

THE FOLK MUSICIAN AS THE BEARER OF INFORMATION

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The study and discussion of folk songs necessarily involves their bearers and field research. According to some definitions, ethnomusicology begins with the collection of folk songs. However, this article focuses not on collecting, but on the people that are the source of this collection. Who are folk singers as informants? What information can they provide and what can they not? What have previous researchers already told us about them, what do we wish they had told us (but perhaps did not), and can we fill these lacunae? Because they are the bearers of folk tradition, folk musicians are also the bearers of cultural heritage. As creators and guardians of tradition, they also have a copyright on the knowledge they create and preserve. The discussion of informants and the methods of fieldwork and research described in this article are primarily connected with the past and present work of the SRC SASA Institute of Ethnomusicology.

By constantly emphasizing interdisciplinary work, research on Slovene folk song to date has primarily concentrated on collecting and analyzing melodies and lyrics. Folk singers were merely tools that facilitated access to these. Zmaga Kumer defined the following basic characteristics of folk musicians: they play for others and not for their own amusement; they perform at local and public events; they are invited and do not come of their own accord; they perform beyond their home area; playing an instrument is not their basic profession; they are not educated musicians, although they may be masterful performers; and they do not perform primarily for money, although they are paid (1983: 152–53). Kumer described Slovene folk instruments and musicians in detail, but she only described the situation up until the Second World War, which she viewed as a turning point in the lifestyle of the rural population. Nonetheless, she is the author of one of the few monographs dedicated to folk musicians based on extensive fieldwork and an overview of an enormous number of other sources and literature.

Folk singers create their lyrics and melodies spontaneously, and their lyrics combine reality and poetic imagination. Folk singers do not necessarily expect their songs to be published. In addition, they may act merely as bearers and preservers, not as creators of song tradition as well (Kumer 1988: 92–93). Information connected with these definitions has been collected during field research, representing a considerable amount of material on folk singers and musicians. Examining these definitions, the dilemma arises whether it was the information collected in the field that provided the definition. It would be interesting to evaluate a group of young

musicians today, perhaps a group that gathers in a garage at home to play their music, using the established definition of folk musicians cited above (cf. Muršič 2005: 56).

In contrast to the American practice of ethnomusicological fieldwork, which includes long-term contact with a specific area and gaining musical knowledge from individuals (Nettl 1983: 144), the Institute of Ethnomusicology uses a variety of fieldwork in which the material is merely collected, be this through longer stays in a particular area or through individual visits. Researchers thus rarely form close connections with their informants and gather only the information that seems useful for their research. In most cases, this involves contact with the singer or musician (or the group) alone, and not the wider community—which (just like the singers) is also the bearer of the folk songs. According to Bohlman, changes in social structure influence not only the folk music repertoire, but also the methods of transmitting this repertoire (1988: 15). This, however, is a truism not only for modern times. The community has always been changing, and has consequently influenced folk songs, and this is why it should be included in research.

Especially interesting are the cases in which folk singers have their own distinctive singing style, one that stands out from that of the singers in their own narrow cultural environment (or even in the same village or town). Such singers should be dealt with through case studies. Nettl even wonders if what one learns in the field from an individual singer can be misleading (1983: 145) and may not actually be representative of a given area.

The trend to seek special features can also be noticed in the increasing popularization of folk music, through a myriad variety of adaptations, performances, and folklore events. In Slovenia, the public expects institutions to ensure that folk music is as authentic, typical, and Slovene as possible. It expects something special, something that remains unknown and belongs only to the Slovenes. However, there is a trap in all these expectations. In the search for special features, general features are overlooked. The most “popular” folk music in Slovenia comes from Resia and Prekmurje—the westernmost and easternmost extremes of Slovene ethnic territory, respectively. Resian music is something unique in Slovene ethnic territory and, among the Prekmurje folk songs, the ones that were borrowed from the Hungarians are the best known. This is not a dilemma over musical “authenticity,” but exemplifies the issue of what is in general use and is not an exception.

According to Bohlman, separating folk songs from performance and tradition is debatable (Bohlman 1988: 17). The link between the song and its performance is both the folk musicians and the community in which they operate. This is why the knowledge of all the bearers of folk music is

so important. Unfortunately, even the collection *Slovenske ljudske pesmi* (Slovene Folk Songs), which the Institute of Ethnomusicology has been publishing through the Slovene Society (*Slovenska matica*) since 1970, contains only a small amount of this information. Enriching scholarly editions of folk songs with the information on the communities in which these songs lived (or still live) would be a step forward in the study of folk songs. Considering that the collection is far from being finished yet and that several projects currently underway at the institute deal with the bearers of folk song, it can be expected that in the future the songs discussed will also be supplemented with this kind of information.

Insisting on the entrenched definition of folk songs and their bearers, or the unwillingness to transfer these definitions to a modern environment, means that not many years hence folk songs will disappear. According to Bohlman, folk music can remain alive only if it is performed, and both the musicians and the community must actively participate in this performance (1988: 80). Modern society has indeed become strongly differentiated, but there exists a certain group of people that are similar in their desires, expectations, tastes, and lifestyle; they could be called average people, but not in a pejorative sense. This is the average that Nettl sees among the folk musicians in a specific area—of fifty singers within a specific community, six of them are exceptional, six are poor, and the rest are good (and these are the ones he is interested in; 1983: 145).

People have not become silent or deaf. Music still accompanies them in their everyday lives. The influence of popular music on people is strong, but so was the influence of folk musicians in the past. It is true that only the songs that suited people's taste were accepted, but musicians also helped shape this taste. They introduced new features that took root (or not), but the musicians were the ones that introduced them. Considering the importance of pleasing a wide circle of "consumers" in the past, it sometimes seems that modern marketing is overrated. The songs that are not merely a fleeting hit in today's music arena must also suit a wide circle of people, and not only a narrow interest group. Songs are still preserved by people hearing and remembering them. When a group of people gather for various occasions (for celebrations, rituals connected with important life events, and so on), songs are still sung.

Modernization has introduced many changes in musical life. The range of instruments used has become bigger, and instruments are mass-produced and not only crafted at home. Learning the techniques of playing an instrument has become more accessible, and personal contact with an instructor is not necessary because musicians can also learn from various sound media. The technology of transmitting music has changed (including sound carriers and media), but the repertoire on the radio must nonetheless suit people's taste—it is only the circle of people reached by this music that

has widened. Musicians are no longer in constant physical contact with the audience, but contact nonetheless exists (Bohlman 1988: 125–26). Zmaga Kumer (1983: 177–78) also discussed the fact that, for folk musicians, dealing with music can also be professional and they can thus make a living from it. However, she also observed the following: “Only true folk singing can keep the song tradition alive and create a new one, and not transcriptions, audio recordings, song books, or various bands!” (Kumer 1988: 208). Even musicians with formal training must give their music their own stamp if they want people to accept it. An additional source of information for folk musicians has been changed or added; however, this does not mean that they do not learn directly from other musicians anymore—it is merely an additional possibility.

Because both the musician and the community are required, they also remain the main sources of information. However, both must be observed simultaneously, because only in this way can they offer a more comprehensive view, as well as complement one another.

The information that folk musicians can provide concerns primarily themselves as personalities; that is, the conditions in which their personalities were formed. These include descriptions of their families (size, parents’ profession, place where they lived, etc.), important life events (rites of passage, weddings, families, military service, etc.), first encounters with music (beginnings, place, and who they learned from), musical repertoire (whether they have only preserved and transmitted songs by others, or have also created their own songs), and various events connected with playing or singing. They can also describe themselves as musicians (where and on which occasions they played or they still play, how they were paid, etc.) and their communication with the community in which they operate (how they communicate with people, their perceptions of how they are viewed by people, their views on differences between individual towns, etc.). Nettl states that the information on musicians as individuals comprises their biography, personal repertoires, and personal performance. Through an individual’s biography, which also serves as a pattern for a specific community, information on the role of music in his life is obtained (1983: 173). Through the study of individuals, it can be established how they see themselves within their own communities and how they present themselves (Nettl 1983: 178). According to some authors (cf. Kumer 1988), folk singers have an excellent memory and therefore they can provide an enormous amount of information in addition to that which is connected strictly to folk music.

It must be borne in mind that this view of the community or communities in which they operate or operated is strictly from the perspective of the folk singer. In order for researchers to obtain a broader view of the community in which they have collected music and in which

this music is alive, they must also study other members of this community. From them they will be able to obtain information on how they see folk musicians as personalities, singers, and members of their community. Only the combination of both sets of information can provide a clearer picture. Information within the wider community must also be sought when folk musicians are treated as case studies.

The necessity of interdisciplinary work was emphasized by Marko Terseglav (1987: 47–48), and new forms of folk music were highlighted by Zmaga Kumer (1983: 177). Information on folk singers is still being collected in the field, but nobody is dealing with analyses and observations of new forms of “folk music.” It does not seem necessary to change the term. Self-sufficient and isolated village communities may really no longer exist (if indeed they ever existed at all), but the contacts between people remain. Modern communications may have even facilitated these contacts and not slowed them down—it is only the space of communication that has become bigger. The researchers currently employed at the Institute of Ethnomusicology comprise experts on Slovene studies, musicologists, and ethnologists. The musicologists and Slovene experts have learned their techniques for ethnographic work through experience and additional training. They carry out their fieldwork individually, which presents a lost opportunity. Teamwork in the field (combining a Slovene expert and an ethnologist, or a musicologist and an ethnologist) would yield more thorough results. The problem appears to lie in a lack of researchers and funds. In the long term, however, the greater amount of information collected through teamwork would lower the aggregate costs of research.

The information received from informants in the field must be appropriately recorded. During the first decades of tape recording, researchers recorded only songs and turned off their recorders during conversations. At that time, this was actually the result of financial pressure because researchers had to purchase the tapes from their own salaries. Today there is no longer any need for this, but some researchers still inappropriately feel that conversations are not particularly important. Every visit with an informant should be fully recorded. Occasionally the informants feel somewhat intimidated by all the recording equipment, especially if it is large and includes microphones, and so on. Quality recorders have decreased in size considerably, but they are still large enough that they are not “forgotten” during the conversation; they also hinder movement during the interview. In such cases a notepad and a pen, or modern micro-recorders (e.g., dictaphones, mp3-recorders, and so on) come in handy. The collection of information must not be affected by the recording technique because the main task of fieldwork is to collect information, and this must be given priority.

Because they operate among the people, folk musicians are a great source of information. The information they provide at certain points may not be relevant to current research, but it can be used later. Putting it plainly, nobody lives forever. Researchers come and go, and the information they collect (especially if they collect it for public institutions) is not “disposable.” It can be used even several decades later for analysis and research.

In order to avoid the loss or censorship of information that may devalue the importance of the informant as the source of information, the material collected must be carefully archived. Information contained on sound media is entered into field records, which include information on the informants, the time and place of recording, technical information on the recording, the songs sung, and a short description of the conversation’s content. The records also contain information on additional data recorded by researchers in their field notebooks. Unfortunately, today the use of field notebooks is rare, especially because of the tendency for everything to be recorded, which sometimes results in a loss of information. When making records (and partly also during conversations in the field) it is necessary to bear in mind that the information is being archived for a long time and for various users. This is why information should be recorded as clearly as possible and with all the details that will enable quality use of the information for those that did not participate in the field project. The fact that precise archiving is extremely important becomes evident only when an enormous amount of material accumulates over the years, which an individual cannot control without a stable and systematic approach.

The information collected by the Institute of Ethnomusicology, which is a public research institution with its own archive, must be available to the general public. Therefore, the archiving method must also make the information available to complete non-professionals.

Archive modernization includes the transfer of information to computer databases that are created by simultaneous collecting of material and entering of data for the previous periods. This mitigates data searching considerably, but only under the condition that all the information is entered in the database and their systematics is clearly defined.

Because folk musicians are bearers of information, they also have a copyright on this information. This area is poorly regulated, although Slovenia’s Cultural Heritage Protection Act (Sln. *Zakon o varovanju kulturne dediščine*) deals with it in part; however, this does not directly solve the copyright issue. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore was officially adopted in 1989. This recommendation includes a definition of folklore as the basis for defining elements that should be protected by copyright. When the author of folk songs is known, it is easier to determine the copyright holder.

However, when the community is the bearer of information—especially if its activity is extremely remote chronologically (even a hundred or more years)—competent authorities should be determined at the national level. When material is used for publication or performance, it must be authorized; if it is used to make a profit, a certain amount of compensation should be received by the source from which it has been taken (the informant or the archive). UNESCO's recommendations state that the following should be protected: the informant as the bearer of tradition, the interest of the collector with a guarantee that the material collected will be saved in the archive under appropriate conditions and organized according to specific methods, and necessary measures to protect the material from (intentional or unintentional) misuse. In addition, they stipulate that the responsibility for supervising the use of the material collected should be delegated to the archives, which should supervise the use of the material and the consideration of the copyright of the sources (i.e., the informants and collectors). From the copyright viewpoint, the informant and the collector are somehow connected; if the collector had not recorded the material, it would have disappeared. Only a well-organized and clearly established infrastructure offers a certain guarantee of copyright protection, as well as the protection of other rights concerning secondary use of folklore material (Honko 2005: 247–51). An even more radical step in recognizing authorship is the proposal that informants be credited as coauthors of academic studies based on the material and knowledge they have provided (Nettl 1983: 158).

As an archive, the Institute of Ethnomusicology, which collects and preserves the material discussed in the UNESCO recommendation, already performs the function of a competent authority. Its archive is accessible to the public and enables use by all interested parties. However, for potential publications source quotation is strictly requested; with for-profit publications this also involves financial compensation. The institute's role as a guardian of the material requires that all the information obtained in the field be recorded and archived with the utmost care, because otherwise the importance of folk musicians as the sources of information would be lost. It is important that the archive (or the Institute of Ethnomusicology) take into account the protection of informants' copyrights if they publish their own CDs with the material they keep.

Every source of information, regardless of its form, has limited breadth. Folk musicians (both singers and players) can provide a wealth of information on their lives and work. When giving information about the community in which the music that they create lived or still lives, they are limited to their own views; that is, the views of an individual. Their work depends on the community in which they live; without it they cannot exist. On the other hand, the community is a sum of individuals, and each one of them has his own views and is a bearer of information in his own unique

way. The sum of the information of individual members of the community (priority is given to the information concerning folk music and folk musicians that is collected from a specific limited number of individuals) and the information from folk musicians reveals the life of folk music within this community. At the same time, folk musicians and the community are necessary not only for the life of folk music, but also for research on it. They are the bearers of the information that forms the basis for analyses and scholarly explanations.

Studying field information gained by our predecessors makes it possible to observe the process of how “traditional” society changes into modern society. Along with this, “new” creators, bearers, and preservers of folk music can therefore be recognized in modern society as well.

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Source: Field records of SRC SASA Institute of Ethnomusicology.

POVZETEK**LJUDSKI GLASBENIK KOT NOSILEC INFORMACIJ**

Članek osvetljuje vlogo ljudskega glasbenika kot nosilca informacij. Na kratko je opisano dosedanje ukvarjanje z ljudskimi glasbeniki. Skozi perspektivo ljudskega glasbenika kot nosilca informacij, skušamo nakazati, kje gre iskati sodobne ljudske glasbenike. Dosedanje raziskovanje ljudskega pesništva na Slovenskem se je ob stalnem poudarjanju interdisciplinarnega dela posvečalo predvsem zbiranju in analiziranju melodij in besedil. Na Glasbenonarodopisnem inštitutu je uveljavljeno terensko delo, kjer se gradivo zgolj zbira, naj gre za daljše bivanje na nekem območju ali posamezne obiske. Na Glasbenonarodopisnem inštitutu uveljavljeno terensko delo, kjer se gradivo zgolj zbira, naj gre za daljše bivanje na nekem območju ali posamezne obiske. Vezni člen med pesmijo in njenim izvajanjem pa so tako ljudski glasbeniki, kot skupnost, znotraj katere delujejo. Prav zato je poznavanje vseh nosilcev ljudske glasbe tako pomembno. Ker sta torej potrebna glasbenik in skupnost, ostajata tudi glavna vira informacij. Šele vsota obojih informacij nam lahko da popolnejšo sliko. Da ne pride do izgube ali cenzure podatkov, ki bi lahko razvrednotila pomen informatorja kot vira podatkov, je potrebno zbrano gradivo natančno arhivirati. Modernizacija arhivov vključuje prenos podatkov v računalniške podatkovne baze. Ljudski glasbeniki so s tem, da so nosilci ljudskega izročila, tudi nosilci kulturne dediščine. S tem, ko je ljudski glasbenik nosilec informacij, mu za te informacije pripadajo tudi avtorske pravice. Arhiv je odprtega tipa in omogoča vpogled vsem zainteresiranim, vendar se ob morebitnih objavah striktno zahteva citiranje vira, če gre za objave profitnega značaja, pa se to kompenzira tudi finančno. Prav zaradi vloge varuha gradiva, je potrebno z vso skrbnostjo zapisovati in arhivirati informacije, ki jih dobimo na terenu, saj bi lahko v nasprotnem primeru izničili pomen ljudskega glasbenika kot vira podatkov. Poglobljanje v informacije, ki so jih pridobili predhodniki pri zbiranju na terenu, nam lahko omogočijo, da opazujemo proces spreminjanja »tradicionalne« družbe v moderno in tako tudi v moderni družbi prepoznamo »nove« ustvarjalce, nosilce in ohranjevalce ljudske glasbe.

