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***NATIONAL MINORITIES – MUSICAL MINORITIES IN THE PAST AND PRESENT  
ROMANIAN CULTURE***

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*Abstract: We aim at drawing attention to the special structure of the musical culture(s) in the Romanian territory: their spreading areas, the ratio between preservation and renewal and, particularly, the inter-cultural interferences. Beyond the artistic phenomenon, the ritual, social and communicational contexts might reveal an interesting outlook on the cultural mentalities and their dynamics in the past and present Romanian culture. The controversial issue of the minorities' role in the evolution of the musical life as well inside Romania as in connections with the neighbour centres is worth to be more comprehensively discussed. The nowadays „map” of the musical structure might also imply a broader perspective on cultural dialogue and identity.*

***Keywords: tradition, acculturation, minority, neighbourhood, cultural mentality***

**Musical tradition in Romania: structure and relationship with two kinds of minorities, established and landless**

One of my constant preoccupations is the problem of the national minorities and their contribution to the Romanian musical culture<sup>1</sup>. From the start we have to notice some important differences between resident minorities and migrant ones, which concern musical exchanges too. So, the Hungarians, Slovaks, Turks, Szeklers, Saxons etc. exerted a very limited influence on the immediate neighbourhood. They also rigorously try to underline their particular differences. The vicinity is stimulating mostly the preservation instinct and some fortuitous contaminations, if any, were subtle and enough limited. The concern to be different from the neighbours occurs also within the frame of the same ethnic group in areas like Wallachia or Oltenia, which have a large Romanian majority. Here we can find a lot of noticeable differences that are parting small groups of villages. Such delimitation inside the Romanian communities themselves reveals the importance of the temporal part of the musical culture. The visual part is more pragmatic: often houses and clothes are related to practical reasons: weather, relief etc. The architecture, closing and adornment are testifying about a perennial unity of the Romanian culture, while the living rituals not directly pending on practical imperatives, as weddings, funerals, festivities, even some rituals linked to agriculture or shepherding are marking the differences, that is the specific culture of a limited zone. Music also underwent local modifications, but the fact that communities from large areas were employing almost the same musicians (itinerant fiddlers' bands) the musical style was less fragmented.

One of the defining features of the ancient Romanian musical culture is the absence of Romanian professional musicians<sup>2</sup>; hence the employment of established musical bands of itinerant minorities: Jews and Gypsies. More than space, the time was playing a significant role in the Romanian musical tradition. Together with newer forms, some old song strata were still persisting in variable ratios. These older ones had a more unitary character being almost unmingled preserved. Thus the traditional Romanian cultural pattern was alike the Oriental

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<sup>1</sup>Veronica Gaspar: „Musical Culture of Minorities in the Romanian Music; Dynamics, Evolution, Role and Interaction in Surrounding Areas” in: *Musical Romania and the Neighbouring Cultures*, Laura Vasiliu, Florin Luchian, Loredana Iaseten, Diana Andron eds. PL Academic Research, Peter Lang Ed. Frankfurt am Main 2014 pp. 170-181

<sup>2</sup>Viorel Cosma: *Fiddlers Yesterday and Today* p. 10

one, meaning that the main features of the ancient Romanian musical culture were pluralism and force of preservation (immobility). In the Far-East, for instance the newly acquired art forms and even doctrines, religions etc. are coexisting together, without replacing the old ones. In opposition, the Western European culture is shaped on evolution; the art forms, ideologies etc. are dominating for a while being eventually modified or replaced.

A changing trend will come in the Romanian cultural space just with the Western style penetration, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This particular stratification in the traditional Romania, is calling into question the balance between preservation and renewal, the socio-cultural peculiarities of the above mentioned minorities in the Romanian context, as well as the non-geographical vicinities of similar musical influences first observed by Béla Bartók one hundred years ago<sup>3</sup>. In within the traditional framing, the foreign influences/ novelties found access paths in the newer culture forms, tied to the average communitarian life; the older forms being assigned to fundamental rituals. The isolated dwellings were more privileged. When Béla Bartók investigated the Romanians' music, he deliberately choose the isolated zones in order to discover the old authentic layer, unaltered by neighbour influences lured by a more complex social life<sup>4</sup>. This great musician was one of the first to outline the dynamic of the musical acculturation from a specific tradition, until its "possible urban development and trans-national prolongations"<sup>5</sup>.

Beside the peasants' music, other musical styles as the church music were adapted to a similar parallel pattern. The dominant religion was the Orthodox Christianity accompanied by the Byzantine music, which was kept from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, also having a negligible mutual influence with the laic music. In Transylvania, Bukovina and Banat was also present the Western-style music in the Catholic and Protestant churches, leading to a thin layer of urban music. To a lesser extent, these cults existed, with their musical style included starting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the extra-Carpathian region too, in Romanian communities in Argeş, Severin, Bacău and Iaşi. However, their intrinsic nuclei of Western music had not at all influenced the surrounding musical life. Even in Transylvania the Western music was not expanded before the 19<sup>th</sup> century but kept in the same distinctive parallel structure as in any of the provinces inhabited by Romanians. Until the great musical European acculturation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Western music's influences were rather isolated in Transylvania and Banat too, even if their urban centres had built plausible premises to favour inter-cultural and inter-confessional exchanges.

The smaller musical layer was the court music performed in the aristocrats' dwellings, having extensions in market towns and fairs. The fiddlers (mostly Gypsies) performed almost the music of the dominant Empire: Turkish music in Walachia and Western music in Transylvania. These foreign musical styles were minor for several centuries by both extension and impact.

So, the vicinities played a limited role in the traditional musical culture in the Romanian Principalities. The musical contiguities were pending more on time than on space; hence the unaccountable kinships between songs from distant areas discovered by Bartók<sup>6</sup>. The theories advocated by sociologists<sup>7</sup> regarding the neighbour contaminations are not confirmed in this very specific field. The alterations, be they contaminations or borrowings, did not come from the immediate neighbourhood, except in more complex social milieus, like towns under the circumstance of the loss of traditional ritual frames. As far as music is part of a resistant

<sup>3</sup> Veronica Gaspar: „Musical Culture of Minorities ...” p. 171

<sup>4</sup> Bartók Béla: *Notes on the Folk Song* p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Laurent Aubert: *The Other's Music* p. 10

<sup>6</sup> Béla Bartók: *Notes on the Folk Song*, p. 28

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Sartori: *Pluralism, Multiculturalism and the Foreigners*, p. 41

cultural embodiment, its opportunities to last are firmer. Besides, the parallel coexistence is favouring preservation. More a minor community was isolated; more the tradition was strictly kept.

At the beginning of the Modern times, the ascending trade circulation encouraged the cultural one too. During two centuries, starting from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Romanian Principalities underwent two waves of musical acculturation. The first, less lasting was coming from South-East: Turkish and Greek influence and the second was the Western acculturation (including music). This later modified in an absolute manner both cultural style and structure, ending a centennial tradition which gradually becomes a minority culture. In Transylvania, Banat and Northern Bukovina, where the communication between towns was more active, a similar process occurred earlier and smoother. As stated above, the music of the Germans was present since centuries in within the Romanian territories, but its spreading occurred only when towns and communication ways were developed. Not only the Romanian traditional music was distorted; the music of the other non-German minorities underwent a similar process: Hungarians, Serbs, Ukrainians, Polish etc. However, the loss of tradition is less severe wherever the population is isolated – as number or ethnicity.

If the sedentary minorities were neither influencing nor influenced through neighbourhood, a different condition occurred with those peculiar landless minorities: Gypsies and Jews. Especially the first had a significant contribution to spread the Romanian music. They were participating in most of the Romanian feasts (weddings, funerals or just popular meetings). The Gypsies were at the same time both tradition's keepers and renewal agents. The other semi-nomadic population furnished an important number of fiddlers – the *klezmorim*. The *klezmer* was eminently laic and used for feasts, fairs, weddings by any ethnic community spreading an eclectic repertoire made by Jewish, Russian, Polish and, especially Romanian tunes. They used to say that “more Romanian sounds the *klezmer*, more beautiful it is”<sup>8</sup>. The Romanian influence was, perhaps, the strongest and most durable of the musical styles that influenced traditional *klezmer* musicians<sup>9</sup>. Even the names of the tunes were Romanian: *Vulekhl* (Wallachian) or *Bulgarish* (from “*Bulgăreasca*”), *Hora* or *Zhok* (*Joc*), *Sirba* (*Sârba*) and, with a large extent, *Doina*. It is difficult to imagine a common feast gathering the songs of two sedentary people like, for instance, Romanian with Ukrainians. Yet this kind of melting happened when Gypsy fiddlers or *klezmorim* were involved. The landless minorities were the main actors in musical performances and the leading agents of inter-culturation processes in the Romanian society.

### Modern times

Over the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional popular and ecclesiastic musical genres have inverted the ratio. Majority or minority, the people in Romania turned toward the new style. The decline of the musical tradition was worriedly signalled by intellectuals aware of the danger to lose the national identity. The new fashion (language, harmony, melodic structure) had penetrated almost everywhere as light music, in hybrid combinations with popular themes or as classical music that soon became the educational aspiration of the emerging middle class. Even the average people's preferences were modified. Still the tradition (music, poetry, habits etc.) had already begun to be gathered and archived in the new ethnographic institutions. But the authentic folk tradition remained mostly a specialists' concern, while the real musical life, including the entertainment side, already underwent a constant process of western acculturation. The Gypsy fiddlers stepped back at the suburbs level spreading a melange of folklore and Western music, even in villages. Some of them attended the Western-

<sup>8</sup> Mark Slobin: *Fiddler on the Move: Exploring the Klezmer World*, p. 37

<sup>9</sup> Veronica Gaspar: “Musical culture of minorities...” p. 181

style musical school and became professional performers, sometimes reaching international prestige. The majority remained just fiddlers until today. A significant turn modified the Jewish people's musical preoccupations. The *klezmerim* faded out, to be found just in some little villages in the Northern Romania usually in bands, mixed together with Romanians, Gypsies etc. The Jewish population became dominant in towns and provided a huge majority of listeners and performers of Western music. They decisively contributed to the musical life in towns. The Jewish people were an active factor to spread Romanian music abroad and to bring the musical Europe in Romania. They played a weighty role for the inclusion of our country in the core of the European culture – especially in music.

The Western classical music is not – and never was – the average public's first preference. However, between the two World Wars, in Romania one could find even in modest dwellings the concern for a “proper” musical education. The concert halls crowded and the demand for music lessons was enough important that a lot of foreign music makers, teachers or performers were coming in Romania. After the World War II, together with the dislocation of an important mass form the rural zone, the decimation of the middle class and, the massive emigration of the Jewish people, the enthusiasm for the classical music started to decrease. Besides, the new ruling class was if not hostile, at least indifferent to European forms of art, and very few among them were attracted by the classical music. The rulers of Jewish origin made exception, but their power and influence did not last for long. At the end of the '60s the empty concert halls were also demonstrating the importance of the Israelite people for the musical life in Romania. At the end of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a test made by the Association “Concept” showed that just 1% of the music consumers are attending classical concerts. In less than 60 years the Romanian audience for classical music, which was one of the most numerous in Europe, became indeed insignificant. The opening toward West after '89 opened the way for the American style light music. Its entire species together with the new popular music, which is a wide spread hybrid made between Oriental style, folkloric tunes and rudiments of Western harmony. For the majority, the media spreading combined with the lack of cultural education in schools led to the fact that the ratio between these two tendencies and all other kind of music is overwhelming. The general perception is that the Gypsies are guilty for the nowadays musical map of the society. But they did not anything else, but what they always did: to spread the music in fashion (any music). Besides they are truly the most disfavoured: their traditional music, orally transmitted and not very carefully archived is practically destroyed. The other minorities used to be more careful to keep alive their cultural heritage, but recently the young generation tends to reach the average public taste; so the above-mentioned cultural heritage becomes gradually just propaganda mean.

We may conclude that the ethnical differences are no more so important; now another splitter line tends to part the society horizontally, by cultural criteria. Under a huge undifferentiated global layer, we find a thin stratum, where the cultural or the ethnical differences are still relevant. The traditions are no more a matter of national identity, but a cultural option. I think that any struggle to reduce the ratio between the specific cultures and the global subculture could be rewarding for any cultural heir.

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