

## Anthony Seeger: ICTM President, 1997–1999

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### *Anthony Seeger*

I always saw my term as ICTM president as a transitional one. I took office at the 34th ICTM World Conference in Nitra, Slovakia, on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the IFMC (figure 1), and passed the presidency to Krister Malm at the 35th World Conference in Hiroshima. I would later take on the responsibilities of the ICTM secretary general in 2001, but that narrative appears in the section on secretaries general. This section presents a brief outline of my involvement with the ICTM prior to my election as president, a short discussion of the roles of the Executive Board, president, and secretary general at that time, and a description of some of the activities during my presidency.

I have been a member of the ICTM since 1982. Like many members, I joined because I wanted to participate in a nearby world conference. In my case it was the 1983 conference at Columbia University, where the recently appointed ICTM secretary general, Dieter Christensen, was a professor. I thought the conference a great success intellectually and socially. But I had no intention of renewing my membership because I thought I could not attend more distant world conferences and because I was already an active member of several other professional organizations in anthropology, folklore, and ethnomusicology. Nerthus Christensen, Dieter's wife and secretary treasurer of the ICTM, kept sending me renewal notices, encouraging me to continue my membership, as I am sure she did many others. I believe it was after the third reminder that I gave in and I have been a member ever since. In their review of their twenty years of service as secretary general (N. Christensen and D. Christensen 2001), they wrote that the 1983 world conference led to a large surge in membership. I am sure they worked hard to keep the new members. Dieter, then the editor of the ICTM journal, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, later invited me to assume the role of book review editor. I accepted and served from 1986 to 1992. I was elected to the ICTM Executive Board in 1987 and served on it for ten years prior to my election as president and two years after my term.

I enjoyed serving on the Executive Board because it included interesting scholars from many parts of

the world and because I thought the activities of the Council to be very valuable. We held one long meeting every year, one that met before and after the world conference, and the other that met in the intervening year, often in association with a conference or event in which some of the Board members could participate. With a term of six years, renewable once, the Board provided stability for a group that only met once a year. The president and vice presidents had two-year terms, though there was no limit on the number of years they could serve. Erich Stockmann had been president for five years and Dieter secretary general for six, when I joined the Board.

Two things struck me immediately when I joined the Board. The first was how small the total budget of the ICTM was, around USD 62,700. It was run on what in US English we call “a shoestring”—very little money. The small budget could accomplish a lot because the Board members were volunteers, and the secretary general also did not charge for his work. His wife, Nerthus, received a very low payment for her hard work. They literally managed most of the business of the ICTM on the dining room table of their faculty apartment in New York City. The *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, *Bulletins*, and directories were self-published and mailed from the ICTM offices, which is much less expensive than using a commercial publisher, but required the editor do to all the copyediting and proofreading, negotiate with a printer, and make arrangements with the mail service. Yet the main ways to increase the size of the budget were to raise membership dues, which the Board was reluctant to do because membership was already expensive in many currencies, or to increase the number of members—though each new membership also incurred expenses. There was very little money available for new initiatives, unless they could be funded through an outside source, of which the UNESCO series of recordings was one. An impediment to joining the Board was that members were expected to pay their own transportation to the meetings every year in places always distant for some members. Internet access was still quite limited, though I asked those who could not attend the 1998



Tony Seeger, ICTM Slovakia, June 26, 1997

**Figure 1.** Anthony Seeger addressing the General Assembly of the 34th ICTM World Conference in Slovakia. Nitra, June 1997 (photo courtesy of Anthony Seeger).

Board meeting to remain close to their telephones for a certain number of hours. I had negotiated a large travel budget from my employer and could manage the expense, but without strong institutional support or government support, commitment to a six-year term on the Board meant a major financial investment.

The second thing that impressed me was how little change there was to the agenda of each meeting. The agenda involved reviewing the activities of the Council, including the activities of the national committees and liaison officers, the activities of each study group, applications for new study groups and colloquia, selecting the programme-committee members and preparing a slate of nominees for the biennial elections. Information about Council activities was provided at considerable length by the secretary general, while the president chaired the meeting and called for advice and decisions. Every two years, at the world conference, the General Assembly of the ICTM would hear a report from the president, a report from the Executive Board, learn the results of the election for officers and other Board members, and could raise questions if they wished to.

Erich and Dieter were a nice complement to one another at the Board meetings. Erich was genial and thoughtful, often moving toward compromise when there were disagreements. Dieter often had actions he wanted the Board to agree to. He would get frustrated when his ideas weren't adopted. Erich was based in East Germany, and Dieter in the United States, an important balance during the Cold War and an important reason the ICTM could be active on both sides of what was then called the Iron Curtain. During the ten years I served on it, the ICTM Executive Board dealt with its regular agenda, but some of us on the Board felt that some changes in procedures and organization would be desirable for the ICTM. The election of officers was one area where there was sometimes conflict within the Board. This is not surprising, since hiring and promotion in academic departments can also be contentious. The ICTM did not have a nomination committee until the twenty-first century. Instead, the Board would prepare a slate of nominations for each election. It would propose one nominee for each of the offices to be filled. It was possible for any two members of different national committees or countries to make additional nominations, but they almost never did. As a result, the membership was usually presented with a single slate of candidates to approve. This appeared to some Board members to be undemocratic and contributing to an undesirable image of the Board as a small, self-perpetuating in-group. In addition to creating a slate of nominees, the Board could invite (co-opt) up to two additional members without an election. Local arrangements chairs of future world conferences were often co-opted, as well as scholars from parts of the world that were underrepresented on the ICTM Board.

I experienced the internal dynamics of a nomination personally at the 1994 Board meeting. Erich Stockmann, who had been president for fifteen years, was in ill health and decided he would resign so that a new president could be elected in 1997. The 1996 Board meeting was held in the castle of Smolenice in Slovakia. Krister Malm (figure 2), then serving as a vice president, was unable to attend, but his name had been mentioned as a good replacement for Erich Stockmann. When we reached the point in the meeting where we would decide on our nominations, we adjourned to take a break. Erich came up to me in a hallway and asked me if I would do him a favour. It was always difficult to refuse Erich a favour, so I asked what it was. He asked me not to decline if I were nominated as the Board's candidate for president. I responded that I would agree to his request, but that I thought Krister would be a much better president than I, and that I would vote for him. To my immense surprise, I was nominated and received the most votes and was put on the ballot as the Board's nominee for president; with Krister





**Figure 2.** Krister Malm and Anthony Seeger at the ICTM world conference in Sheffield, 2005 (photo by Trần Quang Hải).

Malm (Sweden) and Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco (Portugal) as vice presidents; and Marianne Bröcker (Germany), Allan Marett (Australia), and Wim van Zanten (the Netherlands) as nominees for the Board. (Both Malm and Castelo-Branco would eventually serve very active terms as president).

The next morning, when I joined Dieter and Nerthus for breakfast, his first words, spoken in an angry tone of voice, were: “You should have refused the nomination.” He thought Krister would have been a better choice—as did I. Krister was a good friend and we had spent a lot of time together. But I also believed that free voting and multiple candidates were a normal process. I never told Dieter about my promise to Erich. But our relationship remained somewhat strained for the duration of my two-year term. After the Board meeting, Dieter approached Krister about a possible nomination through two members in different countries in order to have at least two nominees for president for the membership to choose between, but Krister refused. Dieter was used to having a president on the other side of both the Atlantic Ocean and the Iron Curtain (which in 1996 was falling). He was accustomed to doing most of the work and planning of the ICTM himself along with Nerthus. I think he was justifiably concerned about having both the president and the secretary general of an international organization based in the United States. I think he was also insecure about what changes would come about after fifteen years with Erich Stockmann, especially since I was part of a group of Board members critical of some long-standing procedures.

When I drove down to Dieter’s lovely summer home in the mountains of western Massachusetts, with a few initiatives I thought it would be good for the ICTM to pursue, he told me that the ICTM president is just a figurehead, and that the secretary general is the person who really mattered for the ICTM. This may have been a legacy from the era of Maud Karpeles, who pretty much dominated the early presidents. He stressed that it was very different from the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), which (at that time) had no professional manager and thus required much more of its presidents (I was already aware of this since I had been elected to the SEM Executive Board in 1986–1988 and served as its president in 1992–1994). My meetings with Dieter were socially congenial, but professionally tense, and the Board meetings were tense as well, though we did all the normal things—prepared for the 1997 world conference in Hiroshima, Japan, monitored study groups and colloquia, and followed the normal agenda. Dieter was also a good mentor to me. I became much more familiar with budgetary and publication details of the ICTM. He took me with him to Paris for a meeting of UNESCO NGOs and introduced me to the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Office. The relationships I forged with Noriko Aikawa and others in that office were very important and led to my representing the ICTM in several initiatives as the president and later secretary general of the ICTM, which was then a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) “in formal consultative relations” with UNESCO. This meant that if UNESCO wanted an NGO’s opinion on anything having to do with traditional music, it could ask the ICTM to provide it, and the ICTM would respond. I

became involved in the preparative phases to the creation of the 2003 UNESCO convention on intangible cultural heritage.

I also encouraged the Board to reflect on the structure of the Council. I sent an email to them that said:

Given the changes in technology, professional activities and institutional support, what might we need to change to have an effectively run organization? It is much more important for us to think about what the ideal organization would be, and then make that happen, than to try to replicate what has been done for nearly two decades without careful consideration as to whether it is the one that will best serve us in the next decade.

I asked them to come to the 1998 meeting prepared to discuss what kinds of organizational structures they were familiar with elsewhere that worked well and that we might wish to consider for the Council, how we might increase the use of the Internet to benefit communication and Council activities, and whether there were any kinds of meetings, in addition to the colloquia, study groups, and world conferences, that we should be considering. In the coming years, future ICTM presidents would spearhead important rewrites of the ICTM “Rules,” the Internet became a vital centre for ICTM communications, and in 2015 the ICTM began a series of fora designed to provide an environment conducive to overcoming disciplinary and other barriers that often interfere with the recognition and appreciation of differing systems of thought. This is why I consider my presidency to have been transitional—I started conversations that were completed and enacted by later presidents and secretaries general.

In early 1998 it seemed to me that one of the most important things I could contribute to the ICTM would be to serve only one term. It was important to demonstrate that the officers of the ICTM did not always serve long terms, but that they could rotate regularly and democratically. My decision was further prompted by my father’s illness and an anticipated job change, both of which would demand my time.

My final act as president of the ICTM was my President’s Report to the 34th General Assembly at the 1999 World Conference in Hiroshima, Japan. I suggested that “between the lines [of the *Bulletins*] lie the adventures of our intellectual lives” (*BICTM* 95, Oct 1999:20). I also called for an activist ethnomusicology that would address the horrors of war, ethnic and religious conflicts, and displacements of large populations that continue to afflict us and the musicians and communities whose performances we study and admire. This essay has tried to take you between the lines of the *Bulletins* to look at some of the human dilemmas and efforts that have always been part of the governance of

the Council and to help to understand the directions the organization has taken after my term ended.

At its 1998 meeting the Board nominated Krister Malm for president, and I was nominated as a Board member. He assumed the presidency in Hiroshima in 1999. During my term as president, the ICTM continued its regular business and I laid some of the groundwork for the active presidents that followed me and for the kind of collegial collaboration that has characterized the relationship between ICTM presidents and secretaries general since 2001.

## Reference cited

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