

Graduate Student Profile

Sija Tsai, York University
Geoffrey Whittall, Grande Prairie Regional College

This issue's edition of the Graduate Student Profile features our two guest editors, Sija Tsai and Geoffrey Whittall. Both Sija and Geoffrey focus on Canadian folk festivals in their research, and have spent the last several years dedicating their summer months to fieldwork at the Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, and Mariposa folk festivals, among others.



Sija Tsai

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Sija grew up listening to 60s R&B, classic rock, and metal. At the age of 15, she attended the Winnipeg Folk Festival for the first time. She was struck by three things: 1) It was the highest concentration of Canadian musicians she'd ever seen in one area, 2) She'd never heard of most of these musicians before, 3) Despite #1 and #2, the music was *good*. Like many Manitobans, Sija made the WFF an annual tradition, and became accustomed to hearing a large concentration of high-calibre artists over three days in July. But it was also a three-day party with close friends and complete strangers, who figured out how to have

a great time in a semi-flooded field of mosquitos with no shade trees.

Sija continued her musical activities at the Brandon University School of Music. She majored in music history and theory, while continuing piano studies and playing *viola de gamba* in an amateur consort. A major turning point in her musical thinking occurred after graduation, when she travelled to China for a year. The main reason for her trip was to travel and learn Chinese; but as a former music student, she was often asked to describe what "Canadian music" sounded like (without audio examples, since YouTube had not taken off yet and mp3 players were less ubiquitous).

In her attempts to describe Canadian music, she often found herself referring to the folk festivals she'd been attending since she was a teenager. Years before words like "neo-trad" became popular, she found herself trying (but failing) to pin down the aesthetic of the music she'd heard there. She would start with "It's kind of like folk-rock, I guess—but not really. More on the folky side, but not exactly traditional—wait, think of it this way: the young people like it and they party with all the grey-haired people and...uhhh..." (*But, Miss Tsai, we have that too in China! We have artists who mix their traditional music with pop!*) "Oh, no no no! It's not the same! This is not just a traditional fiddle melody backed up by a synthesizer and basic rock beat. It's more... I don't know. But here's another thing: we like to listen to it outside. And after the music's over, we like to camp out in tents at night, with lots of beer and mosquitos..." This failed effort to frame an important musical genre of her country would only bring looks of incredulity, confusion, or scepticism.

As she wandered around bustling Chinese markets and watched brand-new skyscrapers be erected before her very eyes, she often found herself thinking about how to better describe Canadian roots music and the significance of the outdoor, grassy setting in which it is enjoyed every summer in so many communities across Canada.

Some months after returning home, a small fluke brought her to the website for York University's Graduate Program in Music. Wanting an excuse to leave Manitoba again, she applied to the program. She has since spent the last seven years in graduate school mapping out the historical and cultural significance of folk festivals to Canada. Her publications on

the Winnipeg and Mariposa folk festivals can be found in various issues of *MUSICultures* and *Canadian Folk Music/Musique Folklorique Canadienne*. Sija also maintains an interest in Asian music. She has published on the subject of karaoke among expatriate groups (2007) and began playing the *erhu* five years ago.

Geoffrey Whittall

Geoffrey Whittall is pursuing his Ph.D. at York University. He became interested in ethnomusicology and popular music studies through his research and performances as a percussionist.

To help pay bills as a university student, Geoffrey moved between occasional performances with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and performances with a Ukrainian-Canadian country wedding band. He then took a step in the direction of learning Latin and other world percussion traditions; a workshop with Sal Ferreras, Glen Velez, and Trichy Sankaran solidified Geoffrey's interest in learning more about performing world music, and led directly to learning about non-performance aspects of music.

Geoffrey has taught percussion and a wide variety of music courses at Grande Prairie Regional College since 1990. In 2008, while chairperson of the College's Fine Arts Department, he started doing research for his dissertation at the Calgary folk music, the Canmore folk music, and the Edmonton folk music Festivals. This continued on until the summer of 2011, at which point he also became a volunteer on the "Green Team" at the Edmonton Folk Music Festival, a role he returned to in 2012 (the photo opposite was taken during a "plate return" shift in 2012). Volunteering was a part of his research into the creation and reception of value at those folk fests; thousands of volunteers work at the bigger festivals, often returning year after year.

While working at York University on a Ph.D. in Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Geoffrey has focused largely on Canadian and popular musics and rhythm. In his research, he has explored ideas about rhythm, folk festivals, Celtic music in Canada, traditional ethnic musics in Canada, and Ukrainian music culture in Grande Prairie. He has also conducted research on micro-temporal variations in soul and the early funk music of James Brown.

Geoffrey has presented papers at conferences of the Society for Ethnomusicology and the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (American chapter). He has contributed articles to the Revised New Grove Dictionary of Music and the New Grove Dictionary of American Music (forth-

coming), and film reviews to the journal *The World of Music*. Currently, he is working on editing a book tentatively entitled *Grassland Sounds* with Gillian Turnbull and Gordon Ross.



Geoff Whittall