

The Role of Wind Orchestras in the Development of Music Education in Albania

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine wind orchestras in Albania as the first institutions that enabled the teaching of musical instruments in the country. Brass and wind instruments began to be used at the end of the 19th century, during a time when cultural influences, especially from Italy, played a significant role in Albania's cultural, economic, and social development. The research question addressed in this study is: What contribution did wind orchestras make to the development and enrichment of cultivated music in Albania? The methodology of this study combines several approaches, including historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives, analyzed through the lens of the role played by wind orchestras. The study's findings highlight the key role of these musical ensembles in advancing cultivated music in Albania. The adoption of advanced practices in music reading and writing, along with the establishment of wind orchestras in every city and educational institution, created opportunities for organizing national and international events, competitions, and festivals. These developments also influenced the shaping of educational and cultural policies. The discussions and conclusions emphasize the positive impact of these musical ensembles on Albanian youth, uniting them with one another and with peers around the world. Music serves as a universal language that facilitates intercultural communication and collaboration. In this way, learning a musical instrument becomes not only an educational process but also a way to speak the sublime language of music, one of the most powerful forms of human expression.

Keywords: History of Musical Bands, Musical Ensembles, Intercultural Collaboration.

Introduction

Music has always played a vital role in shaping the cultural identity and social cohesion of Albania. Among the earliest and most influential musical formations in the country were the wind orchestras, which emerged during the late nineteenth century. These ensembles were not merely sources of entertainment but also became the first informal institutions for music education, laying the groundwork for systematic training in musical instruments and theory.

The establishment of wind orchestras coincided with a period of cultural transformation influenced by Western—particularly Italian—musical traditions. Their introduction marked a turning point in Albania's artistic development, fostering literacy in music reading and writing and cultivating an appreciation for both

local and international repertoires. Over time, these orchestras spread across cities such as Shkodër, Korçë, and Elbasan, influencing both cultural life and educational practices.

Through their activities, wind orchestras nurtured the first generations of Albanian musicians, many of whom later became the founders of formal music schools and professional ensembles. These formations bridged the gap between popular and cultivated music, creating a foundation for the establishment of structured music education systems after World War II.

This paper explores the historical and educational significance of wind orchestras in Albania, highlighting their contribution to the creation of national identity, music pedagogy, and artistic professionalism. It examines how these ensembles shaped

generations of musicians, promoted intercultural exchange, and continue to influence contemporary approaches to music education.

Methodology

This paper is based on:

- Historical analysis of archival documents
- Scholarly literature by Albanian authors such as Tonin Zadeja, Mato, Konica, etc.
- Case studies on wind orchestras in Shkodër, Korçë, Elbasan, and other cities
- References to lectures, school documents, and accounts of key historical figures in Albanian music

The first musical formations that used wind and brass instruments originated in the city of Shkodër. According to researcher Tonin Zadeja, the first wind orchestra in Shkodër, and indeed in the entire country, was established in 1878. It was founded with the help of the Franciscan missionary, the Arbëresh At Tom Marcozzi, and the contribution of the Shkodran magnate Mr. Filip Parruca. For teaching the instruments, the Italian master from Naples, Giovanni Canale, was hired. This ensemble consisted of 31 musicians [1].

The creation of this ensemble served as a guide for the formation of other groups in the city. In the years that followed, several other wind orchestras were formed, such as "Vllaznia," "Bogdani," "Antoniane," and others. Renowned musicians and conductors from these formations left a significant mark on the development of music in the country. Figures like Palokë Kurti, Frano Ndoja, Zef Kurti, At Martin Gjoka, Luigi Prela, and Sulë Licaj played a foundational role in teaching and promoting these instruments among the youth of the time. The band formations and the halls where young people gathered to learn the instruments became the first informal music schools in this field. These early "schools," so to speak, nurtured some of Albania's most important future musicians, such as Prenkë Jakova, Çesk Zadeja, Tonin Harapi, Tish Daija, Ramadan Sokoli, Simon Gjoni, Pjetër Dunga, and many others who later contributed significantly to the development of Albanian music.

The long-lasting contribution of these artists supports the conclusion that these musical ensembles were de facto institutions where music and instruments were taught. These bands became full-fledged schools for the learning and performance of cultivated music in Albania. In the city of Korçë, the efforts of local patriots and the establishment of cultural clubs enabled the creation, in 1908, of the "Banda e Lirisë" (Band of Freedom). This musical band had 40 musicians under the direction of maestro Pascal Anibale, an Italian who had come from Egypt, supported by local patriots and merchants. A significant detail is that in the band's charter it stated: "The Society is obliged to spread music education to the schoolboys as well, who shall not pay any fee, and the instruments will be provided by the Society" [2].

In a similar spirit, the "Afërdita" Musical Band was formed in the city of Elbasan in 1917, following the patriotic spirit inspired by the establishment of the Normal School. The Austrian maestro Anton Cimmfli was brought in to teach the instruments, funded by local citizens and merchants. A particularly notable contribution to the spread and teaching of brass instruments came from the "Vatra" Musical Band, which arrived from America in 1920

under the direction of Mr. Thoma Nasi. This musical group was created in 1916 by young Albanian emigrants in the U.S., part of the patriotic federation of the same name, "Vatra." The ensemble was composed of 29 musicians, all young Albanian emigrants. Its arrival enriched the artistic life of Korçë and other cities across Albania, where it gave concerts, even supporting fighters on the front lines during the Vlorë War in 1920. The song composed by Thoma Nasi, "Vlorë Vlorë," became an anthem sung by fighters everywhere [3].

The music of famous composers like Verdi, Bizet, Wagner, Schubert, and others was introduced to the Albanian public through performances by this musical formation in town squares and streets. In reference to this contribution, Faik Konica, using a concert poster of the Vatra Band that featured Schubert's Unfinished Symphony and Wagner's Tannhäuser March, wrote: "A group of Albanians from America, the boys of the Vatra Band from Worcester, led by Professor Thoma Nasi, are striving to introduce good music in Albania" [3, 4].

"A band that dares to perform such elevated music deserves the sympathy and respect of every enlightened person. Poor, beloved Schubert! Your immortal Unfinished Symphony, a marvel of beauty and longing, in which destiny seems to converse with teary-eyed mercy, was finally heard in Albania. And Wagner's dignified march showed our people, too often accustomed to vulgar trivialities, a model of noble beauty" [4]. Thoma Nasi, the leader of the Vatra Band, emerged as a key figure in the development of Albanian music. He distinguished himself as a composer and orchestrator of renowned repertoire, enriching it further with local musical works. Having studied flute at the Boston Conservatory, he made great efforts to establish a proper music school in Albania [3].

Additional efforts in this direction were made in 1929 during King Zog's reign, with the creation of the Artistic Committee of the National Entity "Djelmënia Shqiptare" (Albanian Youth). One of King Zog's sisters, Princess Rukije, was involved in overseeing the committee's operations. In 1932, efforts began to prepare the documentation for the establishment of a music school, envisioned as the "Royal Institute of Music." Mr. Sotir Kozmo, a former music teacher at the Korçë Lyceum, was tasked with selecting young talents. There were even requests to hire foreign (mainly Italian) teachers, to be paid by the Albanian state. During this time, the subjects, departments, and study durations were also planned.

Unfortunately, the initiative failed, and by 1935 the efforts to establish Albania's first formal music school had come to an end, despite the fact that cultivated music was already being performed in the country. These circumstances lead us to the conclusion that up until the end of World War II, the teaching of brass instruments in Albania was almost entirely autodidactic. During the monarchy, there were efforts to send some Albanian musicians abroad, mainly to neighboring Italy, to attend professional courses or schools for these instruments.

One such case was Mr. Sulejman Gjevori, who studied trumpet in Florence. Upon returning, he initially contributed in Durrës and later in Shijak and Elbasan, helping to establish and direct musical bands and teach brass instruments. Other notable Alba-

nian musicians, such as Prenkë Jakova and Çesk Zadeja, studied at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome for two years. Another prominent figure from this period was Luigj Filaj, who studied with August Forster in Vienna. Their subsequent contributions became undeniably essential to the formation of Albanian music history and its various genres of artistic creation. Taking a broader look at the state of music education, particularly in the field of instrument learning, we can confidently state that musical bands were the first schools for wind instrument education in Albania.

Due to the nature of these ensembles, they also taught music theory, including reading and writing sheet music, laying the foundations for cultivated music in the country. Since there were no formal schools for learning these instruments, the conductors of these bands also served as the first music teachers. However, the professional level during this time, both of those teaching and those playing, often did not meet the technical standards required by musical works. The repertoire was often carefully adapted to suit the limited technical skills of the musicians, usually consisting of simpler genres such as marches or patriotic songs.

This artistic process of learning musical works evolved within these ensembles, from writing and reading music parts to public performances in the streets and squares of Albanian cities.

The democratic nature of these bands had a significant educational impact on the broader population, who would hear these bands during their concerts. In this environment, wind and brass instruments were introduced and taught for the first time. Young people of the era learned how to read and write music, and music education progressed through the exposure to cultivated music composed by prominent international composers. Teaching these instruments within the bands laid the groundwork for the pedagogy of wind, brass, and percussion instruments in Albania. The performance of numerous works by well-known composers by these ensembles testifies to the progress and improvement in the musicians' interpretative abilities.

After Albania's liberation, many of these musicians contributed to the establishment of the country's first orchestras. In most cases, they became founding members and helped develop this newly established musical tradition. Post-World War II Developments and the Institutionalization of Brass Education Around 1950, with the efforts of self-taught musician Mr. Kristo Kote, the first formal class for brass instruments was founded at the Artistic Lyceum of Tirana. In this class, students learned trumpet, trombone, and French horn. In 1953, a foundational orchestra was formed in Tirana from various instrumentalists. This group would later become the Orchestra of the Opera and Ballet Theater.

To meet the country's growing needs in 1958–1959, some brass students were sent to fellow socialist countries such as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, where they studied in schools or courses modeled on military bands of the communist tradition. However, following the breakdown of relations with Eastern Bloc countries in 1961, especially after Albania's exit from the Warsaw Pact, all students studying in these countries returned home. This marked the last contact that the brass class had with Eastern European conservatories. These students did not com-

plete their full academic cycles abroad. It's important to note that between 1945 and 1960, there were no Albanian students studying music in Western countries.

Those instrumentalists who didn't complete their studies abroad were later attached to the Higher Institute of Arts (founded in 1962 in Tirana, now the University of the Arts) and completed their degrees there. In the early years of the institute's activity, the brass instrument class was led by trombonist Muharrem Bërxxolli, who had received musical training in Bulgaria. After the graduation of Mr. Prokop Nishku (in 1967), who had studied trumpet in Czechoslovakia, the trumpet class was finally led by a professionally trained Albanian musician.

In the following years, the music education system in this field expanded with the establishment of eight-year and secondary music schools in other cities across the country. Specialized schools for music and the fine arts were opened in Shkodër, Korçë, Elbasan, Berat, Vlorë, Durrës, Fier, and Gjirokastër, and more recently in Kukës and Peshkopi. Many students who graduated from the Institute of Arts went on to become music teachers in these schools, contributing to the spread and teaching of musical instruments across the country. Meanwhile, orchestras in the capital city were gradually filled with university-trained instrumentalists.

Among the most prominent students who took over teaching trumpet at the University of the Arts was Prof. Isak Shehu, whose contributions significantly elevated both the interpretative quality and the repertoire available for performance. He was also the first Albanian trumpeter to compose original works and perform them publicly, promoting the trumpet as a solo instrument for the first time in Albania. As general education expanded across the country, in addition to students in formal music schools, many amateur instrumentalists began learning in local courses and Pioneer Houses established nationwide. This made it possible for many of them to start performing and eventually fill almost all municipal fanfares and musical bands formed throughout Albania.

In the main cities, alongside musical bands, philharmonic orchestras were also established. During this period, national musical gatherings were organized for these ensembles. The professionalization of these formations with trained instrumentalists raised the interpretative level of performance. This also introduced a competitive spirit among musical groups across cities. Most musical bands performed marches, partisan songs, and revolutionary pieces, repertoire closely aligned with the political ideology of the time. As a result, these formations often became megaphones for the regime's propaganda. The imposed schematism in repertoire selection limited the creativity of composers. The push to "Albanianize" all content led to an isolation from international music culture, both from the West and even, after the 1960s, from the East. This total isolation impacted the technical and interpretive standards of instrumentalists.

Low-quality imported instruments and outdated teaching methodologies also contributed to the limitations in performance quality. Often, technical limitations and the inability to play across all registers of the instruments led to issues in interpreting musical works. The lack of formal professional training among

many band instrumentalists and the absence of regular practice meant that playing was often harsh, overly loud, and lacked tonal precision. Attempts to imitate Eastern European military band models were undermined by the lack of appropriate instruments and qualified personnel, often resulting in poor imitations.

The rapid political, economic, and social changes at the end of the 1990s were accompanied by an opening in the field of art and culture. With increased contact with the world, mass emigration, and the rise of a free market economy, music professionals were exposed to new and unfamiliar methods and practices. The arrival of conductors and instrumentalists, especially from Western countries, as well as the new repertoire being introduced, made it necessary to adopt modern methods and techniques for brass instrument performance. In this new social environment, the Albanian music education system, particularly the training of brass musicians, faced a significant challenge.

Currently, the system for teaching brass instruments in Albania still functions under outdated models inherited from the past regime. While the totalitarian system was rejected, the educational structures that it left behind have not been effectively maintained or adapted. There is no clear vision or strategy guiding music education today. Relevant institutions have failed to take steps toward implementing new music education policies like those adopted in developed countries. At the same time, the old system is no longer effective. If this transitional uncertainty continues, music education in Albania risks falling into crisis, with long-term consequences for national culture.

The solution lies in implementing a new, modern system within the music education chain. It should begin by teaching a musical instrument to every child in Albania's elementary (9-year) schools. The selection of students who will study these instruments must be done carefully, under the guidance of qualified specialists. Learning brass instruments should be integrated into the official music curriculum, using international models, especially the American model of music education in schools. Starting from elementary schools, continuing into secondary education and universities, this approach would allow every 8-year, high school, and university institution to have its own musical band. This educational chain would ensure the identification and development of talented individuals, who could then attend regional or national professional music schools. Mass participation would raise the overall level of quality and lead to the creation of diverse musical formations. Such variety in ensembles would support the development of different musical genres and enrich the country's artistic life.

Currently, school music textbooks in Albania lack essential information about musical instruments. Music is taught for only one hour per week, which is neither adequate nor educational for the generations we are raising. Let us remember the heroic efforts of Albanian patriots who established the Elbasan Normal School in 1909. In that school's early programs, music was taught for three hours per week. Many of its graduates later became leading patriots and outstanding educators, making significant contributions to Albanian education. Teaching a musical instrument as part of the music subject requires passion, dedication, and time to bring it to life. The use of modern methodologies makes learning more enjoyable and accessible. In developed countries,

renowned musicians often play instruments together with children, encouraging and motivating them. Many of these musicians also teach masterclasses to children in different countries. The goal of these initiatives is for children to love music and enjoy playing it. According to numerous scientifically supported theories, learning a musical instrument supports cognitive development in children. "Playing a musical instrument automatically enhances self-discipline, self-expression, communication, appreciation of art and beauty, creativity, social interaction, motor skills, critical listening, and much more. Imagine a world without music" [5]. The relationship between a child and a brass instrument is not merely a musical activity, but can be compared to participation in a sport. The development of breathing and exhalation techniques supports the healthy growth of the lungs [6].

Embracing new ideas and modern teaching methods used around the globe is the responsibility of the teaching staff. Continuous training of educators, the organization of annual meetings between teachers and students, and the exchange of ideas and experiences are essential for progress. Inviting renowned instrumentalists and professors from advanced music schools around the world would bring a spirit of collaboration and support the goals of such gatherings. A comprehensive reform of the teaching system is urgently needed, including interventions in current methodologies and the implementation of progressive educational practices.

A major improvement would be shifting from learning a single brass instrument to learning the entire family of brass instruments. A student should not only study one instrument but should become familiar with the full spectrum of the brass family. The equipping of brass classrooms with modern didactic tools is a necessity. Teaching students how to use various mutes (sordinas) enriches the color and expressive effects of the instrument. These tonal nuances and effects, indicated in the musical scores, help convey to the audience the emotions the composer intended. The absence of mute usage in performance leads to incomplete musical expression and hinders the delivery of the intended message. The lack of proper use of instruments and mutes on stage reveals a lack of professionalism that must be addressed. Equipping orchestras with all necessary instrument types and accessories, including mutes, must become a priority for relevant institutions. This issue requires a swift and professional response, involving local and international experts. Facing the reality and adopting the best global practices will result in measurable progress [7].

To reform this system, it is essential to fill pedagogical staff gaps that currently exist in many schools. Ensuring an adequate supply of instruments and qualified, well-trained educators would also shift current mindsets. Teaching these families of instruments in schools and integrating them into diverse musical ensembles should happen as soon as possible. This would enhance the sound palette and improve the artistic quality of musical formations across the country. Establishing institutional connections with homologous schools and traditional music education centers worldwide, along with individual collaborations, masterclasses, and workshops, would accelerate progress. Exchanging experiences and facing global standards will support professional growth and elevate the field [8]. The development of performance skills on brass instruments is directly linked to the quality

and advancement of orchestral formations in the country.

Teaching music through instrument performance, especially starting with children, would place Albania on par with developed countries. Realizing this dream would mean that every school, university, and city could have its own orchestra or musical band. Such circumstances would allow for the organization of concerts, competitions, and festivals at the national or international level. Musicians and musical ensembles from Albania and abroad could participate, contributing not only to artistic exchange but also to educational and cultural policy development. The community of performers and educators must work together to raise awareness and find ways to support future generations [9]. Performers, as a community, should unite in their efforts to change the current state of music education and advocate within the proper institutional frameworks.

Musical interpretation represents the final phase of a creative process. Through performance, musicians make it possible for musical creations to reach the audience. This gives the performer a central role in shaping musical taste and culture [10]. When Albanian youth play music together, they connect with one another and with peers around the world. The shared musical alphabet makes the language of music a powerful and easy medium of global communication. Ultimately, through the learning of instruments, we learn and speak the divine language of music. As Faik Konica once wrote in one of his articles on music: “For those who understand and love it deeply, music is not a pleasure, it is a religion.” [4].

Conclusion

The history of wind orchestras in Albania demonstrates their profound influence on the evolution of the nation’s musical culture and education. From their origins in the late nineteenth century, these ensembles played a central role in introducing structured musical training, promoting instrumental proficiency, and bridging traditional and Western musical practices. They not only provided entertainment but also served as community learning centers, fostering the early development of music literacy and performance discipline among young Albanians.

Over time, wind orchestras became instrumental in the forma-

tion of professional musicians and educators, many of whom later contributed to the establishment of music schools, conservatories, and cultural institutions. Their presence encouraged a broader appreciation for music across social classes and regions, helping to integrate music into both civic and educational life.

Even today, the legacy of wind orchestras endures through contemporary music programs, local ensembles, and academic curricula that continue to draw inspiration from their traditions. Preserving and revitalizing these ensembles is essential for maintaining the cultural heritage of Albania and ensuring that music education remains accessible, dynamic, and deeply connected to the country’s historical identity.

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