

# EDITORIAL TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

## FROM DESPERATION TO HOPE: THE MEANINGS AND EFFECT OF GROUP SINGING\*

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This special issue of the *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* brings together research articles that build upon and expand presentations given at the From Desperation to Hope: The Meanings and Effect of Group Singing conference held at the Estonian Literary Museum on November 29–30, 2022. The theme of the conference was inspired by a deep sense of crisis – first in response to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, but even more so following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Recognising how humankind has continuously invented and developed self-destructive practices and tools – as Regina Bendix highlights in the opening article of this issue – the organisers of the conference sought to counteract the negative and emphasize group singing as a way to foster hope, support, and resilience through communal singing, particularly in times of crisis.

The conference, organised by the Estonian Folklore Archives at the Estonian Literary Museum in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair on Applied Studies of Intangible Cultural Heritage at the University of Tartu, was the 12th in a series that began in 2000. Initially, the conferences focused on the older Finnic oral song tradition, known as runosong (in Estonian, *regilaul*). However, starting with the 2018 conference, the scope was broadened to encompass song traditions from around the world. Many of the papers presented at these conferences have subsequently been published as scholarly articles in special editions of books or journals (Jaago and Sarv 2001; Sarv 2004; 2012; Lintrop 2006; Oras et al. 2014; Oras 2017a; 2017b; Saarlo et al. 2024; Väina and Särg forthcoming). We are delighted that the *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* has

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provided an opportunity to publish a special issue based on the song-related research of our conference.

The author of the expressive title for the 2022 conference was one of its organisers, **Kristin Kuutma**, a renowned cultural researcher, ethnologist, and folklorist. Now, the scholarly community of cultural researchers and heritage practitioners, but especially her closer circle, have been affected by yet another profound crisis, as on May 16, 2025, Kristin passed away. As a researcher, Kuutma observed traditional singing from multiple perspectives – examining how an ancient song culture transforms in the modern world, analysing its role and various meanings within contemporary heritage discourse, representation, and embodiments in present-day traditions. The foundation of Kuutma’s sensitive scholarly perspective, which always centred on the viewpoint of the singer and the singing community, was shaped by her formative years as an active practitioner of traditional singing. During the Soviet era in Estonia, tradition revival itself carried the meaning of resistance, and in that context she recognised group singing as unifying, empowering, identity-forming and politically significant. This background highlights the meaningful connection between singing and hope – a connection that can inspire resilience in a world shaped by loss and permacrisis. While writing this foreword, we think about Kristin’s legacy and commemorate her.

In this volume, several articles highlight the historical recurrence of crises such as wars and epidemics, as well as the frequent sufferings in human life, such as loss, grief, socially low status, or exclusion, and analyse a similar coping tactic used in these situations – singing together. Inspirational Insights, the article by **Regina Bendix**, states that one of the tasks of a cultural researcher is to bring to light problems marginalised in society and to pose questions about how and why people silently accept presumably dangerous phenomena such as the militarisation of society and arms races without attempting to resist them. As the editors of the collection, we add that one of the tasks of a cultural researcher is also to reflect on the remedies humanity has discovered for difficult situations that cannot be changed.

The main content of the collection, consisting of ten articles, is divided into three conceptual parts, but due to the multilayered nature of the articles, other connections can naturally be drawn between them. The articles share a focus on communal singing, a Central Eastern European perspective, and authors closely connected to their subjects, often belonging to the communities they study and speaking the same language. While ethnomusicology typically values an outsider’s fresh view, these insider perspectives – such as researchers who actively participate in LGBT+ choirs or are members of the ethnic groups studied – offer deep knowledge of the material. Although this can affect the result, it does not diminish the research’s value as the authors are methodically consistent, acknowledge and address their possible positional biases.

The first three articles in this collection about traditional song examine, from historical, social, and folkloristic viewpoints, how people belonging to certain national or ethnic communities have used and continue to use their traditional singing heritage in difficult situations. Between the objectively written lines, we read emotional stories about how the traditional song repertoire has helped empower and support people through communal singing in crisis situations that unfortunately recur repeatedly in human society.

This painful topic is introduced in **Marjeta Pisk**'s article "Singing out Strange Days" which focuses on group singing during critical periods: the Slovenian independence processes in the 19th century, World War I, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The author examines how and which songs have acquired symbolic, empowering value for the people, while also bringing to light the enduring problems of human history, primarily the recurrence of wars. Group singing became especially meaningful during times when gathering was not possible; for instance, choral singing was entirely impossible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pisk demonstrates that virtual choirs attempted to alleviate the need for face-to-face contact; therefore collective singing was not only a way to spend leisure time but also a therapeutic tool that provided stability and a sense of security.

**Olha Petrovych** reports on the same topic, exploring in her article "'Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow': Reflecting the Ukrainian National Mood" the historical, cultural, and social context of the Ukrainian song *Oy u Luzi Chervona Kalyna*, as well as the circumstances of its origin, dissemination, and variations. The song, which originated from the tradition of the Ukrainian Cossacks, has endured through numerous historical events and armies, remaining relevant during Ukraine's independence movements in the late 20th century and the protests known as the revolutions of the early 21st century. Symbolising Ukraine's struggle for independence and identity, the song gained particular significance during the full-scale war initiated by Russia in 2022. The article demonstrates how collective singing as a cultural practice supports collective identity and becomes especially prominent during turbulent times.

**Delia Dattilo**, in turn, writes about the use of historical singing traditions to empower an ethnic group in contemporary conditions, although this article does not directly deal with a time of crisis. She writes in her article "Multipart Music as Self-determination: Perspectives and Discourses in an Arbëresh Community of Singing Women" about the voluntary cultural activities of the Albanian diaspora minority in the Province of Cosenza, Calabria – historically one of Italy's poorest regions. In the village of Lungro, local women gather under the guidance of Anna Stratigò to sing traditional songs in the Vuxhë Grash ensemble, to socialise, teach the dialect to children, organise festivals, etc. Dattilo demonstrates that cultural engagement is not merely a pastime, entertainment, or social activity; it is also a profoundly important practice that shapes cultural and local identity, empowers minorities by strengthening internal community relationships and intergenerational bonds, and inspires the acquisition and sharing of knowledge.

The following three articles represent the music-analytical research approach in this collection. **Žanna Pärtlas**'s article also forms a pair with that by Delia Dattilo, as both address women's singing heritage as a certain supportive system that enables self-expression within a traditional ethnic group. Pärtlas focuses in her article "From Lament to Lamenting Song: Musical Models, Meanings, and Expression in Seto Solo and Choral Funeral Laments" on the song genre associated with inevitable crises in human life. The study examines the lament tradition of the Seto people, a Finnic ethnic group living in south-eastern Estonia. Central to this tradition are solo funeral laments and bridal (wedding) laments, performed polyphonically by a choir. In certain cases – such as the funeral of a young girl – choral funeral laments have also been sung. Choral funeral laments themselves form a unique genre within the lament traditions of the

wider eastern region beyond Estonia. The article presents an engaging exploration of the performance contexts and regional parallels, followed by a musical analysis that identifies both shared and distinct characteristics of three local lament genres and reveals their close connection to the ritual songs of ancient musical layers.

**Hans-Gunter Lock**'s article "Gradus ad Parnassum: International Online Training for Microtonal Singing with 22 Pitches within the Octave" relates to the collection's theme by documenting how communal singing was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which members of the microtonal singing group, like other music enthusiasts such as the youth choir in Pisk's article, organised joint singing sessions online. Lock introduces the international microtonal music community, an alternative tradition to Western mainstream music, and explores its development, microtonal systems, and traditional examples. The author's Gradus ad Parnassum online training served as both a laboratory for microtonal singing methods and an experimental space for online music education, culminating in live concerts. While emphasising the value of in-person practice, the study shows that online sessions spurred new microtonal compositions, advanced creative online learning, and sustained the microtonal community.

**Martin Boiko**'s article "Techniques of the Melody Formation and Improvisation in Latvian Recitatives" addresses the older singing tradition of Latvians living in close proximity to Estonians and Setos, which was typically performed as communal singing with a lead singer alternating with the choir. This article does not directly focus on the social aspects of singing; instead, it concentrates on the different styles of recreating orally transmitted songs. The author focuses on the question of what unwritten rules folk singers of past centuries followed when recreating melodies and attempts to deduce and systematise various creative techniques based on an analysis of old handwritten musical notations. The article provides an excellent insight into the older Latvian singing tradition, which fulfilled various functions within the Latvian peasant community's singing heritage.

The last four articles in the collection discuss the singing traditions of certain groups where people are connected not only by a common location or ethnic background but also by shared beliefs, or marginality and exclusion. Methodologically, the articles in the last section differ. Lukin has searched for and studied various historical sources, Davidjants and Raju use a social approach, relying on surveys. Pap draws on both her own experience and a statistical analysis of ecumenical hymnals, Jõks represents a subjective, reflexive research approach.

Two of these articles form a counterbalance to earlier studies on women's singing traditions addressing the LGBT+ community, and on men's singing practices. In their article "Identity and Mental Well-being: A Case Study of the Estonian Vikerlased LGBTQ+ Mixed Choir" **Brigitta Davidjants** and **Marju Raju** examine a choir focusing on the cultural significance of its activities and on impact on members' identities. The authors reveal that participating in a community based on shared experiences and engaging in musical practice fosters a sense of belonging and security, which is crucial for the members' mental well-being. Practicing choral singing, a highly valued musical self-expression in Estonian society, channels individual achievement needs on one hand, and supports the need for social acceptance on the other, especially when joining other choirs at a large, nationwide song festival.

In his article “Collective Singing in the Jewish *Shtetl*” **Michael Lukin** discusses the music of a community destroyed in the Holocaust – the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe –, a subject that can only be studied through historical ethnomusicology and comparative methods. The author presents a systematic overview of a phenomenon of collective singing, revealing how these vocal traditions – emerging and evolving from early modernity through the post-Holocaust era – reflect a unique interplay between vocal and instrumental elements within the broader European-Jewish musical poly-system.

The last two articles in the special issue address the development of contemporary Christian singing traditions. In his article “The Adoption of Runosong Techniques in Estonian Antiphonal Psalmody: Toward a Circular Model of Chanting” **Eerik Jõks** examines the emergence of a new idiomatic style of Estonian prose-form ecclesiastical chant, integrating performance techniques from the archaic Finnic communal singing tradition of runosong. Jõks reflects on the challenge of developing a chant style suited to the phonetic, prosodic, and performance traditions of the Estonian language and culture, aiming to move beyond reliance on Indo-European musical models. Using a hybrid research method that combines artistic research and autoethnography, the long-term creative process (2010–2024) is recorded and analysed as a case study in establishing a new communal singing practice.

**Kinga Marjatta Pap**’s article “The Faces of the Central Eastern European Region in Hymnals of the Global Ecumenical Movement” examines international or interethnic musical communication within the Lutheran Church and broader ecumenical practice, with a focus on hymnals compiled for major international gatherings. The article analyses the success stories of local hymns from different historical periods across Eastern Europe, examining how these hymns have been integrated into global liturgical practice. By considering the textual content, musical features of hymns, and the church-political background of gatherings, Pap investigates why certain songs have entered the international tradition and repeatedly featured in ecumenical hymnals. The discussion is framed by the concept of the Lutheran *Kernlied* (core hymn), which captures the defining qualities that support a hymn’s lasting role in communal worship and international recognition.

The articles in this singing-themed collection discuss communal singing, showing that despite different perspectives and problem settings, communal singing is a general and necessary phenomenon in society. Communal singing arises more easily in cohesive communities, but it also helps to unite communities and connect people.

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