

## 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY CHRISTMAS CAROLS IN THE TRANSYLVANIAN PLAIN

ZOLTÁN GERGELY<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY.** From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we can witness the popularity of the songs written by cantors and priests. Musically, these melodies can be placed within the frames of classicism and romanticism, with the frequency of common chord and a general AABA melodic structure. The lines have mostly 10-15 syllables. Especially within the repertoire of the Protestant Churches – also from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – there has been a growth in the number of songs imported from abroad, which have been translated to Hungarian. The spread of the songs were favoured first of all by handwritten cantor books, pulp fiction, and later on by the hymnals of different confessions, and media. The Christmas carols broadcasted on television and radio have become more and more popular, thus they could have been included in the local repertoires.

**Keywords:** Christmas Carols, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Transylvanian Plain, local repertoires, translation.

### Example 1.

The song *Mennyből az angyal* [An Angel from Heaven] has been one of the most well-known and beloved Christmas carols of the Hungarian language area since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its first written appearance dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as it was included in the volume *Patai Graduálé*, but without the rhythm and with some changes in the starting motifs of the lines.<sup>2</sup>

According to musical literature the structure built on 5 and 3 syllables units is quite rare in Hungarian folk music. The text that had been published in the hymnal<sup>3</sup> edited by Szentmihályi Mihály in 1798 and the melody that

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<sup>1</sup> PhD, Researcher of the Folklore Institute of the Romanian Academy in Cluj/Kolozsvár,  
E-mail: zoli\_gdur@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> MNTK I. 902–903. IV(G) type 465.; MNT II. 437. nr. 358/II., 583. nr. 395., 1124.

<sup>3</sup> <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/E/Egyh%C3%A1zi%20%C3%A9nekes%20k%C3%B6nyv.html>  
(2013. 09. 19.)

had been published in 1844 in the so-called Gimesi collection were included in the Zsasskovszky hymnal from 1855<sup>4</sup>. After these stages this Christmas song has been promoted through Catholic and Lutheran hymnals, becoming not only a part of the ecclesiastic praxis, but also of the popular one<sup>5</sup> (1a–1b). The collection of Romanian Christmas carols edited by Sabin Drăgoi presents also a Romanian variant (1 c), but its spreading was not sustained by further fieldwork results<sup>6</sup>.

The text is mostly the same throughout the Hungarian language area, presenting the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. Through the ages other religious – and even profane – texts were associated to it, regarding different dramatic or social folk customs.<sup>7</sup>

E.g. 1

1a. *Mennyből az angyal*

♩ = 64

Menny-ből az an-gyal le-jött hoz-zá-tok, Pász-to-rok, pász-to-rok.

Hogy Bet-le-hem-be, si-et-ve men-ve, Lás-sá-tok, lás-sá-tok.

**Nuşeni, Bistriţa-Năşăud County, Kiss (Gergely) Rozália 63,  
recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012.**

1b. *Mennyből az angyal*

♩ = 68

I. Menny-ből az an-gyal, le-jött hoz-zá-tok, Pász-to-rok, pász-to-rok.

Hogy Bet-le-hem-be, si-et-ve men-ve, Lás-sá-tok, lás-sá-tok.

**Suatu, Cluj County, Maneszes (Tóth) Mária 88, Kiss (Dezső) Anna 78,  
recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012.**

<sup>4</sup> MNTK I. 902–903. IV(G) type 465.; Volly István 1982. 119–120. nr. 119., 300–302.

<sup>5</sup> Dobszay László 2006. 176. nr. 434.; *Éneklő Egyház* [Singing Church] 2010. 117–118.; *Evangelikus énekeskönyv* [Lutheran Hymnal] 2009. 637. nr. 549.

<sup>6</sup> Drăgoi, Sabin 1925. nr. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Hungarian Academy of Sciences Folk Music Typological System number: 16.285.0/0.

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1c. *Din cer ingerii*

Andante ♩ = 88

Din cer in - ge - rii se po - go - ră - ră. La noi păs - tori, la noi păs - tori,  
Că n Vit - le - am de grab' să mer - gem, Să-l ve dem, să-l ve - dem.

Dobra, Hunedoara County, recorded by Sabin V. Drăgoi

**Example 2.**

The repetitive structured AA<sub>v</sub>BA, major hexachord scale song has a melody and a text with still unknown origin. Although it has not been promoted by the printed hymnals, we can find it all over the Hungarian language area, as it can be heard at the midnight mass of Christmas in almost every Catholic settlement.

**E.g. 2**

2. *Leszállt az éj dicső királya* [The Mighty King of Night has Descended]

Poco rubato ♩ = cca. 187

1. Leszállt az éj di - cső ki - rá - nya, kö - zénk ez ün - nep haj - na - lán. Já -  
szol - ban fek - szik rongy ru - há - ban ki meny - nyet, föl - det al - ko - tá.  
Légy üd - vö - zül - ve, kis Jé - zus - ka, a - ki az ég és föld u - ra, El -  
mú - lik im a bűn - nek é - je, mert Te az üd - vőt hir - de - ted.

Unguraş, Cluj County, Réti Rozália 60, recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2011.

**Example 3.**

The song *Kicsiny Betlehembe* [In Tiny Bethlehem], that appeared in the *Kolozsvári református énekeskönyv* [Reformed Hymnal of Cluj]<sup>8</sup> in 1923, has been included in the Christmas repertoire of certain settlements of the Transylvanian Plain. The melody was written by dr. Kováts Lajos (1870–1921). The text by Tóth L. is a summary of the theological content of Christmas.

**E.g. 3****3. Kicsiny Betlehembe**

Giusto ♩ = 58

Ki-csiny Bet-le-hem-be, Meg-zen-dült az é - nek, Di-csé-ret, di-cső - ség

Az ég Is - te - né - nek, Kit oly rég-től fog - va, Szív - sza-kad - va vár - tunk,

Meg - szü-le-tet meg - vál - tó - ja a bü-nös vi - lág - nak.

**Nuşeni, Bistriţa-Năşăud County, (Gergely) Rozália 63,  
recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012.**

**Example 4.**

This minor scale song with AABA structure, 1 (1) 5 1 cadence, is a distant relative to the Zionist anthem. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century its variants have been quite popular also in the Romanian folk music. Romanian musicologist Gheorghe Breazul makes reference to Abraham Cevi Idelsohn<sup>9</sup>, who did not only publish the Zionist anthem, with similar melody, but also outlined its Armenian and Ukrainian parallels. The melody was used by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana in his symphonic poem entitled *Vltava*<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Péter Éva 2008. Appendix 1. 154.

<sup>9</sup> Idelsohn Abraham Cevi (1882–1938) Jewish folk music researcher with Lithuanian origin, interested in the folk music of Mizrahi Jews.

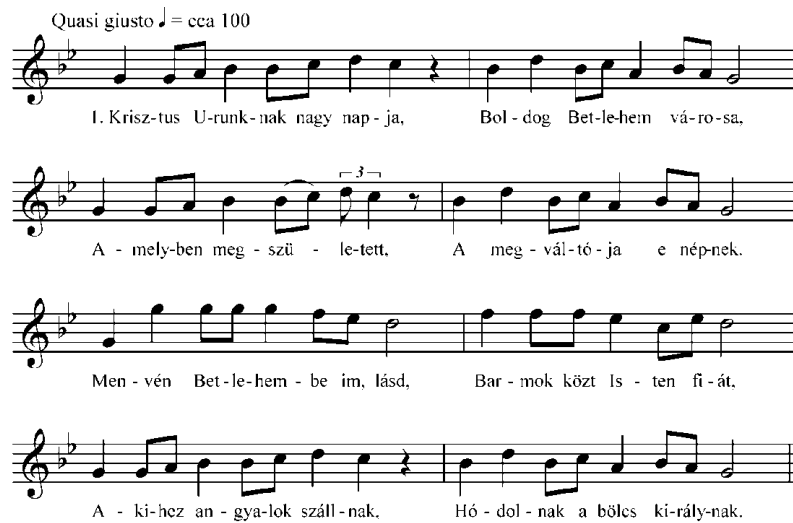
<sup>10</sup> Rădulescu, Nicolae 1968. 21. nr. 21.

Within the Hungarian language area this melody has had several functions: with the text *Tüzed, Uram Jézus* [Your Fire, Lord Jesus] it has become a part of liturgical singing, in Chesău it was a Christmas carol entitled *Krisztus Urunknak nagy napja* [The Big Day of our Lord Jesus]. The unknown author of the text does not only sum up the story of the birth of Jesus, but also the essence of faith itself.

E.g. 4

4. *Krisztus Urunknak nagy napja*

Quasi giusto ♩ = cca 100



I. Krisz-tus U-runk-nak nagy nap - ja, Bol - dog Bet-le-hem vá-ro-sa,  
A - mely-ben meg - szü - le-tett, A meg - vál-tó - ja e nép-nek.  
Men - vén Bet-le-hem - be im, lásd, Bar - mok közt Is - ten fi - át.  
A - ki-hez an - gya-lok száll - nak, Hó - dol - nak a böles ki-rály-nak.

Chesău, Cluj County, Földvári Mihály 76,  
recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012.

Example 5.

The next melody is a close variant of the type MNTK I. IV (B)/101<sup>11</sup>. This 19<sup>th</sup> century minor hexachord scale melody was noted with several different texts all around the Hungarian language area. In western part of Hungary and in Transylvania – among others in Unguraş too – it was associated with the text of the folk ballad about the “girl with a peacock”<sup>12</sup>. The melody was incorporated into the winter repertoire as well. In Hungary and certain Catholic parts of Transylvania it was performed within a winter

<sup>11</sup> MNTK I. 614. IV(B)/101. type; MNT II. 349., 1114.

<sup>12</sup> Vargyas Lajos 1976. 595–598. type 93.

dramatic folk custom, with the text *Szállást keres a szent család* [The Holy Family Seeks for Accommodation].<sup>13</sup>

Besides this ABCA<sub>vk</sub> structured example from Unguraş we have no other data from the Transylvanian Plain, so it is possible that the informant learnt this song from a book or from relatives from Hungary.

**E.g. 5**

**5. Szállást keres a szent család**

Poco rubato ♩ = cca. 146

I. Szál-lást ke - res a szent csa - lád,  
De sen - ki sincs ki he - lyet át.  
Nin - csen a - ki be - fo - gad - ja  
Őt ki ég - nek, s föld-nek u - ra.

**Unguraş, Cluj County, Réti Rozália 60, recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2011.**

**Example 6.**

The second and third verse of example 6 was written by Reformed priest and poet Szabolcska Mihály (1862–1930). The title of his poem – *A megváltó ma született* [The Saviour was Born Today]<sup>14</sup> – can be found in the chorus sung to the last melody line through the sections. The first line of the ABCDA<sub>v</sub> structured, major hexachord scale melody has a starting motif with quart, which – as well as the chorus-like appendix at the end of the verse – shows some similarities with a melody documented from the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup>, but they are not identical, being obviously of more recent origin.

<sup>13</sup> Volly István 1982. 104–105. nr. 97., 290–291.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.jmvmk.hu/sites/default/files/e-konyvtar/komaromiujsag/1915/ku1915\\_51.pdf](http://www.jmvmk.hu/sites/default/files/e-konyvtar/komaromiujsag/1915/ku1915_51.pdf) (2018. 04. 06.)

<sup>15</sup> MNTK I. 769–771. IV(E)/305. type. This type can be found also with different texts: Péter Éva 2008. 131–132.

In the collection of Lajtha László from Sânmărtin<sup>16</sup> this melody was not included, thus we can presume that it appeared only later, being included into the local Christmas repertoire by the cantor of the village.

E.g. 6

6. *Karácsony este azt ragyogja* [Christmas Night Shines]

Poco rubato ♩ = cca. 142

1.) \_\_\_\_\_ 2.) \_\_\_\_\_

1. Ka-rá-csony es-te azt ra-gyog-ja, Krisz-tu-sunk fek-szik a já-szoj-ba.  
 Pász-to-rok, böl-csek, jöt-tek el hoz-zá-ja, Csil-lag fény ve-ze-tett,  
 A meg-vál-tó ma szü-le-tett.  
 1.) \_\_\_\_\_ 2.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 3. Az ár-vák és sze-gé-nyek. 2. vsz.-tól

Sânmărtin, Cluj County, Varga (Borzási) Anna 73,  
 recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012.

Example 7.

One of the most well-known works of Samuel Wesley Martin (1839–1926?), organist and composer from Chicago, is the song entitled *The Gospel Bells are ringing*, which was quite successful already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This four-part harmony piece has been promoted by different American choir collections since 1877, being translated to several languages, it has become an internationally well-known song<sup>17</sup>. The English text was translated by poet, translator and publicist Vargha Gyuláné Szász Póla (1863–1947). The song was published in the ecumenical hymnal entitled *Hallelujah*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Lajtha László 1954.

<sup>17</sup> Published at: [http://www.hymnary.org/text/the\\_gospel\\_bells\\_are\\_ringing](http://www.hymnary.org/text/the_gospel_bells_are_ringing) (2013. 09. 19.)

<sup>18</sup> Kováts ed. 1944.

At Chiochiş the song is known by the Hungarian title *Halld az ég harangi zengnek*, and it was included in the Christmas repertoire, as according to the informants this is the carol of the married and the adults. The text is not specific for Christmas, it refers to it, but it is more educational and confessional.

E.g. 7

7. *Halld az ég harangi zengnek*

Quasi giusto ♩ = 58

1. Halld az ég ha - ran - gi zeng-nek, Mesz-sze föld - ről szer - te - szét.  
 Hí - rül ad - va min - de - nek - nek, Is - ten üdv ü - ze - ne - tét.  
 Ál - dott Is - ten nagy ke - gyel - me, Hogy le - küld - te szent Fi - át,  
 Ben - ne higgy, s az é - let lel - ke, Meg - győz ben - ned sírt, ha - lát.  
 Szent ha - rang, é - gi hang, zen - dül szer - te han - go - san,  
 Drá - ga név, Jé - zus él, Most ke - gyel - me - nap - ja van.

Chiochiş, Bistriţa-Năsăud County, Group, recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012

Example 8.

The composition of Scottish chorister Hugh Wilson (1766–1824) has become very popular within the Baptist church; it has been performed up to our days.<sup>19</sup> The text was translated also to Hungarian, and the song was

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.hymnary.org/tune/martyrdom\\_wilson](http://www.hymnary.org/tune/martyrdom_wilson) (2013. 09. 19.)



promoted by the Baptist hymnals under the title *Feléd, szerelmes Istenem* [Towards Thee, My Beloved God].<sup>20</sup> At Chiochiş the melody has become a part of the Christmas repertoire of adults and married people, with the text *A sötét éjszakában* [In the Dark of the Night]. The author of the Hungarian version is unknown, the text talks about the birth of Jesus.

E.g. 8

### 8. A sötét éjszakában

♩ = 143 <sup>1)</sup>

1. A sötét éjszakában, felülnek egy csillag, mely

a keletől bűcsöknek mutatja az utat.

<sup>1)</sup>

Chiochiş, Bistriţa-Năsăud County, Group, recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012

### Example 9.

The song *Silent Night, Holy Night* is one of the most popular Christmas songs. Its original German text (*Stille Nacht*) was written by the Austrian Catholic priest Joseph More (1792–1848) in 1816, the melody was composed by Austrian organist Franz Xaver Gruber (1787–1863) on December 24 1818, just a few hours before the Christmas mass. It has become more and more popular starting with the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being translated into several languages.<sup>21</sup>

In Transylvania it is known first of all as a congregational song, it was published in the Reformed hymnal from Cluj in 1923<sup>22</sup>, then gradually it

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. *A hit hangjai*. Baptista Énekeskönyv. [Voices of Faith. Baptist Hymnal.] 2006. song nr. 210.

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.hymnary.org/text/silent\\_night\\_holy\\_night\\_all\\_is\\_calm\\_all](http://www.hymnary.org/text/silent_night_holy_night_all_is_calm_all) (2013. 09. 19.)

<sup>22</sup> Péter Éva 2008. I. *Appendix*, 151.

has become a part of the Christmas carols' repertoire in several settlements of the Transylvanian Plain. Although originally it was written in 6/8 beat, the performance of the variant from Bozieş is more adapted to the halting church version (the eighth beats sometimes are fused with the quarter beats), according to the practice of learning songs through oral tradition.

E.g. 9

9. *Csendes éj, szentséges éj*

Quasi giusto ♩ = 50

1. Csen - des éj, szent - séges éj, Min - de - nek nyug - ta mély,  
Nincs fenn más csak a szent szü - le pár, Drá - ga kis - de - dük ál - ma - i - nál,  
Szent Fi - ú a - lud - jál, Szent Fi - ú a - lud - jál.

**Bozieş, Bistriţa-Năsăud County, Group, recorded by Gergely Zoltán, 2012**

The Christmas carols from the presented group of songs<sup>23</sup> (1–9.) date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The number of examples (9) could be enriched considerably with further fieldwork. Most of the presented examples were imported from abroad, in their spreading a great role was played by different Protestant and Neo-protestant hymnals as well as by the media and the Internet. Besides the songs *Mennyből az angyal* (1) and *Csendes éj* (9), about which we can surely state, that are the most popular and well-spread songs of this group, the other melodies are only of local importance. The song *Kicsiny Betlehemben* (3), which can also be found in the Reformed hymnal, was introduced in the Christmas repertoire of a few settlements from the church repertoire, while the songs *Leszállt*

<sup>23</sup> This study was published in Hungarian within the volume a *Mezőségi kántáló énekek* in 2016-ban. Gergely Zoltán, *Mezőségi kántáló énekek*, [Christmas Carols from the Transylvanian Plain] Hagymányok Háza, Budapest, 2016. ISBN 978-963-7363-89-4.

az ég dicső királya (2), *Krisztus Urunknak nagy napja* (4), *Szállást keres a szent család* (5), *Karácsony este azt ragyogja* (6), *Halld, az ég harangi zengnek* (7) and *A sötét éjszakában* (8) can be found only within one certain settlement or another.

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