

Editorial: Echoes of Traditional Music in Central and Eastern Europe in Times of War and Peace

DOI: 10.21104/CL.2026.3.01

In her 1985 memorial lecture for the Society for Ethnomusicology titled “Slavic Folk Music: Forms of Singing and Self-Identity”, ethnomusicologist Barbara Krader spoke about forms of folk music in former Yugoslavia and their connection to the identities of people “who have undergone conquest, upheaval in wars (...) and are today faced with rapid change all around, exacerbated by the economic need to work abroad for long periods”. Krader, who served as a secretary of the International Folk Music Council in the 1960s, an organisation known today as the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance, played an important role in connecting researchers on both sides of the Iron Curtain and bringing topics from Central and Eastern Europe to the attention of scholars in the West. The current volume originated in the 4th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Music and Dance of the Slavic World, held in Prague in October 2023. The topics discussed at the symposium demonstrated that the relationship between music and identity remains as important today as it was four decades ago. The wars are different, and people move along different trajectories, but they continue to create and recreate their identities through music and dance.

On an October evening in a former quarry workers’ settlement in Brno, a punk-rock song drawing on a Moravian folk melody brings a crowd into the street for a feast modelled on a Moravian village *hody*. In the Sutla Valley, on the Croatian-Slovenian border, each year on 5 January, three or six men set out after dark on Epiphany Eve carrying a star, singing at the threshold of each home. In Lviv and in Kyiv, young singers gather around field recordings made decades ago on cheap cassette tapes, learning to sing “without embellishment” while air-raid sirens punctuate their rehearsals. The articles collected in this special issue ask, in different ways, a common question: What happens to song and dance when the ground beneath them shifts through migration, urbanisation, generational change, or war?

Reflecting the interdisciplinary character of the contributions and the intersection of ethnomusicology and ethnology, this issue approaches music and dance as social practices rather than artistic objects. Music and dance are understood not as isolated forms of artistic expression, but as social action embedded in ritual, memory, identity, politics, and everyday life. Throughout this volume, singing, dancing, festivals, and performances emerge as ways of organising communities, expressing belonging, negotiating identities, and responding to historical change.

The term “traditional music” is the subject of considerable debate and can itself appear problematic; however, the idea of tradition as a process through which music is both preserved and transformed by different people for different purposes still serves as a useful framework. As the studies collected in this volume show, tradition can conserve old layers of repertoire as well as revive or create entirely new modes of expression. This raises an important question: How do traditions continue when the social worlds that produced them have fundamentally changed? Rather than treating tradition as something static, the articles demonstrate that continuity often depends on adaptation. Through the use of musical instruments, the continuation of singing traditions, or the creation of new institutions—such as music festivals that construct new “traditions” in a post-migration landscape—individuals and communities preserve inherited practices while simultaneously reinventing them. In other words, persistence often requires transformation rather than preservation in its literal sense.

The title of our special issue invites a broader understanding of war, which can be understood not only as a military conflict but also as a historical force whose consequences continue long after violence ends. Two articles in this issue directly address the transformation of Ukrainian folk music and dance culture under the conditions of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Larysa Lukashenko traces the longer history of the reconstructive folk-revival movement from its late-Soviet origins as a form of scholarly, fieldwork-based resistance to a stagnant, Sovietised “pseudo-folk” culture, to its contemporary negotiation between preservation and recontextualisation. Anastasiia Mazurenko examines how, since 2014 and especially since 2022, this movement has been transformed by war into something markedly more grassroots, participatory, politicised and visible—from cassette-archive revival projects to folk-rave nights in Kyiv—while also revealing the movement’s internal tensions over authenticity, generational authority, and the “correct” way of performing national culture under existential threat. Read alongside the volume’s other case studies of invented and reconstructed tradition, these two articles sharpen a question that runs through the whole issue: What is gained, and what is put at risk, when tradition is mobilised urgently and publicly in the service of collective survival?

The remaining articles, set in villages and cities across Poland, Croatia, Slovenia and Czechia, remind us that “peacetime” is itself not a stable condition for tradition. These papers address the consequences of post-war migration and changing borders, while also examining the effects of socialist cultural policies and post-socialist transformation processes, such as gentrification. Peace can thus be regarded as a period in which societies also continuously renegotiate their cultural memory.

Another common thread concerns the relationship between music and place. Across the articles, music and dance actively produce, rather than merely reflect, a sense of local belonging. They create, evoke, and reconstruct places, from borderlands and resettled regions to ritual landscapes, newly defined meanings of urban neighbourhoods, and festival spaces. Some traditions remain deeply rooted in one locality, whereas others illustrate what might be called “mobile heritage”, where traditions travel and acquire new meanings.

The issue also reflects contemporary debates on intangible cultural heritage and moves beyond essentialist understandings of folklore towards dynamic models of cultural transmission. Rather than asking whether traditions are “authentic”, the contributors explore who defines and performs tradition, why it continues, how its meanings change, and how institutions, local communities, performers, and scholars jointly construct heritage.

“The Slavic world” is not a culturally homogeneous space. The region of Central and Eastern Europe is instead characterised by fluid borders and multiple identities. Slavic languages are an important connecting element, and the close connection between language and music plays a significant role. However, despite the linguistic proximity and certain shared experiences of the “great history” of the region in the twentieth century, different historical trajectories and political experiences, post-migration regions, (disappeared) minority communities, borderlands, and local ritual systems have also shaped locally specific music and dance traditions.

Tanja Halužan’s study of *Trikraljski zvezdari*, the Epiphany carollers of the Sutla Valley, resists the temptation to measure present practice against a lost “authentic” original. Instead, it traces how ritual functions, performer demographics, gender composition, instrumentation, and even the acoustic geography of performance have changed over the decades, while identifying elements that provide recognisable continuity. Three further articles turn to the more self-consciously constructed side of tradition. Gabriela Gacek’s study of translocal music festivals in post-war Lower Silesia shows how “tradition” is assembled on stage from the disparate regional inheritances of a resettled population, in a setting where no single local repertoire is able to unify performers or audience. Drago Kunej’s article on the accordion in Slovenia traces how a comparatively young, imported instrument became naturalised as a national emblem, moving between village dance floors, staged folklore, popular *narodnozabavna* music, and diaspora nostalgia. Oldřich Poděbradský extends this logic to a contemporary urban setting, examining an invented autumn feast in a gentrifying artists’ quarter not as folklorism or pastiche, but as “functional folklore”—a practice through which space, community, and belonging are produced

anew each year. Taken together, these contributions show tradition as an ongoing labour, which is selected, adapted, and legitimised by particular actors for particular purposes.

The articles in this issue draw on ethnographic fieldwork, archival research on historical sources and visual documentation, music and dance analysis, soundscape research, and heritage studies. Together they demonstrate that contemporary research on music and dance requires a combination of ethnological and ethnomusicological perspectives. In addition, several contributors write as participant-researchers with long-standing personal involvement in the traditions they study, whether as singers, folk-dance ensemble members, festival jurors, or, in one case, a scholar displaced by the war she writes about. This shared positionality is thus an important methodological strength of the issue.

Taken as a whole, the articles demonstrate that music and dance are not merely reflections of social reality but active agents in its construction. They mediate relationships between memory and history, locality and mobility, continuity and transformation, peace and conflict. In the Slavic world, where twentieth- and twenty-first-century history has been marked by wars, shifting borders, forced migrations, and profound political change, music and dance have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for resilience. They are continually recreating cultural meanings, enabling communities to negotiate identities and maintain social continuity amid changing historical circumstances.

August 2026

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