

# Traditional Music and Dance in Romania Today

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**M**any musical traditions are practiced with great vitality in Romania today, ranging from song and dance types that are rooted in a conservative peasant world of experience and that may carry ritual meanings, to manifestations of the most contemporary trends in commercialized "world music." Traditional music continues to be an important part of the musical soundscape, from remote rural villages to sophisticated urban centers. Traditions may be localized within a particular region, or they may be of wide circulation found in similar form throughout the country. When traveling through Romania today, a visitor is most likely to encounter traditional music and dance at organized cultural events celebrating the Romanian folk heritage. Between 1975 and the revolution of 1989, folk festivals were often part of a nationwide, organized program, the Song of Romania, used to select the best representatives of this heritage for a massive final performance every two years before the dictator Ceaușescu. This form of organization produced a stylized presentational manner of folklore performance as "spectacle" that was far removed from vernacular aesthetics in music and dance. Many of those who participated within this framework strove nevertheless to valorize authentic traditions, and they continue their efforts to promote these traditions today, sometimes experimenting with new models for staging traditional performance. At the same time there has always been a layer of traditional practice that contin-

## "Arieș ce treci prin Turda"

A lyric *doina* sung by Vasile Soporan

*Arieș ce treci prin Turda  
Să-mi aduci în vale mândra  
Arieș să-mi aduci mândra  
Sâmbătă la Târg la Turda*

*D'Arieș de n-o aduci-măi  
Prin Turda să nu mai ur'i, măi  
Să te scurgi tăt prin pământ  
Să te usci când bate vânt mă*

*Hai, să-ți rămâie matca goală  
Hai, să să facă drum de țară  
Lăstarul să-mi țină umbra  
Când vine mândra la Turda.  
[Repeat last two lines]*

Arieș [a river] that runs through Turda,  
Bring my love to me in the valley.  
Arieș, bring my love  
Saturday to the market fair in Turda.

Arieș, if you don't bring her,  
No longer flow through Turda.  
Trickle deep into the earth,  
Dry up when the wind blows

So your bed remains empty  
And makes a path through the country.  
Woods, cast your shade upon me  
When my love comes to Turda.  
[Repeat last two lines]

ued without much overt institutional interference and that is not hard to find if one knows whom to ask. While quite resilient, these traditions have not been insulated from larger processes of social change affecting the lives of tradition bearers. Many communities today have a disco in which young people gather to socialize and dance to the latest recorded hits, usually from the United States and Western Europe. The increased mobility of people within Romania and between Romania and the rest of Europe, the Balkans, and Asia Minor is having a profound effect on musical tastes. I have seen young people in Maramureș, for example, choose to dance to music from Banat at their engagement party, and *lăutari* (professional musicians) such as the ensemble Taraf de Haidouks add musical com-

positions in the style of Indian film music to their repertoire.

## TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND ITS CUSTOMARY OCCASIONS

Traditional artistic creation takes place as a part of everyday life, reflecting its circumstances and conditions. Alongside the forms of oral literature (prose and verse, either sung or recited) stand musical, choreographic, and dramatic works. Some are performed only by women, others by men, children, or the elderly. The mode of performance might be vocal, instrumental, or a combination. Some traditions are integrated with calendar customs marking cycles of rural life in which the basic preoccupations are agriculture and animal husbandry. There are also rituals for fertility and the reinvigoration of nature.



The customs of mid-winter, from December 24 to January 7 — including the birth of the “invincible sun” at the winter solstice followed by the birth of Jesus — are major occasions for celebration. *Colinde*, traditional Christmas songs, are sung all over Romania by groups of carolers visiting homes throughout their communities. These songs are striking for their archaism and the richness of rhythms found in the simple melodies — all the more impressive when performed by groups without any special training, such as the *călușeri* from Orăștioara de Jos in the Hunedoara region. Various traditions are intended to bring plenty and happiness during the coming year. The oldest form of good-luck visit, going from house to house wearing animal masks (goat, deer, and bear), is practiced at New Year’s, especially in Moldova. The *vălărețul* group from the village of Voinesti in Moldova, who are at this year’s Festival, provide a good example. Its members include a *fanfară*, or band using modern brass and woodwind instruments; they play specific traditional melodies for each of the masked characters they accompany, as well as a repertoire of regional dance tunes and even modern music such as the theme from *Dallas*, the American television series that once enjoyed great popularity in Romania.

Music was always indispensable to shepherds, and this ancient pastoral occupation generated a musical repertoire with particular characteristics. The power of sound served to control the animals or to placate maleficent powers that might threaten the animals’ health. The largest part of this pastoral repertoire is instrumental: played on *bucium* (a long wooden trumpet), *corn* (horn), *tilinca* (a flute without finger holes), *fluier* (fipple flute), and *cimpoi* (bagpipe). Among the folkloric genres tied to this pastoral life are signals; lyrical instrumental melodies; magical melodies; sound “poems” with a moral sense such as the widely known “When the shepherd lost

his sheep”; the epic oral poem *Miorița*, recognized as a high point of Romanian oral literature; and finally dances.

Weddings and funerals play a central role in Romanian folklore tied to family life. Weddings include a series of moments with special significance intended to assure the passage of the young couple from one social state to another. These moments are strictly

observed and associated with a musical repertoire as well as orated texts and specific dances.

Other musical traditions are not linked to particular occasions. These genres include the *doina* (lyric love song or so-called table song, for listening to while sitting around a table), *cântec bătrânesc* (ballad or old song), and epic song. The *doina* is a melody of open form with lyric

## Folklore Today

Mihai Pop

**I**f we regard folklore as a phenomenon both of ongoing human communication and of developing social exchange, we can comprehend its current twofold existence. On one side is the traditional folklore of an independent rural society. On the other is the folklore that has become a consumer good in contemporary industrial society.

What is the latter “consumer-goods folklore”? What is its relation with the traditional folklore? Who produces it? And in what shape is it consumed?

The process by which traditional folklore has been created, preserved, and transmitted follows strictly established patterns and has been doing so for ages. Traditional folklore has particular languages\* and codes for their use, through which sacred, ceremonial, and artistic messages can be conveyed. These messages have meaning within a complex semiotic system. Such elaborate ancient codes cannot be taught, but are handed down from generation to generation like mother tongues.

The consumer-goods folklore is above all a reproduction of the traditional one. It is a reproduction that is more or less faithful, depending on how it is actually consumed: the kinds of occasions, the audiences, and the producers themselves.

Consumer-goods folklore follows fashion, as other consumer goods do. Today, the songs with rhythmical melodies, extracted from the repertory of dance music, are preferred to traditional lyric song, with its slow, sluggish melodic. For the same reason, very few epic songs are offered on the song market.

Consumer goods also become standardized. The freedom to make the individual variations characteristic of traditional songs is being lost. Uniformity also results because those whose songs are for consumption at concerts and shows, on radio and TV, prefer the accompaniment of a folk music band or orchestra that has established stereotypes for accompaniment, unlike traditional singers, who sing unaccompanied.

The performers who make folklore reproductions are mostly outsiders. Good reproduction requires scientific knowledge of the reproduced songs, that is, of the language in which they were created and transmitted, of the significance of the signs, and of the way they are articulated in creation and performance. This knowledge is insufficient in the case of the outsiders, whose performance has become mostly mimicry. There are exceptions among extremely gifted interpreters as, for instance, the famous singer Maria Tănase, the musi-

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\*EDITOR’S NOTE: Professor Pop uses the word *language* generically to refer not only to speech itself but to the systematically structured, meaningful, and self-reflexive dimensions of traditional performance — such as music, graphic art, dance, and various forms of narrative.



## "Flori-s dalbile di măru"

Dinăntea ce doi curțu  
 Sun'doi meri alăturațu  
 Din vîrvuțu merilor  
 Sunt două turturele  
 Tînîn' două luminele  
 Dintr-un picur ce s-a face  
 De s-ar face-on feredeu  
 Să să scalde taica meu  
 To' să scaldă și să-ntreabă  
 Ce-i mai bun p-aist pămîntu  
 Nu-i mai bun ce bou-al bunu  
 Că răvarsă brazdă neagră  
 Și samînă grîu roșioru.  
 Tot să scaldă și să-ntreabă  
 Ce-i mai bun p-aist pămîntu  
 Nu-i mai bun ca vaca-i bună  
 Tot să duce și ne-aduce  
 Și sara și dimineața  
 Tot să scaldă și să-ntreabă  
 Ce-i mai buna p-aist pămîntu  
 Nu-i mai bun ca calul bunu  
 Că-n calica voinicu ma  
 Și ne scote di la rele  
 De la grele războiele  
 Tot să scaldă și să-ntreabă  
 Ce-i mai bun p-aist pămîntu  
 Nu-i mai bun ca oaia-i bună  
 Căci cu lîna te-ncălzește  
 Cu laptele te-ndulcește  
 Tot să scaldă și să-ntreabă  
 Ce-i mai bun p-aist pămîntu  
 Nu-i mai bun ca porcu-ăl bunu  
 Că-i mînci carne la Crăciunu  
 C-o-nkinăm cu sănătate  
 Pe la gazde, pe la tote.

White flowers, white apple flowers  
 In front of the two courtyards.  
 There are two apple trees  
 Next to one another.  
 On top of the apple trees  
 There are two turtle doves  
 Keeping two little candles.  
 What will become of one candlewax drop?  
 It will make a tub  
 To bathe my father in it.  
 He keeps bathing and wondering:  
 What is the best thing on this earth?  
 Nothing is better than a good ox  
 Because he pours out a black furrow  
 And plants red corn.  
 He keeps bathing and wondering:  
 What is the best thing on this earth?  
 Nothing is better than a good cow  
 Always bringing milk to us  
 In the evening and in the morning.  
 He keeps bathing and wondering:  
 What is the best thing on this earth?  
 Nothing is better than a good horse  
 Because a brave young man mounts it  
 And saves us from danger  
 And from difficult wars.  
 He keeps bathing and wondering:  
 What is the best thing on this earth?  
 Nothing is better than a good sheep  
 Because it keeps you warm with its wool  
 And makes you sweet with its milk.  
 He keeps bathing and wondering:  
 What is the best thing on this earth?  
 Nothing is better than a good pig  
 Because you eat its meat on Christmas.  
 We toast to your health  
 To the hosts, to all of them.

A *colindă* text from Ann Schuursma, "Colinde cu Dubă in Valea Mureșului, Southwestern Transylvania [Hunedoara Province, Romania]." Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1987. Copyright © Ann Schuursma. The symbol of the apple tree is found frequently in *colindă* texts.

text that may be called by a variety of regionally specific terms, such as the "long song" in Oltenia or *de jale* (of sadness) in Moldova. In Maramureș, Lăpuș, and Năsăud the *doina* may be sung with *noduri*, that is, punctuated by distinctive glottal interjections on certain vowel sounds, a technique that requires true virtuosity to master. A separate genre without ritual function is the ballad. This oral epic form, which employs more recital than the *doina*, is performed in general by *lăutari*, typically Roma (Gypsy) professional musicians, accompanied by violin, *cobza* (lute), or *țambal* (hammered dulcimer). The subjects of ballads are diverse and include the exploits of bandits, shepherds, brave heroes, and lovers. The richest genre, the most varied and at the same time the most widely distributed, is the song proper. It has a strophic form and is performed individually, sung in response to both hard times and happiness. Through song one confesses, cultivates a profound state of reflection, or expresses love, longing, sadness, or alienation.

The Romanian people use a variety of musical instruments today, some very old in form, others newer and factory-made: simple leaves and fish scales (placed between the upper gum and tongue or the lower teeth and lip, to produce a clear and penetrating tone); many types of flutes; the *nai* (panpipe); relatives of the guitar; instruments of the violin family, often modified from their standard construction; and modern instruments such as the accordion, clarinet, and saxophone. Some instruments are identified with particular regions and repertoires: the violin with horn (a Stroh violin) in Bihor, the *taragot* (like a large clarinet but with conical bore) in Banat, the trumpet in Moldova. The trio formation is found throughout the country, as it allows for melody, harmony, and rhythmic-harmonic accompaniment. The Transylvanian trio of violin, *contra* (viola), and contrabass is particularly well known. Instrumental music reaches its peak artistic value when it is joined with



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dance. Dance music takes hold to provoke a veritable euphoria; in fact, dance melodies are constructed to incite joy, to rouse the elemental energy of the body, focused in rhythmic movement, with a powerful role in physiological and implicit psychic release.

## TRADITIONAL DANCE

If song and story are, in general, the specialty of gifted and talented individuals, popular dance is essentially a collective art — one that has great vitality in Romania and an important social role, even if sometimes it has been attenuated by modern developments and urbanizing tendencies. In traditional village social life, dance was long the primary entertainment of Romanian peasants. In time it established particular rules for the observance of different festive occasions in which the community came together to celebrate important events in the life of individuals or of the village, such as baptisms, weddings, Sunday celebrations (village dances), patron saints' days, or fairs in mountainous regions on holidays connected with pastoral life.

Romanian folk dance is a singular phenomenon with an undeniable continuity, while at the same time revealing a great diversity in structure and style. The explanation of this remarkable diversity of choreographic forms must be sought first of all in the historical circumstances of the Romanian people, whose origins account for the presence of ancient Mediterranean influences in dance, and second in the central position of Romania vis-à-vis the cultural currents of West and Southeast Europe, where both group dances and couple dances are characteristic. The Romanian repertoire includes

dances of archaic style and simple structure (some of them maintaining a ritual function), alongside men's dances with a complex harmonic structure and acrobatic elements — *călușer\** (men's ritual team dance) and *feciorești* (men's display dance) — sometimes performed along with the more numerous Transylvanian couple dances.

There are four main choreographic structures found in Romanian traditional dance.

- Group dances, in which dancers are joined by holding hands, shoulders, or belts. The dance develops in a circle, semi-circle, or a line.
- Couple dances, in which the couples may be arranged in columns, a circle, line, or freely in the dance space. Partners are positioned either side by side or face to face, holding hands, shoulders, or in a ballroom social dance position.
- Team dances, which in the majority of cases are men's dances of great virtuosity, and may be grouped as the dances of *călușeri*, *feciorești*, or shepherds. In these dances the participants are not holding one another, and in some cases they carry a stick.
- Solo dances, which often have a ritual character, being dance expressions of masked characters among processing celebrants at winter holidays, such as *capra* (goat), deer, bear, bear keeper, etc.

Three principal styles, and two sub-styles, may be identified with various folkloric regions.

- The Dunărean dance style, which extends throughout the Romanian plain, comprising Oltenia and Muntenia up to approximately the sub-

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cian Gheorghe Zamfir (panpipe), the *taragot* interpreter Dumitru Fărcaș, the young singer Țițiana Mihali, and others. Creative usage and knowledge of traditional language can sometimes be observed at the level of consumer-goods folklore, too.

When traditional folklore meets consumer-goods folklore that uses genuine expression, they can influence each other on the cultural stage. Local folkloric events can contribute to the preservation of tradition or create new forms of it.

Folklore nowadays is definitely bifurcated, and its two components are bound to live together, at least for a while. The difference between them remains their function. Traditional folklore acts are messages of creative performers presented for their own sake or purposely addressed to equals in the community, serving a range of particular purposes within their traditional context. The consumer goods have, for the time being, the status of mere replicas, like reproductions in the fine arts. They address the national community as a whole, effacing regional differences. The complex structure of industrial society creates different levels of acceptance and functional diversity in folklore consumption. For their part, the professionals do not intend to communicate traditional folkloric messages but rather artistic messages that can be perceived as pleasant entertainment or a great, essentialized artistic experience....

Adapted from an article in Mihai Pop, *Folclor românesc* 1: 237–47.

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\*The *călușerul* of Transylvania and *călușul* of the Danube plain share similar names and were once closely related healing and fertility rituals performed by men. However, in Transylvania the dance is performed as part of winter customs, and its most widespread form stems from a cultivated revival as a national dance that dates to the mid-19th century. Widespread throughout Romania in the 18th century as a healing ritual, *călușul* is performed today as a summer custom and only in the south of Romania, where it can be found as a village ritual, town entertainment, in organized competitions, and in theatrical performance.



Carpathic hills, as well as Dobrogea. The principal characteristic of this style is the preponderance of group circle and line dances. Towards the Carpathian foothills, one may also find the men's ritual *căluș* dances of summer.

- The Transilvanian dance style found in an area comprising the upper basin and middle of the Mureș River, the Transylvanian plateau, and the Someș basin. In this stylistic region couple dances predominate along with men's dances. Integrated here are also the *căluș* dances of winter. The folkloric regions Oaș, Crișurilor, Câmpia Mureșului, and a large part of the Apuseni mountain region represent a distinct "western" substyle characterized by a preponderance of couple dances in lines, as well as particular men's dances.
- The Carpathic dance style, which extends over both slopes of the Carpathian Mountains (southern and eastern), southern Banat, the sub-Carpathic regions of Oltenia, Mun-

tenia, and Moldova, as well as the south and a strip of eastern Transylvania. In this stylistic zone group dances are found in an equal balance with numerous couple dances, and the two are often seamlessly integrated in performance. In a distinct substyle, the folk dances of Podișul and Câmpia Moldovei feature couple dances (*polcuțe, învârtite simple*) specific to this area.

Of course the delimitation of style areas can only be approximate, and there are many zones of interpenetration. But it is possible to assert that the Carpathic dance style region, because of its geographic position as a gateway that facilitated an intense cultural and economic exchange among the historic provinces of Romania, constitutes the principal link in the unity of Romanian folk dance — a unity evident in the particular patterns of syncopated rhythm found in almost all dance types and styles.

Traditional dance in Romania has been subject to stylization when repre-

sented on stage over the last 50 years. Young Romanians watch Western music videos and learn hip-hop moves along with youths around the world. Yet strong local traditions persist that are resistant to these influences. *Călușari* like those from Optași in Oltenia dance on the ritual occasion of Rusalii, visiting homes throughout their village to bring the community health and fertility. On Christmas Day in 1998, 15 young *călușeri* sang *colinde* and danced throughout Orăștioara de Jos, in Hunedoara. After services on Sundays throughout the year the young men of Oaș organize village dances with traditional fiddlers playing their reconstructed violins called *cetere*, while dancers wearing a mixture of traditional and modern dress fill the *ciuperca* (mushroom), as the community dance pavilion is called. In these communities and others throughout Romania, traditional music and dance retain their power to enact participants' social relations and express their energy for life.

## Suggested Reading and Listening

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