

REVIEW ESSAY: WHY WAS THIS COLLOQUIUM ON DRUMS AND DRUM ENSEMBLES ALONG THE SILK ROAD IMPORTANT IN THESE TIMES?

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Abstract

This short review essay aims at answering the question ‘Why was this Colloquium on Drums and Drum Ensembles along the Silk Road Important in these Times’? It was the very first gathering on this topic I experienced. I could meet experts as an amateur since I only recently dealt seriously with music. I wanted to share my ideas and I could learn a lot, too. However, I think that this mutual learning is the most important. The colloquium was to a great part to increase interest in many details about which we do not know yet.

Keywords

International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), Colloquia, Mutual learning, Knowledge exchange

At the outset, I would like to make sure that scholars, who might probably expect a detailed review, won’t misunderstand this short essay. I am not a musicologist nor an ethnomusicologist and my interest in music is rather less professional. There was a very fine review of the event ‘27 Colloquium of the International Council for Traditional Music: Drums and Drum ensembles along the Silk Road’ by a Chinese scholar. His name is Guang Bingyang (关冰阳). His review will be published in the widespread Chinese journal, People’s Music.¹

To understand my interest in music, especially in drum playing, particularly playing the *derebuqa* of Egypt in the context of living in Alexandria, I would like to briefly, explain some personal background.

The very first time I dealt with a *derebuqa* was when I was almost 6 years old. It was during my aunt’s bachelor party. I watched my mother taking down a *derebuqa* from the top of the wardrobe in my grandfather’s house. Animal skin was used to cover the opening of this clay drum. This *derebuqa* type is nowadays rare in normal households. Rather, the contemporary type has a metal resonator with the opening covered with a plastic ‘skin’. I had the opportunity to watch one of my aunties playing an Upper Egyptian rhythm on the *derebuqa* at the bachelor party. These special and unique sounds reminded me of what I heard far away in Aswan, in my father’s hometown, and of singing those old and completely exotic songs to people in the big city of Alexandria. Then, I started to knock on this *derebuqa* randomly. I could not hold it because it was quite big and heavy for a 6 years old child with a tiny body. Yet, feeling its sound is warms my heart, which was probably the moment I fell in love with the *derebuqa* at first sight.

¹ The publication will have the following title: “丝绸之路上的鼓与鼓乐”: 第 27 届国际传统音乐学会 (ICTM) 专题研讨会述评. There was a pre-print shared on WeChat.

During my early life, I remember to have listened to music every day, maybe even all day long. During the mornings, my mother used to listen to the daily broadcasting program while ironing my school shirt and preparing breakfast. I remember most of the songs, whereas some musical pieces were introductions to concerts. I was then singing and banging on the desks in the school with my classmates during the breaks, between classes, going back home in the afternoon and watching a daily old movie with dozens of Egyptian-styled songs accompanied by a specific fashionable belly dance that required specific rhythmic accentuation. Later at night, before going to bed, my siblings and I used to gather in my mother's bedroom and listen to some other broadcasted songs and audio novels. That is why I still memorize quite many songs. Additionally, this might be a reason why I express them in a specific manner, namely by drumming the rhythmic structure rather than singing them. I used to make a number of mistakes with many words of the lyrics, the reason why all family members made fun of me and my musical ambitions. Nonetheless, never gave up.

During my high school year, I used to study 8 to 10 hours a day, and after a little while I found out that when I think about something deeply, for example a math question, I cannot get an answer unless I drum while thinking, and it works effectively every time. Since then, drumming became a way to focus on any type of work or study. I needed to drum, and I did not know yet, that drumming also needs people like me.

In Egypt, even though the *derebuqa* belongs to the most iconic and respected musical instruments, it is a bit hard for people from the middle class of society to become a drummer. The majority, the middle class in big cities such as Alexandria, to which my family belongs, does not accept fully that doing music or beware drumming is a real profession. Working as a 'drummer' for a living is somewhat shameful and brings a bad reputation. This is the reason why my parents did not pay attention to such a skill and did not want me to become a professional *derebuqa* player. Subsequently, I never intended to do it for a living. But, after the "Arab spring 2011" and the many transformations that happened to all sections and subsections within the society, young people started to consider the *derebuqa* as an inspiring instrument, and they find it very cool to learn it and improve their skills.

Finally, yet importantly, the *derebuqa* has never been a curriculum to me, it is something that I feel in my soul, I never owned a *derebuqa*, yet it is the specific rhythmic association and the beats, which are a part of my everyday life. I am stating this to ensure everyone that I love doing music and feel responsible for the future of this musical instrument. In times of conflicts, social hardship, or health issues, playing any musical instrument is very rewarding, particularly if this musical instrument has a history that gives one confidence and trust. That might be the main reason, why dealing with it is so important, exactly now.

I think that the colloquium about drums and drum ensembles along the Silk Road includes the North African region. In this conjunction, specifically Egypt is a major spot of the traditional Silk Road, where a lot of trade and contact took place in the past and at present. Egypt is a place where in the past, social circumstances paved a way to the development of many musical instruments, not only because of long periods of stability but also due to the manifold contacts to others. Interestingly, diversity contributed its part to this stability. Hence, in this regard, the *derebuqa* should be taken as one example. So far, I could not find any drum that has the same sound like this one. I believe that the *derebuqa* sound fits my personality without a doubt. It produces the loudest drumming sound I am aware of since my youth. This loud sound can express a lot of enthusiasm. The Silk Road still exists in a modern way. Nowadays, it symbolizes the cultural connections between the worlds. Many skills cultivated along this trade route may have been lost for ages. The whole world of knowledge about those skills was hidden in war times and cruel competitions. However, the re-emergence of the Silk Road offers a chance to re-connect. Especially the exchange of intellectuality and of cultural differences. I

believe that people can only know themselves if they are able to know others through anything that connects them such as sound and sound production.

I am studying in Shanghai, at the other end of the Silk Road, so to say. My interest in drumming connects me with many friends and people from all over the world. Now, I play *taiko* in an ensemble of drum instruments iconic for modern Japan. The instruments play the main role in my life. I can express my best while playing in the *taiko* ensemble. It involves my physical body and my mood. It made me think of the main duties of my life. It also helps me to make decisions. I learn to communicate with people in a much better way. Most people I know get very excited about musical instruments, their specific voices. They change their behaviors; they want to do things enthusiastically and in their own way. Instruments can play generally an important role in peoples' life. Nevertheless, many do not realize it and need support. Therefore, this colloquium is important. Musical instruments are irreplaceable. They will never be away from humans' lives or merge in pure electronic devices. Now, that is my experience, middle class people become more nostalgic. They want to keep old things to prove their roots, their connections to earlier times, for example in China, the dedication to *guqin* or *pipa*. They learn it not anymore due to the wish of becoming musicians, they need it for their entire education and also want to achieve distinction in a new popular way.

The colloquium, to which I humbly contributed, was the very first gathering I experienced. I could meet experts as an amateur since I only recently dealt seriously with music. I wanted to share my ideas and I could learn a lot, too. However, I think that this mutual learning is the most important. The colloquium was to a great part to increase interest in many details about which we do not know yet that they become important very soon.