

The Soldier's Song – a Distinct Species Specific to the Occasional Lyrics

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Abstract: *The soldier's song is a distinct species having an occasional function, which emerged in relation to the compulsory military service. This musical genre was linked to the ceremonial departure of young men to serve in the army, marking the passage of a threshold of maturity before marriage, marking through its theme an important event in a person's life. By the way of execution, the soldier's song is an occasional genre, performed by men. Given that military service is no longer mandatory in our country, this musical genre is on the verge of extinction. Following the ethnomusicological approach that I carried out in Neamț County, during 2019-2022, I found only two soldier's songs, which I analysed and inserted in the present paper.*

Keywords: *soldier; ethnomusicology; informers; folklore; Neamț;*

Introduction

The soldier's song (Rom. *cântec de cătănie*, also called *de cătane*, *al răgutelor*, *de miliție*) is a folk musical genre that belongs to the occasional category, that is, it is performed on a specific occasion, namely during the ceremonial departure of young men for the army. From the point of view of execution, the soldier's song is a collective one, sung in specific circumstances. Its theme reflects an essential moment in the destiny of young men, and its performance is part of the traditional repertoire of men.

The soldier's song has its roots in the regions of Transylvania, Bihor and Maramureș, and appeared in the context of the establishment of compulsory military service during the Habsburg period. This custom extends to both the Romanian and Hungarian communities in the mentioned areas, marking the transition from youth to adulthood before marriage and the mandatory stage of life that young men went through

1. Description of the custom

For many young men, military conscription meant not only a long separation from family (military service could last up to seven years), but also a serious lack of help in the household and agricultural work, as well as postponing the moment of marriage.

Once summoned for military duty, young men were usually instructed in German and often subjected to humiliating treatment, including insults and punishments, and were sent to fight in distant territories such as Italy and Bosnia. For these reasons, many tried to avoid

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conscription by hiding in the mountains, only to be pursued by the authorities, captured, and conscripted.

This period was experienced with a strong emotional charge by everyone involved – young men, parents, sweethearts – and was reflected in specific folkloric creations, known as soldier's songs.

The soldier's song was integrated into a ceremony held in the days preceding the conscription and enlistment, at two moments:

- a) the *asânare* or *mășura*, as conscription was also called;
- b) the enlistment.

When young men reached the age of 20, they were summoned for military service. The evening before their departure, the lads would walk through the village singing specific songs (*cântecele de cântare a feciorilor*), then they would visit their relatives and sweethearts, who would offer them the "*pana de clop*" – a symbol of departure. In the morning, all dressed in folk costumes, with the tricolor at their waists, they would gather in the centre of the village. After that they would set off for the Military Centre, in carts decorated with green branches and pulled by adorned horses. Usually, fiddlers accompanied them with traditional music.

At the military commissariat, the young men were subjected to a document check and a medical examination. Those rejected were looked upon with shame, being considered unworthy and were told that they were not good lads (*feciori de treabă*). Those accepted, called "*cătane*," returned home and enjoyed a period of parties until the official order for enlistment arrived. Typically, 6-7 young men from the same village were conscripted and therefore it was customary to celebrate in turns, at their respective homes.

On the day before the departure, the village gathered for a farewell ritual. Parents, sweethearts and villagers offered gifts, cakes or money for good luck, and the soldier's songs filled the atmosphere with emotion. On the day of departure, everyone went along with the recruits, and on the way, they stopped at crossroads, where they danced and sang together with the fiddlers several songs on themes of separation, sadness, regrets, etc. During the dance, the young men wore the recruitment order on their hats or *clop*, and stole the girls' handkerchiefs to keep as souvenirs.

The most emotional moment was when the young lads said goodbye to their loved ones by singing the "*hora catanelor*" for the last time. After that, getting into decorated carts, the young men left with the mayor to the police station, leaving behind the laments of their mothers, sisters and sweethearts who were left alone. Once at the police station, the young men were assigned to different fighting units and cities.

Although this ritual was gradually abandoned after World War II, the songs were passed down from generation to generation and are still found in the collective memory today.

2. Characteristics of the soldier's song, according to scholars

The soldier's song is appreciated by ethnomusicologists for its profound thematic content.

The ethnomusicologist Béla Bartók (1881-1945), in his work "R.F.M." vol. III, classified the lyrics of the songs from A to Y, with the soldier's songs being found in category C, immediately after the love and lament songs.

Folklorist George Breazul (1887-196) noted that these songs have "the sad character of *doinas*, and at other times they have a lively, more vigorous and invigorating character"².

² Breazul, George. 1941. *Patrium Carmen* [Patrium Carmen]. Craiova: Editura Scrisul Românesc, p. 247.

Researcher Constantin Brăiloiu (1893-1958) believed that from a musical point of view, the melodies of these songs were taken from other older lyrical genres, such as *doinas*, laments, songs proper, vocal dance melodies or *strigături* [rhythmic shouts]. Regarding those from

Moldova, “the lyrics of the soldier’s songs are sung to a lyrical melody of mourning, a local variant of the *doina* proper”³.

In Maramureș, the soldier’s song falls into the instrumental melody with rhythmic shouts, the melody of the local *hora* (round dance) and the melody with a ritual character-lament, ballad or carol.

In southern Transylvania, the soldier’s song was similar to dance melodies, especially the “*putatele*,” and to the song proper.

In the Gilău, Dej and Cluj Hills, the proximity to the rhythmic shouts tunes and wedding songs from Năsăud was noted.

Research has also identified exceptions in several areas of Transylvania. In southern Transylvania, Ilarion Cocișiu was the first to report the presence of “*de cătane*” songs that “seem to create a separate genre” through their themes and melodies, despite that “although they have characteristic themes, the lads sing to these melodies other texts as well”⁴.

In Bihor, the soldier’s songs have the melodic lines common to other lyrical genres, without a melodic line of their own.

In Moldova, the soldier’s songs were performed in keys similar to the *doina* proper in the local version – lyrical and mournful.

Between 1971–1975, researchers from the Folklore Archive Institute of the Romanian Academy in Cluj Napoca identified in the Meseș-Plopis area (Sălaș County), some songs that, in addition to their theme, also have their own melodies, but also soldier themes set on the melodies of the song proper.

According to the research carried out by the ethnomusicologist Traian Mîrza, “the soldier’s song in most of the country does not have its own melody, and in smaller areas it does not have a unitary character”⁵. In the Bihor area, Mîrza identified soldier’s songs around Oradea, which, in addition to their own thematic component, also have unitary musical features that distinguish them from other songs in the region. As the author says, “the soldier’s song in the Oradea area presents significant traditional aspects”⁶ as follows: the verse is tetrapodic with an important role in structuring morphological units of a rhythmic and melodic order; the rhythm is syllabic in measured form, structured in tetrasyllabic formulas (frequently minor Ionian, paeon 4, disponde), corresponding to hemistichs; and the melody with a syllabic and mixed aspect uses as sound material the major hexachord or the Mixolydian with a cadence on the first scale step. According to the architectural form and the internal cadences, he separates them into two groups of melodies.

Researcher and university professor Dr. Ioan Bocșa emphasizes that “from a musical point of view, the melodies are not unitary, in most cases the common element of this repertoire being the rhythm of the steps in the ceremonial walk and the manly, brave manner of interpretation”⁷ and “the melodic types encountered do not have a specific regional character, being related both to neighbouring areas and to other distant areas”⁸.

³ Brăiloiu, Constantin. 1967. *Works [Opere]*, vol. I. București: Editura Muzicală a compozitorilor R.S.R., p. 68.

⁴ Cocișiu, Ilarion. 1963. *Romanian folk songs [Cântece populare românești]*. București: Editura Muzicală, p. 20.

⁵ Mîrza, Traian. 1970. *The soldier’s song from Bihor, a Species of Occasional Lyrics. Musicological Works [Cântecul de cătanie din Bihor, o specie a liricii ocazionale. Lucrări de muzicologie]*, vol. 6. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Conservatorul de Muzică „G. Dima”, p. 119.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 128-129.

⁷ Bocșa, Ioan. 2009. *Traditional vocal music from Sălaj [Muzica vocală tradițională din Sălaj]*, vol. I, Cluj-Napoca: Editura MediaMusica, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

3. Analytical foray into the soldier's song of today

With deep admiration for the work previously conducted by researchers of the Neamț repertoire, I wanted to contribute to a better understanding of the regional folklore, through new field investigations. Thus, in the campaign to collect musical folklore in Neamț county, carried out between 2019-2022, as part of my doctoral studies, I found two folk songs: *Mărie și Mărioară* and *Trenule, vagon de blană*; my informant was Bostan Dragoș, aged 90, from Hangu village, Hangu commune.

Following the analytical journey conducted on this musical genre, I aimed to highlight the musical elements that compose each individual soldier song, taking into account the following aspects: the structure of the verses, the number of syllables in each verse, types of rhyme, additional syllables, syllable elisions, additional anacrusis and refrains, as well as the components of musical melody: the sound system, the general melodic range and contour, the architectural structure, the rhythmic system and ornamentation.

The soldier's song *Mărie și Mărioară*, collected in 2022, thematically expresses a spiritual burden of young lads before leaving for military service, namely, the request they make to their loved ones not to get married.

The versification in the analysed soldier song is composed of only of acatalectic tetrapodic verses of 8 syllables.

The rhymes encountered are feminine and perfect:

Examples of feminine rhyme / perfect rhyme:

Spune-i maică, lui Maria,

Spune-i maică, lui Maria.

Elements such as additional anacrusis, syllabic additions, syllable elisions, etc., are missing. Instead, we encounter a regular acatalectic tetrameter refrain:



Example 1. *Refrain*

The analysed soldier's song repertoire displays only one category of form: the strophic one. In this song, we identified stanzas with four melodic lines with the form ABCDrf, the main caesura 5 – 5 – 1 – 1, built along a descending melodic profile.

From a melodic point of view, the melody is reflected in modal sound structures, namely, a bimodal major mode song (Ionian/Mixolydian):



Fig. 1. *Scale*

The final cadence is on the first degree (G).

The analysed example has a varied melodic contour and a wide ambitus that extends to the ninth (G4 – A5). The rhythmic structure is *distributive*.

This musical genre has the melody constructed in such a way that, through its line, movement, and intonation, it is singable. Its construction is only supplemented by a few ornaments with simple anterior and posterior appoggiatura.

In the second soldier song analysed, *Trenule, vagon de blană*, the thematic motif refers to the spiritual burden of the soldier who curses the train that transports the soldiers to the enlistment units.

Regarding the versification, it is emphasized by acatalectic tetrapodic verses (8 syllables), with feminine, perfect and imperfect rhymes.

Example of perfect rhyme:

*Trenule vagon de blană,
Trenule vagon de blană.*

Example of imperfect rhyme:

*Și ti blastăm și eu,
Că m-ai luat din satul meu, măi, măi.*

In this song, too, we did not find additional anacrusis, syllabic additions, syllable elisions, etc. Only a fixed additional refrain is noticeable, as are the refrains themselves, which expand the verse with additional syllables. This was formed by doubling the syllable *măi* in no. 8:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff contains the lyrics "Tre-nu - le, va-gon de bla - nă, Tre-nu - le va - gon de bla - nă," with notes corresponding to the syllables. The second staff contains the lyrics "Tă - tă lu - mea te blăs-ta - mă, Tă - tă lu-mea te blăs-ta - mă, măi, măi." The final two notes, "măi, măi", are circled in red. The music is in a 2/4 time signature.

Example 2. *Additional refrain*

In the analysed soldier's song, we identified stanzas with four melodic lines, with the form ABBvarC, the main caesura 5 – 2 – 5 – 1, in a combined vaulted profile.

From a melodic point of view, the melody is reflected in a modal sound structure, in the major mode based on Mixolydian.

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in treble clef. It contains a scale starting on G4 and ending on G5, consisting of the notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G. The notes are written as quarter notes.

Fig. 2. *Scale*

The melodic shape cadences on the first scale degree, on G, and the general range is of a minor seventh (G4– F5).

The rhythm has a measured, distributive form, from which result heterometric structures.

As in the first soldier's song analysed above, the ornamentation is not rich, with only a few simple anterior and posterior notes present:



Example 3. *Simple anterior and posterior appoggiaturas*

4. Conclusion

Compared to other customs, the ceremony organized for young men of the same age who were suddenly leaving for military service is a relatively new one.

The soldier's song reflects a significant stage in the lives of young lads in the village, symbolizing an important transition to adulthood. Even though the lads are the obvious protagonists of this moment, their sweethearts play an active role, completing the ceremony. The soldier's song takes shape in the life of the village as a significant stage of the prenuptial age of the young men, a stage equally significant for the young men and women. Although the active participants of this moment seem to be only the young men, this ceremonial also involves the young women, as participants of the same category. The departure of the soldiers joins in a way the other forms of preparation for the threshold of passage, which will lead into marriage.

If the annual village sitting bee and the village round dance constitute the preparatory stage, being opportunities for young people to get to know each other, to choose a life partner, if the customs of the winter holidays – carolling and New Year's Eve traditions – prefigure the fulfilment of the ceremonial of passage, of including young married people among the ranks of wives and men, respectively, the *catănia* is a threshold towards maturity, after which the traditional mentality considers marriage possible and is a threshold from the point of view of the engagement promise, that is, a covenant whose resistance is verified by the military stage. In this preliminary chain of the transition from one state to another, to a new way of life, the soldier is in an intermediate position: halfway between the moment when the young people met (the sitting bee) and the fulfilment of the couple in the family (marriage).

From a musical point of view, the soldier's song does not have a unitary melody or its own one, but in most cases, according to the findings of several ethnomusicologists, the defining element of the genre is the rhythm of the steps in the ceremonial walk of the young men. The intonation of some sounds is untampered, which proves a subtlety in the use of means of expression.

Through its non-unitary form, through the presence of actual and additional refrains, through the modal composition and through all the other characteristics mentioned above, we can state that this musical genre, even if it is no longer sung today, constitutes an important and precious document for the knowledge of the past life of our people and deserves to be preserved alongside other Romanian folk customs.

Although its practice has been abandoned, the soldier's song remains a valuable document of the history of Romanian folk culture, offering a vivid image of how rural communities experienced moments of balance, solidarity, and emotion.

5. References

• Books

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