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Developing Vocal Skills Through Coastal Folk Song Traditions in Central Vietnam

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ABSTRACT:
Background: Coastal folk singing in Central Vietnam brings together vocal phrasing, diction, rhythmic coordination, leader-chorus exchange, and culturally situated expression. Its potential for university vocal education cannot be understood by treating songs as isolated melodies or assuming one technique applies across local traditions. Objective: This article identifies pedagogically relevant vocal competencies within selected coastal performance practices and develops a framework for their responsible use in higher music education. Methods: An interpretive documentary review compares accounts of coastal work singing in Quang Binh, the Ho Cheo Can tradition of Canh Duong, and Ba Trao performances associated with fishing communities in Quang Nam and Khanh Hoa. These accounts are read alongside singing science, music learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and intangible-heritage scholarship. Results: The synthesis identifies four linked competency areas: breath-voice coordination; diction and ornamentation; listening and collective response; and context-sensitive expression. It proposes the SONG cycle: Source inquiry and listening, Oriented vocal practice, Negotiated ensemble enactment, and Guided review and revision. Conclusion: Coastal repertoires can inform distinctive vocal learning tasks when their provenance, variation, and social functions remain visible. SONG is a conceptual pedagogical framework, not a tested intervention; its feasibility and educational effects require further evaluation.

KEYWORDS: vocal skills, coastal folk music, Central Vietnam, Ho Cheo Can, Ba Trao, culturally responsive music education, intangible cultural heritage, SONG framework

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese folk singing has developed within diverse occupations, communal relationships, languages, and ritual settings. Along the central coastline, work calls, responsive chants, and ceremonial performances may organise labour, invoke safety at sea, or express collective belonging. Their musical meanings are inseparable from questions of who initiates a phrase, who responds, how participants coordinate movement, and why a particular text is sung. Learning such a repertoire therefore involves more than matching pitches and durations. It also involves listening to the interactional and cultural conditions in which the voice acquires its function (Nettl, 2015; UNESCO, 2003).

University vocal education commonly addresses respiration, phonation, resonance, articulation, register coordination, and repertoire interpretation. These resources can support the learning of unfamiliar material, but technical proficiency alone does not establish stylistic understanding. A student may reproduce a melody accurately while flattening a responsive rhythmic pattern, shifting the linguistic emphasis of a local text, or presenting a ceremonial excerpt as if it were an autonomous concert song. Conversely, copying a single recording need not produce understanding of the choices, variations, and social responsibilities of traditional practitioners. The pedagogical problem is the transfer of general vocal coordination into a culturally specific performance task.

Published descriptions offer three contrasting points of reference. Accounts of Quang Binh coastal singing situate songs within the working and communal life of fishing villages (Nhan Dan, 2024). At Canh Duong, Ho Cheo Can includes differentiated chant types and a combination of leading and collective responses, embedded in the locality's fishing-related practices (Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, 2017). In Hoi An and other south-central coastal communities, Ba Trao combines singing, narrated and dramatic elements, simulated rowing, defined roles, and observances associated with the Cau Ngu fishing festival (Hoi An Cultural Heritage Portal, 2024; Vinh Phuc, 2023). These are connected coastal traditions, not instances of one interchangeable vocal style.

Ethnomusicological work places musical form in relation to social practice (Nettl, 2015; Small, 1998), while culturally responsive music education highlights the need to account for language, community knowledge, and performance convention (Shaw, 2012; Allan, 2022). Such perspectives complicate a narrowly technical approach. An educational excerpt must be sufficiently focused to teach, yet adequately situated to avoid a misleading account of its source. The challenge is not to reproduce every traditional practice within a classroom but to distinguish legitimate skill development from claims of faithfully reconstructing an entire living tradition.

Three research questions guide the article. RQ1: Which vocal and expressive characteristics of selected central-coastal traditions can be translated into teachable competencies? RQ2: What tensions arise between technical standardisation, local stylistic difference, student agency, and culturally responsible performance? RQ3: How can source inquiry, focused practice, ensemble interaction, and assessment form a coherent teaching process? The contribution is an explicit pedagogical architecture rather than a claim of measured gains in singing performance.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Vocal coordination and musical purpose

Singing depends on coordinated respiration, phonation, resonance, articulation, and auditory regulation. Sundberg (1987) examines the relationship between vocal production and the acoustic result, while Titze (2006) explains the physical rationale for selected semi-occluded vocal-tract tasks. These studies support informed technical diagnosis; they do not establish a single desirable timbre, loudness, or registration strategy for every folk tradition. The technical requirement of a phrase must be understood in relation to the singer's capabilities and to the intended musical and linguistic effect.

For coastal vocal material, breath distribution may enable a clear leader's call; consonant timing may affect the intelligibility of a response; and changes of intensity may serve collective timing rather than solo display. A teacher can isolate these demands without claiming that an observed village singer uses a particular anatomical mechanism. The relevant distinction is between a documented feature of performance and a proposed exercise that might help a student approach it. Where acoustic measurements or close analyses of recordings are unavailable, technical interpretations must remain provisional.

Expressive performance likewise involves more than volume or emotional exaggeration. Juslin (2003) describes relationships among musical structure, emotional communication, and expressive choices. In a sung oral tradition, phrasing, timing, timbre, pauses, and text accentuation can signal narrative and relational meaning. The educational aim is to help students explain why an audible choice serves a given phrase, not to prescribe a universal emotional formula.

2.2. Listening, deliberate practice, and feedback

Informal music learning often depends on listening, imitation, experimentation, and participation with others (Green, 2002). Such practices are particularly pertinent to orally transmitted singing because staff notation may not capture flexible timing, regional pronunciation, vocal colour, and response cues. Nevertheless, imitation should not become unexamined replication. When multiple source performances are available, students can compare their differences, identify a feature they intend to practise, and explain the reasons for adapting rather than copying it.

Ericsson et al. (1993) conceptualise deliberate practice as focused work on a defined problem, supported by informative feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) distinguish actionable information from undifferentiated praise or criticism. Applied to coastal singing, saying that a student lacks a 'sea-song character' provides little corrective guidance. Identifying a delayed chorus entrance, a breath taken across a meaningful word group, or an ornamental figure that obscures the text creates a testable next task. The objective is not merely longer repetition but a cycle of diagnosis, trial, evidence, and adjustment.

This approach must also respect limits in the materials used for feedback. A phone recording may reveal a late entrance yet distort vocal balance, spectral colour, and apparent intensity. Technical commentary should compare listening evidence with teacher observation and, where feasible, the interpretation of practitioners who know the relevant local tradition. Assessment becomes more defensible when it makes the grounds of judgement visible rather than substituting a generic score for a culturally complex performance.

2.3. Coastal singing as participatory and ritual heritage

The UNESCO (2003) Convention defines intangible cultural heritage through practices and knowledge recognised and continuously recreated by communities. UNESCO (n.d.) also describes transmission as a continuing social process. Its emphasis on transmission means that a living singing tradition is not reducible to a score or audio file. Small (1998) treats musical participation as a set of relationships, and Turino (2008) distinguishes participation-oriented music-making from presentations structured primarily for audiences. These perspectives are useful when a classroom converts a work chant or a ritual excerpt into a stage assignment: the roles and purposes of participation may change even if the melody remains recognisable.

Published accounts of Canh Duong describe responsive chanting and parts linked to local fishing culture, whereas documentation from Hoi An describes Ba Trao's distinct roles, collective formations, and combined singing and movement (Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, 2017; Hoi An Cultural Heritage Portal, 2024). Vinh Phuc (2023) also discusses the regional diversity of Ba Trao. The descriptions provide contextual and structural evidence, but they do not supply a comparable corpus of acoustic recordings that could substantiate a universal vocal-technical profile. Education should therefore begin from identified versions rather than a presumed standard song for the entire coastline.

Community interpretation also matters beyond the immediate singing lesson. Phuong and Lam (2025) demonstrate the analytical importance of community feedback in heritage communication in Hanoi, while Vu and Nguyen (2026) examine associations among heritage memory, identity, and community engagement within Vietnamese cultural tourism. Neither study tests a vocal-training method. They nevertheless support a bounded consideration: decisions about attribution and presentation should not be based only on what an institution finds musically attractive. The views of heritage bearers are relevant to determining what a classroom excerpt represents and what it omits.

2.4. Authenticity, documentation, and culturally responsive teaching

Allan (2022) discusses two recurrent challenges in teaching songs across languages and cultures: linguistic barriers and the tension between musical authenticity and achievable instructional goals. Shaw (2012) similarly argues for attention to cultural context within choral teaching. These arguments make two opposing errors visible. Rigid imitation can deny students interpretive agency, while unrestricted stylistic modification can erase the very feature that motivated the inclusion of the repertoire. The instructional response is to separate source-informed performance, explicitly adapted study material, and newly created work influenced by a tradition.

Documentation can improve source traceability without substituting for community transmission. Phuong (2026) identifies opportunities and limitations of digitising Vietnamese cultural heritage, including metadata, access, resources, and ethical issues. For vocal education, a useful recording record would state the performer, locality, event, date where known, permission status, and subsequent classroom alterations. Such metadata supports accountability, but it does not itself establish the cultural appropriateness of reproducing a particular ceremonial segment. Direct exchange with informed practitioners remains important where an exercise or public presentation may affect contextual meaning.

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3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design

This article uses a purposive interpretive review and a comparative pedagogical synthesis. The analytical unit is a vocal-learning task: a clearly defined activity through which students can work on a skill derived from a documented performance feature. The method is appropriate to questions about conceptual relationships, repertoire selection, and course design. It is not a systematic review, ethnographic field study, or intervention evaluation.

3.2. Materials and selection principles

Three source clusters were examined: published accounts of Quang Binh coastal singing; descriptions of Ho Cheo Can at Canh Duong; and reports concerning Ba Trao in Hoi An, Quang Nam, and south-central coastal areas including Khanh Hoa. They were selected to provide contrasts among work-linked singing, leader-chorus interaction, and ritualised ensemble performance. The geographic labels follow the cited source descriptions and do not imply a current administrative classification or coverage of every provincial tradition.

Disciplinary literature was selected for a defined analytical role: voice science for functional coordination; music-education research for listening and feedback; ethnomusicology for context and participation; and UNESCO-based heritage scholarship for transmission and community authority. Complementary Vietnamese studies inform the discussion of digital provenance, community feedback, and heritage identity (Phuong, 2026; Phuong & Lam, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2026). Because these studies investigate heritage preservation and communication rather than vocal instruction, their relevance is confined to the social and documentation conditions of repertoire-based teaching.

3.3. Procedure and evidentiary limits

The synthesis followed four stages. First, each coastal source was examined for its stated performance setting, participant roles, musical interaction, and limitations. Second, potential vocal-learning targets were mapped to four categories: breath-voice coordination; diction and ornamentation; listening and response; and context-sensitive expression. Third, the categories were compared with the learning and heritage literature to identify conflicts between technical control and cultural specificity. Fourth, the relationships were organised into a four-stage learning cycle and translated into tasks, records, and review criteria.

The source base was purposive, not exhaustive. No performance recordings were newly collected or systematically coded, and the study involved no direct observation, interviews with bearers, acoustic measurements, student sample, or teaching trial. Consequently, statements describing cultural practices come from the cited documentary accounts; skill classifications are the author's interpretive synthesis; and exercises and assessment indicators are proposals for future evaluation. No inter-rater agreement, effectiveness estimate, or causal effect is claimed.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Three contrasting coastal repertoires

The comparative reading identifies different teaching opportunities rather than a shared 'coastal vocal technique'. Quang Binh work-related singing provides a context in which phrase placement, verbal clarity, and the relationship between calls and working activity can be examined. Descriptions do not provide enough consistent recorded examples to identify particular vowel targets, voice registers, or vocal load requirements. Accordingly, listening analysis and source interpretation are more securely justified than prescriptive acoustic imitation (Nhan Dan, 2024).

At Canh Duong, the interdependence of initiating calls and group responses makes audible timing a central instructional question. Students might isolate an entrance cue, practise a short leader phrase, and test whether the group can answer with coordinated timing while preserving the source text's stress pattern. This is a proposed educational adaptation; it is not evidence that participants in the original tradition used a standard classroom exercise sequence. Descriptions of Ho Cheo Can and the fishing festival situate these interactions within broader ceremonial and communal practices (Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, 2017).

Ba Trao offers a different challenge: singing occurs in an integrated event involving named roles, movement simulating rowing, and ritual narrative. The relationship between a leading voice, the collective group, gesture, and stage or ceremonial space can reveal weaknesses that remain hidden during solo vocal practice. Yet a classroom excerpt cannot claim to reconstruct the full rite. A selected passage needs an explicit description of its provenance, removed elements, and pedagogical purpose (Da Nang Arts and Letters, 2009; Hoi An Cultural Heritage Portal, 2024; Vinh Phuc, 2023).

Table 1. Documented coastal practices and potential vocal-learning tasks

Tradition / location	Documented performance features	Possible classroom task	Evidence boundary
Coastal work singing, Quang Binh	Singing associated with fishing work and village occasions; local transmission	Compare phrasing, text stress, and entry patterns in identified recordings	Descriptions alone do not establish acoustic technique
Ho Cheo Can, Canh Duong	Multiple chant types; a leading call and chorus response; rhythmically energetic segments	Practise short calls, cue recognition, breath placement, and responsive timing	The selected excerpt is not the entire local performance
Ba Trao, Quang Nam and south-central coast	Singing, narrated passages, role allocation, simulated rowing, and ritual context	Coordinate group listening, clear diction, movement, and narrative intent	Versions and ceremonial conventions vary by locality

Source: Author's comparison of Nhan Dan (2024), Vietnam National Authority of Tourism (2017), Da Nang Arts and Letters (2009), and Hoi An Cultural Heritage Portal (2024).

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4.2. Four transferable competency areas

The first competency is breath-voice coordination. Students need to distribute breath across a meaningful utterance, produce a sufficiently clear entry, and sustain the phrase without avoidable strain. Exercises can move from speech rhythm to short pitched calls, then to complete phrases. Breath capacity is not an end in itself: a longer sustained note is useful only when it serves the chosen repertoire and remains repeatable with an appropriate level of effort (Sundberg, 1987; Titze, 2006).

The second competency is diction and ornamentation. Students can analyse text segmentation, regional pronunciation, onset timing, vowel duration, and the placement of audible bends or embellishments. A useful exercise compares a documented source with a simplified classroom attempt, asking which details are essential for intelligibility and which are contingent on the singer or situation. Embellishment should be justified by a specific version, not added merely to create an impression of 'folk style'.

The third competency is listening and collective response. Leader-chorus work requires students to identify the initiation cue, match a responsive rhythm, and adjust to other singers without losing their own phrase. Rotating leader and chorus roles can reveal whether students understand an interaction rather than memorise one part. The fourth is context-sensitive expression: phrasing, intensity, narrative intention, and movement should be explainable in relation to the source event and the adaptation's purpose. The four areas are interdependent and should not be treated as separate, finished blocks of training.

Table 2. Competency domains, learning tasks, and review evidence

Competency	Proposed learning activity	Observable evidence
Breath-voice coordination	Map phrase groups; alternate paced speech and pitched calls; test manageable phrase lengths	Breath placement respects sense; entry is clear and repeatable
Diction and ornamentation	Annotate text and local pronunciation; compare a source phrase with two recorded attempts	Words remain intelligible; variation is identified and explained
Listening and response	Rotate leader and chorus roles; rehearse cue timing and short response patterns	Accurate entrance; rhythmic continuity; attentive ensemble adjustment
Context-sensitive expression	Discuss song function; test delivery choices with and without staging	Intensity, tempo, and gesture can be justified against the chosen source

Source: Author's interpretive synthesis; suggested activities are not experimentally evaluated.

4.3. Four tensions in pedagogical transfer

The first tension is technical consistency versus local vocal difference. General exercises can improve stability, but a uniform, polished classroom tone may conceal productive variations in speech accent, timbre, and phrase timing. Review criteria should therefore ask whether a choice is purposeful, feasible, and source-informed, not whether all students produce an identical sound. The second tension concerns short excerpt practice versus the integrity of a larger performance sequence. A teachable passage can lose its function when its responsive or ritual context is omitted.

The third tension is interpretation versus appropriation. Creative comparison can help students make informed artistic choices, but a new arrangement should not be described as an unchanged community version. Attribution, identification of omissions, and permission for recording or public use are therefore elements of responsible course design (UNESCO, 2003; Allan, 2022). The fourth tension is individual assessment versus group interaction. A solo test may fail to show a student's capacity to cue, listen, and respond; conversely, a successful ensemble can conceal an individual's unstable preparation. Both individual and collective evidence are needed.

These tensions suggest a practical sequence: source listening establishes a reference; focused work targets a documented difficulty; group enactment tests transfer; and evaluation distinguishes a technical error, an intentional stylistic variant, and a recording or rehearsal condition. A teacher should not assume that every vocal problem arises from inadequate emotional commitment. For instance, a delayed response could reflect uncertainty about the leader's cue rather than weak pitch control; fatigue when singing with movement could call for reducing task demands rather than urging greater volume.

4.4. The proposed SONG teaching cycle

The synthesis yields the SONG cycle: S, Source inquiry and attentive listening; O, Oriented vocal practice; N, Negotiated ensemble enactment; and G, Guided review and revision. 'Source inquiry' records who performed the material, where and why it was sung, and which particular rendition guides the exercise. 'Oriented vocal practice' identifies one teachable technical target connected to the text, phrase, or response. 'Negotiated ensemble enactment' brings the target into a shared musical situation with roles, cues, and appropriately described movement. 'Guided review' uses recordings, teacher commentary, peer observation, and where feasible feedback from knowledgeable practitioners to determine the next task.

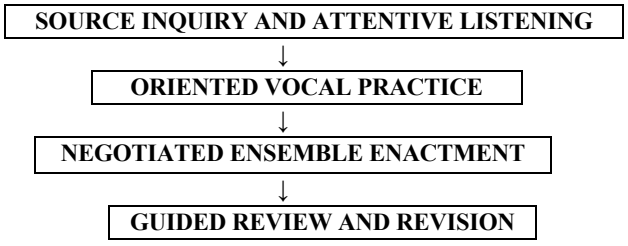


Figure 1. The iterative SONG pedagogical cycle

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Re-evaluation returns the learner to source listening and targeted practice.

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis of the reviewed literature.

SONG is a revisable cycle, not a hierarchy of achievement. A group recording that exposes inaccurate response timing may return students to source listening and cue recognition. A technically secure passage that suppresses local stress patterns may prompt a revision of the exercise rather than further repetition. A staged excerpt that appears musically coherent but misrepresents the sequence of a ceremony may need a different contextual explanation or a different choice of material. Such revision treats cultural understanding as part of musical competence rather than as supplementary information.

Table 3. Guiding questions and learning evidence in the SONG cycle

SONG element	Guiding question	Minimum learning evidence
S - Source inquiry and listening	Who performs this version, where, and in what situation?	Source record, listening notes, performer-role map
O - Oriented vocal practice	Which technical adjustment serves the text, phrase, and cue?	Focused exercise, comparison recording, effort note
N - Negotiated ensemble enactment	Can the phrase work with responsive partners and movement?	Group video, role and timing feedback, context annotation
G - Guided review and revision	What changed, which evidence supports it, and what follows?	Reflection log, revised take, specialist feedback where available

Source: Author's proposed pedagogical framework.

An illustrative eight-session module might allocate two meetings to source enquiry and comparison, three to text, breath, and responsive singing, two to ensemble integration and recorded review, and one to an excerpt performance followed by reflection. This is an example of instructional planning, not a timetable used in a documented course. Its suitability depends on learners' prior training, the quality and permitted uses of recordings, and access to informed local practitioners.

4.5. Learning evidence and assessment

A selective learning portfolio can include a source record, a baseline phrase recording, a brief log of a targeted technical problem, an ensemble interaction video, a revised version, and a short explanation of interpretive decisions. Each item should respond to a question about learning rather than add administrative work for its own sake. Recordings should be interpreted alongside their technical limitations, including microphone position, background sound, and the presence or absence of other singers.

Four descriptive assessment dimensions follow from the synthesis: dependable voice coordination within a phrase; intelligible and source-sensitive diction and ornamentation; accurate listening and role-based response; and contextual understanding combined with the capacity to revise. A four-level scale ranging from 'requires support' to 'applies flexibly' could be developed with observable anchors, but neither numerical weights nor universal standards are justified by the present evidence. Testing would be needed to determine whether teachers and heritage practitioners interpret the descriptors consistently.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Developing situated vocal competence

The pedagogical contribution is to connect a specific vocal action with a meaningful musical and social purpose. A learner distributes breath to finish a leader's call; articulates text so that a group understands its cue; listens in order to enter a response; and chooses intensity and gesture in relation to narrative and setting. These activities can support conventional technical goals while preventing the local repertoire from becoming a decorative addition to a generic vocal curriculum.

Deliberate practice helps explain how a problem can be isolated and corrected (Ericsson et al., 1993), while ethnomusicological perspectives clarify why performance interaction remains part of the object being learned (Small, 1998; Turino, 2008). A classroom that turns leader-chorus material into uniform unison singing might strengthen intonation but lose the responsive musicianship for which that source was selected. This is a design concern, not evidence that one approach has already produced better results.

5.2. Cultural specificity and boundaries of transfer

A task suitable for Canh Duong Ho Cheo Can cannot simply be transferred, unchanged, to Hoi An Ba Trao or every Quang Binh coastal song. These practices differ in event structure, participant responsibilities, movement, and the extent to which singing forms part of a ritual. Vinh Phuc (2023) documents the regional variation of Ba Trao; that variability makes the use of identified versions central to teaching. Comparative learning should therefore start with a specific source and expand to other cases only after students can describe the differences.

A university module also needs to distinguish learning from a heritage practice from training to perform an entire traditional ceremony. An excerpt may be appropriate for teaching responsive singing without constituting a complete Cau Ngu rite. A public presentation should make clear whether the result is a documented excerpt, a student adaptation, or a new work drawing inspiration from coastal tradition. This distinction protects both artistic exploration and the accuracy of cultural representation (UNESCO, 2003; Allan, 2022).

5.3. Institutional and community implications

A practicable teaching collection would combine audio or video with traceable source metadata, annotated lyrics, notes on local pronunciation, descriptions of role distribution, and clearly limited exercises. Collaboration among vocal lecturers, ethnomusicologists, and community practitioners can help address different aspects of the material. Practitioners' judgements regarding wording, sequence, and appropriateness should

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not automatically be replaced by a teacher's preference for vocal polish. A consultation process is particularly important when the proposed excerpt has ritual significance.

The three additional Vietnamese heritage studies clarify complementary issues rather than establishing vocal-training outcomes. Phuong (2026) provides a rationale for preserving provenance and considering the limitations of digitisation; Phuong and Lam (2025) demonstrate the value of feedback from local communities in a separate heritage-communication context; and Vu and Nguyen (2026) situate heritage identity and participation within wider social relationships. Their findings cannot be directly generalised to coastal singing students. Their bounded contribution here is to support the documentation, attribution, and community-review components of a teaching design.

5.4. Limitations and future inquiry

The source documents vary in descriptive detail. Accounts of coastal work singing offer limited evidence about vocal acoustics; descriptions of Canh Duong and Ba Trao more often specify roles, movements, and ceremonial setting than measurable vocal processes. This article did not examine a systematically sampled audio corpus, conduct field observation, interview performers, or run an instructional trial. It therefore cannot identify a definitive production technique for any local tradition or establish that SONG improves student performance.

Further inquiry can begin with recordings whose use has been agreed with relevant practitioners and whose source context is documented. Expert review could assess whether learning objectives represent the selected material fairly. A pilot course could then examine the clarity of cues, text intelligibility, transfer from solo practice to response, and students' ability to justify interpretive decisions. Any pre-post comparison would require transparent sampling, stable recording conditions, assessor training, and analysis of agreement between teachers and informed community reviewers. None of these prospective measurements should be confused with a measure of heritage safeguarding within the community.

6. CONCLUSION

Coastal folk singing in Central Vietnam provides varied, culturally situated opportunities for developing vocal skills. Work-linked singing in Quang Binh, Ho Cheo Can at Canh Duong, and Ba Trao in Quang Nam and neighbouring south-central communities draw attention to different combinations of phrase organisation, leader-chorus timing, ceremonial narrative, and collective enactment. The synthesis organises possible learning outcomes into four domains: breath-voice coordination; diction and ornamentation; listening and response; and context-sensitive artistic expression.

The SONG cycle connects source inquiry, focused vocal practice, ensemble enactment, and guided revision without assuming a universal coastal singing style. Its present contribution is a framework for selecting tasks and documenting learning while maintaining the provenance and social functions of the repertoire. It remains a conceptual teaching proposal requiring contextual adaptation and empirical evaluation before claims about educational effectiveness can be made.

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