

Past—Present—Future: Fifty Years of RIdIM

Antonio Baldassarre

Fifty years ago, on August 29, 1971, the Répertoire International d'Iconographie Musicale, commonly known under the acronym "RIdIM" was founded at Hotel Ekkehard in St. Gallen (CH), during the annual meeting of the International Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres (IAML),¹ jointly organized with the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA).² The then-acting IAML President, Vladimir Fédorov (1901–1979), simply declared in his conference opening speech: "Il est inutile, je pense, d'attirer votre attention sur l'ampleur et l'intérêt évident de cette nouvelle entreprise."³ Fédorov obviously assumed that the foundation of RIdIM was more or less the most logical thing to happen at that time—most particularly due to both the hype of interdisciplinary scholarship driven by the idea of the benefit that "a unified science, general knowledge, synthesis, and the integration of knowledge"⁴ offered, and the strong belief in the advantages of technological progress regarding archival and documentation projects to which I will return shortly.

Under the visionary leadership of Barry S. Brook (1918–1997), Geneviève Thibault, Comtesse de Chambure (1902–1975), and Harald Heckmann (b. 1924), thirty-two scholars from Europe and the USA gathered at the planning-founding conference of RIdIM.⁵ As the third major international scholarly venture, RIdIM joined the Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (RISM, founded 1952) and the Répertoire de Littérature Musicale (RILM, founded in 1966), and was—as its sister repertoires—sponsored by the IMS and IAML. In addition, the new project, which would be unthinkable without the advice and support of art historians and museum directors, enjoyed the sponsorship of the Comité international pour les musées et collections d'instruments de musique (CIMCIM), a professional society working within the framework of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

Given the already mentioned strongly interdisciplinary nature of RIdIM, it is surely not a coincidence that the intensified examination of visual source material with musical subject matter and the institutionalization of this examination fall into the period of the great hype of interdisciplinary cooperation within the academia of the 1960s and 1970s. Against the enthusiastic and promising background of the potentials of interdisciplinary collaboration, one has to interpret the optimistic hope of Emanuel Winternitz (1898–1983), the first director of the musical instruments department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a highly active music iconography scholar, that

iconological research in music has a very important by-product. It helps to free musicology from that isolation into which so many specialized branches of research have fallen in our overspecializing times.⁶

Ironically, music iconography has not relieved musicology of specialization but has rather developed itself into a highly specialized field of research with its own discourses, narratives, and agendas.

In contrast, the realization and implementation of Brook's vision regarding the "new international venture," was considerably more successful. He envisioned that

ideally, each country should have a national center where all of the data on its sources is gathered . . . ; this information can then be exchanged between centers or between a center and an individual scholar, and eventually gathered internationally. The desiderata for international iconographic-bibliographic cooperation are: (1) that all cataloging be accompanied by a reproduction of the work cataloged; (2) that all cataloging be designed for future computerization; and (3) that all catalogers use a similar catalog card so that information can be readily exchanged.⁷

Some years later, at the 1978 RIdIM meeting in New York, Brook chaired the panel "The Application of New Computer Technologies to Cataloging and Retrieving Visual Information" and summarized in the report that

computerized and stored RIdIM data should have two facets: (a) the cataloged information should be available for retrieval on a dial-up basis, and (b) the picture itself should be stored, perhaps through a method similar to that of television, producing an imperfect reproduction on the screen for identification . . . the cataloging aspect of computerization has already been tested; the real problem is in joining it to the display of stored visual materials.⁸

From the very beginning, RIdIM was—in contrast to the other two then existing inventories—envisioned to fulfill a twofold role: first, providing complete organization of metadata and access to visual sources, applying precisely defined methodological principles; second, functioning as a framework of scholarly interpretation of visual source material with musical subject matter.⁹ Brook’s vision in a technological solution eventually came true with the establishment of the web’s online environment in the mid-1990s. However, in the 1980s and 1990s RIdIM’s originally remarkable activities (including annual meetings, the development of a methodology and a cataloguing card, publications of inventories, etc.) experienced a considerable hiatus because of the lack of strong leadership—“Brook had stepped away from his tireless role as spearhead of RIdIM’s worldwide activity”¹⁰—and due to the tight financial situation. RIdIM continued to exist primarily through on-going activities of individuals and institutions in many countries, doing scholarly research and cataloguing often at their own expense and with minimal support.¹¹

Thus, it comes with no great surprise that, for many, RIdIM was believed to be dead around the turn of the millennium. Thanks to joint activities and support of the three sponsoring societies the necessary “resuscitative measures” could be initiated and—interestingly enough—implemented again at a IAML conference, this time the event that took place in Edinburgh (UK) in 2000. The project’s numerous backers and allies “knew the time had come to reinvigorate RIdIM as a global organization.”¹² The vivification process finally resulted in the incorporation of RIdIM as a non-profit organization pursuant to articles 60ff. of the Swiss Civil Code with its seat in Zurich (CH) in 2011. In addition, the vision of RIdIM’s founders of the 1970s was made a reality: “Association RIdIM has planned, developed, and

hosted a free web database of visual sources depicting performing arts,”¹³ released in the summer of 2012, and since then continuously enlarged and further developed (see db.ridim.org). The realization of this project could only be carried out thanks to a generous grant by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. Finally, since 2009, the interrupted organization of an international scholarly conference has been resumed. All these measures have significantly contributed to the establishment of Association RIdIM as an international organization.

One of the major future projects is the realization of Association RIdIM’s “Linking and Uniting Knowledge of Music, Dance and the Dramatic Arts in Visual Culture.” With this initiative, launched in 2015, Association RIdIM has designed the framework for the establishment of the first unique network and platform for open data exchange and knowledge sharing with other organizations and institutions under the leadership and with the database of Association RIdIM as both a vital tool within the set of resources available as well as the central hub. As part of this initiative, the migration of more than 20,000 datasets of RIdIM Deutschland is currently undertaken and will be available to the public soon.

Within the last fifty years the topical, methodological, and theoretical premises, upon which the cataloguing and scholarly scopes of Association RIdIM are based, have been constantly considered, further developed, and refined. Association RIdIM, once mainly concerned with artworks belonging to what is generally labeled as “Western fine arts” (which is partly understandable given the easier accessibility of such objects in museums and public collections), developed into an enterprise with a multicultural scope.

The expansion and shift are, for instance, strikingly reflected in the deployment of the cataloguing and indexing principles as tangible in the development from the original RIdIM card, designed in the 1970s, and the RIdIM database, created in the first decade of the twenty-first century after intense considerations in numerous working group meetings over a period of two years. In addition, the further development and refinement can also be captured in the expansion

of the topical scope that is broadened to add dance and the dramatic arts.

The decision to expand the scope of cataloguing and research activity toward the iconography of dance and the dramatic arts was not suddenly taken, but rather prudently, based on a thorough analysis out of which two major insights resulted:

1. A huge amount of visual material with musical subject matter often includes dance scenes or reveals links with the dramatic arts.
2. In many cultures the boundaries between music, dance, and the dramatic arts are often not so strict as it is performed in Western academic contexts. Indeed, even in the Western milieu, such activities as performance art that include music are impossible in most cases to side-line into simply “music.”

Finally, with its conference series that has been—as mentioned—resumed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Association RIdIM significantly contributed to the consideration, reflection, and inspection of new theories of the interpretation of visual source material, including, among others, gender and media studies, cultural and critical theory, postcolonialism, and the manifold theoretical perspectives as emerged within the broad and diverse field of *Bildwissenschaft* and visual studies, in general—which was instrumental in the re-consideration and re-shaping of the longstanding strong euro- and logo-centric foci—and often implicitly positivist approach—within the interpretation of visual sources.¹⁴

The fiftieth anniversary is a landmark, and Association RIdIM has made significant, relevant, and influential steps forward despite some setbacks and still-existing serious challenges—and there is still much to do.

References

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Verein | Association | Associazione | Association | Asociación
 Répertoire International d’Iconographie Musicale