

The importance of music theory in transcribing the musical text as an ethnomusicological document

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Abstract: *The transcription, a fundamental element of ethnomusicological research, has as main objective the representation from a graphic point of view of all the melodic, rhythmic and ornamental elements that the musical folklore contains.*

The musical text is laid out on paper, taking into account several important criteria: the analysis of the sound text to be transcribed, the identification of the elements perceived after the initial analysis and the correct and accurate assignment of the corresponding graphic elements.

The paper aims to highlight the importance of the basic elements of music theory in the realization of ethnomusicological discourse. The thorough acquisition of these elements determines the scientific transcription of the collected musical repertoire, and the transcription decisions that the researcher assumes, ensure the document quality of the musical discourse.

Key-words: *ethnomusicology; music transcription; music theory; music repertoire; folklore*

1. Introduction

The present study starts from the hypothesis that music theory is the discipline which, having as main objective the achievement of a correct correlation between the musical text and the sound configuration, based on aural skills and reading and writing skills, provides the ethnomusicologist with the necessary tools for recognition, transcription and analyzing the musical repertoire collected from the subjects.

The roots of ethnomusicology are usually traced back to the 1880s and 1890s, when activity in the field began with studies conducted mainly in Germany and America.² In our country, the study of folklore on a scientific basis acquires consistency, first of all thanks to the method revolution carried out by Constantin Brăiloiu in cooperation with the sociological school of Dimitrie Gusti.³

Romanian musical folklore, outlined since the last century, when we see the expansion of the area of investigation and the emergence of modern means of collection, was based on a solid concept, expressed by Constantin Brăiloiu who argued that the study of traditional music creation should be based on multilateral criteria according to the aesthetics created by the masses and not according to the aesthetic criterion of scholarly art.⁴

At the beginning of the twentieth century, ethnomusicology was established as a specific field of study, and the term of musical folklore is replaced by that of ethnomusicology. This passage is due to Jaap Kunst who published in 1950 the work "Ethnomusicology". Ethnomusicology was considered comparative musicology, which had set as its object of study

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² Merriam Alan P. 1964. *The anthropology of music*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, p.3.

³ Oprea G. 2002. *Romanian Musical Folklore*. Bucharest: Music Publishing House, p. 63.

⁴ Rădulescu F. I. 2005. *Romanian musical folklore from a diachronic and scientific perspective*. Constanța: Europolis Publishing House, p. 181.

*extra-European music, both scholarly and popular (representatives of the Berlin school of comparative musicology: Carl Stumpf, Erich von Hornbostel, Curt Sachs).*⁵

The transformation of the old musical folklore into ethnomusicology involved both the study of the structures of folk music, of the functionality of its categories and of a historical-comparative approach to the phenomena. There have been some trends of rapprochement between the different European and American schools of ethnomusicology.

Some researchers believe that folklore and ethnomusicology do not overlap, and others admit that the two notions intersect. In their vision, musical folklore focuses on the creation of a certain ethnic group (people), while ethnomusicology studies the specifics of an ethnic community seeking to capture its specifics, compared to other communities.

The ethnomusicologist has the duty to approach traditional music from his structural perspective. He must be able to note the music, analyze its component parts and understand how these parts fit together to form a coherent and unitary entity. This way of researching traditional music *is essentially descriptive and very technical, being characteristic of specialists, those from higher vocational education.*⁶

It is well known that the study of folklore, perceived as the totality of artistic creations in popular spiritual culture, involves interference with history, geography, philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, sciences with which it harmonizes in order to achieve the scientific act. From the lyrics of the song, the ethnomusicologist discovers many aspects regarding the society subject to research, and the analysis of the structural principles offers, besides the purely technical elements, notions of aesthetics and stylistics.

Ethnomusicology is not an isolated discipline, it seeks to combine different research methods to solve a wide range of problems, both in the humanities and social sciences. As we have already noted, the aims and objectives of ethnomusicology do not differ significantly from those of other disciplines, and in addition to music, the ethnomusicologist's research field includes both the social sciences and the humanities.

2. The importance of aural skills and musical notation skills in making ethnomusicological discourse

Music, the art of emotions, *is a language and a universal means of expression, a cultural-spiritual value to which all mankind has appealed since prehistoric times, from the anonymous creators and performers of folklore, to the brilliant representatives of cult creation.*⁷

The study and multilateral research of music is done theoretically and practically, music theory having as main purpose the presentation of the musical phenomenon in melodic and rhythmic aspect, as well as a series of principles necessary to understand and know the other sides of this phenomenon - dynamics, timbre, graphic representations, elements of melodic syntax, etc.

Musical notation is nothing more than an attempt to codify the laws governing human sound and musical impulse. These laws, being discovered, led to the theoretical formulation of the principles of musical art. Because they are based on the musical impulse, deep-intimate inner movement related to the sound element, the matter of music proves to be from the beginning a psychological phenomenon through everything it contains.

⁵ Oprea, G. op. cit. p. 65.

⁶ Merriam Alan P. op. cit. p. 14.

⁷ Giuleanu V. 1975. *Fundamental principles in music theory*. Bucharest: Music Publishing House, p. 6.

Music theory is the only discipline that, starting from the four natural (physiological) qualities of sounds - pitch, duration, intensity and timbre, deals with the graphic representations of music (notation), the specific ways of propagating and spreading the artistic message. If we think of the art phenomenon analytically, music, in its entirety, can be decomposed into the physical - respectively physiological - elements from which it derives. If we think of it synthetically, so in the opposite direction to the analytical one, the music can be recomposed and reconstructed starting from the same natural factors (height, duration, intensity, timbre).

In vocational education, music theory, a fundamental discipline of the musical phenomenon, aims, along with other disciplines, to reflect as accurately as possible the complex aspects of sound art. The theoretical, analytical and sound skills provided by this discipline are essential and necessary for musicians throughout their professional activities. The longevity of these skills depends on their theoretical / scientific exercise (music education teachers, musicologists) or practice (instrumentalists, conductors).

To study music you need musical skills. The pedagogue I. Gagim, in his work "The psychological dimension of music", establishes two aspects in terms of musical skills: the first being *technical* and the second *artistic*.

The *technical* aspect refers to the aural skills capacities related to the orientation in the acoustic, purely sonorous substratum of music, with reference to the formative-constructive side, of organizing the sonorous-musical phenomenon.

The *artistic* aspect *is related to the orientation in the content side, in the sphere of musical emotion, it is related to the reception of the poetic line of the sound discourse, the capture of the artistic image of the work.*⁸

The elements of traditional musical language are represented in writing and decoded with the help of aural skills, memory and musical thinking. Aural skills are considered an essential skill that can be cultivated in the process of musical training through daily exercises (solfeggio). Through thorough training, advanced aural skills can be acquired. This type of aural skills is the key to all the basic aspects both in the evolution of practicing musicians (intonation, precise rhythmic performance, phrasing / breathing), and those in the theoretical / scientific sphere (writing a linear succession of musical tones, polyphony or harmony, recognizing the system modal, tonal, chromatic, of the timbre, the transcription of the elements of agogics and dynamics, the framing in genres, the recognition of the way of interpretation, of the form / structure, etc.).

The lightness of reproducing what we hear, melodic or harmonic, contributes both to the development of transcription skills and to the development of musical memory and internal aural skills. There is a certain correlation between the ability to memorize musical material and other musical skills. *Recent research results have established a direct link between memory quality music and stage of development of aural skills and musical rhythmic sense. The more developed the aural skills and the sense of rhythm, the more productively the mechanisms of musical memory work.*⁹

The fidelity of the playback of the heard songs is supported by the musical memory but also by the other musical skills. The study of music theory contributes to the formation in the higher plane of musical perceptions, those specific sensations, produced by sound qualities (pitch, duration, intensity and timbre) and received by the brain. The perception of music is in relations (direct or indirect) with other psychic processes - with memory, thinking, imagination, being directly conditioned by attention and will.

⁸ Gagim I. 2003. *The psychological dimension of music*. Iași: Timpul Publishing House, p. 141.

⁹ Gagim I. op. cit. p. 155.

3. The responsibilities of the ethnomusicologist regarding the elaboration of the scientific authority document

According to the folklorist G. Oprea, the main responsibilities of the specialists who collect the traditional musical repertoire are:

- objectivity (detailed notation of all field observations);
- respecting the authenticity (detecting the functionality of the creation, establishing from the beginning the standard informants in order to obtain quality ethnomusicological documents and to cover all the existing categories in the community repertoire);
- systematic research (depending on the specific problem, the researcher establishes the purpose of the research and the necessary documents for this purpose - monographic file, survey questionnaire, direct observation sheet, frequency sheet, category directory sheet, informant or interpreter sheet, sheet of poetic text - as well as research tools - audio-video equipment).

The following research methods are used to effectively collect the musical repertoire:

- direct observation (used in case of complex folklore events: wedding, funeral, caroling, sitting, etc.);
- indirect investigation (carried out simultaneously with the method of direct observation and helps to reconstruct occasional and non-occasional repertoires and is carried out on the basis of oral surveys or with the help of written questionnaires);
- comparative method (highlights commonalities and differences between zonal or national creations);
- the historical-geographical method (folklore collection and commentary requires both a synchronic and diachronic perspective);
- statistical method (determines the frequency of songs and repertoires either within customs, localities, styles, genres, ages, etc.)
- the method of the experiment (contributes to the observation of constant and accidental variations due to the recording of a piece from different performers, with different ages and in different periods of time).

As fundamental types of research, in Romanian ethnomusicology we distinguish:

- direct research (consists in the actual collection);
- typological research (involves both the systematization and classification of the collected material and the study of common aspects of the collected variants, taking into account the following criteria: structure, architecture, functionality);
- theoretical / scientific interpretation (*represents the culmination of the entire activity of the ethnomusicologist and considerations are made on the genesis and evolution of creations, on their functionality, on their documentary and aesthetic value*).¹⁰

As we have seen, the scientific study of musical creation involves several mandatory steps: collection, systematization, transcription, analysis, typology. In Romanian ethnomusicology, the methodological system crystallized over time, and its components appeared successively.

If at the moment of transcription, the musical work is perceived by the ethnomusicologist as a succession of distinct sounds, for the performer it is a unitary creation.

The transcription, a fundamental element of ethnomusicological research, has as main objective the representation from a graphic point of view of all the melodic, rhythmic, agogic, dynamic, stylistic and ornamental elements existing in the traditional musical creation.

¹⁰ Oprea G. op. cit. pp. 67-69.

Ethnomusicology, as a musical discipline, deals with the phenomena and processes of folk creation, presenting the connections between different disciplines in the field of music - music theory, music forms, organology, musical aesthetics.

The book "Transylvanian Trio-stylistic peculiarities" written by Ovidiu Barteş and Ioan Haplea shows that from the beginning Romanian researchers have faced over time the problem of identifying a unifying principle in noting songs, so ethnomusicologists have developed four proposals for noting musical folklore:

- notation of songs with a single final on Sol (Béla Bartók);
- relative notation (Paula Carp);
- major-minor notation (Doina Haplea);
- notation with stable center (Doina Haplea)

During the audition, the ethnomusicologist can choose both the scoring principle and the level of difficulty at which he performs this approach. He has a choice between:

- *schematic notation of the song and rhythm;*
- *indicative notation of the details regarding the stylistics of the interpretation;*
- *noting the piece down to the smallest detail.*¹¹

In many cases, the lack of skills and competencies offered by music theory affects the value of the transcription made by the ethnomusicologist, the result being a compromised acoustic document, without scientific value.

We can say that the responsibilities of the ethnomusicologist regarding the elaboration of the scientific authority document begin with the portable writing of the musical text. This action will occur only after the analysis of the sound text subject to transcription, the identification of the elements of musical language perceived after the initial analysis and the exact choice of the graphic elements.

It should be borne in mind that the transcript must extract the musical meaning of the memorized (recorded) discourse and in no way, influence it.

In the process of transcribing traditional music there is an issue related to the difficulty of recognizing and noting ornaments. The ornamental configuration of the traditional repertoire is represented by anterior and posterior apogees (single and multiple), upper and lower mordents (single and double), trills (upper and lower), groups (upper and lower), glissandos and vibratos. Only an advanced aural skill can accurately recognize the multitude of ornamental notes and their placement in the melodic context.

In order to achieve a precise and accurate transcription of the musical text, the ethnomusicologist must take into account certain factors independent of his professional training. These factors are related to the musical perception of the performed work, the context in which the interpretation takes place and the performer's relationship with the ethnomusicologist's personality.

The act of perception of the interpreted work can be influenced by the context (environment / ambiance) in which the actual collection takes place (in the family, at the cultural center, at school, etc.). Depending on the chosen place, the ethnomusicologist can ascertain the mood and feelings of the informant, and in order to achieve the collection in optimal conditions,

¹¹ Barteş O., Haplea I. 2009. *Transylvanian Trio - stylistic particularities*. Cluj-Napoca: Clear Vision Publishing House, p. 19.

without hesitation and interruptions due to stress, he has the duty to ensure a relaxed, friendly climate.

As we have already noted, the ethnomusicologist's responsibilities regarding the elaboration of the discourse of scientific authority are multiple. The most important are related to his professional training and others derive from related fields (anthropology, history, literature, choreography, etc.).

Over time, the transcription of the traditional repertoire has been done in several ways. In the past, the song was written as it was listened to. It was a difficult process, and scoring in a single hearing could have weaknesses. These were due to the distraction of the ethnomusicologist from certain factors with a role in the realization of the artistic act - dance, shouts.

Currently, the high-performance equipment, which ensures the recording of the musical repertoire, comes to the aid of the ethnomusicologist, relieving him of the effort to transcribe and at the same time increasing his accuracy.

4. Integration of subjectivity in the transcription of ethnomusicological discourse

The transcription of the musical repertoire is done manually, remaining an indispensable tool for the ethnomusicologist. In fact, the researcher uses a notation that is to some extent selective, in line with his training in the field. The transcription of the music is done starting from the developed aural skills and from the scoring abilities.

Most of the time the ethnomusicologist belongs to a foreign musical culture that tries to write the music of another culture. If the ethnomusicologist is not part of the researched ethnic group and the period of contact with this foreign culture was extremely short, the transcription work involves increased attention to the rendering of all elements considered significant and distinct.

The subjectivity of the researcher consists in the transcription decisions that he has to take into account in order to produce the ethnomusicological document. He must decide which signs of classical music notation are satisfactory in order to render all the details contained in the traditional musical creation.

*The ethnomusicologist, like the ethnologist, belongs to a culture, an ideological framework and possesses a cultural identity that interacts with the context of the research and description of the culture studied. In other words, it is "part" of the dialogue invoked above.¹² Ethnomusicological research, as well as anthropological research (social, in general) is not only intersubjective but also subjective, in the sense of belonging to the subjects involved in the dialogue. The new ethnographic theories show that *the affiliation is not dichotomous, they / us or natives / anthropologists or natives / ethnomusicologists, but it is much more nuanced. In both categories there are identities: gender, ethnic, racial, formation or social positioning, adherence or political participation that influence knowledge and how it is obtained "in the field".¹³**

And in ethnomusicology the reflexive character of social research and cultural interpretation is obvious. Reflexivity is related both to the fact that the ethnographer / ethnomusicologist has the same nature, human, as the "researched object", and to the fact that, interpreting cultural facts, it interferes with two cultures, of which its own functions as a mirror

¹² Văetiși Ș. 2008. *The new ethnographic theories and the concept of describing culture*. Cluj-Napoca: Publishing House of the Foundation for European Studies, p. 91.

¹³ *Ibid.*

frame of the studied . *This is not only an involuntary reference in the process of trying to understand another culture, but is related to the "empathic" dimension of any cultural interpretation, as it developed as a type of analysis, following the development of anthropology / ethnomusicology as an interpretive discipline.*¹⁴

A special aspect of reflexivity in anthropology / ethnomusicology is the possibility of returning to the field. It works on a number of motivations that range from completing information and capturing historical changes (which have taken place since the first field visit).

Reflexivity is the ethnographic / ethnomusicological attempt to show that *research and its results are constitutive and not separable from socio-historical contexts and the everyday world. Reflexivity, therefore, operates on the basis of a dialectic between the researcher, the research process and the research products.*¹⁵

5. Conclusions

The hypothesis from which this scientific approach started is confirmed, the importance of music theory in transcribing the musical text as an ethnomusicological document being demonstrated. The competencies and skills set by this fundamental discipline guarantee both the scientific transcription of the collected musical repertoire and the document quality of the musical discourse.

I would propose a number of measures that can be taken, both at regional and national level, to help maintain traditional social repertoires in "social memory" and in community practice:

- continuing field surveys to update information using modern methods and means (recording and filming them);
- the establishment at national level of a digitized archive of folk songs on the ethnoculturally representative areas of our country;
- elaboration and publication of specialized studies;
- revitalization and promotion of musical repertoires through profile competitions;
- supporting collaboration between the institutions responsible for protecting the intangible cultural heritage.

Traditional music is transmitted to future generations verbally and not in writing, and therefore ethnomusicological research has an important role to play in safeguarding, protecting and capitalizing on this intangible heritage.

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¹⁴ Văețiși Ș. op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 103.