



# ETHNOTES

## From the Editor...

EDITED BY  
ALLISON SOKIL

Welcome to Issue 8 of Ethnotes! This issue features an update on our upcoming annual Music Graduate Students' Association conference from this year's organizer, **Nicholas Goode** (PhD year 1), plus an online interview with our keynote speaker, **Dr. Timothy Taylor** (UCLA); an interview with Alia O'Brien (PhD year 3) and **Dr. Nasim Niknafs** (University of Toronto) discussing the relationship between music education and ethnomusicology, a DIY and improvisatory approach to music in the classroom, and an update on Dr. Niknafs' recent research on "unofficial" music-making in Iran; and a look at **Polina Dessiatnitchenko's** (PhD year 5) reflections from the field after her latest trip to Azerbaijan to study *mugham* music and philosophy in Baku and the Absheron region in 2015.

The full texts for all articles, interviews, and back issues can be found on the Ethnotes blog (click on the banner below). Blog posts will continue to be published throughout the year, so keep checking back for the latest news. For weekly updates, feel free to follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). Enjoy!

## Issue 8: Spring 2016

- 1 From the Editor
- 2–3 News and Announcements
- 4–5 The 2016 Music Graduate Students' Association Conference  
Featuring Dr. Timothy Taylor (UCLA)
- 6–7 Reflections From the Field: On *Mugham* Performance,  
Philosophy, and Imagination and Embodiment in Azerbaijan
- 8–10 An Interview with Dr. Nasim Niknafs, Assistant Professor of  
Music Education at the University of Toronto
- 10 2016–2017 Graduate Courses and World Music Ensembles



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# News and Announcements...

## Conference Reflections

**Nadia Younan** (PhD year 2) attended the “Orchestrating the Nation: Music, Dance and (Trans)nationalisms” interdisciplinary conference as part of the *Festival de l'imaginaire* in Paris, France from November 12–13, 2015. Her paper, entitled “Shake that *Sheikhani!*: The Performance of Nation in Diasporic Assyrian Practice,” was well-received and she attained valuable feedback on what was one of her first papers on Assyrian dance practice. She would also like to thank everyone from the University of Toronto ethnomusicology community for their concern as she was in Paris during the ISIS-related terrorist attacks.

**Max Kelly** (MA year 2) presented his paper titled “Listening to Mexico's Southern Border: The sound(s) of Plan Frontera Sur” at Tulane University for the Latin American Graduate Organization Conference: *Liberalism and its Discontents*, which took place from January 28–30, 2016. Although he had to fly back before Mardi Gras, he was happy to see a few parades and catch some live music.



## Upcoming Conferences

**Polina Dessiatnitchenko** (PhD year 5) will present a paper titled “A Bird Needs Two Wings to Fly”: Relationship Between Music and Poetry in Azerbaijani Mugham” at the Conference on the Music of South, Central, and West Asia at Harvard University (March 4–6, 2016), and another paper titled “Improvising the Beyond: Ghazal Poetry and the Creative Impulse of Azerbaijani Mugham” at the annual British Forum for Ethnomusicology conference in Kent, UK (April 14–17, 2016). She will also be presenting a study on “Azerbaijani Mugham and Possibilities of Improvisation in Discourses and Experience” at the *Eighth International Doctoral Workshop in Ethnomusicology* at the Centre for World Music in Hildesheim, Germany (June 21–25, 2016).



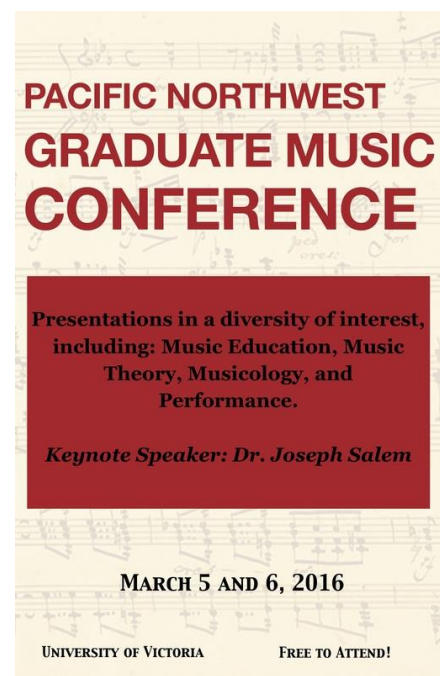
*Conference news continued...*

**Tamara Rayan** (MA year 2) will present at the Pacific Northwest Graduate Music Conference at the University of Victoria (March 5–6, 2016). She will be presenting her work on “Reform Through Recitation: An Examination of the Islamic Feminist Counterpublic.”

**Ryan Persadie** (MA year 1) will be presenting his paper titled “Hussein in the Port of Spain: Transformations of Emotion within the Shi’ite Practises of Iranian Ta’ziyeh and Trinidadian Hosay” at the Ottawa Graduate Students Music Conference: *Bridging Discourses and Disciplines in/ via Music* hosted by the University of Ottawa and Carleton University (March 11–12, 2016).

**Allison Sokil** (PhD year 1) will be presenting her paper titled “Dismembered and Disembodied: Representations of Women in the Visual Media of Electronic Dance Music” at the annual MGSA conference titled *Music and Labour* at the University of Toronto (April 1–3, 2016).

**Dr. Farzaneh Hemmasi** (University of Toronto), **Dr. Jeff Packman** (University of Toronto), and **Dr. Danielle Robinson** (York) will be presenting a Research Dialogue at the University of Chichester (UK) in April. Professor Hemmasi will be presenting a paper titled “Baba Karam in the Blood: Iranian Movement, Music and Memory”; Dr. Packman’s paper is “Time, Memory, and Rapprochement with Bahian Carnival Dance Music”, and Dr. Robinson’s is “Improvising Dance in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” **Dr. Hemmasi** will also be giving a paper at the British Forum for Ethnomusicology conference in Kent, UK (April 14–17, 2016) titled “Nostalgia for the music industry: A look from Iranian Los Angeles.”



## Publications and Other News

A very big congratulations to **Polina Dessiatnitchenko** (PhD year 5) for the publication of her article “Rendering Musically the Form, Meters, and Meanings of Ghazal Poetry in Azerbaijani Shur Mugham” in “Azərbaycan Muğamşünaslığı: Problemlər, Perspektivlər” (*Mugham Studies in Azerbaijan: Problems, Perspectives* 2015).

And to **Yun Emily Wang** (PhD year 4) for being elected as a student member of the Society For Ethnomusicology Council (2015–2018). The Society For Ethnomusicology Council advises the Board of Directors on current and long-term issues, areas of interest, and recommendations for the Ethnomusicology community.

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# Music and Labour: The 2016 Music Graduate Students' Association Conference Featuring Dr. Timothy Taylor (UCLA)

By **Nicholas Goode**, current MGSA Conference Organizer, and **Dr. Timothy Taylor**, 2016 keynote speaker

This year's MGSA Grad Conference will be looking to stimulate ways of thinking about music that account for its multiple encounters with labour. As all of us can attest, music involves many kinds of work — affective, theoretical, political, economic, imaginative, pedagogical, and so on — in its production, performance, and consumption, and yet music's relationship to labour and work has often been sidelined and occluded, both in scholarly literatures and in the popular imagination. The musical object, or music-as-text, was once the privileged site for understanding music. New critiques from within and outside of all branches of music studies, however, have begun to redress the balance between perspectives which see music as a thing and music as *done* and *doing* things. With this in mind, we seek to ask questions about the natures, forms, and limits of the labour of music, and of the music of labour.

Accordingly, we have an extremely diverse and bountiful line-up of presenters and panels to look forward to, and we're especially excited to be welcoming Professor Tim Taylor of UCLA as our keynote speaker. Professor Taylor's work is



well-known to ethnomusicologists, especially his books *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (Routledge, 1997) and *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Duke, 2007), and his SEM Jaap Kunst Prize-winning essay “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of “Mechanical Music”” (2007). His latest book *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) will no doubt provide much fuel for the discussions we look forward to in April. *ETHNOTES* caught up with Professor Taylor for a sneak peek of what we can expect...

**ETHNOTES:** Hi Tim! Your keynote for *Music & Labour* will be on ‘Valuing Music’: which thinkers and ideas have most influenced your approach to music and capitalism?

**TT:** I think it was Attali’s book *Noise* that really got me into it, and Adorno, of course, though I have a love/hate relationship to him for years. Since then, though, I have found anthropological theories of value, from Arjun Appadurai, David Graeber, and Fred Myers especially, to be very useful. These theories (which I will discuss in my talk) give us ways to move beyond strictly economic (or economicist) theories of value like those from Marx and later Marxists.

**ETHNOTES:** What can perspectives on money, capitalism, and Marxism offer to today’s music studies?

**TT:** Thinking about these things is always useful ethnographically, since musicians have to figure out ways of making a living and this is a major issue for them. Thinking about value more generally has been very helpful to me in finding ways of talking about music or other forms of cultural production and consumption that would be difficult to understand in terms of economic value.

**ETHNOTES:** Does the present moment have its own characteristic forms of musical labour?

**TT:** I wouldn’t say that today’s musical labour is all that different than in the past except for the technology, of course, though there have always been new technologies. But I don’t see much to gain in creating taxonomies of labour (or types of cultural commodities). Marx’s labour theory of value was just that, a theory of value, so our questions should have just as much to do with value as labour.

**ETHNOTES:** How have music industries responded to contemporary technologies, media, and economies?

**TT:** Today’s cultural industries have learned that composition can be done more quickly than ever, and that changes can be demanded much later than in the past. Musicians are working longer and harder, and there are fewer jobs for performing musicians in the studio world because they have been outsourced to Prague and other places. Production companies and record labels that used to be standalone have been bought up in mergers and acquisitions from the 1980s and after, and now there is a lot more attention to the bottom line than in the past as these companies have become part of multinational conglomerates that care much more about profit than product.

**ETHNOTES:** How do you view the future of musical marketplaces, labourers, industries? Who should be optimistic, and who suspicious?

**TT:** I’m not very optimistic. Musicians can more easily record themselves, but they now have to know a whole range of technologies, from recording to social media for promotion. Record labels expect musicians to do a lot of self-promotion and building up of their fan base and generating millions of YouTube hits before thinking of giving them a contract, and, at least for major musicians, contracts are now usually 360-degree deals that gobble up money the musicians could have been making from T-shirt sales or whatever. Most institutions of higher education in music are not educating their students for this new world.

To learn more about this year’s conference and to review presenter abstracts, visit our website at:

<https://sites.google.com/site/musicandlabour/schedule>

# Reflections From the Field: On *Mugham* Performance, Philosophy, and Imagination and Embodiment in Azerbaijan

By **Polina Dessiatnitchenko** (PhD year 5)

*I was asked on TV once to reveal what mugham philosophy is. Just as Archimedes said, "Give me a place to stand on and I will move the Earth," I answered: "We have mugham, maqam, makom, shashmaqam, and the other similar "m-m" words for musical systems. Remove these 'm's and I will be able to explain to you what mugham philosophy is."*

Valeh Rahimov, distinguished Azerbaijani *tar* player

Many ethnomusicologists face a nearly impossible task of translating into words the essence and subtleties of musical experience, usually belonging to a group of people with different value systems and worldviews. What is the nature of the states of *mugham* performers? How are these states shaped by their understandings of "*mugham* philosophy" and other discourses? How are they influenced by sociohistorical factors? And how are they beyond text, in the realms of imagination and embodiment? These have been the questions guiding my fieldwork research in Azerbaijan for nearly two years. I figured that such questions necessitate lots and lots of active participation, learning how to play, sing, and perform *mugham*, as well as immersing myself in the culture and perhaps even going slightly native. So I have put my baggage of theoretical knowledge aside and embarked on my journey with as much of an open mind as possible.



The journey took me from urban cosmopolitan Baku to surrounding religious rural villages in the Absheron area. Baku, the oil capital of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, is situated next to immense oil and gas reserves and fiercely blazing mud volcanoes. Hence Azerbaijan, the Land of Fire, attracted many foreigners in the late nineteenth century to the capital, eager to partake in the oil boom and make a fortune. Despite the presence of oil and its foreign influences, as well as the Sovietization of the region, local traditions remain strong, albeit somewhat hidden beneath the surface. While *mugham* thrived in the capital with numerous *mugham*-operas and *mugham*-symphonies composed and staged, the real conservatory of *mugham* during the twentieth century was not in Baku but in the remote conservative Absheron settlements. Musicians from all over Azerbaijan visited these areas to perform in front of *mugham* knowers, religious leaders, and accomplished *irfan* poets, who had unbounded knowledge of *mugham* music, poetry, and, most importantly, harmony between the two. This was not about the show, but about the





depth of spiritual *mugham* experience triggered by correct conveyance of *mugham* meaning. The toughest critics of the Absheron villages would judge performances and determine the musicians' future success.

Wearing full Muslim attire and overjoyed with the opportunity to attend *mugham* gatherings in these provincial settlements, I set out with my recorder and *tar* to explore the remains of the real conservatory in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Sitting in a room full of elders, I was moved to tears by intimate performances of invited young musicians from Baku and subsequent conversations of the knowers. Multiple layers of meaning contained within a single line of sung poetry were uncovered for hours on end. Moreover, I was astonished to learn about how *mugham* and everyday lives of Azerbaijanis in these villages intertwine: *mugham* meanings permeate behaviour, attire, activity, and interactions between people. However, I also learned that after independence of Azerbaijan in 1991, these regions witnessed much poverty due to cessation of the carnation trade with Russia. This resulted in a lack of opportunity to host *mugham* events.

Inspired by my excursions and realizing how much *mugham* students in Baku could benefit from such meetings, I assembled a team of a few students from ADA University in Baku where I held a fellowship at the time, and we launched a project aimed to revive the tradition of *mugham* gatherings in the urban capital. It also helped that our project was funded by the Youth Foundation of Azerbaijan. We chose a house museum and studio of a famous Azerbaijani painter, Tahir Salahov, as our venue. *Mugham ustads*, poets, musicologists, philologists, and, of course, *mugham* knowers from Absheron villages, were invited to listen to and discuss performances of aspiring students from top music institutions. The young performers were dazzling, but then the masters began to speak in astringent remarks. You could have heard a pin drop as the audiences attended to the critics who talked fervently while intensely gesticulating with *lezginka*-like movements. They talked about the state of *mugham* art today and the significance of “*mugham* philosophy” for the appropriate experience of *mugham*.

Communication with *mugham* experts and masters was fruitful and amounted to much fieldwork data, but the most valuable insights came from my personal experiences of performing *mugham* as well as living immersed in the Azerbaijani culture. Accumulating knowledge of people's worldviews and lifestyles, and learning about the various dimensions of creativity in *mugham* offered a glimpse into the interconnections of these ways of being and the nature of interpretive activity that can take place during performance. Completing my fieldwork journey, now the difficult task of theorizing and textualizing this experience lies ahead!



# An Interview with Dr. Nasim Niknafs, Assistant Professor of Music Education at the University of Toronto

By **Alia O'Brien** (PhD year 3)

*Earlier this year, Ethnotes had the privilege of sitting down with Dr. Nasim Niknafs to discuss some of her recent research on “unofficial” music-making in Iran, the connections between music education and ethnomusicology, and applying a do-it-yourself ethos to teaching and curriculum-planning.*

**ETHNOTES:** Firstly, perhaps you can give Ethnotes readers some of the recent research you’ve been doing, and what is on the horizon for you?

**NN:** My research comes out of my performance background; I don’t have a standard music education background, for example, within the framework of public school education. Rather, I was involved in underground music scenes. I taught underground, I learned underground – as in private one-on-one lessons, and private meaning away from public gaze and not as studio lessons *per se*–, I performed underground, so that’s where my research is focused. At the same time, even though I was learning via underground music scenes, I was a classical musician, so in terms of improvisation, I was terrified of touching my instrument—the piano—without having a score in front of me. I was always keen on being able to play my instrument without having an extra sheet of paper in front of me. So I got into that—I found some other underground musicians in Chicago and New York, and I began playing with them. We eventually started an ensemble in Chicago; it was a free improvisation ensemble with community music members. One of my partners was a Turkish flute player who couldn’t read or write music, but whose ear was phenomenal. I learned so much from him. Another trumpet player was a jazz musician; he brought us together, and it went from there. We’d play at cafés and get paid in free coffee. So that’s how my research interests began to take shape.

These days, I’m working with underground musicians in Iran. I should mention that they don’t call themselves “underground” because this label has fairly heavy connotations; instead, they call themselves “unofficial musicians.” This movement has a different agenda when compared to the music scene that I used to be involved in. Thankfully, it’s much better now.

Since there is no systematic, institutional learning taking place in this scene, I’m interested in how participants are learning through one another, informally, via improvisatory action.

Speaking of location, my research is based in Iran, which is obviously far away, so I can’t take off and go there whenever I please. However, because of my involvement in underground music, I still know people, and so I am still able to conduct

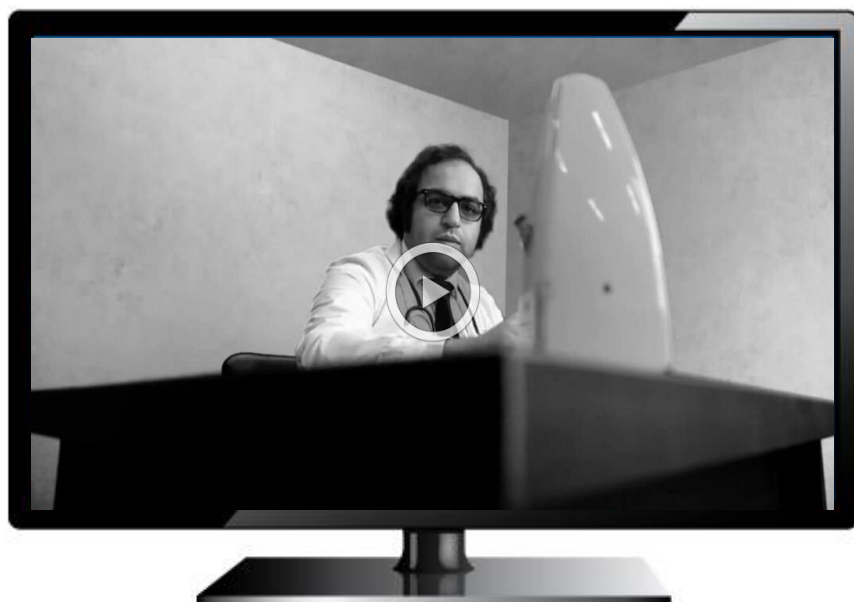




interviews, and research online. This adds an interesting layer—how do you deal with your friends as research participants? It's good that I know what's going on in the scene, but I'm not sure if my point of view will ever approach objectivity.

**ETHNOTES:** What kinds of music are being performed by these groups or these networks of musicians?

**NN:** The musicians that I'm working with mainly play alternative rock. And, these days, also electronic music. There's a group called B-Band, when you transliterate this name into Farsi, it has another meaning, which translates roughly to "without any boundaries." In addition, B-Band is the name of a guitar pickup company. One name, many layers! Their music is a mix of punk, electronic, rock, progressive, and jazz... they have a very cool video online, for a song whose name, translated into English, means "Hit Me With Anything" (click the screen below to view the video)



**ETHNOTES:** I know you've written extensively on incorporating DIY (do-it-yourself)/DIWO (do-it-with-others) and improvisatory practices in various sorts of educational settings. I was wondering if you could speak a bit about this?

**NN:** One of the biggest things that I've learned doing music—or musicking—is that we must create opportunities for ourselves. They rarely come at you; you have to go after them. I guess since I was into improvisation, I sought my own opportunities, I found like-minded musicians. In addition, we had limited access to public music making resources, and this, in a way, forced us to be DIY (do-it-yourself), to seek out teachers and performance opportunities. We also learned to be good at DIWO (do-it-with-others), because music is not an isolated practice. Really, music is incredibly social, and to be a musician, you have to have people skills.

In education, it's similar: you need people skills. You need to be able to understand people, at least to some extent, and you have to be open to what they have to say. And just as DIY/DIWO approaches are crucial, so is being open to opportunities, and to the people that you are working with, this will make for a better educational moment. That's what I believe in, and I try to practice this both in the classroom and in my research.

**ETHNOTES:** Would you incorporate elements of improvisatory performance in a classroom setting?

**NN:** Yes! I teach a course called *Multimodal Approaches to Music Teaching and Learning*, and in this course, we have a module on improvisation, a module on informal music learning, a module on community music programs, and a module on technology. So for the improv module, for example, we gather and play; I usually give them some prompts and instructions, because improvisation doesn't happen haphazardly, as there is an ingrained soundscape in each one of us, and

we need to embrace this soundscape while we're improvising.

For the informal music-learning module, I have the students copy a song by ear without looking at the charts, and they should perform it in class. They are also required to write a composition, but I don't teach them how to compose; I give them the tools necessary, for instance, they're given access to instrumentalists, vocalists, et cetera, or music making software. We use one another as resources for composing. All of this is very DIY/DIWO, although, of course, I'm always there to facilitate if students have questions, but I am not there to impose my own ideas about what constitutes "good music."

**ETHNOTES:** There was a recent call for submissions for SEM Student News that focused on trajectories of music education and ethnomusicology. It read: "as music departments around the country work to broaden and strengthen their training of musicians in the 21st century, we hope that this volume will highlight some of the issues of and possibilities for integrating music education pedagogy and ethnomusicological studies." This immediately made me think about your work, particularly the piece that you recently published in IASMP@journal. I'd be interested in hearing your perspective on the benefits and/or difficulties that arise when ethnomusicological and music education methodologies collide.

**NN:** Personally, I have a great affinity for ethnomusicology. I love the people in the program here at U of T. I believe that both music education and ethnomusicology are, by their very nature, interdisciplinary. In music education, for example, you need to know psychology, sociology, statistics, music, and you need to have people skills. In ethnomusicology, you need to know anthropology, sociology, history, music, and you also need to know how to teach, and how to work with others. Both fields involve interacting with people, and so it is necessary to be open to different or "other" points of view and experiences. I also think that music education and ethnomusicology touch upon similar subjects, although the language may be a bit different; for example "music transmission" versus "music teaching and learning."

At the U of T, it's great, because there *is* a strong connection between the ethnomusicology and music education programs.

Find a complete transcript of this interview (and more!) on our [blog](#).

## Graduate Courses & World Music Ensembles in 2016-17

MUS1250F PhD Seminar (Packman)

MUS1271F Music & Circulation (Hemmasi)

MUS1234F Music, Health & Aging (McLeod)

\* \* \*

MUS1\*\*\*S Ethnomusicology & Cultural Geography (Pilzer)

MUS1134S Music, Capital, Industry, Markets (Packman)

MUS1317 Music in Canada (Elliott)

Iranian Music Ensemble (Khavarzamani)

Klezmer Ensemble (Katz)

Japanese Taiko Ensemble (Nagata)

\* \* \*

African Drumming & Dancing (Dunyo)

Latin American Percussion (Duggan)

Steel Pan (Cullen)

For instant updates, reminders, and other fun tidbits on the Ethnomusicology Community at U of T, follow us on Facebook, Twitter, or subscribe to our Blog. To submit, just send an email to [ethnotes@gmail.com](mailto:ethnotes@gmail.com)