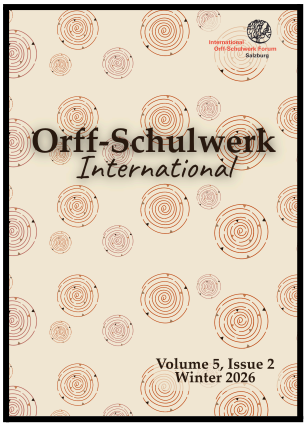
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Myth, Music, and Memory: Naqqāli in the Orff Classroom

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Farzan Farnia

Introduction: A Question of Cultural Belonging

After completing my Orff-Schulwerk training in Salzburg, an important question gradually emerged in my mind:

How could Orff-Schulwerk be lived within Iranian culture rather than merely imitated?
For me, this question became increasingly important as I returned to Iran and continued my work as a music educator. Orff-Schulwerk gave me a deeply meaningful way of thinking about music education: an approach rooted in participation, creativity, movement, speech, improvisation, and the active involvement of the learner. Yet the question remained: how could these principles find an authentic voice within my own cultural environment?

The challenge was not simply to add Iranian songs or instruments to an existing pedagogical framework. Nor was it to reproduce, in Iran, the educational experiences I had encountered elsewhere. Rather, I became interested in discovering cultural forms that already contained qualities resonant with the fundamental principles of Orff-Schulwerk.

This search eventually led me back to one of the oldest and most powerful elements of Iranian culture: storytelling.

More specifically, it led to *Naqqāli*[1], a traditional Persian form of storytelling in which the narrator brings epic stories to life through speech, gesture, vocal expression, dramatic timing, movement, and interaction with the audience. Traditionally, *Naqqāli* has been closely associated with the stories of the *Shahnameh*, the great Persian epic written by Ferdowsi.
Over the past decade, my colleagues and I, along with my students, have explored ways to bring *Naqqāli* into an Orff-based music classroom. In this process, storytelling became connected with rhythm, body percussion, instrumental music, movement, dance, visual art, improvisation, and, more recently, digital technology.

This article reflects on that journey. It explores the relationship between myth, storytelling, cultural memory, and music education, and considers how a traditional cultural practice can become a living source for contemporary creative learning.

Myth and the Human Need for Stories

Stories may be understood as one of humanity's oldest psychological and cultural refuges. Throughout history, human beings have listened to stories, told them, performed them, transformed them, and passed them from one generation to another. Through stories, communities preserve memories, communicate values, confront fears, imagine the future, and give meaning to experiences that might otherwise remain difficult to understand.

[1] https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/naqqli-iranian-dramatic-story-telling-00535

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The exact origins of storytelling may be impossible to trace. Perhaps they are inseparable from the development of human language itself. Before written language, human knowledge, memory, and imagination were transmitted orally. Sound, vocal expression, gesture, and eventually words became the means through which human beings named the world around them and shared their experiences with others. Long before literature could be preserved on paper, stories, rituals, songs, and myths existed through performance and memory.

The emergence of writing later made it possible to record what had previously depended on oral transmission. Yet even today, every child experiences a similar developmental sequence. Before learning to read and write, children listen, imitate sounds, speak, sing, move, remember, and create their own narratives.

This developmental path has particular relevance for music education.

Orff-Schulwerk similarly begins not with abstraction or notation, but with direct experience. Music is first encountered through the body: in movement, speech, singing, listening, playing, and improvisation. Musical understanding grows from active participation. Notation and other forms of abstraction may eventually become meaningful, but they emerge from lived experience rather than replacing it. In this sense, storytelling and music share a common foundation. Both begin as human acts of communication.

Myths are particularly important within this process. They do not merely belong to the distant past. Mythic stories continue to live because they address fundamental human experiences: courage and fear, loss and hope, conflict and reconciliation, vulnerability and strength. The heroes of myth may change their names and appearances across cultures and historical periods, but they continue to return. From Hercules and Rostam [2] to the superheroes of contemporary popular culture, human beings repeatedly create figures who embody possibilities larger than ordinary life.

For children, myth and storytelling can provide an imaginative space in which powerful experiences may be explored safely. A child may encounter fear through a monster, courage through a hero, loss through a tragic story, or transformation through an impossible journey. At the same time, children do not simply receive these stories. They actively transform them.

A story becomes a game. A character becomes a role. A narrative becomes movement. A battle becomes a rhythm. A mythical world becomes a place in which the child can imagine, perform, and create. This active transformation of stories is one of the reasons myth became such a meaningful foundation for our work.

Storytelling and Cultural Memory in Iran

Iran has a long and deeply rooted tradition of poetry and storytelling. Literature has played an important role in shaping cultural memory, and the oral transmission of poetry and stories has historically connected different generations and social groups.

[2] A legendary hero in Iranian mythology and historical tradition.

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Even today, storytelling and poetry remain central to important cultural occasions. *Yalda Night*, for example—the longest night of the year in the Persian calendar—is traditionally associated with gathering, conversation, storytelling, and the recitation of poetry.
The tradition of professional storytelling in Iran is also ancient. Storytellers known as *Gusans* performed in earlier periods of Iranian history, while centuries of oral and literary traditions eventually contributed to the creation and preservation of major works of Persian literature. These include *Kalila and Dimna*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, Saadi's *Golestan*, *The Conference of the Birds*, and, above all, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.

Many of these works demonstrate that storytelling has never been separate from education. Stories have carried ethical, social, philosophical, and psychological meanings. They have offered warnings, preserved historical memory, transmitted cultural values, and created opportunities for reflection.

The *Shahnameh*, however, occupies a particularly important position within Iranian cultural memory.

Written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi, the *Shahnameh* is a monumental epic containing myths, heroic stories, and historical narratives. Its characters—including Rostam, Zal, Simurgh, Kaveh, Zahhak, and many others—have remained powerful symbols within Iranian culture. For many Iranians, these figures are not simply literary characters. They are part of a shared imaginative world.

Yet the language of the *Shahnameh* is poetic and sophisticated. For much of history, access to written literature was limited, and its literary language was not always easily understood by the wider public. This is where storytelling became particularly important.
Storytellers transformed complex poetic narratives into more accessible spoken forms. Through performance, gesture, vocal expression, and dramatic interpretation, they brought the stories of the *Shahnameh* into public spaces. In this way, storytelling became a form of cultural transmission.

Naqqāli: Storytelling as Performance
In its broadest sense, *Naqqāli s*imply refers to storytelling. More specifically, it is associated with the performance tradition of narrating epic stories, particularly stories from the *Shahnameh*. Historically, *Naqqāli* flourished in public spaces, including coffeehouses. These were not merely places for drinking coffee; they were important social and cultural gathering places where people met, exchanged ideas, and encountered stories.
A *Naqqāl* does not merely read a text aloud. The storyteller performs the story. Through changes in voice, gesture, facial expression, dramatic timing, physical movement, and improvisation, the *Naqqāl* moves between characters and situations. A single performer may create an entire world through the body and voice.

The development of *Naqqāli* also contributed to visual forms of storytelling. Large paintings depicting scenes from epic and religious narratives became part of the storytelling environment. The narrator could point to particular figures or scenes while bringing the story to life through speech and performance.

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Mansour Vafaei: The Battle of Rostam and Sohrab (Persian coffeehouse painting – Wikipedia)

This relationship between story, image, voice, and gesture is particularly significant. *Naqqāli* is not only a literary practice. It is an embodied form of storytelling. The story exists through the interaction of language, movement, imagination, voice, and audience.
For me, these qualities create an immediate connection with the educational principles of Orff-Schulwerk. Here is a cultural form in which speech and rhythm already exist together. Gesture is inseparable from storytelling. Improvisation is central to performance. The narrator transforms words into dramatic action, and the audience participates emotionally and imaginatively in the experience.
The question, then, is not how to import *Naqqāli* artificially into the music classroom. The question became:

What might happen if children are invited to enter this tradition creatively and transform it through music, movement, and their own imagination?

From Tradition to the Orff Classroom
At *Adamak* Institute and within the Iranian Orff-Schulwerk Association, I have been fortunate to work with colleagues who shared an interest in understanding Orff-Schulwerk deeply while also searching for meaningful connections with Iranian culture. As we explored possible cultural resources for lesson planning, *Naqqāli* quickly found its place in our work. Traditional *Naqqāli* is not usually accompanied by instrumental music in the way we might expect from a theatrical or musical performance. However, this absence became an invitation rather than a limitation.

What might happen if rhythm entered the story?

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What if a battle could be expressed through body percussion?
What if a landscape could emerge through the sound of barred instruments?
What if movement could become another form of narration?
What if children could create their own musical, visual, and verbal interpretations of an ancient story?

Gradually, our projects developed into interdisciplinary processes in which storytelling became the central thread connecting different forms of expression.
Over the past decade, I have had opportunities to work with several groups of students using stories from one of the most beloved sections of the *Shahnameh*: Rostam's Seven Labours.

Four collaborators played especially important roles in this journey: the musicians Sanaz Boroujerdian and Arghavan Malekmohammadi, professional storyteller and *Naqqāli* teacher Fahimeh Baroutchi, and theatre educator Olka Hedayat.

Although performances eventually emerged from these projects, the final performance was never the primary educational goal. The most important learning took place throughout the process.

Students listened to stories, explored characters, created rhythms, moved, improvised, painted, discussed, questioned, and gradually developed their own relationships with the material.

Giving the Story a Body and a Voice
Traditional *Naqqāli* often begins with verses praising the Creator. In one of our projects, we explored one of the most famous opening passages of the *Shahnameh* through movement and body percussion. Rather than simply reciting the text, students explored its rhythm physically.

Words became movement.
Speech became pulse.
The body became an instrument.

This kind of process reflects an important principle within Orff-Schulwerk: musical understanding does not need to begin with explanation. It can begin with experience. Students may first feel a rhythm, move it, speak it, and play it before they analyse or notate it. The relationship between speech and music becomes especially powerful when the text already carries a strong rhythmic identity. Persian poetry, with its patterns of meter and sound, provides rich possibilities for this kind of exploration. In our work, the spoken text was not treated as something fixed and untouchable. It became material for musical discovery. Students experimented with dynamics, tempo, articulation, gesture, and vocal colour. Through these explorations, storytelling gradually expanded beyond language alone.

Children as Visual Storytellers
The visual tradition associated with *Naqqāli* also inspired our work. In one project, students worked in seven groups, each creating visual representations of one of Rostam's Seven

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Labours. Their drawings became another way of entering the story. The children were not asked simply to illustrate what they had heard. They had to decide:

What is the most important moment?
Which characters should appear?
What kind of landscape surrounds them?
How can danger, courage, fear, or transformation be represented visually?

Later, these drawings were animated using artificial intelligence (Runway AI) and projected during the performance. The purpose of this technology was not to replace children's imagination. On the contrary, the technology became a means of extending their collective imagination into another medium. The visual images created by the students moved from paper into performance.

In another project, visual artist Nazanin Aygani created paintings live, while students performed the story. Her working process was projected in real time behind the performers, allowing the audience to witness the creation of visual imagery alongside the unfolding of the narrative. These experiences reminded us that storytelling does not have to belong to a single artistic medium.





The Seven Labours of Rostam (2013), featuring live illustrations by visual artist Nazanin Aygani projected behind the performers © the author.

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A story can be spoken.
It can be sung.
It can be played.
It can be moved.
It can be painted.
And, perhaps most importantly, it can be continually recreated.

Rewriting the Story

Traditional storytellers often use handwritten narrative scrolls known as *Tomār.* These texts may reflect the individual language, experience, and artistic identity of the storyteller. This aspect of *Naqqāli* became particularly meaningful in our educational work. We did not want students merely to memorise a story written by adults. Instead, we gradually developed versions of the narratives shaped by the students themselves. Their language, questions, interpretations, and imagination became part of the process.

One particularly important experience emerged when Olka Hedayat invited students to consider the stories from the perspective of Rostam's enemies.

Why did they fight him?
What might their fears have been?
Did they understand themselves as villains?
What stories might they have told about Rostam?

This shift in perspective transformed the educational process.

The students were no longer simply reproducing a familiar narrative. They were questioning it. They were discovering that every story can be viewed from different positions. The mythical hero became more complex. The enemy became a character with a voice. The children became authors as well as performers.

This process revealed another important possibility of storytelling in education: stories do not need to be preserved only by repeating them. They can also be preserved by allowing each generation to enter into dialogue with them.

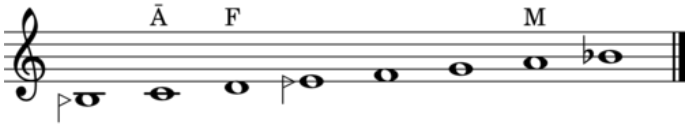
Movement as Storytelling

Movement gradually became another essential dimension of our work. One section of the Seven Labours describes Rostam and his horse, Rakhsh, wandering through a barren desert. Rather than explaining the emotional quality of the scene verbally, we explored ways in which students could embody the landscape and the journey.

How does exhaustion move?
How does heat affect the body?
How might two characters move differently through the same environment?
How can distance, isolation, or uncertainty be communicated without words?

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In one performance, the musical material was based on the *Daramad* of the Persian musical mode *Shur*[3]. The exploration of this musical language allowed the students to encounter an important element of Iranian musical culture within the dramatic structure of the story.
Dastgāh-e Šur is one of the seven ***Dastgāh***s of Persian Music. (Here is D Šur)



Again, the cultural material was not presented as information to be memorised. It became something to experience. Movement, sound, and narrative supported one another.

Games, Rhythm, and the Sound of Myth
Games also played an important role in shaping the musical world of our stories. In one project, a familiar tabletop rhythm game became part of the soundscape for a battle scene between Rostam and Arzhang Div. The transformation was simple but meaningful. A game that students already knew was placed within a new dramatic context. The rhythmic structure began to suggest conflict, movement, tension, and action. The students were able to experience how a familiar musical activity could acquire new meaning when connected to a story.

To create an epic atmosphere, we also explored the Persian mode Dashti[4]. In this way, traditional musical material, children's games, body percussion, and mythological storytelling could coexist within the same creative process. This coexistence became one of the most important characteristics of our work.

We were not attempting to reconstruct an ancient *Naqqāli* performance exactly as it might have existed in the past. Nor were we attempting to create a museum version of Iranian culture. Instead, we were asking how cultural memory could become material for new creation.

The Child as Narrator, Musician, and Co-Creator
Traditionally, a *Naqqāl's* reputation depends partly on the storyteller's ability to create emotional intensity. A skilled narrator knows how to use silence, timing, vocal dynamics, gesture, and improvisation to hold the attention of the audience. These qualities became important areas of exploration for our students.

In one performance, a child storyteller narrated the climactic battle between Rostam and the White Demon with such energy that the audience began applauding before the performance ended. For me, this moment represented something important.

[3] Classically, Persian Music is organized into seven ***Dastgāhs*** and five ***Āvāzes***.

[4] ***Dašti*** is one of the fourth domain belong ***Āvāzes*** of **Dastgāh-e Šur**

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The child was no longer simply presenting information that had been taught by an adult. They had taken ownership of the story. The story had become embodied and personal.

Over the years, I have repeatedly observed that mythological storytelling can generate extraordinary enthusiasm among students. Even children who already knew the stories of the *Shahnameh* discovered them again through music, movement, improvisation, and performance. Familiar stories became unfamiliar once more.

Students also appeared to develop a deeper interest in poetry and literature. Some became proud of their ability to perform stories and surprise adults with their expressive and creative capacities. Perhaps this is one of the most important transformations that took place. The child moved from being a passive listener to becoming an active participant in cultural memory.

The student became:

- a storyteller,
- a musician,
- a mover,
- a visual artist,
- an improviser,
- and a co-creator of meaning.

_Naqqā_li as a Living Educational Resource

My experience with *Naqqāli* has gradually changed the way I think about cultural tradition in education. Tradition does not have to mean repetition. Preserving a cultural practice does not necessarily mean reproducing it exactly as it was performed in the past. A tradition remains alive when new generations can enter into a relationship with it. For our students, *Naqqāli* became such a meeting place. It connected them with Persian mythology and cultural memory, while simultaneously inviting them to create something new. Ancient stories became starting points for contemporary musical experiences. Traditional narratives became spaces for improvisation, movement, visual art, collaboration, and experimentation. This process also helped me return to my original question:

How can Orff-Schulwerk be lived within a particular culture rather than merely imitated?

I do not believe there is a single answer. Every cultural environment contains its own stories, games, languages, musical traditions, movements, rituals, and forms of artistic expression. The task of the educator may not be to place these elements artificially inside a pre-existing pedagogical model. Perhaps the more important task is to discover where the fundamental principles of an approach such as Orff-Schulwerk already resonate with the cultural life of a community. For us, *Naqqāli* became one of these places of resonance.

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It brought together speech, movement, imagination, improvisation, performance, and collective participation. It allowed students to encounter their cultural heritage not as something distant or untouchable, but as something they could inhabit and transform.

Conclusion: When Myth Becomes a Living Experience

Throughout the past decade, whenever I have used mythological storytelling and *Naqqāli* as the foundation for lesson planning, I have been reminded of the extraordinary power of stories.

Stories can connect the past with the present.
They can connect language with music.
They can connect individual imagination with collective memory.
Within the Orff classroom, myth can become a living experience.

The story no longer belongs only to the book, the teacher, or the professional storyteller. It moves into the bodies and voices of the students. It becomes rhythm, movement, sound, image, and play.

In this process, the child is no longer a passive listener.
The child becomes a narrator.
A musician.
A performer.
A creator.

And perhaps this is where cultural tradition and creative education meet most meaningfully. *Naqqāli*, in this context, is not simply the recreation of an old Iranian storytelling practice. It becomes a contemporary educational resource—a way of reactivating imagination, participation, and cultural memory through artistic experience.

For me, this journey has also suggested a broader understanding of culturally rooted Orff-Schulwerk. To live Orff-Schulwerk within a particular culture may mean listening carefully to the artistic traditions already present there and asking how they can become starting points for creative exploration.

The goal is not to preserve culture under glass. It is to allow culture to move, change, speak, and create again. When this happens, myth is no longer only something we remember.

It becomes something we live.

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Farzan Farnia graduated from the Advanced Studies in Music and Dance Education/Orff-Schulwerk programme at the University of Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, in 2011. He also completed the Music Education Pedagogy/Extended Studies of the Finnish Orff-Schulwerk Association (JaSeSoi ry) in 2024, as well as the International Mentorship Programme in Orff-Schulwerk Pedagogy. He is a music teacher working with people of all ages, from children to adults. He has also composed pieces for various orchestras, primarily for or by children. He organises workshops and seminars in education and music and movement education. Farzan was part of the team that translated *Texts on the Theory and Practice of Orff-Schulwerk, Vol. 1* into Farsi. He has also published arrangements of Iranian folk music for Orff instrument ensembles. The Iranian Orff-Schulwerk Association (ADAMAK) was established in 2015. Farzan was a founding member and has been president of ADAMAK since 2022.

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