

A Brief Institutional History of the Society for Asian Music (SAM)

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Introduction

The Society for Asian Music – hereafter referred to as “the Society,” or SAM – celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2010. In recognition of this milestone, the SAM board suggested that it was time to write an institutional history. This history draws upon Board Meeting notes, newsletters, journals, and other files from the Society’s archives, housed at the University of Pittsburgh. In addition, past and present Board members were asked to contribute information through interviews and questionnaires.¹ Presented in a chronological fashion largely by decade, this article covers the major events and shifts in direction that have taken place since the Society’s founding.

The Society’s Beginnings

In post-war America of the 1950s, as economic and cultural flows were becoming more global in scope, a number of American organizations were established in an effort to encourage understanding and cross-cultural exchange between people of the U.S. and Asia. In New York, for example, the Asia Society was founded in 1956 by philanthropist John Rockefeller III as a way “to promote greater knowledge of Asia in the US.”² As part of this initiative, the Asia Society established councils devoted to individual countries, each of which would operate outreach programs and generate interest and understanding about that country’s culture. The activities of these councils, in turn, brought together interested parties from a variety of fields and backgrounds.

The Society for Asian Music began as an outgrowth of the Asia Society’s initiatives. Its foundations were laid one evening in 1959 in the living room of the New York City apartment of Roseanne Klass, secretary of the Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society in the 1960s. As Ms. Klass later explained in a letter to the *New York Times*, published in the April 15, 1979 edition, her living room “had been serving as a sort of informal chamber concert hall where Indian musicians gathered to play for themselves and a small group of aficionados” (Klass 1979). Those in attendance, including former editor of *The American Record Guide* James Lyons and musicologist Shirish Gor, agreed that the time was right “to reach out and bring Asian music to its public – if necessary, to create the public for it by giving them a chance to hear it” (ibid).

Building upon these informal gatherings, the individuals that would come to be known as the Society for Asian Music’s founders held several planning meetings. Shirish Gor, ethnolinguist William Kay Archer, attorney Louis Archer, ethnomusicologist Fritz Kuttner, and

¹ Questionnaires were sent to past SAM board members, with a series of questions regarding the duties they performed for the Society and their thoughts regarding its evolution, legacy, and direction for the future.

² <http://asiasociety.org/about/mission-history> (accessed September 6, 2012)

director of the Asia Society Paul Sherbert signed the initial charter of incorporation. James Lyons then presented a concrete plan to the Asia Society. The Asia Society welcomed this proposal, seeing the potential for the Society for Asian Music to exist under the umbrella of a Performing Arts Program headed by Isadora Bennett – a publicist who specialized in the performing arts – that was dedicated to presenting “three concerts of traditional music, dance and theater a year.” (Bunning 1979). It agreed to allow the use of its downstairs auditorium as well as help promote concerts.

The Society for Asian Music was incorporated as a non-profit educational/cultural association on March 7, 1960. In the Certificate of Incorporation, the Society claimed as its goals:

[T]o cultivate, promote, foster, sponsor, develop and disseminate among its members and to other interested persons, an appreciation, understanding, interest, taste and love of the music, and arts ancillary to music, of Asia; to create a center for the advancement of such purposes and to maintain the same to secure the interest of patrons of these arts; to encourage the composition of such music so as to provide social and aesthetic activities, entertainment and amusement and the exploitation of such talents; to provide a reference depository, accessible to members and others interested in same, to issue publications and information pertaining to the same, all for no pecuniary gain; and to do lawfully and all things necessary suitable and proper for the accomplishment of these purposes;

To foster the interchange of musical and kindred arts between the United States and Asia through the encouragement of significant projects which will increase mutual respect and appreciation of each other’s aesthetic heritage and achievements;

To encourage and cultivate a greater understanding and knowledge of Asian music in the United States by means of lectures, discussions, concerts and recordings, and to make available in the United States authoritative books, articles, films, musical scores and similar materials concerned with the same;

To aid, associate and cooperate with such existing non-profit organizations and institutions as have similar purpose, interests and activities.” (Certificate of Incorporation of the Society for Asian Music; submitted March 7, 1960)

The first General Meeting of the Society was held at the Asia House in New York on March 27, 1960 (Blum 2011: 3-4). In tandem with the meeting, noted Indian musician and scholar B.R. Deodhar presented a concert of Hindustani vocal music; this pattern of pairing meetings with concerts would be followed by the Society for decades. A report in the first Society newsletter stated that over 100 interested persons attended the concert and meeting.

For much of the early period of its history, the Society focused primarily on activities in the New York metropolitan area. Beyond the partnership with the Asia Society and the hosting

of events at the Asia House, there was the acknowledged practicality, as stated in the first Newsletter, that “Asian performers visiting this country are likely to pass through New York, thus giving the opportunity to arrange recital appearances for the New York membership” (Society for Asian Music Newsletter No. 1, August 1, 1960). While it was hoped that the scope of services provided by the society would expand geographically, the Board decided for the time being that the headquarters and main focus of activities would be in New York.

The 1960s

The majority of early Society initiatives were live events, with concerts serving as one of the primary vehicles for cultivating interest in Asian music. The Society sponsored five concerts in 1960, expanding that number to eight in 1961 and fourteen in 1962. It began an annual lecture series in 1962 in an effort to expand the offerings of the Society beyond simply concerts; the first year featured six lectures by Society members, including a lecture on the music of Asia by composer Henry Cowell, a lecture on modern Indian music by composer Howard Boatwright, and a lecture on the music of Thailand by ethnomusicologist David Morton.

The majority of early concerts sponsored by the Society were by Indian artists, a reflection of the growing popularity of Indian classical music around the world thanks in part to the efforts of Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan. However, in 1961 the Board decided that the Society should concern itself with lesser-known artists, believing that the better-known performers would be promoted by commercial management companies. In response, in 1962 the Society began working with the State Department to help bring such artists to the United States.

By 1963, the Society’s activities seemed to be proceeding well; in addition to an increasing number of concerts and lectures, a membership of 356 members was reported at that year’s Spring Board meeting. However, there was still acknowledged room for growth. Additional efforts were made to increase recital attendance, including an expansion of publicity into various New York arts guides like *Cue Magazine* and the sending of notices to New York City universities including Columbia University. Unfortunately, as acknowledged by a May 1963 letter from Chairman of the Board Henry Cowell to the Avalon Foundation (which had helped provide funding for the Society), the Society was operating at a loss in regard to the recitals.³ When asking for an increase in funding, Cowell declared the invitation of foreign artists to the United States as the work whose merit was most deserving of consideration.

Following the establishment of a concert and lecture series, the Society’s next major initiative was to found a journal, *Asian Music*. The Society had produced a quarterly newsletter since August 1960. In addition to concert and conference reports and listings of recent recordings of Asian music, these newsletters also featured articles by Society members; the Spring 1964 quarterly, for example, featured an essay by musicologist Harold S. Powers entitled “The Western Musician and Indian Music” and an introduction to Chinese, Korean, and Japanese string instruments by ethnomusicologist Barbara B. Smith.

³ Henry Cowell, personal letter to Thomas Parran, Avalon Foundation, May 20, 1963.

However, the Board sought something more substantial. In his introduction to the first issue of *Asian Music* – published in February 1969 – Society President Willard Rhodes discussed the reasons for launching a dedicated journal:

The Society for Asian Music, in its desire to be of greater service to the public in the study and dissemination of Asian music, is embarking on a publication project that will make available a variety of materials. The first publication to appear is this Journal, *Asian Music*.

In launching this Journal the Society for Asian Music envisages a reading public not only of cultivated amateurs who desire to deepen their knowledge and enjoyment of the many musics of this part of the world, but also those professional musicians and scholars who have specialized in Asian music. It is further hoped that the Journal may serve as an introduction to many persons who have not yet discovered the treasures of this rich musical culture.” (Rhodes 1969)

Keeping in line with the initial goals of the Society, *Asian Music* was intended to help cultivate an interest in Asian music in the larger community. The first issue featured an eclectic collection of articles, ranging from an essay by John Cage on the use of Eastern musical practices by Western composers to a bibliography of the writings of Robert Hans Van Gulik and a reprint of Robert Graves’ poem “George II and the Chinese Emperor.”

The development of *Asian Music*, and indeed the Society for Asian Music, occurred in an era of institutional change and greater cultural awareness. It was a period “when research universities in the United States were developing centers for East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and Latin American studies” (Blum 2011, 3-4). Much of this activity was due to the Higher Education Act of 1965. Title VI of this act authorized the creation of a grant system that would be used to support domestic programs in higher education “designed to strengthen the capability and performance of American education in foreign languages and in area and international studies.”⁴

At the same time, local Asian cultural organizations were beginning to emerge across the United States, working to foster interest in Asian culture just as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened new doors for Asian immigrants to enter the United States. There was a renewed interest by younger generations of minority populations in the culture of their parents’ or grandparents’ home countries (in many cases, linked to a growing political consciousness that saw music as a vehicle that could be used to fight stereotypes and discrimination – see, for example, Asai’s study of third-generation Japanese-American musicians (Asai 1997)). At the same time, a young generation of musicians became increasingly aware of non-Western music and musicians on a larger scale, thanks in part to The Beatles’

⁴ <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/iegps/index.html> (accessed February 6, 2012)

relationship with Ravi Shankar and Indian music. During this period, increasing numbers of foreign artists toured the United States.

The 1970s – A Time of Change

By 1970, both the concert series and the journal were going strong. However, membership was in decline; a membership of 185 was stated in a November 30, 1970 membership report, a far cry from the 350 noted by Henry Cowell in his 1963 letter to the Avalon Foundation. The Board instituted a number of programs to combat this development, including the expansion of function notices to all Asia Society members (as reported in the November 30, 1970 Membership report). In response, the membership numbers soon improved, rising back up to 228 by November 1972, 250 by October 1973, and 300 by 1975.⁵

Meanwhile, the relationship with the Asia Society was beginning to change, even as some of the concerts presented by the Society were co-sponsored by other organizations in New York City, including the Japan House and the Korea Council. The Asia Society was experiencing a period of reflection concerning its activities; in 1972, it was noted that the Society for Asian Music was the only organization offering performing arts programs at Asia House. In a moment of presentiment, at a board meeting in the fall of that year Dr. Victor Sendax, the president of the Asia Society, suggested the Society for Asian Music begin to look to private foundations for continued support.

The Society began to reassess its activities and its position on numerous issues. At a October 24, 1973 board meeting, during a discussion of the concert series, the proposal was made that “folk music (only of high standard) and composed music by Asian composers might be included in future programs,” advocating a potential expansion of the concert offerings of the Society (Minutes, October 24, 1973 Meeting of the Board of Directors). Further, in 1975 the Board recommended a larger representation of Asian performers in SAM-sponsored events (suggesting that there had at some point been a shift towards United States-based musicians). Such reassessment found its way into *Asian Music* as well. Even as the journal was being successfully published on a regular basis, it was suggested during a Board meeting in 1974 that the journal’s editorial board meet to “re-consider its goal” (Minutes, October 24, 1973 Meeting of the Board of Directors). In 1975, a concern was raised during a board meeting that the contents of the journal were perhaps “a little too technical” (Minutes, April 27, 1975 Executive Board Meeting).

Just as the role of *Asian Music* within the Society was being reexamined, SAM’s troubled relationship with the Asia Society reached a head. In a memorandum from Konrad Bekker to Phillips Talbot, both Asia Society staff and members of the SAM Executive Board, Bekker remarked that the main interest of Society for Asian Music members was “not Asia, but music” (Konrad Bekker, March 4, 1975 memorandum to Phillips Talbot). The necessity of the Society remaining “autonomous in its organization and leadership” was recognized, but since it was

⁵ Numbers taken from the November 30, 1972 Membership Report, the October 24, 1973 Board Meeting minutes and an April 25, 1975 letter from Konrad Bekker to Society President Johanna Spector and Chairman Willard Rhodes.

acknowledged that SAM contributed financially to the Asia Society the possibility was raised that SAM should be looked at as a “functionally specialized area council” requiring staff support. The staff support issue was a particularly important one; volunteers at the Asia Society had taken on many of the Society for Asian Music’s administrative duties, but this situation was becoming increasingly unfeasible.

A \$6,000 dollar gift made by Peter Stern of the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation to The Asia Society for the benefit of the Society of Asian Music spurred the Board to formally evaluate the nature of its relationship with The Asia Society. As noted in Board Meeting minutes from the April 27, 1975 meeting, even though the gift was made to The Asia Society, “the rules under which tax-exempt organizations operate [did] not permit The Asia Society to act as a pass-through to a non-tax-exempt institution” (Executive Board Meeting Minutes, April 27, 1975). Thus, Phillips Talbot recommended that the Board investigate the potential for the Society to apply for tax-exempt status. At the same time, another option presented to the Board was to make SAM an Asia Society subsidiary – which, admittedly, would lead potentially to the Society losing its independence. Such a move would have been problematic, as it would have reduced the ability of the Society to conduct independent activities it was planning, such as a conference on Asian music and the awarding of prizes to the best papers and articles submitted to the journal.

In the end, the Society decided to apply for tax-exempt status, which it received in September 1976; at the same time, the Society began to reorganize, looking to simplify the constitution and by-laws and hold elections for new, active board members. As expected, the awarding of tax-exempt status led to a reassessment of the relationship between the Society for Asian Music and the Asia Society. It was decided that the Asia Society would still host concerts, but the Society for Asian Music would for the first time in its history take care of all administrative work and concert organization. Additionally, this led to the Society having the ability to more concretely project income and expenses for the first time.

With this newfound status and financial flexibility came a necessary restructuring of the organization. Society treasurer Konrad Bekker acknowledged in the 1977 treasurer’s report that the sources of the Society income would “soon meet the constraints of a numerically and financially limited membership.” As a result, the Society looked to increase outreach activities and increase general membership and audience attendance. This last initiative was particularly important, as the concert series was beginning to encounter difficulties. The Country Councils of The Asia Society had ceased to co-sponsor performances, because, as noted in a December 1, 1977 letter to SAM members, the concerts appealed “to a small, specialized, and widely scattered audience.”

The Society began numerous programs to increase audience numbers, including an expansion of publicity efforts to include letters sent to area colleges, music schools and conservatories; the announcement of concerts in the monthly calendar of the Asia Society; and the encouragement of lecture demonstration. Thanks to these efforts, by the beginning of 1978 concerts were drawing larger crowds. Membership increased in turn, and by 1979 the Society was operating in the black without any major sources of outside support. Meanwhile, on June 5,

1979, new ground was broken for a new Asia House in New York, with the design for its concert hall made with input from the Society for Asian Music.

The 1980s

As the Society moved into its third decade, its troubled relationship with the Asia Society continued. In a mid-1980s treasurer's report, Konrad Bekker acknowledged that the Society for Asian Music's "long, friendly, but confused relationship with the Asia Society had become burdensome, and that both organizations are far better off with clearly defined administrative and financial responsibilities." Bekker characterized the Society as a group that shared the professional interests of Asian musicians rather than a concert agency or a listeners' guild, recommending that the Society begin to look for ways to extend its reach. One potential solution was to merge with the performing arts program of the Asia Society, a viable solution given that the chairman of the board at the time, Beate Gordon, was also the head of the Asia Society Performing Arts Program. Another potential solution presented at the December 7, 1980 Executive Board Meeting suggested that the Society "should maintain its present identity and function, but with an emphasis on the journal rather than concerts" (Executive Board Meeting Minutes, December 7, 1980).

The Society's hand was forced in part by a series of events in 1981. When the new Asia House was opened, Robert Oxnam, the new president of the Asia Society, announced that the Asia Society would be unable to "continue to make auditorium space available to the Society for Asian Music on a regular basis due to the expanded commitments of new programs in the new hall" (Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, May 17, 1981). Further, the "Asia House decided that the Society for Asian Music would not move with them to the new location" (1981 Treasurer's Report). This was not too much of a surprise, however; at the August 29 board meeting, board member Paul Sherbert noted, "changes in policies developing recently in these organizations [had] resulted in an orientation more towards a business outlook and away from cultural affairs" (Executive Board Meeting Minutes, August 29, 1981)

Thus, the Society was left searching for a new concert venue just as it received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to fund a reduced concert series. It instituted a rotation system, with the first series being held at New York University, Hunter College, and the Museum of National History; later, the Metropolitan Museum of Art would also serve as a concert venue. The concert series would continue on in this manner, but its troubles were not over. In 1984, Board Chairman Elise Barnett acknowledged in a letter to board members that the Society was facing a fiscal crisis due to financial losses from concerts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Society initiated efforts to improve the concert series. In the fall of 1985, the Society signed a contract with the World Music Institute to function as a promotional agent for the concerts. Based on this action, positive results were seen by spring of the following year; as Society President Ralph Samuelson noted at the 1986 Board of Directors meeting, "the cooperative efforts of the World Music Institute with SAM had been quite productive ... in terms of publicity and overall attendance" (Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, May 18, 1986).

The focus of the Board soon turned towards expanding membership, as well as focusing on *Asian Music* as the Society's "major national program" (Ralph Samuelson, Letter to Society Members, August 14, 1986). Of course, the journal had also been experiencing a identity crisis of sorts; at a 1985 board meeting, editor Martin Hatch had suggested that "area studies rather than theoretical concerns should be a primary function of the Journal" (Executive Board Meeting Minutes, March 10, 1985). Meanwhile, in a letter to members, president Ralph Samuelson stated that the Society had a "concern for both scholarship and music production and how each can enhance the other" (Ralph Samuelson, Letter to Society Members, August 14, 1986).

In 1987, proposals for the growth and development of the Society led to the presentation of a plan to separate journal finances from concert finances, and by 1988 there was an acceleration of the transfer of the Society's concert series to the World Music Institute. At the same time, there was a revival of cooperation with the Performing Arts program of the Asia Society, and in 1988 the Society began to hold Annual Meetings in conjunction with the annual meetings of Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM). Even with all the changes, however, it was acknowledged in a pamphlet that looked back over the history of the Society that SAM's purpose was still "to deepen, cultivate and promote the various areas of the music and dance of Asia" (Promotional Pamphlet, late 1980s).

The 1990s and 2000s – A New Direction

By 1992 the annual board meeting was held in tandem with the annual meeting of SEM, and the number of concerts being held by the Society was gradually decreasing. After holding nine concerts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1990, eight were held in 1991 and six in 1992.⁶ Robert Browning reported at the 1992 Board Meeting that there were funding cutbacks at the New York State Council on the Arts and no additional funding from the NEA. Due to rising costs and a lack of funding, the viability of a concert series was raised. As pointed out in the October 23, 1992 board meeting, New York City had both community and non-community based professionally managed venues for Asian music, thus reducing the role of SAM as a concert promoter. Further, it was noted that "less than ten percent of the Society membership lived in the New York area," reflective of the increased role of the journal in the Society's activities, and that audience observations indicated that "the audience consisted mostly of students and the elderly" (Board Meeting Minutes, October 23, 1992).

Finally, in 1993, president Terry Miller and the Executive Board decided that the "main function of the organization was to produce the journal and that Asian specialists need to have a functioning organization" (Board Meeting Minutes, October 29, 1993). Thus, the Society began to shift away from being an organization dedicated to the cultivation and promotion of Asian art and towards becoming an academic society. This change was characterized succinctly in a 1995 letter to lapsed members:

⁶ Numbers taken from information provided by Kenneth Moore. (Personal communication, September 28, 2011)

Over the past ten years or so the Society has gone through a transformation from its original purpose of offering concerts of Asian musics in the New York area to becoming a nationally and internationally based scholarly society which encourages research, professional presentations, and scholarly writing. (Terry Miller, Draft, Letter to Lapsed Members, 1995)

By 1996 the society was an officially recognized ancillary organization of SEM, holding its annual board and general meetings at the SEM Annual Meetings. At the 1997 General Membership meeting, Miller described SAM as a “Society that publishes a journal as its primary enterprise” (General Membership Meeting Minutes, October 25, 1997). With this shift in purpose, the Society restructured its organization. In 1999, Miller “reactivated” the board – which had been fairly inactive for a number of years – and initiated efforts to write a new constitution. At the 1999 General Membership Meeting, “Incoming President Susan Asai... solicited suggestions from the membership for improving the Society,” resulting in an extended discussion about the Society’s website, reflecting changes in the role of the Society in members’ lives (General Membership Meeting Minutes, November 19, 1999).

Over the next few years, efforts would be made to create a smaller and more active board, create a more concise constitution, and increase membership. At the same time, the Journal was undergoing a transformation. In 1994 the Journal began its contract with JSTOR, allowing for the electronic distribution of its contents; this was complimented by the beginning of a relationship with ProQuest in 2002. With the increased emphasis on internet-based communication and journal access came an assessment of the Society’s reach. In 2007, with the official creation of the new constitution, it was acknowledged that the Society’s mission moving forward was “to increase its international membership and reflect greater representation of native Asian music scholarship in the journal” (Board Meeting Agenda, 2007).

Conclusion

In the Society for Asian Music’s Certificate of Incorporation (1960), a series of lofty goals were set for the organization. The 50th Anniversary of the Society’s founding provides a ripe opportunity to ask whether these goals were met. The primary goal set forth was “to cultivate... an appreciation... and love for the music, and arts ancillary to music, of Asia.” As this article has shown, this goal has been met time and time again. Through the many concerts it has presented, the journal it founded, the books it helped to publish, and the various workshops and other activities it has sponsored, the Society has actively engaged in a variety of undertakings that have helped to cultivate an appreciation for Asian music in the United States.

Of course, there have been many changes during the Society’s history. The Society began as an outgrowth of the Asia Society. Due to increased tensions between the Asia Society and the Society for Asian Music, SAM became a separate entity. Independent status meant greater responsibility but also greater control over its own direction. Meanwhile, what was once a New York City-centered organization has spread out to include members from across the world. Further, the *Asian Music* editorial board actively seeks submissions from scholars in Asian countries, in an effort to reach out beyond the United States-based community. Also, the

presence of Asian members of the board demonstrates efforts to build stronger networks with Asian scholars.

The Society evolved to suit the times, all the while continuing to further the goals described in the Certificate of Incorporation. It evolved from an organization whose main activities were concerts and lectures into a primarily academic organization centered on the publishing of a peer-reviewed journal. The Society de-emphasized concert production because production companies, cultural organizations, and universities began taking a greater role in sponsoring concerts of Asian music. As a result, the objective of the Society for Asian Music shifted more squarely to “the advancement and research and study of music and associated performing arts of Asia or of Asian origin.”⁷

Whatever the future may hold for the Society of Asian Music, it is certain that it will continue the goals laid out in that New York City living room in 1960, when a group of individuals decided to band together “to encourage and cultivate a greater understanding and knowledge of Asian music.”

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⁷ <http://asianmusic.skidmore.edu/SAM-Constitution.html> (accessed September 7, 2012)