

INTRODUCTION: THE POTENTIAL AND CONSTRAINTS OF CULTURAL TRANSFER THROUGH VOICE, CONNECTION, AND MESSAGE

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This special issue gathers research articles that are based and elaborate on the presentations given at the conference under the theme “Voice, Connection and Message in Traditional Singing”, held at the Estonian Literary Museum from 30 November to 1 December 2020. The time and the setting were exceptional due to the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing. Consequently, this re-occurring scholarly meeting in Tartu, Estonia, with the guiding topic specifically focusing on traditional songlore, was transformed into an online event – a format that had gradually become a new normality. The number of contributions delivered turned out to be impressive, nevertheless: the conference featured 18 papers by 23 presenters from 7 countries. All in all, it was the eleventh scholarly gathering organized by the Estonian Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum

in a series that had initially concentrated on the older Finnic oral tradition of the runosong (Est. *regilaul*), yet from 2018 onwards the scope has extended to the song traditions around the world. A significant number of papers presented at these conferences have found their way into special collections of scholarly articles, either in the form of books or journal issues (Jaago & Sarv 2001; Sarv 2004, 2012; Lintrop 2006; Oras & Kalkun & Sarv 2014; Oras 2017a, 2017b).

The consolidating premise for the current collection of articles is found in the multidimensional quality of the conception of 'song': it denotes the vocal musical expression but may, at the same time, refer to verbal communication, lyrics, and poetic expression. Furthermore, it appears that the initial conference proposal to address the triad of voice, connection, and message has inspired the authors of the following explorations more observably for an indirect take, so that the suggested conceptual frame remains rather metaphorical when giving ground to a probable indication. Thus we would like to expand somewhat further on the conceptual frame proposed, which may be seen as a complex grounded basis for all the studies collected, and at the same time the formulations presented and expanded may incite new directions for research into the exciting field of songlore and singing, as a mental and artistic effort, as a creative act and performance that connects people by a meaningful communication.

From an analytical point of view, the concept of voice may stand for various approaches as, besides reference to the ability to produce sound, it signifies a medium of expression in the social production of meaning, which forms a rather predominant focus in the current humanities research. In discourse analysis voice relates to agency and to the individual, to the right of expression, to the position expressed, to power relations, and to discursive events (e.g., Hymes 1996; Blommaert 2005; Fairclough 2006), whereas the social context similarly implies the recognition of multiple voices, of collective agency. The state of many, i.e., a collection, indicates a related process, that of connecting, of bringing together or establishing a link or joining people and things. The act of singing connects: it builds social and emotional connections between the singers in a group, or with listeners – the audience. This perspective allows us to consider the connection to be likewise conducive of communication: there is a message conveyed while the content, form, and text of the song performed (or presented in textual form) reflect both the singer's voice and a cultural meaning. In addition to the direct musical or worded messages, one may distinguish between intended, accidental or occasional ones. Lastly, we have come full circle in this conceptual sketch by implying the equivalence of voice and message, the latter being a distinct unit or an idea in communication.

Moreover, the categories of voice, connection, and message are linked to the performatory quality or accomplishment, as well as create performative and

often emotional effects that reflect historical music-making traditions, singing repertoires or practices or aesthetics, which convey specific meanings, significance, and agency. One form of connection and communication in engaging with song traditions – when particularly highlighting the aspect of social communication – is revival. In this process the temporal and contextual frameworks undergo transformation, denoting a recontextualization and transition that aims at cultural renewal (see Slobin 2014; Hill & Bithell 2014). The project of revival opens a space for the imaginary within the tradition (Feintuch 2006), be it a direct communicative situation or a corpus of archival collections.

In the studies presented below, the thematic direction on voice, connection, and message has inspired the contributing authors to bring forth two of the paramount aspects of songs and singing – the situational and the textual, whereas the musical component remains predominantly outside of a targeted exploration as largely contextual. The act of singing may be studied as a musical expression or from the perspective of a poetic and linguistic quality of verbal communication, whereas engagement with an audience remains more occasional in this set. Another widely cross-cutting feature of the articles put forward in this special issue is the investigative take on the previously collected and archived material, forming links to the past but nevertheless posing questions that derive from the present, as it is often the case in the countries and cultures that host large archival collections of folklore.

The notion of the abovementioned crisis appears directly, addressed by **Jelena Jovanovič**, when she explores the transcendable ritual function in Serbian traditional songs employed in current singing practices that generate sought-after self-empowerment. The author leads the multipart singing group Moba engaged in the urban revival of traditional singing and elaborates on the meanings and messages of performed songs out of their traditional context. The article documents an experiment intended to arrange a performance of a selection of multipart repertoires of various peoples in Europe, which was unfortunately altered by the pandemic lockdown conditions. The search for ways to find one's voice or arrange collective singing under the restrictive circumstances of COVID-19 concurrently shifted the focus of this study on how the ritualistic essence, the ritual meaning and message of traditional songs become significant and revived in critical situations.

Austė Nakienė and **Rūta Žarskienė**¹ have studied the singing practice and the preferred traditional repertoires in the first-generation diaspora communities of Lithuanians in the United States, which were recorded by Jonas Balys, a seminal folklorist of the time, who profoundly shaped the dissemination of song repertoires and maintenance of emotional bonds. This historiographical review traces the documentation of traditional songs in which the image of the

homeland left behind connects to memories of the practice of singing traditional songs, hence reviving them, raising their importance, and certainly also ritualizing them. It became a means for connecting with the singers' loved ones left behind, by sending them those 'voice' messages of songs, visualized as postcards dispatched with a nostalgic and therapeutic message. The first-generation immigrants tended to become encapsulated in sharing such nostalgic memories.

In turn, **Janika Oras** examines the complexities of a colonial subject position by introducing a talented professional stage performer of folklore from the mid-twentieth-century Estonia, Laine Mesikäpp, who practiced traditional singing styles and repertoires. Against the odds, she managed to retain the stance of pre-Soviet origin, despite aligning with the Soviet-style public performance model. The article focuses on the creative voice and messages of Laine Mesikäpp, which were compromising, censored, and self-censored, but also resistant, constantly testing the limits. The singer's representation of historical wedding traditions carried an anti-colonialist connotation due to avoidance strategies and creative hybrid meanings that turned the required Soviet content into a formality.

With another focus on the constrained political agency, **Savannah-Rivka Powell** investigates the encoded Ainu identity and its bonds to the transnational Indigeneity movement, which the Ainu folk music revival promotes. The analysis traces the fusion of historical sources with global popular music styles, which creates a positive hybridity that carries the potential to build connections among the modern urban Ainu. The parallel tendencies of the fusion are also evident in Ainu identity formation, where the discovery and acknowledgement of one's roots draw inspiration and support from the global Indigenous movement. Powell shares the Ainu musicians' emotional testimonies of finding their own voice as Ainu, which may even have been a therapeutic experience, as well as her personal insights as a participant observer.

In her study, **Liina Saarlo** highlights once again the role of an individual, be it a singer as a performer or the counterpart represented by a documenting folklore collector. However, the author questions the latter's aesthetic judgments on the performative qualities as well as the overall scarcity of meta-data concerning the performance context. Due to archival and collection practices in Estonia, the number of poetic texts stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives is enormous, and this in turn influences how the *regilaul* tradition is conceptualized. Furthermore, the tradition was essentially text-centric, with a simple melody and a close-to-speech singing style. Hence the foregrounded component appears to be the poetic song text, because the scarceness of documented musical tunes or performance situations leaves the act of singing as a process in the background. In addition, most of these songs were documented in the phase of the demise of the tradition when singers no longer mastered a rich repertoire

of melodies or the skills to perform them with expected variation both in the text and the musical expression. The characteristics of their performance did not connect with those of the collectors, whereas modern researchers remain to be challenged in their search for the voice of the singers.

Hanna Karhu builds her critical study on the usage of archival materials when presenting Finnish rhymed folk songs that have fed into literary works, which became particularly popular in early-twentieth-century theatrical performances. She illuminates the process of national identity construction in Finland where creative writers of the new literary culture elaborated traditional songs into modern poetry through selection and recontextualization – some of the original messages did not correspond to the intellectual elite's conception of proper national heritage. Such exclusions left several age groups and social classes without a voice. Karhu also brings forth various emotions and meanings in singing, such as love, joy, sorrow, and longing as well as defiance, frustration, or confrontation, which were voiced in rhymed couplets and eventually found their place in the works of some younger writers, regardless of the elitist exclusion.

The remaining set of contributions tackle more substantially the digitized archival materials, in order to explore innovative methodological aspects for further songlore research. However, there is a challenge to be addressed in the context of investigating larger corpora of materials, with an intention of investigating poetic text collections, their semantic, stylistic, or linguistic qualities, as well as content. These studies pertain to and develop in a meaningful way the field of digital humanities which provides novel tools and methods for gleaning previously unattainable and strikingly new research results.

In their article **Kati Kallio, Mari Sarv (Väina), Maciej Janicki, and Eetu Mäkelä** introduce explorations of the similarities detectable between texts found in the Estonian language ERAB corpus and Karelian-Ingrian-Finnish language SKVR and JR corpora. They have investigated the large corpora of collected oral poetry in Finnic languages (Estonian, Karelian, Ingrian, and Finnish), which has instigated and suggested innovative and experimental methodological approaches to analyse small non-standardized dialectal language variants. Based on their research on various levels – song types, verse types, motifs, and formulae – the authors conclude that there is no single computational method or toolbox suitable for tracking all the aspects of similarities and variabilities. The results appear to be too cacophonous and require filtering through human interpretation. Nevertheless, the common Finnic voice can be detected, which allows to identify the connection between the Northern and Southern Finnic languages. Metaphorically, the task is to make the common message across the Gulf of Finland audible and recognizable.

Ukrainian researchers **Olha Petrovych**, **Inna Zavalniuk**, and **Valentyna Bohatko** study in their analysis the semantic usage of vocative expressions to address or invoke someone, and to serve as guides for introducing substantive and emotional elements, distinguishable in the folk song corpus from the Podillia region in Ukraine. The use of the vocative case has decreased in modern speech, but was widely represented in older poetry, conveying messages that signified human communication – emotions, intimacy, or hierarchy – as well as connections with other living beings or inanimate objects. The corpus analysis underscores the stylistic and semantic nuances of traditional songlore.

The article by **Taive Särg** and **Kaarel Veskis** addresses the concepts denoting singer or singing, which have been comparatively extracted from an archival corpus of Estonian media texts from the 1890s, and from the corpus of song lyrics / poetic texts at the Estonian Folklore Archives. The results highlight the verbal quality of the vernacular concept in traditional poetry, while also demonstrating the potential of corpus linguistics. This research combines quantitative word analysis with qualitative examination of lexical categories and semantic associations. The article offers new insights into the social representation of singing and demonstrates how distinct conceptualizations of expression are reflected in oral and written traditions. In the newspaper corpus, insights into new singing traditions and lesser-known communal singing practices are provided, revealing how language patterns were related to national identity construction. The tracing of the stem denoting 'song' reveals a potent meta-level in the conceptualization of singing, which symbolically opposes the archival collections where singing as a meaningful practice that unifies the community can easily remain muted by the multitude of poetic texts.

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NOTES

¹ Regrettably, Rūta Žarskienė passed away in 2023.

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