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## “Oy Verbove Koleso”: from Hutsul Vesnyanka Tradition to an Orff-Schulwerk Model

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## “Oy Verbove Koleso”: From Hutsul Vesnyanka Tradition to an Orff-Schulwerk Model

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“Elemental music is never music alone, but forms a unity with movement, dance and speech.”  
(Carl Orff)

### Introduction

One of the key principles of Orff-Schulwerk is its connection to local musical traditions. In every country, Carl Orff’s pedagogical system acquires its own character through national folklore, in which natural forms of elemental music-making – the unity of movement, rhythm, speech and collective action – are preserved. Within the Ukrainian tradition, children’s folklore and *vesnianky* (spring ritual songs) represent especially valuable genres in this context. In both, music does not exist separately from movement: singing is inseparable from play, gesture, stepping, dance and circular motion. According to tradition bearers, a *vesnianka* performed without movement ceases to function as a ritual action and becomes merely a song. Thus, movement is not an additional element but the foundation of musical experience itself.

Similar ideas may also be found in Ukrainian music-pedagogical traditions. Already during the period of *Kyivan Rus* (medieval East Slavic state centered in Kyiv), music was embedded in religious and educational practice: compulsory singing, instruction led by clergy using *cheironomy* (hand signs) to internalize melodic motion, and children’s participation on instruments such as *sopilka* (folk flute), horns, *gusli* (violin), and percussion. Music accompanied games, dance, and communal activities, shaping an experience in which sound, movement, and community formed a unified whole. Thus, Ukrainian musical culture early developed at the intersection of folklore and pedagogy as an embodied, social, and creative process.

Mykola Lysenko was among the first Ukrainian composers and educators to address children’s music education systematically. Mykola Leontovych, in his “Musical Literacy”<sup>23</sup>, emphasized the primary role of rhythm and collective music-making. Vasyl Verkhovynets<sup>24</sup> –

<sup>23</sup> Mykola Leontovych was a composer, author of the world-renowned “*Shchedryk*,” and a distinguished pedagogue-methodologist. In his work “*Music Notation*” (1919), he substantiated the primacy of rhythm as the foundation of musical thinking, drew on the ideas of eurhythmics developed by *Émile Jaques-Dalcroze*, and integrated music education with movement, collective music-making, improvisation, and imaginative-associative thinking (notably through his original seven-colour pitch system). The textbook existed in manuscript form and was prepared for publication; however, following the assassination of Leontovych by Soviet authorities in 1921, the suppression of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, and the premature death of Kyrylo Stetsenko (who had undertaken the responsibility of publishing his colleague’s work), it was never issued in the 1920s and has survived only fragmentarily. The pedagogical system he formulated demonstrates a typological affinity with the principles of Orff-Schulwerk. Today, contemporary Ukrainian musicology is actively reinterpreting Leontovych’s work and publishing updated research on his legacy as both a composer and a pedagogue [3, 9, 13].

<sup>24</sup> Vasyl Verkhovynets is a key figure in Ukrainian music-pedagogical and choreographic culture of the first half of the 20th century—a composer, conductor, ethnographer, and the first theorist of Ukrainian folk dance. In his work “*Vesnianochka*” (1923), he conceptualizes play as a natural mode of children’s existence that integrates movement, singing, and social interaction; rhythm functions as a unifying factor of collective creative activity,

often referred to as the “Ukrainian Orff” – combined singing, movement and play in his work “*Vesnianochka*” (1923), almost simultaneously with the formation of Orff-Schulwerk ideas in Europe.

Thus, the relationship between Ukrainian pedagogical traditions and Orff-Schulwerk is not limited to methodological parallels. Both approaches share a deeper understanding of music as a bodily, communal and creative process rooted in folk culture.

The purpose of this article is to explore these parallels through the *hutsul* (ukrainian highland ethnographic group from the East Carpathians, at the border of Zakarpattia and Ivano-Frankivsk regions) vesnianka “*Oy verbove koleso*” (“Oh, Willow Wheel”) from Yasinia village (Zakarpattia region, Ukraine), examining it both as an example of authentic folk performance practice and as a model for adaptation within an Orff-inspired classroom. Particular attention is given to an ethnographic reconstruction created approximately twenty-six years ago by students studying folklore at Uzhhorod D. Zador Music Professional College under the guidance of ethnomusicologist Vira Madyar-Novak. The reconstruction demonstrates important performative elements of the tradition and provides a valuable pedagogical source for contemporary classroom adaptation.

### **Children’s folklore and Vesnianky: a shared foundation**

Within the Orff approach, special value belongs to those folklore genres that preserve elemental forms of music-making: the unity of rhythm, movement, speech, and collective interaction. In Ukrainian folk tradition, children’s songs and vesnianky share several common characteristics:

- obligatory connection with movement (gesture, stepping, dance, play);
- simple melodic structures within a limited range;
- clear metric pulse;
- repetition and variation;
- close relationship to speech intonation;
- collective participation.

As *Béla Bartók* observed, many children’s folk melodies are organized within the structure of “four steps,” revealing a natural connection between musical rhythm and bodily movement. A similar principle operates within vesnianky, where music is physically embodied through circular motion, stepping, and coordinated gestures. These genres preserve some of the oldest forms of collective music-making in Ukrainian culture, where music exists not as an isolated artistic object but as a shared social and ritual experience.

*“Movement is not an addition to music-making; it is one of its origins.” (Barbara Haselbach)*

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while the circle serves as a central organizational form enabling a shared musical-motor experience. The pedagogue emphasizes freedom of bodily and emotional expression and takes into account the age-specific characteristics of children. Like Mykola Leontovych, Verkhovynets became a victim of Soviet repression (executed in 1938, posthumously rehabilitated). Taken together, their pedagogical systems demonstrate the emergence in Ukraine of an early model of elementary music education that is both historically and conceptually aligned with Orff-Schulwerk [3, 14, 15].

### Vesnianky as ritual action

Vesnianky are ancient Ukrainian ritual songs connected with the arrival of spring, the awakening of nature, and the beginning of agricultural work. Historically, they fulfilled not only artistic but also symbolic and magical functions: through singing, movement, and communal participation, people sought to “call” spring and renew the natural world. The genre originated in pre-Christian times and survives under different regional names: “vesnianky” (central Ukraine), “haivky” (Galicia), “maivky” and “velykodni lhrovi” (Zakarpattia).

In Zakarpattia during the 1920s and 1930s, spring ritual games remained an important part of Easter celebrations. After evening church services, young people gathered near rivers, groves, cemeteries, or churches and performed circular dances and singing games until sunset.

In the hutsul village of Yasinia, these ritual games traditionally began with “Oy verbove koleso.”

The willow tree (“verba”) symbolizes the first awakening of spring, since willow is among the earliest trees to bloom after winter. The wheel (“koleso”) simultaneously represents the sun, cyclical renewal, and ritual protection.

The ethnographic reconstruction referenced in this article preserves several important musical and performative elements:

- a drone-like introduction performed on “drymba” (jaw harp);
- repetitive hand-clapping patterns functioning as rhythmic ostinato;
- circular movement coordinated with the pulse;
- accompaniment by two violinists, one sustaining a bourdon fifth while the other performs melodic interludes;
- alternation between vocal and instrumental sections.

The reconstruction demonstrates an essential feature of traditional music-making: song, movement, rhythm, and instrumental performance function together as a unified collective action rather than separate artistic categories.

This principle strongly resonates with Orff-Schulwerk, where music, speech, and movement emerge from a shared rhythmic foundation.

### Oy Verbove Koleso

hutsul vesnyanka (spring ritual song)

Yasinia village,  
Zakarpattia region,  
Ukraine

**Allegretto**

Violin/Xylophone

Jaw harp (Dymba) / Vargan

Hand clap

Voice

Violin/recorder

Xyl.

Jaw harp

Hd. Clp.

Vo.

Vln./rec.

2

Xyl.

Jaw harp

Hd. Clp.

Vo.

Vln./rec.

ko\_le\_so, a scho te\_be pry ne alo pry ne alo

Oj ver bo ve ko le so

#### Traditional game structure of “Oy verbove koleso”

According to descriptions recorded in Transcarpathian folklore sources by Volodymyr Hoshovsky and later republished by Vira Madyar-Novak, the game began with participants forming a circle around willow branches placed on the ground. The circular movement symbolized the sun, the cyclical renewal of spring, and ritual protection. During the performance, participants moved rhythmically in a circle while singing the vesnyanka. The movement included stepping, gentle swaying of the body, and synchronized rhythmic gestures. In some local variants, performers gradually accelerated the tempo, intensifying the collective emotional energy of the game.

The performance practice combined several simultaneous layers:

- singing;
- rhythmic movement;
- clapping patterns;
- instrumental accompaniment;
- circular spatial organization.

The reconstruction created by students of Uzhhorod D. Zador Music Professional College preserves these structural principles and demonstrates how rhythm, movement, and collective interaction function together within the tradition (see video).



Oy Verbove Koleso — Traditional Vesnianka from Zakarpattia:  
<https://youtu.be/k9h4ppZPr2U?si=VVrYe3EDD7ZECwEB>

### “Oy verbove koleso” as a model for Orff-inspired practice

The hutsul vesnianka “Oy verbove koleso” represents an example of a syncretism musical form highly adaptable to Orff-inspired pedagogy.

Its main musical characteristics include:

- melody within a pentachordal range;
- repetitive strophic structure;
- rhythmic organization closely connected to movement;
- collective performance practice.

The game itself includes:

- circular movement;
- stepping patterns;
- gradual acceleration;
- rhythmic coordination;
- interaction.

Most importantly, according to tradition bearers, the vesnianka loses its essential meaning without movement. Thus, movement is not an accompaniment to music but one of its structural foundations.

### Adapting the vesnianka in the Orff classroom

The adaptation process does not attempt to simplify or replace the traditional version. Instead, it seeks to preserve the structural principles of the folk model while translating them into a contemporary educational context accessible for children and classroom instruments.

One of the most important principles of this adaptation is preserving the layered nature of traditional performance.

Instrumental adaptation: In classroom practice, the traditional “*drymba*” (drone) may be transferred to:

- boomwhackers;
- bourdon patterns on xylophone or metallophon;
- sustained vocal drones.

Similarly, the violin melody may be performed on the recorder. Such adaptation remains close to authentic Ukrainian folk instrumental traditions themselves, where violin and *sopilka* (folk flute) frequently alternate or coexist within ensemble practice.

The rhythmic “*obereg*” pattern (a protective ostinato used in this vesnianka) from the reconstruction may be performed through:

- body percussion;
- stepping patterns;
- clapping ostinato;
- wooden idiophones such as “*troskotalo*” (canes).

This allows children to internalize rhythm physically before approaching melodic material.

### Recommendations for classroom work

The adaptation of “*Oy verbove koleso*” in the Orff classroom may develop gradually, moving from bodily rhythm experience toward collective ensemble performance.

Suggested sequence of activities:

#### 1. Pulse and movement

Children first internalize the pulse through stepping in a circle. The teacher may introduce:

- walking patterns;
- directional changes;
- body swaying;
- synchronized group movement.

The aim is to establish a shared bodily sense of rhythm before singing begins.

## 2. Body percussion and rhythmic ostinato

After movement is established, children add:

- clapping;
- stamping;
- body percussion patterns;
- rhythmic speech formulas.

The “obereg” rhythm from the traditional reconstruction may function as a repeating ostinato layer.

## 3. Speech and text rhythmization

The text “Oy verbove koleso, koleso...” may first be spoken rhythmically before singing. This allows children to connect speech intonation with the musical pulse.

## 4. Melody learning

The melody is introduced gradually:

- first vocally;
- then with recorder or violin accompaniment;
- later combined with movement and ostinato.

Because the melody remains within a limited pentachordal range and repetitive structure, it is accessible even for younger children.

## 5. Layering and improvisation

Additional musical layers may gradually appear:

- bourdon on boomwhackers;
- xylophone bourdon;
- vocal drone;
- recorder improvisation;
- movement improvisation.

This process reflects one of the key principles of Orff-Schulwerk – collective creation through layered elemental music-making.

## 6. Reflection

At the final stage, children may discuss:

- how movement influenced singing;
- how rhythm was experienced physically;
- how collective music-making changed the atmosphere of the activity.

### **Contemporary classroom adaptations**

Today, “Oy verbove koleso” is actively used in *solfège* classes at the Music Studio of Uzhhorod D. Zador Music Professional College within the pedagogical practice program. Alongside the ethnographic reconstruction, there are three video examples demonstrating different approaches to adapting the vesnianka within an Orff-inspired educational environment.

1. Movement, stamping, and violin accompaniment. The first video recreates the traditional model most closely. Children move in a circle while performing rhythmic stamping based on the “obereg” pattern and singing the vesnianka accompanied by violin. This version preserves the close connection between pulse, bodily movement, and collective singing characteristic of authentic performance practice (see video).



Oy Verbove koleso: [https://youtu.be/f1LykDRUS2c?si=KQcFWht1GNGg\\_cl](https://youtu.be/f1LykDRUS2c?si=KQcFWht1GNGg_cl)

2. Boomwhackers bourdon and vocal layering. The second adaptation transfers the traditional bourdon fifth onto boomwhackers performed by children. Instead of instrumental interludes, descending vocal phrases based on the hutsul minor mode are introduced between verses. The principal melody of “Oy verbove koleso” is also performed vocally, creating a layered vocal texture rooted in the original folk material while remaining accessible within the Orff classroom (see video).



Oy Verbove koleso boomwhackers: <https://youtu.be/gTG85aW6lmk?si=yq0zuoZqxTrrk8wH>

3. Polyphonic rhythmic score and bourdon recitation. The third example explores collective rhythmic texture and layered ensemble performance. Students perform

different rhythmic patterns simultaneously, creating a polyphonic and polyrhythmic structure combined with bourdon-like recitation. Although experimental in nature, this adaptation demonstrates how traditional folk material may become a basis for creative group improvisation and elemental composition (see video).



Polyrhythmic Verbove koleso: <https://youtu.be/d1lt0drcJBI?si=IYFgKVudSo9gbTSg>

Together, these examples demonstrate that vesnianky may function not only as archival folklore material but also as living pedagogical practice capable of developing rhythm, listening, movement coordination, ensemble awareness, and collective creativity.

### **Ethnographic reconstruction as pedagogical memory**

The reconstruction created by students of Uzhhorod D. E. Zador Music Professional College, under the guidance of Vira Madyar-Novak possesses not only ethnographic but also pedagogical significance. Importantly, the reconstruction itself emerged from educational practice, where students engaged with local folklore bodily, collectively, and performative rather than only analytically. Today, when many ritual traditions survive primarily through archives and educational initiatives, such reconstructions become forms of cultural memory and continuity. The use of archival or reconstructed material in Orff-inspired pedagogy creates a bridge between the preservation of tradition and contemporary creative music education.

### **Conclusion**

*“The roots of music are to be found in rhythm and movement.” (Carl Orff)*

“Oy verbove koleso” demonstrates how Ukrainian ritual folklore may function simultaneously as:

- ethnographic source;
- performative tradition;
- pedagogical model;
- the foundation for elemental music-making.

Its combination of movement, rhythm, drone texture, communal singing, and instrumental flexibility aligns naturally with the principles of Orff-Schulwerk. Rather than treating folk music as a museum object, the Orff approach allows tradition to remain a living, bodily, and creative process. Through movement, improvisation, and collective participation, children encounter folklore not as museum heritage but as an active, shared experience.

In this sense, the vesnianka becomes not only a song about spring renewal but also a model for renewing connections between tradition, education, and communal music-making.

Translation by the author

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