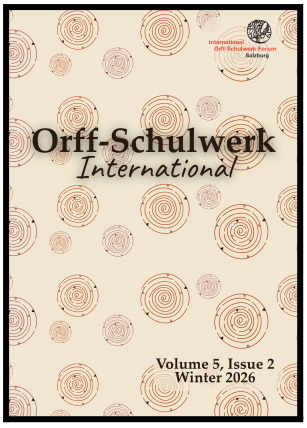
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A Tribute to Polyxene Mathéy (1902-1999)

Carolee Stewart with Anna Mathéy, Nikolas Tsaftaridis, and Angelika Panagopoulos-Slavik

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Convention 2026 Presentations

A Tribute to Polyxene Mathéy (1902-1999)

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Polyxene Mathéy teaching during a course in Toronto, 1963
University of Toronto Archives, Jack Marshall Photography fonds, B2019-0041/631207
Photographer: Jack Marshall Photography
(Carl-Orff-Foundation/Archive: Orff-Zentrum München)

While we were in Athens, it seemed only right that we should pay tribute to the woman who was responsible for introducing Orff-Schulwerk in Greece: Polyxene Mathéy.

Carolee Stewart moderated a session about this exceptional woman, and this article is based on the content of that session. Anna Mathéy, the granddaughter of Polyxene Mathéy, shared a personal portrait of her grandmother, and her presentation was followed by a short film with interviews of Mathéy. Nikolas Tsaftaridis and Angelika Slavik shared some of their first-hand experiences with Mathéy. The three presentations are the content of this article.

Introduction

In 1990 Polyxene Mathéy was the first individual to be honoured with the Carl Orff Foundation's *Pro Merito* award. Hermann Regner's remarks during that occasion began with these statements:

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strong temperament and virtuoso technique,
agile and poised, full of an innate joy in shaping the music,
warm feeling and great spirit,
a capricious, captivating musician,
musical energy, intelligent disposition,
profound artistic seriousness and charm,
a distinctive, highly interesting musical personality.

Dr. Regner did not invent these descriptors. They came from newspaper reviews written of Mathéy during her career as a concert pianist in Berlin. He goes on to say that these qualities also distinguish her as an educator (Regner, 1990, p. 52).

Following are reports from Anna Mathéy, Nikolas Tsaftaridis, and Angelika Panagopoulos-Slavik, who knew Mathéy and her work.

My grandmother
Anna Mathéy

My grandmother, Polyxene Mathéy, was not the typical grandmother we have in mind. She was, even to me, a teacher.

She was interested in everything – except football. Her memory was incredible. She could recite Ancient Greek, Latin, Modern Greek, and German texts she had learned in school, so she never stopped wanting to learn. For example, when I was in high school, she asked for my biology books to read chapters that did not exist in her student years.

She used to say that if she were born again, she would do the same things again... Who knows? She was a prolific writer; even today, we look to her texts for inspiration.

She belonged to the so-called "Generation of the 30s", the intellectuals who marked modern Greek civilisation.

Her father was Othon Roussopoulos, a chemist and pioneer in the conservation of antiquities, including the famous 'Antikythera Mechanism'. He also founded the 'Roussopoulos Academy', the first technical school in Greece. Her mother was Eleni Naoum-Roussopoulou, one of the pioneers of the women's movement in Greece and co-founder with Kallirhoe Paren of the Lyceum of Greek Women.

My grandmother was born in Athens in 1902, lived through the entire 20th century and passed away just before its end in 1999. As she said, "*I grew up and grew old in this century, which dazzled us with amazing technical discoveries but also reserved unimaginable horrors for us… I hope that, in the coming century, humanity will find a way out of today's impasses and be able to live up to the name of its species: Homo Sapiens* [Wise Man]".

While still a high school student, Polyxeni met Manolis Triantafyllidis, a Greek linguist, educator, and leading advocate for the movement that sought to modernise spoken Greek in

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education and public life. His influence shaped her approach to linguistic and cultural pursuits throughout her life.

Music was her life. She began playing the piano at age six and, after receiving a piano diploma from the Athens Conservatory, continued her piano studies in Leipzig, Germany.

In 1926, she married the painter Georg Alexander Mathéy, of Greek and Romanian descent. Two years later they moved to Berlin, where Polyxeni pursued a career as a piano soloist. There, she often met the conductor Dimitris Mitropoulos, the composer Nikos Skalkotas, the soprano Alexandra Trianti, and many others. Notably, in 1929, she performed the world premiere of Nikos Skalkotas' Concerto for Violin and Piano.

In 1931, she and her husband moved to Greece. Because she could not continue her career as a piano soloist in Greece, she became involved in music and movement education, collaborating with her cousin, Koula Pratsika until she went to Munich in 1935 to attend classes at the *Günther-Schule*, where she met Carl Orff. She walked past a room where strange sounds could be heard from a piano being used as percussion and simultaneous singing by a male voice. It was the very moment *Carmina Burana* was created.

When the pianist who was causing these sounds noticed her, he said, "*Orff",* and she replied, *"Mathéy". "Ah! You are the musician from Greece whom we have been waiting for".*

Going back to Greece in 1938, she founded her school: The School of Gymnastics and Rhythmics Polyxene Mathéy-Roussopoulou.



Polyxene Mathéy teaching in her school, 1963
Photo: Carl-Orff-Foundation/Archiv: Orff-Zentrum München

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In 1962, because she was Orff's collaborator on the Orff-Schulwerk, she was also the first to introduce ORFF MUSIC AND MOVEMENT EDUCATION in Greece. The booklets she published featuring Greek folk songs adapted for the Orff children's orchestra constitute an invaluable legacy (Mathéy, 1963; 1968).

At 95 years old, she complained that she didn't *"remember as well as she used to"* because she had forgotten the librettist's name for Mozart's *Magic Flute*. After a while, she remembered him: Emanuel Schickaneder, and added that he had played Papageno in the first performance of *The Magic Flute* in 1791.

The Matey Dance School continues its work to this day, completing 87 years now!

I remember my grandmother playing the piano, even when she had difficulty walking. Her energy made you think she could get up and dance.

I could easily imagine her among us today because she will always be here through her work.

Eyewitness account

A film that features Mathéy speaking about her work with Orff-Schulwerk can be found at this *link.* It is part of a project undertaken by Coloman Kallós and Manuela Widmer in which they depict individuals who have played a decisive role in the history and development of the Orff-Schulwerk through "eyewitness accounts" (Widmer & Kallós, 2000, p. 88). This first film in the series shows Mathéy at age 92 being interviewed by Manuela Widmer at her home in Athens (Kallós & Widmer, 1994).

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Polyxene Mathéy: When Orff-Schulwerk found a Greek voice
Nikolas Tsaftaridis



Polyxene Mathéy and Carl Orff, 1968
Photo: Monika Brill/Carl-Orff-Foundation/Archiv: Orff-Zentrum München

There are people who we first come to know through their books. And then there are people who, once we have met them, help us to understand their books in an entirely different way. For me, Polyxene Mathéy was one of those people. During the academic year 1993-1994, while I was preparing my master's thesis at the University of Reading, I had the privilege of conducting an extensive interview with her about the Greek edition of the two Orff-Schulwerk volumes.

At that time, she was more than ninety years old. She was no longer teaching regularly, yet she remained intellectually active, deeply engaged with music education and with the continuing development of Orff-Schulwerk.

Those who had the good fortune to see her at seminars remember something very characteristic about her. She listened with the concentration of a good student. Not to supervise younger teachers, but to learn herself, to listen to new approaches, and to see how a new generation was carrying the work forward.

I remember in particular a seminar I taught on minimalist music. Mathéy was present. She was there not as an authority who expected to be confirmed. She followed the work with genuine interest and with the rare alertness of someone who never believed that learning had come to an end.

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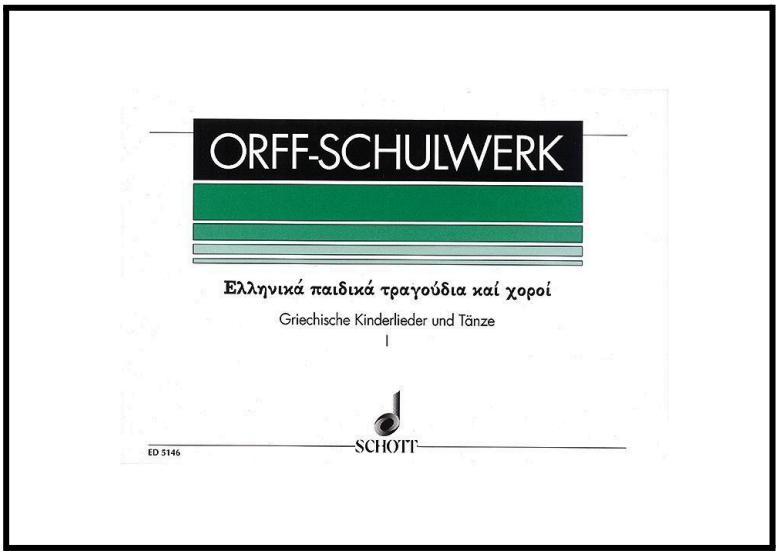
What stayed with me was not simply the breadth of her knowledge. It was her openness: the conviction that a living pedagogy must remain in dialogue with new ideas, new teachers, and new generations.

I believe that this attitude leads us directly to the essence of Orff-Schulwerk. Orff-Schulwerk is not a closed system, nor a method to be applied mechanically. It is a living educational experience, developed each time in the classroom – with children, with speech, sound, movement, the body, imagination, and the particular cultural material of each place.

My interview with Mathéy began with a simple question: Why was the Greek edition of Orff-Schulwerk so different from the German and English editions?

The German edition appeared between 1950 and 1954, the English edition between 1957 and 1966, while the Greek edition was published by Schott in two volumes, in 1963 and 1968.

The answer led back to Carl Orff himself.





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Mathéy's relationship with Orff had begun much earlier, in 1935–1936, when she went to Germany and studied at the *Günther-Schule*. There she encountered Orff and his educational ideas first-hand – ideas that would shape the course of her entire life. In 1961, Orff himself encouraged her to prepare a Greek edition, but not as an adaptation or translation of the five German volumes.

As Mathéy told me:

> Orff would not allow me to make the five volumes. He told me that those Bavarian materials could not simply be translated. Murray and others had done it. There is a closer musical relationship among Western countries, but the Greek language and music are entirely different. (Tsaftaridis, 1997, p. 43)

For me, this last sentence is the key. Orff did not want his work to become an export product. He did not want it to be transferred unchanged from one country to another, like a ready-made formula. He recognised that the Greek language, the Greek musical tradition, its dances, modes, mixed metres, and rhythmic sensibility required a different and organic approach. The Greek edition, therefore, was not an appendix to the German one. It was an authentically Greek response to the spirit of Orff.

Mathéy worked with traditional songs and dances from all over Greece. She drew on their melodic lines, their rhythmic character, their asymmetrical metres – such as 5/8 and 7/8 – and on musical forms that lay outside the usual Western European experience. Yet she did not aim at a strictly ethnomusicological transcription of this material. Such a transcription would have had to preserve – with complete precision – natural intervals, vocal ornamentation, and the individual rhythmic nuances of each singer. It would have been extremely valuable as a scholarly record, but often difficult to use as educational material for children.

Mathéy did something different. She placed Greek traditional material within the framework of elemental music. She did not simplify it into something poorer. She gave it educational life. The songs of the Greek edition do not function as folklore specimens *(σπέσιμεντς)*. They become starting points for voice, movement, rhythm, improvisation, and collaboration. Their melodic shape, their arrangements, and their rhythmic organisation serve the children's active and embodied participation.

Through seminars, this material did not remain only in Greece. It became part of the international dialogue of Orff-Schulwerk, showing how a local musical idiom can speak with authenticity within a global community.

The two Greek volumes were intended for children from the age of ten onwards. This choice was not accidental. Mathéy had behind her many years of teaching experience. She knew that the material should not merely be musically interesting. It had to be able to live within the child.

This is why her books do not function as recipes. They offer texts, movements, and rhythmic explorations, and at the same time they invite teachers to develop their own creativity. The material is presented as a point of departure, not as a limit.

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In this way, the teacher is not an executor of instructions. The teacher is a creator of conditions. The teacher listens to the class, sees the children, and adapts the material to their abilities, needs, and musical imagination.

Mathéy believed deeply that Orff-Schulwerk was not intended simply to teach music in the conventional sense, i.e., notation, intervals, and scales. Its purpose is aesthetic education. She expressed this in a memorable way:

> Sound, speech, and movement are aesthetic education – forms of aesthetic education in a broader sense. For the ancient Greeks, beauty was not like mustard that we add to food. It was food itself. Aesthetic education is paideia – a word that is difficult to translate into another language. (Tsaftaridis, 1997, p. 45)

Beauty, then, not as decoration. Not as something added afterwards. But as nourishment. As the substance of education.

Here, I believe, Mathéy and Orff meet most deeply: in the conviction that music education begins with experience. With the body. With the voice. With rhythm. With relationship. With the child who does not simply learn music but enters a world of aesthetic awareness.

I would like to conclude with a phrase by the late Avon Gillespie: 'Each stage of development within the Schulwerk constitutes a part of the whole which has as its ultimate goal the complete musical experience' (Choksy et al, 1986, p. 108).

More than thirty years after that interview, I realise that Polyxene Mathéy was not speaking to me only about two books. She was also speaking about the way an idea can travel from one generation to another without losing its soul. Tradition is not preserved because it is repeated. It is preserved because it continues to create. And as long as there are teachers and children creating together the work of Carl Orff – and the work of Polyxene Mathéy – will remain alive.

A key person in my life
Angelika Panagopoulos-Slavik

Polyxene Mathey is a key person in my life! I got to know her when she was 78 years old and nearly deaf! She was the reason I came to Greece in the winter of 1980-81 and I spent my first two years there in her house.

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The photo shows us together in 1982, after the passing of Carl Orff. Mathéy spoke about him at her school in Athens, and afterwards, we played a piece from the Orff-Schulwerk.
Photo: Private collection of Angelika Panagopoulos-Slavik

This time of daily cohabitation, her excellent understanding of the German language and culture, as well as her expertise on the Orff-Schulwerk gave me fundamental assistance for my Greek learning and for teaching Greek children. They formed the basis for learning to understand a new and unknown culture for me – the Greek culture!

From the beginning, she let me participate in lectures on music and movement education for music educators, preschool educators, and dance pedagogues. Sometimes I took on the task of carrying out some practical exercises.

It must be emphasized that, at this time in Greece, music and movement education was primarily integrated into – mostly private – dance schools and had its origins in the eurhythmics shaped by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze.

We discussed a lot about the applicability of Orff-Schulwerk especially in the music education in Greece, which is strongly influenced by Eastern traditions in its folk music. In contrast, classical music training at music schools and conservatories is predominantly Western-oriented!

And what about the unity of MUSIC – DANCE – SPEECH according to the ancient Greek model? Does it still exist in our time?

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Sometimes we had opposing opinions, but she loved it when one engaged in debate and brought in different viewpoints.

Later, the small study *Rythmos* (Mathéy, 2026/1992) emerged, in which she sought an anthroposophical clarification of the concept of rhythm. In it, she explains, '*Meter* divides time into mathematically equal intervals with which man can *count, calculate*. Meter is governed by mathematical rules and is apprehended intellectually. By contrast, *rhythm* is not accessible to purely cognitive processes: it is not calculated, but *experienced* ' (Mathéy, 2026/1992, p. 56).

Further, she writes, 'Every rhythmic phenomenon is *unique*; it can never be repeated with absolute precision, and this is consistent with nature and with life' (Mathéy, 2026/1992, pp. 56-57).

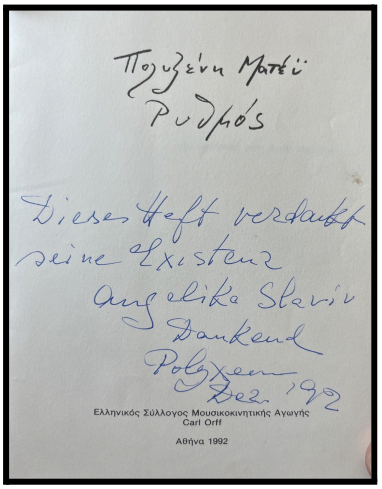
And also, 'This technical civilization, with its astonishing achievements, has enslaved us. *We orient our lives primarily toward what can be measured, calculated, and judged as useful'* (Mathéy, 2026/1992, p. 57).

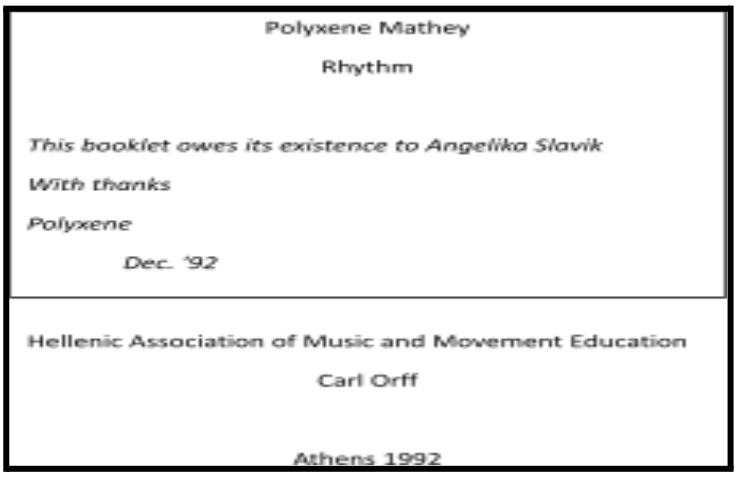


Polyxene Mathéy reading her book, *Rythmos*
Photo: Private collection of Anna Mathéy, with kind permission

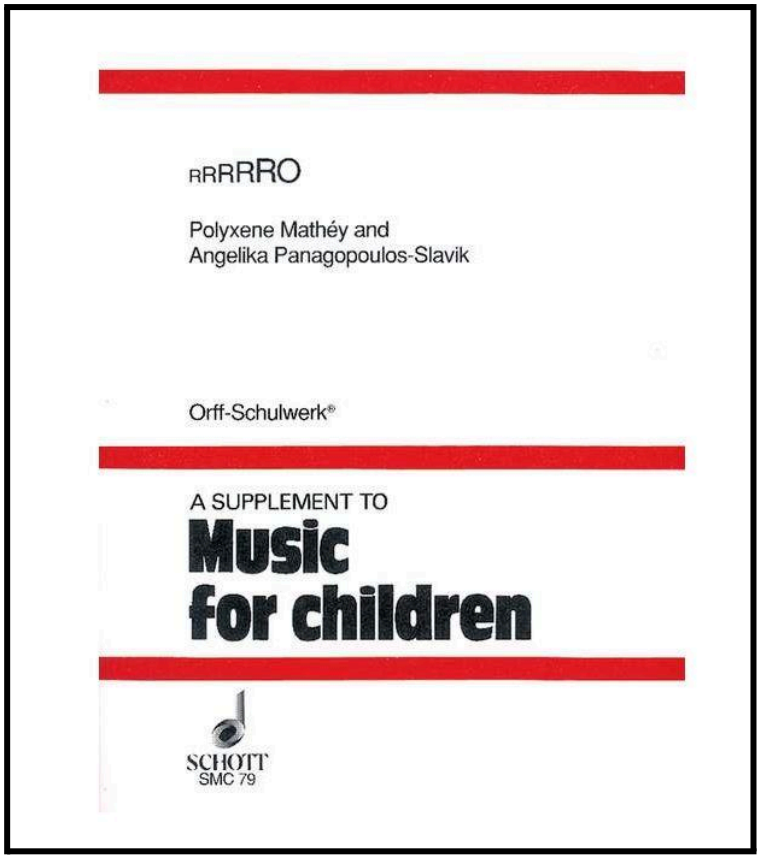
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Her loving dedication in my personal copy reminds me of this time:





Around this time, I assisted in the publication of the Greek/English booklet *RRRRRO* (Mathéy & Panagopoulos-Slavik, 1993), which was created following a request from Schott Music. It was intended to represent the Greek language in the American edition supplements of the Orff-Schulwerk. Polyxene selected texts from antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times (folk and literary), and the target audience was children and teenagers from about 12 years of age.



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In the introduction you can read:

> We believe that these texts can be used as examples to illustrate the dimension a text can assume when recited by groups in accord with its internal rhythm and content, accompanied by various means of making sound. These adaptations, however, are only one suggestion. Each teacher can and should work creatively with the students to find other solutions of movement and sound. In the spirit of the Orff-Schulwerk children from all countries are encouraged to come in contact with music and dance from foreign cultures. (Mathéy & Panagopoulos-Slavik, 1993, p. 3)

When we spoke a little later about the published book, I mentioned that I would change a few pieces. She was indignant: *'No! The piece is fine as it is!'*
But a few days later she came up to me and said, '*You're right – it could be done differently, too!'*

She held firm opinions but was always open to others – to new ideas.

Conclusion
Carolee Stewart

Mathéy's presence was felt many times during the 2026 convention, including performances of pieces from her Orff-Schulwerk publications. Her book, *Ρυθμός/Rhythm/Rhythmus* – recently translated into English and German – was available in a trilingual format for purchase.

During the years after her first encounter with Carl Orff, Polyxene Mathéy reported several times about Orff-Schulwerk in Greece. Information about some of those reports along with other published information about Mathéy is included in the 'additional resources' at the end of this article.

Hermann Regner's final words during the *Pro Merito* presentation in 1990 offer a wonderful and personal portrayal of Mathéy:

> Anyone who has seen Polyxene Mathéy teach will never forget the experience. She is not the sort of workshop star who whips up wild euphoria only to leave participants feeling let down afterward; rather, she is a woman who knows how to inspire enthusiasm while maintaining a sense of balance and moderation.
>
> She has friends all over the world. Through her work and her example, people have come to know and love the Orff-Schulwerk. (Regner, 1990, p. 53)

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Polyxene Mathéy teaching at the Orff Institute, 1963
Photo: Private collection of Anna Mathéy, with kind permission

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Anna Mathéy, Angelika Slavik, Carolee Stewart, and Nikolas Tsaftaridis
Photo: Private collection of Carolee Stewart

Anna Mathéy has taught music and movement education at various adult seminars; and since 1991 she has been the Artistic Director of the Mathéy School, where she teaches dance, gymnastics, and Orff-Schulwerk to children, as well as dance gymnastics to adults. Her roots at the school run very deep because she grew up in the building that housed the school until 1993, a building that holds the family's legacy. There she was immersed in its teaching from an early age, attending classes alongside her peers and even older students. She is a graduate of the State School of Dance, has attended seminars at the Orff Institute in Salzburg, and has studied jazz freestyle dancing in France under Matt Mattox.

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Angelika Panagopoulos-Slavik graduated from the 4-year course at the Orff Institute in 1990. She has studied Greek rhythmology and Greek folk instruments so she can integrate this knowledge into courses for children and adults. In Greece, she taught at the Mathéy School, State Dance School, and music schools, as well as continuing education courses organized by the Ministry of Culture and Education, the Greek Society for Music Education in Thessaloniki, and the German School in Athens. 1986-1990, she developed and directed the two-year advanced training course for music and movement education at the Moraitis School. She is a founding member of ESMA and has several publications, including one with Polyxene Mathéy.

Carolee Stewart is retired Dean of the Peabody Preparatory of The Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, USA), a former faculty member in Music Education at the Peabody Conservatory, a former choral and general music teacher in grades 5-12, a former Orff-Schulwerk level course teacher of recorder, a past IOSFS board member, a Special Course graduate. As a member of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association, she served as national conference chair, editorial board member, vice-president, and president. She is a former editor for supplements to the American Edition of Orff-Schulwerk (Schott) and an editor of the series Texts on Theory and Practice of Orff-Schulwerk, Volumes 2 and 3.

Nikolas Tsaftaridis is a former professor at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He holds a Ph.D. in teacher education from NKUA, an MA in music education, and a BA in ethnomusicology. He has taken seminars at the Orff Institute and holds a diploma from the Kodály Institute in Kecskemét, Hungary. He is the author of books and articles on music and movement education and a founding member of the Hellenic Orff-Schulwerk Association (ESMA) and the Greek Society for Music Education. His work has focused on music and movement education, music pedagogy, creativity, children's songs and compositions, and the cultural dimension of musical instruments.

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