

An analytical look at some Romanian choral works from the First half of the XXth century

Ramona PREJA¹, Elisabeta-Anda MOLDOVAN²

Abstract: *Choral music at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is rooted in the folk art of Romanians, an art preserved to this day in the monodic form of folk songs, peasant dances, and church melodies. Modal melodies, whether chromatic or diatonic, modal harmony and polyphony, particularly attractive heterophony, and the intense variety of timbre and rhythm are expressive means through which the choral music of this period enriches the national treasure. Music has the immense quality of being able to „absorb” the specific sensitivities of each nation, and the composers of the first half of the 20th century in Romanian choral music constitute landmarks in the national musical universe. Both their cultivated works and their folk arrangements are musical jewels of value that must be promoted.*

Key-words: *Folklore, Creation, 20th Century, Choral, Composers.*

1. Introduction

The first collections of Romanian folklore date back only to the 19th century. Therefore, evidence of the existence of popular culture can be found in indirect sources: language, chronicles, inscriptions, literary works, and scientific writings—both Romanian and in other languages.

There are known chroniclers and foreign travelers who, in subsequent centuries, recorded Romanian folk songs. From the 17th century dates „the first attempt to use the prosodic schemes of folk poetry as a model for cultivated Romanian poetry in the 'Psalter in Verse' (1673) by Metropolitan Dosoftei.”

Romanian folklore gains its significance through the works of Stolnicul Constantin Cantacuzino and Dimitrie Cantemir. The first, in the preface to *The History of Wallachia*, dwells on old songs, considering them historical documents,

¹ University of Arts Târgu-Mureş, Music Department, PhD. lectuniv2009@yahoo.com

² National College „Mircea Eliade” Sighişoara, andamol@gmail.com

while Dimitrie Cantemir, due to his monumental work *Description of Moldova*, can be considered the first researcher of Romanian ethnography and folklore.

Interest and passion for folk poetry, for collecting and researching its values, began to take shape in the 19th century, especially during the period of the 1848 revolutions.

In the second half of the 19th century, folklore enjoyed increased attention, both ideologically and in terms of collections. If in the previous era, the romantic fervor guided writers, this time, new scientific orientations were sought through the efforts of Alexandru Odobescu, and especially through Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu and his school of folklore.

Densușianu initially interprets folklore from an ethno-psychological perspective: "The purpose of folklore," he states, "is to show us the proper way of feeling of a people, its spiritual life in all its most characteristic manifestations..." Later, however, he surpasses this framework and highlights, "like no one before him, the aesthetic values of folklore, outlining a series of stylistic aspects as the distinguishing feature of certain folk species."

It can be concluded that in the first five decades of the 20th century, Romanian folklore gradually became an autonomous discipline, seeking to clarify its principles and working methods in the spirit of the times, and delimiting its field to literature, music, and popular dance. Folklorists began to study in folklore the artistic creation, not just the ethnographic fact or historical document. Their attention increasingly turned to contemporary folklore, to living folklore, and in this sense, the life of folklore became the primary objective of field research. Folklore, as a cultural, spiritual, and social phenomenon, began to be studied in the context of life as a whole.

The ways of utilizing folk melodies in the cultivated creations of composers from the Romanian national school in the first half of the 20th century are multiple. To observe in detail how Romanian composers project the Romanian ethos into the sound of musical works, we will delve into the structure of a few representative choral works to analyze the folk elements in the compositional concept that highlight the popular ethos.

2. "Sârba pe loc" by Gh. Danga – for mixed choir

Gheorghe Danga composed this piece in a folk style, creating a melody in the rhythm of a sârba (a traditional Romanian dance). The lyrics of the work express a successful description of the folk dance.

The atmosphere of joy is highlighted by the chosen key, F major. Even the modulating sections use major keys to maintain the lively cheerfulness of the sârba. The form is strophic, combining several themes inspired by the folklore of the Prahova region, emphasized either by the soprano or by all voices successively. The title of the work is justified by the repetitive verse „Sârba tot pe loc” (The Sârba Standing Still) in various rhythmic-melodic structures included at the end of each theme.

Tempo de joc

S. *Ro - mâ-nu-lui îi pla - ce Din o - pinci să ia - să foc,*

El vrea cu toți să joa - ce Sîr - ba, sîr - ba tot pe

loc, *Ro - mâ-nu-lui îi pla - ce*

Sîr - ba, sîr - ba tot pe loc, Ro - mâ-nu-lui îi pla - ce, îi pla - ce

Fig. 1. „Sârba pe loc” (1-20 bars)

The first theme in F is introduced by a solo *soprano*, then repeated with the entry of the *alto* section. The male voices intervene as a response to the female voices, continuing the dialogue between the soprano and the rest of the choir. The second theme in B-flat brings the soprano back to the forefront, with the rest of the choir providing an orchestral accompaniment without words. The short notes and well-timed pauses give the impression of a cimbalom accompaniment typical of folk ensembles from the Prahova region.

The third theme first appears in the *soprano* in G, with the alto, tenor, and bass continuing the orchestral-like accompaniment. The theme is taken up by the *tenor* in C, then by the *alto* in F, and finally by the *bass* in B-flat. The fourth theme in F is reintroduced by the soprano, who once again takes the leading role, changing the tonal structure by lowering the leading tone. The fifth theme is dedicated to the bass in B-flat (the lowered seventh degree insinuates a mixolydian mode, giving it a modal tint). The piece continues with the return of the third

theme in F in the alto, taken up by the tenor in B-flat, and the fourth theme repeated almost identically with the first exposure. The work ends with a final in which all voices are involved, creating a moment of tension resolved, as in all the themes, with a characteristic exclamation of many dances: „Hei hop!” accompanying the final dance step.

The image shows a musical score for the final of the piece "Sârba pe loc". It consists of four staves: three vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor) and one bass line. The music is in 2/4 time and ends with a double bar line. The lyrics are: "Strîn-ge-n spe-te, cot la cot, Tot pe loc, tot pe loc, tot pe loc, — Hei, hop!". The word "lunga" is written above the final measure of the vocal lines. The bass line provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes.

Fig. 2. „Sârba pe loc” (The last six bars)

Rhythmically, the work is in a binary meter (2/4), without measure alternations, and from a conducting perspective, due to the tempo, the work will be conducted *in uno*.

The image shows a musical score for a fragment of "Sârba pe loc". It features four staves: two soprano parts, an alto part, and a bass line. The soprano parts are marked "(2-3 soprane)". The lyrics for the soprano parts are: "Zum-bai, zum-bai, zum-bai zum-bai zum-bai zum-bai zum-bai zum-bai". The alto part has the lyrics: "A — Tot". The bass line has the lyrics: "Rînd pe rînd, pi - cio - rul ba - te, Tot pe loc, pe loc, pe loc, — Ui - te stîn-gul, simile". The bass line is marked with dynamics *f* and *p*. The music is in 2/4 time and ends with a double bar line.

Fig. 3. „Sârba pe loc” (fragment)

In terms of the dynamic plan, the changes are not radical. The transition from one nuance to another occurs gradually. However, in the section of the third theme, a rare differentiation of intensity levels among the voices is noted, explained by the fact that some sections imitate orchestral accompaniment, requiring dynamic adjustments according to the rhythmic-melodic structure of each voice. For example, in measure 100, the theme is intoned by the tenor in *mp*, with soprano 1 holding a pedal on C2 in *f*, soprano II in *p* imitating the string section, alto holding a pedal on G in *p*, and the bass alternating *f* with *p* imitating the double bass.

The only moments of sudden change are during the exclamations when *f* changes to *p* on the same note in three beats. This dynamic conception succeeds very well in highlighting the dance's character, accompanied by the orchestral-specific rhythm of popular dance.

This highly popular work is included in the repertoire of many Romanian choirs, clearly expressing the Romanian's love for dance.

3. „Chindia” by Al. Pașcanu – for mixed choir and optional piano

Chindia is a Romanian folk dance, mostly encountered in Sub-Carpathian Muntenia at celebrations. It is performed in a circle, with arms on shoulders, by a mixed formation to a specific melody. It has a binary rhythm and a lively movement with small steps and comic figures. It belongs to the category of sârbas.

Inspired by this lively dance, Alexandru Pașcanu composed a brilliant choral work without words, using onomatopoeic syllables to create an orchestral sound solely from vocal timbres and piano, which bears the same name: „Chindia”. Created in a folk style without folk quotations, it reflects Romanian melodies through the scales and intervals used, the sârba rhythm, and the idea of alternating dance-doina-dance (A-B-Av). Indeed, the alternation between fast and slow movements is very often encountered among Romanian composers (the association of doina with dance being preferred).

The first section, *Allegro*, represents the dance and consists of three themes. The work begins in G major with a mobile degree C – C# creating a tonal uncertainty in the soprano. The piece begins with a 4-measure introduction representing three ostinato formulas for alto, tenor, and bass (each voice with its own formula). The feeling of anticipation and preparation given by the ostinato rhythm of eighth notes in alto and tenor is complemented by the bass pulse and a constant harmonic alternation of the I and V(7) degrees. This continuous oscillation is also supported by the melodic line of the inner voices, made up of the

pause, the entire „Chindia” ends like a sigh with an interjection: „muf!” Besides the glissando in *ff* from the CODA, this is the only moment when all voices execute the same thing.



Fig. 5. „Chindia” (the last bars)

The dynamics of the work contribute to asserting the character of a popular dance that requires strength and energy, so for the most part, it is sung in *forte*, with *piano* nuances only announcing a change.

„Chindia” is one of the most famous and frequently performed Romanian choral works, both in the country and abroad. Although the score includes piano, more and more choirs prefer to sing it a cappella, better highlighting the instrumental role of the voices. About it, in the article „A Romanian Song Travels the World,” Alexandru Popa appreciates: „...among the successful choral creations of recent years, loved by the public as well as by the country's youth choral ensembles, is 'Chindia,' the exceptional choral piece by composer Alexandru Pașcanu, in which virtuosity blends harmoniously with the beauty of Romanian folklore.”

4. „Răsunet de la Crișana” by I. Vidu – for mixed choir and baritone

In many of his works, Ion Vidu uses a *parlando-rubato* style that makes his pieces a true model of folkloric treatment, where, in addition to treatment techniques, the form itself derives from folkloric practice. The formal pattern of slow-fast, that is *doina*-dance, sometimes *hora-doina*-dance, or *parlando rubato-giusto* syllabic, is well highlighted in many of his choral pages. In addition to the form, the treatment of melody, which is richly ornamented with a pronounced melismatic allure, as is the case with the piece „Răsunet de la Crișana”, brings to the forefront the virtuosity of using folkloric procedures both in content and form.

The work „Răsunet de la Crișana” was composed in 1897 on lyrics processed by Ion Vidu, using the technique of creating in a folk style, inspired by the folklore of the Arad region, north of the Mureș River.

As a structure, it consists of three parts: Introduction (Moderato), Doina (Lento), and Dance (Allegretto). The first part is called Introduction – augmented – which through its complexity could stand as a section, giving the impression of a slow hora, followed by the doina it anticipates. However, the composer's intention is clear: to create a diptych of *doina* and *dance*. It is a tonal work, starting in G minor. In the Introduction and Dance, we have a homophonic-harmonic exposition, and we note the presence of the tonal.

I. INTRODUCEREA
Moderato

The musical score is written in G minor (two flats) and 3/4 time. It consists of four staves. The top staff is the soloist's melodic line, and the bottom three staves are the choir's accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Haid', Fe-ciari, să dai-nim-ia-ră. Dai-nă-cea-dea-lai-lă-sea-ră." The tempo is marked "Moderato".

Fig. 6. „Răsunet de la Crișana” (Introduction)

The *doina* is closer to the folkloric modal (aeolian) through the soloist's melodic line, but the choir's inserts are on the first degree of the G minor tonality. Moreover, in this part, Vidu almost completely abandons harmonization, allowing the baritone soloist to sing the doina. The few interventions of the choir with a chord on the first degree are only at the end of the verse, supporting the melismas on the final syllable. The profoundly lyrical character of the melody places this part in the category of authentic doinas.

The finale brings back the hora character, closing the entire work in a frame, obviously returning to the initial tonality of G minor.

The image shows a musical score for the finale of "Răsunet de la Crișana". It consists of four staves. The top staff is the vocal line with lyrics: "Du-te dor! Du-te dor pi - nă ce-i nor, Că da-". The lyrics are written below the notes. The second, third, and fourth staves are piano accompaniment. The score is in G minor (one flat) and 6/8 time. It is marked "FINAL ad libitum" and "Tempo giusto". There are various musical notations including notes, rests, and fermatas.

Fig. 9. „Răsunet de la Crișana” (Finale)

Rhythmically, Ion Vidu manages to maintain the folk character of the piece, using for the slow hora the 6/8 meter with a clearly divided rhythm, for the doina the 2/4 meter, but the exceptional divisions and fermatas create a freer rhythm specific to the doina, and for the dance the 3/4 meter with a bouncing dotted rhythm.

The dynamic expression, with many changes determined by the melodic line, contributes greatly to consolidating the sound edifice. The doina's *pp* is very effective, giving the soloist a note of individuality.

Although it does not use a folkloric quote, the folk melody is so well captured in the rhythmic-melodic structure and harmonic construction that it gives the piece the authenticity of a Romanian song. Being one of the most beautiful choral pieces composed by Ion Vidu, it has been included over time in the repertoire of many choirs as a reference piece.

5. „Mă luai, luai” by Tudor Jarda – for mixed choir

One of the most beautiful Romanian choral creations, „Mă luai luai”, was written in 1965 when Tudor Jarda was a professor of harmony at the „Gh. Dima” Conservatory in Cluj-Napoca. Inspired by folklore, the work is part of the carol repertoire of many choral ensembles.

Originally, carols are related to the custom of caroling, a tradition perpetuated since pre-Christian times. Initially having a ritual function, over time they have retained only the festive atmosphere of ceremony and wishes, speaking about the creation of the world and allegorical hunts, about princesses and great lords, about the dispute between wine, wheat, and myrrh, between linden and fir, about love and death, about the end of the world with strong ancestral elements related to the marriage ceremony, such as „trees joined by their trunks / by their tops brought together,” the ring, the crown, the apple, the well.

One of the most special carols, found in dozens of versions, has as its theme love fulfilled through death, being classified as a „mourning carol” or „fatal love carol.” About „Mă luai luai,” the opinions of specialists are divided. Some ethnologists claim that it is a pre-marital carol based on the myth of the Flying Lover, while others, following Ovidiu Bârlea's line, consider it a true „Miorița for girls,” placing it in the category of mourning carols.

In some versions, the girl's illness seems incurable, and the ending is rather somber: „I know what my cure is: / The priest and the deacon / And the cross at my head.” This is why Ovidiu Bârlea hypothesizes that „both the carol 'Mă luai luai' and 'Miorița' were originally mourning carols”. (Bârlea 1967, 339-347).

In a study on this theme, Vasile Filip says: „From Northern Transylvania, covering the area between the Maramureș Mountains and the Târnave region, between the Apuseni Mountains and the Gurghiu-Căliman line, about 45 versions of a type of carol showing disturbing tonal and atmospheric affinities with 'Miorița' have been collected and published”. (Filip 1993, 97-103).

In the carol „Mă luai luai,” we find the confluence of the two fundamental myths: erotic and pastoral, in equal measure. Vasile Avram analyzes the cosmological substratum of carols and identifies certain productions where death is associated with eros: „A shiver of awe permeates the melody intoned by the 'reaper girl,' who, finding a poppy flower in the field, associates it with the metaphor of the Flying Lover, embodied by a young man with the sheep in the mountains, ultimately accepting the solution of an initiatory death as in „Miorița”. (Avram 2001, 134).

Tiha Bărgăului – Năsăud
Traian Mărza, 36, p. 228

Allegretto

Lento

Mă lu-ai, lu-ai, _____

ppp Mă lu-ai, lu-a-iu Joi de di-mi-nea-ță Sus pe la
(I went out on a Thursday morning)

ppp Mă lu-ai, lu-a-iu Joi de di-mi-nea-ță Sus pe la

mă lu-ai, lu-ai Sus pe la fă-na-ță Cu ro-chi-a crea-ță,
(up to the meadow, in my pleated skirt;)

fă - na - ță Cu ro - chi - a crea - ță,

fă - na - ță Cu ro - chi - a crea - ță,

Fig. 10. *Mă luai, luai* (carol)

Composer Tudor Jarda (Preja 2012, 17) subtly captured the Transylvanian folk style and gave the piece the naturalness and orality characteristic of Romanian folklore. The version used for choral arrangement was collected from the Năsăud area. As a procedure, he initially uses direct quotation, the only modification being the transformation of the first interval from a minor third to a prime, obviously resulting in a fifth instead of the next major third.

Lento

p Mă lu - ai, lu - ai, —

ppp Mă lu - ai, lu - a - iu Joi de di - mi - nea - ță Sus pe la
(I went out on a Thursday morning)

ppp Mă lu - ai, lu - a - iu Țoi de di - mi - nea - ță Sus pe la

mă lu - ai, lu - ai Sus pe la fă - na - ță Cu ro - chi - a crea - ță,
(up to the meadow, in my pleated skirt;)

fă - na - ță Cu ro - chi - a crea - ță,

fă - na - ță Cu ro - chi - a crea - ță,

Fig. 11. „Mă luai, luai” (1-6 bars)

As a form, the piece is tripartite A-B-A. Section A is predominantly homophonic-harmonic, while B is predominantly polyphonic, with the melody line alternately carried by the female voices, harmonized by the male voices. The work is modal in chromatic Dorian on D (a tone lower than the original). The theme of the work is direct quotation and is highlighted by a rather airy accompaniment with fifths in the male voices and by the alternation of timbre in the female voices, presenting a timbral play (in A, the theme is exposed in alto, then in soprano, then in B again in alto, the return to A continues the exposure of the theme in alto, and then in soprano, which concludes the thematic exposure).

After a two-measure introduction in B and T, alto enters with the theme composed of 4 measures (section A), which is followed throughout the entire work, oscillating between alto and soprano in a timbral play as a melodic formula ritualistically sustaining the lyrics. In section B, he applies the folk quotation to alto

plus the reintonation procedure in soprano, thanks to the use of polyphonic writing (from measure 19). From measure 27, section A returns, shorter than the initial one. The work ends with a coda, which is an introduction seen in „mirror”. Section A creates the atmosphere of a mystical initiatory ritual through the recitative of the male voices, highlighting the significance of the carol. In contrast, section B changes the discourse with the help of polyphony, increasing the drama and leaning more towards the erotic significance mentioned by Vasile Avram in the work „The Cosmological Substratum of Carols”.

Rhythmically, the choral work is in aksak meter 8/8 (2+3+3), using the same rhythmic pulse throughout the choral work, compared to the original, which alternates the 8/8 measure with 7/8 due to the syllabic succession 6-5 (as in „Miorița”).

As means of expression to highlight the folk ethos, the composer uses:

- ♦ Dynamics that outline an arch, starting with a *ppp* in the introduction, *p* at the entrance of the theme in alto, *mp* at the entrance of the soprano, *mf* at the beginning of section B, the climax in the middle of the polyphonic fragment in *f*, then gradually decreasing: *mf*, *p*, *ppp*. The decrescendo indication on the last notes in the bass determines a fading ending, signifying the timelessness characteristic of archaic folklore.
- ♦ Tempo Lento with ritenuto at the end;
- ♦ Parallel fifths that determine tonal instability, creating a sensation of ancient ritual (which the archaic carol was);
- ♦ Displaying the female voices separately to intensify the monodic folk style and the ison held by alto in the first section and soprano in the last section, with the role of completing the harmonic plan without altering the modal sound;
- ♦ Introduction and ending on the male voices (pastoral ambiance);
- ♦ Imitation;
- ♦ The seventh chord at the beginning of the second section, which increases the drama and prepares the polyphonic exposure (the climax of the work);
- ♦ Parallel fifths added with seconds.

Besides the thematic value of the work being of archaic folk inspiration, Tudor Jarda gave it artistic value through the approach, the harmonic and polyphonic writing, the timbral play, and the form of the work, making it one of the reference Romanian pieces.

6. Conclusion

Looking back at the Romanian compositional school - a school without tradition (having a few centuries handicap compared to Western European culture and music in particular) - we observe that it had a truly miraculous birth and ascent. Emerging at the same time as the extensive phenomenon of national schools from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, it progressively implanted itself at the forefront of the West, eventually detaching from this context through extremely original ideas and achievements.

Choral music at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is rooted in the folk art of Romanians, an art preserved to this day in the monodic form of folk songs, peasant dances, and church melodies. Modal melodies, whether chromatic or diatonic, modal harmony and polyphony, particularly attractive heterophony, and the intense variety of timbre and rhythm are expressive means through which the choral music of this period enriches the national treasure.

Music has the immense quality of being able to „absorb” the specific sensitivities of each nation, and the composers of the first half of the 20th century in Romanian choral music constitute landmarks in the national musical universe. Both their cultivated works and their folk arrangements are musical jewels of value that must be promoted.

The choral creation of pioneering composers, although heterogeneous in terms of approach and processing of folklore, played an important role in constituting and stimulating the tradition of valuing folk melodies. Its spectacular evolution throughout the 20th century is marked by the new compositional concepts to which Romanian musicians adhered.

In Romanian music, the modal melody and the particularly attractive rhythm, both through its constant variation and its suggestive asymmetry, constitute the prominent expression through which composers have created numerous works inspired by the tender songs and spirited dances of the people. This inexhaustible treasure, our remarkable folklore, cannot be neglected, having a significant role in enriching the cultivated art. The composer's role is to internalize the folklore, taking into account all the technical achievements of the compositional art of the time, using them through thoughtful selection, choosing those that characterize him to create a rich content of ideas and feelings, realized with a new form at a high artistic level.

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