

# *Borderlands of Sonic Encounter*

**Philip V. Bohlman**

**2022 Balzan Prize for Ethnomusicology**

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**Affiliated Institution:** University of Chicago

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## **Concept**

Music histories traditionally account for the ways in which style, repertory, and practice converge around centers—political, geographic, and aesthetic. Music historians write about the music of nations, the emergence of canonic genres and common soundscapes. Music theorists establish the rules whereby meaning accrues to structure, which in turn paves the well-worn paths of influence. It has been the contribution of ethnomusicologists, in contrast, to move through and beyond the centers of nation and genre to open ways of encountering precarity of the borderland. The borderland is the site of diverse and often conflicting forms of encounter, of both accommodation and violence. Unlike the musical confluence that settles in the center, movement across the borderland is complex and encumbered, mobilized as migration, rerouted as the journey of refugees. Aesthetically, the movement across music's internal borderlands endows it with changing meaning and ontology, opening the portals of difference and sounding the ways musicians bestow agency upon sonic encounter.

The 2022 International Balzan Prize in Ethnomusicology works with colleagues around the world to engage more fully with the forms of sonic encounter that are afforded by the borderland. Listening to and acting with music at the border is more critical in the twenty-first century than ever before. Migrants and refugees move ceaselessly across borders at the sites of conflict. The sonic landscape of borders resounds with violence and threats to sovereignty. The metaphors of the border reflect the most profound of human concerns, above all the borders between life and death. The Balzan research project

*Borderlands of Sonic Encounter* takes shape around three foundational concepts for understanding the sonic functions of borders:

- 1) the borderland as a site of silence and those who have been silenced;
- 2) the borderland as a site of mediation and passage;
- 3) the borderland as a contact zone, transforming music and affording new narratives.

Because ethnomusicology is a field of agency and ethnography, *Borderlands of Sonic Encounter* will generate projects for young scholars that combine historical and analytical work with the fieldwork that makes sonic encounter for those scholars global. The project itself unfolds across five years of work that will coalesce around symposia and workshops that largely take place at the global centers of the University of Chicago (especially Paris, Delhi, and Hong Kong). Balzan fellowships for young scholars will fund two types of projects. Some scholars will work in more broad, historical ways, utilizing archives and research centers dedicated to the study of border regions. Other Balzan fellowships for young scholars will facilitate new and innovative ethnographic fieldwork, for example, with refugee communities or in diaspora studies with migrant communities. An account of Bohlman's undertakings at the end of the American academic year 2024-2025 follows.

## **Balzan Symposia**

### **“Unsettled Passage: A US-Mexico Border Symposium of Sonic Encounter”**

February 27–28, 2025; University of Chicago

Partners: Franke Institute for the Humanities and the International House  
University of Chicago

### **“Sounding Taiwan: Borderland and Crossroad of Sonic Encounter”**

June 6–7, 2025; Taipei, Taiwan

Partner: Taipei National University of the Arts

### **“Musikwissenschaft modern, 1918–1933”**

Collaborative symposium, University of Vienna and University of Chicago

November 28–29, 2024; Vienna, Austria

## **Balzan Fellow Residency**

Rohen Bose, Kolkata, India – Balzan Fellow from Sept. 25–Dec. 7, 2024. Performed, recorded, and led workshops at the University of Chicago. Recording with the Taraf Ensemble will be released in autumn 2025, with financial subvention from the Balzan Project, *Borderlands of Sonic Encounter*

## **Documentary Film Projects**

*The Kolkata Piano Shop*, a film project in Kolkata, India, directed by Philip V. Bohlman, with Balzan scholars, Ronit Ghosh and Pramantha Tagore.

Filming in India completed in September 2024; currently in post-production.

Collaborative funding from the Balzan Foundation and the University of Chicago.

*Of Broadsides and Borderlands: Sonic Encounters with Patua Rolls across the West Bengal/Bangladesh Borders*, a film project scheduled for March 2026.

Ethnography and production by Philip V. Bohlman, Ronit Ghosh, and Lars-Christian Koch. Collaborative funding from the Balzan Foundation and the University of Chicago.

## **Audio Recording by the Taraf Ensemble**

*Contemporary Music from Asia's Borderlands* (tentative title).

An ensemble with young ethnomusicologists and Balzan fellows in residence at the University of Chicago. Studio recording is now complete; currently the CD is being mixed and edited.

## **Collective Project: "Sonic Borderlands of South Asia"**

A two-year collective project at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society (an institute of advanced study at the University of Chicago). Successful funding application and planned for 2025–2027 (years three and four of Bohlman's Balzan Project, *Borderlands of Sonic Encounter*. Project directors: Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago), Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chicago), Anna Schultz (Chicago), Amit Chaudhuri (Kolkata), Lars-Christian Koch (Berlin), and Saymon Zakaria (Dakha). Home page:

<https://neubauercollegium.uchicago.edu/research/sonic-borderlands-of-south-asia>

## **Balzan Symposia Planned and Funded for 2025–2026**

### **"Sonic Border Passages in the Making of Chinese Modernity"**

Three-day symposium in Hong Kong (Dec. 15–17, 2025).

Collaborative funding with the Balzan Foundation: Hong Kong University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the University of Chicago Center in Hong Kong.

### **"Screens, Sound, Stages: Aesthetic Borderlands of South Asia"**

Three-day symposium in New Delhi (March 10–13, 2026).

Collaborative funding with the Balzan Foundation: University of Chicago Center in Delhi and the Chicago Committee on Southern Asian Studies.

### **"Liminal Encounters: Counterhistories of the Rohingya"**

Three-day symposium and performances, Chicago (February 25–27, 2026)

Collaborative funding with the Balzan Foundation: Franke Institute of the Humanities. Co-organizers: Philip V. Bohlman and Tomal Hossain.

## Dissertation Workshop for South Asian PhD Students

Preceding “Screens, Sound, Stages” symposium above, March 9, 2026.

Faculty from the Balzan Project, “Sonic Borderlands of South Asia.”

## Publication Plans

The projects undertaken by participants in *Borderlands of Sonic Encounter* will take two general forms. The project as a whole will lead to the creation of an interactive digital archive and website that enables scholars throughout the world to engage more intensively with the soundscapes of borderlands. The interactive archive, currently called *Musical Topographies of the Borderland*, will be developed with colleagues at the South Asian Collection of the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago, already the home to global digital projects including the internationally acclaimed South Asia Digital Library (<https://dsal.uchicago.edu>) and the newly established Forum for Digital Culture. *Musical Topographies of the Borderland* not only allows global accessibility, but it also assures that there will be contributions to the Balzan project itself long into the future.

The second direction toward publication will be a series of small monographs, each addressing a borderland or site of sonic encounter. Two models for such small monographs are the Oxford University Press *Very Short Introductions* and the Bloomsbury 33 1/3 series, both of which include volumes by Bohlman. Authors for new monographs in these series may be sought among the project’s young scholars, affording them the chance for more intensive research during its early years, and establishing possibilities for public-facing scholarship for them. Other potential publishers for series may include the University of Chicago Press, where Bohlman is editor of two book series, *Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology* and *Big Issues in Music*.

*Caribbean Borderlands and Sonic Encounter*, co-edited by Philip V. Bohlman and Timothy Rommen. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, under contract.

An edited volume growing from the Balzan symposium of the same name at the University of Pennsylvania, February 2024.

*Sounding Taiwan*, co-edited by Philip V. Bohlman and Chun-bin Chen.

An edited volume growing from the Balzan symposium of the same name at the Taipei National University of the Arts, June 5–7, 2025. Hildesheim: University of Hildesheim Press, in preparation. NB: All chapters grow from the contributions of young East Asian scholars attending the symposium.