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Conversation with Hugo Zemp

Hugo Zemp

Biographical Note (from www.der.org)

As an adolescent Hugo Zemp wanted to become a jazz musician, and at the age of 20 entered in a three-year program of percussion at the Conservatory of Basle, his hometown in Switzerland. In 1958, at the age of 21, he travelled to Côte d'Ivoire to experience African percussion. There he met André Schaeffner, the father of French ethnomusicology from the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and his wife Denise Paulme, professor of anthropology. Seeing Zemp's enthusiasm for African music, they invited him to come to Paris to study. He finished his musical studies and began studying anthropology, linguistic and ethnomusicology in Paris.

Conducting his fieldwork between 1961 and 1967 in the Côte d'Ivoire, mostly among the Dan people, Zemp wrote a doctoral thesis that garnered interest among French- and English-speaking ethnomusicologists studying West African music. He also made shorter stays among other peoples to document and record their music, among these the Senufo, whose balafon music impressed him so much that he returned to Côte d'Ivoire forty years after his first encounter to make the four-film series *Masters of the Balafon*. In 1967 he became researcher at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) at the Ethnomusicology Department of the Musée de l'Homme, in Paris, where he worked until his retirement in 2004.

An important event for Zemp's professional life was an encounter with Daniel de Coppet, whose sound recordings from the 'Are'are people of the Solomon Islands almost let him forget African music for a time! Hugo Zemp started a new fieldwork period in 1969 with a 16mm camera, making all of the mistakes of a beginning filmmaker. Zemp began to find his way into ethnographic filmmaking with the help of friend and ethnographic filmmaker, Jean-Dominique Lajoux, as well as all of the books he could find on documentary filmmaking and the films of Jean Rouch.

An esthetic shock was watching Rouch's film *Tourou et Bitti*, a nine-minute sequence shot on a possession ritual in Niger. This film and the writings of Jean Rouch persuaded him that long takes with a moving camera, and without zooming, could be the ideal strategy for filming music in the field. On his second field trip to the Solomon Islands in 1974, Zemp made the film *'Are'are Music* to show the native classification of music, explained by a master musician. With its richness of musical types and the beauty of the polyphonic instrumental and vocal music in the film, it was and still is an important event for ethnomusicologists. Zemp, though, remained unsatisfied with

the artificial shooting techniques (he urged the musician to be short because of limited film stock), and because many musical types had to be shot out of context.

Zemp went on to make a series of four films about the traditional local yodelling of a mountain valley in his home country Switzerland, learning from watching David McDougall's films to use subtitled conversations to transmit verbal information. Next was a film about overtone or bi-phonic singing, *The Song of Harmonics*, which showed for the first time sound synchronized shots of x-ray and of spectral analyses. At the invitation of Georgian anthropologists met at a film festival in Estonia, he shot his two first videos in the Georgian Caucasus in 1991 and then returning to his first love, African music, he made his series on Senufo balafons, and two films on urban music of Côte d'Ivoire.

Besides his many publications, 18 recorded discs and position as the general editor of the record series "Collection CNRS/Musée de l'Homme", Zemp has written several articles on filming music and taught analysis and production of ethnomusicological films at the University of Paris X-Nanterre. He has presented his work at many ethnomusicology conferences and universities in Europe and America, and many of his films have received awards at international festivals.

Filmography (all films originally in French)

'Are'are Music (1979)

Shaping Bamboo (1979)

A Swiss Yodelling Series: Jüüzli of the Muotatal: The Wedding of Susanna and Josef (1986)

Glattalp (1986)

Yootzing and Yodelling (1987)

Head Voice, Chest Voice (1987)

The Song of Harmonics (1990)

The Music of Georgia (Caucasus) series:

The Feast-Day of Tamar and Lashari (1998)

Funeral Chants from the Georgian Caucasus (2007)

Duduki of Tbilisi: Eldar Shoshitashvili and His Students (2012)

The Masters of the Balafon series:

Funeral Festivities (2001)

The Joy of Youth (2002)

Friend, Well Come! (2002)

The Wood and the Calabash (2002)

An African Brass Band (2004-06)

Siaka, an African Musician (2005)

Polyphony of Ceriana: The Compagnia Sacco (2010)

Related Resources

Read Hugo Zemp's article, "Filming Music and Looking at Music Films", originally published in *Ethnomusicology*, Fall 1988.

Nicola Scaldaferrì

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His research focuses on music of Southeastern Europe, Southern Italy, Southern Africa, and electroacoustic music. Major publications include *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico* (1997), *Nel paese dei cupa cupa* (with Stefano Vaja, 2006), the edited books *Audiovisual Media and Identity Issues in*

Southeastern Europe (with E.Pistrick and G. Schwörer 2011), *I Suoni dell'Albero* (with S. Feld, 2012), and the video documentary *Two Portraits from Ghana* (2013).

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The conversation, in French, started after seeing the film *The Feast-Day of Tamar and Lasbari*.

HZ

...this was the first time I was using a video camera. I had it just a week before leaving for Georgia. It was really new to me. I was used to a 16 mm camera with a separate tape recorder for the sound.

As I was using it for the first time, half of the materials had the time code recorded on the bottom of the frame. I had not understood yet that it could be switched off. Therefore I had to cut the images at the bottom and resize them, for this reason the video you have seen is in 16:9.

NS

It reminds me of the experience of Jean Rouch using a camera for the first time, when he was in a boat shooting alternately the two sides of the river, and being not aware of the same final result...

HZ

I have an anecdote about Rouch. When my first film of the balafon series was displayed at the *Maison des Cultures du Monde*, during the discussion, Rouch approached me about the scene and publicly told me: "I can tell you a secret: when you are looking through the viewer of the camera (held on the right shoulder), you are not able to see what is happening at your right; so you should have someone at your back who touches your shoulder to point other interesting things that may happen and you will turn to it." Having always used 16 mm cameras held on the shoulder, he was not aware that small hand video cameras have small screens and when the camera is held with both hands on the level of the belly, one can shoot, look at the screen and at the same time turn one's head and watch what happens out of the frame, left or right.

NS

Jean Rouch plays a landmark role experience in your activity.

HZ

Yes, you know that his film *Tourou et Bitti* was crucial for me. When I watched this long sequence shot of 9 minutes for the first time, and many times afterwards, I thought that sequence shots, or in general very long shots with a moving camera, would be a marvelous way to film long musical pieces without interruption. But in contrast to Rouch, I did not want to cover music with voice-over narration, so I found that short written texts in slightly transparent boxes allowed me to keep the full sound of music and the image. After that, I did this on all my films shot in video.

NS

I agree, the presence of written indications does not disturb the music. Some positions in your work are constantly maintained in a coherent way. At the same time, however, you changed between many fields of research – from Solomon Islands to Georgia, from West Africa to Switzerland.

I have a question for you on this topic – the same I asked some time ago to Michael Herzfeld, about his moving from the Mediterranean area to Thailand. What is the reason for your choices, so different in time and space? Are there some connections among them?

HZ

The main reasons are the encounters I had with other people.

I was a student at the Conservatory in Switzerland, and I wanted to become a professional jazz musician, so I went to Africa to listen to the African drums.

Some friends of mine went to Congo (at that time a Belgian territory) to play dance music for the white people there. I wanted to return there with them, but they changed their plans. I asked other friends but nobody wanted to come to Congo to play dance music for the whites... Eventually I decided to go to the Ivory Coast because the travel was not as long and it was cheaper. When I was there visiting a museum and explaining my interest to the director, he suggested going to a village where an ethnomusicologist was working. He was André Schaeffner, the “father” of French ethnomusicology. I traveled around for two months, and got in touch with the Dan and the Senufo people. I met Schaeffner again on the boat trip back to Europe; he suggested a list of books to me, and invited me to come to Paris the following summer to make some practical work in the ethnomusicology department of the Musée de l’Homme.

After six years of studies in Paris, at the final stage of my PhD thesis, I wanted to become a researcher at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) and I was required to do a presentation in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ seminar. After my presentation about Dan music, Daniel de Coppet, an anthropologist member of the seminar, invited me at home to listen to some recordings he made in the Pacific. I was so enthusiastic about this beautiful and completely unknown music (to the West), that he proposed I join him on a one-year field trip to the Solomon Islands.

During the editing of *‘Are’are Music* at the CNRS, I met the ethnologist Dominique Lajoux, who had taught me how to use a 16mm camera. He was going to East Switzerland to photograph maskers at a New Year festival, who performed strange shouts. I immediately thought of yodelling and took a tape recorder and went with him to this festival. I searched

through record shops for Swiss yodelling recorded in the field during festivals and peasant work and I did not find one single record. There were only official yodel choirs, recorded in the studio under the direction of a conductor. This led me to make the first two published field records on Appenzell and Muotatal yodelling. The latter was so strange, with intervals out of the tempered major scale and very high-pitched tense voices that I decided after the record to make four films about it.

NS

So, in this chain of encounters, you arrived at the yodel of your homeland whilst passing through the editing of the Solomon Islands music....

HZ

I thought: I am making research on the music of the Solomon Islands, and I ignore what happens at home.

After the *Swiss Yodelling Series*, I was at the Musée de l'Homme working with sonograms, which allowed me to visualize the sound spectrum with sync sound. Tran Quang Hai was there, practicing overtone singing from Mongolia and I had the idea of using the new medium for a film on this topic. When I presented the film *The Song of Harmonics* at a documentary festival in Estonia, I met colleagues from Georgia and they invited me to come to Georgia to film whatever I wanted.

So, all the changes in my life as an ethnomusicologist have been marked by meetings with someone.

However, I can tell you that I want to enjoy the music; if I choose to do new fieldwork in a different part of the world; there is also a personal element of pleasure, meetings are not enough.

NS

The answer of Herzfeld to my question about the choice was a little different. For him the quality of the food is an important element in choosing a place for research.

HZ

I have always thought that good food is connected with good music. However, this is not true for the Solomon Islands: no salt, no spices and sauces, no fish, only a little meat.

NS

In the *'Are'are Music* film we can see some appetizing images of pork...

HZ

Yes. But it happens 3-4 times per year for funeral celebrations. It was not a daily situation. Luckily, there was the beautiful music... otherwise, I may not have stayed there, since the living conditions were difficult: long walks in the mud (it was raining nearly every day) and dangerous open-sea travels on canoes.

NS

Do you think that your approach in observing the musical practices changed during your passage through all these different contexts? What is your feeling about your own perspective through all these encounters? My personal opinion is that we can recognize in your work a coherent perspective maintained throughout the time, despite the change of technology, from *'Are'are Music* to the most recent works. But I would like to know what you think about it.

HZ

In my personal perspective, the experience of *'Are'are Music* is apart from the others. It was my first film experience. Today I am unhappy about the result of that film. But at that time there was no other solution to working there. During my second stay there, the CNRS sent me a 16mm camera for 3-4 months, and during that period there were no festivities to see the music in context, so I worked mainly on ethno-theory and classification. There was certainly an impressive richness and variety of musical situations. Some of the traditional musical genres were no longer in common use, so the elders told me whom to contact and arranged recording and filming sessions. I thought of connecting them with some 'constructed' interviews. I had a limited quantity of film stock to use, and during the interviews I had to ask my main informant and friend to give short answers, which sounded a bit artificial.

After that, I worked on the *Swiss Yodelling Series*. Here we have only one musical genre, explored in different films with different approaches. In this case I had been influenced by the documentary film school of Beaconsfield, near London, which I visited during a workshop together with English ethnomusicologist John Baily. Another important influence was that of David McDougall, especially in using conversations instead of interviews.

From the perspective of that approach, I am more satisfied. However, technically the *Swiss Yodelling Series* were not shot as well as the *'Are'are Music*. For the new American distribution by *Documentary Educational Resources*, I restored the films with Final Cut, improving many things, shortening some shots without shortening the music, making new subtitles and color corrections.

NS

You mentioned the topic of conversation. An interesting aspect is to consider the films as a kind of collaborative work, or at least something to share with the musicians. Was this always important for you, since the beginning?

HZ

Yes, and it came to me from Rouch's ideas. Despite technical obstacles, I had already shown in 1977 a first version of *'Are'are Music* to the local people on an 8mm copy, using a generator for electricity. It was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life: to see the reaction of the people, especially in seeing each other four years after the film, or recognizing people who had died in the meantime.

The local screening of *'Are'are Music* was also a crucial point. The regional council of Malaita island was consulted to obtain research permission from the national government, and for a reason that I ignored, the permission was refused. The *'Are'are* council of chiefs, after watching this first cut of the film, wrote to the general government that they wanted me to

continue research, and I got the research permission. I then filmed the whole part about vocal music, for which I had not had enough film stock during the preceding fieldwork.

NS

In the *Masters of the Balafon* series the idea of sharing experience and collaborating with local people and musicians is also very evident, even in the structure of the movies. But what about the local feedback?

HZ

You did not ask me why I went back to the Ivory Coast after thirty years of interruption! During all that time, I was thinking from time to time about my first encounter with the balafon music of the Senufo people. In 1998 I got an invitation to a conference on African music in Abidjan, organized by a former student of our ethnomusicology group in Paris. I thought this was the occasion to go back and took two video cameras with me. Here again I was lucky to meet a Senufo balafon player in Abidjan, Sikaman Soro, who became my research assistant and introduced me to the best musicians in the area where he came from.

To turn back to your question of local feedback: everyday, I copied the shots and watched them with my assistant and some of the people who were in the film, to get some accompanying information, and to program new shootings. I sent back the first VHS cassettes and some people have seen them. But the real event was two years ago, when all four of my films were projected in several villages during a regional music festival. People stayed whole nights and wanted to watch the films again and again! A funny thing is that many people took some sound from the films with their mobile phones. One man said that the films were like the painting of Mona Lisa: every time he looks at the films, he discovers something new! In one village, an old man was sitting in the first row for the screening, telling that he must be the first to see that film. He was the man who publicly announced the gifts for the funeral, announcing my name as a guest who had come from afar to film the funeral. Since that day, the people jokingly call him Hugo Zemp... so he had the right to see the film first!

My field assistant told me these stories. We still have monthly contacts by telephone and email since the first shooting in 1998, and he asks me for financial help for funerals of important musicians whom I filmed, for hospital costs, school fees for children, roof reparations, just like most anthropologists who give something back in exchange for what the people have given them for the research.

NS

In my opinion, one striking aspect of some of your films, is the analytical component, particularly, *Head Voice, Chest Voice*. I guess at that time the realization was really long and complex. Actually some graphic solutions work very well in explaining the polyphonic structure, as well as the melodic contours. How did this idea of doing the graphic animations come to you? Did it happen whilst you were working and shooting in the field? Or perhaps you arrived there with this analytical purpose?

HZ

No; after many weeks spent during three years in the Muotatal village and publishing the record, and making two thousand still photos as well, I just went back with the idea of making a film. Because the material was so rich, it became three films. During a screening in a local school, some teachers asked me how to explain the students the technique and structure of yodelling. I thought about the best way to visualize some musical elements and remembered graphics on millimeter paper which can be read by people not familiar with musical notation. My idea was to animate the graphics with sync sound in *Head Voice, Chest Voice*. I was also thinking of writing a small book for school purposes, but at that time no budget was found to print it.

Only today, while I am preparing the study guide for the four films of a 2-DVD set distributed by DER, I asked my assistant and sound man of the films, Peter Betschart, who still lives in his village, what the outcomes were of the films. He told me that the films have never been used in the schools... I had sent VHS cassettes to schools and made a German version especially for local people, besides the French and English versions. Performers and their families still have some copies, but nobody uses VHS cassette players any longer. Now that the English version is distributed on restored DVDs and that a local newspaper published an important article, many local people have ordered the DVDs, besides those for whom I sent free copies.

I was thinking about a continuation of the series. You can see in the film boy of a few years old, who today is a professional musician and travels around the world; however, he continues to yodel in the traditional way, learned from the elders, and not in the official folkloristic version. Today there is a new generation of performers, using drums and other instruments, and at the same time they are recovering the old style of yodelling.

NS

This is an interesting point; in many other contexts I know, the young performers are recovering the old musical styles, sometimes skipping their parents' generation – connected with folkloristic practice – and searching for a link with the musical style of their grandparents.

But I would like to come back to the topic of analysis. In *Head Voice, Chest Voice* you have a kind of double analytical perspective: the film itself is an analysis of the yodel in relationship to the context; and at the same time, there is an analysis of the structural element of the performance.

Usually when you make a film, do you think about it as an analytical process in itself?

HZ

It depends. Among my films, *The Songs of Harmonics* surely goes in that direction.

In that case I started with the idea of using spectral analysis of sound and of filming with x-ray what happens inside the mouth cavity. Whereas x-ray still photographs were already known, I could film for the first time the movements of the tongue in sync sound. A workshop held by Tran Quang Hai, who teaches the participants – allowed at the same time the audience of the film to get the information without voice over narration. In our

Ethnomusicology department of the Musée de l'Homme, we received a new sound spectrum analyzer that allowed the filming of the sound spectrum for the first time in sync sound. When I showed a first cut in our seminar, I was really enthusiastic. Nobody had ever seen such images in real time. But a colleague told me that it was too didactic – this was not really a compliment, he meant “boring”, and I was disappointed. I thought about how I could transmit to the audience the discovery of these never-before seen images, which were so exciting for me. I decided to try to make the audience experience the process of discovery, as I lived it during filming. The reaction of the audience was very positive. Also in the reviews it was underlined that actually the film is not just a result of research, but is the research in itself.

To come to more recent works, I can tell you that some of the ideas of the *Swiss Yodelling Series*, especially the relationship between folklore and the local tradition, are also present in *Polyphony of Ceriana: The Compagnia Sacco*. It is extraordinary in Ceriana to see the members of the Compagnia Sacco singing both amongst the local people and on stage.

I tried to show the two different aspects with two different ways of shooting. During the concert, I used two cameras, both on tripods, one with a fixed general shot to show the whole scene, the other with a tele-lens position and panning, just like a spectator “pans” with his eyes, looking from left to right, focusing on different performers. The singers asked me afterwards why I did not climb up on stage to film them more closely, like a TV cameraman who was there. I explained that to film them during the concert, I wanted to be in the middle of the audience, like the spectators who were sitting in a fixed place.

But when the singers performed in informal situations, I changed my position with traveling shots, moving from one performer to another with a mobile hand-held camera. I was among the performers who also changed places, but instead of singing, I was filming.

NS

In *Polyphony of Ceriana: The Compagnia Sacco*, the sequence with the performance of the famous ballad *Donna Lombarda*, at the very beginning of the movie, is very striking to me. Here, you selected and edited together different performances of a song...

HZ

Yes, I alternated stanzas coming from different performances; on stage, during informal gatherings, and even on the terrace of my house after eating and drinking together when the performers had come to watch a first cut of the film.

NS

One of your most relevant assertions is to never stop the continuity of a musical performance, and to keep its integrity. In this case your choice was different – or, at least, you proposed a different idea of the unity of a musical piece. To create an ideal unity of the ballad - on the bases of the lyrics - you assembled portions of many musical performances...

HZ

A complete performance of all the stanzas of *Donna Lombarda* lasts 10 minutes. I was wondering how I could deal with this. People watching concerts on TV are used to many

alternating shots from different positions; general shots, close-ups, etc. Concerts of classical music, as well as of rock music, are filmed with many cameras, up to a dozen! How do you keep the interest of an audience with a film shot with a single camera?

I was aware that this ballad was really crucial in the repertory of the Compagnia Sacco. Even at concerts the performers select only some stanzas. It would be difficult for an audience of non-Italian speakers to listen to 10 stanzas during 10 minutes without being able to understand the lyrics (and at a concert there are no subtitles like in my film!).

But I liked the idea of having an “entire” *Donna Lombarda*. Firstly, I had some stanzas filmed in different settings. Before the annual concert in their village, I asked them to sing it in its entirety, but it was not possible because of the presence of other groups that required their time; so I told the Compagnia to sing the stanzas which were missing during my earlier shootings, and they sang them. Eventually I had all the stanzas. It was also necessary, during the editing, to make some adjustments to the pitches, with digital editing, with the help of Giuliano D’Angiolini, whose role was crucial in this project. (He is another of my encounters...)

NS

In some way, in order to respect the idea of unity of this song, you made a kind of ‘falsification’ of the performances...

HZ

It is a “falsification” that eventually gives us the idea of the reality and its diversification, because if you listen to it during a concert, you will never hear a complete *Donna Lombarda*. All the songs, even the shorter ones, were shortened by the singers, not for the camera. Giuliano d’Angiolini, who has known the Compagnia Sacco for many years, told me that this was a recent phenomenon, probably related to our time in which everything is going in a hurry! I suspect that the performers at informal meetings enjoy singing many songs together that they like, without feeling necessary to sing all the stanzas.

NS

The relationship between shooting and editing is always a sensitive point in making a film. My feeling, looking at your documentaries, is that from your perspective the moment of shooting is perhaps the most important, thanks also to the use of techniques like sequence shots, or the presence of a special microphone.

HZ

Unlike *‘Are’are Music*, where a stereo microphone was always put on a stand for ambient sound (but the 16 mm film of the time did not allow stereo sound!), in the *Swiss Yodelling Series* my co-researcher and soundman followed me with a stereo microphone, therefore the sound changes at the same time as the framing of the camera. For the films shot with a video camera, I used a microphone fixed on top with very good isolation, to avoid noises made by touching the camera. This microphone, which is not commercially produced, is a modified

electret microphone, where the stereo heads are replaced by one shotgun head and one cardioid head. There are other devices available, every filmmaker has his favorite one.

NS

But do you think the editing process is in any way crucial in the construction of the film? And not only from a technological perspective, but also from the narrative perspective?

HZ

Yes. Since the beginning, I worked at the CNRS with a professional editor. He was always my advisor, and also edited the documentaries from the Ivory Coast. We worked a lot at my house during the night, because during the day he had his own job. Of course, over time I started to learn to edit by myself. *An African Brass Band* and *Siaka, an African Musician*, and also *Polyphony of Ceriana* and my newest film *Dudukki of Tbilisi*, I edited by myself. But a very important aspect is that his perspective is different, and sometimes he completely changed the structure of the editing.

NS

Do you pay attention to his suggestions, even when they seem to contrast with your ideas?

HZ

Yes, and I show him all the modifications I make.

NS

So do you agree with the idea of an external eye proposed by Rouch?

HZ

Yes, absolutely. Thanks to my adviser I decided to start the film with *Donna Lombarda*. In a first version of editing I was beginning in a more usual way, by showing the village, the geographical environment, and planning to put *Donna Lombarda* in the middle. But he convinced me of a different solution, which I am happy with.

NS

A last question brings us back to Africa. Not to your films, but to a crucial and controversial point of African musicology. You did landmark research on the musical practice of West Africa, also in the presence and the use of the balafon. In your opinion, following your experience on this topic, do you think that this instrument ultimately “speaks” or “sings”?

HZ

The instruments speak, absolutely. During fieldwork, with my assistant, we verified this point a lot of times. But of course, music is not limited to three pitches of *senar*, the language of the Senufo people. What is important is the relation of the pitches, the melodic structure going up or down or staying on the same level. There are variations and improvisations. With the help of my local assistant, I have written an article about that, in which I also quote the results of other researchers, foreigners and locals (Zemp 2010).

But, in conclusion, I would like to recall a point of a documentary on which you collaborated with the filmmaker Rossella Schillaci, whose work I believe is the opposite of what I want to do.

There is a moment in *Pratica e Maestria*, when the two old *zampogna* musicians are watching the images of a report about themselves on the TV: do you remember what they say, when complaining about the journalists?

NS

Yes: “They could have waited until the end of our tune...”

HZ

Voilà. And the filmmaker in that documentary - just like many other filmmakers - did the same: never waited until the end of a musical piece...

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