

## ICTM Study Group on Computer Aided Research

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The beginnings of the Study Group on Computer Aided Research date back to the 28th ICTM World Conference in Stockholm/Helsinki in 1985. In response to the emerging need to support ethnomusicological studies with information technology (IT) solutions, Dieter Christensen organized the special session entitled “Computers and traditional music: The use of digital equipment in information retrieval, exchange and analysis.”

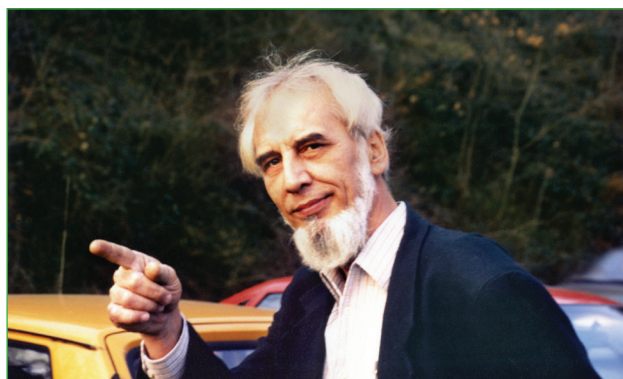
The meeting turned out to be a great success. As Carl Rahkonen writes in his report,

the first computer session created such interest that the room was full to capacity, and the topic had scarcely been covered in the ninety minutes allotted. It was decided to convene a second session on the topic during the Helsinki part of the Conference. (Rahkonen 1986:31)

Yet it still was not enough—finally, there were three sessions. Despite the broad scope of the title, the discussions were limited to the use of computers in retrieving information on materials in ethnic sound recording archives and similar institutions, which gave an initial name to the group then proposed to be formed—Study Group on Computer Retrieval, with Helmut Schaffrath (Essen, Federal Republic of Germany; [figure 1](#)) appointed as its chairman (*BICTM* 69, Oct 1986:26–28).

The first independent meeting of the group took place on 1–3 October 1986 in Essen. This time, the scope of subjects covered a wider range of problems: “Retrieval and databases”; “Automatic musical notation and analysis”; and “Network activities.”

In 1987, the group was officially recognized by the ICTM Executive Board as the Study Group on Computer Aided Research. Under this name it was announced for the first time in the *Bulletin* (*BICTM* 71, Oct 1987:6), with Helmut Schaffrath and Anthony Seeger as co-chairs. Its purpose was “to find new ways to use computers in data collecting, analyzing and storing” (*ibid.*). In 1987 the study group was present at the ICTM world conference in Berlin with five papers given at special sessions.



**Figure 1.** Helmut Schaffrath. Bochum, Germany, 1992 (photo by Ulrich Franzke).

In the time that followed, the group met at least every two years (1988: Edinburgh, UK; 1990: Marseille, France; 1991: Nitra, Czechoslovakia; 1992: Vienna, Austria; 1994: Warsaw, Poland; 1996: Jyväskylä, Finland; 1997: Dolná Krupá, Slovakia; 1998: Tel Aviv, Israel; 1999: Kraków, Poland; 2004: Vilnius, Lithuania).

The group’s activities can be divided into two periods separated by the sudden and untimely death of Helmut Schaffrath in March 1994. In the first years, only researchers from Western Europe participated in the meetings. From my perspective from Eastern Europe, it can be explained by the fact that at that time ethnomusicological centres in Eastern Europe—although rich in repositories of folk music resources and very well-developed music theory and analysis—did not yet have the right IT equipment. My first personal computer, bought in 1990 after enormous sacrifices, served primarily for typing and experimenting with the database software dBase. The economic issues hindering trips to the West were also important, especially before political changes in the 1990s.

My first encounter with the study group took place at the ICTM world conference in Schladming (1989) and was most impressive. Although some IT applications discussed in the 1980s may sound naïve from today’s perspective—such as computerized cataloguing—at that time they were innovative solutions

enriching the ethnomusicologist's workshop with new tools to operate on large amounts of data. Some issues are still surprisingly topical, such as ensuring the compatibility of different systems, standardizing terminology, controlling access to information, ensuring information security, protecting the rights of informants, and so on.

The scope of the problem has constantly changed, however, following recent developments and including issues such as automatic music transcription and notation, digital sound processing, machine-learning, computerized acoustical studies, music similarity, and many more.

Helmut Schaffrath was not only the founder, but also the soul of the study group. As the creator of EsAC (Essener Assoziativ Code) and co-author (with Barbara Jesser and Ulrich Franzke) of the software for music retrieval and analysis of EsAC data, he consistently promoted the use of this system to study traditional folk music. At the same time, he was open to all subjects raised by the group members.

With his death, the study group lost its inspiring leader. Due to my close collaboration with Helmut Schaffrath in 1992–1994, the members of the group appointed me a co-chair with Kathryn Vaughn (1994) and then as chair (1997). After this change, we attracted more members from Eastern Europe and adapted the topics of the seminars to their needs and interests, such as taking up issues concerning sound archives.

In this second period, the group initially maintained a steady pace of meetings, but the energy gradually weakened as the use of computers in the everyday work of ethnomusicologists became a matter of course. Furthermore, the rapid and lush development in the field of computer-aided research in musicology made it hardly possible for a small study group to compete with dedicated global organizations like ISMIR (International Society of Music Information Retrieval), active since 2000 and attracting specialists from the borderland of musicology and computer science. The seminar in Vilnius (2004) was the last meeting of the Study Group on Computer Aided Research. It was formally closed by the Executive Board in 2011 (EB minutes, 105th meeting, 30 Jun – 1 Jul 2010:§5220), and is last listed in *Bulletin* 119 (Oct 2011). Nevertheless, the spirit of cooperation established at the time continues to bear fruit to this day.

Despite the enormous development of IT solutions and encoding standards, Helmut Schaffrath's beloved "child," EsAC, is still alive and thriving. EsAC databases continue to be used by Music Information Retrieval people all around the world. In 2017, at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, in cooperation with the Poznan University of Technology,



Figure 2. EsAC 2022.

we resumed work on the renewal of applications that support EsAC collections (figure 2). In an updated form, it will be a tool not only for ethnomusicologists, but also students, teachers, and amateurs of traditional music. We have been building a monumental database containing nearly 20,000 records of Polish folk tunes from the collections of Oskar Kolberg (1814–1890), which will be freely available to a wide audience in autumn 2022.

Although the Study Group on Computer Aided Research does not exist any longer, we thus pay tribute and continue the legacy of our friend—the charismatic founder and the leader of this group, Helmut Schaffrath.

## Reference cited

Rahkonen, Carl. 1985. "Study Group on Computer Retrieval (in Formation). *BICTM* 67 (Oct): 30–33.