The Variability of a Cadential Melodic Formula - an Element of Evolution in the Transylvanian Carol

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Abstract: *In Romanian carols (colinde), an important genre of traditional Romanian folklore, there exists a range of melodic formulas whose degree of stability or instability contributes to the variation within the repertoire. This variation is influenced by several factors, such as the intensity of the caroling custom at the local level or the diversity of the repertoire performed.*
The present article analyzes the variability of a consistent melodic formula - a variability that may arise from the ornamentation of the formula, alterations in rhythmic structure, or modifications of the cadence through the introduction of the subtonic. After establishing the formula as a model or prototype, its variants are classified according to their divergences from the prototype and the number of occurrences within the repertoire. Melodic formulas that are both variable and widely represented in the carol repertoire may be regarded as accepted by the community, thus constituting one of the mechanisms of evolution in the Transylvanian carol. Depending on the relationship between the method of variation and the frequency of its occurrence in the repertoire, we may conclude that certain variation techniques serve as catalysts for evolutionary processes, while others yield non-representative variants with limited dissemination, often confined to a particular community or specific interpretive group.

Keywords: *traditional carol; melodic formula; musical variation; evolution of carols*;

Introduction

As one of the most significant genres of occasional repertoire in Romanian folklore, the traditional carol remains well-represented across the territory, particularly in Transylvania, where it continues to be practiced within caroling rituals or preserved in the memory of villagers who have participated in caroling, either as performers or as hosts, throughout their lives. This enduring presence over time can be attributed to several factors, among which we mention the cultural significance of caroling within rural communities, the rigorous process of repertoire transmission, and the collective mode of performance.

Nevertheless, over time, both melody and text may undergo certain alterations, leading to the emergence of variants derived from the initial carol. Within this process of change - which may be interpreted either as an evolutionary development or as a degradation of the original material (a perspective that will be further elaborated in the present article) - some elements remain constant, while others are variable, resulting in versions that are more or less divergent from the original model.

In this study, we examine the modifications undergone by a cadential rhythmic-melodic formula identified in the repertoire documented in the volumes *Colinde româneşti* - a foundational work in the study of the Transylvanian carols, awarded with *Ciprian Porumbescu Prize for Musicology* by the Romanian Academy.

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1. Purpose of the Research and Methodology

To identify potential variations that may occur within Romanian carols, we selected a representative sample - namely, Supragroup III from the typological classification developed by Professor Ileana Szenik. As we presented in a paper delivered at the *Ninth Symposium of the ICTMD Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe*, 2024 edition, Supragroup III constitutes one of the most prominently represented typological categories within the repertoire of the Apuseni Mountains region. This group comprises carols that employ the "architectonic principle of return, the ABA structure (or its synonymous variant ABC), combined with the register placement of the lateral lines"[2]. This statement is

The melodic formula identified as relevant for this study will be subjected to morphological analysis, alongside its corresponding variants. A statistical overview will also be provided, based on the frequency of occurrence of these variants within the repertoire.

On the basis of this material, we aim to draw a distinction between evolutionary development and degradation, by comparing the structural characteristics of the prototype with those of its variants, while also considering their persistence in the repertoire (i.e., number of variants documented).

The research methodology integrates the historical method - concerned with the diachronic evolution of the melodic formula - bibliographic inquiries related to the morphology of the carol and its typological classifications, as well as specific formal analyses. We will also conduct a structural examination of the identified melodic formula in the context of the complete carol from which it is derived.

2. The importance of cadential melodic formulas

Since as early as 2002, in his Ph.D. degree study, Professor Ioan Bocșa has emphasized the importance of rhythmic patterns and melodic formulas in the traditional carol repertoire from the Middle Mureș Valley. In addition to identifying the principal rhythmic patterns and their relationship to various forms of melodic variation, Bocșa also noted that carols are often constructed using these recurring patterns[3]. Stan states that „the term *rhythmic pattern* is used for a structure that sustains the entity of a verse or whole refrain"[4].

As for melodic formulas, these generally align with the formal concept of the motif, going beyond the idea of the cell, and are likewise distributed across the span of a hemistich. Once the hemistich is localized within the phrase structure, the melodic formula may function as either an antecedent or a consequent. In musical folklore research, the concept of cadence at the level of each melodic line is frequently employed. Based on these cadences and the relationships between them, classification systems have been developed (notably by Krohn, Bartók, Carp, Szenik), in which cadences may be internal, principal, or final. One of the main reasons for using cadences as typological criteria lies in their relative stability and predictability.

In conclusion, it is to be expected that cadential rhythmic formulas corresponding to the consequent hemistich would be less susceptible to variation than those located in the antecedent hemistich.

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[2] Ileana Szenik. 2008. *Studii de etnomuzicologie, vol. II* [*Studies in Ethnomusicology, vol. II*]. Cluj-Napoca: MediaMusica, p. 26.

[3] Ioan Bocșa. 2022. *Colinda în zona Mureșului mijlociu – Studiu asupra unui grup tipologic muzical* [*Carols in the Middle Mureș area – Study on a musical typological group*]. Cluj-Napoca: MediaMusica, pp. 83-92.

[4] Alina Stan. 2009. *Limbajul muzical al colindelor din Transilvania [The Musical Language of Transylvanian Carols]*. Cluj-Napoca: Clear Vision, p. 95.

3. Locating the Melodic Formula within the Repertoire

After surveying the targeted repertoire and identifying several melodic formulas, we chose to narrow our focus to one that had a high frequency of occurrence across multiple variants. The formula that emerged most prominently, features a stepwise descending motion spanning a minor third, set within a giusto-syllabic rhythmic framework. This formula is also highlighted by Ioan Bocșa, who identifies it among the cadential formulas of the lateral lines[5].

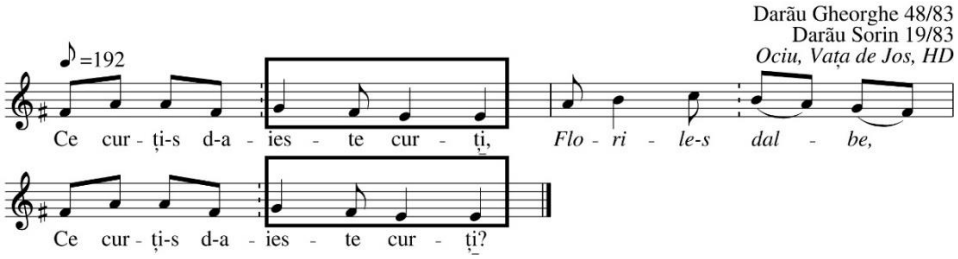


Fig.1. Selected melodic formula, *Colinde românești*, nr. 440

In Supergroup III, we identified this formula in a number of 158 carols, from the volumes *Colinde românești*. Supergroup III contains 3 groups: A, B and C, the difference between them being determined by the melodic profile: unilinear for A, vaulted for B and a combination of them for C. Group B contains carols consisting of 3 melodic lines (ABA), which have a vaulted profile, where "the middle row B runs in the middle register"[6]. As for the types, B.11 contains bipodic refrains (3+2 or 2+2 syllables), while B12 contains tripodic refrains (3+2+2, 2+3+2 or 2+2+2 syllables) and B13 tetrapodic refrains (2+2+3+2, 3+2+3+2, 2+2+2+2 syllables).

From the total repertoire in groups III.B.11, III.B.12 and III.B.13, the selected formula is present in 158 carols from 252, meaning that we identified it in 63% of the repertoire. Among the 3 groups mentioned, the distribution of the formula can be observed in Table.1.

Supergroup, Group, type	Number of the carol
III.B.11.1b	422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 519.
III.B12.1b	520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 523, 526, 527, 528, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547.
III.B13.1b	549, 551, 552, 553, 554, 556, 559, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 568, 570, 583, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 596, 597, 611, 612, 617, 618, 621, 624, 625, 626, 632, 633, 634, 636, 637, 640, 643, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 652, 653, 655.

[5] Ioan Bocșa. 2022. *Colinda în zona Mureșului mijlociu – Studiu asupra unui grup tipologic muzical* [*Carols in the Middle Mureș area – Study on a musical typological group*]. Cluj: MediaMusica, p. 135.
[6] Ioan Bocșa – coordinator. 2002. *Colinde românești, vol. I* [*Romanian Carols, vol. I*]. Cluj-Napoca: MediaMusica, p. 52.

Table 1. Distribution of the formula among the typological classification

In selecting the carols that contain the melodic formula under investigation, we applied several criteria:

- Final cadence on *E* (*mi*);
- Stepwise descending motion;
- Preservation of as many musical notes as possible from the original formula;
- Maintenance of a *tetrapodic* hemistich (four syllables in length).

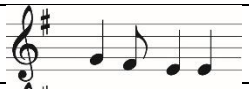
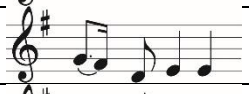
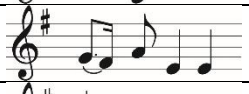
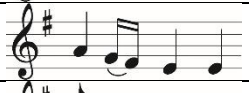
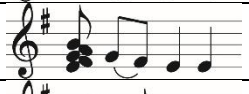
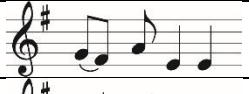
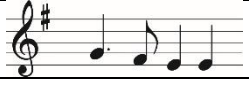
4. Variations of the formula

Although the melodic formula, from which this analysis originated, has already been presented, I am reminded of a conversation I had in 2015, during the preparation of my doctoral dissertation, with Professor Ileana Szenik. While discussing patterns and their variants, Professor Szenik highlighted that the two are intrinsically interrelated and can only be defined in relation to one another. In her view, a pattern (*tipar*) can only be considered as such if it generates a sufficient number of variants, and conversely, a variant can only be termed a variant if it can be traced back to a well-defined pattern.

In the conclusions at the preface of the volume regarding Romanian carols, Bartók stated that the main characteristics of the Romanian carols are: „Three-line stanza structure with main caesura at the end of the second melody line; and *Tempo giusto* rhythm”[7]. The predominance of the *giusto-syllabic* rhythm, characterized by proportional values in a 1:2 ratio, and the combination of ternary and binary metric feet;

- A melodically unornamented structure, characteristic of group singing;
- The anticipation of the final pitch, especially with a keyrole in antiphonal performance contexts.

After organizing all the collected variants, I compiled the table below, in which the prototype - or basic formula - stands out clearly from the remaining variants. This pattern appears in 34 c*arols*, whereas the next most frequently occurring variant is present in only 13 *carols* within the analyzed repertoire.

Melodic formula	Carols
	34
	13
	13
	8
	8
	6
	6

[7] Bela Bartók. 1975. *Rumanian Folk MusicVolume IV: carols and Christmas Songs (Colinde)*. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, p. 29.

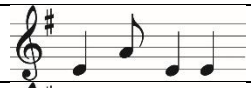
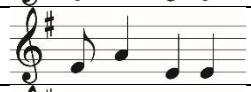
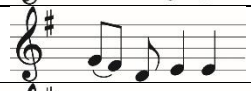
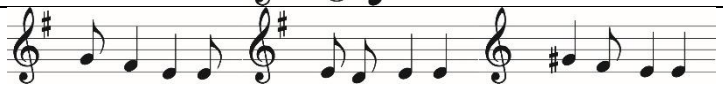
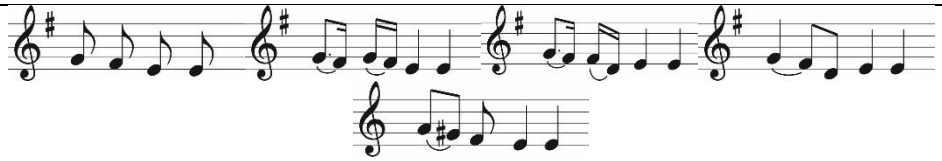
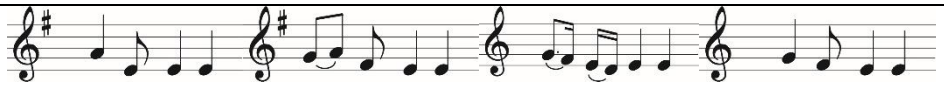
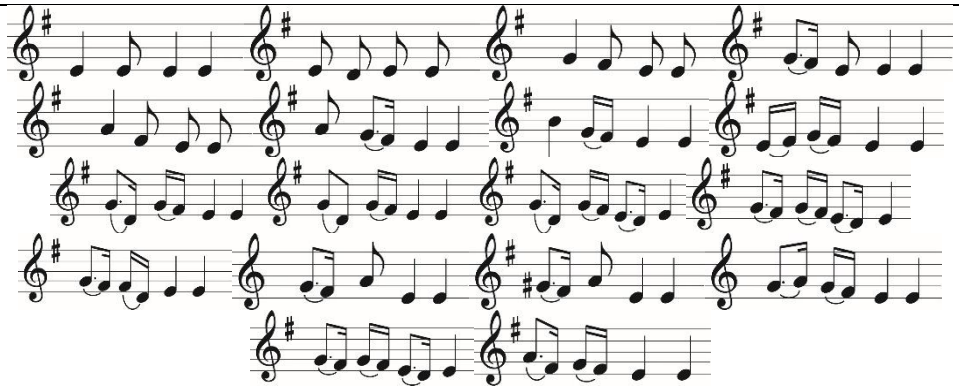
	6
	6
	5
	4
	3
	2
	1

Table 2. Initial formula and variations – number of appearances

3.1. Cadential interval modification

According to its frequency of occurrence within the repertoire, the most significant variation of the melodic formula involves the alteration of the final interval within the phrase. It is important to note that, in this variant, the initial pitches of the formula are retained; however, the first two tones are transformed into a *melisma*, while generally preserving their durational differentiation ♩♪→♫. The mathematically ideal version of this transformation would resemble a *triplet* subdivision  , yet such a configuration does not occur in the context of traditional Romanian carols.

Following this modification of the initial melodic cell, an additional pitch is introduced - in this case, either the *subtonic* D (*re*) or the *perfect fourth* A (*la*) - each of which appears in 13 carols. Furthermore, these variations exhibit additional subtypes: one in which the first two rhythmic values are equal, and others, which will be addressed later in this article.

Fig.2. Formula with cadential variation, with difference in the first values

3.2. Modal variations

Another principle of variation within the melodic formula involves the alteration of pitches that modify the modal structure. Although such variants are relatively few, they are of particular analytical significance. Surprisingly, the major mode variants (Ionian, Lydian, or Mixolydian) are absent, with one exception. Instead, we encounter versions featuring the *augmented second* and the *Phrygian cadence* (*F–E*). Also employing the Phrygian cadence is the authentic realization of this mode, articulated through the sequence *G♮–F♮–E*.

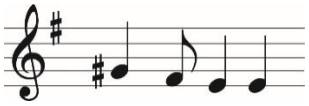


Fig.3. The major variant is not found in the repertoire in this form

The chromatic variants, characterized by the augmented second *G♯–F♮*, represent a local stylistic feature. All seven examples were collected from Hunedoara County, with four of them originating specifically from the commune of Densuș.

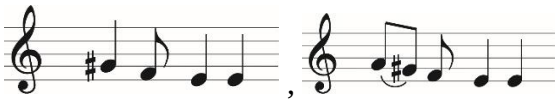


Fig.4. Chromatic variants, found in Hunedoara County

3.3. Incipit modification

The initial pitch of the formula is frequently subject to variation, either through the substitution of *G* (*sol*) or by the addition of another pitch, whereby *G* is shifted to the position of an eighth note. In the latter case, any pitch within the interval *E–B* (*mi–si*) may appear at the beginning of the formula, as illustrated in Fig.5.

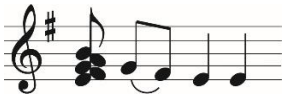


Fig.5. Change of the incipit by adding a note and shortening the old incipit

Even when the initial note retains its quarter-note value, the first pitch of the formula may appear as *E* (*mi*), *A* (*la*), or *B* (*si*).

3.4. Ornamentation of the formula

One of the means of variation lies in the individual personalization of performance. While in group performances, ornaments are either absent or only rarely employed, field recordings often rely to solo informants, in which case the melody may undergo slight modifications compared to the version performed within the actual caroling ritual. This

personalization does not influence the active repertoire - evidenced by their sporadic occurrence, most often appearing in a single carol only. Accordingly, our target formula also displays a number of variants in which one or more syllables are rendered *melismatically*.

Fig.6 presents the most ornamented versions, each found in just one *carol*.

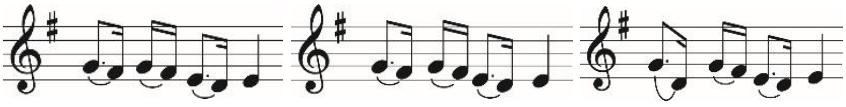


Fig.6. Change of the incipit by adding a note and shortening the old incipit

3.5. Rhythmic variations

Rhythmic variations are generally less significant than melodic ones, with a single notable exception. This exception involves the alteration of the rhythmic system from *giusto-syllabic* to *divisive* (*divizionar*). In this case, the structure is organized into 4+4 eighth notes; however, this variant appears in only six carols, which is nearly five times fewer than the occurrences of the basic *giusto-syllabic* formula (3+4).

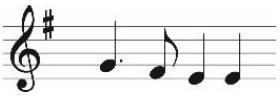


Fig.7. Variant with distributive rhythmic system

Other rhythmic variations consist of instances in which one of the quarter-note values is shortened - typically the final quarter note, especially when the group needs to take a breath or prepare to initiate a new verse. However, it is also possible for the initial quarter note to be shortened, or for the first two rhythmic values to be inverted.

3.4. Mixed variations

Many of the variations are, in fact, combinations of the procedures presented earlier. Thus, with the modification of the cadence, the rhythmic structure may also be altered, or ornamentations may be introduced. In one such variation, we find both the major mode variant as well as other interesting variants, such as one where the rhythm is present solely on the pitch *E* (*mi*), or another where each syllable has an eighth-note value. Since these occur sporadically, typically in just one carol each, they are not capable of influencing the overall repertoire.

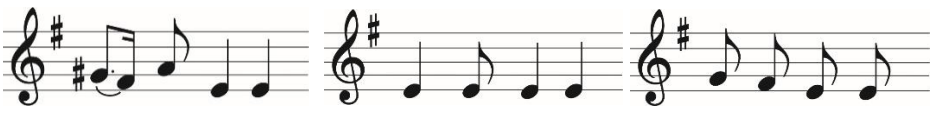


Fig.8. Uncommon variants, though rarely encountered.

5. Conclusions

As mentioned at the beginning, the carol is one of the traditional genres that has demonstrated remarkable resilience over time. However, throughout the course of the study presented in this article, a significant number of variants of a single rhythmic formula were identified. The question that arises is: to what extent does this variation affect the carol repertoire? Does it represent an evolution or a deterioration? This question is not easily answered, and opinions are undoubtedly divided. Nonetheless, I wish to present my own perspective, supported by the arguments derived from this research.

Melodic variation is a natural process, one that may result from various causes - as we have seen - including performance practices, local habits, or even lapses in memory. What is crucial, however, are the boundaries within which these variations occur. The morphological characteristics of the carol must allow for such modifications; otherwise, the resulting melody no longer belongs to the genre. We have seen that unusual or idiosyncratic variants are not consistent elements of the repertoire and are typically excluded by the community's internal mechanisms of aesthetic regulation.

The modifications observed, rarely affect the terminal segment of the formula; with two exceptions, all other variants conclude with a repetition of the pitch *E* (*mi*), rendered in various rhythmic values, with the most prevalent being two consecutive quarter notes. Greater flexibility is found at the beginning of the formula, where the initial pitch may be any within the interval of a perfect fifth (*E–B*, or *mi–si*).

The predominant rhythmic structure belongs to the *giusto-syllabic* system, which Constantin Brăiloiu identified as characteristic of the carol genre. The continuation of this research should involve an investigation of how this cadential formula behaves in its broader musical context, in correlation with the antecedent formula within the melodic line, and possibly in connection with the text itself, which may act as a generator of rhythm.

The research possibilities remain rich and promising, offering pathways toward a deeper understanding of the historical evolution of this highly generative and expressive genre.

6. References

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