
CIMCIM in stormy weather
Personal memories of Frank P. Bär
CIMCIM-President 2019–2022

When, after having served three years as Vice-President, I agreed in 2019 to run for President of CIMCIM, my main concern was if, with rather little experience on the Board, I could cope with the challenges and duties of such a prestigious position. At that moment, no one could imagine what was soon to come. However, one could have been alerted by the discussions around the way the draft for a new ICOM museum definition had been devised, communicated and discussed in the forerun of the 25th ICOM General conference in Kyoto, Japan, from 1 to 7 September 2019. There, the events happened quick and fast:

3 September 2019: CIMCIM's triennial general assembly with the results of the online voting procedure for the new Board 2019-2022.

5 September 2019: First CIMCIM Board meeting of the incoming Board. Rather than willing to start new projects, I expressed my wish to first finish what we had begun, in part a long time ago: refresh the by-laws, actualize, and republish the International Directory of musical instrument collections, have a close look at and finish publications by CIMCIM, and pursuing and finishing the project about functional museum objects together with ICOM-CIMUSET – to mention just the main tasks. In brief: An impressive term of steep growth in many respects under Gabriele Rossi Rognoni should be followed by a calmer term of consolidation and harvesting what had been sown.

7 September 2019: ICOM's Extraordinary General Assembly and 34th ICOM General Assembly turned into a disaster between technical problems, passionate pleas for and against the new museum definition draft and endless legal deliberations about how and if to put it to a vote at all. After nine hours of conflict in the same hall where, in 1997, dozens of nations had agreed to the famous Kyoto Protocol to seriously tackle the problems of climate change, ICOM threatened to break into pieces.

What followed these events is told elsewhere¹, but cracks began to become visible in the plans I had proposed just two days before. Subsequently, ICOM should set up a new, participative procedure in order to create a new draft that was intended to better reflect the membership's opinions. CIMCIM seized the opportunity and participated well through several surveys and workshops amongst its membership – a rather time-consuming, but communicative task that hadn't been on the initial agenda for this term.²

Meanwhile, the international conference on functional museum objects had to be prepared. The plan was to bring people from different countries and different cultures together, and to hear and discuss what their practice was in conserving and presenting functional objects, such as machines, cars, devices, clocks, and musical instruments – in other words, objects that the general public expects to see, hear, and feel working. In a second step, led by CIMCIM and CIMUSET, a cooperatively designed guidelines should provide advice to the worldwide museum community on how to handle this class of museum assets. Eventually, the conference with around 130 visitors and contributors from more

¹ Cf. Frank P. Bär: Some information about the ICOM leadership crisis. In: CIMCIM Bulletin December 2020, pp. 5–8.

² For a follow-up of CIMCIM's participation in the procedure, see the reports in: CIMCIM Bulletins December 2020, pp. 9–11, September 2021, pp. 4–5, December 2021, pp. 4–7.

than 40 countries on all continents, took place on 4 to 6 February 2020 and was kindly hosted by Cité de la Musique / Musée de la musique in Paris.³

Although there had been news about a new disease spreading in Asia, no one imagined this event would be the last one where CIMCIM members met personally in a considerable number for more than two years. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, but it took until 11 March for the declaration of a pandemic. On 10 March, I participated in a meeting in Paris about the new museum definition draft, and I remember well dear colleagues no longer “se faire la bise” (the French formalized way of hugging), the young Steward on the half-empty airplane to Paris offering me as many muffins I wanted before his last flight home the same day, and Charles de Gaulle airport approaching the atmosphere of a ghost town on my way back. Something was about to change everybody’s life profoundly.

The life of CIMCIM changed as well. For the first time I can remember, an annual meeting had to be postponed to the next year. Until the last possible moment, the team in London had tried to find a solution, but the exponential spread of COVID-19 blocked all doors.

Communication within the Board and with the membership continued by the long-established means: E-mail and telephone. Slowly, online meeting platforms began to be available and to be used regularly, first time, if I remember well, for an ICOM meeting in July 2020, then, in September 2020 for the first online Board and Business meetings of CIMCIM. As human beings tend to stick to their habitudes, the new medium of online meetings turned only little by little from a painstaking makeshift-solution that could “never ever and by no means” replace personal contact, into a tool that would allow to move things forward in a way not seen before just through personal contact, even if it be virtual. So, it took until February 2021 for regular monthly Board meetings to be established.

Meanwhile, within ICOM, the turmoil around the museum definition turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg. In June 2020, the reelected president of ICOM, Suay Aksoy, unexpectedly resigned without any further explanation. Suddenly, virtually everything was on trial, under other things in asking the question if smaller, specialized international committees shouldn’t be merged with others or even discontinued. I don’t know if anything comparable already had happened before, but for not casting any doubt on the importance of CIMCIM, action had to be taken by showing presence in all relevant meetings and in participating in all of the many surveys and votes that paved the way to the next General Assembly in Prague. Here, by the way, the online format showed one of its (subversive?) strengths: Save travel time for an administrative meeting with dozens of participants, switch off your microphone and screen to save bandwidth, and make yourself comfortable in casual outfit in your office or at home.

The online format showed another strength when it turned out that CIMCIM’s postponed annual conference in London couldn’t take place as planned. First, an in situ personal meeting wasn’t possible for everybody due to the ongoing pandemic, then even a hybrid format touched the limits, and finally the conference happened entirely in the digital space from 6 to 8 September 2021. There, we could witness technical and human progress in a nutshell: While one year before there was no solution, co-chairs Gabriele Rossi Rognoni and Mimi Waitzman with their team from the Royal College of Music and the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London provided us with a virtual conference that I don’t hesitate to qualify as simply perfect.

The Board of CIMCIM and, as I hope, the membership of CIMCIM in general benefitted from the new means of communication as well. In the decades before, the Board members met once or perhaps twice a year, especially to prepare the annual business meeting. As of February 2021, the monthly Board meetings allowed us to discuss running issues directly and efficiently, and it turned out that Board members were much more willing to take on different tasks or assume defined responsibilities. This began even to spread out to ordinary members who were invited to the meetings and particularly

³ For more details see: Frank P. Bär: CIMCIM and CIMUSET joint project and conference “Playing and operating: Functionality in museum objects and instruments”. In: CIMCIM Bulletin December 2020, pp. 12-13.

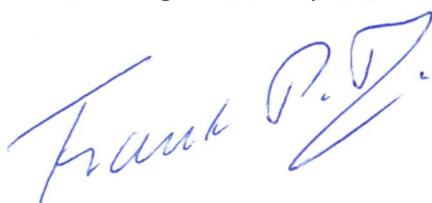
with, as a really multiplying function, Giovanni Paolo Di Stefano's idea to call for regional representatives among the CIMCIM membership.

While the pandemic seemed to lower its impact, another challenge came as a surprise: The raid of the Russian government on the independent state of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. CIMCIM mirrored the pertinent ICOM statement on its website on the same day. The Board decided after intense discussion not to take any independent political action, but rather to give its only Ukrainian member, the Museum of Musical Instruments History BarabanZA in hard-fought Zaporizhyya, a platform for reports and statements, eventually helping to get some support through ICOM Ukraine. From the beginning of this war, contacts with the Russian CIMCIM members became more and more scarce and eventually ceased completely. Again, in a nutshell, I have been confronted with questions that are eminently politic, such as: Was it right to accept the kind invitation to Russia for CIMCIM in 2015, the year after the annexation of the Crimea peninsula, seen that I then acted as a liaison officer for the organization of the event? How unpolitical can an unpolitical group as CIMCIM actually be, also seen that ICOM becomes inevitably more and more political in committing to the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals? More questions – and no satisfying answer.

At least, the shadows that the pandemic had thrown over the planet slowly cleared up. The 26th ICOM general conference in Prague from 20 to 28 August 2022 was held in a hybrid format, and for those who attended in person, “se faire la bise” was possible again. During the three years of this term, themes that had been less present, latent or even new, received increasing attention: provenance, decolonialization, how to deal with human remains, inclusivity, equality, participation, eurocentrism and others. Some of them, based on a proposal by Christina Linsenmeyer, were discussed in the last CIMCIM workshop in Prague, and the results were handed over to the new CIMCIM Board as a recommendation and wish for the future.

I can't really say if the term 2019-2022 was especially difficult or not, as I have no opportunity to compare with other terms from the position of President or, as it became more and more common to say during these three years, *Chair*. In retrospect, the balance is mixed: The functional objects project disappeared in the pandemic turbulences, CIMCIM's by-laws were updated after three decades, the International Directory will reappear in the near future in a hitherto unknown completeness and quality, the *CIMCIM Bulletin* that was led by Heike Fricke to a publication one likes to cite. The new museum definition was voted and approved, and CIMCIM actively contributed to a version that we can live with, especially as it still keeps the permanent care for the collections at the core which was not the case with all proposals. And sometimes apparently small things are of great value as the chronology of relevant CIMCIM moments that was installed and was maintained by Secretary Marie Martens turned out to be a great help for my memory.

I was very happy to learn about the very diverse composition of the next CIMCIM Board, which is excellent for CIMCIM's future challenges. But the infinitely enriching experience was to work with the regular and the co-opted Board members who all accepted and fulfilled their task: VicePresident Christina Linsenmeyer, Secretary Marie Martens, Treasurer Pascale Vandervellen, Giovanni Paolo Di Stefano (International Directory), Jean-Philippe Échard (Communication), Nataliya Emelina (liaison with the Russian Association of Music Museums until the outbreak of the war), Emanuele Marconi (Webmaster), Arnold Myers and Gabriele Rossi Rognoni (by-laws), Jennifer Schnitker (conservation), Patrice Verrier (membership), Yuanyuan (Anna) Wang (liaison with the Chinese Association of Music Museums). And there are many more ordinary members who made indispensable contributions to the whole. In few periods of my life, I have had the chance to learn so much.



Frank P. Bär, Nuremberg, February 2024