and Ars Serena (B. M. Pomberger, M. Hackl, I. Wagner-Kraft, B. Winkler). A new interpretation of a Hurrian hymn from Ugarit (14th century BC), arranged for harp, was also performed (N. Thym). Ancient civilisations were further represented by an Egyptian flute, lute, and frame drum, alongside an Ancient Greek lament accompanied by the kithara (S. Hagel) and diaulos (K. Wysłucha). The concert, which was very well received by the audience, concluded with the medieval harp (N. Thym).

The ambitious title of the meeting reflects the fact that in this dynamically developing and highly interdisciplinary field, there is truly no shortage of novel approaches. While the symposium did not herald revolutionary or sensationalist shifts in theory or methodology, it demonstrated consistent,

diligent scholarship that remains open to the application of new technologies and ideas alike. It is precisely such interdisciplinary gatherings that facilitate this progress. It is anticipated that the majority of the contributions will be published in the Journal of Music Archaeology, published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Luboš Chroustovský

References

- Chroustovský, L. 2023*: Artifacts – Images – Texts. Archaeology and the Historiography of Sound (ISGMA, Würzburg, 25.–29. 9. 2023). *Archeologické rozhledy* 75, 439–441. <https://doi.org/10.35686/AR.2023.29>
- Goodnick-Westernholz, J. – Maurey, Y. – Seroussi, E. (eds.) 2014*: Music in Antiquity. The Near East and the Mediterranean. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Mungari, M. – Wysłucha, K. 2021*: Material music in ritual soundscapes of Pompeii. *Open Arts Journal* 10, 89–108. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2021s05>