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Negotiating Authenticity through Folk Singing Interpretations

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how interpretations of folk singing in Slovenia reflect shifting concepts of authenticity within heritage processes. Drawing on historical analysis and ethnographic interviews, it argues that authenticity is not a fixed trait but a relational category shaped by institutional norms, historically informed aesthetics, embodied performance, and performers' emotional connection to songs.

Keywords: authenticity, folk singing, interpretation, heritagisation, folk music revival

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje, kako interpretacije ljudskega petja v Sloveniji odražajo spreminjajoče se pojmovanje avtentičnosti v procesih ohranjanja dediščine. Na podlagi zgodovinske analize in etnografskih intervjujev prikaže, da avtentičnost ni fiksna lastnost, ampak relacijska kategorija, ki jo oblikujejo institucionalne norme, zgodovinsko utemeljena estetika, utelešeno izvajanje in čustvena povezanost izvajalcev s pesmimi.

Ključne besede: avtentičnost, ljudsko petje, interpretacija, dediščinjenje, ljudskoglasbeni preporod

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Introduction

The article focuses on contemporary interpretations of folk songs in Slovenia in the context of heritagisation, exploring how notions of authenticity are shaped among folk revival performers. These notions are always constructed in relation to selected traditional forms, which are perceived by the performers as the foundation of their interpretation. Although the distinction between traditional and revival singing is theoretically and empirically complex – and in some respects a slippery one – I nevertheless apply it here, as it enables a clearer analysis of the relational positioning that revival performers assume toward traditional singing practices. Accordingly, the article first outlines two modes of folk song performance. The first form is traditional folk singing, performed by singers understood in the discourse of Slovenian ethnomusicology and music folkloristics as traditional folk singers. It entails musical expressivity that is embedded in the local cultural setting and is "passed down within a community as part of its living culture".[1] Traditional singing is most frequently an intergenerational process, where the repertoire, the way of singing and the context of performing are preserved within family, village or other community frameworks. Over the past century, traditional singing has undergone continuous change, shaped by shifting aesthetic norms and influenced mainly by mass media, other musical genres, and cultural and pedagogical institutions.

The second phenomenon this article focuses on is revitalisation singing of folk songs, which is usually associated with performative folk music practices. The performers are individuals or groups who typically re-create folk music on the basis of audio and written sources, and sometimes oral sources. They adapt the music to contemporary aesthetic preferences and needs, and place it in the context of a stage performance before an audience. In contrast to the gradual and often implicit changes characteristic of traditional singing, the transformation of folk songs in revitalisation contexts is typically a conscious and intentional process, informed by artistic choices, conceptual frameworks, and the demands of public presentation. This phenomenon is part of a wider folk revival movement situated in Slovenia since approximately the 1980s that is also taking place in other cultural settings outside Slovenia. Characteristically, it "involves the deliberate selection, adaptation, and sometimes invention of musical elements to fit contemporary needs and contexts".[2] In discussing this phenomenon, I will primarily use the term folk revival singers, along with the term interpretation, to highlight their deliberate and reflective approach to re-creating tradition – specifically, in the case of folk song.[3]

1 Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17.

2 Ibid., 17.

3 Sundin, in the context of Western art music, understands an "interpretative act" as a "cognitive modus whereby the mind is attuned to surrounding objects in the world", Nils-Göran Sundin,

When a certain expression or practice begins to be valued as highly significant and worthy of preservation and promotion at the local, national or international level, it passes into the sphere of cultural heritage. This transition does not occur as a matter of course; it involves processes that attribute new value to a tradition. In such contexts, heritage functions as a mode of cultural production in the present, drawing selectively on elements of the past. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett thus defines heritage as a "value-added industry"[4] that creates new meanings from existing or past cultural forms through various means (musealisation, institutional support, tourist promotion). However, the evaluation and selection of what is preserved as heritage is often "in the hands of specially approved professional experts who select what is to be preserved according to certain approved criteria".[5]

In this process, folk revivalists often play the role of intermediaries between (living or past) traditions and the official heritage sphere. They act as external players who reinterpret tradition and adapt it to contemporary aesthetic norms and institutional frameworks. In doing so, they often come under the scrutiny of institutions that use their own set of norms and selection mechanisms to determine which musical renditions are to be considered 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' in terms of officially recognised heritage. Such institutional legitimations are also sometimes critical of contemporary interpretations, as these may deviate from the established canons of authenticity that apply to folk musical expression.

Therefore, this paper also focuses on the concept of authenticity, which pervades the sphere of traditional, heritage and revivalist practices. Authenticity is not a static characteristic of musical expression, but a dynamic and contextual concept that is constantly being redefined. In the process of heritagisation, authenticity becomes an evaluation tool – for example, it validates some forms of expression as legitimate while rejecting others, usually as excessively adapted to contemporary aesthetic and commercial influences.

Accordingly, this paper starts from the assumption that authenticity in the context of folk song interpretations is always the product of discursive, affective and institutional practices rather than a pre-given attribute. Over the last hundred years, heritagisation has produced various norms of how to perform folk songs 'correctly' and 'authentically', from scientifically reconstructed archival versions, through institutional regulations (e.g. those introduced by the Public Fund for Cultural Activities of the Republic of Slovenia; hereinafter

"Aesthetic Criteria for Musical Interpretation: A Study of the Contemporary Performance of Western Notated Instrumental Music after 1750", *Jyväskylä Studies in the Arts* 45 (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 1994): 9.

4 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Theorizing Heritage", *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 3 (1995): 370.

5 Owe Ronström, "Traditional Music, Heritage Music", in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, eds. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 53.

Public Fund), to contemporary, sometimes affectively based, revivalist practices. Based on interviews conducted with performers and an analysis of their performances, this paper shows how contemporary folk song interpretation takes place in a dynamic sphere where historical definitions, embodied performance practices, emotional resonance and (critical) responses to heritage institutions intersect. Thus, by focusing on the conceptualisation of the 'authenticity of performance' of folk music, this research will also contribute to a better understanding of heritagisation, since public performances play a key role in shaping the perception, placement and evaluation of folk music in a contemporary context.

Methodologically, the research is based on the analysis of musical performances and interviews with performers, and it partly involves a self-reflexive perspective, as I am actively engaged in the structures related to the topic of this article. Having long served as vice-president of the Folk Slovenia Cultural and Ethnomusicological Society,[6] which brings together contemporary performers and interpreters of folk music, and as a former expert advisor at the Public Fund, where I was involved in developing evaluative criteria for staged folk singing, I am not merely an outside observer. My position is shaped by long-term participation in the very structures I am analysing. This insider perspective enables a deep understanding of institutional and cultural dynamics, while at the same time requiring a self-reflexive and critical approach to my own role within them. This dual perspective allows me to analyse the processes of heritagisation, revivalist practices and the concept of authenticity in contemporary folk music in a more holistic way.

The introductory theoretical chapter sets forth a few conceptual approaches that define the authentication relationship between musical practices, traditions and interpretations in different ways. Next, a historical overview sheds light on how processes of scientific codification and institutionalisation have influenced the understanding and practice of authenticity in folk music in Slovenia. Here, special attention is given to the attitude of collectors, researchers and composers towards folk song representations from the late nineteenth century onwards as well as to the norms in stage representations of folk music to the present day. This historical introduction is followed by the empirical part of my research, which centres on the perception of authenticity through the interpretations of folk songs in some folk revival singers. In the conclusion,

6 The Folk Slovenia Cultural and Ethnomusicological Society [Kulturno in etnomuzikološko društvo Folk Slovenija], established in 1996, has for decades served as an umbrella organisation for folk revival musicians as well as for scholars in the fields of ethnomusicology, ethnochoreology, ethnology, and cultural anthropology. For more detailed insight into the organisation and ideology of this society, see Mojca Kovačič, "The Folk Music Revival in Slovenia: Conceptual Frameworks of the Folk Slovenia Cultural and Ethnomusicological Society", in *Táncház 50: Half a Century of the Hungarian Táncház Movement*, eds. Richter Pál and Lipták Dániel (Budapest: HUN-REN BTK Zenetudományi Intézet, in print).

theoretical concepts are brought into dialogue with the empirical material, critically examining their relevance and manifestation in folk revival musical practices. These conclusions are not meant to be generalized to all Slovenian regions or folk revival music practices. Instead, they aim to highlight contrasting perspectives and interpretive strategies within this field.

Theoretical Considerations of Authenticity

As early as the nineteenth century, the idea of authenticity began to be legitimised through science and its methodologies, which, as Regina Bendix points out, reflected the Romantic "moral and emotional conceptualization of authenticity".[7] The emerging discipline of *Volkskunde* gave rise to essentialist perspectives in which folk creativity was conceptualised as a direct and organic expression of national identity. Although romantic nationalism had ebbed by the end of the century, these views were preserved in the work of institutions such as museums and conservation organisations, which sought legitimation and direction in folkloristics. At the same time, folklorists often saw cooperation with institutions as a means of realizing their scientific ambitions.[8] This reinforced the tendency to materialise authenticity in the form of supposedly 'proper' versions of folk songs, reconstructed by using ethnographic notes, archival sources and phonetic precision. Bendix points out that such an approach reproduces the logic of colonial epistemologies, in which musical expressions are considered as static, ethnically restricted and unchanging entities.

For a broader understanding of the authenticity discourse, it is also relevant to consider theoretical perspectives from tourism. In her study, Ning Wang presents a typology of authenticity, which offers useful tools for the analysis of cultural practices.[9] She distinguishes between objective, constructive and existential authenticity. The first is based on museum logic, according to which authenticity is an inherent characteristic of objects or practices, measurable through historical and formal criteria. Constructive authenticity is based on the societal notions and expectations projected by the cultural industry or the audience onto cultural phenomena. Finally, existential authenticity refers to an individual's experience and sense of genuineness, linked to the intrapersonal (sensory, emotional) and interpersonal (communal) dimensions. Wang thus suggests that authenticity is not inherent to the object but emerges through subjective experience, which opens analytical space for understanding authenticity in contemporary musical practices as well.

7 Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 46.

8 Ibid., 105.

9 Ning Wang, "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience", in *The Political Nature of Cultural Heritage and Tourism*, ed. D. J. Timothy (London: Routledge, 2017), 469–490.

Similar shifts can also be observed in ethnomusicology. For example, the participants of ethno camps often understand music as 'authentic' if they connect emotionally with it, which implies a link between personal experience and the representation of national identity. Researchers argue that participants' choice of repertoire at an ethno camp may occur through a framework of personal authenticity, "wherein music that feels authentic to a person is by extension authentic to their nation".[10] These notions also reveal a conceptual shift from objectivist understandings of authenticity to more subjective, experiential ones. However, while the turn to personal authenticity may appear to move beyond essentialist definitions, it may still remain entangled in them. Such subjective perceptions can still be shaped by broader cultural narratives about what is considered authentic. As Simone Krüger argues in her critique of early world music pedagogy, authenticity has often been constructed through the essentialisation of the Other, relying on stereotypical visual and sonic markers of race, ethnicity and traditionality. The juxtaposition of these perspectives suggests that personal authenticity, though seemingly subjective and emotionally grounded, may still draw from shared cultural imaginaries and inherited scripts about what 'authentic' music is supposed to sound or look like.[11] As Sarah Weiss also notes, students often judge authenticity not by the acoustic qualities of music, but in accordance with their own cultural expectations. She describes authenticity as 'malleable', flexible, and politically contingent – often entangled with ideals of purity, locality, and resistance to globalisation. At the same time, she stresses that hybridity and authenticity are not mutually exclusive; rather, hybrid musical expressions can, over time, be perceived as authentic, which reveals the processual, negotiated nature of the authentic.[12]

In the context of musical revivals in the second half of the twentieth century, Bithell and Hill define authenticity as a key ideological element. For some performers, it is expressed as accurate reproduction of musical patterns, while others have an approach based on experiencing music and its interpretation.[13] In line with Henry Feintuch's idea that tradition is a place of imagination, not a measure of reality, a different understanding of authenticity emerges – the "authenticity of the consumer"[14] or the "authenticity of experience".[15] This is

10 Lee Higgins and Sarah-Jane Gibson, *Ethno Music Gatherings: Pedagogy, Experience, Impact* (Bristol: Intellect, 2024), xxxi.

11 Simone Krüger, "Undoing Authenticity as a Discursive Construct: A Critical Pedagogy of Ethnomusicology and 'World Music'", in *Beyond Borders: Welt-Musik-Pädagogik: Musikpädagogik und Ethnomusikologie im Diskurs*, eds. Barbara Alge and Oliver Kraemer (Augsburg: Wissner Verlag, 2013), 93–114.

12 Sarah Weiss, "Listening to the World but Hearing Ourselves: Hybridity and Perceptions of Authenticity in World Music", *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 3 (2014): 506–525.

13 Bithell and Hill, "An Introduction to Music Revival", 14.

14 Ronström, "Traditional Music, Heritage Music", 47.

15 Bithell and Hill, "An Introduction to Music Revival", 24.

a dimension where the audience perceives something as authentic because it triggers identification, emotional resonance or reflection. This layer is often not linked to the performer's intention, but to the expectations of the audience, which may be "ill-informed, based on mythology, inherited prejudice, or manipulated by market forces".[16]

Similarly, Ronström emphasises that authenticity is not an inherent characteristic, but the result of legitimation.[17] Performers often need the validation of institutions (researchers, media, festivals) that shape and distribute knowledge. The key mechanisms of legitimation identified by Ronström include historicization (as a reference the past), aestheticization (as a mechanism for linking the past to universal values of beauty and humanity) and authenticity (as the attribution of "factuality, truth, and also affect").[18] Within this logic, it is not historical accuracy that is decisive, but the effect of reality: "What is true is what feels true."[19]

However, the sense of authenticity is not the exclusive domain of the audience; the performer's emotive experience also contributes to the legitimation of authenticity and is in continuous dialogue with the audience's response. Musical revival thus manifests as a dynamic relationship between the past and the present, where the past is consciously invoked to replace or make sense of the present,[20] or as Ronström puts it, "to create symbolic ties to the past, for reasons of the future".[21] Livingston describes this process as a search for personal authenticity in historical forms.[22] In this framework, some performers establish authenticity through fidelity to their artistic vision or engagement in the current context, which means that authenticity goes beyond mere reproduction of the past. The process of authentication also involves the creation of symbolic ties with ancestral heritage, communities or specific social roles. In this respect, too, authenticity is not an absolute, but an interpretive and emotionally coloured act that draws its meaning from culturally relevant forms of heritage.

In the context of performative conceptualisation of authenticity, it is particularly interesting to note papers which address affective authenticity as a

16 The authors highlight the gap between audience expectations and the artistic intentions of performers, particularly in the context of world music. For example, African artists are often accused of inauthenticity if they do not fit into Western colonial notions of Africa as 'primitive' and 'natural'. Such perceptions are reinforced through visual symbols (e.g. drums, grass skirts) which are meant to signal authenticity. Ibid., 24.

17 Ronström, "Traditional Music, Heritage Music", 45.

18 Ibid., 46.

19 Ibid., 47.

20 Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 130.

21 Owe Ronström, "Revival Reconsidered", *The World of Music* 38, no. 3 (1996), 18.

22 Tamara E. Livingston, "Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory", *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1 (1999), 74.

concept that foregrounds perceived reality, emotional resonance and inner belonging as the foundation for music interpretation, as opposed to normative or historical criteria of 'correct' performance. A study in art psychology finds that "people's beliefs about authentic music are influenced by the emotionality of the music more than by the proficiency of the music", and that "authentic music is related to feelings of emotional connectedness".[23] A similar shift can be seen in the paper by Gazit and Belkind (2024), who conceptualise affective authenticity as an alternative to so-called scientific authenticity, which denies musicians "the creative right to their musical histories",[24] which refers to Western domination over African musical heritage. The focus of affective authenticity is the meaning ascribed to music by performer and listener, with an emphasis on the emotional togetherness of a community and its members through sound expressions. This concept situates authenticity within a relational and affective framework, where it is enacted as an experience that generates symbolic, identificatory, and emotional connections, often exceeding genre, ethnic, or historical expectations.

In this context, it is also relevant to draw a comparison with conceptions of authenticity in contemporary spiritual music as presented by Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Ruah Midbar in their article "Outdoing Authenticity".[25] Unlike Gazit and Belkind, who understand affective authenticity as an internalised and politically informed experience grounded in the acoustic practice and historical preoccupations of Afro-diasporic artists, Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Ruah Midbar see affect as a tool of Western appropriation. In the second of the three models analysed by these authors, Western performers and listeners reach for elements of 'other' cultures, which they understand as symbols of authentic spirituality – not out of respect for tradition, but as a result of their emotional impact. In this model, affective authenticity functions primarily as a mechanism of self-affirmation for the dominant culture.[26] Interestingly, their

23 Tara Venkatesan, George Newman, and Joshua Knobe, "Beliefs about Authentic Music" (undergraduate thesis, Yale University, 2018), https://cogsci.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Thesis-2018Venkatesan.pdf.

24 Nir Gazit and Ori Belkind, "Affective Authenticity: South African Singer Letta Mbulu and the Black Protest Tradition", *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 36, no. 1 (2024): 76, https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2024.36.1.51. Affective authenticity is strongly tied to identifications within the Afro-diasporic world in the USA. It denotes a form of representation that emphasises the multifaceted, shifting and temporary nature of black subjectivities and the connections made through cultural production. It is based on the resonances between displaced, reconnected and reinterpreted black cultures, developing under the influence of enduring colonial conditions, and expresses fractured and non-linear historical narratives, often through vocal techniques and sound expressivity.

25 Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Omri Ruah Midbar, "Outdoing Authenticity: Three Postmodern Models of Adapting Folkloric Materials in Current Spiritual Music", *Journal of Folklore Research* 54, no. 3 (2017): 199–231.

26 The first model is characterized by a nostalgic return to one's own tradition, aiming to re-create a sense of authenticity through restoration rather than preservation, Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Ruah Midbar, "Outdoing Authenticity", 200.

third model, termed 'remix spirituality', shares a common aspect with affective authenticity, i.e. the understanding that emotional impact is the key criterion of authenticity. In postmodern spiritual practices (e.g. in the context of trance parties and DJ sets), authenticity is not tied to origin or meaning, but to the ability of sound to evoke a sense of mystical or identity fulfilment. "Namely, the experiential effect of authenticity is authenticity",[27] the authors stress, giving legitimacy also to artificial or constructed spiritual experiences. However, it should be once again noted that the epistemological framework here is different: for the African diaspora, affective authenticity means the affirmation of a complex identity within historically informed and politically intertwined spaces, whereas in the 'remix model', affect functions as an aesthetic tool, divorced from content, origin or history.

Heritage Authentication through the Institutionalisation of Slovenian Folk Song

Conceptual views of folk song in the nineteenth century Europe were rooted in the romantic notion that folk song was an expression of national identity, neglecting individuals as the bearers of tradition, while the belief strengthened that it was an aspect of spontaneously emerging nationhood. This was the foundation for the development of the first institutional processes of heritagisation, where the intellectual elite selectively determined which elements of local folk culture would be included in national identity representations involving folk songs and how they would be presented to the general public. In Slovenian context, the selection process took place at various levels, including selective transcription of songs in the field, simplification of musical notations and their adaptation to Western art music concepts, selection of songs for collections, arrangements for vocal ensembles, and the selection of repertoire for public events, schools, radio broadcasts and gramophone records. In this period, the term *narodna pesem* [national song] was more common than *ljudska pesem* [folk song]. 'National songs' were mainly published as well as represented on stage as choral arrangements. Many collectors of folk songs in this period (Oskar Dev, Janko Žirovnik, Matej Hubad etc.) published them in collections, arranged for male or mixed choral ensembles. Such publications incorporated the aesthetics of choral interpretation, with added tempo, dynamic, and agogic markings, and the positioning of voices in polyphony followed the principles of the four-part choral form.[28]

27 Ibid., 220.

28 With regard to compositional approach, these compositions are designated in studies and subsequent discussions as harmonisations, arrangements or reworkings of folk songs, where such terms describe "the degree to which the arrangement departs from the model". Urša Šivic, "Ljudska pesem in njena priredba za zbor", in *So ptičice še snivale: ljudske pesmi slovenskih pokrajin / Čarnice* 1-5 (Ljubljana: Založba kaset in plošč RTV Slovenija, 2007), 1.

As choirs spread to the countryside in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century as the result of the increasing activities of cultural societies, the choral aesthetic began to influence folk singing as practised in people's everyday lives. As Kumer notes, the advent of choral singing in rural areas changed the aesthetic values of singing in local settings.[29] Nevertheless, it is not possible to conduct a detailed analysis of how folk songs were sung in everyday life during this period, as very few audio recordings were made in the field at that time.[30] Scarse examples can offer fragmentary assessments on the way of singing in Slovenian context of that period. For example, when I analysed the polyphonic singing recorded on wax cylinders, I observed that in some cases the manner of singing tends to be closer to a choral aesthetic, whereas in others it is more folk-like (as described later in the article).[31] The most distinctive traditional folk singing element that I identified was the manner of voice leading (e.g. with the use of vocal parts such as *naprej* or *tretka*[32]).

Although these rare sound recordings give some insight into the sound of traditional singing, the conceptual baseline of the first publications in the second half of the nineteenth century were mostly not tied to the empirical documentation, but to the cultural perceptions and nationalist Romantic ideas of the time.[33] In the spirit of that period, they perceived folk song as a heritage artefact that should be preserved both in materialised form (e.g. publications of folk songs) and intangible form (e.g. on the stage), albeit in adapted form. The Song was therefore treated primarily as raw material for heritagisation, whereas the manner of singing in a traditional setting was not important, and if songs were re-created from such records, they were adapted for the purpose of cultural representation to the aesthetic expression of the contemporary intellectual milieu. Authentication during this process was aimed at standardisation and canonisation, not at preserving specific performing practices of communities.

29 Zmaga Kumer, "Ljudska pesem v sodobnosti", in *Pogledi na etnologijo*, eds. Stanko Kremenšek and Angelos Baš (Kranj: Partizanska knjiga, 1978), 335–364.

30 For more information about the first sound recordings see: Drago Kunej, *Fonograf je dospel! Prvi zvočni zapisi slovenske ljudske glasbe* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2008).

31 The folkloristic view of folk singing was formed on the basis of extensive field recordings of folk singing made after 1955, when the Institute of Ethnomusicology acquired a magnetic tape recorder and began to systematically collect, transcribe, analyze, and systematize the recorded material.

32 *Naprej* is the lead voice that starts the song on its own. *Tretka* is the third voice above the bass line. This type of voice leading is specific to folk polyphonic singing in Slovenia.

33 The collection of folk songs conducted under the leadership of Karel Štrekelj (1859–1912) – a Slavist, linguist, ethnographer, and editor of the monumental collection *Slovenske narodne pesmi* [*Slovenian Folk Songs*], as well as the head of the Slovenian committee within the campaign of the *Odbor za nabiranje slovenskih narodnih pesmi* [Committee for the Collection of Slovenian FolkSongs; OSNP] under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Public Worship and Education – did establish a folkloristic scholarly apparatus. However, in Štrekelj's case, it resulted in the publication of song texts only, while the OSNP collection contains mostly modestly notated, monophonic versions of folk melodies. Neither collection includes information about the manner of singing.

This understanding of song as a cultural artefact subsequently had a significant impact on the work of the leading musical heritage institution in Slovenia.

The Folklore Institute, which is now called the Institute of Ethnomusicology and is attached to the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (henceforth also referred to as the Institute), was founded in 1934. With the primary aim of collecting, archiving, systematising and analysing folk song, instrumental and dance material from the field, it was headed by France Marolt (1891–1951) as the only employee until 1941. However, in Marolt's time the Institute did not possess a sound recorder, so the sources available from that period are mainly written. An exception is a small number of sound documents recorded by Marolt in cooperation with Radio Ljubljana produced for the purposes of academic lectures and during a public demonstration of some folk customs in an urban setting, in Ljubljana.[34] These sound documents prove that, even in the period of Marolt's work up to the Second World War, heritagisation still treated folk song chiefly as an artefact worthy of study and, especially in his time, of establishing the historical and national significance of Slovenian songs. Namely, the socio-political situation still encouraged the idea of equating the concept of 'folk' with 'national', where textual or musical artefacts of the past in Slovenian songs legitimised the existence of the Slovenian nation long before the emergence of Slovenian political statehood. France Marolt collected, analysed, presented, and sometimes also falsified folk songs and wrote studies about folk songs with this aim.[35] Furthermore, the rare sound recordings preserved from this period and produced by Marolt show that he used Western art aesthetic interpretive criteria to provide sound illustrations of the material. This is evident from the fact that the folk songs on these recordings are performed by trained singers in the manner of choral singing, even though its aim was to show the richness of the rural musical tradition of the time.[36]

Following advancements in both music folklore scholarship and audio recording technologies, the Institute acquired a tape recorder and started conducting field recording after 1955. The ensuing period of intensive recording and analysis of those recordings brought new insights into folk song, especially into certain peculiarities that had not been noted in previously available written sources. For example, detailed annotation of the metrics of sung songs allowed researchers to establish frequent variation within a particular song type, discover some of the rhythmic specifics and explore previously overlooked ways of forming polyphony. In terms of singing style, they found that folk songs are usually sung without agogic and dynamic changes, and when present,

34 For more information see Drago Kunej, "France Marolt's Endeavours to Sound Document Folk Music", *Musicological Annual* 56, no. 2 (2020): 107–135, doi: 10.432/mz.56.2.107-135.

35 Zmaga Kumer, "France Marolt (1891–1951)", *Traditiones* 20 (1991): 9–28.

36 These recordings are kept at the Archives of the Institute of Ethnomusicology.

they are usually the result of the singers' engagement in choral activities. The question of singing technique was largely overlooked in the research, with only occasional general remarks characterising folk singing as free, loud, and confident. Only Robert Vrčon, a trained opera soloist and former collaborator of the Institute, offered a more detailed observation, describing traditional singing as resonant, robust, and powerful, yet appearing natural and physically unforced.[37]

Interest in public folklore representations for folk singing grew in early 1970s,[38] during the period of economic reforms and with the emergence of tourism.[39] This period saw the establishment of the cultural political associations, which played an important role in unifying the guidelines of folklore activities on republic and federal levels.[40] During this period, Mirko Ramovš, Julijan Strajnar, and Zmaga Kumer – researchers at the Institute – as well as Bruno Ravnikar, a university professor of acoustics, leader and mentor of folk-dance ensembles, and long-time head of the professional board for folklore activities within the cultural-political association, made important contributions to the development of guidelines for public presentations of folk music. In the 1970s, annual public concerts of folk music were launched. Initially, traditional singers were invited to perform by experts, but by the 1980s, singers were applying to perform. At these events, performers began to receive first recommendations and guidelines from experts for 'quality' performance, which for a long time was a label mainly for preserving or imitating selected past folk songs and musical practices in stage form.

From 1996, the role of main influence on the cultural policy of folklore activities has passed to the Public Fund of the Republic of Slovenia for Cultural Activities (hereafter referred to The Public Fund).[41] Under its auspices, there have evolved, from initially more free advice based on the personal beliefs of the evaluators about the 'authenticity' of folk singing, increasingly stringent and united criteria for determining the representative form of 'authentic' Slovene folk music. Expert evaluators gradually set down criteria that were mainly

37 Robert Vrčon, "O nekaterih avtohtonih značilnostih slovenske ljudske vokalne glasbe", *Traditiones* 29, no. 1 (2000): 23–24.

38 The history of folklore festivals goes further back to the 1930s. In 1960, the first Yugoslav Folklore Festival was organised in Koper. Since 1969, this festival and its successor, a major international folklore festival, have been held in Beltinci. The festivals demonstrate a strong involvement of the profession in the programming direction of folklore shows.

39 At the time of these economic reforms, Slovenia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, consisting of several republics. Yugoslavia had a distinct model of socialist self-management and a relatively open economy compared to other socialist countries.

40 For more detailed historical overview see Mojca Kovačič, "In Search of the 'Folk Character' We Would Like to Hear: The Dichotomy Between Folk, the Profession, and Scholarship", *Traditiones* 41, no. 1 (2012): 78–80.

41 For a description of a similar cultural-political and evaluative system in the Czech Republic, see Zita Skořepová, "'Zpěváček' Folk Singing Competition: Regional Identity and Heritage Performance in the Czech Republic", *Traditiones* 52, no. 2 (2023): 105-124.

based on historical notion of 'proper' folk singing, as they advised group leaders how to come as close as possible to past folk musical expressions. Institutional criteria, applied mainly through gatherings of folk singers and musicians, thus had a strong influence on the presentation of folk singing on stage.

The singing of folk songs was also disappearing from people's everyday social life, which was reflected in the fact that individual singers, who used to be part of spontaneous singing communities, became members of organised singing groups and thus harmonised their singing styles, repertoire, dress and so on. These criteria influenced singing technique, song selection, ways of forming polyphony, tempo, intonation, the (non)use of instruments[42] and even behavioural mannerisms. Contemporary influences (e.g. pop-folk music or choral aesthetics) were rejected at stage folk music representations, which made some singers feel a sense of disparity between musical practices in own local settings and the expectations of institutions.[43] As a result, the professionally supervised stage revitalisation of folk song, the emphasis on certain aspects of past singing practices, and singing seminars all led to a considerable unification of musical and aesthetic norms for folk singing.[44] These criteria have influenced the contemporary performances of many music groups and individuals who re-create folk music, whether in the framework of the Public Fund for radio broadcasts or other public performances linked to heritage institutions and themes.

Since 2019, however, the criteria have changed again and emulation of past musical expressions is no longer a requirement for participation; folk song can be a source for new creations that are not limited by genre or style. However, as decades of guidance have shaped aesthetic norms and notions of 'true', 'authentic', and well-executed stage performance of folk song, the introduction of new criteria has provoked disagreement, generating resistance among some, while being welcomed by others as a reflection of changing needs and values within parts of the performing community. It should be mentioned that in the last decade, evaluators have also paid more attention to stage presentation and music and folk song text's interpretation that to the re-creation of the styles and repertoire of past singing practices.[45] It is noticeable that in the last few

42 In accordance with the predominant past practices (primarily those predating the Second World War), singers were discouraged from singing with instrumental accompaniment.

43 More about these cases: Kovačič, "In Search of the 'Folk Character' We Would Like to Hear", 77–90, and Urša Šivic, "The Double Identity of Traditional Musicians: The Case of Slovenian Vocal-Instrumental Group from Loka-Rošnja", in *Proceedings of the Second Symposium Held in İzmir, Turkey, 7–11 April 2010: Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe*, eds. Elsie Ivancich Dunin and Mehmet Öcal Özbilgin (International Council for Traditional Music), 101–106.

44 Urša Šivic, "The Influence of Institutionalized Standards on the Transformation of Traditional Singing", *Translingual Discourse in Ethnomusicology* 2 (2016): 63–81.

45 For evaluation criteria see: *Napev - odsev, revija poustvarjalcev glasbenega izročila Slovenije 2025*, https://www.jskd.si/folklorna-dejavnost/prireditve/odrasle/poustvarjalci/majsperk_25/uvod_majsperk_25.htm.

years, the highest recognition has been given to singers with a considerably more Western art or popular musical style of interpreting folk songs, both in terms of song arrangement and vocal technique.

In the last decades, only certain aspects of folk music have been included in educational systems. In primary and secondary education, folk music is only marginally included in the curriculum, both in terms of content and repertoire; however, most teachers use a choral approach to teach singing, which often does not reflect the stylistic or vocal characteristics of traditional folk singing. At the tertiary education level, folk music is mostly taught as a theoretical subject, for example, as part of the Ethnomusicology and Folk and Pop Music course at the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. For students of these departments, the theoretical programme is sometimes complemented by workshops in folk singing or dancing, offered in collaboration with other organisations. Students at the Academy of Music, University of Ljubljana, benefit from more extensive experience in folk singing, instrumental music, and dance within the study programme in music pedagogy. However, these activities are still offered within the framework of the predominantly theoretical course Introduction to Musical Folkloristics at the MA level.

In primary music education, folk music is mostly included through certain recognised folk instruments (tambura, zither and diatonic accordion), but the performing styles they are taught and the repertoire are not linked to past folk music practices; they are subject to formal music education systems that are based on Western art music norms. This gap in formal education has always been filled by the Public Fund (and its predecessors), which established training systems for amateur musicians (and dancers) in the form of seminars and workshops.[46] Over time, many of these students attended structured educational programmes, where they gained knowledge about Slovenian music (and dance) traditions and creative processes, transforming themselves from initial amateurs into seasoned experts in the field, with many of them working today as mentors to future generations. Some of these experts have subsequently become evaluators and heads of training seminars at the Public Fund.

Non-formal education thus played a crucial role in shaping the mindsets and aesthetic norms of professionals involved in implementing Public Fund's cultural policy. Through evaluation, educational programmes and selection procedures, it has defined the (changing) criteria of folk music authenticity and quality. In turn, this has guided the development and public image of folklore musical practices, and influenced the broader field of music aesthetics and the perception of folk music authenticity and value in contemporary times.

46 See also Drago Kunej, "The Changing Nature of Instrumental Music and Musicians in Folk Dance Ensembles", *Traditiones* 52, no. 2 (2023): 69–90.

Authenticity through Interpretations of Folk Song in the Context of Folk Revival

The historical overview of heritage processes is a framework that helps understand the empirical part of my research by shedding light on the influences that have shaped contemporary negotiations of authenticity. This section looks at contemporary interpreters of folk song, i.e. folk revival singers. The singers that I studied (all of them are women, which was not intentional)[47] mostly live and work in urban settings, consciously seek new repertoire for re-creation and present it on stage for audiences, but they also differ from each other in terms of how they represent and interpret folk songs. The central research questions that guided this study were: How do these singers conceptualise the 'proper' way of representing folk music? What kinds of freedoms and constraints do they recognise or adopt in their approaches, and how do they explain the origins of the representational norms they follow? These questions are closely linked to the discourse on the authenticity of representing folk traditions, which was set out in the introductory part of this article, whereas the results of the empirical work, along with theoretical considerations, provide a basis for the conclusion in this paper. The selection of singers was guided by my prior familiarity with the staged folk music scene, which allowed me to identify performers whose trajectories and practices appeared to represent a broad spectrum of interpretive approaches. The aim was not to construct a representative sample in a statistical sense, but to explore contrasting cases that could illuminate the diversity of ways in which folk song is approached, understood, and embodied in contemporary revival contexts.

My research focused on the views of four samples of interviewees: two singing groups and two individuals (not part of the singing groups under study).[48] The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, guided by a set of core questions posed to all interviewees, while allowing ample space for open-ended responses and the interviewees' own narrative trajectories.

All of the singers are or were members of the Folk Slovenia Ethnomusicological and Cultural Society, although the beginnings of their individual activities are not necessarily connected to the association itself. The following section summarises their history of singing folk songs, as interpreted through interviews, with a focus on their initial motivations for engaging in folk music,

47 This tendency may be partly attributed to the predominance of female singers and the still-persistent gendered division of musical roles, with women as vocalists and men as instrumentalists; yet perhaps more crucially, it reflects the ways in which women are often more deeply engaged with poetic and spiritual narratives, such as those found in folk song traditions, which are also central to identity formation in New Age and related movements, as later elaborated in the article.

48 The individual singers are or were also active in other contexts: they have either combined folk song with contemporary creative approaches and performers from different artistic fields (not music) or participated in musical projects outside the scope of folk music.

the figures or contexts that influenced their artistic development, their understanding of representational norms, and the ways in which they acquire and select their repertoire. To avoid revealing the identities of the singers, the names of the groups or individuals are not mentioned, but to help understand their diverse perspectives, I refer to the 'first' and 'second' singer when discussing the individual singers.[49] The analysis of transcribed interviews reveals diverse ways in which individual singers and singing groups engage in the practice of performing folk songs. Based on the findings, I structure the discussion by grouping the narratives of the two singing groups on one side and the two individual singers on the other. This division emerged organically from the results of the analysis and serves to highlight the distinct approaches and experiences within each category.

Sources of Repertoire and the Processes of Revival

Both singing groups originated within folk-dance ensembles, where their members initially participated as singers and dancers, before establishing their own independent singing groups in 1989 and 2006, respectively. Their initial participation in folk-dance ensembles and their later activities within folk-dance societies had a strong impact on their attitudes to folk song presentations. They often attended folklore training seminars organised by the Public Fund and participated in its public performances, where they acquired knowledge and developed norms on folklore heritage presentations in line with the institutional guidelines discussed in the previous chapter. Both groups sing songs from all the regions of Slovenia and its bordering regions with Slovene minorities, and plan their repertoire by listening to the Institute's audio publications. They also acquire material directly from the Institute, and they learnt some of the songs at singing seminars or from other singing groups. They also use printed (mainly the Institute's) publications of Slovene folk songs, and more recently, videos of certain singing groups, which are available on the YouTube channel.

Similarly, both interviewed individual singers, although they did not start out as members of folk-dance ensembles, also drew on institutional guidelines; the Institute and national radio played a key role in legitimising their singing. In 1978, the first singer was asked by Zmaga Kumer, a leading ethnomusicologist of the second half of the twentieth century, to illustrate her studies of narrative songs with her singing.[50] Kumer guided the singer

49 The sources are stored in the Archives of the Institute of Ethnomusicology ZRC SAZU in the form of sound recordings and transcripts: interview with the first singing group (30/5/2024), interview with the second singing group (22/5/2024), interview with the first singer (27/5/2024), interview with the second singer (17/6/2024).

50 Around this period, the singer also performed with a vocal-instrumental group dedicated to re-creating folk songs. Together with the group, she performed in its early years and participated in the recording of the two albums.

by having her listen to selected audio recordings from archival sources so that her interpretation would reflect the original version of folk singing. The singer says that before this, she sang with a strong vibrato that she had learnt in her childhood when singing with her grandmother, with a rich repertoire of folk songs. Her grandmother had never sung in choirs, so she did not adopt her style from choral aesthetics, but the interviewee and I were not able to identify any other influences that might have influenced her singing style. Thus, at the beginning of her vocal career, institutional guidance led the singer to abandon the local family tradition as regards the mode of song rendition and to adopt a way of singing that was adjusted to institutional notions of folk singing. She has relied on institutional sources for her repertoire, too, taking them directly from the archives or from various collections of folk songs. She has always preferred to sing narrative songs and pieces from the border regions, because, as she says, their melodic features differ from those of central Slovenia.

At the beginning of her singing career, in 1988, the second individual singer was invited to work for the national radio by one of the editors, who believed that the singer had 'something archaic in her voice' and suggested she should record some narrative songs, most of which were no longer included in contemporary folk singing repertoires.[51] The singer mentions that she initially accompanied her singing by guitar, but she abandoned this practice on the advice of one of the Institute's associate who believed that folk songs should not be performed with guitar accompaniment.[52] The singer acquired extensive knowledge of older singing practices through institutional sources and from (older) people in the field, both in her local area and beyond. She says that her own fieldwork practice was motivated by the fact that the Institute did not enable extensive listening to recordings of field material, and also that when comparing some of the available recordings with their notations, she found the transcripts of the sound recordings to be deficient, especially in a performative sense. In her words, "A book can't show you the voice, [...] it can't show you the way of singing, or breathing." She has always chosen her repertoire for public performances with great care, bearing in mind the context of a song, which she often explains to her audience. In the interview, she stated that she prefers to include narrative songs, especially those of older origin, because, in her words, they contain a 'primal, spiritual culture' and convey a 'universal' message. Many of the songs she selects are also linked to the local traditions of her native area, giving preference to pieces that express human connection with nature. She

51 A significant validation of her artistic direction came in 1989, when she received praise from participants at an academic symposium held at Snežnik Castle to mark the 300th anniversary of the publication of *The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola* by Janez Vajkard Valvasor.

52 The perceived authorities at the time, whom she does not name explicitly, were also members of the Folk Slovenija society, and, according to her, they also publicly criticized her performances.

also associates the authenticity of singing with place and time, believing that one can only sing authentically in the place of birth. For her, a song is not just a historical artefact, but a living vibration that connects the past, present and future. Associating the past with the ecology of a place, she also likes to choose nature or churches as sites for singing.

Both singers were also encouraged to frequently interpret narrative songs due to the strong interest in this genre among researchers at the Institute, who had for many years been preparing and publishing folk songs, as well as supportive or independent studies on specific types or variants of narrative songs. Another important factor here is that these songs are also perceived as markers of the past and antiquity, with narrative songs acting as symbolic tools that help shape historical consciousness.[53]

Understanding Tradition and the Concepts of Authenticity through Interpretation

A strong emphasis on credibility that stems from institutional criteria is present in both singing groups. They both strive to emulate the sound of the audio recordings they acquire (field recordings from the institute or those received in seminars), which includes the way of singing, paying special attention to the pronunciation of dialect words and pitch accuracy. They have had contact with Institute employees, who had been actively involved in folklore activities (dance, instrumental music and singing) and the Public Fund. One of the key guidelines the singers have received on the performance of folk songs was the advocacy of interpretatively 'static' singing,[54] i.e. singing without dynamics and agogics, with relaxed voices, without the use of vocal technique and in an intonation framework that allows all members of the group to perform comfortably. The singing groups have weekly rehearsals. One group has a leader, who seeks new repertoire and leads the singing rehearsals. The other group has no designated leader, but its members say that: "sometimes we wish we had someone [...] to tell us things. Sometimes we can't get it right and we don't know what to do."

The first singer reports that, at the beginning of her career, she performed songs with pronounced emotional expressiveness. She shaped her vocal delivery according to the narrative content of the lyrics. Later, however, she made a conscious decision to reduce expressive elements in her singing: "I struggled with this for quite a while. Because I realised that I was taking interpretation too far [...] too much interpretation, too much drama. In the last few years,

53 Firat Karadas, "Historicity, Narrative and the Construction of Monstrosity in John Gardner's Grendel", in *Phenomenology/Ontopoiesis Retrieving Geo-cosmic Horizons of Antiquity*, eds. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Analecta Husserliana, vol. 110 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1691-9_39.

54 Šivic, "The Influence of Institutionalized Standards on the Transformation of Traditional Singing", 73.

especially now, I've been going back to no interpretation. None at all." Although she does not explicitly refer to institutional norms, her choice of a more restrained vocal approach corresponds with the aesthetic ideals promoted by institutional authorities at the time, which often favoured emotionally neutral, 'static' interpretations of folk songs. She felt that this manner of singing allowed her to detach emotionally from the song and present it without personal imprint. Her goal became to present the life and voice of someone from the past without leaving a personal imprint – acting, in her words, as a medium between past and present. At the same time, this singer is also known for collaborating with musicians and sound artists who work outside the folk genre. In these projects, her interpretation refers to creative reworking of folk songs, often involving experimentation, genre crossover, and sound design, indicating a different kind of artistic freedom.

The second singer believes that authenticity cannot be achieved by simply imitating old singers or techniques, which she perceives as "identity theft". She stresses the importance of respecting tradition-bearers, whom she sees as the original community: "These are their songs, we are drawing from them." She believes that folk singing has a specific 'code' that belongs to the community from which the song originates, and that it is unethical to invade this space without respecting and understanding its meaning. As a singer, she thus has the freedom to interpret, but at the same time, she emphasises personal responsibility towards a song and its bearers.[55] For this reason, she is critical of some singers of folk song – either for departing from folk singing in terms of genre and style, or, as she understands it, for disrespecting the tradition-bearers by failing to indicate the sources of the songs in published works or stage performances. From the point of view of singing technique, she is thus critical of 'modern', 'technically polished' singing approaches, believing that a cultivated, trained throat, if not naturally shaped in the appropriate way, may take years to approach the 'rustic' and 'natural' sonority of a folk voice. She also voices concern over the lack of regulation and supervision of interpretations within the Folk Slovenia Cultural and Ethnomusicological Society and the Institute thus acknowledging the legitimacy of institutions in shaping and validating the notion of authenticity. Her overall understanding of authenticity, therefore, cannot be reduced to a single source. Rather, it emerges as a synthesis of her stage performance experience, her critical engagement with institutional frameworks, and her encounters with tradition-bearers in the field. This layered perspective reflects both her personal involvement and her ethical stance on the responsibilities of interpretation.

55 Some of her other statements in the interview also show that her freer expression is still framed by her own boundaries about the appropriateness of moving beyond the 'folk sphere'. More freedom in terms of crossing into other genres is seen in her two projects with authors of other musical genres or multimedia artists.

The Spiritual and Emotional Dimensions of Singing Folk Songs

The spiritual dimension of folk songs is another layer that became particularly apparent through conversation about the performer and audience relationship. Interestingly, the members of the singing groups did not address this aspect in our conversations. There could be several reasons for this: either they did not perceive or recognise these dimensions in their singing, or perhaps it was simply not mentioned because I did not ask them about it directly. Other possible explanations for these differing views on the interpretive relationship with folk song will be addressed in the concluding section.

With both individual singers, although also not explicitly asked about it, the conversation soon turned to different ways of understanding folk singing, some of which have been discussed in the analyses above. The first singer mentions that she feels herself to be a medium between the past and contemporary times, and during singing, she immerses herself in the place and time of the song's action: "If you're all in – I don't know how else to describe it – if you truly enter this ritual, if you truly step back in time, not so much the story, but time, a life that is not your own but someone else's that you're singing about, then the magic really starts to happen."

The second singer says that she does not discuss the spiritual dimensions of folk songs just anywhere because not everyone understands them. She believes in the spiritual power of song, occasionally also felt by the audience: "That's why I do this... the people in the audience begin to breathe, because they can simply be part of creation. That's the power of these songs." Often, a moved audience is proof for her that the songs carry something old, distant, but deeply present: "Ever since I started singing, many people would weep... they say they can feel the song is coming from far away, that it has a source. They make a connection. And it moves them." She also enjoys singing in churches, where the natural reverberation enhances the performance by eliciting sensory, emotional, and cognitive responses from the listeners. She also sees singing as a deeply personal and spiritual act that transcends mere public performance. In her opinion, a singer should not sing just for others, but should be in touch with the source of the song and sing to 'something higher', which then reaches the audience. This connection, she believes, is the foundation for authenticity, which is also felt by traditional folk singers.

In their accounts, both singers repeatedly stress the effect that singing has on the audience, often mentioning that listeners are spellbound, deeply moved or even weeping. As they understand it, performativity and embodied experience are vehicles of transmitting the ancestors' knowledge, wisdom or even way of being. Again, we can see that longing for authenticity is linked to longing for the imagined past, where the old or ancient is often understood as sacred, undefiled, even ecological – especially in relation to the contemporary

consumerist, non-ecological and globalised world.[56] Here, the singer is a mediator between the past and the present, between the ancient and the modern, between the protagonists of the song and the listeners, as the first singer explains: "Suddenly I see a tear, then another, from men, from women. The moment is here, the experience of the story is carried from the woman who lived it to these people. Through me. Mediation. True mediation."

This conception of folk song certainly goes beyond the frames of notions about the functions and uses of folk song as held by institutions or even demonstrated in stage practice. However, it points to the ways, in the last decade more frequently demonstrated in the Western world, of seeking new human connection with the ecology of being, which is often represented by the past, with pre-Christian symbolism, natural cycles and embodied experiences that cannot be fully interpreted with a rationalist or historical analytical approach. The search for a connection between the archaic and the modern, between mystical traditions and the search for the authentic, for a personal spirituality that transcends religious and cultural boundaries, also fits into the sphere of contemporary alternative spiritualities (e.g. New Age, ecofeminism), which draw on as well as reinterpret local traditions through the prism of a globalised search for meaning, healing and connecting with nature and cosmology. Spiritual interpretations are ways of making sense of one's existence and finding one's place in complex social realities.[57]

Conclusion: Perspectives on Contemporary Understandings of Authenticity in Folk Song Interpretations

Interviews with all the singers and their subsequent analysis suggest that the two individual singers offered more in-depth and reflective insights into their singing paths, their understanding of folk songs and singing practices, and their approaches to interpretation. This can be understood in several ways. First, one-on-one interviews tend to foster a more intimate and expressive

56 For example, Blain and Wallis (2008) describe a similar effect when writing about contemporary pagan rituals at archaeological sites, where the sense of site transformation, ancestral presence and the performers' bodily engagement evoke strong emotional responses in both performers and observers. In these situations, the site is not merely a stage, but an active agent that helps create the experience of 'living landscapes' in which modern man connects with an imagined but emotionally real past. Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, "Sacred, Secular, or Sacrilegious? Prehistoric Sites, Pagans and the Sacred Sites Project in Britain", in *(Im)permanence: Cultures In/Out of Time*, eds. Judith Schachter and Stephen Brockmann (Pittsburgh: Penn State University Press, 2008), 212–223.

57 Even though the increase in magical, religious and spiritual practices in the Western world is dated to the period after the Second World War, this movement in post-socialist countries has "specific features, among other [things] due to the negative attitude to religions during the previous socialist era". The shift after 1990 opened the door not only to churches but to new spiritualities. Tatiana Bužeková, "Communication of Tradition(s): Narrative Templates of Magical Healing in Urban Shamanism", *Traditiones* 52, no. 1 (2023): 12–13.

form of conversation. Second, singers in singing groups are more likely to follow established conventions without incorporating individual perspectives into their vocal technique or broader interpretive approach. Third, the two individual singers have been engaged with folk song for a significantly longer time. Their involvement dates back to a period when institutionalised education for singers was not yet available and when the aesthetic and interpretive criteria promoted by cultural institutions were not yet (relatively) unified. In addition, unlike members of singing groups, these two singers do not come from the more hierarchical, top-down folklore environment that typically structures group-based folk singing performance.[58]

All the singers seem to aspire to the idea of conveying folk songs with authenticity, yet each group or individual does so in a slightly different way. Each of the interviewees began her singing career within institutional frameworks and these shaped or legitimised their approaches to interpreting folk music. Judging by the interviews, this institutional legitimisation was very important to them at the beginning of their careers.

In the groups, which evolved through their singing activities under the influence of Public Fund guidelines, no major deviations from the norms imposed by the profession could be detected in their interpretation of songs. The members of the singing groups show a strong trust in their leaders or in the guidelines received in the framework of folklore activities. As a rule, they do not question authorised knowledge, but consistently implement it in their interpretative and aesthetic frames of folk singing.

Unlike singers from singing groups, the individual singers do not take part in Public Fund stage representations of folk music, which allows them greater freedom in selecting repertoire and shaping their approach to performance. Although they initially sought institutional validation for their work, they later developed a more critical stance toward the evaluative criteria promoted by Public Fund frameworks. Neither of them has participated in official folklore stage productions, although one of them has led several vocal workshops within that system. Through years of their own research – both fieldwork and the study of scholarly literature, particularly that published by the Institute – they have cultivated a more personal and autonomous relationship with folk song and its interpretation. This independence is reflected in the gradual erasure of boundaries between what is institutionally considered 'appropriate' or 'authentic' and what lies outside such frameworks. These boundaries are also visibly blurred in their collaborations with artists from other disciplines, where folk song becomes a source of creative expression beyond conventional representations.

58 Of course, there may also be other here unidentified reasons, such as personality traits, general views, and understanding of the world, etc.

Building on this autonomy, the singing of individual singers transcends the intellectual transmission of knowledge and takes place at the level of embodied experience, which, following Csordas,[59] constitutes the existential basis of cultural exchange. The interviews suggest that these singers do not merely reproduce songs using technically or stylistically appropriate vocal approaches, but rather immerse themselves physically and emotionally in the symbolic space of the song. They describe entering the story, temporal framework and emotions of past voices. In this sense, singing becomes an embodied practice: the body acts as a central medium of meaning, memory, and affect.

The contemporary approaches to folk song within the studied cases reflect a combination of elements derived from past institutional norms and individual interpretive choices. The process of authenticity, as conceptualised by Bithell and Hill, is established through the analysis of contemporary singing practices in three key dimensions: historicization, aestheticization and legitimation.[60] Historicization is present in the efforts of all the singers, who draw on institutional sources in their search for old songs and ways of singing. It is more explicit in the individual singers, because they see the connections between the 'ancient past' and the present as an essential aspect of contemporary folk song re-creation. Aestheticization is expressed in the conscious shaping of the mode of performance, whether in terms of sound, performance setting, the way of communicating with the audience, or minimization of interpretive expression. Legitimation refers to the processes through which certain interpretations and practices are socially or institutionally validated as authentic. Throughout history, authorised authenticity of folk music has been established by institutions that defined the criteria for the performance, preservation and documentation of musical heritage. Historically, folkloristic and ethnomusicological institutions have reinforced essentialist notions of heritage-approved versions of folk song, reproducing the logic of isolated and supposedly immutable cultural expressions.[61] Today, this approach is being increasingly transformed: the institutions are reducing their direct normative influence over stage representations, opening a space and allowing recognition for diverse creative interpretations. Similarly, the question of the authenticity of interpretations and representations is being reopened, in the spirit of understanding heritage as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. Consequently, the practices discussed are moving away from the interpretations presented in this paper as past practices of traditional singing.

Ning Wang's typology of authenticity[62] also proves relevant in the studied case of revival music practices: institutional guidelines can be understood as

59 Thomas J. Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology", *Ethos* 18, no. 1 (1990): 5–8.

60 Bithell and Hill, "An Introduction to Music Revival".

61 Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*.

62 Wang, "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience".

an attempt to establish an objective authenticity, while the individualised approaches of the individual singers are closer to the constructive dimension of authenticity, where personal feelings, bodily engagement and emotional resonance are key. Empirical analysis of the individual performers shows that the influence of institutions has remained significant, but authenticity is no longer understood as a fixed category. According to conceptualisations such as proposed by Wang and Rönström,[63] authenticity increasingly occurs as a process of negotiation between performers, audiences and cultural mediators, in which perceived experience plays a key role rather than merely the objective reproduction of tradition.

As Weiss and Krüger have shown,[64] perceptions of authenticity are often shaped more by emotional resonance and cultural expectation than by sonic or structural traits, a dynamic clearly reflected in the audience responses discussed in the empirical part of the study. This supports theoretical perspectives advanced by Venkatesan, Newman and Knobe,[65] as well as Gazit and Belkind,[66] who conceptualise authenticity as a relational and affective phenomenon, one that emerges not primarily from formal musical structures, but from emotional resonance, shared meaning, and the dynamics between performer, audience, and cultural context. These findings apply especially to the individual singers in this study, whose interpretations are strongly grounded in emotional connection and often transcend formal norms, reinforcing a sense of communal belonging and lived experience.

The interpretations of folk music examined in this study demonstrate that contemporary understandings of authenticity within folk singing in Slovenia are shaped by a multiplicity of perspectives, practices, and experiences. They reveal that authenticity is not a fixed attribute anchored in origin or tradition, but a dynamic outcome of several intertwined factors: historically conditioned institutional frameworks, emotional and bodily experience, ongoing negotiation among cultural actors, and individual creative agency. In this light, and as evidenced by the singers' narratives and practices, authenticity appears not as a measurable quality rooted in the past, but as a relational and processual category shaped in specific performative and social contexts.

63 Ronström, "Traditional Music, Heritage Music," 47.

64 Krüger, "Undoing Authenticity as a Discursive Construct", and Weiss, "Listening to the World but Hearing Ourselves".

65 Venkatesan, Newman, and Knobe, "Beliefs about Authentic Music".

66 Gazit and Belkind, "Affective Authenticity".

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SUMMARY

The article explores how contemporary interpreters of folk songs in Slovenia understand and perform folk singing through the lens of authenticity. The author departs from the premise that authenticity is not a fixed property but a result of discursive, affective, and institutional practices that are constantly negotiated and shifting. The research is based on a historical overview of institutional activities related to the collection, publication of folk song and evaluation of folk singing, and on the empirical analysis of four contemporary female performers: two vocal groups and two individual singers.

In the theoretical section, the author presents various conceptualizations of authenticity and highlights a shift in scholarly literature from essentialist notions toward relational and experiential understandings of authenticity. She emphasizes that even personal or affective authenticity is not neutral, as it is often imbued with institutionally shaped notions of what counts as 'authentic'.

The historical overview shows how Slovenian institutions have shaped the criteria for the 'proper' performance of folk songs since the late 19th century. Initially, the role of the individual as a bearer of tradition was marginalized, while folk song was treated primarily as a national symbol and artifact. Since the 1980s, with the rise of staged folkloric performances and educational seminars, there has been an increasing standardization of stage presentations, privileging certain historically grounded aesthetics, interpretations, and techniques.

The empirical part of the study draws on interviews and performance analyses. The two vocal groups originate from folk-dance ensembles and follow institutional guidelines, drawing their repertoire from archival sources and adhering to pedagogical instructions from seminars. Their singing style is shaped by criteria promoting interpretative 'staticity' and emotional neutrality. In contrast, the two individual singers, who have been active for a longer period and operate outside formal institutional frameworks, demonstrate greater autonomy and critical distance from such norms. Both perceive singing as a spiritual and embodied experience that transcends purely aesthetic or historical criteria, involving emotional resonance, personal connection to the origin of the song, and even a mystical dimension.

The study concludes that contemporary understandings of authenticity in folk song interpretation are not uniform but are shaped at the intersection of historically conditioned institutions, embodied and emotional experience, individual creativity, and negotiations with audiences. The findings support theories that conceptualize authenticity as a relational, processual, and contextual construct.

POVZETEK

Pogajanja o avtentičnosti v interpretacijah ljudskega petja

Članek raziskuje, kako sodobni poustvarjalci ljudske pesmi v Sloveniji razumejo in interpretirajo ljudske pesmi skozi koncept pristnosti oziroma avtentičnosti. Avtorica izhaja iz predpostavke, da avtentičnost ni statična lastnost, temveč rezultat diskurzivnih, afektivnih in institucionalnih praks, ki se nenehno pogajajo in spreminjajo. Raziskava temelji na zgodovinskem pregledu institucionalnega delovanja na področju zbiranja, objavljanja in ocenjevanja ljudske pesmi ter na empirični analizi štirih primerov sodobnih izvajalk: dveh pevskih skupin in dveh individualnih pevk.

V teoretskem delu avtorica predstavi različne koncepte avtentičnosti ter opozarja na premik v znanstveni literaturi od esencialističnih predstav k relacijskim in doživljajskim

razumevanjem avtentičnosti. Poudari, da tudi osebna ali afektivna avtentičnost ni nevtralna, saj je pogosto prežeta z institucionalno pogojenimi predstavami o tem, kaj šteje kot pristno.

Zgodovinski pregled pokaže, kako so slovenske institucije od konca 19. stoletja naprej oblikovale merila za 'pravilno' izvajanje ljudske pesmi. Sprva je bila vloga posameznika kot nosilca tradicije potisnjena v ozadje, ljudska pesem pa je bila obravnavana predvsem kot narodni simbol in artefakt. Od 1980-ih let naprej se je v okviru folklornih odrskih reprezentacij ljudske glasbe in izobraževalnih seminarjev krepilo normiranje odrske predstavitve, pri čemer so se uveljavila merila, ki so dajala prednost določenim zgodovinsko utemeljenim estetikam, interpretacijam in tehnikam.

Empirični del raziskave temelji na intervjujih in analizi interpretacij izvajalk. Pevski skupini izhajata iz folklornih skupin in sledita institucionalnim usmeritvam, saj črpata repertoar iz arhivskih virov, pri načinu petja pa sledita navodilom s seminarjev in se držita meril za interpretativno statično, čustveno nevtralno interpretacijo. Individualni pevki, ki delujeta daljše obdobje ter zunaj formalnih institucionalnih okvirov, kažeta večjo avtonomijo in kritičnost do teh norm. Obe razumeta petje kot duhovno in telesno izkušnjo, ki presega le estetske ali zgodovinske kriterije in vključuje čustveno resonanco, osebno povezanost z izvorom pesmi in celo mistično dimenzijo.

Zaključki raziskave kažejo, da sodobno razumevanje avtentičnosti v interpretacijah ljudske pesmi ni enoznačno, temveč nastaja na presečišču zgodovinsko pogojenih institucij, telesne in čustvene izkušnje, individualne ustvarjalnosti ter pogajanj z občinstvom. Ugotovitve te raziskave podpirajo teorije, ki avtentičnost razumejo kot relacijski, procesualni in kontekstualni konstrukt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MOJCA KOVAČIČ (mojca.kovacic@zrc-sazu.si) is an ethnomusicologist at the Institute of Ethnomusicology, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU). Her research focuses on folk singing, traditional instrumental music, and contemporary popular music and sound practices, which she examines both in terms of their sonic structures and their broader social and political contexts. Her work addresses themes such as the relationship between music and gender, nationalism and music, cultural policies, music in migratory contexts, language choices in popular music, affective aspects of musical experience, as well as processes of heritagisation and the evaluation of musical expressions.

O AVTORICI

MOJCA KOVAČIČ (mojca.kovacic@zrc-sazu.si) je etnomuzikologinja, zaposlena na Glasbenonarodopisnem inštitutu ZRC SAZU. V svojem raziskovalnem delu se osredotoča na ljudsko petje, ljudsko instrumentalno glasbo ter sodobne popularnoglasbene in zvočne prakse, ki jih analizira tako v njihovih zvočnih strukturah kot v širših družbenih in političnih kontekstih. Njene raziskave obravnavajo tematike, kot so razmerja med glasbo in spolom, nacionalizem, kulturne politike, glasba v migracijskih okoljih, jezikovne izbire v popularni glasbi, afektivnost v glasbenih izkušnjah ter procesi dediščinjenja in vrednotenja glasbenih izrazov.