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Safeguarding the Identity of Thanh Hoa Folk Music Through the Integration of Traditional Vocal Art and Contemporary Performance

LE MAI LY
Hong Duc University, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT:

Background: The preservation of regional folk music involves not only melodic materials but also vocal conventions, relationships among performers, embodied actions, and the social contexts that sustain transmission.

Objective: This study examines how traditional vocal art can be integrated into contemporary performance without obscuring the distinctive identity of folk music in Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam.

Methods: Qualitative document analysis and purposive contrastive comparison were applied to two documented traditions: Ho song Ma (Ma River work chants) and Ngu tro Vien Khe (the Dong Anh folk performance complex). Ethnomusicological scholarship, local music studies, heritage instruments, and relevant interdisciplinary research were interpreted across five analytical dimensions.

Results: The comparison indicates that identity is better understood through three interrelated continuities-sonic and linguistic, interactive and embodied, and contextual and community-based-than through melodic resemblance alone. In Ho song Ma, lead-and-chorus response and the rhythms of river work are salient organising relationships; in Ngu tro Vien Khe, singing is embedded in movement, dramatic roles, and the sequence of a performance. The article distinguishes technically supported traditional performance, staged adaptation, and newly composed works inspired by folk materials, and proposes a five-dimensional framework for documenting and interpreting transformations.

Conclusion: Contemporary performance can extend the visibility of Thanh Hoa folk traditions when artistic interventions are identified transparently and remain accountable to source practices and their communities.

KEYWORDS: Thanh Hoa folk music, Ho song Ma, Ngu tro Vien Khe, traditional vocal art, contemporary performance, ethnomusicology, intangible cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Folk music is a cultural practice sustained through sound, sung text, performers' capabilities, and socially recognised conventions of participation. Unlike a notated score, which may be copied in relatively stable form, a performance unfolds through particular relationships among people in time and place. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines heritage in relation to community recognition, transmission, and continual recreation within changing social and historical environments (UNESCO, 2003). Consequently, safeguarding folk music cannot be reduced to storing melodies, nor does it necessarily require preserving unchanged every technical means once associated with a performance.

In present-day musical life, the same tune may be sung in a community setting, arranged for a professional stage, incorporated into vocal training, or developed into a new song. Each setting potentially changes the organisation of time, the distribution of vocal roles, the relationship with listeners, and the extent of technical intervention. The analytically important question is therefore not whether an arrangement uses modern instruments. It is which relationships are transmitted, which are reorganised, and how an audience is informed about those transformations. This perspective is consistent with Bohlman's (1988) treatment of folk music as a living component of modern musical worlds rather than an unchanging historical object.

Thanh Hoa contains folk musical practices associated with different communities and settings. This article focuses on two contrasting traditions of the province's Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) population: Ho song Ma, linked to river work and lead-and-chorus response, and Ngu tro Vien Khe, in which sung text is closely associated with movement and dramatic sequence in communal performance (Cao Xuan Hai, 2018; Do Thi Thanh Nhan, 2017; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2017). Their contrasts help clarify how different components of musical identity are affected when a traditional practice is brought onto a contemporary stage. They are selected as analytically informative cases, not as representatives of every musical tradition in Thanh Hoa.

Relevant scholarship provides a substantive basis for the comparison. Cao Xuan Hai (2018) examines the formal organisation and rhythmic characteristics of Ho song Ma. Nguyen Lien and Hoang Minh Tuong (2017) and Do Thi Thanh Nhan (2017) document aspects of Thanh Hoa folk music and its festival environments, while Nguyen Dinh Thao and Do Thi Thanh Nhan (2024) analyse music within the organisation of festivals.

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Regarding relations between established traditions and new works, Vi Minh Huy (2021) investigates the inheritance of folk-melodic materials in songs about Thanh Hoa, and Trinh Thi Thuy Khuyen (2022) discusses vocal technique in teaching songs associated with the province. Yet the connections among musical signs, interactional structures, and continuity of a source practice within contemporary performance require further integrated analysis.

The study addresses three research questions. First, which characteristics provide recognisable anchors of identity in the two selected traditions? Second, which relationships among vocal delivery, performance organisation, and cultural meaning are altered by contemporary adaptation? Third, how can the analysis, classification, and teaching of adaptations be organised to support the continuity of their source practices? The intended contribution is an interpretive framework grounded in musicological and heritage scholarship, not a single fixed standard for all Thanh Hoa folk music.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Musical identity as a relationship of performance

In ethnomusicology, the unit of inquiry is not exclusively the musical work conceived as a sequence of pitches and durations detached from use. Bohlman (1988) connects the study of folk music to oral transmission, performers, communities, and the interaction of musical text and context. Rice (1987) similarly situates music-making within historical processes, social maintenance, and individual experience. Together, these perspectives suggest that a musical feature can be interpreted adequately only in relation to the practices and meanings of those who use it. Melodic similarity is thus an important trace of continuity, but cannot by itself establish the continuity of a musical tradition.

In the present study, folk-music identity is operationally understood as a configuration of recognisable relationships: between the sung phrase, rhythmic organisation, and text; between a leader and responding singers; between vocal sound, movement, and performance roles; and between the musical practice, its social function, historical setting, and transmitters. These relationships do not imply a single authoritative original, since traditions may exist through multiple variants. The elements to be maintained must therefore be assessed against identifiable practices and traceable sources rather than the assumption that all versions share an identical structure or expressive value.

A living-heritage perspective also distinguishes continuity from mere repetition. UNESCO (2003) frames safeguarding around conditions that enable recognition, practice, and transmission, rather than the freezing of a practice at a particular historical moment. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) draws attention to how heritage is presented, interpreted, and situated in cultural institutions. From this viewpoint, an adaptation is a situated re-presentation: it can expand access while producing a new layer of interpretation. The scholarly task is to explain how that layer relates to the source practice, rather than simply opposing the authentic to the modern.

2.2. Participatory practices and presentational performance

Turino (2008) distinguishes participatory and presentational forms of music-making. This is not a ranking of artistic quality; rather, it concerns how participation, performer roles, and audience relationships are organised. In a participatory setting, the boundary between making music and joining it can be flexible. In a presentational setting, musical activity is more explicitly organised as a product for a listening or viewing audience. A change of setting can therefore transform the underlying musical relationships even when a melody remains largely recognisable.

For folk vocal art, this transformation is particularly evident in the relationship between the leader and responding group, collective and individual singing, phrase length, recurring pulses, and singers' adjustments to one another. Stage performers also face legitimate demands for accuracy, sound balance, item duration, and programme coherence. If those demands replace a responsive leader-chorus relation with a fixed solo line or predetermined backing harmonies, however, a change has occurred at the level of performance organisation. Such a change needs to be described and classified, rather than automatically judged as either an improvement or a decline.

2.3. Traditional vocal delivery and contemporary performance techniques

Vocal technique has physiological and functional dimensions, but it also carries the aesthetic norms of particular musical traditions. Breath management, articulation, and pitch control may support expressive consistency. Nevertheless, imposing a single vocal-production method across distinct folk tunes can obscure variations in the placement of sound, stress, vocables, and vocal colour. In the context of teaching songs about Thanh Hoa, Trinh Thi Thuy Khuyen (2022) emphasises the importance of selecting techniques appropriate to the repertoire. With community-based folk singing, the issue is broader: technique should serve the phrase structure and performance function of the tradition under consideration, rather than recasting its identifying features according to an already established vocal ideal.

Vi Minh Huy (2021) shows that new songs may inherit folk materials through melodic motifs, textual organisation, and compositional development. Among the examples analysed are materials from the Dong Anh Lantern Dance suite used in a newly composed song about a moonlit setting. This distinction is important: composing a new work from folk materials is not the same activity as presenting an existing folk practice. The first permits materials to be restructured within a new compositional design. The second requires closer attention to inherited modes of vocal delivery, sequence, and function. Without this distinction, the concept of safeguarding becomes so broad that any composition with a folk-inspired sound might be misclassified as heritage transmission.

2.4. Safeguarding principles and community agency

Articles 2 and 15 of the UNESCO Convention emphasise heritage viability and the broad participation of the communities, groups, and individuals who create, maintain, and transmit intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2003). UNESCO's ethical principles further emphasise the agency of heritage-bearing communities, transparent relationships, and consultation based on consent (UNESCO, 2015). In Vietnam, the Law on Cultural Heritage No. 45/2024/QH15, effective from 1 July 2025, addresses the management, safeguarding, promotion, and responsibilities associated with heritage (National Assembly, 2024). These instruments make it possible to assess adaptation not only aesthetically but also in terms of how materials are used, represented, and transmitted.

A heritage-bearing community should not be equated with a professional cast or event organiser. Naming a tune, explaining variants, discussing alterations to lyrics, identifying the sequence of a dramatic item, and checking the attribution of source materials all concern agency over cultural representation. A performance resembling a traditional genre may therefore still cause confusion if it has no traceable source or fails

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to disclose substantial rearrangement. Conversely, a newly composed work can have artistic and communicative value when presented as such, rather than as a substitute for documentation of the source practice.

2.5. Heritage reception, interpretation, and communication: Interdisciplinary comparisons

Heritage-tourism scholarship offers a complementary perspective on memory, identity, and participation, although it does not replace specialist musicological evidence. In Hanoi, Nguyen (2025) examines relationships involving sustainable tourism, behaviour, and community awareness of cultural heritage conservation. At a broader Vietnamese scale, Vu and Nguyen (2026) consider heritage memory, cultural identity, place attachment, and resident participation in sustainable cultural tourism. These studies raise questions about local actors' position in heritage interpretation and promotion. For Thanh Hoa folk music, a cautious interpretive implication is that the circulation of a performance alone cannot demonstrate continuity if its knowledge holders are marginalised in selecting, explaining, and transmitting the source practice.

Another strand concerns interpretive quality and the design of heritage experiences. Ha et al. (2026) examine the quality of architectural-heritage interpretation at the Imperial Citadel of Hue, including content, attractiveness, and delivery, in relation to responsible visitor behaviour. Nguyen and Nguyen (2026) study heritage storytelling in Vietnam, addressing authenticity, interaction, and co-created experiences. Neither study evaluates vocal techniques or adaptations of Thanh Hoa folk music. Their transferable value is therefore limited to the requirement that source accuracy and audience accessibility be addressed together: an adaptation should be explained clearly enough for audiences to distinguish a traditional practice, a staged rearrangement, and a folk-inspired new composition.

From a communication perspective, Phuong and Lam (2025) assess heritage communication in Hanoi with attention to local-community feedback, cultural narratives, and interactive channels. Considered alongside UNESCO's living-heritage framework (2003), such research suggests three supplementary criteria for contemporary performance: the traceability of source information, clear explanation of artistic interventions, and opportunities for cultural communities to respond to how their knowledge is represented. These are criteria of interpretation and governance; they should not be misconstrued as measurements of vocal timbre, breathing, or stylistic accuracy.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design and unit of analysis

The study employs interpretive qualitative document analysis combined with a purposive contrastive comparison of two cases. Its object is the relationship between traditional vocal characteristics and contemporary modes of presentation. The unit of analysis is a performance configuration that includes musical organisation, singing practices, patterns of interaction, and social context. Ho song Ma and Ngu tro Vien Khe were selected because their historically documented functions and modes of organisation differ. Comparison therefore allows features specific to each tradition to be distinguished from principles that may be transferable to the analysis of adaptations.

3.2. Documentary sources and selection principles

The materials were organised into five groups: (1) musicological publications and monographs addressing Thanh Hoa folk music, festivals, Ma River chants, and Dong Anh folk performance; (2) studies of composition and vocal pedagogy relating to folk materials from Thanh Hoa; (3) theoretical scholarship on folk music, performance practice, and music education; (4) official cultural-heritage instruments; and (5) interdisciplinary studies of heritage memory, conservation awareness, interpretation, communication, digitisation, and promotion. The first two groups provide the main case-specific musical evidence. The third and fourth supply conceptual and normative foundations. The fifth informs comparisons concerning reception, participation, and heritage governance but is not treated as a substitute for structural musical evidence.

Preference was given to sources with identifiable authorship, publication years, publishers or issuing authorities, and content that could be checked against the analytical question. Reports of isolated events were not treated as evidence of the effectiveness of a performance or of safeguarding outcomes. The corpus is purposively selected rather than the output of an exhaustive systematic review; no total number of screened records or standardised effect estimate is claimed.

3.3. Analytical procedure

The material was examined through five dimensions: melodic and rhythmic organisation; vocal production and sung text; performer interaction; context and meaning; and community agency in sustaining and representing sources. For each dimension, three epistemic levels were kept distinct: a characteristic explicitly documented in specialist scholarship, an interpretation of what might change when performance conditions change, and a proposed principle for responsible application. Interdisciplinary studies were used principally at the third level for comparisons about interpretation and governance, not as direct empirical evidence about either selected singing tradition.

A contrastive reading then identified which relationships are characteristic of each case and which questions can reasonably structure the analysis of folk-music adaptations more generally. This procedure reduces the risk of treating a documented fact, a theoretical inference, and a practical recommendation as equivalent forms of evidence. The framework developed below is an interpretive guide, not a quantified scale or a claim that one arrangement has been experimentally shown to outperform another.

3.4. Scope of inference

Both selected cases belong to a portion of the Kinh folk-performance traditions of Thanh Hoa; they do not represent the entire musical heritage of the province's ethnically diverse population. Since performances vary across singers, occasions, and transmission settings, any judgement about a particular arrangement requires an explicitly identified source version. The analysis therefore examines continuity of relationships within documented practices, rather than assigning an ahistorical percentage of authenticity or a universal weight to every musical feature.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Ho song Ma: River-work rhythm and the lead-and-chorus relationship

Cao Xuan Hai (2018) identifies Ho song Ma as a form of folk vocal practice closely associated with river travel and work. The account distinguishes five principal chant types connected with successive circumstances of a river journey: departing a landing, travelling upstream, travelling downstream, a boat becoming stranded, and arriving at a landing. It also describes varied phrase structures, rhythmic flexibility, and the

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predominance of duple rhythmic organisation. The analytical significance is not simply the number or naming of the chant types. Rather, rhythm, physical labour, and collective coordination are interconnected: musical organisation historically participates in the work it accompanies.

Lead-and-chorus exchange establishes two related temporal roles. The lead singer may develop the words or a musical phrase, while the responding group repeats vocables or collective signals. Rhythm therefore functions not only as a measure of duration but also as a means of coordinating participation. Vi Minh Huy (2021) likewise identifies the lead-and-chorus relation as a recognisable feature when discussing the use of Ma River chant materials in newer compositions. Together, these sources support one crucial finding: the distribution of initiative and response is part of the performance identity, since a phrase initiated by one voice obtains its social and musical completion through group participation.

On a contemporary stage, adding instrumental accompaniment need not be the most consequential intervention. One possible arrangement gives the initiating part to a solo singer, the response to an audible group, and rhythmic support to instruments; this could retain a legible relationship between the roles. By contrast, placing the entire melodic material in a continuous solo line, even with similar pitch contours, would reorganise the response structure. This is an inference from the documented organisation of the practice, not a finding obtained from evaluating a particular stage production. A meaningful analytical question is therefore 'Who initiates, who responds, and how is their relationship heard?' before it is 'How many instruments have been added?'

Rhythmic flexibility constitutes a second major issue. A uniform beat can assist ensembles and choreography, but it may also obscure the contrasts between chant types originally associated with different phases of labour. Removing a recurring response to satisfy stage-duration requirements can alter more than surface timing when that response once acted as a collective cue. Analysis should therefore distinguish amplification or balance changes from adjustments to tempo, and both from the replacement of an interactional mechanism. These distinctions are central to assessing how a staged version relates to the source practice.

4.2. Ngu tro Vien Khe: Singing, movement, and dramatic sequence

Ngu tro Vien Khe, also associated with Dong Anh folk singing, was included in Vietnam's national inventory of intangible cultural heritage through Decision No. 3421/QD-BVHTTDL dated 11 September 2017. The decision identifies Dong Anh Commune, Dong Son District, Thanh Hoa Province using the administrative designations current at the time (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2017). From a musicological standpoint, the practice is better approached as an integrated complex of performance activities than as an anthology of autonomous melodies. Sung words may be connected with narration, bodily movement, dancing, dramatic characters, and customary sequences. These connections contribute to how the performance is recognised and understood.

Do Thi Thanh Nhan (2017) studies music in the traditional festival environments of the Thanh Hoa region through links among tunes, dramatic items, and ceremonial practice. Nguyen Dinh Thao and Do Thi Thanh Nhan (2024) examine the spatial and temporal organisation of festivals and the musical genres operating within them. These works support the proposition that festival music should not be detached analytically from its functions and sequences. In relation to Ngu tro Vien Khe, a segment may be performed independently on stage, but the segment should not be described as a complete enactment of an entire traditional performance sequence.

A further vocal dimension concerns the selection and development of melodic motifs. In his discussion of Dong Anh Lantern Dance materials, Vi Minh Huy (2021) identifies several singing segments and ornamented motifs that have been adapted in modern song composition. He uses a song centred on a moonlit domestic scene to illustrate compositional inheritance and transformation. The relevance of this analysis is a boundary between two different claims: a recognisable ornament or melodic contour may establish a compositional reference, but it does not establish that the movement, dramatic roles, and procedural sequence surrounding the original segment have also been preserved.

Two artistic intentions should accordingly be separated. If a newly created item is intended to introduce a Dong Anh melodic gesture or text, abbreviating and developing the material may be appropriate, provided that its status as an adaptation or new composition is disclosed. If the intention is to present one of the Ngu tro Vien Khe dramatic items as a heritage practice, singing, gesture, role, and sequence require integrated consideration. In the latter setting, the vocal polish of the stage performers cannot substitute for the coherence of the dramatic organisation and the associated cultural meaning.

4.3. Contrasting the performance anchors of the two cases

The cases demonstrate that different traditions require different forms of continuity. Ho song Ma is characterised especially by coordination between a leader and a group in the temporal organisation of river work. Ngu tro Vien Khe foregrounds the relationship of song, action, and the meanings attached to dramatic items. Both employ melody, language, and vocal conventions, but the relative significance of these elements for recognisability may differ. It follows that maintaining a tune is not necessarily sufficient to safeguard a practice, just as reproducing every visual feature of a historical staging is not a universal requirement.

Table 1. Identity anchors in the two selected traditions

Dimension	Ho song Ma	Ngu tro Vien Khe
Performance unit	Chant types associated with stages of a river journey and river-related work	Dramatic performance items combining singing, movement, and action
Vocal organisation	Initiating singer and responding chorus; collective rhythmic participation	Vocal roles coordinated with characters, gesture, and dramatic development
Identity anchors	Lead-and-chorus organisation, response vocables, and rhythms linked to work	Connections among text, gesture, dramatic imagery, and ordered performance sequence

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Dimension	Ho song Ma	Ngu tro Vien Khe
Adaptation risks	Replacing responsive singing with a continuous solo or flattening differences among rhythms	Extracting melody from dramatic roles or presenting a segment as if it were the whole traditional practice

Source: Comparative synthesis of Cao Xuan Hai (2018), Do Thi Thanh Nhan (2017), Vi Minh Huy (2021), and Nguyen Dinh Thao and Do Thi Thanh Nhan (2024).

The comparison also clarifies an often-neglected relationship: vocal technique is not independent of the design of musical action. Breath distribution, sustained tones, and adjustments to resonance are appropriate only insofar as they serve the phrase, role allocation, and expressive aims of the tradition being performed. Rather than asking only how modern singing techniques may be inserted into folk music, the more productive question is which technical choices are demanded by the source practice and how far those choices can be adapted. This reframes the problem from processing a musical resource to understanding a performance configuration.

4.4. Three interrelated continuities of identity

The theoretical discussion and case comparison lead to a three-part model of continuity. These are simultaneous sets of relationships rather than hierarchically ranked layers. The first is sonic-linguistic continuity: melodic and rhythmic structures, vocables, articulation, phrase endings, and characteristic ornamentation. The second is interactive-embodied continuity: initiating and responding roles, performer positions, dramatic action, bodily movement, and the sequence of events. The third is contextual-community continuity: provenance, cultural functions, heritage bearers, and established forms of transmission.

These continuities interact. Shortening a response vocable, for example, can alter interactive continuity if the vocable functions as the group's reply. Recasting responding singers as a fixed background chorus can change the social meaning of collective music-making. Conversely, moving a performance from a riverbank to a theatre does not necessarily dissolve every relationship with the tradition if the organisation of voices is thoughtfully retained and the changed context is explained. The model is therefore intended to describe transformations of relationships, not to calculate the proportion of notes that remain unchanged.

This approach helps resolve a recurring tension in performance-based safeguarding. Adaptation to stage conventions may make a work easier to circulate, while increasing the need to explain which source practice the new product represents. Reach and continuity need not be opposing outcomes, but they are different outcomes. A widely viewed arrangement may raise recognition of a folk genre; sustained competence within the community depends on additional arrangements for learning, participation, and intergenerational transmission that audience metrics cannot capture.

4.5. Three categories of artistic intervention

The three continuities support a distinction among three relationships between source practice and a new performance product. The first is technically supported traditional performance: amplification, lighting, and audiovisual documentation facilitate listening and viewing while basic vocal roles, phrase organisation, and sequence remain primarily determined by practitioners. The second is staged adaptation: duration, instrumentation, spatial arrangement, and the organisation of parts may be modified, with retained and transformed elements identified. The third is a newly composed work inspired by folk materials: a composer develops motifs, lyrics, or cultural images according to the internal design of another work and acknowledges the source of inspiration.

These categories do not constitute a ranking of artistic merit or degrees of modernity. The same harmonic technique might support one performance without altering its social organisation and play a more constitutive role in a staged adaptation. Classification turns on what the product claims to present and which relationships it changes, not on the number of accompanying instruments or the size of the stage. A new song based on a Dong Anh Lantern Dance motif may be assessed as a composition, but its label should not obscure the name or cultural status of the source practice. This is a question of analytical classification and responsible attribution, not aesthetic superiority.

Three pieces of information should, at minimum, accompany a product intended to reference a folk tradition: the documented version or community practice used as the source; the elements retained, modified, or newly created; and the identity of the product as a practice-based performance, a stage adaptation, or a derivative composition. These requirements do not prescribe one stage formula. They enable sources to be traced and support dialogue among performers, arrangers, teachers, learners, and heritage communities.

4.6. A five-dimensional framework for examining adaptations

Drawing on Thanh Hoa musicological studies, Turino's (2008) distinction between performance organisations, the living-heritage approach (UNESCO, 2003, 2015), and interdisciplinary evidence regarding memory and community feedback (Phuong & Lam, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2026), the article proposes five analytical dimensions (Table 2). Cross-disciplinary research informs primarily the contextual and community dimensions; musical organisation, rhythm, singing style, and interactive action must still be examined through relevant musical sources. Each dimension is investigated by comparing the identified reference practice with the proposed or existing arrangement rather than assigning a subjective authenticity score.

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Table 2. Five-dimensional framework for analysing staged adaptations

Dimension	Analytical question	Source evidence and reporting requirement
Musical and rhythmic organisation	Which motifs, vocables, pulses, and phrase endings belong to the source version?	Identify recordings, transcriptions, or relevant studies; document alterations to instrumental arrangement and rhythmic organisation
Voice and sung text	How are articulation, ornamentation, vocal production, and inherited lyrics treated?	Distinguish technical support from changes of style; identify altered or newly written words
Interaction and embodiment	Are initiating-responding roles, dramatic functions, and physical actions retained?	Describe changes, omissions, or additions to vocal roles and dramatic sequence
Context and meaning	How are provenance, function, and the status of a performed excerpt communicated?	Name the source tradition, describe the adapted status of the product, and explain the source setting
Community and transmission	What role do practitioners and communities have in identifying, interpreting, and transmitting the source?	Record attribution, contributions, usage conditions, and the forms of transmission supported

Source: Authorial synthesis of the musicological, performance-theory, and heritage sources cited in the text.

The dimensions do not carry equal importance in every genre. For Ho song Ma, call-and-response and rhythmic coordination are prominent; for Ngu tro Vien Khe, connections among sung text, role, and movement may be at least as important as melodic contour. Application therefore proceeds in three steps: identify the source practice and its documented version; describe interventions along each dimension; and explain their implications for recognition and continuity. The result is an evidence-informed, contestable interpretation-not a percentage score purporting to measure 'preserved identity'.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Between expressive innovation and the substitution of heritage practices

The analysis indicates that changes in presentation do not necessarily amount to changes in identity, while a seemingly minor alteration in sound may have major consequences for performance relationships. Replacing a microphone or relocating a cast mainly affects the conditions of listening and viewing. Removing the chorus response from Ho song Ma, or reorganising the sequence of actions in Ngu tro Vien Khe, can alter how the practice itself is recognisable. The assessment of adaptation should therefore emphasise the kinds of relationships transformed rather than the apparent modernity of stage technology or instrumentation.

Two theoretical extremes should be avoided. The first treats every change as a loss of identity, an interpretation inconsistent with the continual recreation of living heritage. The second treats every use of folk material as safeguarding, thereby conflating new composition, staged presentation, and the transmission of a community practice. The middle position developed here identifies what kind of product is being presented and what it actually continues. Transparency about transformation does not curtail artistic creativity; it allows new work to be recognised for its own contribution while leaving the source tradition clearly visible.

Identity should thus be considered contextually. When communities maintain multiple variants, differences between versions cannot automatically be judged as errors. Performance production may select one or more traceable sources, explain the interpretive choices involved, and avoid claiming that one arrangement is binding on an entire community. This is consistent with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2004) analysis of heritage presentation as mediation and with UNESCO's (2015) principles concerning respect for the agency of practitioners.

5.2. Implications for vocal training and teaching materials

In vocal training, integrating folk music should mean more than adding several folk-inspired songs to a conventional sequence of voice exercises. A course unit can instead be organised around a specific performance practice: identification of sources, listening and observation, analysis of text-rhythm-vocable relationships, rehearsal of social and dramatic roles, and only then a documented adaptation. With Ho song Ma, learners should experience both the initiating and responding parts and examine how rhythmic organisation relates to coordination. With Ngu tro Vien Khe, learning to sing should be connected with movement and the dramatic sequence rather than restricted to pitch accuracy.

Campbell (2004) approaches global music education through experience and cultural context, whereas Green (2008) demonstrates the pedagogical importance of listening, imitation, and collaborative informal learning. Although neither work directly investigates Thanh Hoa singing, both help articulate a pedagogy in which classroom technique is connected with socially situated musical practice. Vocal exercises should support reliable production and control; stylistic articulation, responsive interaction, and the meanings of sung language require engagement with source documentation and practitioners knowledgeable about the tradition.

The safeguarding of folk-music heritage through the Kodály concept, included by UNESCO in its Register of Good Safeguarding Practices in 2016, illustrates connections among research, education, documentation, composition, and community musical activity (UNESCO, 2016). The implication for Thanh Hoa is not to copy this model unchanged, but to coordinate activities around continued transmission. A teaching archive should accordingly identify versions, singers, recording circumstances, lyrics, dramatic content, and conditions of use. Phuong (2026) also

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discusses metadata and ethical responsibilities in the digital preservation of Vietnamese heritage, considerations directly relevant to the traceability and responsible circulation of music-learning resources.

5.3. Implications for staging and safeguarding governance

For performance organisations, the study suggests a source-to-product sequence rather than the reverse process of designing a complete stage item and adding folk elements afterwards. First, define the item's purpose and the claims made about its cultural status. Second, select traceable source materials and describe the meaningful musical and interactional relationships. Third, arrange the instrumentation, vocal roles, and words, recording the interventions made. Fourth, discuss attribution, meaning, and explanatory notes with people knowledgeable about the source practice. Such a procedure makes artistic decisions open to informed discussion without prescribing a uniform stage style.

Research by Ha et al. (2026) and Nguyen and Nguyen (2026) suggests that reliable interpretation and engaging heritage storytelling are related but distinct tasks. A programme using Ho song Ma, for example, could explain the initiating and responding roles and the connection between chant and river work before presenting a staged version, then identify the elements modified for the stage. Likewise, a presentation of a Ngu tro Vien Khe excerpt should identify the relevant dramatic item and clarify which components of its original sequence are omitted. These examples are proposed applications derived from documentary analysis, not observations of a particular evaluated concert.

Community participation is relevant to the selection of materials, teaching, use of recordings, and public explanation, not only to the performance itself. UNESCO's ethical principles (2015) support transparent attribution, informed consultation, and recognition of cultural agency. Where an adaptation employs a specific tune or passage, identifying the tradition, transmission source, contributors, and newly composed elements helps articulate responsibility. This becomes especially important online, where an extracted sound clip may circulate without the original programme note.

Community feedback can provide an additional layer of accountability. Phuong and Lam (2025) highlight its relevance in heritage communication, while Nguyen (2025) and Vu and Nguyen (2026) incorporate residents' participation, memory, and conservation awareness into cultural-tourism analyses. For folk-music production, a cautious application is to establish post-performance feedback channels, maintain source records, disclose differences between the reference and adapted versions, and invite heritage practitioners to advise on representation. These practices are intended to strengthen interpretive responsibility and opportunities for transmission. Their direct effects on singing quality or safeguarding outcomes cannot be presumed from evidence obtained in different heritage sectors.

Safeguarding evaluation should also distinguish audience reach from the continuation of musical practice. View counts, concert attendance, and circulation of recordings can indicate public visibility, but not whether singing skills are passed on, practitioners remain active, source records are reliable, or younger members can participate. Living-heritage approaches therefore require attention to the social conditions under which people can continue to sing, perform, and transmit their own musical knowledge (UNESCO, 2003).

Studies from other heritage sectors add organisational comparisons but require clear limits on inference. Hung and Tuyen (2026) analyse the conservation of marine cultural heritage in relation to tourism development in Thanh Hoa, including community participation and governance conditions. Pham et al. (2025) discuss the use of traditional brocade-weaving values in distinctive tourism development in northern mountainous Vietnam, drawing attention to cultural values and local relationships. Neither study concerns the musical structures of Ho song Ma or Ngu tro Vien Khe. Their useful common question lies at the governance level: does presenting a traditional value create conditions for communities to continue practising and to influence its interpretation? Findings about tourism or textile crafts cannot determine vocal techniques, harmonisation, or staging procedures for a particular folk tradition.

6. CONCLUSION

Integrating traditional vocal art with contemporary performance should be understood as transforming a configuration of musical and social relationships, rather than simply blending singing techniques or instrumentation. For Ho song Ma, the relationship between river-work contexts, rhythmic organisation, and initiating-responding roles provides particularly important anchors of recognition. For Ngu tro Vien Khe, singing, movement, and the sequence of dramatic activity form a closely connected whole. These contrasts call for case-sensitive adaptations, not one standardised solution for every folk genre.

The article's conceptual contribution is a model of three interrelated continuities-sonic-linguistic, interactive-embodied, and contextual-community-together with a distinction among technically supported practice, staged adaptation, and newly composed folk-inspired work. A five-dimensional interpretive framework is proposed for examining which characteristics are continued and which transformations require explanation. Its value lies in organising accountable, source-based musical interpretation instead of inferring authenticity from a single sonic resemblance or from an unsupported numerical score.

In practical terms, vocal education, artistic production, and documentary management can contribute to safeguarding when they attend jointly to provenance, interpretation, and community agency. Contemporary performance is not inherently opposed to tradition: it can broaden the public life of folk materials when the product is properly identified, the adaptation is responsibly explained, and new forms of presentation remain connected with the communities and conditions through which the source practice continues.

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Corresponding Author: LE MAI LY