

Poul Rovsing Olsen: IFMC/ICTM President, 1977–1982

Peter Cooke

When Poul Rovsing Olsen (1922–1982) was appointed president of the International Folk Music Council in 1977, he had already been a member of the Council for over three decades. He brought with him a wealth of experience. He was a composer of considerable merit, receiving his initial musical training at the University of Copenhagen. Having developed a strong interest in composition, he then studied with Nadia Boulanger and Olivier Messiaen in Paris. He had also studied for a second degree in law and, from 1949, worked at the Ministry of Education where he was involved in drafting the Danish Copyright Act. However, an interest in non-Western music had led him to explore musical traditions in the Arabian Gulf, Egypt, Turkey, and Greenland. In each case, he recorded and subsequently published representative samples of the traditional music of these regions.

During the years leading up to his presidential appointment (taking over from Klaus Wachsmann), he had proved himself a willing and highly useful member of the Executive Board. As Keeper of the Danish Folklore Archives (Dansk Folkemindesamling), he took on the responsibility for the care of the IFMC's own archives (figure 1). Rovsing Olsen served as treasurer when the IFMC Secretariat was located in Copenhagen, 1967–1968. He was co-opted to a number of committees, such as the Membership Committee; another to consider rule changes regarding verification of the Council's accounts; and yet another to investigate the practicality of producing field recordings made by members of the IFMC. In 1971 he was asked to join the small committee investigating ways and means of updating and continuing the hugely important bibliography, created by Jaap Kunst and published in his ground-breaking book *Ethno-musicology*. Kunst had died in 1960, and the bibliography clearly needed updating and expanding to include citations of more recent research publications, as well as to make it available on a continuing basis.

Given his decades of membership in the IFMC and the usefulness of his wide knowledge and experience, it was little surprise that in 1975, at a Board meeting in Regensburg, Poul Rovsing Olsen was unanimously

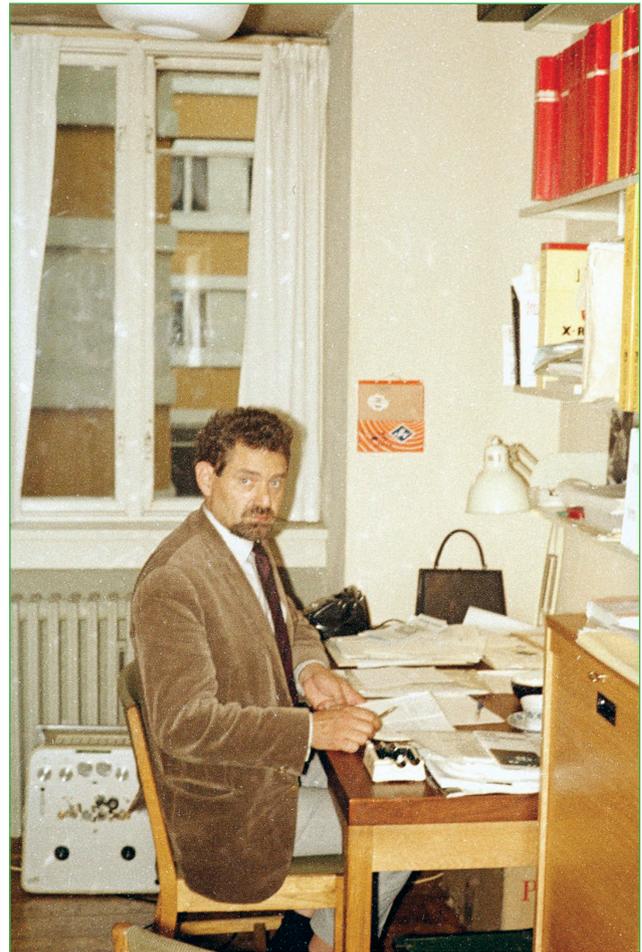


Figure 1. Poul Rovsing Olsen in his office at the Danish Folklore Archives, 1967
(photo courtesy of the Danish Folklore Archives).

nominated for the presidency of the Council to succeed Klaus Wachsmann, who was due to retire in August 1977.

At the 53rd meeting of the Executive Board, held in August 1977, Kishibe Shigeo, known for his detailed research into music of the Chinese Sui and Tang dynasties, had observed that the Council's work was heavily based in the Western world. Rovsing Olsen's own experiences in researching and collecting in the Middle East



Figure 2. Poul Rovsing Olsen, 1978
(photo by Zofia Kruszona).

and India led him to agree that the Council is “much too much Western,” and to ask for suggestions as to how the 1979 conference might help to remedy this, for the geographical scope of the Council’s work was widening fast. (EB minutes, 53rd meeting, 18 Aug 1977:§849).

This was also a period when members of the IFMC were considering the usefulness of the term “folk music,” not just because it formed part of the Council’s title, though it had also become clear that the name of the Council was in itself some hindrance to its attempts to strengthen links with other international organizations. The term was considered irrelevant to scholars in many parts of the world. In Rovsing Olsen’s own institution—the Danish Folklore Archives—“folk music” was already a questionable term. I recall his close colleague, Thorkild Knudsen, confronting me in 1969, microphone in hand, at the Edinburgh School of Scottish Studies, with the words, “Tell me, Peter, who are ‘the folk?’” However, it was not until the Board met in Dresden in 1978 that a proposal for a name change was put forward by Dieter Christensen, one which led to “vigorous, serious and far-reaching discussion” (EB minutes, 54th meeting, 18–21 Aug 1978:§883). Members were clearly divided about this proposal, and it was only later in Tunis in 1980 that the Board voted by a narrow majority to recommend to the General Assembly that the name be

changed to the International Council for Traditional Music (EB minutes, 57th meeting, 1–4 Jul 1980:§938).

When the change of name was eventually achieved, Rovsing Olsen (figure 2) wrote in a short piece entitled “Summing Up the Conference”:

We hope to have found a name which, much better than the original one, explains what our Council stands for in the world of scholarship—and in the world of international organizations. The IFMC has been concerned, from its beginnings, with all kinds of traditional music, not only with “folk music”. This has not always been understood by outsiders. (Rovsing Olsen 1983; orig. written in 1981)

Other pressing needs of the time were for the Board to give advice and to rationalize the degree of supervision necessary relating to numerous new national committees and study groups, which were forming in many parts of the world outside Europe and needed guidance and some tactful control. The Board was also finding difficulty in cooperating with the OCORA record company over plans to publish recordings resulting from the research of the Council’s members. At this time, too, the Council wanted to establish more fruitful contacts and relationships with the International Music Council and with the Society for Ethnomusicology in the US. All these issues called for resourcefulness and tact from the president.

The Council’s three vice presidents were given useful parts to play with regard to these issues. Claudie Marcel Dubois—one of the IFMC’s founding members in 1947—still served from time to time as a vice president and was asked to help maintain fruitful contacts with the Council’s national committees. Erich Stockmann, another active, long-time member of the Council, had recently been in contact with the International Music Council on behalf of the IFMC in an attempt to establish better working contacts and was asked to continue exploring such possibilities. He was also asked to serve as interim chair at the meeting following Rovsing Olsen’s death and was later nominated as Council president. Trần Văn Khê was the third vice president to serve with Rovsing Olsen. Although he was born in Vietnam, he spent much of his working career based in France, but maintained useful contacts with numerous Asian musical institutions and scholars. All three vice presidents had good relationships with the president.

It was a shock to the Board and to members everywhere to learn at its meeting on 6 July 1982 in Dolna Krupa, Czechoslovakia, that President Poul Rovsing Olsen had succumbed to a brief, but incurable, illness just four days earlier. Despite serving for just less than five years as president, this genial scholar had made a huge contribution during a very difficult period in the history of the Council.

References cited

- Kunst, Jaap. 1955. *Ethno-musicology: A Study of Its Nature, Its Problems, Methods, and Representative Personalities to Which Is Added a Bibliography*. 2nd ed. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Rovsing Olsen, Poul. 1983. "Summing Up the Conference." *YTM* 15: xviii.