

The background features a dark navy blue central area. To the left, a textured gold rectangle is partially visible. On the right, a large, curved, textured gold shape overlaps the dark area. The entire composition is decorated with intricate white and gold line art resembling constellations or orbital paths, with small dots representing stars or planets. The text is positioned on the left side of the dark blue area.

Rethinking
Continuity:
Toward a Theory of
**MUSICAL
PERSISTENCE**

A RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR
CONTINUITY IN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

Rethinking Continuity: *Toward a Theory of Musical Persistence*

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First Edition

The Problem of Continuity

Continuity occupies an unusual position within ethnomusicology. Few concepts appear more frequently in discussions of musical tradition, yet few receive sustained theoretical scrutiny. The language of continuity informs studies of oral transmission, revival, ritual, migration, nationalism, heritage, and performance, often functioning as an implicit measure of historical endurance. Musical practices are described as continuous, disrupted, revived, transformed, or preserved with remarkably little disagreement over the meaning of those terms. The apparent consensus is deceptive. Although ethnomusicologists have produced sophisticated accounts of how music circulates within communities, how repertoires are learned, and how performance creates social worlds, considerably less attention has been devoted to explaining the conditions under which those processes remain capable of reproducing themselves across generations.¹

This omission is understandable. During the second half of the twentieth century, ethnomusicology deliberately moved away from models that treated musical traditions as stable collections of repertoires or stylistic features. Alan P. Merriam's tripartite formulation of music as concept, behavior, and sound redirected scholarly attention toward music as human activity rather than autonomous object.² Subsequent work by scholars including John Blacking, Bruno Nettl, Christopher Small, Steven Feld, Thomas Turino, and Timothy Rice expanded this shift in different directions, demonstrating that musical life unfolds through participation, social relationships, historical contingency, and cultural interpretation. These contributions transformed the discipline. They also altered the terms of an older question. Once music is understood as an ongoing social practice rather than a bounded cultural artifact, continuity can no longer be explained simply by pointing to the persistence of melodies, instruments, or repertoires.

The problem has not disappeared; it has changed form. Historical continuity is frequently treated as an observable outcome rather than an analytical problem. Scholars identify traditions that have survived colonialism, migration, religious reform, commercialization, or technological change, yet the explanation for that survival is often distributed across several distinct concepts. Transmission accounts for the movement of knowledge, heritage addresses institutional preservation, performance explains the enactment of social relationships, and identity situates music within broader cultural life. Each contributes an indispensable part of the picture. None, however, is intended to explain why these processes continue to operate over long periods of historical time or why they remain effective in some communities while becoming increasingly fragile in others. The explanatory burden is dispersed across a vocabulary whose individual terms were developed to answer different questions.

Evidence from ethnographic research illustrates the difficulty. A repertoire may survive in archives long after the social conditions that once sustained it have disappeared. A community may continue to identify strongly with a musical tradition whose repertoire has changed almost beyond recognition. Heritage recognition may increase the public visibility of a tradition while altering the social relationships through which it historically acquired meaning. Digital networks may expand

opportunities for learning even as they redefine longstanding assumptions about authority, locality, and participation. Describing each of these situations as examples of continuity obscures significant differences in the processes that produce them. The same word is asked to explain archival preservation, communal participation, institutional recognition, stylistic adaptation, and historical resilience.

The argument developed in this essay begins from a narrower claim. Continuity should not be understood as an explanation for musical endurance but as one of its observable consequences. If ethnomusicology is to explain why traditions remain capable of regenerating themselves across generations, analytical attention must shift from the historical appearance of continuity to the relationships that make continuity possible. Those relationships are social, cultural, material, political, and increasingly technological. They are neither static nor equally consequential, nor do they operate independently of one another. Understanding their organization requires a conceptual framework different from the vocabulary that currently dominates discussions of musical continuity.

The pages that follow propose such a framework. Rather than treating preservation, transmission, performance, adaptation, and cultural meaning as parallel explanations for musical endurance, the essay considers whether they may be understood as interdependent conditions whose interactions shape the long-term resilience of musical traditions. From this perspective emerges the concept of musical persistence: not a synonym for continuity, but a theoretical category concerned with the capacity of musical communities to reproduce meaningful participation across historical change. The framework offered here is intended neither as a universal law nor as a taxonomy of musical cultures. It is presented as a heuristic model that invites further ethnographic testing, comparative refinement, and theoretical debate.³

Continuity has occupied ethnomusicology since the discipline's earliest attempts to understand music as a cultural practice. Whether discussing oral tradition, ritual performance, revival movements, migration, nationalism, or heritage preservation, scholars routinely describe musical traditions as enduring, transforming, or disappearing through time. The vocabulary varies, but the underlying concern remains remarkably consistent: *how does music maintain historical identity while existing within societies that are themselves constantly changing?*¹

The question has rarely been addressed directly because continuity has generally functioned as a descriptive category rather than an analytical one. Ethnomusicologists have been far more interested in documenting the mechanisms through which music is transmitted than in explaining why those mechanisms continue to operate across successive generations. Studies of apprenticeship, performance, kinship, ritual, education, and participation have produced increasingly sophisticated accounts of musical life, yet the persistence of those relationships is frequently assumed rather than investigated. When continuity appears in ethnographic writing, it often denotes the outcome of historical processes instead of becoming an object of theoretical inquiry itself.²

This emphasis reflects an important intellectual shift within the discipline. Earlier comparative musicology often sought continuity within musical structures themselves, tracing scales, melodic formulae, instruments, or repertoires across geographical and historical boundaries. The emergence of ethnomusicology after the Second World War challenged those assumptions by relocating music within social life. Alan P. Merriam's insistence that music should be understood simultaneously as concept, behavior, and sound marked more than a methodological adjustment; it reoriented the discipline toward human relationships rather than musical objects.³ Music could no longer be explained adequately through notation or recorded sound alone. The circumstances in which people performed, learned, valued, and interpreted music became equally significant.

Subsequent scholarship deepened this transformation. John Blacking argued that musical organization reflects human organization, directing attention toward the cultural processes through which musical knowledge acquires meaning.⁴ Christopher Small's conception of *musicking* displaced the musical work from the center of analysis, proposing that performance creates relationships among participants rather than simply presenting aesthetic objects.⁵ Steven Feld's work among the Kaluli demonstrated that listening, emotion, language, and environment cannot be separated from musical practice, while Thomas Turino's analysis of participatory performance emphasized the social conditions through which communities reproduce themselves musically.⁶ These perspectives differ substantially in method and emphasis, yet they converge on one point: musical traditions exist because people continually recreate them through social action.

The success of this intellectual movement has produced an unexpected consequence. By emphasizing music as process, ethnomusicology has become exceptionally good at explaining how musical life unfolds within particular historical and cultural settings. It has been less successful in accounting for why those processes remain historically durable. Communities teach music because they value it, perform because participation carries social significance, and adapt because historical circumstances demand change. These explanations illuminate particular dimensions of musical life, yet they seldom address the larger question of why these interconnected practices continue to reproduce themselves over decades or centuries. The persistence of the system is often inferred from the survival of its individual parts.

The distinction becomes clearer when traditions experience profound historical disruption. Political repression may interrupt public performance while leaving communal memory largely intact. Migration can disperse performers across continents without dissolving shared musical identity. Heritage recognition may preserve repertoires within archives even as everyday participation declines. Digital technologies have expanded opportunities for musical learning while challenging inherited assumptions about locality, authority, and community. Each circumstance complicates conventional understandings of continuity because different aspects of musical life persist at different rates. Repertoire may survive while performance weakens. Performance may flourish while systems of transmission become increasingly fragile. Institutions may remain stable even as communal meanings shift. Speaking simply of continuity obscures these distinctions.

The resulting ambiguity is not merely terminological. It has consequences for the kinds of questions ethnomusicologists ask. If continuity describes every form of historical endurance, it risks explaining very little. A concept broad enough to encompass archival preservation, ceremonial performance, intergenerational learning, institutional heritage, stylistic stability, and digital dissemination becomes increasingly difficult to use analytically. The challenge is not to abandon continuity as a scholarly concept but to specify more precisely what it describes and what it leaves unexplained.

The argument developed in this essay begins with the proposition that continuity is better understood as historical evidence than historical explanation. Observing that a musical tradition has endured does not identify the conditions that made its endurance possible. Those conditions must be sought elsewhere—in the social relationships, cultural commitments, systems of knowledge, institutional structures, material resources, and historical negotiations through which musical communities continually recreate themselves. Only after those relationships have been examined does it become possible to ask whether continuity is the appropriate concept for explaining long-term musical endurance or whether a different analytical framework is required.⁷

Continuity and Its Limits

The conceptual ambiguity surrounding continuity becomes clearer when one examines the ways ethnomusicologists have employed the term. It has referred to the survival of repertoires, the maintenance of ceremonial functions, the persistence of stylistic conventions, the reproduction of musical identities, and the endurance of particular communities. These usages overlap, yet they are not interchangeable. A repertoire may remain accessible through recordings or notation long after the community that produced it has dispersed. A ritual tradition may continue despite extensive musical change. Conversely, communities often retain strong musical identities while performing repertoires that would have been unfamiliar to earlier generations. Describing each circumstance as an instance of continuity risks collapsing fundamentally different historical processes into a single category.⁸

The distinction is evident in the history of archival collecting. Since the late nineteenth century, scholars, collectors, and cultural institutions have invested enormous effort in documenting musical practices considered vulnerable to disappearance. Wax cylinders, field recordings, transcriptions, photographs, manuscripts, and later audiovisual media have preserved an extraordinary body of musical evidence that might otherwise have been lost. These collections remain indispensable to ethnomusicological research, allowing scholars to compare repertoires, reconstruct historical performance practices, and examine traditions that have undergone substantial transformation. Archives unquestionably preserve music in important ways.

What they preserve, however, differs from what communities sustain. A recording documents a particular performance under particular historical circumstances. It captures sound with remarkable fidelity while remaining silent about the countless relationships that gave that performance meaning. The recording cannot preserve the informal conversations preceding a ceremony, the habits of listening acquired over decades, the social obligations governing

participation, or the local knowledge that determines when a melody is appropriate and when it is not. Those dimensions survive only if communities continue to reproduce them. Archival preservation and cultural persistence therefore answer different questions, even though they frequently become conflated within discussions of continuity.⁹

Comparable difficulties emerge in scholarship on transmission. Few areas of ethnomusicology have received greater attention than the processes through which musical knowledge passes from one generation to the next. Research has demonstrated repeatedly that learning extends well beyond formal instruction. Apprenticeship, observation, imitation, participation, ritual involvement, domestic life, and sustained interaction with experienced musicians contribute to the acquisition of musical competence.¹⁰ These studies have profoundly reshaped understandings of musical education by emphasizing embodiment, social participation, and experiential learning.

Yet transmission alone cannot explain historical endurance. Communities possess the capacity to teach only when individuals continue to regard the tradition as worthy of learning. Every lesson presupposes a prior commitment that extends beyond pedagogy itself. Parents devote time to teaching children because the music retains cultural significance. Experienced performers mentor younger musicians because they believe the tradition deserves continuation. Institutions establish educational programs because musical practices have acquired social, political, or historical value. Transmission therefore depends upon relationships that it cannot itself explain.

Heritage introduces another layer of complexity. International recognition, government sponsorship, museum collections, and educational initiatives have created unprecedented opportunities for safeguarding musical traditions. UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage accelerated this process by encouraging governments to document and support practices regarded as culturally significant.¹¹ Such recognition often strengthens institutional visibility and creates new avenues for funding, education, and international exchange.

Recognition also alters the object it seeks to preserve. Once musical traditions enter the language of heritage, they acquire audiences, administrative structures, and political expectations that may differ substantially from the circumstances in which they developed. Performances may become demonstrations of national culture, tourist attractions, educational resources, or symbols of regional identity. None of these developments necessarily weakens a tradition. They do, however, remind us that preservation always operates within changing historical conditions. Institutional recognition cannot be assumed to reproduce the social relationships through which music previously acquired meaning.

Performance presents a similar challenge. Since Richard Bauman's influential work on performance and Christopher Small's formulation of *musicking*, ethnomusicologists have increasingly understood performance as the creation of social relationships rather than the presentation of finished artistic objects.¹² This shift has transformed the discipline's understanding of musical activity. Performance is no longer treated simply as evidence of an existing tradition; it

becomes one of the principal ways through which traditions are continually enacted and negotiated.

Even here, continuity remains difficult to define. Public performance may flourish while participation within the originating community declines. Tourist presentations may preserve stylistic features while altering social function. Digital platforms enable performances that reach global audiences without depending upon geographical proximity or inherited community structures. Performance clearly contributes to continuity, yet its presence alone cannot explain why some traditions remain historically resilient while others become increasingly fragile.

Each of these concepts—preservation, transmission, heritage, and performance—captures an essential aspect of musical life. None was intended to bear the full explanatory weight that discussions of continuity often place upon it. The problem is not that ethnomusicology lacks adequate theories of learning, identity, ritual, or performance. The problem is that these theories frequently operate alongside one another without a broader account of how their interactions sustain musical traditions over historical time. A conceptual framework capable of integrating these relationships must therefore begin somewhere other than continuity itself. It must ask what conditions enable continuity to emerge before continuity can be observed.¹³

From Continuity to Musical Persistence

The preceding discussion has not sought to replace continuity as a useful ethnomusicological concept. Continuity remains indispensable for describing historical endurance, whether that endurance is observed through repertoires, ceremonial practices, institutions, or communities. The difficulty arises when descriptive language begins to perform explanatory work. Identifying continuity tells us that historical connections remain visible; it does not explain how those connections continue to be reproduced or why they remain resilient under changing social conditions. The distinction is subtle, yet it changes the analytical problem considerably.¹⁴

Ethnomusicological research has already identified many of the processes that contribute to the historical life of music. Studies of apprenticeship explain how musical knowledge is acquired. Scholarship on ritual and performance demonstrates how communities continually recreate social relationships through musical activity. Research on heritage examines the institutional structures through which traditions are documented, protected, and publicly represented. Investigations of migration, nationalism, globalization, and digital media reveal the historical conditions under which musical practices are reconfigured. None of these perspectives is incomplete. Each addresses a different dimension of musical life with considerable sophistication.

What remains less clearly articulated is the relationship among them. The persistence of a musical tradition cannot be reduced to successful transmission, nor does institutional recognition guarantee continued participation. Performance alone does not explain why communities continue to invest in musical practices, while adaptation by itself cannot account for the durability of the social relationships that make adaptation meaningful. These processes are plainly interconnected, yet they are seldom considered as components of a larger explanatory framework. The result is that

continuity frequently appears as the cumulative consequence of multiple independent phenomena rather than as the product of relationships that themselves possess an identifiable structure.

The concept of *musical persistence* is proposed here to address that problem. The term refers to the capacity of a musical community to reproduce meaningful participation across historical time despite changing social, political, economic, and technological conditions. The emphasis falls deliberately upon participation rather than repertoire, and upon relationships rather than musical objects. A tradition persists because people continue to recognize it as culturally significant, continue to invest in its transmission, continue to perform it within socially intelligible contexts, and continue to negotiate its place within changing historical circumstances. Persistence therefore describes neither permanence nor resistance to change. It concerns the ongoing reproduction of conditions through which musical life remains possible.

Defining persistence in relational terms also clarifies its distinction from preservation. Preservation seeks to protect musical materials or practices from disappearance. Persistence concerns the continuing ability of communities to generate musical life from those materials. The difference may appear slight until traditions experience disruption. Recordings, manuscripts, instruments, and archival collections often survive periods during which everyday musical participation declines dramatically. When communities later revive those traditions, the decisive question is rarely whether historical evidence exists. The more difficult task involves reconstructing the relationships through which inherited music once acquired meaning. Archives preserve traces of musical activity; communities regenerate musical worlds.

This distinction also explains why traditions exhibiting similar historical trajectories may possess markedly different prospects for long-term endurance. Two communities may enjoy comparable institutional support while differing substantially in intergenerational participation. Another pair may maintain equally active performance calendars despite divergent understandings of musical authority or cultural identity. A tradition may flourish artistically while experiencing increasing uncertainty concerning who possesses the legitimacy to teach it. Such differences cannot be explained adequately through continuity alone because continuity describes the historical outcome without distinguishing among the relationships that produce it.

A relational approach has another advantage. It accommodates disagreement without treating conflict as evidence of cultural decline. Ethnomusicological literature has repeatedly demonstrated that musical traditions are sustained through negotiation rather than consensus. Musicians debate questions of authenticity, repertoire, innovation, pedagogy, and authority. Religious institutions, governments, commercial organizations, educators, and performers frequently pursue different cultural priorities while participating in the same musical tradition. Persistence does not require unanimity. It requires relationships capable of absorbing disagreement without losing their capacity to reproduce participation. In many traditions, conflict itself becomes one of the mechanisms through which continuity is renegotiated.

Digital musical cultures reinforce this point. Online communities often lack the geographical cohesion historically associated with musical transmission, yet they cultivate forms of

mentorship, stylistic evaluation, collaborative performance, and collective memory that are no less consequential because they occur across digital networks. The technologies are new; the underlying question is not. Musical communities continue to depend upon relationships through which participants recognize one another, evaluate musical practice, and transmit shared understandings across time. The environments in which those relationships develop have changed considerably, but the necessity of those relationships has not.¹⁵

If persistence is understood as the reproduction of these interconnected relationships, a further question immediately follows. *Do all relationships contribute equally to historical endurance, or do some establish conditions that make others possible?* The answer cannot be found by compiling longer lists of contributing factors. It requires asking whether the relationships themselves exhibit patterns of dependence. Some appear to provide the foundations upon which others operate, even while remaining subject to continual revision through lived musical practice. The framework developed in the following section begins from that possibility.

The Relational Hierarchy of Musical Persistence

The argument developed thus far rests upon a relatively modest observation. Musical traditions endure through many interconnected processes, yet those processes are rarely examined as parts of an integrated system. Ethnomusicologists have produced detailed studies of learning, ritual, performance, identity, memory, heritage, institutions, and historical change. Each has expanded understanding of musical life. None was intended to explain, by itself, why musical communities remain capable of reproducing themselves across long stretches of historical time. The question is therefore not whether existing scholarship is incomplete. It is whether its insights can be understood relationally rather than independently.¹⁶

A common response is simply to enumerate the factors that appear important: transmission, participation, institutional support, economic resources, cultural identity, political recognition, technological adaptation, and so forth. Such inventories are valuable because they acknowledge the complexity of musical life. They also risk implying that every factor contributes in equivalent ways. Ethnographic evidence suggests otherwise. The disappearance of one relationship may profoundly alter an entire musical community, while the loss of another may be absorbed with comparatively little disruption. Some relationships appear to establish the conditions under which others operate. Recognizing differences in dependency does not diminish the importance of any single process; it asks how those processes are organized.

For this reason, the framework proposed here is described as a relational hierarchy. The term *hierarchy* requires careful qualification because it carries associations that are foreign to the present argument. It does not imply a ranking of musical cultures, a measure of authenticity, or a sequence through which traditions inevitably develop. Neither does it describe a fixed historical progression from one stage to another. The hierarchy concerns dependency, not value. Its purpose is to identify those relationships that appear to provide the conditions within which other forms of musical activity become possible.

Even this formulation remains incomplete unless one further distinction is made. Dependency should not be confused with linear causation. Musical traditions are not mechanical systems in which one process simply produces the next. Relationships continually reshape one another. Performances alter communal understandings of value. New pedagogical practices influence musical aesthetics. Political institutions redefine cultural meaning. Technological innovation changes both performance and learning. Historical experience continually reorganizes the relationships that communities inherit. The hierarchy therefore describes a system of recursive feedback whose points of stability emerge through continual negotiation rather than equilibrium.

The model proposed here consists of five relational domains:

- Cultural Meaning
- Transmission
- Musical Language
- Performance
- Adaptation

These domains should not be understood as separate compartments within musical life. Each overlap with the others, and each remains active throughout the history of a tradition. Their analytical usefulness derives from the distinct questions they pose.

Cultural meaning asks why a community continues to regard particular musical practices as worthy of investment. Transmission asks how new participants acquire the knowledge and social competence necessary for legitimate participation. Musical language asks what shared expectations allow participants to recognize one another's musical actions as intelligible within a tradition. Performance asks where and through what forms of participation those shared understandings are continually renewed, challenged, and negotiated. Lastly, adaptation asks how traditions remain historically recognizable while responding to changing social, political, economic, and technological circumstances.

Each domain identifies a different dimension of persistence. Their order reflects differences in dependency rather than chronology. Communities rarely invest substantial effort in transmitting musical practices that no longer possess cultural significance. Shared musical languages cannot develop independently of repeated participation and learning. Performance depends upon participants capable of recognizing common musical expectations. Adaptation presupposes an existing tradition that communities continue to value sufficiently to reshape rather than abandon. The hierarchy therefore represents a logical order of relational dependence, even though historical change continually moves in multiple directions at once.

The recursive character of the model is equally important. Adaptation does not occupy the apex of the hierarchy because it represents a final destination. Every successful adaptation eventually influences the conditions beneath it. New performance practices gradually alter musical language. Changing musical languages reshape pedagogical priorities. New forms of transmission influence the meanings communities attach to inherited traditions. Cultural meaning itself evolves through accumulated historical experience. The hierarchy therefore contains no true beginning or

end. It identifies the relative depth of particular relationships while acknowledging that every domain participates in the continual reorganization of the whole.

This distinction has important methodological consequences. A researcher employing the framework would not ask simply whether a tradition has survived. The more revealing questions are relational. *Where has transmission weakened? How has performance changed the community's understanding of authenticity? Which institutions have acquired authority over musical knowledge? Have technological innovations strengthened participation or merely increased circulation? Does cultural meaning remain widely shared, or has it become concentrated within particular social groups?* These questions shift ethnographic attention away from the observable products of continuity toward the processes through which continuity is repeatedly assembled.

The hierarchy should therefore be regarded as a heuristic rather than a predictive model. It does not determine which traditions will survive, nor does it assign equal historical trajectories to communities facing radically different political or economic conditions. Its value lies elsewhere. It provides a common analytical vocabulary through which the durability of musical traditions may be examined without reducing that durability to any single explanatory principle. In doing so, it reframes continuity as the historical expression of deeper relational processes whose organization can itself become an object of ethnomusicological inquiry.¹⁷

Testing the Framework

A conceptual model acquires analytical value only if it clarifies historical situations that are otherwise difficult to explain. The Relational Hierarchy of Musical Persistence is therefore intended less as a classification of musical traditions than as a way of organizing ethnographic observation. It encourages researchers to ask not whether a tradition has survived, but which relationships have enabled that survival, which have weakened, and how changes within one domain have reshaped the others. Different musical communities rarely exhibit identical configurations of persistence. Their histories instead reveal different balances among cultural meaning, transmission, musical language, performance, and adaptation.¹⁸

Irish traditional music illustrates this point particularly well. Explanations of its historical endurance often emphasize the remarkable continuity of instrumental repertoires or the vitality of contemporary performance. Neither observation is incorrect, yet neither adequately explains the tradition's resilience. Political upheaval, linguistic change, mass emigration, urbanization, and commercialization profoundly altered Irish society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Had repertory alone determined continuity, one might expect corresponding levels of musical disruption. Instead, Irish traditional music retained an extraordinary capacity for regeneration across both rural and urban communities, within Ireland and throughout the diaspora.¹⁹

That resilience depended upon more than the preservation of tunes. Informal transmission remained embedded within family life, neighborhood interaction, festivals, and local performance long after broader social conditions had changed. Organizations such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann later expanded educational opportunities, but they entered a musical culture in which participation already possessed considerable social value. Sessions functioned not simply as venues

for performance but as recurring spaces where stylistic expectations, interpersonal relationships, and communal authority were continually renegotiated. Innovation occurred within a musical language that remained widely intelligible to participants, allowing new repertoires and performance styles to circulate without dissolving the tradition's internal coherence. Persistence emerged from the interaction of these relationships rather than from any single institutional achievement.

Balinese gamelan presents a different configuration. Village ensembles have historically occupied positions within ritual life that extend well beyond musical performance. Temple ceremonies, life-cycle rituals, and communal obligations integrate music into broader systems of religious and social organization. Participation has therefore often been sustained through responsibilities that cannot be understood exclusively in musical terms.²⁰

This does not imply historical stability in the conventional sense. Twentieth-century Bali experienced colonial administration, Indonesian independence, expanding tourism, international performance, conservatory education, and extensive intercultural exchange. Repertoires changed, new compositions appeared, performance contexts diversified, and musicians increasingly engaged with audiences far beyond the island itself. Yet these developments did not simply replace earlier musical practices. They were interpreted through established systems of communal participation that continued to reproduce shared understandings of musical responsibility. Adaptation proved possible because the relationships through which music acquired meaning remained active even as their historical circumstances evolved.

These examples demonstrate that traditions may arrive at comparable levels of resilience through different historical arrangements. They also suggest why the hierarchy should not be understood as prescribing a single model of continuity. Persistence depends upon the interaction of relational domains, but the particular form those relationships assume remains historically contingent. Ethnographic comparison therefore becomes indispensable. The hierarchy offers questions rather than predetermined answers.

Its explanatory value becomes even more apparent when continuity is interrupted. The twentieth century provides numerous examples of musical traditions disrupted by political repression, forced migration, cultural assimilation, or economic transformation. Under such conditions, the various domains of persistence frequently separate from one another. Cultural meaning may remain remarkably strong while systems of transmission collapse. Repertoires may survive within archives although opportunities for performance disappear. Communities may retain powerful historical memories of musical practice despite lacking experienced performers capable of teaching subsequent generations.²¹

Revival movements reveal these tensions with particular clarity. Much scholarly discussion has treated revival as the recovery of repertory or performance practice, yet historical evidence frequently suggests a more complicated process. Archival recordings, manuscripts, and documentary collections provide indispensable resources, but they cannot by themselves recreate the social relationships through which traditions previously functioned. Revivals succeed when

communities reconstruct systems of participation alongside musical materials. They fail when preservation substitutes for participation instead of supporting it. The distinction explains why two traditions possessing comparable documentary resources may experience markedly different outcomes.

Questions of authority become equally significant in these circumstances. Every revival requires decisions concerning repertoire, performance style, pedagogy, authenticity, and institutional leadership. Those decisions are rarely uncontested. Musicians, scholars, community organizations, government agencies, religious institutions, and cultural advocates often advance competing interpretations of what should be preserved and how continuity ought to be understood. Persistence therefore involves negotiation as much as conservation. Historical disagreement should not be regarded as evidence of conceptual failure but as one of the ordinary conditions through which traditions redefine themselves.

Contemporary digital environments extend these dynamics rather than replacing them. Online archives have transformed access to historical recordings. Remote instruction enables students to study with musicians living thousands of kilometers away. Virtual ensembles, livestreamed performances, and social media communities have expanded opportunities for collaboration beyond geographical locality. These developments complicate older assumptions about apprenticeship and community while leaving the central analytical question intact. Digital circulation may facilitate learning, but participation still depends upon relationships through which musicians establish trust, evaluate performance, and negotiate shared standards of practice. Technologies alter the environments in which persistence unfolds; they do not eliminate the need for persistence itself.²²

The framework proposed here cannot predict which traditions will flourish under future historical conditions. It can, however, identify where pressures are likely to emerge. Declining participation among younger musicians, weakening systems of informal transmission, institutional dependence upon external funding, fragmentation of communal authority, or rapid technological change each affect different relational domains. Examined independently, such developments appear as isolated historical events. Considered together, they reveal changing patterns within the broader ecology of musical persistence. It is this shift—from isolated observations to relational explanation—that constitutes the principal contribution of the framework.

Persistence as a Framework

The concept of continuity has remained indispensable to ethnomusicology precisely because musical traditions are historical phenomena. Every ethnography, archive, recording, and performance carries some implication about the relationship between past and present. Yet continuity itself explains remarkably little. It identifies endurance without specifying the conditions that make endurance possible. The term has proven sufficiently flexible to encompass preservation, transmission, revival, adaptation, institutional recognition, and cultural identity, but that flexibility has also obscured important distinctions among the processes through which musical communities reproduce themselves over time.

The framework proposed in this essay has attempted to relocate the discussion. Instead of asking whether traditions remain continuous, it asks how continuity becomes historically achievable. This shift redirects attention from the observable products of musical history toward the social, cultural, material, and political relationships that sustain musical participation across generations. Continuity remains historically visible, but it is no longer treated as the primary explanatory concept.

The idea of musical persistence is intended to capture this distinction. Persistence concerns the continuing capacity of communities to regenerate meaningful musical participation under changing historical conditions. Its focus lies neither in repertoires nor institutions alone, but in the relationships through which musical knowledge acquires cultural significance and remains capable of reproduction. Those relationships include systems of value, pedagogical practices, shared musical understanding, public participation, and adaptive responses to historical change. They are continually shaped by material circumstances, political authority, technological innovation, and internal disagreement. No single relationship determines the future of a tradition, yet neither do all relationships contribute equally to its endurance.

The Relational Hierarchy of Musical Persistence provides one way of organizing these observations. It is presented neither as a universal model nor as a definitive theory of musical continuity. Musical traditions differ too profoundly in their histories, institutions, and cultural priorities for any framework to eliminate the need for careful ethnographic analysis. The hierarchy serves a different purpose. It encourages researchers to investigate patterns of dependency among the relationships that sustain musical life instead of treating those relationships as isolated variables. Such an approach invites comparison without assuming uniformity.

Several implications follow from this perspective. Discussions of revival may benefit from distinguishing documentary preservation from the reconstruction of participatory communities. Research on digital musical cultures may focus less on technological novelty than on the ways digital environments reorganize systems of authority, learning, and collective recognition. Heritage studies may ask whether institutional visibility corresponds with sustained communal participation or whether those processes increasingly diverge. Comparative ethnomusicology may find that traditions sharing remarkably different repertoires nevertheless exhibit similar relational structures through which musical persistence is maintained. None of these questions replaces existing scholarship. Each builds upon it by placing familiar observations within a different conceptual framework.

The framework also invites dialogue beyond ethnomusicology. Historians of religion have long examined the continuity of ritual practice. Linguists investigate the persistence and transformation of speech communities. Anthropologists study kinship, memory, and social reproduction. Heritage scholars explore the institutional preservation of cultural practices, while sociologists analyze the durability of communities under changing political and economic conditions. Musical persistence intersects with each of these conversations because it asks how cultural practices remain socially viable despite historical change. The concept may therefore prove

useful not only as an ethnomusicological heuristic but also as a point of contact with broader discussions of cultural continuity across the humanities and social sciences.

Whether musical persistence ultimately becomes a durable analytical concept will depend less upon this essay than upon its usefulness in future research. A theoretical proposal acquires value only through continued application, revision, and criticism. Ethnographic studies may demonstrate that additional relational domains deserve consideration, that patterns of dependency differ across musical traditions, or that particular historical circumstances require substantial modification of the framework presented here. Such outcomes would strengthen rather than weaken the project. The purpose of conceptual work is not to close debate but to make new forms of inquiry possible.

Ethnomusicology has never lacked careful descriptions of musical continuity. What has remained comparatively underdeveloped is a language for explaining why continuity persists under some historical conditions and falters under others. By shifting analytical attention from continuity itself to the relationships through which continuity is continually regenerated, the concept of musical persistence offers one possible direction for that conversation. Whether the framework remains intact is ultimately less important than the question it places at the center of inquiry: *what enables musical communities not simply to preserve inherited practices, but to make them socially meaningful again and again across time?*

Notes

1. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964); Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 3rd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
2. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, 32–44.
3. John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 17–43; Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 1–18; Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, 3rd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 1–29; Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 21–54; Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction*, 14–35.
4. Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, 23–42.
5. Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 15–39; Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2013), 45–82.
6. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production," *Museum International* 56, nos. 1–2 (2004): 52–65.
7. Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1984), 37–58; Christopher Small, *Musicking*, 133–158.
8. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, 5–17; Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, 95–112.
9. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72–95.
10. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 16–28.
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