

FOLKLORE AND DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM. A CASE STUDY OF ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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SUMMARY. Romanian ethnomusicology has a series of less discussed and, implicitly, less understood topics. One of them is the relatively vast literature that addresses the new folklore that appeared after the installation of the communist regime and the folk music of artistic ensembles performed on stage. Most of the texts written on these subjects display a strong political and ideological pressure. Consequently, they are either forgotten or superficially perceived as evidence of a repressive regime, adding to the general belief that the communist regime turned peasant art into an instrument of propaganda. Starting from a study signed by Ioan R. Nicola on music collected from Mărginimea Sibiului, we will try to understand the theoretical horizon and the ideological limitations that influenced the way researchers wrote about contemporary music phenomena in the second half of the twentieth century. Despite the constraints, we argue that ethnomusicologists had at hand a coherent system of analysis of the folk music, which they had to adapt to the official ideology.

Keywords: new folklore, amateur artistic ensembles, folk performance, ethnomusicologic research, communist ideology

Introduction

After its promising beginnings in the interwar period, Romanian ethnomusicology is placed, after 1947, in a completely new political and ideological framework. With the establishment of the People's Republic, the folk music researchers, like any other type of scientist, are forced to adapt to new requirements, imposed by the political doctrine of the communist party.

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Certainly, the interest in traditional peasant music was not hindered, but ethnomusicologists had to consider another series of problems. One of the most important issues was the research and promotion of “new folklore” (or “music of the new life”), whose emergence was ignited by the communists’ rise to power. The new sphere of preoccupations also included the involvement of folklore specialists in the activity of amateur artistic groups, whether it was their guidance, their judging, or even their promotion. These groups have appeared in various state institutions, in both urban and rural areas (factories, cooperatives, unions, schools, universities), as an opportunity for the artistic expression of the working class, but also to help strengthen the consciousness of the socialist “new man”.

Out of conviction or necessity, Romanian ethnomusicologists could not avoid approaching topics related to the new folklore, the revolutionary and working-class folklore, the transformations produced by socialism on peasant art or the quite common and, as the time went by, the more and more grandiose practice of stage folklore performances. For this reason, many folklorists sought refuge in the exclusively theoretical study of Romanian rural music, focusing on operations such as classification, typologies, or the compiling of monographs, thus abandoning the social aspects of music production and reception², which were subject to a greater ideological pressure and control. These theoretical endeavors were the scientific contributions that the Romanian ethnomusicology chose to retain after the fall of the communist regime; writings dealing with ideologically charged subjects were either forgotten or discredited as the product of the pressure exerted by an authoritarian state.

According to the current dominant narrative in the social sciences, the communist regime set up a complex propaganda machine capable of promoting its interests and supporting the work of intense mass indoctrination. From this point of view, all cultural initiatives of the regime pursued propaganda³ and control of the individual’s life as final goals. One of the most elaborate forms of propaganda was the transformation of peasant folklore into an entertainment product for the stage. This derivative of peasant music has been described as a huge exercise in social engineering through which the single party tried to impose its vision of traditional culture and its standards for the individual and socialist society on the population⁴.

² Rădulescu, Speranța. “National Ideology, Music and Discourses about Music in Romania in the Twentieth Century”. *Musicology Today*, vol. 8, issue 3 (31), July-September 2017, p. 190.

³ Examples of such approaches are numerous, we give here only two samples: Crotty 2007, where the establishment of choirs in rural areas is related only to the propaganda activity of the state (p. 156), and Păuța Pieslak 2010, where the initiatives of music education of the workers are again seen exclusively as state propaganda for socialism (p. 229).

⁴ See Rădulescu 1997 and 2002.

Although such interpretations are not necessarily wrong, they are certainly simplistic and incomplete. More specifically, they cannot provide answers to complex problems such as the evolution and present-day situation of the rural folklore in modern industrial societies (whether socialist or capitalist). Nor can they inform on the folklore's integration as an entertainment product into a consumer society or its deep interweaving with the legitimacy discourses of the modern nation-states. Moreover, the one-sided explanation of the transformation of folklore into folklorism⁵ exclusively through a huge propaganda effort of the communist regime leaves us with the impression of a state (especially its higher echelons) with a quasi-total power to control the public and private life of the individual. Furthermore, this view reduces the mass of the population to the role of a passive receiver of the communist propaganda, incapable of critical reception⁶.

In this paper, we will elaborate on these premises in the light of a text written during the communist period. The text, kept in the documentary funds of the Folklore Archive of the Romanian Academy in Cluj-Napoca, belongs to Ioan R. Nicola, researcher of the institution and professor of folklore at the Conservatory of Cluj. The author wrote this manuscript to serve as theoretical support (a "monographic sketch") for his collection of musical folklore from Mărginimea Sibiului⁷. Taking Nicola's contribution as a pivotal source for this paper, we aim to understand the theoretical perspectives available to ethnomusicologists who addressed topics such as the evolution of peasant music in modern socialist societies, its relationship with folk music on stage, or the role and responsibilities of amateur artistic groups and their instructors. We will discuss all these aspects starting from the understanding of the analytical tools available to the authors of that period and the way they were used to deliver coherent explanations (even if limited due to the party's regulations). To have a more comprehensible view, we will also consider the economic and social history of the period. By using this approach, we want to show how the transformations that occurred in Romanian folk music in the second half of the twentieth century are not solely indebted and depended on the efforts of the regime's propaganda machine to indoctrinate its citizens.

⁵ The term "folklorism" appears in Anca Giurchescu, who defines it because of the symbolic transformation of traditional folklore from a social to an artistic meaning and from a variable form to a fixed form. Giurchescu 2001, p. 117.

⁶ For an example, see Rădulescu, 1997. Here, the only ones capable of subversive actions are the rural instrumentalists who, some of them, still use their traditional way of playing for certain occasions.

⁷ The collection appeared after Nicola's death, and of the more than 500 typed pages of the study, only a few dozens were retained for printing.

Writing about the transformations of the peasant music

A monographic work (like most of the ones conceived by the author), the collection of folklore from Mărginimea Sibiului is accompanied by Nicola's extensive introductory study, that covers a wide range of topics: the history of the area, dialect peculiarities, ethnographic descriptions of material culture, spiritual life, history of folklore collections in the area, etc. The description and analysis of music creations are the focus of his research, but Nicola does not limit himself to a strictly analytical discussion. He also intends to bring clarifications regarding the material and social conditions that formed the basis of the musical language of the area (the "local specificity", to use the author's expression). Along these lines, he manages to advance explanations regarding the transformations of folklore that took place in different historical periods but does not go past his present. Contemporary life plays an important role in his study, that he addresses extensively, as opposed to other authors, who avoid the present because of the political load of the subject.

If in much of this monographic sketch Nicola's approach is dependent on conceptions and terminology formed under romantic and/or nationalist influence⁸, one can also find important passages that have their origin in the new ideology imposed by the socialist state after World War II. For ethnomusicology, one of the most important contributions brought forth by the official philosophy of historical and dialectical materialism⁹ is the distinction made between base and superstructure¹⁰. Any progress in society (including cultural progress) is determined by the periodic rearrangement of production relations that characterize the economic base, rearrangement that conditions new forms of manifestation of superstructural phenomena. From this perspective, historical materialism is a theory of history that argues that the organization and development of a society are determined by the forces and relations of production (the base). On the other hand, dialectical materialism is a philosophical theory of evolution that explains man and the spiritual phenomena starting from the material movement that is at the origin

⁸ For a discussion of romantic or sociologically inspired features in Nicola's monographs, see Constantiniu, 2020.

⁹ At one point, the author states that he "detached himself from the old and outdated idealistic, romantic and nationalist conceptions" and that he sought the essence of folk phenomena through "the scientific perspective of historical and dialectical materialism" (Ioan R. Nicola donation fund, file 12a, p. 79). The statement seems to have been made rather to comply with the official scientific research requirements of the period and is only sporadically and superficially respected.

¹⁰ For Marx and Engels, the base was represented by the economic organization of society, while the superstructure (political, legal, religious and cultural phenomena) was built above and in dependence on the former.

of sensations, spirit and nature being thus explained in relation to each other, dialectically¹¹.

The theoretical framework of Marxist philosophy is applied (most often in a simplistic way, rather out of obligation than out of conviction) until 1989 to all types of research, musical folklore being no exception. In this area, one of the main problems was to study how the transition from a capitalist market economy to a planned socialist economy (hence a change in the economic base) affects rural music as part of the cultural superstructure. Nicola also operates within this framework¹², especially in the pages he dedicates to the historical evolution of the music from Mărginime and the transformation of its characteristics over time. Just as the relations of production and the relations between the forces of production changed with the transition from feudalism to capitalism and then from capitalism to socialism, music underwent changes that altered its structure or led to the dissolution of some genres and the appearance of others. According to the official doctrine, the economic and political changes after 1944 inevitably resulted in transformations in people's consciousness, which was also reflected in folk creation, especially in the new song, which became "an expression of the new consciousness of working people"¹³. The author consistently uses this historical framework when talking about the lyrical song from Mărginime, trying to capture the specifics of this genre during the transition from one period to another. Thus, feudalism is the period in which the old-style song crystallizes, the transition to capitalism determining the appearance of the modern song, and socialism bringing with it the new song ("of the new life").

This structural-historical analysis of Mărginime music leads to the conclusion that the musical folklore of the area (as well as of the whole country) evolves – under the influence of schooling, urbanization, and technological means of music playback (radio, disc, TV) – to an increasingly pronounced uniformity and towards an increasingly visible dilution of the local influences. From the socialist state's point of view, this outcome is to be expected as its aim was, at least theoretically, to blur the developmental differences between the village and the city (because of the abolition of class differences and, finally, of the classes themselves). From the point of view of the ethnomusicologist, however, this change brings forth a significant narrowing and impoverishment of his research object. For an author like Nicola, whose main concern is, in this study, highlighting and analyzing the specifics of

¹¹ Julia, Didier. *Dicționar de filosofie (Dictionary of Philosophy)*. Univers Enciclopedic, 1999, p. 204.

¹² At one point, the author states that peasant music is a superstructural phenomenon (Ioan R. Nicola donation fund, file 12a, p. 57).

¹³ Cernea, Eugenia et al. *Cântece și strigături populare noi (New folk songs and shouts)*. Ed. Muzicală, 1966, p. 5.

Mărginime folklore, this tension between uniformity (because of the evolution of material conditions) and the specificity and regional diversity of Romanian folklore is felt all the stronger.

Unlike ethnomusicologists up to World War II, for whom folklore was an immutable cultural phenomenon that had to be saved from the extinction caused by the accelerating gallop of modernization, Nicola adhered to an evolutionary vision (probably influenced more by Brăiloiu's¹⁴ thinking than the Marxist theory of history), complemented with the official party doctrine, in which rural music followed an ascending path to an increasingly complete artistic expression. In his vision, the gradual cultivation of the rural population will bring with it an increase in their aesthetic demands, which will result in the proximity, or perhaps even the fusion of folk music with art music¹⁵. Even if the folklore of Mărginime has acquired its most pronounced signature in the past (see the old-style lyrical song), for Nicola, "the current creation is decidedly superior – from all points of view – to the one from the past. [...] We believe that it will be even more intense in the future, but, of course, with features that will bring it closer and closer to the cultivated creation"¹⁶.

Although seemingly hopeless, this contradiction between evolution and uniformity receives, from Nicola, an interesting solution. For him, the qualitative leaps in the evolution of folklore should be based on the local tradition or, in other words, the new elements must be grafted on the old and distinctive musical substance¹⁷. By doing this, it is possible to ensure a natural continuity that allows the perpetuation of the local specificity in superior forms of manifestation. However, this folding of the new to traditional forms cannot be achieved by itself because folklore is constantly "threatened" by various sources of "pollution". The convergence of the two can only be achieved through the active involvement of "competent and conscious local artistic instructors"¹⁸.

The ethnomusicologist as a discreet supervisor of change

The cultural activist becomes an important figure towards the end of Nicola's study, as he formulates a list of suggestions and recommendations

¹⁴ Constantin Brăiloiu (1893-1958), the most prominent figure of the Romanian ethnomusicology was, in the interwar period, the founder of a folk archive (Arhiva de folklore) and a professor at the Bucharest conservatory. Nicola was one of his students and was also a collaborator of the archive.

¹⁵ Ioan R. Nicola donation fund, file 12i, p. C.f.26. Some authors show how literary procedures such as strophic arrangement or various types of rhyme influence the contemporary creation of folk songs (Eugenia Cernea et al., *op. cit.*, p. 13).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. C.f.10.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. C.f.21.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. C.f.29-C.f.30.

regarding the fate of the musical folklore from Mărginime. The activist is, in fact, the link between the ethnomusicologist (as a scientific authority) and the consumers and performers of folk music. In this role, he needs, according to Nicola, adequate training: “auditions-lessons, illustrated with musical examples (disc, magnetic tape), followed by discussions to educate instructors, soloists and all those who work in mass artistic movements, on the specific features of Mărginime’s folklore and its interpretation”¹⁹. They will be taught about the specifics of this music (formation, features, evolution), as well as on its contribution to the enrichment of the Romanian folk treasure and on the need to preserve it. In their turn, cultural activists will have the mission of disseminating this information among the popular masses who will also form “a lucid awareness of the need to value and maintain the specificity of the Mărginime, as well as the need to resist the factors that affect this special character”²⁰. Thus, the penetration and assimilation of new elements will not affect (at least not decisively) “the specificity, authenticity, beauty, and charm of the Mărginime’s folklore.”

These recommendations made by Nicola could be considered (according to a superficial but extremely popular grid of interpretation) as a new proof of an all-powerful totalitarian state that imposes its doctrine in the smallest details and down to the basic level of society, that of the individual. In such a scenario, ethnomusicologists themselves become agents in charge of ideological propaganda, their objective, scientific work being perverted by the directives of the single party. But reality never had these characteristics: not only did the regime fail to impose its practices and ideology entirely, but some ethnomusicologists even managed to stay away from politically charged subjects, taking refuge in more abstract, analytical areas that could provide an illusory form of ideological freedom²¹.

What for some researchers today might seem like a strong state, with a monolithic will and whose directives managed to be imposed unmistakably, for others, the power of the state apparatus is a more complex and nuanced topic up for debate. Anthropologist Katherine Verdery argues that Romania at that time was, in fact, a weak state, and in support of this statement brings several arguments. One of them is that of the dependence of the central power on the cadres in the middle and lower echelons who had to provide them with data, reports, and information as accurately as possible for the former to be able to make the appropriate decisions²².

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. C.f.33.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. C.f.36.

²¹ Marian-Bălașa, Marin. *Muzicologii, etnologii, subiectivități, politici* (*Musicologies, ethnologies, subjectivities, politics*). Ed. Muzicală, 2011, p. 36.

²² Verdery, Katherine. *National ideology under socialism. Identity and cultural politics in Ceaușescu’s Romania*. U of California P, 1991, p. 83.

This observation is valid not only for the economic and industrial aspects but also for the way of implementing the cultural-artistic decisions in the territory. As the historian Cristian Vasile points out, local bodies have often exceeded the limits imposed by the center through excessive zeal²³. When it came to folklore performances, this excess of zeal can also be explained using official folklorism and the amateur artistic movement as springboards for political promotion²⁴. Discussing the Cântarea României (Singing Romania) national festival, the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu states that this was a huge process of reconstructing the folk culture, but that it would be misleading if we considered it as planned in the smallest details according to a clear conception of what popular culture should have been. Rather, the author suggests that the festival did not serve the same purpose throughout or through all its components, and some manifestations developed within it can be explained by various initiatives by local activists or specialists, each motivated by their ideas or ambitions²⁵.

Nicola also operates in a framework in which the general directions are dictated from the center, and their concrete application is conditioned by the creativity and ability of the researchers in the territory to juggle the imposed limits. He sees the transformations in rural folklore because of the evolution of the whole society and conceives the folklore show as a necessary result of this evolution. He focuses rather on stronger regulation of popular music practices (peasant or spectacular) during a modern society (which is inclined to a certain degree of homogeneity) with a highly centralized political system. In such a context, the author is animated by the romantic ideal of “saving” the folklore, but he operates from within a system that, at least theoretically, recognizes that music must change with society, and phenomena such as industrialization and urbanization entail transformations in terms of musical expression²⁶. Hence his recommendations are an attempt to reconcile his subjective conservation concerns with those of assuming the inevitable transformations. Nicola is not an advocate for forcibly imposing musical practices; rather, he hopes that, following the education of the masses with the necessary ethnomusicological notions, they will come to recognize the need for adequate cultivation of folklore

²³ Vasile, Cristian. *Politicile culturale comuniste în timpul regimului Gheorghiu-Dej (Communist cultural policies in the Gheorghiu-Dej regime)*. Humanitas, 2011, p. 24.

²⁴ Vasile, Cristian. *Viața intelectuală și artistică în primul deceniu al regimului Ceaușescu (The intellectual and artistic life in the first decade of the Ceaușescu regime)*. Humanitas, 2015, p. 81.

²⁵ Mihăilescu, Vintilă. „A new festival for the new man: the socialist market of folk experts during the „Singing Romanian” national festival”. *Studying Peoples in People's Democracies*, vol. II, edited by Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ilia Iliev and Slobodan Naumović, LIT Verlag Münster, 2008, p. 73.

²⁶ In fact, the communist regime placed an increasing emphasis (especially since its nationalist turn) on assembling a set of perennial values of folklore, and less on highlighting the transformations or changes that were taking place in this field.

and will willingly stimulate the musical creations that consider local tradition and specificity. This guidance process must not take the form of a constraint, of an “order from the top” that the peasants are obliged to respect, but rather the local cultural and artistic organizations must discreetly deal with this training of the public and watch closely the results of this action²⁷.

In this fashion, solving the problem of musical folklore in socialist Romania follows a dialectical path like the Hegelian model: the folklore specific to the area (or what was preserved from it in the second half of the twentieth century) is the given situation, and the centrifugal and leveling forces of modernization represent the negation of this situation. The dialectical synthesis of the two previous moments is represented by the new folklore, as overcoming the contradiction between specificity and uniformity and, at the same time, preserving the old and the new in a superior form. Of course, the author’s arguments are not necessarily constructed as a dialectical demonstration, but this line of thought can be extrapolated from the numerous statements he makes regarding the current and future situation of the folklore in Mărginimea Sibiului.

Folklore ensembles and folk shows

Naturally, the embodiment of this dialectical synthesis is represented by the folklore show, the stylization, and the scenic transposition of the rural cultural manifestations. This type of show was intensely promoted by the communist leadership, gaining pantagruelian proportions in the last two decades of the regime’s existence. It intended to provide the masses with a substitute, approved by the state, for traditional musical practices. This substitute had to meet people’s entertainment needs and was also able to mark a line of continuity with the village musical practices from before the communist regime. But most of all, it had to reflect all the qualities of the new order and the “new” man created under its impulse. In this context, the expression “from ritual to spectacle”, it is eloquent as it was used by the cultural activists of the time to emphasize the peasant origin and its grandiose transformation²⁸. This performative turn was even more necessary as the actual ritual was in a process of continuous disintegration (as Nicola attests for the Mărginime area); consequently, one of the conditions for the appearance of these stage productions was the disappearance of the acts that the officials claim to continue and represent, this whole process could be described in Debord’s words: “everything that was lived directly was exiled in a representation”²⁹.

²⁷ Ioan R. Nicola donation fund, file 12i, p. C.f. 42.

²⁸ Rădulescu, Speranța, *Peisaje muzicale din România secolului XX (Musical landscapes from twentieth century Romania)*, Ed. Muzicală, 2002, p. 83.

²⁹ Debord, Guy. *Societatea spectacolului (The society of the spectacle)*. Rao, 2011, p. 9.

Usually described exclusively from the perspective of their role in the state propaganda apparatus³⁰, amateur artistic ensembles and the stage products of their activity (folklore performances, theater plays, etc.) must be viewed from the broader perspective of the development strategy approached by the communist regime, namely developmentalism (national-Stalinist in the case of Romania). A strategy common to many states after World War II, developmentalism proposed state-driven industrialization as the main engine of economic development. In this sense, the intentions of the communist regime aimed to overcome the status of agricultural dependence in which the country was, to transform it into a medium industrial power³¹. This new economic approach was accompanied by a process of rapid urbanization, ensuring full employment, universal access to social services, investment in education, and research. The developmental policy of the regime has produced important progress not only in economic terms but also in improving economic opportunities for much of the population, ending a highly stratified society³².

The economic advance allowed the creation of a large cultural-artistic infrastructure (village halls, houses of culture, performance halls, costumes, instruments, publishing houses, scores, institutions) that had the role of accomplishing what the regime called the cultural revolution. According to historians, the cultural revolution starts after the political revolution and involves equalizing cultural conditions and access to culture, rapidly raising the level of education, preparing a new type of intellectual, that is closer to the people and the working class³³. Among other things, folklore was a priority of the regime, which substantially funded genuine academic research³⁴. This is the context in which the development of a mass artistic movement took place, the aim of which was not only to “make an important contribution to the development of socialist consciousness”, but also to contribute to the “aesthetic education of the masses, to the pleasant and instructive use of their free time”³⁵. In parallel with the economic growth, the amateur movement is also experiencing a significant expansion: in a 1970

³⁰ Cristian Vasile goes so far as to wonder, at one point, whether the amateur artistic groups were an integral part of a “national totalitarian movement”. Vasile, 2015, p. 85.

³¹ Ban, Cornel. *Dependență și dezvoltare. Economia politică a capitalismului românesc (Dependency and development. The political economy of the Romanian capitalism)*, Tact, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, p. 44.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 48 et passim.

³³ Vasile, Cristian. *Politicile culturale comuniste (Communist cultural policies)*, p. 31.

³⁴ Marian-Bălașa 2011, p. 18. The author also remarks that “under communism, it seems that no other art form has been more agreed and appreciated by the state and by political ideology than the folklore.”

³⁵ Vasile, Cristian. *Viața intelectuală (Intellectual life)*, p. 62.

speech, Nicolae Ceaușescu, to demonstrate the success of the cultural revolution, estimated, at that time, the existence of 24.543 such artistic formations, compared to 3.500 in 1938³⁶. Although consonant with the social policy of the regime that intended to facilitate access to culture for the broadest masses of the population (a culture, of course, agreed by the political power), some authors continue to see in these initiatives of the communist leadership only forms of propaganda and manipulation.³⁷

The folklore representations were executed by ensembles of different compositions and sizes but which, most of the time, contained vocal soloists, instrumental orchestra and a group of dancers. Renowned ethnomusicologists of the period (Tiberiu Alexandru, Emilia Comișel) expressed their appreciation for such ensembles, considering them representative of “authentic folklore”³⁸. The same thing can be said about Nicola, who speaks, on several occasions, in laudatory terms about the peasant ensembles formed in Mărginime after the Second World War. The most widespread in the area were the pipes ensembles, the creation of which was possible due to the construction of standardized pipe models, capable of a clean and uniform intonation. This technological development later influenced the performance possibilities of the ensembles. At the initiative of instructors that had some theoretical knowledge, peasant performing style had been modified to then incorporate art music techniques: canons, fugato entrances, imitations, pedals. The next step was to set up vocal-instrumental ensembles, choir, and pipes. Based on the Western music theory, voices and instruments were now divided into distinct voices, arranged according to configurations hitherto unknown to peasant music. Although most contemporary authors consider the activity of such ensembles as impoverishment and a uniformity (exactly the phenomena of which the author was concerned) of the traditional peasant repertoires, Nicola sees in them “the expression of a happy combination between tradition and innovation”³⁹. At the time, the folk music orchestra was considered an improved form of taraf (the small traditional band playing mostly instrumental dance music), in which the deficiencies of peasant group performance are eliminated, and the various scholarly innovations raise it to a higher artistic level.⁴⁰ The same idea appears in Nicola’s writings. He believes that, because ensembles

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 80-81.

³⁷ One such case is that of the historian Cristian Vasile, who considers Casa Centrală a Creației Populare (Central House of Popular Creation) to be an institution created “with the clear intention of political-ideological instrumentalization of folklore, in general, and of rural artistic ensembles, in particular.” Vasile, Cristian. *Viața intelectuală (Intellectual life)*, p. 63.

³⁸ Rădulescu, Speranța. *Peisaje muzicale (Musical landscapes)*, p. 83.

³⁹ Nicola, Ioan R. donation fund, file 21a, pp. 150-151.

⁴⁰ Rădulescu, Speranța. *Peisaje muzicale (Musical landscapes)*, p. 84-85.

did not have a leader, the peasant instrumental ensembles formed ad-hoc upon different festive occasions and this is why they have an interpretation that presents “serious deficiencies from an artistic point of view”⁴¹.

Noticing, in his field research, a dissolution of rituals and a significant narrowing of certain musical genres, Nicola sees in their scenic representation a way of perpetuating the village folklore. Discussing the performances that reproduced the nuptial ritual enacted by folk ensembles from different Mărginime villages, the author considers them as villagers’ initiative, who realized the disappearance of the old forms of this ritual and decided to give it a new life on the stage of the village hall. Rather than a strategy of local officials or intelligentsia, these shows are for Nicola “an eloquent and ever-living proof of the capacity for creative adaptations of folklore by the creators themselves, as well as the happy collaboration between them and the professionals who value folk art”⁴². As in the case of the pipe ensembles, for the Cluj ethnomusicologist such stage productions are “a masterful capitalization of the traditional folklore in a successful combination with the current folklore”⁴³. On the same note, he discussed the future of ballads, which Nicola believes can be revitalized by stimulating guidance received from higher forums. From the researcher’s point of view, such an incentive capable of bringing ballads back to life is represented by radio and television shows, or by folklore festivals and competitions, which require performers and contestants to perform epic productions⁴⁴. Although this belief may seem naive at first glance, Nicola’s hope in folklore contests and performances as possible factors in revitalizing rural traditions was not unfounded. As some contemporary research shows, a cultural event of the magnitude of the Cântarea României (Singing Romania) national festival could determine, in some rural communities, a renewed interest in forms of folk art that were obsolete or preserved only in the memory of the elders⁴⁵.

Nicola’s references to the folk ensembles of various amateur groups may seem outside the concerns of the contemporary ethnomusicologist, but during the communist regime, with its strong emphasis on promoting mass culture, the involvement of professionals in guiding or evaluating the activities of these groups was a duty which too few could avoid. For example, in 1970

⁴¹ Nicola, Ioan R. donation fund, file 21a, p. I.13.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. N/17-N/18.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. B/33-B/34.

⁴⁵ For a musical example, see Sava, Eleonora. “The peasant in socialist Romania. An ethnological perspective”. *Memoria Ethnologica*, no. 36-37, July-December 2010 (X), p. 73. This idea is also supported by Vintilă Mihăilescu, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

the author is part, together with his younger colleague Traian Mârza, of the jury of the folklore festival-contest of Cluj. In an investigation of the *Flacăra* newspaper⁴⁶ conducted with the members of the jury, Nicola saw this as a chance to promote the local folklore ensembles, whose members were not only cheered by a large audience but also scored and scrutinized by specialists in the field. In addition to these positive aspects, he also mentions some shortcomings, such as the poor training of vocal soloists, the choice of repertoire from other ethnofolkloric areas than Cluj or the “creative interpretations” imposed by some ensemble instructors. In his turn, Traian Mârza drew attention to the violation of the adequate chronology of a show that staged a nuptial ritual. As a solution, the latter proposed that “before being presented in public, the show should receive the approval of a specialist”⁴⁷.

It is worth pointing out that the criticisms brought forth by ethnomusicologists to the stage representations of folklore did not consider the reasons for which peasant oral music was presented on stage as a show, with all the necessary changes arising from this adaptation⁴⁸.

Rather, specialists were only drawing attention to the training of instructors (who were supposed to know the realities of rural culture in detail), to the authenticity of the performances, or their excesses⁴⁹. This is because, according to the official doctrine (also reproduced in a study by Anca Giurchescu⁵⁰), it was not possible to distinguish, except from a theoretical point of view, between the folklore in a traditional social context and the folklore conveyed on stage, the two being interdependent.

In addition to the nature of the criticisms that ethnomusicologists could bring to such cultural events, we can also observe two other social phenomena that developed with the rise of the artistic amateur movement. Firstly, although it is an entertainment product, the folklore show is not subject to market pressures, like any product of the capitalist societies, so its existence does not depend on the profit it could produce. Indeed, public success is still an important criterion in its evaluation, but this success can be achieved through

⁴⁶ Chioreanu, V. „Ascendența spectacolului folcloric” (“The ascendance of the folkloric performance”). *Flacăra*, year XXVI, no. 7312, May 14th, 1970.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ The only such approach published before 1989 that I know of is that of the sociologist Henri H. Stahl, in the article “Folclor «autentic» și folclor profesional” (“«Authentic» Folklore and Professional Folklore”), included in his book *Eseuri critice despre cultura populară românească* (*Critical essays on the Romanian popular culture*). Minerva, 1983.

⁴⁹ Suggestions similar to those made by Nicola and Mârza can be found, for example, in Anca Giurchescu 1961, 1977.

⁵⁰ Giurchescu, Anca. 1977.

the superior quality of the staging and the “authenticity” of the acts presented. In this case, the role of the ethnomusicologist is crucial (it suffice to highlight Mârza’s suggestion or Nicola’s constant preoccupation with educating the public, performers, and instructors), as he is the one who could exert a certain kind of pressures for the staged folklore to maintain a close connection with its rural dimension. Secondly, we can talk about the development of two socio-professional categories whose interests overlapped to a certain extent, but whose encounter was not without frictions: ethnomusicologists, on the one hand, and the instructors of artistic groups or various cultural activists in the field of folklore, on the other side. These two types of specialists have come to interact more and more frequently as the number of artistic activities increased, especially after the establishment of the Cântarea României (Singing Romania) national festival. Even if their concern was in the study and conservation of village folklore, the different nature of their activity placed them, at times, in a conflicting relationship, both in terms of the principles according to which folklore should be studied and staged⁵¹ and in terms of the access to resources (funds for field research, book publishing, disk releases, etc.)⁵².

Conclusions

Up to this point, we tried to explore how Romanian ethnomusicologists dealt with a series of delicate topics, that had a strong ideological load and were strictly determined by the party directives. Due to political constraints, these topics have never been of real interest to post-war specialists, and today, more than ever, they have fallen into disuse. In opposition to the current trend, we intended to demonstrate that issues such as the transformations suffered by peasant music in contemporary society, including their adaptation to the stage, are non-trivial subjects. Moreover, we wanted to indicate that historical and dialectical materialism provided researchers with a theoretical framework capable of conducting analyzes of the social structures and the transformations they went through⁵³. This framework was more flexible when

⁵¹ Examples of such situations can be found in Rădulescu 1997.

⁵² For a broader discussion on the role of specialists in the Cântarea României national festival, see Mihăilescu, 2008.

⁵³ An example of such an approach is the work in three volumes by Henri H. Stahl, *Contribuții la studiul satelor devălmașe românești (Contributions to the study of Romanian joint property villages)*, in which the author deals with the problem of changing forms of ownership in the rural world with the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In fact, Stahl also applies this type of analysis when he talks about the transformation or disappearance of some folk practices, which he links to the existence of certain social groups, determined, in their turn, by different socio-economic configurations.

applied for periods prior to 1944, but it became much more rigid when the new folklore had to be dealt with, in this case, the directives of political power took precedence over the research activities⁵⁴.

Nicola dedicates a significant number of pages to the problems of folklore that appeared with the establishment of the communist power, more than we usually find in other studies by authors of similar, monographic collections. We cannot assume with conviction whether the attention paid to the subject is due to a real concern of the author or was conceived as a concession made to the regime and as a strategy to ensure the publication of the book (probably both reasons are equally plausible). What is certain is that, from a semantic and stylistic point of view, his language oscillates between one of romantic inspiration (when, for example, he uses terms such as “pure folklore”, “spiritual treasure”, etc.) and one modeled on the ideology of the Communist Party (when he refers to contemporary social phenomena). Starting from the official ideological framework, he intends to justify (and not necessarily offer an explanation) the transformations of contemporary folklore and to design a “set of good practices” for all those involved in artistic activities, so that the content of the music (if not the form) remains as close as possible to the original local specificity, the one so revered by ethnomusicologists.

Nicola’s arguments, which could be perceived today as dated or somehow naive, help us understand that the establishment of professional and amateur folk groups and their activity as stage shows was not just an arbitrary decision of some party officials looking exclusively for means to intensify the regime’s propaganda. From the perspective of dialectical materialism, these phenomena of modern culture appear with necessity in certain socio-economic conditions, conditions present at that time in Romania (industrialization, urbanization, entertainment industry), and favored by the economic policy of the regime. Justified or not, the regime’s decisions had, at least in this case, a coherence, based on a certain conception regarding the course of history and the progress of human societies. Without this more nuanced perspective, the current exegesis and commentaries on the Romanian ethnomusicology are reduced to a plain condemnation of the regime for the distortion and instrumentalization of the peasant folklore.

⁵⁴ Although he admits that the peasant culture undergoes changes with the transition to socialism, Nicola warns that the new creation needs time to be able to develop, suggesting the removal of the pressures exerted to hasten it (Ioan R. Nicola donation fund, p. 57 and p. C.f.8).

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