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THE USE OF FOLK MUSIC IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of folk music in education, emphasizing its role as intangible cultural heritage and a means of fostering cultural identity. Folk songs and games develop students' musical abilities, including pitch, rhythm, intonation, and musical literacy, while also conveying moral, aesthetic, and emotional values. The pedagogical focus is on Miodrag A. Vasiljević's functional method, which uses folk melodies and rhythms for gradual and natural musical learning, promoting interdisciplinary competencies. Folk instruments and musical games encourage practical experience, coordination, and teamwork. The paper also addresses contemporary challenges, such as globalization and the dominance of popular music, while highlighting opportunities for integrating technology and multimedia resources into teaching. When applied methodically, folk music becomes a living educational tool that connects tradition, creativity, and holistic personal development.

Keywords: *folk music; music education; functional method; cultural heritage;*

INTRODUCTION

Folk music represents one of the most important elements of a community's cultural heritage, as it encapsulates the historical, social, and aesthetic experiences of many generations. It is not merely a form of entertainment or emotional expression, but also a means of preserving collective memory and transmitting values from older to younger generations. In an increasingly globalized world influenced by mass culture, the importance of folk music in education becomes even more pronounced, as it enables students to develop awareness of their own cultural identity, as well as the ability to critically reflect on the diversity of musical traditions.

The pedagogical use of folk music in music education operates on multiple levels: from the development of hearing, rhythm, and vocal technique to familiarizing students with cultural and historical contexts, interdisciplinary learning, and emotional education. In this sense, folk music becomes a medium that connects theoretical knowledge with practical experience, allowing students to actively participate in the learning process. One of the most significant approaches to using folk music in teaching was developed by Miodrag A. Vasiljević, whose functional method represents a systematic model of musical literacy based on folk songs and rhythms. His work encompasses both the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching, linking oral tradition with contemporary pedagogical principles and interdisciplinary potential.



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The aim of this paper is to explore the use of folk music in education, highlighting its role as intangible cultural heritage, as well as the pedagogical foundations of musical literacy based on folk music.

1. FOLK MUSIC AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

Unlike material culture, which can be observed through objects or buildings, intangible heritage is living and dynamic—it is transmitted through performance, oral tradition, singing, playing traditional instruments, and folk dances. Folk music serves as a means for a community to preserve its values, customs, and historical memory. Through melody, rhythm, and song lyrics, important messages about the community, morality, courage, labor, and spirituality are conveyed.

Moreover, folk songs reflect local customs and ways of life in different regions, thereby maintaining cultural diversity. For example, songs from villages in eastern Serbia have different rhythmic structures and melodic lines compared to those from the coastal regions, showing how natural and social conditions shape musical practice. In this sense, folk music becomes a living document of cultural identity and a witness to different historical periods.

Although folk songs and dances retain their basic forms, they are subject to change over time—they adapt to new styles, instruments, performers, and audiences. This dynamism allows music to remain relevant to contemporary audiences while preserving its roots.

Oral tradition also involves interactive learning: younger generations learn from older ones by singing, playing, dancing, imitating, and modifying melodies, thereby creating a continuity of culture. This “learning through experience” represents a living pedagogical method that aligns with contemporary principles of active learning.

Traditional games contribute to students’ socialization, evoke joy, and suppress negative emotions. In addition to developing psychophysical and musical abilities, these games strengthen endurance and encourage self-discipline and responsibility. Some examples of folk games allow students to experience and more easily understand certain musical concepts and principles during musical literacy instruction (Pavlović, B., & Trakilović, J., 2013:224).

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLK MUSIC IN EDUCATION

Music education, as a school subject, encompasses multiple components, but the performance of music — singing, playing, musical games, and listening—permeates the entire educational process in primary school. “The immense role that a music teacher plays in the upbringing of young people is of incalculable importance for developing aesthetic sensibilities, motor skills, musicality, the growth of children’s imagination, the formation of character traits, and so on. This delicate path of a child’s development is primarily guided by the music educator, especially in the early grades of primary school.” (Vasiljević, Z., 2000:53). Folk music, as intangible heritage, plays several important roles in education. Students develop their sense of pitch, rhythm, intonation, and musical literacy. They become familiar with the traditions, customs, and history of their people, as well as with various musical expressions across the region. Folk songs convey messages about moral and social values, fostering emotional intelligence and social sensitivity.

Folk music connects different areas of study, such as language, history, geography, visual arts, and social sciences, contributing to the overall education and interdisciplinary development of students. In education, folk music is not just content for singing, playing, and listening; it has deep pedagogical foundations that support the holistic development of a student’s personality. Its use in primary school teaching is based on principles of musical, aesthetic, social, educational, and moral function.

Folk songs and dances, due to their melodic simplicity and natural rhythm, provide high-quality material for developing the foundations of musical literacy. Folk songs often have recognizable rhythmic patterns, which help cultivate a sense of aesthetic movement in dance and the natural temporal flow of music. Singing folk songs by ear and playing traditional instruments encourages the ability to remember musical phrases and motifs. The application of Vasiljević’s method prioritizes ear training and live singing, allowing musical development to be natural, gradual, and appropriate for the student’s age.



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Folk songs are not merely musical forms; they carry significant aesthetic and moral messages. Through listening and performing, students learn to distinguish lyrical, epic, and spiritual expressions, and they develop a sense of harmony, melody, and rhythm. The lyrics of folk songs often contain messages about courage, honor, respect for elders, the nurturing of family values, faith, and solidarity. Folk music allows students to experience a range of emotions, to empathize, and to understand human experiences portrayed in the texts. In this way, music becomes a tool for personal development, not just technical mastery of musical material.

Folk music has a strong social aspect, especially when performed in groups. Collective singing and musical games require coordination, attentive listening, and teamwork. Performing complex rhythms and harmonic structures demands focus and adherence to musical rules. Students feel part of a shared cultural experience, which strengthens collective identity and interpersonal bonds. Group musical performance, particularly through folk songs and dances, fosters mutual solidarity and emotional intelligence.

Learning folk songs in the school environment develops not only musical skills but also cognitive and interdisciplinary competencies. Analyzing song lyrics enhances grammar, vocabulary, and analytical thinking. Students learn about events, people, and customs depicted in songs and dances through singing. Understanding regional and ethnic differences in music encourages respect for cultural diversity.

“Only through careful selection of songs can one influence emotional sensitivity, develop aesthetic and artistic taste, and contribute to the formation of positive character traits. Since a song represents a complete musical-poetic unit, alongside musical elements, it is necessary to consider the educational role of the song’s literary text when choosing repertoire. Priority is given to songs with simple, clear, and child-understandable texts that have literary value, which implies linguistic purity, clear expression of ideas, realistic depiction of events, poetic quality of the text, and more.” (Cicović Sarajlić, D., & Pavlović, B., 2014:426). In this way, folk music becomes an effective instrument for holistic education. The pedagogical foundations of using folk music in education demonstrate that it is not merely musical content for entertainment or vocal exercises, but a complex and functional educational resource. “Musical abilities in preschool and early school-aged children are stimulated and developed through musical activities in the home environment, including listening to music, play, dance, and collective singing.” (Trakilović, J., & Trakilović, D., 2017:55). Through the development of musical abilities, aesthetic and moral education, social interaction, and interdisciplinary connections, folk music enables the formation of conscious, creative, and culturally educated individuals. Its application in teaching, especially when based on the functional methods of Miodrag Vasiljević, makes the educational process lively, dynamic, and meaningful. The use of folk music in education contributes to strengthening the foundations of a creative collective impulse, within which each generation finds its authentic expression.

3. MUSIC LITERACY BASED ON FOLK FOUNDATIONS

Vasiljević is one of the most significant Serbian music theorists, educators, and ethnomusicologists. He studied Serbian musical heritage from the regions of Kosovo and Metohija, Southern Serbia, the Raška area, Macedonia, and Montenegro. By applying the functional method, he clearly laid the foundations of the Serbian school of music literacy based on folk musical tradition.

In his pursuit of discovering universal musical values in Serbian folk songs and dances, Vasiljević focused on finding the most effective ways of music education grounded in folk foundations. The functional method includes model songs such as *Domaćine, rode moj, Resavo, vodo ladna, Mi idemo preko polja, Falila mi se prošena moma, Sol mi daj, Lazara majka karala, and Sini sunce*. The model itself does not constitute the method; rather, it is a principle based on the phenomenon of remembering the initial syllable of each song along with its text. To enliven teaching, model songs need to be supplemented with new folk songs.

Given that Serbian folk music is full of compositions with simple movement in the accompanying voice, the most natural introduction to two-part singing is through two-part folk melodies in which the lower voice represents the drone tone — *ison* (bourdon). Throughout his life, Miodrag Vasiljević devoted himself to both practical and theoretical studies of folk music, as well as melography, leaving behind works of great historical significance.



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Thanks to this, he is considered among the most important Serbian methodologists, ethnomusicologists, melographers, and music theorists. Vasiljević's contribution gains even greater significance because he largely created the conditions for Serbian musical tradition to become an important part of national and cultural identity. After Miodrag A. Vasiljević, in the 1960s, there were renewed periods of uncertainty, where, instead of modernization and development, education shifted toward copying methods and foreign instructional literature by certain authors, based on traditions — both musical and methodological — different from the Serbian context (Drobni, 2005). "When, by decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the 'French solfège' was introduced (referring to the absolute naming of tones using solmization), it led to a series of unprepared changes in music pedagogy." (Trakilović, J., & Trakilović, D., 1999:44). The Functional Method of Miodrag A. Vasiljević is based on Serbian folk singing and later integrates into contemporary teaching processes through singing folk music, listening to music, and incorporating folk-based content from music teaching methodology courses.

The functional method—a methodological procedure for establishing the pitch of the basic scale, developed by Vasiljević—has been the subject of numerous professional discussions and analyses. Studying his framework reveals a systematically developed pedagogical philosophy that has significantly influenced Serbian music pedagogy and modern music education. This method encompassed teaching rhythm, dictation, melody, perception, and intonation, and was founded on psychological, pedagogical, scientific, and national-historical principles. The term "functional" comes from its reliance on the functions of tones—their role and sonic significance within a key and their relationships with other tones. In early music literacy education in Serbian-speaking areas, teaching was based on folk songs, traditional instruments, and folk dances. The instructional material was grounded in national musical patterns, with later transition to explaining the major-minor system of Western European music.

Unlike the common approach, which immediately introduces students to scales, intervals, and chords, Vasiljević considered that these concepts are more appropriate for a later stage of learning. The first step in forming an understanding of the diatonic major scale involved selecting suitable melodic models. The fundamental tones were established through songs whose initial syllables corresponded to specific solmization syllables. In this way, a connection was created between familiar folk songs and the intonation of the seven scale tones. Students learned the pitches by singing the models by ear, without relying on instruments and without prior instruction on classical scale movement. Once they became familiar with the guiding tone, the octave span of eight tones was completed.

A particular value of the method lay in the use of authentic folk melodies from the local area where teaching occurred, allowing students to simultaneously learn specific modal and melodic patterns distinct from the Western European major-minor system. In addition to melody, rhythm played an important role. Vasiljević incorporated models of various rhythmic structures into lessons so that students could develop a sense of different metric patterns from the beginning of their musical education. Folk rhythms were considered an essential foundation for proper music education, forming the rhythmic basis of the functional method. The method allowed for systematic acquisition of both melody and rhythm, while also introducing students to an interdisciplinary understanding of music—from folkloric and cultural context to the theoretical laws of music. The functional method of Miodrag A. Vasiljević exemplifies how folk songs and folk music can become a living educational tool that bridges tradition and contemporary pedagogical principles. Its application remains relevant today in teaching musical culture, solfège, music literacy, and the preservation of cultural identity.

In Serbian folk music, we also encounter modal variations. The establishment of the D major scale occurs through the folk melody *Noćni stražar* ("The Night Watchman"). The tonal plan of the song (d minor, D major, d minor) clearly demonstrates that folk songs can serve to establish new tonalities in which the tonic fifth remains the same, representing so-called third-degree mutations or mutational forms in folk singing. Serbian folk music, along with traditional musical instruments, can be viewed as a legacy of Slavic culture and as a synthesis of various Eastern cultures—primarily Byzantine, Persian, Armenian—as well as Western culture (Trakilović, J., & Trakilović, D., 2017).



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Example 1.

Зеџ копа репу

f Зеџ ко-па ре-ну, а ли-си-на цве-кту.
p Вук им се при-кра-де, ас-на да у-кра-де!

Зеџ баци репу, а лисица цвеклу.
Брзо трчи зека, а пред њим је река.
Вука није било, у сну им се снило
Зека сада спава, њега боли глава.

Example 2.

Ноћни стражар

Се-до ми је ни-ско, ма-ло, то ј' не-то-ва ствар.
А ја сам му чу-вар, ноћ-ни му стра-жар.
Ни-ко не сме при-ћи бли-зу се-лу мом.
Ту ја стра-жу чу-вам с мо-јом жу-ти-јом.

4. THE ROLE OF FOLK INSTRUMENTS AND FOLK DANCES IN MUSIC EDUCATION

Folk instruments represent one of the most important elements of musical tradition and a key resource in the teaching of folk music. They provide students with the opportunity for direct musical experience, allowing practical acquisition of rhythm, melody, harmony, as well as the development of motor and coordination skills. The introduction of instruments into the educational process enables a deeper understanding of musical relationships, such as intervals, pitch, and dynamic variations, while fostering the development of musical ear, creativity, and interpretation.

The use of folk instruments and dances with singing in music education allows for:

1. Development of musical ear and intonation: Students first sing folk songs and then perform them on instruments, strengthening the connection between vocal and instrumental learning.
2. Development of rhythmic competence: Percussion and other rhythm instruments provide hands-on experience with different rhythmic structures and metric patterns characteristic of folk music.
3. Interdisciplinary learning: Instruments and their use allow for the integration of music with history, ethnology, visual arts, and folk customs.
4. Ensemble and social skill development: Playing and singing in a group encourages listening to others, collaboration, and a sense of harmony in collective performance.

Miodrag A. Vasiljević recognized the importance of instrumental practice as a complement to singing in folk music education. He emphasized that the use of local folk instruments connects theoretical knowledge with authentic musical experience. Instrumental practice stimulates the development of motor and musical



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abilities, ear training, and interpretation skills. Performing songs together allows for a deeper understanding of rhythmic structures and interdisciplinary aspects of folk musical tradition.

Through the systematic integration of folk instruments, the teaching process becomes interactive and dynamic, and students develop a profound connection with both musical and cultural heritage. At the same time, instruments enable practical application of the functional method, linking vocal performance, ear training, and rhythm into a cohesive musical experience.

5. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN USING FOLK MUSIC

Despite the undeniable cultural and pedagogical value of folk music, its position in the contemporary educational system faces numerous challenges. These challenges arise from broader social, technological, and cultural changes that shape the musical tastes and educational priorities of younger generations.

One of the greatest challenges is the dominance of commercial music in the media. Digital platforms, social networks, and other recommended content shape young people's musical habits, often favoring global trends over traditional forms. In such an environment, folk music may be perceived as "outdated" or less attractive. This places a responsibility on teachers to design contemporary and creative approaches that introduce students to traditional music without compromising its authenticity.

Another challenge is the risk of reducing folk music in the classroom to the mere formal study of sheet music, without understanding its cultural context. If a song is treated exclusively as material for intonation exercises, it loses its life and emotional dimension. Traditional music emerged within communities and for communities—within rituals, celebrations, work, and family gatherings. The modern classroom often lacks this immediacy, which can create a distance between students and the material. Although the functional method and pedagogical system of Miodrag A. Vasiljević provide a solid foundation for working with folk melodies, in practice it is not always sufficiently represented in the initial training of teachers. A lack of professional training in ethnomusicology can lead to uncertainty in interpreting modal systems, specific rhythms, and ornamentation. The contemporary teacher must be not only a performer and pedagogue but also a cultural mediator who understands the historical and social context of the musical material. Folk music can serve as a medium for cultural dialogue if presented within the broader context of world musical heritage. While digitalization carries the risk of superficial music consumption, it also offers significant opportunities. Archival recordings, ethnomusicological databases, and multimedia content can enrich lessons and allow students direct exposure to authentic performances. The challenge lies in integrating technology into the teaching process in a way that deepens knowledge rather than replacing live musical experience. Traditional music was once part of everyday life, whereas today its transmission is often limited to cultural-artistic societies and institutional frameworks. Urbanization and changes in lifestyle have made spontaneous intergenerational transmission more difficult. Through music education, schools assume the responsibility of preserving folk musical tradition and continuity, which requires a systematic and professional approach.

Contemporary approaches to using folk music in education, mass culture, globalization, limited class time, technological changes, and the interruption of intergenerational transmission of tradition represent a complex system of obstacles—but also opportunities for developing innovative teaching. The synthesis of these challenges shows that the key lies in creating a learning environment that:

1. Combines tradition and modern technology – the use of audio and video recordings of authentic performances, digital archives, and multimedia content allows students to engage directly with folk music while preserving its vitality and context. Technology thus becomes a tool for deepening the experience, rather than a replacement for it.
2. Enables an interdisciplinary approach – integrating music with language, history, geography, visual arts, and social sciences enhances the quality of instruction. Students learn not only the song itself but also its cultural context, moral messages, historical background, and social connections.
3. Supports the development of cultural identity and critical awareness – through conscious engagement with local traditions. Students develop an understanding of their own cultural heritage as well as the ability to engage in dialogue with other cultures. Folk music becomes a means of preserving identity, as well as a tool for civic and social education.



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4. Encourages creativity and practical involvement – using the pedagogical approach of Miodrag Vasiljević, students actively participate in singing, playing instruments, and analyzing melody and rhythm, which develops musical literacy, ear training, and musical skills. Project-based learning, field research, and performance in the school environment strengthen a sense of responsibility and community.
5. The contemporary teacher should be more than a performer – acting as a mediator between tradition and students, a guide through the cultural and historical context of music, a coordinator of interdisciplinary activities, and a facilitator of creative projects.

Contemporary challenges are not only limitations but also incentives for developing teaching methods adapted to the 21st-century student. When systematically, methodically, and creatively integrated into the educational process, folk music can retain its traditional value while being a lively, relevant, and innovative teaching resource. It becomes a bridge between past and future, between the local and the global, and between theoretical knowledge and practical musical experience.

CONCLUSION

Folk music in education represents a multi-layered means of instruction and upbringing, combining cultural, aesthetic, musical, and social development of students. Through the systematic learning of folk songs and rhythms, students develop musical abilities, intonation, ear training, rhythm, and vocal technique, while simultaneously internalizing the emotional, moral, and cultural values embedded in folk music. The pedagogical foundations of using folk music indicate that it is not merely content for practical singing, but a tool for the holistic development of personality. Introducing folk songs into the curriculum allows for the integration of interdisciplinary content – from language and literature, through history and general culture, to visual arts and social sciences – enabling students to create connections between different areas of knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of the world around them. “In general education schools, through the subject of music culture, students develop an interest in music and cultivate musical abilities within the limits of individual potential; this instruction has a general educational character and, together with other subjects, contributes to the formation of young personalities.” (Vasiljević, Z., 2000:53). The methodological approach of Miodrag A. Vasiljević, based on the functional method, represents one of the most significant examples of the practical application of folk music in education. Vasiljević successfully introduced students to musical literacy through folk melodies and rhythms in a manner adapted to their age and psychological abilities, while simultaneously preserving cultural identity and encouraging creativity and interpretation. His method demonstrates how folk music can become a dynamic and functional teaching tool, bridging tradition and modern pedagogical principles. Contemporary challenges in the use of folk music, such as globalization, mass culture, and the reduced practice of music in schools, do not diminish its importance. On the contrary, they highlight the need for active preservation and promotion of folk music as intangible cultural heritage. Integrating folk songs into the educational process enables students to develop awareness of cultural diversity, strengthen their identity, and form lasting emotional and intellectual connections with their tradition. The emphasis on preserving the folk music tradition has been studied by authors Vesna Zdravković and Aleksandar Stojanović, who pointed out: “If we lose tradition, we lose the territory, and if we lose the territory, we lose the people; if we lose the musical tradition, we will lose all the qualities that characterized that people” (Zdravković, V., & Stojanović, A. 2010:262).

In conclusion, the use of folk music in education represents not only a musical practice but also a means of forming conscious, creative, and educated individuals. It enables the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, the development of interdisciplinary competencies, and the preservation of cultural identity. Therefore, folk music in education cannot be considered in isolation as merely musical content, but as a key instrument in the process of comprehensive education and the upbringing of new generations.



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