

## The Secretariat under Anthony Seeger: Los Angeles, USA, 2001–2005

---

### Anthony Seeger

Who says there is no drama in academic societies? For any younger scholars who may eventually become involved in the administration of university departments and professional organizations, it is important to know that conflict is not unusual. Strong personalities are probably important for organizations, especially when all parties are convinced of the importance of an organization.

In the April 2001 *Bulletin*, after the preliminary programme for the 2001 world conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, there appears an article on the twenty years of the ICTM Secretariat in New York City. Signed by then Secretary General Dieter Christensen and his wife and assistant, Nerthus Christensen, the short essay recounts how the ICTM found itself in a difficult situation around 1980, when the ICTM Executive Board asked Dieter Christensen to host the secretariat at Columbia University in New York City.

According to the article, membership had declined to about 800, the publication of the *Yearbook* was years behind, and the Council was technically bankrupt (N. Christensen and D. Christensen 2001:25). The 1980 budget figures presented in the *Bulletin* (*BICTM* 59, Oct 1981:13–18) show a deficit of US\$9,981 and lower membership numbers than those provided by the previous Secretary General Graham George.

By dint of prodigious effort and devotion to the ICTM, Dieter was able to return the Council to solvency, recruit new members, embark on new endeavours like the ICTM colloquia, and as editor of the *Yearbook*, he maintained the journal as a very important and highly regarded publication that appeared on time. He also assumed the editorship of the UNESCO series of recordings, under a contract of the ICTM and the Intangible Heritage Office of UNESCO. He simultaneously served as a voting member of the Executive Board for several terms. For two decades he coordinated the world conferences, managed memberships, organized meetings of the Executive Board, and published and mailed the ICTM *Yearbooks*, *Bulletins*, and other publications on a very small budget. During fifteen of those

years he was assisted by a repeatedly re-elected ICTM president, Erich Stockmann of the German Democratic Republic (formerly often referred to as East Germany), thus enhancing the ability of the ICTM to transcend the divide created by the Cold War.

If there was one danger in this centralization of activities in the hands of a single secretary general for twenty years, it was what is sometimes called “founder’s syndrome.” Among other traits described for this is that the organization becomes identified with the founder and that the founder so identifies him- or herself with the organization that suggestions for changes are perceived as personal attacks. While Dieter was not an ICTM founder, he transformed it and ran its operations for many years. It was difficult for him to delegate to others, and his relations with some members of the Executive Board and some people who left or never joined the ICTM were at times contentious.

In the same article from the April 2001 *Bulletin*, Dieter had announced that he would retire from Columbia University in 2004 and that the Secretariat would need to move before then. But in an angry speech at the 2001 General Assembly in Rio de Janeiro, he announced his immediate resignation and threw a bundle of keys on the table. Everyone present was stunned, and most of us were deeply saddened by this sudden end to his participation in the ICTM. The Executive Board members were totally unprepared for such an immediate transition. (This moment has also been mentioned in Malm and Hemetek’s essay on conferences and General Assemblies, and in Malm’s chapter on his presidency).

I had been elected president of the ICTM in 1997–1999, had served on the Executive Board for twelve years, and had been the programme chair for the Rio de Janeiro world conference. As a result, I knew the organization fairly well. I knew there would be a lot of work to do to move the Secretariat and to manage all of its operations and that the ICTM budget was too small to support an assistant. Nerthus Christensen had worked for little money and no benefits.



**Figure 1.** Anthony Seeger and his assistant and ICTM treasurer, Kelly Salloum, traveling to the 37th ICTM World Conference in Fuzhou and Quanzhou. Los Angeles, January 2004 (photo courtesy of Anthony Seeger).

The evening following Dieter's resignation, I met on a beach in Copacabana with the dean of the College of the Arts and Architecture at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), ethnomusicologist Dan Neuman, and ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice, the chair of the UCLA Department of Ethnomusicology, where I worked as professor. They were both attending the conference and recognized that some swift action was needed. They agreed to provide special funding to pay a half-time administrative assistant for the Secretariat, to provide office space for it in the Ethnomusicology Department at UCLA, and to allow me to teach one less course each year in order to manage the duties of secretary general. The ICTM is greatly in their debt for their comprehension of the situation and quick action taken to seek a resolution. The next day I presented to the Board an offer to host the Secretariat in Los Angeles. The Board received three other offers (from Hong Kong, Portugal, and Norway), but the relative ease of transition within the same country, and the funding and space I had already arranged were convincing. I was suddenly, and unexpectedly, secretary general. I resigned my seat on the Executive Board, because I thought it a conflict of interest to be a member of the board that appoints the secretary general.

Every secretary general must move the offices of the ICTM to his or her institution and find ways to continue the Council's work in a new place. My job was quite difficult. Dieter forbade me to talk to his wife, Nerthus, about anything. He informed me that I must move the contents of two rooms out of Columbia University space by 31 July (later extended until September). And I discovered that the keys he had thrown down on the

table weren't the real keys to the offices, but rather a dramatic prop and could not at first open the door. I arrived in New York City to pack up the office on 9 October 2001, not long after the attack on the World Trade Center. A former student of mine living in New York, Christen Amigo, and I packed the accumulated papers of twenty years of the Secretariat in one day. We boxed the contents of many file drawers, consolidated dozens of boxes of back issues of the *Yearbook*, and arranged for everything to be shipped to California. Everything we left behind was discarded. I only hope we didn't miss anything important.

It was clear to me that my job as secretary general was to keep the ICTM functioning by preparing, printing, and distributing the publications, collecting the dues, and managing the finances of the Council. I also needed to prepare for the next world conference, in Fuzhou and Quanzhou, China, and take steps for an orderly and successful transfer of the Secretariat to another location (preferably in another country) in a few years. I knew I would probably publish fewer books and need to change some of my plans, but I thought—and still think—the ICTM was more important than my personal career plans. I was a good friend of ICTM President Krister Malm, as well as of many members of the Executive Board. Working harmoniously together we were able to navigate the ICTM through the occasionally difficult transition. I also learned a lot being secretary general that I could have learned in no other way.

I was extremely fortunate to be able to hire Kelly Salloum, a scholar, composer, performer, and administrator, as my ICTM assistant (figure 1). She had been the best-organized teaching assistant I ever had at UCLA,



**Figure 2.** Jonathan Stock, chair of the local arrangements committee, and Anthony Seeger. Sheffield, 2005 (photo by Svanibor Pettan).

from which she held an MA in ethnomusicology; and she was willing to take on the joint duties of ICTM Administrative Assistant (managing publications, membership, and eventually treasurer) and the Department of Ethnomusicology Publications Coordinator. She was admired by the Board for returning emails at night and on weekends, and for the depth of her preparation for Board meetings and practical advice. We had a small but well laid-out space in the Music Building, but the boxes from New York completely filled it. We sent most of them to storage and kept only the recent files and a few copies of each volume of the *Yearbook* to sell as needed. Kelly then set about mastering the databases for membership and mailing, establishing the ICTM as a non-profit organization in the State of California, opening bank accounts, and trouble-shooting innumerable issues that arose which we were forbidden to ask the last incumbent about. This slowed the publications that year (see *BICTM* 99, Oct 2001:2). The ongoing operations of the ICTM were in her hands, leaving me free to firm up external relations, visit conference sites, and the rest.

Among the accomplishments of this period were:

- Moved the ICTM website and email addresses to a UCLA address, improved and integrated the membership and subscription databases, and put more ICTM information online, including *Bulletins*.

- Set up banking and facilitated payments by credit card.
- Answered hundreds of questions from members and subscribers who were confused by changes of address after twenty years in one location.
- Established a formal, 501(c)(4) non-profit status for the ICTM in California and set up bank accounts. This is a designation for a social welfare group that is exempted from certain taxes in the USA.
- Established an agreement with JSTOR to make back issues of the *Yearbook* available, thus relieving the Secretariat of the necessity of keeping all the back issues.
- With the intervention of Stephen Wild, arranged for the National Library of Australia to house the official papers of the ICTM, which previously had moved with the Secretariat.

*World conferences:*

- Finalized the details of the 37th World Conference in Fuzhou and Quanzhou China.
- Oversaw the rescheduling of that conference from 2003 to 2004, which had to be delayed due to the SARS epidemic.
- Arranged for 38th World Conference in 2005 to be held in Sheffield, UK (figure 2).
- Arranged for 39th World Conference in 2007 to be invited to Vienna.

*Activities with UNESCO:*

- I travelled frequently to Paris for meetings of various kinds at the UNESCO headquarters. I found that the presence of the ICTM secretary general was important to ICTM interests at those meetings, quite apart from what I was able to contribute.
- I served as editor of the UNESCO series of recordings until passing it to Wim van Zanten. While we had contracts to prepare new projects, UNESCO was unable to get its distributor to continue publishing them in view of changes in the record industry. I sought to try to resolve the backlog of unpublished projects that had been approved by the ICTM, but this was only resolved many years later, when Smithsonian Folkways Recordings began to distribute the UNESCO recordings.
- The Intangible Heritage Office asked the ICTM to undertake the “technical and scientific review” of nominations for the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity project in 2001, 2003, and 2005. This was a very large project, begun before the creation of what became the UNESCO 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and took a lot of the Secretariat’s time along with student assistants. It is described in Seeger (2009).

One of my most important contributions to the ICTM, I believed, would be to establish an organized and collegial transition of the Secretariat to another location and another secretary general. We discussed the issue in an Executive Board meeting, but no one sprang forward to offer their services. I travelled to Ljubljana, Slovenia, to visit Svanibor Pettan, who didn’t think he and his institution were ready to host the Secretariat, but left open the possibility of doing it in the future. I also travelled to Canberra, Australia, and met with Stephen Wild, who had been editing the *Yearbook* and had served on the Executive Board and as vice president. After consulting with officials at the Australian National University where he worked, Stephen offered to host the Secretariat in Australia and the Board concurred.

By the end of 2005 there wasn’t much to send to the new Secretariat. Almost everything required to run the ICTM was on computer files in commonly available software programmes. We recycled most of the back issues of the *Yearbook* and *Bulletin*. We shipped the historical papers to Australia for deposit in the National Library of Australia, and in January 2006, Stephen took over for the next five-and-a-half years, following which Svanibor Pettan served for six years before passing it to Ursula Hemetek, in Austria, in 2017. These transitions have been well-planned and efficiently done, so that the membership and the activities of the Council were improved with each move.

Now our conflicts can move to the academic arena, where we can debate and argue ideas in our study groups, colloquia, symposia, fora, and world conferences. That

is where the engaged debates and the intellectual efforts of all of us will be the most productive.

## References cited

- Christensen, Nerthus, and Dieter Christensen. 2001. “20 Years ICTM in New York.” *BICTM* 98 (Apr): 25–26.
- Seeger, Anthony. 2009. “Lessons Learned from the ICTM (NGO) Evaluation of Nominations for the UNESCO Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 2001–5.” In *Intangible Heritage*, edited by Laurajane Smith and Natasko Akagawa, 112–128. London: Routledge.