

Diachronic perspectives of a multicultural traditional instrument – Cavalul Dobrogean

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Abstract: *Current ethnomusicological approaches tend to focus on subjects regarding orally transmitted folk knowledge and culture. But another well debated subject is the issue of multiculturalism in traditional societies, especially in geographical areas with a high degree of cultural interference. One such area of traditional multiculturalism is the region of Dobrogea in eastern Romania, and one of the most representative folk instruments of this multicultural heritage is the Dobrudjan Kaval. The Dobrudjan Kaval is a woodwind instrument with a complex history and an important role in traditional society. It is a type of Kaval more similar to Balkan Turkish style kaval, and very different from the Romanian „Caval”. While it played a major role in the folk music of Dobrogea until the end of the XIXth century, the Kaval started to disappear in the XXth century and it survived in only two villages until the XXist century, in the villages of Izvoarele and Cerna in Tulcea county*

This article is meant to illustrate the historical and socio-cultural evolution of the Dobrudjan kaval within the context of a multicultural traditional society. The study is based upon ethnomusicological sources, research on the ground and comparisons with different forms of the instrument from other Balkan regions.

Key-words: *Kaval, traditional music, multiculturalism, Dobrogea*

1. Introduction

It is often said that the folk music of Romania is, although diverse, still mostly similar, especially in areas with a clear ethnic Romanian majority. However, in areas of the country where there is no clear ethnic majority, this is not the case, as the music of these areas tends to be very different from the music of adjacent regions. One such example is the region of Dobrogea.

Known under many names, such as “Dacia Pontica” or “Scitia Minor”, Dobrogea is a geographical region located in eastern Romania, between the Danube River and the

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Black Sea. The population of this region, although mainly comprised of Romanians today, has been historically very diverse, with a lot of ethnic minorities such as: Turks, Tatars, Greeks, Bulgarians, Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians, jews and Aromanians, who migrated from the Balkan peninsula in multiple stages (Gibescu 2014, 87).

These multiple ethnicities that inhabited the territory of Dobrogea had an immense influence on the folk music and traditions of each other, thus creating a common dobrudjan folklore, manifested especially in multiethnic urban communities such as the cities of Tulcea, Constanța, Medgidia and Babadag. This common Dobrudjan folklore was strongly linked to Balkan and oriental folk traditions and rather different from the folk music of other regions of Romania, where both the language and customs had been somewhat standardized following the efforts of the Transylvanian School in the XIXth century. As such, when Dobrogea united with the rest of Romania in 1878, it had a very different culture from the rest of the country.

During the communist period, in the second half of the XXth century, efforts were made to standardize the folk music of Dobrogea, thus making it more similar to the folk music of the rest of Romania. These measures included banning most of the multicultural elements of Dobrudjan folk music, such as the different languages in which songs were sung (only allowing songs in Romanian, or very few songs in Turkish or Tatar) and banning of traditional instruments, such as the Gadulka, Tambura, Zurna or Bendir; and the banning of small village folk ensembles, replacing them with soviet style folk orchestras. Most of the recordings of instrumental dobrudjan music from this period are made by musicians from different regions of Romania that did not respect the traditional style of ornamentation and did not play on traditional dobrudjan style instruments. The few records of Dobrudjan artists such as Grigore Kiazim (Dobrudjan-Turkish mandolin player) or Kadriye Nurambet (Dobrudjan-Tatar folk singer) are still recorded with a folk orchestra accompaniment and not with a traditional Dobrudjan ensemble.

In this context, one of the instruments that nearly disappeared is the Dobrudjan Kaval. This type of Kaval, traditional to the region of Dobrogea is a Balkan style kaval, almost identical to instruments from Turkey and Bulgaria, and very different from the Romanian style "Caval", the Romanian style being a fipple flute with only 5 finger holes, usually tuned in A minor. The instrument survived until the XXIst century in only two villages from the north of Dobrogea, Izvoarele and Cerna from Tulcea county, however today only one traditional musician remains in the village of Izvoarele. In both these cases of the two villages, the Kaval survived as part of the folk traditions of an ethnic minority, in the case of Izvoarele it survived in Greek folklore, and in the case of Cerna, in Bulgarian and Aromanian folklore.

This article represents an analysis of the history, evolution, construction and repertoire of the dobrudjan Kaval, along with any possibilities of future perspectives.

We shall analyse the state of the instrument in the present day, using information gathered from the last traditional player of the Dobrudjan Kaval, Fotea Dobre, born in 1949 in the village of Izvoarele and currently living in the city of Tulcea.

2. Brief historical review

The Kaval is a traditional woodwind instrument common in Balkan and oriental cultures and with a rich and complex history marked by many intercultural influences. In the wider area of modern-day Romania, the kaval is considered a remnant of oriental cultural interference and a symbol of the Balkanic cultural connection (Papană 2019, 112). In Dobrogea, the tradition of the kaval took on a new meaning, representing Dobrogea's connection to eastern folk cultures, separating it from the traditional culture of the rest of Romania.

The oriental roots of the kaval can be seen from the etymology of its name. Kaval is a word of Arabic roots, coming from the Arabic word "qwl" meaning "to speak", or "to prophesize". This linguistic root produced word „qawwal", meaning singer³, but also the style of music qawwali and the Arabic folk instrument "Kawala", a possible ancestor of the Kaval. The modern form of the instrument originates in the Anatolian Peninsula and was spread to the Balkans during either the migration of the Bulgars, or of the Ottoman Turks. During the Ottoman period, the Kaval was seen as a rural version of the Turkish Ney, used in Ottoman classical music (Krader, 1969).

The presence of this type of Kaval in Dobrogea can be explained through multiple theories. The Romanian ethnomusicologists Gheorghe Oprea and Larisa Agapie claim that the instrument is native to Dobrogea, basing this belief upon fragments of a bone flute found in the archaeological site of the ancient city of Histria (Oprea 1983, 41). The same opinion is held by Romanian ethnomusicologist Gheorghe Ciobanu who claims that the instrument is Thracian in origin and was later adopted by the migrating Turkic tribes (Ciobanu 1992, 20). The ethnic Greeks from Izvoarele claim that they are the ones who brought the instrument from the north of Greece to Dobrogea, when they migrated around the year 1830 when they founded the village of Izvoarele, originally named Alibichioi (Niculache 2020, 30). Although this type of kaval is common amongst the Greeks from the Thrace region, the most likely theory regarding its road to Dobrogea is that it was probably brought by the ethnic Bulgarians, during an earlier migration. This theory can easily be proven by the historical presence of the Dobrudjan Kaval in other ethnic Bulgarian villages in

³ *** Caval – the Romanian 5 holes pipe, 2018, <https://eliznik.org.uk/traditions-in-romania/traditional-music/pipes/caval-the-romanian-5-hole-pipe/>, accessed on 26.06.2025.

Tulcea county such as Cerna or Vișina. Even Izvoarele had among its founders 7 Bulgarian families, so it is possible that they gave the instrument to the Greeks.

3. Particularities regarding the construction and playing technique

The dobrudjan kaval is an end blown flute, with no fipple, similar to other oriental style flutes such as the Ney. It is usually constructed from plum or cornel wood. Although Bulgarian varieties tend to be constructed from more types of wood such as maple, linden, or even types of metal (Tupanjanin et al. 2023, 1).

It is constructed from three segments that connect to each other to put together the full instrument. From the kavals that we observed in Dobrogea we can determine that these connections have a role only in the transportation of the instrument, due to the fact that they are fixed, and cannot slide in order to help with the tuning as would be the case for a concert flute, for example. Most of the time these connection points are strengthened with rings made of deer antler or metal, so the wood doesn't crack.

The Kaval has a total of 12 holes, 8 finger holes and 4 tuning holes. These tuning holes, placed on the lower segment of the instrument, would have been often partially covered in beeswax to ensure a more precise tuning. The 8 finger holes are placed on the middle segment of the instrument, 7 holes on the front and a thumb hole on the back, in the upper part. Unlike the Bulgarian Kaval, the dobrudjan Kaval has a thinner bore, the internal diameter of the instrument being only around 16 mm. The bore is cylindrical, so the diameter remains constant along the length of the tube. Although these parameters can vary due to the fact that there is no standardized form of the instrument.

The playing technique of the kaval is similar to other types of end-blown flutes. The sound is produced by blowing air with a high pressure towards a sharpened edge at the top of the instrument. The kaval requires a special embouchure similar to the way one holds his lips while whistling. The kaval is held at a 45° angle from the centre of the body, but the playing position can vary also from musician to musician. Unlike fipple flutes, the kaval must be held constantly in its proper position to maintain the sound. The changing of the position of the kaval on the lips can also alter the tuning.

The Dobrudjan kaval has a range of two octaves and a perfect fourth, or a perfect fifth, depending on the instrument. The register of the instrument is changed by changing the blowing pressure, a higher pressure is used for the higher register and a lower pressure is used for the lower register.



Fig.1. *The range and scale of the dobrudjan Kaval*

The sound and the scales that this instrument can produce are unique in the landscape of traditional Romanian music. The semi-chromatic scale of 11 notes per octave can produce different musical structures based around which sound the player chooses to represent the tonic of the melodic line (Papană 2019, 113). This unique display of the finger holes is able to create multiple modal scales creating a bridge between European modes and Turkish maqam scales.

The lowest note that a kaval can produce, with all the finger holes covered is considered the fundamental sound from which the tuning of the instrument is derived. As such, a Kaval whose lowest note is D will be considered a Kaval „in D”. The most common type of Kaval is the Kaval in D, however there are longer Kavals tuned in C or B flat and shorter ones tuned in E flat or F.

4. Ground Research Regarding the Dobrudjan Kaval

Due to the fact that in the modern day the dobrudjan Kaval is no longer used in traditional communities and in professional folk ensembles it is replaced by the panflute or the clarinet, it is very difficult to identify potential traditional musicians that still play the instrument. We have collected information on the ground and centralized it, organizing the information in information sheets. Recordings were made with the traditional repertoire discovered on the ground in order to observe the regional specificity of the ornamentation and technique; and to observe the different melodies performed within the context of traditional events of the village life. The main objective of the ground research was the identification of traditional methods of construction, sound, acoustics and repertoire of the dobrudjan Kaval.

Following the research, we managed to identify one of the last traditional musicians who play the dobrudjan Kaval, Fotea Dobre, born in 1949 in the village of Izvoarele, from who the majority of the information was collected. However, he was never a professional kaval player, his profession was auto-mechanic. We have also identified field recordings with a folk ensemble from the village of Cerna who have used the instrument in the past.

4.1. The Kaval's role in XXth century rural society

Reminiscing about his childhood, Fotea Dobre told us that the instrument was very common in Izvoarele in the 1950's especially with the older generations. He remembers at least 50 traditional musicians that played the Kaval, especially from his grandfather's generation. The profession of the majority of men in Izvoarele around that time was sheep herding, and the majority of shepherds also played the Kaval in their free time. The village of Izvoarele was rather isolated from other communities in Dobrogea and at that time it was a majority ethnic Greek community with a unique folk music tradition.

Later, Mr. Dobre told us about his father's generation. His father, Vangheloe Dobre (b.1926 – d.2010) was the last professional kaval player in the village. As a profession, Vanghelie Dobre was a tailor, but also specialized in music, playing music at different traditional events, part of the village life, such as weddings and celebrations. He was also the leader of a semi-professional Kaval ensemble in Izvoarele, along with 7 other kaval players. The ensemble became quite successful in the 1970's having concerts all around Tulcea county and appearing in the concerts of Cănaclul Flacăra, a major cultural movement for young generations in 1970's Romania. Vanghelie Dobre also played in a wedding ensemble alongside a bagpipe, accordion and bendir.



Fig. 2. *The kaval's of Fotea Dobre, inherited from his father*

Vanghelie Dobre never recorded his music, only three video recordings of him exist from 2009, made by a team from the ethnography museum in Tulcea.

Most of the instruments played by the older generations from Izvoarele were artisanal instruments, not meant for professional music. However, the instruments used by Vanghelie Dobre and his ensemble were of much better quality, built to be in tune with each other by a famous Kaval maker from Izvoarele named Gheorghe Leonid.

After the fall of communism, younger generations of villagers from Izvoarele started to leave the village and move to larger cities such as Tulcea or Constanța. This represented a breaking point with tradition, most of the younger generations abandoning the Greek language and Greek folk customs and as

such the kaval was left behind, replaced by other more popular instruments such as the clarinet or saxophone.

When Vanghelie Dobre passed away in 2010, the dobrudjan kaval was considered extinct, him being the last professional player of the instrument. Fotea Dobre told us that even though he started to learn the Kaval from his father during his childhood he started practicing more seriously after he retired around 2012. As such he has forgotten a lot of the tunes that his father used to play, and although some of the tunes and playing techniques were passed down to him, the profession of Kaval player has been lost. Most of the instruments that older people in the village had disappeared and thus the dobrudjan Kaval is an almost extinct instrument in the XXIst century.

4.2. Playing techniques

When talking about the playing techniques of the dobrudjan kaval we discovered that the blowing is one of the most important aspects. The traditional way of doing vibrato for slower songs is by alternating blowing harder and softer, as one would do for tremolo. Also, since the Kaval is an end blown flute, it is very hard to separate notes by tonguing, like on other woodwind instruments. As such, the note separation is achieved by the movement of the fingers using ornaments such as cuts, rolls, trills and mordents to articulate different notes. This gives the Kaval a continuous sound, similar to the bagpipe. The traditional way of playing is with growling, to make a low humming sound with your throat at the same time as you blow. This gives the Kaval a harsher and louder sound. In the past this technique was used to help the instrument project better in open spaces before amplification. The Kaval has a decently large range for a folk flute and as such the sound quality changes with the different registers in which one plays. The lower register produces a soft warm tone, the middle register produces a strong, loud and full tone, and the upper register produces a very thin and shrill sound, similar to a panflute.

In the few video recordings that we managed to find we could observe that there is no standard position to hold the instrument. Some players hold it on their right side and others on their left.

4.2.A short analysis of the repertoire

After analysing the bibliography and the information provided to us by Mr. Fotea Dobre, we can determine that the repertoire of the dobrudjan Kaval contains two types of songs: dance tunes of Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish or Aromanian origin; and

slow lament style songs where the Kaval was used to accompany the voice. In the instrumental repertoire collected from the Dobre family we could observe a strong intercultural element, the tunes having influences from the folk traditions of many dobрудjan ethnicities. Thus, we have encountered dances with possible Bulgarian origin like the *geampara*, similar to the Bulgarian *rachenitsa*; dances of Romanian origin such as the *sârba*; and dances with a possible Greek or Aromanian origin such as the *paidușca* and *macancuța*. There are also many tunes for dances that Mr. Doble simply called *horă*. This is a generic name representing the choreography rather than the music, because the term *Horă*, or *Horo* in Bulgarian, simply means “circle dance”.

Paidușca

Izvoarele

culeasă de la Fotea Dobre



This dance is a clear example of multicultural elements in the music of Dobrogea, as it has characteristics of multiple folk traditions. The ternary rhythm is inspired by Aromanian music and the form is inspired by Bulgarian music. It has a ternary form ABB_1C and the scale changes between the melodic phrases. The first two phrases utilize a *hicaz makam* pentachord (a minor scale with an augmented second interval between the second and third degrees of the scale), starting on E, and the last phrase, uses a *Çârgâh makam* pentachord (corresponding to the major scale in western music) with the tonic on A and with a cadence on the second degree of the scale.

Moving over to the Kaval ensemble in Cerna, we can see a lot more Bulgarian influence in their music. Unfortunately, they only recorded one song, a dance tune with the rhythm of *geampara*. A typical dance rhythm in both Dobrogea and Bulgaria.

This tune also utilizes a modal scale based around pentachords. We can observe that the tune has a binary form AA_1B and as it was the case of the *Paidușca*, the scale changes with each melodic phrase. In this case we are dealing with the upper and lower pentachords of a Dorian scale with the tonic on A.

Geampara

Cerna

Grupul de cavalagii din Cerna



The first section utilizes the lower pentachord (A, B, C, D, E), but in a higher register, whereas the second section utilizes the upper pentachord (D, E, F#, G, A), but in a lower register. This is a very representative element of Bulgarian folk dance tunes, that use the middle note as the tonic. This tune has an aksak rhythm of 7/16 (divided in 2+2+3), a rhythm of Bulgarian origin, very common in Dobrogea. This melody was recorded by a group of three kaval players. After a careful analysis of the repertoire, we can observe the abundance of multicultural elements that the music of the dobrodjan Kaval used to have. It was an instrument well suited for all the styles of folk music in Dobrogea, incorporating many aspects of Turkish, Bulgarian, Greek, Aromanian and Romanian music.

5. Conclusions

The great historical tragedy of the dobrodjan Kaval is that it was never recorded when professional musicians were still alive. The instrument never appeared on traditional music records and there are also very few semi-professional recordings of the Kaval. The only recordings that do exist are: a recording of the Kaval group in Cerna, as part of the documentary "România muzicii tradiționale" and three short recordings made by the museum of ethnography in Tulcea with Vanghelie Dobre (Fotea Dobre's father). As such, the majority of the repertoire and traditional playing techniques are most likely lost and this makes any reconstruction efforts very difficult.

Today, we consider the dobrodjan kaval an extinct cultural heritage, but one that can still be revitalized. And even though the instrument has survived only in isolated communities until the XXIst century, as a reminder of Dobrogea's archaic past and in deep contrast with its modernization; there is no denying that the Kaval has played a major role in both the history of the Greek and Bulgarian communities of Romania (Buchanan, 2006), but also in the traditional soundscape of Dobrogea.

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