

## HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS OF THE FIGURATIONS PHENOMENON PRESENT IN THE INSTRUMENTAL FOLK MUSIC IN TRANSYLVANIA

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**Abstract:** *Figuration is a characteristic phenomenon of instrumental folk music interpretation in Transylvania. The specialized literature discovers the presence of figuration in European cult music from the 16th to the 17th centuries. In the same period the integration of the Gipsy fiddler into the folk tradition took place. The phenomenon with different names from different areas and centuries is largely similar to the folk phenomenon of today. The figurations are manifest within developed variations, together with them being present in the phenomenon of improvisation as well. This manner of interpretation is maintained in the playing of the instrumental music of Transylvania, and it is reminiscent of a practice largely prevalent throughout the whole of Europe from times long past.*

**Keywords:** *figurations, Gipsy fiddlers, Transylvania, European links.*

The present paper is part of a larger work, in which the research of the figurative variations of the Tarafs from Transylvania was considered. The research was concentrated on the repertoire of the Transylvanian fiddlers, played at the events of the Hungarian community.

Sárosi notes that the integration of the rural area gipsy fiddlers into the folk tradition is made steadily starting with the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century, and for the last two centuries they are the ones who have renewed, enhanced and kept the instrumental part of this tradition. [6, p.

13.] Moreover, the fiddlers with great virtuosity have been known since the time when they began to be involved with the evolution of European music. From a brochure dating back to 1683 we discover that, the Hungarian fiddlers (they are obviously talking about gipsies) use very well studied passages, repeated two or three times (*"Die Ungarischen Geiger [...] verbleiben bei einer wol gefasten und erlernten auch wohl anstandigen Leuffel so etwa 2. oder 3. mal repetiren."*), and they are distinguished by using rapid figurations. [8, p. 225.]

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Pávai shows that the first sources which refer to the use of the violin as an accompaniment instrument for the folk dance appear in the late 16th century [5, p. 55-56.], which is important because, as also shown by Sachs, instruments spread together with the music played on them. (*"Instruments have travelled with their music."*) [6, p. 14.] Sárosi finds that the modern violin becomes very popular in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, both with the Hungarian and in neighboring or more distant countries. [6, p. 28.]

According to their drawing, figurative melodic cells can be:

- scale type cells,
- circumscription cells,
- arpeggio type cells and
- repetitive cells.

Here are some examples, adding one piece of figurative instrumental music similar to each of them (*example no. 1.*). These figurative melodic cells are represented on the staff without a clef (starting from the middle line), because they can appear on any height.

The image displays four examples of figurative melodic cells, each consisting of a five-line staff with notes starting from the middle line. The examples are labeled as follows:

- Baciú-Mera:** The first example shows a melodic line with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Ceuaş:** The second example shows a melodic line with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes.
- Baciú-Mera:** The third example shows a melodic line with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Sic:** The fourth example shows a melodic line with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

The figurations system used today by fiddlers appears in European cultivated music around 1600. [6, p. 131.] Undoubtedly, we are talking about an interpretation manner based on variations in movement with lower values. The phenomenon, with names from different areas and centuries, (diminution, division, minuritionum, passages – *passaggi*, *figura* etc.) covers largely the same manner as the popular one today. Sárosi draws the attention to that practice which is still alive within the dance music (played on the violin) in Vienna, called *diminution*, by means of which the musician

circumscribes with sixteenth notes figurations the quarter notes belonging to the functional relations of tone-dominant-tone from the cadence of the periods. [6, p. 69.] In Hungarian folk terminology, "*figura*" often covers the name of the instrumental interludes. The word is probably inherited from the 17<sup>th</sup> century musical practice, where it referred to some melodic cells with sixteenth notes rhythm. I want to present these "*figura*" cited by Neumann from the treatise of a theoretician of the time (*example no. 2.*). We are talking about Printz's treatises. [2, p. 539-540.]


a. *Circolo mezzo*      b. *Figura suspirans*      c. *Figura bombilans*



d. *Tirata*



e. *Figura corta*




This instrumental technique is described for the first time in the didactic treatises of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Out of these, I want to mention only three: [1], [3], [7].)

The sources cited also show that the technique was used for different instruments. I want to present here some randomized examples of the centuries

mentioned. [1, p. 30-33.], [3, p. 16.], [7, p. 29]

These treatises provide multiple opportunities for variations (mostly figurative) for some melodic fragments, cadences or even intervals, in a manner and style which are representative for the age and the place they originated from (*example no. 3.*):

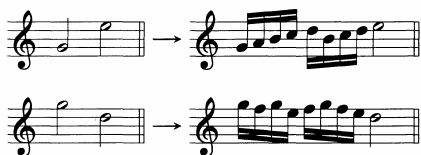
Silvestro Ganassi



Diego Ortiz



Christopher Simpson



From the many examples reviewed by Neumann, it can be seen that the phenomenon is also present in the vocal music of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries (see [2] Cap. IX.: *Free ornamentation*, p. 525-573.). Here is a piece of music he quoted, from a French treatise of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

(Mersenne: *Harmonie universelle*, see [2, p. 31.]), an aria of the court ("air de cour"), where we can find a couplet sung in diminutions, and much is very similar to the phenomenon presented (*example no. 4.*):

Simple

N'es - pe - rez plus mes yieux De

2nd couplet in diminutions

Les pleurs n'ont plus de lieu Dans

re - voir en ces lieux la beau - té que j'a - do - - re:  
le coeur de ce dieu Dont le feu me de - vo - - re:

From a treatise dating back to 1736 we find out that this manner is used more in instrumental music than in the vocals. Montclair (the author of the treatise) disapproves of the passages performed by the instrumentalists to mimic the Italian taste, which alters the nobility of the simple songs by variations which are often ridiculous ("*Les Passages*] se pratiquent moins dans la Musique vocale que dans l'instrumentale, sur tout à present que les joueurs dinstruments, pour imiter le gout des Italiens, defigurent la nobless des chants simples, par des variations souvent ridicules." [2, p. 529.]). This quote raises interest especially by the use of the term variation together with the phenomenon described. This is how, since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, figurations (in the passage quoted: "Passages") have appeared connected to this term.

Referring to the Italian-German school of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Neumann gets a very

important conclusion from our point of view, namely that musicians apply with various melodic instruments (e.g. violin, viola, horn, flute or other) a manner of interpretation improvised for any solo situation ("*Performers on the violin, viol, cornet, flute, and other melody instruments certainly indulged [...] improvised embellishments in any soloistic situation.*", [2, p. 535]). Improvisation is an important factor in the Transylvanian fiddlers' interpretation manner.

This approach has become less and less common after a new practice was applied by the composers, consisting of marking in the score any such variation. Improvisation begins to lose its importance and with the great composers of the Baroque we can only find a modest reminiscence of a practice which was once placed in the forefront of instrumental interpretation. Nevertheless, the phenomenon itself does not disappear. It lives on the figurative

variations of cultivated music, which – in its specific language – also keeps the essence of the phenomenon described. As a demonstration to these words, I want to present an excerpt from a Bach variation (*The Aria with 30 de variations – Goldberg*, ed. Peters, Leipzig, f.a.; in the

presentation of this fragment I have focused only on the melodies of the theme and the 5<sup>th</sup> variation, giving up the other various ornaments in favour of a better comparison) compared to one taken from the instrumental folklore music in Transylvania (*example no. 5*):

The image displays two musical examples, each consisting of a theme and its variation. The first example, labeled 'Tema' and 'Bach', is in G major and 3/4 time. The theme is a simple melody, and the variation (Var. V.) is a complex, rhythmic figure. The second example, labeled 'Model' and 'Baciu-Mera', is in D minor and 4/4 time. The theme is a simple melody, and the variation (Var.) is a complex, rhythmic figure. Vertical dashed lines connect the notes of the themes and variations across the two examples, highlighting their structural similarities.

In the two fragments, we are witnessing the same phenomenon: the variation of a theme by means of developed instrumental figurations. The difference lies in the creative-interpretive level. While the first example is the result of an individual and conscious creation, the second is a product of a long evolution involving hundreds of musicians from whom we have inherited the song and the manner of interpretation, but also a momentary creation as a result of the more or less conscious improvisation of the fiddler equipped with the best musical inclination.

The improvisation factor does not disappear entirely either. It remains alive in folk music. Given that in the early stages of cultivated European instrumental music, this music was still in close contact with folk music, and I believe that it is not an exaggeration to assume that this manner of interpretation was present in both types of music and the phenomenon kept in the instrumental dance music from Transylvania is reminiscent of a once widespread practice across Europe (Regarding some structural features of the instrumental songs, Sárosi writes about these West-European connections, see [6, p. 69-70., 83]).

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