



# RESOUND

## A QUARTERLY OF THE

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#### **The Laura Boulton Collection**

*Marlena Frackowski*

When in the early morning of January 18, 1929, Laura Crayton Boulton, then 30 years old, boarded *The Majestic* in New York harbor to sail to East Africa as a member of an ornithological expedition, she probably did not realize that she was laying ground for one of the most multifaceted and abundant collections of musical materials from the world's cultures. Perhaps she was fascinated not only with the birds' but, above all, the peoples' music she heard during previous scientific trips with her husband, Wolfrid Rudyerd Boulton, Jr., ornithologist and lecturer at the Carnegie Institute and Museum in Pittsburgh, where she became a member of the ornithological staff in the early 1920s. Perhaps her musical training and interests could not be easily suppressed by circumstances and surfaced whenever a slight chance occurred to learn and preserve traditional music. Suffice it to say that this time, during the expedition headed and financed by Sarah L. Straus under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History, Laura Boulton was not only to collect birds and carry out ornithological observations, but also record African music. She brought along a cylinder phonograph and made her intentions clear. The *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* of December 13, 1928, reported: "Mrs. Boulton will attempt to record the music of tom-toms and other weird musical instruments of the natives."

Boulton pioneered not only as a collector of music of unknown tribes and various ethnic and religious groups from around the world, but as a woman, along with Sarah L. Straus, demonstrating that the world's exploration was not the exclusive domain of men. All of that was particularly exotic for the American public of the time. Her methods and her results brought about fascination and enthusiasm. People were curious about how the phonograph and motion picture camera worked and what it was like to use those sophisticated instruments among native tribes. When in the fall of 1934 Laura Boulton was giving a series of lectures and



*Laura Boulton in Angola, 1931.*

presentations following another expedition to Africa with Sarah L. Straus (this time to the western regions of the continent), "the audience listened as if they were children hearing marvelous fairy tales for the first time in their lives. . . records of native music and her camera caught wondrous dances of these primitive peoples" (*Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, October 14, 1934). During that expedition she obtained musical recordings and motion pictures from about twenty-five tribes. In many cases the records and motion pictures were taken simultaneously so they could be reproduced together, thus resulting in an impression of sound and picture synchronization.

Boulton used the technical advances in sound and image recording/reproducing cleverly to her advantage in many different ways. Back at home, she gained support and publicity, and while on fieldwork the willingness of tribesmen to perform in front of the recording device just to test it, compete with it, or simply satisfy their curiosity. She was quoted in the *Chicago Daily News* of October 2,



1934, about her recording experience in Nigeria: "When we were received by the oba, or chief, of Benin I played for him records I had made of some of the native music. He was pleased, but said I should hear it done much better by his court musicians. That was just what I wanted. He commanded his priests and musicians to perform the most sacred ceremonial of the kingdom; we spent two days recording it."

Those African expeditions were turning points in Laura Boulton's career as an ethnomusicologist, a term that for her meant not just a specialist who analyzes the music, but whose interest is "centered on people and their music. . .to see how it functions in individual lives. . .the role it plays in work, worship, war and love—every emotional aspect of human society" (*The New York Times*, December 29, 1964). Throughout her career she conducted some two dozen major expeditions to countries all over the globe, collecting roughly 30,000 musical items on cylinders, discs and tapes, 400 rare tribal and folk instruments, 8,500 photographs and color slides, 60,000 feet of motion picture film, 1,500 illustrated books, pamphlets, articles and documents on musical subjects in many languages, and a significant number of paintings on ethnic music themes. The motivation behind this activity was to collect documentation and preserve music which could never be recorded again, since, as she expressed it, "in the most remote corners of primitive lands, old people are dying and taking their songs with them: everywhere young people are discarding old cultures in their eagerness to assimilate the new" (*I Search for Ancient Music*).

Life in the field was entirely devoted to the search for music right at its source. But one would be mistaken to think that while on expeditions Laura Boulton spent the whole time in those "most remote corners of primitive lands" recording elderly people. She believed that to enjoy some comfort, stay in hotels of capital cities, meet socially prominent people, influential politicians, businessmen and artists would do no harm to her research, but on the contrary, would help to promote her cause, provide information and earn moral and financial support. Numerous pages in her autobiography, *The Music Hunter*, in addition to providing exciting and colorful reports on collecting ethnomusicological material, contain accounts of Boulton's meetings with royalty, heads of state, celebrities, and religious, moral and intellectual leaders.

Laura Boulton had a great desire to record music and collect musical paraphernalia from as many traditional cultures as possible. This is reflected in her expeditions' trajectories that ranged from Russia to Okinawa, from Nepal to Bulgaria, from Italy to Samoa, from Angola to the Netherlands. During the 1930s she participated as the musical specialist in large-scale, institutional expeditions, mainly to Africa. In the 1940s she began to organize her own field trips, sponsored or commissioned by various private, governmental, cultural and educational bodies. Although she was then often the sole member of the expeditions, they were still very productive, using all possible means of transportation (from dog and camel, truck and boat, to train and plane), equipped with the best recording equipment of the time.

When later in her life Laura Boulton remarked that she seemed to have lived through the history of recording, she did not exaggerate. During her early African trips, she used an Edison wax cylinder phonograph with the characteristic narrow horn to channel sound to be recorded and a large horn to channel sound to be played back. For the 1934 expedition to West Africa she used a specially built disc recording machine with a microphone and during her Pacific trips in the 1970s she was equipped with modern microphones, magnetic tapes and battery-operated recorders. Below is a chronological list of the Laura Boulton expeditions that contributed most to the richness and scholarly value of the collection:

- 1929 East Africa (with S. Straus)
- 1930 South Africa (with Carnegie Museum)
- 1931 West Africa (Pulitzer Expedition)
- 1934 West Africa (with S. Straus)
- 1938 West Indies (Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, Dominican Republic)
- 1940 Mexico (Yucatan; with Museum of Modern Art)
- 1940 U.S. Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, California)
- 1941 Canadian Northwest (with Canadian National Film Board)
- 1943 Canadian Eastern Arctic
- 1946 Alaska and Western Arctic (with the U.S. Dept. of the Interior)
- 1947 Haiti
- 1947 Southwest Africa (Angola)
- 1949 Southwest Asia (Borneo, Guam, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, China, Tibet; with American Museum of Natural History and Buffalo Museum of Science)
- 1951 Europe (Scandinavia, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, England, Austria, Yugoslavia, France, Spain, Germany; with UNESCO, Buffalo Museum of Science and European Folk Music Survey)
- 1952 Spain
- 1953 Portugal, Greece
- 1954 Turkey
- 1956 Russia, Scandinavia
- 1956 Africa and Asia (Congo, Sudan, Egypt, Pakistan, Burma)
- 1959 The Balkans and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland)
- 1960 Central and South America (with the U.S. State Department)
- 1960 Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia (with Harvard University)
- 1963 Ethiopia
- 1966 Ethiopia (with Ethiopian government)
- 1969 Southwest Africa (Angola)
- 1976 Micronesia (Palau, Ponape, Truk, Majuro, Saipan)
- 1978 Papua New Guinea
- 1979 Western and American Samoa

Thousands of items—recordings, films, photos, notes, books, sheet music, musical instruments—have been the fruit of those numerous expeditions. What was the fate of



all these materials? How did they become available to the broader public and students? Designated by Laura Boulton to be used for comparative studies and the furthering of international understanding through the knowledge of world music, the greater part of her materials found their places at Columbia University and Indiana University.

The Laura Boulton Collection of Traditional and Liturgical Music was purchased by Columbia University in 1964 and was incorporated into the Center for Ethnomusicology under the direction of Professor Dieter Christensen. It consists of Laura Boulton's original recordings and documentation. Selected recordings have also been deposited at the Library of Congress.

A separate collection, known as The Laura Boulton Collection of World Music and Musical Instruments, went to Arizona State University where Boulton began to work in 1971. The collection was intended to be a resource for research and study for musicians, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, folklorists, laymen and school children. A change in Arizona's priorities led to the relocation of the collection at Indiana University in 1986. The musical instruments were transferred to the Mathers Museum of World Cultures where they can be appropriately displayed, stored, and made available for research. The remaining materials were deposited at the Archives of Traditional Music.

The Laura Boulton Collection at the Archives consists of two major types of items: personal papers and field

materials. Among personal papers, the most important are business and private correspondence, lectures, articles, books, manuscripts, notes on commercial recordings, unpublished manuscripts, scrapbooks, personal photographs, travel notes, and newspaper clippings. The most important field materials include Boulton's personal copies of sound recordings (now on about 800 tape reels), which are accompanied by field diaries, photographs (about 7,000 prints and 5,000 negatives), slides (about 1,500), articles, clippings and catalogs.

There is a great variety of music on the tapes. Music from Africa, the continent Boulton visited on numerous expeditions, predominates. Also represented are thirty tribes of Indians of North America, South America and Mexico. The music of Eskimos of Alaska and Canada is in the collection too, as well as the music of national and folk groups from the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Far East and Pacific Islands. The tapes are now being catalogued and will be available to the public through the library of the Archives of Traditional Music.

The instruments in the collection illustrate their development from the simplest forms to extremely elaborate ones. From region to region, and often within a single country, there is a tremendous variety of instruments. For example, among the West African instruments, one finds both a one-stringed fiddle with a small gourd resonator and a sophisticated 21-stringed harp; a tiny whistle that plays only two or three-tone



*Boulton records Tibetan lamas in 1950.*





*Laura Boulton recording in Hungary in 1959.*

melodies and a well developed flute; a simple skin drum that is stretched between two men and beaten by a third and a four-tone talking drum. All four kinds of instruments—chordophones, aerophones, idiophones and membranophones—are represented in the collection. Many of them are truly works of art. Handmade by special craftsmen, they follow traditional and unique patterns and shapes, sometimes closely related to their functions in the spiritual, social and economic lives of the people.

Most materials in the collection are still being processed. Last year all the slides and negatives were placed in special archival preservation sleeves. Also, the printed documents were organized according to the geo-cultural regions and put into acid-free archival folders and boxes. This year the publications have been entered in a computer data base that contains basic bibliographic information. While at Indiana University, the collection has already been used for research, instruction and display. For example, Ronald Smith, Professor of Ethnomusicology, found the instrument collection very relevant for his project concerning zoomorphological ornamentation in musical instruments.

In the fall of 1988 an exhibit devoted to the life and work of Laura Boulton opened at the Mathers Museum. Many items from her collection, including photographs, books, articles and musical instruments are on display. The exhibit will be open throughout 1989.

Laura Boulton died in 1980. She genuinely believed that music was a universal means of communication and, as such, the key to cross-cultural understanding. Her years of fieldwork and ethnomusicological research produced a large collection of music and music-related materials that are not simply preserved for posterity, but for years to come will be a rich source of information and inspiration for further studies and explanation of musical phenomena.

## Report on a Field Collection from Sierra Leone

*Laura Arntson Harris*

"The 'old mouth' can explain things to the 'new ears'." So goes a proverb I was told in the course of an interview with an elder of Silamania. I had come to Silamania, in the Wara Wara Yagala Chiefdom of the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, in order to carry out dissertation research<sup>1</sup> among Maninka (Mandingo) musicians. I sought out not only music specialists within the society but also the men and women who could share with me their history and culture. One of the primary goals of my research was to learn how music performance repertoire fit into Maninka culture—that is, how music is organized and perceived by members of Maninka society. I came with my "new" ears and tape recorder, and left with new friends, a new name, and an even greater appreciation for the complexity and depth of West African musical and verbal artistry.<sup>2</sup>

With the help of my research assistant, Yahya Daramy, I conducted interviews and recorded music in Silamania, Sukurala and a number of other communities in the Koinadugu District of the Northern Province from November 1987 through April 1988. The almost sixty recorded hours that resulted are contained on fifty-five cassettes, catalogued under accession number 88-072-F at the Archives of Traditional Music, and three additional cassettes (88-085-F) which represent research peripheral to the main collection.

The interviews I conducted focused on personal and community histories and on music performance in Maninka society. Much of the music I recorded occurred during interviews with music specialists and others. One music specialist in particular, a *jeliba* named Pa Sanasi Kuyateh, of Sukurala, became my key informant and contributed the bulk of material contained in the collection. Pa Kuyateh performs on *bala*, which is a wood-key xylophone constructed on a frame with gourd resonators. Accompanied by the *bala*, he sings words of praise to contemporary individuals, for which he receives gifts such as money, cloth or other goods.

Pa Kuyateh's praise-words come from the texts of epic narratives that are known, performed and passed along orally in different variants throughout the Mande world of West Africa. The individual language and culture groups known collectively as Mande include the Maninka, Yalunka, Koranko, Bambara, Mandinka and Dyula, among others, and are dispersed throughout Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Guinea-Conakry, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and parts of Sierra Leone and Liberia. In the Mande world, music specialists and other artisans such as weavers, leather workers and blacksmiths are considered, ideally at least, to represent an endogamous occupational group.<sup>3</sup> These specialists have access to artistic knowledge and, in the case of music specialists or *jelilu* (the plural of *jeli*), access to the knowledge of and ability to perform a particular musical and verbal repertoire. On many of the tapes in this collection, it is Pa Kuyateh who performs on the *bala* and his daughter, Hawa Kuyateh, a *jelimuso*, who sings the praise-songs of contemporary individuals (including myself, known to the people of Sukurala as