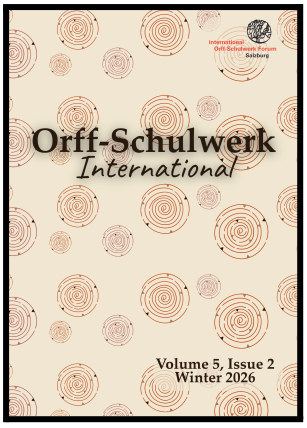
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STORYTELLING. Finding and making meaning through Orff-Schulwerk

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IOSFS Convention 2026

The IOSFS Convention July 14-17, 2026
Storytelling: Finding and Making Meaning through Orff-Schulwerk

Christa Coogan

The 2026 IOSFS Convention, themed around storytelling, took place in Athens, Greece—the European birthplace of myth and story, and the culture they created, illuminated, and guided.

These four intriguing and inspiring days were attended by approximately 140 on-site participants (and another 110 registered online) from 35 countries.

The programme included keynotes, discussion groups, presentations, practical sessions, Come Togethers and evening performances, all of which engaged with fundamental questions of who we are, where we come from, and what holds us together, bringing the past into conversation with the present. Additionally, a tribute to Polyxene Mathéy, two different Research Committee sessions, two presidents' meetings (to accommodate different time zones from online participants), and special interest group discussions were offered. The convention was further enriched by a raffle, an art exhibition featuring work by students of the hosting National and Kapodistrian University, and an exhibition of children's books from around the world.

Our two convention partners - the Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE) of the National and Kapodistrian University Athens (NKUA), and ESMA, the Hellenic Orff-Schulwerk Association - and their representatives, especially Dr Olympia Agalianou from DECE and Maria Saplaoura and her team from ESMA - set an awe-inspiring example of cooperation, artistic attention to detail and quality, professionalism and generosity.

INTRODUCTIONS from the National and Kapodistrian University (NKUA)

Professor Vasileios Tsafos, Dean of the School of Education, warmly welcomed the convention to Athens. He highlighted the city as a meaningful place to reflect on storytelling with its rich history of rhythm, poetry, theatre, and democratic dialogue. Stories explore fundamental questions of community, memory and identity, helping us to understand the human condition and connecting ancient knowledge with contemporary life. He reflected on how imagination, play, dance, and storytelling are not only what we teach, but ways of becoming human and are integral to learning. By fostering empathy rather than uniformity, and dialogue rather than monologue, stories deepen our understanding of ethical dilemmas and our shared humanity. He concluded with a potent reminder: **education is not just about what you know, but who you become.**

Professor Eudoxia Nteropoulou-Nterou, Chair of the Department of Early Childhood Education, welcomed the Forum members and guests to Athens, noting that her department has been a member of the Forum network of Associated Schools and Institutions (ASI) since 2024. She discussed the role of music and dance in education, highlighting the

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interdisciplinary challenges they present to existing dominant practices, and raising questions of values and purpose. She highlighted how Orff-Schulwerk prioritises pleasure and participation over prescribed notions of professionalism. To conclude, she emphasised storytelling's emancipatory potential, the importance of social and overlooked narratives, and the need for political courage.

For the IOSFS convention, **an exhibition featuring work by students from the Visual Arts Lab** of DECE/NKUA was set up on the ground floor of the university building.

KEYNOTES

Dr Theocharis Raptis opened his keynote lecture with an introduction to music education according to Aristotle. Discussing emotional competence and the role of music in emotional development, Raptis distinguished between *perceiving emotions* in music and *experiencing emotions* through music. He argued that this distinction can support music and movement educators to design curricula and plan their lessons. Furthermore, the Orff approach, which values both the perception of music and engagement in musical activities such as storytelling, drawing, dancing and theatre, offers myriad opportunities to develop both musical and emotional competencies.

In her keynote, **Dr Manuela Widmer,** a researcher and lecturer, drew on her decades of experience as a practitioner as well as a lecturer and researcher, to engage the audience with thought-provoking questions and playful voice and movement activities. She revisited key characteristics of Orff-Schulwerk, then introduced the subject of elemental music drama. First, she distinguished between the criteria of simple and complex stories for children of different ages. Next came the all-important questions with examples: how can a story become a play? Where can the musical impulses and the dance possibilities be found? How can texts be amended, highlighted, simplified or expanded? What are the inherent dramatic possibilities? To demonstrate this in practice, two short videos were shown: one featuring children and the other featuring students from the Orff Institute Special Course.

PRESENTATIONS

Angeliki Agalianou and Eleana Chatzaki discussed "the great tree of folk oral tradition", which is rooted in humanity's deep psychic material. They explored themes such as exile, homecoming, identity, justice, and hope. They noted that myths and epics have no borders, "neither in time nor space", spreading across literary genres, countries, languages, and cultures. Narratives, they argue, organise inner and outer worlds. In workshops with teenagers, the narrative functions of the hero's journey are identified, and used to create their own stories. In their moving conclusion, we listened to the story of Odysseus' return home, as he reveals himself to his Penelope amid her suspicions and his assurances. The story is not on a wide screen; just two women recite Homer's text in English and in Greek, singing the poetry with a drum accompaniment. We are enthralled, the images come alive before our eyes.

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Dr Thomas Rösch, Director of the Orff Centre Munich, presented his research on Carl Orff's artistic work, with a special focus this year on his Greek tragedies. Dr Rösch highlighted Orff's profound understanding of Richard Wagner's music, especially *The Ring of the Nibelung,* which in many respects comes closest to Greek tragedy. He also discussed Richard Strauss's modernist opera *Elektra*, which is based on a Sophocles tragedy. Against this background, Dr Rösch argued that Orff's approach to composing operas based on Greek antiquity required a radical reimagining of the relationship between choir and orchestra, undoubtedly influenced by the devastation of the two world wars. In these works, the musical poetry of the chorus drives the dramatic action. Although inspired by ancient drama, Orff's reimagining was nevertheless firmly rooted in the contemporary aesthetics of the mid-to-late 20th century.

This year's two practical sessions, led by **Ezgi Tatar** from Turkey and **George Charonitis** from Greece, epitomised the very best of Orff-Schulwerk teaching practice. Magic and surprise unfolded through rich landscapes of stories, songs, rhythms, movement improvisations and dances. The dynamic interplay between folklore, cultural tradition and contemporary communal experience was brought vividly to life—made visible, embodied and joyfully celebrated.

Polyxene Mathéy is the figure most closely associated with the Orff-Schulwerk approach in Greece. This moving tribute, moderated by **Dr Carolee Stewart**, celebrated her remarkable life, personality and lasting legacy. Her granddaughter, **Anna Matey**, shared heartfelt memories of her "unusual grandmother", while a 1994 film by **Coloman Kallós** and **Manuela Widmer** highlighted Mathey's friendship with Carl Orff, which inspired her pedagogical vision and her efforts to establish an Orff-Schulwerk community in Greece. **Dr Nikolas Tsaftaridis**, former professor at the NKUA and founding member of the Greek Hellenic Orff Association, reflected on their close professional relationship. He recalled her authenticity, curiosity, and conviction that learning never ends. Encouraged by Orff, Mathéy chose not to translate the German publications but to embrace the distinctive cultural elements of Greek music, including mixed meter and modal scales, and the particularities of the Greek language. The result was two original Greek volumes, rooted in the spirit of Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy. Dr Tsaftaridis concluded that Mathéy understood that a living pedagogy must always remain in dialogue with the world. **Angelika Panagopoulos-Slavik** spoke next. Having come to Greece as a young woman, shortly after completing her studies at the Orff Institute, she worked alongside Mathéy for many years and shared personal memories of their time together. The session concluded with Panagopoulos-Slavik's dynamic, practical musical tribute to Polyxene Mathéy.

Mathéy was also at the centre of the presentation by **Dr Maria Filianou and Katerina Sarropoulou**. Using photos and video material, they traced the history of the first generation of Greek and non-Greek Schulwerk pioneers including the following significant organisations: the Orff Institute Salzburg, the Mathéy School and the Moraitis School (both in Athens), and the IOSFS.

Here are some further remarks about other presentations:

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Bethany Elsworth shared a performative presentation, activating the audience engagement with body rhythms, movement improvisation, and song, skillfully building up to a group experience of singing and dancing.

Dafne Michellepis presented her research, demonstrating how stories can facilitate dance processes that enhance presence, strengthen embodiment, and foster community. Her work teaching Brazilian children their own cultural stories through rhythm, dance, and song highlights the relevance of the Orff-Schulwerk approach in the digital age, reaffirming dance education as means of humanisation and the cultivation of embodied memory.

Riikka Rauhala and Sari Mutanen beautifully demonstrated how to share stories about the natural world with young children — an integral part of Finnish culture.

Virginia Longo's presentation focused on two Italian national initiatives, one from 1999. The first, Born to Read, promotes reading aloud in families with children aged 0-6, and the second, Born to Music, was launched in 2006. These two programmes often collaborate in their daily work with children and families.

Farzan Farnia introduced a traditional Iranian story over 400 years old, which was brought to life through music, movement, creative writing, and collective dramatic decisions. In a wonderful video, we see this story being performed by a large group of children, from 1st to 8th grade.

Dr Evrim Onay began her presentation with a Turkish dance, after which she involved the audience in listening tasks and questions about beginnings. Her premise was that there is no single pathway to musical experience.

Xu Mai and **Dr Sarah Brooke**, hailing from China and Australia respectively, presented their intergenerational project involving Chinese schoolchildren and 'third-aged' Australians. The initiative involved the creation of interdisciplinary artworks incorporating art, story writing, and music. We were treated to several charming videos showcasing the results.

Dr Panagiota Giannouli introduced the concept of participatory theatre. This approach sees stories as a learning journey through theatre, grounded in community and collective exploration. It aims, through personal narratives, to create a collaborative dramatic performance.

In her lecture, *Songs of Earth and Sky,* **Charnell Ontong King** explored the challenges of cultural awareness, respect, and appropriation. She discussed the complexity of deconstructing *insider* and *outsider* perspectives to avoid stereotypes and judgement. She introduced a conceptual storytelling framework - a relational model for culturally sensitive storytelling and creative pedagogy - designed for teachers, students, and artists.

Manju Durairaj introduced poetry and a stick dance from India to underscore how storytelling builds rapport, community, and cultural awareness among students. Through Indian fables and folktales, students discover shared themes and cultural differences across traditions.

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We also enjoyed additional presentations from Dr Manuela Widmer, Virginia Longo, Dr Sarah Brooke, and Tiffany English with Virgina Longo of the ASI committee who introduced us to this network.

This year, the **Research Committee** of the Forum held two sessions in different formats. The first featured two researchers, Dr Raquel Pastor Prada and Dr Olympia Agalianou, who each presented their work. The second session was a roundtable event featuring 11 short academic presentations, hosted by Research Committee members Manju Durairaj and Werner Rohrer.

In addition to the 60-minute presentations, several representatives from the **Associated Schools and Institutions (ASIs)** shared examples of their work:

- **China**/IMMEA: Li Shengkai, Fei Wei, Hu Ting, Zhao Liang
- **Italy**/CDMT: Marta Gilmore and Ersilia Prosperi
- **Czech Rep.**/Primary School for German Czech Understanding: Ramona Schulz
- **Australia**/Eton Farm School: Jane Nicholas
- **South Korea**/Notre Dame Kindergarten: Sr. Caritas Maria
- **Thailand**/Jittamett Kindergarten: Krongtong Boonprakong
- **Germany/Carl-Orff-Schule Diessen:** Barbara Kling
- **USA**/The San Francisco School: Sofía López-Ibor and James Harding

The **Come Togethers,** short music and dance sessions, offered lovely insights into the music and dance traditions of five countries:

- **Greece:** Antigoni Zachari & Maria Karyki, Sonia Kouma, and Ermioni Ntetsika
- **Brazil:** Diego Lourenço
- **Italy:** Emanuela De Bellis, Federica Galletti & Marzia Mencarelli, and Sandra Bonizzato
- **Japan:** Dr Wakako Nagaoka
- **Spain:** Carmen Domínguez
- **Finland:** Soili Perkiö and Liisa Kallio

***The Vocal Epic of Kaveh and Ajdahak* – A production of Adamak**

Close your eyes and listen to the *Shahnameh*, a medieval Persian epic poem written by the poet Ferdowsi. It recounts the mythical and historical past of Iran from the creation of the world until the fall of the ancient Persian Empire. Then open your eyes and enjoy a stunning film adaptation that brings the poem to life through shadow theatre, stick puppets, drawings, colour, fabrics, and choreographed lighting. Onstage and behind the scenes, performers sing, gesture, and play Western and traditional Iranian instruments. The vivid musical arrangement, composed by Farzan Farnia, flows throughout the story, creating a rich accompaniment to the narration. The 60 performers in this brilliant production are members of the Iranian Orff-Schulwerk Association, Adamak.

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Exhibition: Children's Literature from Around the World
The IOSFS invited participants attending the 2026 Convention in Athens to donate a children's book in their native language from their home country. The collected books were displayed in an exhibition celebrating children's literature from around the world. Participants had the opportunity to explore the exhibition throughout the convention, and on the final day, each received a souvenir book, chosen by chance. The exhibition was organised by Ilkay Nişancı, Anida Chan and Virginia Longo.

EVENINGS

It is *Tuesday* evening, July 14. Close your eyes for a moment, then open them again. Imagine listening to music being played on a replica of an ancient Greek lyre. The wind, heavy with the scent of bay leaves and thyme, whispers tales of times gone by and is picked up by ancient, folk, and contemporary Greek music. The Acropolis stands confidently above you, shielding you from the setting sun. The musicians of the group *Library Lyrists* are recreating and expanding an ancient musical heritage.

It is *Wednesday* evening, July 15. Close your eyes for a moment, then open them again. Open your ears as well. Listen to music from Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean, played on traditional instruments such as the Greek lute, the Turkish lavta, the zither-like qanun, and the richly resonant tanbur. As we immerse ourselves in the music, three men dressed in traditional attire take to the stage and perform a Greek dance with complex stamp rhythms, while their wrists, shoulders and heads remain soft and malleable. Audience members lean forward in their seats, eager not to miss a moment, as they feel the interplay of dance and music in their bones and breath. No sooner have they relaxed back into their seats when two couples emerge and begin to dance fluidly with one another. When the men embark on solo improvisations, the women join the musicians, underscoring the rhythmic power and intention with their clapping.

The lights go out. When they come back on, the *Idiofono Performing Arts Group* appears on stage. This group comprises students and alumni from the Department of Early Childhood Education at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. With the support of Olympia Agalianou, these formidable performers transport us through time with a captivating blend of song, dance, spoken word, and instrumental music, all tied together with compelling rhythm and expressiveness.

Close your eyes and relax. When you open them again, the stage will be empty. The *Blip Ensemble*, an inclusive group of body musicians, enters the space. A new story begins. The build-up is slow and sustained until the rhythm and the positioning of the performers change. What was the cue? Once again, the audience leans forward towards the performers. Are there leaders or followers? Are the cues acoustic or movement-based? The *Blip Ensemble* surprises us with claps, stamps and all kinds of breath-generated sounds. They move with the utmost clarity around and through the space. Repetition becomes trancelike. The pace is steady, not frantic, yet riveting. The applause must have been audible outside the Goethe Institute, echoing through the surrounding streets.

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This mesmerising evening concludes with a performance by the ESMA Orff Ensemble. Created by George Charonitis in collaboration with the ensemble members, it vividly depicts historical Greek storytelling accompanied by musical gems by Orff and Keetman. The culmination is a moving tribute to Polyxene Mathéy, whose vision and dedication established the Orff-Schulwerk approach in Greece. Those who have led and now lead the Hellenic Orff-Schulwerk Association continue along her path, building on her legacy. The performance ends with a reverberating silence followed by a storm of applause.

It is *Thursday evening*, July 16. Take a walk up the Hill of the Nymphs within the National Observatory of Athens, and discover a landscape of rocks, monuments, pathways, and fragrant bushes and trees. Find somewhere to sit - a chair or rock - for this performance of *Odysseus Suppliant*, directed by Katerina Sarropoulou and featuring students, alumni, and faculty members of the Moraitis School. Close your eyes. Open them again and let the sounds of the Greek language transport you to the most ancient European civilisation. Follow the journey of Odysseus and immerse yourself in a story of hospitality, gratitude, and homecoming, as told through the polyphony of instruments, poetry, songs, and dance presented by these wonderful performers.

Take out your calendars…next year's convention takes place at the Orff-Institute in Salzburg, Austria, from July 12-15. We hope to see you there!

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