

## **PLUGUŞORUL (“LITTLE PLOUGH”) AND SEMĂNATUL (“SOWING”) – MUSIC CATEGORIES BELONGING TO CAROL SINGING AS A FOLKLORE GENRE. AREA OF DÂMBOVIŢA**

**C. BOGHICI<sup>1</sup> S. BOGHICI<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** *The Romanian carol is still enjoying a great popularity, appearing as a great variety of customs, traditions and faiths transmitted from generation to generation. The customs called Pluguşorul and Semănatul are part of the winter repertoire and take place between 24 December and 7 January, belonging to the carol genre.*

*The customs related to the archaic plowing and sowing are some of the oldest and most beautiful Romanian traditions, pursuing to assure - through imitative magic - the abundance and welfare of the Romanian villages' inhabitants. Their origins get lost in the darkness of history - coming probably from the Thracians, Agathyrsi (the Dacian's ancestors), and Getho-Dacians, whose musical talent was mentioned by the great scholars of those times.*

*While Pluguşorul (Little Plough) and Plugul Mare (Big Plough) are practiced on New Year's Eve, Semănatul (Sowing) takes place on the following day, on Saint Basil's Day, marking in this way the beginning of a new agricultural year, through magical acts meant to trigger the earth's fertility. The organization in groups, the ritual, the structural elements (lyrics, melody, rhythm, ambitus, archaic sound systems), the props (petadou /friction drum, oxen, plough) suggest the whole unfolding of the agricultural works in the rural archaic communities, starting with plowing, sowing, reaping and grinding of the wheat out of which the bagels that reward the carol singers are made.*

*The melodies of the Pluguşor (Little Plough) (Muntenia), very similar to those of the Christmas Carol, highlight, from all the perspectives, the belonging of these ceremonials to the archaic Romanian spirituality stratum: simple melody, low ambitus, prepentatonic and pentatonic music scales, slow rhythm, giusto-syllabic in character, tetrapodic versification system, with or without refrain.*

**Key words:** *carol, Pluguşorul (Little Plough), function.*

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<sup>1</sup> Departament Arts, Valahia University of Targoviste

<sup>2</sup> Lyeum of Arts „Domniţa Bălaşa”, Târgovişte.

## 1. Introduction

The winter repertoire belongs to the calendar-related traditions marking certain stages having to do with aspects of the traditional rural life. The folklore events taking place between December 24 and January 7 take on a great diversity of shapes, rejoicing the Romanians' souls, whether they live in the rural or the urban area. Regarding the origin of these traditions, the Romanian ethnomusicologists and folklorists have demonstrated the carol's belonging to the Getho-Dacian culture, a superior culture compared to that of other<sup>3</sup> peoples of the European area, on which came the successive influences of the Romans, Slavs and of other neighboring peoples. In the work *Substratul mitologic al sărbătorilor de iarnă la români și la slavi* (The Mythological Substratum of the Winter Celebrations with the Romanians and the Slavs), Petru Caraman highlights the pagan, pre-Christian substratum of the winter celebrations and also the superposition of their period of celebration with that of the Roman *Saturnalia* and the *Calendae* of Janus<sup>4</sup>. As it results from the specialized studies, the solstice moment supposed the beginning of a new agrarian cycle, celebrated by most of the pagan peoples through noisy parties, rich dinners, mutual gifts, wishes of prosperity and happiness, mock weddings, singing and dancing, with or without masks<sup>5</sup>.

After the Christianity was declared a State religion, the Church tried to forbid these barbarian customs by substituting them with the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ (25 December) which did not actually have the effect waited for. Of the

intention of the Church to do away with these pagan folklore customs testify documents such as: the Church Council of Trulan (693), Nestor's Chronicles (1067), G. Heltai (1550), A. Mathesius (1647), the Order of the Viscount of Deva (1783), and etc.<sup>6</sup> This explains the parallel circulation of lay and religious carols, or of carols whose literary content is religious, yet their music is lay.

About the existence of a strong spiritual life of the people living in the Carpathian geographic area and in the neighboring areas, considered by the historians as being our ancestors (the Thracians, Agathyrsi, Getho-Dacians) spoke great scholars of the Antiquity: Herodotus, Plutarch, Strabo, etc. In their writings they mention the Dacians' skillfulness in music, their interpretative qualities and their artistry in manufacturing music instruments<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. The carol (in Romanian: *Colindul*) – a representative genre for winter traditions

Out of the great variety and richness of the winter customs, the carol stands out as the most representative and appreciated genre, both in the traditional Romanian communities and in the urban settlements. The researchers consider that this term comes either from the *Roman Calendae* or from the Slav *Koleda* (the Romanian *corinda* = the English *carol*).<sup>8</sup> On the Romanian territory, this genre is known under different names: *colind*, *colindă*, *corindă*, *cântec*, *cântec de fereastră*, *cântec de dobă*, *a dobiei*, *pitârăi*, *cântec de pitârăi* etc. (namely: carol, song, drum song).

<sup>3</sup> T. Ghencea...

<sup>4</sup> Caraman, P. *Substratul mitologic al sărbătorilor de iarnă la români și la slavi*, Ed. Minerva, Bucureşti, p.104

<sup>5</sup> *Dictionar de termeni muzicali*

<sup>6</sup> Idem p. 105

<sup>7</sup> Cosma, O.L. *Hronicul muzical românesc*, Ed. Academiei RSR, 1961, p

<sup>8</sup> The academician Al. Rosetti clarifies the origin of the term *colind* (carol), taken over by the Romanian ethnomusicologists.

The carol is a kind of ancient ritual with an agrarian character, with the function of oration, congratulation, carried out as part of a complex ceremony, which varies from region to region.<sup>9</sup>

Carol singing takes place in large groups, of adults, children, or mixed, the children's groups being usually accompanied by one or several adults. The traditional form of organization of the carol singers' group has strict rules (the “administrator” /*vătaful*, “cashier”/*casierul*, “carol singer”/*urătorul* etc. are chosen); the group members gather at the house of one of them to learn the repertory, the moments of the ritual etc., norms very often encountered in the Romanian ritual customs (*călușul* / “the little horse”, *steagul/geavrelele* / “the pole of handkerchiefs”).

Two great Romanian carol types have been delineated: 1. with animal mask (the goat/*capra*, the ram/*cerbul*, the bear/*ursul*, the pig/*vasilca*) and 2. the actual children's and adult's Christmas carol, religious theatre (*Herods/Irozii*, *Bethlehem/vicleimul*), lay popular<sup>10</sup> theatre.

Beginning with the Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve (sometimes at sunrise) the carol singers' group sings or shouts verses at people's window or in people's houses, being rewarded with gifts (meat, drinks, fruits, bagels) depending on their age. Sometimes the carol singing ends by an adults' party, which reminds of the Roman *saturnalia*.<sup>11</sup>

In the Romanian carol, two types of carol can be encountered, an old carol, still present in the south of Transylvania, in Moldova, north Muntenia and western Dobrogea, the new one being more recent.

The one or the other may be dominant in some folklore areas, yet more often than not they occur simultaneously.

### 3. *Plugușorul (Little Plough)*

Starting from the hypothesis that the New Year used to coincide with the beginning of spring with the East-European peoples, which took over, from generation to generation, the carol singing tradition from the Romans<sup>12</sup>, this explains the existence of some specifically agrarian elements and practices (spring works) in most Romanian carols (*sorcova*, lay carols).

One of the oldest<sup>13</sup> and most beautiful Romanian traditions practiced on New Year's Eve is the *Plugușor (Little Plough)*, defined as “an old fertility rite of the Romanian folklore, which has gone through numerous overlappings with other genres and influences, having numerous appearances nowadays”<sup>14</sup>. This custom has an archaic agricultural substratum aiming to assure, through imitative magic, an abundance of wheat and the welfare of the inhabitants of the Romanian villages. According to the geographic area, for the *Plugușor (Little Plough)* other names are also used, such as: *uratul*, *cu plugul*, *cu Plugușorul*, *pluguleț*, *plugurel*, names that catch something of the main structural elements, the great vitality and dissemination of this tradition<sup>15</sup>. It is

<sup>9</sup> *Dicționar de termeni muzicali*, coordinator St. Prof. univ. Zona Vancea, EȘP, București 1987, p.104

<sup>10</sup> Comișel, E.-*Folclor muzical românesc*, EDP, București, 1967, p.

<sup>11</sup> Rucsanda, M, *Obiceiuri de Crăciun și Anul Nou din zona Muscel-Argeș*, Lugoj, 2006, p.1-10

<sup>12</sup> The rituals carried out by the Getho-Dacians and dedicated to their different deities (Zalmoxis, Apolodor, Artemida, Dionysos), expressed the joy of nature's renewal or harvesting and included songs, games, praises, thanks, the earth was purified from sorcery using olive branches that represented the force of vegetation.

<sup>13</sup> Xenophon speaks about the meaning of the ritual of the plough and of the cultivation of the land, describing the ritual called “Carpaia”.

<sup>14</sup> *Dicționar*

<sup>15</sup> Adăscăliței, V., *Istoria unui obicei: Plugușorul*, Ed. Junimea, Iași, 1987, p.27

practiced in almost all the areas of the country, more intensely in Moldova, Muntenia, Dobrogea, and partially in Oltenia and Transylvania.

In the traditional Romanian communities, the beginning of a new year in agriculture is marked by magical acts having the role of triggering the land's fertility. The texts of the *Pluguşor* (*Little Plough*) present the whole unfolding of the agricultural works, beginning with plowing, sowing, reaping, grinding, up to the making of the bagels used to reward the carol singers. They organize themselves into groups of 4 to 8 children, who choose a carol singer out of the children who speak clearly and have a strong voice, a cashier, a man carrying the petadou /friction drum – props encountered more rarely today. The friction drum is a membranophone instrument made up of a trug/tub (a sort of bucket made of wood, shaped like a small cylindrical wooden barrel) whose wooden bottom is replaced by a veal/sheep membrane, well spread, through the middle of which a series of horsetail hairs were passed, fastened inside by means of a knot. This horsetail hair being watered and passed successively through the hands of a member of a carol singers' group, makes a sound like that of an ox (in Romanian: *buhai*, which gave the name of this traditional object). While one of the children holds the friction drum, another pulls the humid hairs and a third carries a water vase to assure the permanent watering of the hair. Another member recites / sings the oration while the others sound their whips, their bells or express the vocal interventions situated in between the orations: *Mânati măi flăcăi/Hăi, hăi*. At the end of the oration, the carol singers receive gifts from the host to whom they sang/recited their carols under the form of fruits, bagels, meat or money.

In many zones of Muntenia, a miniature plough is created, decorated with handmade towels, with multicolored ribbons, and bells; by moving it, an acoustic support is provided to the oration being recited or sung. Being accompanied by a melody similar to a carol, this habit comes to enjoy a great appreciation and popularity. This constitutes at the same time a particularity specific for the *Pluguşor* (*Little Plough*) of Muntenia.

#### **4. Structural elements of the *Pluguşor* (*Little Plough*) that is sung**

In order to determine some of the coordinates of the *Pluguşor* (*Little Plough*) that is sung, we selected a number of 9 musical items, out of which 6 were obtained by means of our own research in the villages of Dâmboviţa County and two are part of the collections of Emilia Comişel and Gheorghe Cucu gathered from the area of Muntenia (Dâmboviţa).

Throughout history, over the melody and the text of the *Pluguşor* (*Little Plough*), different strata have been added; so that what we witness today is the contemporary age of an archaic layer of Romanian spirituality. The melodies are simple, syllabic, very similar to the carols' ones, sometimes being undistinguishable from one another. The melody advances gradually, with rare perfect tierce, quart and quinte leaps, generally having a descending profile, and at other times a slightly arched one. The ambitus corresponds to archaic scales: tierces (ex. no. 3), pentachords (ex. no. 7) and hexachords (ex. no. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8), all diatonic, uncontaminated by the oriental influences or by the influences of uother neighboring peoples, a phenomenon encountered frequently in the Romanian music folklore, especially in the modern one. The particularly expressive, regular

rhythm belongs to the giusto-syllabic system, characteristic for the archaic Romanian carols.

Out of the analysis of the examples presented above one can distinguish two typological categories: one with refrain (ex. 1 no. 6) and others without refrain, which reinforces the conclusion of the belonging of the melody *Plușor* (*Little Plough*) to that of actual carol. The stanzas are made up of one, two or rarely three different sentences followed by a refrain. The latter is situated in the examples under analysis after each verse in turn (ex. 1, 2). The versification is octosyllabic in the stanza and the refrain varies from 2 to 12 syllables<sup>16</sup>; the refrain of the first example is made up of 5 syllables, while the sixth belongs to the hexasyllabic system.

Going back to the unfolding of this tradition, we have mentioned that the *Plușor* (*Little Plough*) can appear either as a song (Muntenia) or as versified orations (in the rest of the Romanian geographic areas)<sup>17</sup>, that is why it is also called *uratul*.

While the text of the carol that is sung is short<sup>18</sup>, the recited one is ample (ex. S,F Marian).

### 5. *Semănatul* (*Sowing*) and the *Plugul Mare* (*Big Plough*)

Just like the *Plușor* (*Little Plough*), the tradition called *Semănatul* (*Sowing*) originates from the basic occupation of the inhabitants of the Romanian lands. The cultivation of wheat in the world of the Antiquity, say the researchers, was a common activity for all the European

peoples, and in Dacia it was attested even by personalities of those times: Crito, Ovid, Herodotus, Theophrastus, Pliny the Elder, etc.<sup>19</sup>.

We consider that we should mention that, between the *Big Plough* and the *Sowing*, no clear delimitations have been made; moreover, according to certain opinions, the *Big Plough* would have followed immediately after the *Sowing*, as the two must have formed a unitary ceremony<sup>20</sup>; according to other researchers, first comes the plowing (*Big Plough*) and on the next day, the *Sowing* would follow. It is very possible that they take place just so, with either the *Plowing* tradition taking place on New Year's Eve and the *Sowing* following the next day, or with the two traditions taking place simultaneously. If we consider this hint, we should take into account the fact that on Saint Basil's Day (a great Christian celebration), people do not work; and we know that the Romanian people respects its traditions/beliefs, including the religious ones, with great care. If we judge things from the other angle, the normal logic makes us believe that both of these traditions occur simultaneously; moreover, they could be one and the same tradition. Let us not forget the customs related to agriculture; once the land ploughed, it is humid, so that an immediate sowing assures a fast germination of the wheat, and so a rich production. An authentic folklore fact determines us to support this hypothesis. 12 years ago, in Pierșinari Village, Dâmbovița County, we collected this tradition that was taking place

<sup>16</sup> Oprea Gheorghe, Agapie, Larisa, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>17</sup> Marian, S,FI, in *op. cit.* notes that in the areas under analysis, the *Plușor* is not sung like the other carols; it is proclaimed and turns into an oration. pp.75-76

<sup>18</sup> See the texts ex. No.

<sup>19</sup> Belciu, C. *Ocupațiile geto-dacilor în lumina literaturii antice în Revista de etnografie și folclor*, XIII, 1968, nr.1., p 64

<sup>20</sup> In the villages of Dâmbovița County, *Plugul Mare* (*The Big Plough*) (plowing) is followed by sowing as we have described it in the doctoral thesis *Ipostaze ale folclorului muzical dâmbovițean în contemporaneitate*, scientific advisor Prof. Ghe. Firca, Iași, 2005, p.

simultaneously (the plowing and the sowing).

Regarding the makeup of the carol singers' group, its configuration varies from one area to the next; it includes only young men or adults, children or a mixed group of men and women. Again, we refer to the conditions of the archaic plowing, the man (the head of the family or another person hired especially for this occupation, leads the oxen, someone else presses on the plough's horns, to make a large furrow and the woman sows the wheat behind the plough. A supplementary argument to what we have stated is the confirmation of the woman's presence as part of this ritual in the old writings, as it is shown by the work of Cornelia Belcin, an author that refers to the writings of Plato and Strabo who speak about the "cultivation of the land in the Thracian world, an activity in which an important role went to the woman."<sup>21</sup>

In the folklore areas where the traditions of the *Plough* or of the *Sowing* have been signaled unaccompanied by specific melodies, they can be accompanied by different instruments under the form of popular bands interpreting the dance song *Muşamaua*, actually encountered as well in the dance called *Capra / The Goat* (Moldova), and in Bukovina was recorded "the Doina played by the friction drum that accompanies the *Pluguşor (Little Plough)* (here as plowing tradition)"<sup>22</sup>

We noticed another folklore aspect with unpublished elements in the *Big Plough (Plugul Mare)* also recorded in our doctoral thesis<sup>23</sup>, introducing two new elements in the unfolding and structure of the Romanian ritual of *Plowing (Aratul)* and *Sowing (Semănatul)*. Consequently, the woman's presence, but especially the

specifically carol-like melody accompanying this tradition gives it uniqueness and documentary value<sup>24</sup>.

Unfortunately, today, the *Big Plough* and the *Sowing* are no longer practiced in the villages of Dâmboviţa County, but it remained in the traditional collective memory, this custom being practiced nevertheless by children in their miniature variant, which suggests the guiding of cattle during agricultural work: *Hi, boilor, hi!* (Go, oxen, go!).

## 6. Conclusions

The diversity, the richness, the way of taking place, the archaism and the spectacular aspect of all the winter traditions have determined many of the researchers of the Romanian folklore to study and emit pertinent opinions with the character of theories on the folklore phenomena in general and especially on the carol as a music genre. The first references to the Romanian agrarian traditions belong to the scholar D. Cantemir in *Descriptio Moldaviae*, who presents and appreciates the origin of the Romanian carol: "the carol corresponds to the old Roman carols"<sup>25</sup>, an idea taken over and later on analyzed in detail by V. Alecsandri. Soon after, Gh. Dem. Teodorescu refers to the deity called Saturn and his wife Ops, considered to be the first discoverers of wheat. In their honor, the Romans celebrated the *Opalia*, which took place after the Saturnalia.

<sup>21</sup> Belcin, C., *Ocupațiile daco-geților în lumina literaturii antice* in *Revista de etnografie și folclor*, XIII, (1968, nr.1, p.64)

<sup>22</sup> Adăscăliței, V., *op.cit.*, p.30.

<sup>23</sup> Boghici, C., *op.cit.*, pp. 169-172

<sup>24</sup> In other villages of Dâmboviţa County, this tradition has preserved its unfolding, without being accompanied by its own melody (Runcu, Măneşti, Râul Alb, Pietroşiţa Răciu, Gura Şuţii, Mircea Vodă)

<sup>25</sup> Cantemir, D., *Descrierea Moldovei* translation by Ghe. Guţu, Bucureşti 1973, p. 343

IN-TR\_O ZI DE SAR-BA-TOA-RE, DA DOAM-NE, DOAM-NE TRE-CE UN IN -  
GER CA - LA - RE DA DOAM - NE DOAM - NE

Fig. 1. *Plușorul* – Dâmbovița  
(Colecția Constantina Boghici)

MAI-NA A\_\_ NUL SE `NO - \_ IES-TE, PLU-GU-SO-RUL SE POR-NES-TE  
HAI, HAI, HAI.

Fig. 2. *Plușor* – Dâmbovița  
(Colecția Constantina Boghici)

MAI-NE A-NUL SE `NO IES-TE PLU-GU SO-RUL SE POR-NES-TE.

Fig. 3. *Plușor* – Dâmbovița  
(Colecția Constantina Boghici)

MAI-NE A -NUL SE\_N NO\_ IES - TE PLU - GU - SO RUL CU DOI BO - I  
PLU-GU--SO-RUL SE POR\_\_NES -- TE  
MA - NATI MAI, MAI HAI, HAI HAI HAI.

Fig. 4. *Plușor* – Dâmbovița  
(Colecția Constantina Boghici)



MAI - NE A - NUL SE - NO - IES - TE

PLU - GU - SO - RUL SE POR - NE - STE

PLU - GU - SOR CU PA - TRU BOL,

PLU - GU - SOR MA - NAT DE NOI.

Fig. 5. *Pluguşor – Dâmboviţa* (Colecţia Constantina Boghici)


Măi-ne a-nul se-noi-eş-te, Dă-i Dom-nu-lui Doam-ne, Plu-gu-şorul se por-neş-te Dă-i Dom-nu-lui Doam-ne

Si a - prin-de-o lu mâ - na - re Dă-i Dom - nu- lui Doam - ne

Fig. 6. *Pluguşor – Dâmboviţa* (Colecţia Constantina Boghici)


Ia scu - laţi, scu - la - ţi Măi bo - eri bo - ga - ţi

Ce tot vă ui - ta - ţi  
Pe - o gu - ră de va - le  
Spre soa - re ră - sa - re

Fig. 7. *Pluguşor – Dâmboviţa* (Gh. Cucu)



Fig. 8. *Pluguşor – Vârtoaptele- Bucureşti* (Em.Comişel)Fig. 9. *Plugul Mare*  
(Colecția Constantina Boghici)

Therefore, the abovementioned author states that the *Pluguşor* (Little Plough), one of the most beautiful and oldest Romanian traditions, represent to this day the Roman celebrations called *Opalia*<sup>26</sup>.

Also concerning the Roman origin of the *Pluguşor*, Tache Papahagii supports his theory by demonstrating from a linguistic perspective that "The Romanian agriculture is, in its entire essence, of Latin origin"<sup>27</sup>, finding the equivalents of the Romanian words related to agricultural works in Latin (*camp* = *campus*, *a ara* = *arare*, *a înjuga* = *injugare*, *boi* = *bovis*, *a semăna* = *seminare*, *sămânță* = *sementia*, *grâu* = *granum*, *secară* = *secale*, etc.). Studying and analyzing the semantics of the words related to agriculture,

<sup>26</sup> Teodorescu, Gh. Dem., *Încercări critice asupra unor credințe, datini și moravuri ale poporului român*, (Critical tests on some beliefs, traditions and mores of the Romanian people) Bucureşti, 1874, p.56

<sup>27</sup> Papahagii, T., *Mic dicționar folcloric*, (Little folk dictionary), Bucureşti, 1979, pp. 391-398

T. Papahagii goes even further with this idea, concluding that "between the Romans' *Semenativae feriae* and the Daco-Romanian *Pluguşor* there is an incontestable similarity, if not even a certain identity."<sup>28</sup>

The great Romanian musicologist Ghe. Ciobanu, following the researches he carried out, reinforces this conclusion in the study *Originea muzicii poporului roman* (The Origin of the Romanian people's Music) declaring that "The Romanian popular music is Dacian through the musical treasury inherited and through the musical sensitivity transmitted and Latin as its language, through the structural organization of the melody and of the rhythm and the preference for certain intervals. Therefore, to the birth of this creation have contributed – as to the birth of the Romanian people, the two mother peoples: the Dacians and the Romans. Consequently, we could state that the Romanian popular music is, next to the Romanian language, the most national creation of the Romanian people."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem

<sup>29</sup> Ciobanu, Gh, *Studii de etnomuzicologie și bizantinologie* (Studies of Ethnomusicology and Byzantinology), Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, Bucureşti, 1974, p. 12

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