

# Contemporary Views on Romani Music and Romani Music Studies: Editorial

Ursula Hemetek

Music and Minorities Research Center, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Austria  
Correspondence: [hemetek@mdw.ac.at](mailto:hemetek@mdw.ac.at)

---

Research on Romani music has been one of the driving forces behind ethnomusicological minority research at the Department of Folk Music Research and Ethnomusicology at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw), as well as for the foundation of the ICTMD Study Group on Music and Minorities. Having evolved out of these scholarly contexts, the Music and Minorities Research Center (MMRC) at the mdw is also dedicated to this area of research. For me personally, Romani music has been one of the major research interests of my academic life. This longstanding relationship to the topic and to my Romani research partners, beginning in the 1980s, has been a personal incentive to publishing this collection.

2023 marked the 30th anniversary of the official recognition of Roma/Romnja in Austria as a so-called “Volksgruppe” (ethnic minority). In the struggle that preceded this political success, ethnomusicological research supported and amplified the voices of Austrian Romani activists and communities (see Hemetek 2006). For the MMRC, this anniversary serves not only as a reason to celebrate, but also as an impetus for continuing ethnomusicological projects with Roma/Romnja. This has taken several forms: “*amenca ketane. Histories of Trauma, Music and Romani Empowerment*,” the 2023’s annual MMRC lecture featured scholars Ioanida Costache, Mirjam Karoly as well as the rap duo Mindj Panter (Sandra and Simonida Selimović), four Romnja whose work is characterized by political engagement and critique (see [Costache et al. 2023](#)). Additionally in 2023, the MMRC launched *Ružake gila* (“Ruža’s Songs”), an online digital exhibition on the musical legacy of the Lovari singer Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos (1945–2022; see <https://ruzakegila.at>, last accessed November 15, 2024). Finally, this special collection marks the anniversary with a wide range of scholars writing on this topic.

“Contemporary Views on Romani Music and Romani Music Studies” is the second special collection of *Music & Minorities* (M&M). The inaugural collection was launched in 2021 and focused on “Music and Forced Migration,” a topic chosen to urgently reflect on the influx of Syrian war refugees arriving in Europe following the outbreak of the

---

This paper is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To read the license text, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. Parts of an article may be published under a different license. If this is the

case, these parts are clearly marked as such.

Syrian civil war in 2015 (see Hemetek 2021). Presently, we address another pressing issue: Roma/Romnja are a minority worldwide and are subject to widespread and severe discrimination. Dispersed all over the world, Roma/Romnja lack the protections of a nation state, and often, lack even a sense of national belonging. Despite this, symbols connected to Romani “national” identity have emerged, for example the Romani flag and anthem. But perhaps most unifying to Romani communities worldwide is the fight against discrimination. Discrimination persists despite the importance of Romani musicians and their necessity and expertise in crucial aspects of the socio-cultural life of majority communities. Romani musicians are very often the only ones who know how to play the ‘right’ music for events such as weddings, circumcisions, and other traditional and religious customs. And yet, despite their embeddedness and importance in the majority cultures in which Roma/Romnja live and work, they are looked down upon because of their ethnic background and the persistence of non-Roma stereotypes about Roma/Romnja (for more on this phenomenon, see Silverman 2007; Hemetek 2017). In addition, Romani musicians are often characterised by an openness to borrowing and adapting a wide range of musical idioms, thereby problematising any expectations of ‘national’ music, which naturally makes Romani music a highly dynamic object of study. The precariousness of Romani musicians, the racial discrimination they face, despite their important contribution to majority cultures, make Romani music a subject par excellence for music and minority studies, as well as for approaches to engaged ethnomusicology, one of the guiding principles of the MMRC.

## The Genesis of this Collection

The idea behind this special collection was to both showcase recent original research on Romani music and to stimulate reflections on the field’s development in the 21st century. The aim is not only to present new insights but also to provide a variety of impulses for the development of the discourses of Romani music studies. Additionally, it felt timely to boost the field’s visibility, in particular in the context of ethnomusicological minority studies, through a concerted effort to gather and disseminate a critical mass of contributions. Romani music studies is a prolific field of research with publications appearing in a wide range of fora and scholarly environments across the social sciences and humanities, indicating the rich interdisciplinary embeddedness and relevance of the field. But this decentralized character can also be a disadvantage in that relevant findings can easily be overlooked, or in that there is no central gathering ground for a more closely knit discursive community. In turn Romani music studies and moreover the communities, individuals, and practices they study may occasionally, in comparison to more visible scholarly fields, not receive the wider attention they deserve. We hope that our special collection will have at least some effect in counteracting such tendencies.

We could rely on my longstanding scholarly networks in the field of Romani Studies for inviting selected experts and also, we issued an open call for contributions in April

2023. The response was very positive and we received many proposals. Not all of the promised manuscripts were finally submitted, but for now there are ten contributions. In the case of some manuscripts, the publishing process was delayed as a result of circumstances beyond the authors' and M&M's control. We hope to publish these contributions in the journal at a later point in time and independently from the present special collection. One significant challenge was finding reviewers for the many submissions. The field is comparatively small and the number of experts is limited. However, we managed to find two anonymous reviewers for each article, and I am extremely grateful to these experts who provided us and the authors with very valuable feedback.

For me, belonging to the older generation of researchers in the field, it was an inspiring process of work and also of learning. New names and new themes emerge, in very diverse contexts. I am pleased that in this collection we find established names as well as newcomers to the field.

## Contents

This special collection presents ten articles on Romani music studies. Throughout all the articles the issue of marginalisation is central. This is no surprise considering the history and the socio-political position of Roma/Romnja worldwide, and their minority status wherever they live. The other topic that all articles have in common is the development of counter-strategies created by Roma/Romnja to overcome the disbalances of power relations, often involving music.

The diversity of Romani music styles is evident in this collection: authors write about traditional as well as popular and western art music genres rooted in various musical systems. The thematic contextualisation of these musical expressions is diverse as well, encompassing among others migration, war, holocaust remembrance, gender relations, religion, the music market, neoliberal philanthropy, virtuosity, education, and archives. These thematic contexts involve diverse performance situations, such as stage presentations, exploratory fieldwork settings, studio productions, night clubs, religious ceremonies, and the internet. The contributions cover Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

All the articles adopt, in the widest sense, an ethnomusicological perspective, yet employ diverse methodological approaches, including, but not limited to ethnography, oral history, archival research, musical analysis, dialogical knowledge production, and engaged ethnomusicology. The authors' cultural analyses draw on theoretical lenses stemming from the fields of Romani studies, performance studies, political science, cultural memory studies, gender studies, decolonial studies, film studies, religious studies, and many more. All of this showcases the wide spectrum of interdisciplinary tools applied in ethnomusicological minority studies.

Every article stands for itself and for an individual approach of the author. Therefore, I do not want to group them under superficial headings. Nonetheless, some of the

articles do have similar approaches or points of departure that deserve to be highlighted.

One of these is holocaust remembrance. Martin Ringsmut (2024) in his article “Sounding Traumatic Memory: The *Symphonia Romani – Bari Duk* and *Dui Rroma* as Memory Media of the Roma Genocide during World War II” specifically focuses on two works of art, one oratorio by composer Adrian Gaspar, an Austrian Rom of Romanian descent, and a documentary film by Gaspar’s mother Iovanca Gaspar. Zuzana Jurková’s (2024) article “Leperiben/Remembering: Romani Musical Remembering in Today’s Prague” examines different approaches to this topic by analyzing several public events during the last decade.

Approaches to archives as places of cultural memory in connection to Romani music is a common feature of two articles, one by Ian MacMillen and the other one by Hazel Marsh, Esbjörn Wettermark, and Tiffany Hore. The latter, titled “Calling Out the Catalogue: Romani Singers in an Archive of English Folk Song,” raises the topic of the “implicit and explicit silencing of Romani and Traveller voices in museum and archive collections, and in the wider narrative of British history” (Marsh, Wettermark, and Hore 2024: 1), a phenomenon that is not limited to Great Britain. Despite processes of decolonisation in museums and archives, “institutional recognition of the significant contributions of Romani and Traveller peoples to the traditional music heritage of the UK and Ireland has largely been absent” (ibid.). A different scenario is presented in the article “Romani Music Collections, the Ruptured Archive, and Epistemic Justice in the United States” by Ian MacMillen (2024). MacMillen addresses “*A Storied People*, an online Romani music project bridging collections of musical media and oral histories of csardas musicians in the Hungarian/Slovak Roma community around Cleveland, Ohio, USA” and “considers how acquiring the collection intervenes in 21st-century Romani music studies, musicological and archival practices, and their interrelations” (ibid.: 1).

Romani musicians and their musical practice, their in-group fame as well as how they find their place in the dominant society is the topic of two articles from different geographical areas, both with historical implications. Margret Beissinger’s (2024) article “Songs of Pain’: *Muzica Lăutărească* and the Voices of Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă” focuses on two female historical personalities in Romania who are famous interpreters of *muzica lăutărească*. The article specifically addresses gender aspects in relation to Puceanu’s and Luncă’s performances of so-called *cântece de durere* (“songs of pain”). Daisam Jalo’s (2024) article “The Dom, a Marginalized Community in the Syrian Music Scene” touches a field that hardly has been studied. Due to the present situation in Syria, it is not possible to do fieldwork there. Therefore, the article is of immense value in compiling and evaluating findings found in publications emerging from numerous scholarly fields and studying historical recordings of Dom music performances.

The role of Romani musicians in the ongoing war in Ukraine is the topic of Adriana Helbig’s (2024) article “Roma Agency and Ukrainian Popular Music During Russia’s War in Ukraine.” This article “provides an overview of Romani political responses to the war and illustrates how Roma in Ukraine have mobilized against Russian aggression” (ibid.:

1). In this context, popular music distributed on social media plays an important role and inscribes Romani musicians into “Ukraine’s resistance narrative” (ibid.).

Another neglected field in ethnomusicological Romani music studies is religious musical practices of Roma/Romnja. Notable exceptions are the works of Barbara Rose Lange (e.g., 2003) and Magdalena Slavkova (2012). István and Kinga Povedák’s (2024) article “Christian Roma Musicking in Hungary” deals with the music itself and its protagonists and highlights “the significance of Romani religious music in the process of Romani conversion, the emergence of a Christian Romani collective identity, and the development of Romani relations and inculturation” (ibid.: 1). Ieva Weaver’s (2024) article “Researching a Community in Transition: Latvian Roma between Latvia and the UK” is first of all an article about migratory movements of Roma/Romnja from Latvia to the UK, but the importance of religious music to this community is visible in the recent fieldwork conducted in the UK.

The most surprising article for me personally was Dominika Moravčíková’s (2024) “Picking the Wild Poppies: Access, Funding, and a Researcher’s Narrative in the Case of Neoliberal Philanthropy Supporting Roma Musical Talent in Slovakia.” The author analyses the project *Divé maky* (“Wild Poppies”) which provides individual scholarships for extraordinarily talented Romani children. The author critically reflects on the model itself and, by using one case study, shows the shortcomings of the program, which is deeply rooted in the neoliberal framework. From several experiences with philanthropic projects for Roma/Romnja over the many years of my research, I share the author’s criticism, and never having written about it myself, I am grateful that Dominika Moravčíková has done so.

Some of the approaches in this special collection may be provocative, and I believe this is necessary if we deal with individuals and music styles in a minority setting that has been and is shaped by centuries of discrimination. May this collection be thought-provoking and may it lead to lively discussions within Romani music studies and beyond.

## Acknowledgments

The publishing process required considerable effort from all parties involved, but finally, we are able to present a wonderful collection of articles. Everyone deserves acknowledgement for making this possible amidst their numerous other obligations.

My thanks go first of all to the authors of articles for their highly inspiring contributions and likewise to the anonymous peer reviewers for their extremely helpful comments on the article submissions, as well as to the members of M&M’s Editorial Board for their input on this editorial. Essential was and is Malik Sharif’s work as Managing Editor. Without his dedicated work we would have no special collection and I am very grateful to have such a skilled and experienced person at my side. Finally, English language editing has been provided by Mike Delaney for the articles and by Benjy Fox-Rosen for this editorial, for which both deserve thanks.

The publication of the special collection “Contemporary Views on Romani Music and Romani Music Studies” was funded in part by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [[10.55776/Z352](https://doi.org/10.55776/Z352)].

## References

- Beissinger, Margaret H. 2024. “‘Songs of Pain’: Muzica Lăutărească and the Voices of Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.33>
- Helbig, Adriana. 2024. “Romani Musical Resistance During Russia’s War in Ukraine.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.35>
- Hemetek, Ursula. 2006. “Applied Ethnomusicology in the Process of the Political Recognition of a Minority: A Case Study of the Austrian Roma.” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 38: 35–57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20464971>
- . 2017. “Roma and ‘Their’ Music in South-Eastern Europe: Silenced Voices? Exclusion, Racism and Counter-Strategies.” In *Researching Music Censorship*, edited by Annemette Kirkegaard, Helvi Järviluoma, Jan Sverre Knudsen, and Jonas Otterbeck, 83–103. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- . 2021. “Launching a New Scholarly Journal on Music and Minorities.” *Music & Minorities* 1. <https://doi.org/10.52411/mm.2021.2>
- Jalo, Daisam. 2024. “The Dom, a Marginalized Community in the Syrian Music Scene.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.20>
- Jurková, Zuzana. 2024. “Leperiben/Remembering: Romani Musical Remembering in Today’s Prague.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.22>
- Lange, Barbara Rose. 2003. *Holy Brotherhood: Romani Music in a Hungarian Pentecostal Church*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacMillen, Ian. 2024. “Romani Music Collections, the Ruptured Archive, and Epistemic Justice in the United States.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.26>
- Marsh, Hazel, Esbjörn Wettermark, and Tiffany Hore. 2024. “Calling out the Catalogue: Romani Singers in an Archive of English Folk Song.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.25>
- Moravčíková, Dominika. 2024. “Picking the Wild Poppies: Access, Funding, and a Researcher’s Narrative in the Case of Neoliberal Philanthropy Supporting Roma Musical Talent in Slovakia.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.28>
- Povedák, István, and Kinga Povedák. 2024. “Christian Roma Musicking in Hungary.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.37>
- Ringsmut, Martin. 2024. “Sounding Traumatic Memory: *The Symphonia Romani – Bari Duk* and *Dui Rroma* as Memory Media of the Roma Genocide during World War II.” *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.36>
- Silverman, Carol. 2007. “Trafficking in the Exotic with ‘Gypsy’ Music: Balkan Roma, Cosmopolitanism, and ‘World Music’ Festivals. In *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image, and Regional Political Discourse*, edited by Donna A. Buchanan, 335–361. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.

- Slavkova, Magdalena. 2012. "Singing and Dancing in the Spirit': Gypsy Pentecostal Music and Musicians." *Axis Mundi* 7(2): 36–45.
- Weaver, Ieva. 2024. "Researching a Community in Transition: Latvian Roma between Latvia and the UK." *Music & Minorities* 3. <https://doi.org/10.52413/mm.2024.34>

## Multimedia Sources

- Costache, Ioanida, Ursula Hemetek, Mindj Panther, and Mirjam Karoly. 2023. "*amenca ketane*. Histories of Trauma, Music and Romani Empowerment." Video of the 2023 MMRC Lecture at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw), November 16, 2023, mdw Mediathek, 01:45:22. Accessed November 15, 2024. <https://mdw.vhx.tv/videos/mmrc-lecture-2023>
- Music and Minorities Research Center. 2024. *Ružake gila*. Digital exhibition about the life and music of Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos (1945–2022). Accessed November 15, 2024. <https://ruzakegila.at>, <https://doi.org/10.21939/23dv-v776>

## Author Biography

Ursula Hemetek is Editor-in-Chief of M&M and Director of the Music and Minorities Research Center the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. She served as Chair of the ICTM Study Group on Music and Minorities from 1999 to 2017, as ICTM Secretary General from 2017 to 2021, and received the Wittgenstein Award in 2018.