

Villages in Vrancea Region and Their Pastoral Songs. Past and Present

Mariana Hurjui-Său

National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania

Mariana Hurjui-Său graduated the National University of Music Bucharest with a degree in Musical Pedagogy and a Masters in Ethnomusicology under the supervision of Speranța Rădulescu. She is currently a doctoral student at the National University of Music Bucharest and ethnomusicologist at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant where she contributes to the research of peasant music and the publication of thematic records in the Ethnophonie collection. Mariana is interested in oral musical cultures in Romania, especially in pastoral songs and funeral rituals of the last century.

Correspondence: marianahurjui95@gmail.com

Hurjui-Său, Mariana. 2024. "Villages in Vrancea Region and Their Pastoral Songs. Past and Present." *Martor* 29: 33-45. [DOI: 10.57225/martor.2024.29.03]

ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the pastoral songs from Vrancea region¹ in relation to the social changes that occurred in the last century. The local pastoral culture, sustained for centuries by *devălmășie*, an archaic form of community organization, started to decline after the rise of aggressive forest exploitations that began towards the end of the 19th century. From this moment on, the old musical practices and their ancient shepherding origin were partly abandoned or integrated into new contexts and situations. For example, during the communist regime that was established in the second part of the 20th century, shepherd songs were adapted and displayed on a national stage under the pressure and careful involvement of cultural authorities. Such authorities established large instrumental groups of 40-50 pipe players with the aim to represent their cultural regions in grandiose folklore events supported by the state apparatus. Individual singing, whether for oneself or for the community, declined as folklorized music, promoted by mass media, became increasingly popular. Currently, the songs of shepherding origin seem to be frozen in time and in the memory of the elders who remained connected to the musical past of the region. At sheepfolds, the whistles, the instruments specific to the place, are no longer heard. Shepherds live in a very different environment, where they have a variety of musical options, including radio and smartphone. During field research, I often felt that I was witnessing the effective disappearance of an exhausted universe that no longer has the will and strength to compete with other musical genres in today's sound landscape. The tradition of the shepherding songs, relics of a once-prosperous archaic society, seems to be nearing its final days.

The oral tradition of music from Romania has undergone significant transformations in the last century. The multiple transformations at the social level have naturally influenced the music in circulation. Some songs have disappeared definitively, and others have survived until today. In the latter case, songs either kept a good part of their expressive past forms, or they took renewed forms to match contemporary tastes. In general, the process of transformation of folk music has been similar and manifested itself

KEYWORDS

Ethnomusicology; pastoral music, shepherding music; social change; Vrancea; Romania.



with quite the same intensity across Romania. Today, documenting peasant music belongs to the category of emergency ethnomusicology.

The field research I have been conducting in the last years focused on the shepherd music—an important part of the oral tradition culture. This music had a strong presence in the peasant space in the past, but in the recent years, its importance decreased significantly, at least in the places of provenance. Today, music is scarce in the shepherd environment. However, folk songs of shepherd origin are still

in circulation in various forms. Some of these songs are known by a few old pipe players (*fluierași*) only and some other songs have been integrated in folkloric music² and performed especially in folk festivals and on dedicated TV stations. Then, various shepherd instrumental themes have been adapted and integrated into pieces of electronic and hip-hop music. This genre is increasingly popular among young people who live in big cities and are perceived as a connection between traditional and modern, between the depth of the past and the effervescence of the present. The audience does not necessarily have important connections with the rural world. Rather, they look at rural world as a lost paradise that inspires them, helps them to find themselves, and to return to their “roots.” For example, the Romanian long pipe (*caval*) that used to be very present in shepherd spaces is now seen as a symbolic instrument and young people are increasingly interested to learn to play it. Musical revivals of this type do not emphasize the technical level and the original repertoire, but rather the very act of singing, improvising, creating new music, and being together with musicians with similar concerns.

The political and social context of the past decades caused various transformations in shepherd music that led to the present-day musical forms. To be able to understand and describe these forms, we have to know the original “model” and the environment in which shepherd music was created and developed, the roles this music once had in the community, and the important transformations that have occurred in the recent past. In this essay, I will turn to the past and describe the archaic shepherd community and its musical culture as a result of social structure.

I chose to examine the case of a single region where shepherding had a dominant role, precisely to be able to closely follow the relationship between music and the transformations that changed the community radically. I focus on the Vrancea region, an interesting space to research especially due to the radical differences between the past

and the present. For centuries, Vrancea was a relatively isolated region, characterized by traditional customs, and heavily dependent on shepherding. In less than one century, this land has transformed into a modern region, although with an impoverished oral culture, in which one can hardly distinguish the historical roots of the region. In addition, I am familiar with Vrancea region because I spent my childhood there. Consequently, I was able to observe the social life in the region not only as a researcher but also as a member of the local community.

Vrancea used to be a small autonomous peasant state in the province of Moldavia. It was located on the border of three Romanian provinces: Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania.³ Geographically, the land has the appearance of a well-defended fortress bordered to the west by the mountains of the Curvature Carpathians and to the east by high hills. In the depression formed by these two extremes there were relatively isolated human settlements who owned their lands in common (*devălmășie*). This meant that the significant part of the land, including pastures or forests, were used in common. The inhabitants were called *răzeși*.⁴ They did not receive laws from the rulers of Moldavia (*domnie*). Rather, they had their own code of unwritten rules created by the wise men in the community. This code responded to the needs and everyday issues in the region. Impenetrable forests occupied a good part of the territory. When the pasture lands became insufficient, *răzeși* used to adapt (*croi*) them to the needs, for example by clearing or burning the small forests in the immediate vicinity of the villages.

Therefore, this space created the premises for the development and conservation of an archaic way of life, which was dependent on shepherding. The concentration of the entire community around a single occupation was the way in which people from Vrancea took advantage of what nature offered them: a hard-to-reach region with mountains that are densely forested, rich alpine pasture lands, the possibility to expand the pasture lands close to



villages, and lands unsuitable for agriculture. The political independence and the privilege of the local people to manage the land according to their own rules without paying taxes for grazing as elsewhere, created the conditions for shepherding to remain a singular occupation for several centuries.

The pastoral society survived here in ancient forms until the second half of the 19th century. After this moment, the typical way of life of the people of Vrancea gradually declined. New occupations appeared, such as forest operations. In a first phase, roughly between 1850-1980, *răzeși* carried out forest operations in basic ways. They used the forest to build their household, as they used to do in the past, but they also produced timber and manufactured wooden vessels to be sold in the fairs of Odobești and Focșani.⁵ After 1890, for the first time in local history, the vast forests of Vrancea became the target of economic interests of entrepreneurs from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Gradually, these entrepreneurs entered the region through a few emissaries who wanted to buy rights to undertake forest operations in the mountains. Based on these licenses, a few Anonymous Forestry Societies started their activity. According to the local system of ownership,

[in] absolute *devălmășie* (...) every citizen of Vrancea had the right to go to the forest to cut as much wood as he needed, from wherever he could reach, to clear *runcuri* and *secături* (drylands), to take as many cattle to grazing. "There was enough space" for all peasants who lived in isolation, with very few connections to the market, everyone could use the forest according to "their power and needs, like the rich, like the poor, like the old man, like the child," as it was set forth in the juridical precepts (*paremii*) of the "custom of the mountain." (Stahl 1981, 56)

The representatives of these commercial enterprises were able to enter the mountains by luring a few *răzeși* with official positions in

the administration of the villages who were willing to "sell Vrancea" for small sums of money if we are to compare with the real value of the processed wood that was extracted from the forests. Using the local system of joint ownership of the assets,

the anonymous society had nothing else to do but to buy the right of a landowner, to replace him and to cut the forest, also "according to their power and need," this time with the power of the cable cars and the needs of the world market. (Stahl 1981, 56)

Towards the end of the 19th century, *răzeși* who used to be domestic workers found themselves in the position to work for very small sums of money for those who had seized the mountains and who became their masters overnight. From this moment on, the life of the former owners declined abruptly. The entire community felt this decline in all aspects of the daily life.

In the interwar period, most people in Vrancea used to work in forest operations. Shepherding was a secondary occupation. Basically, the two occupations divided the inhabitants in two groups. Forest operators were the young population. They were strong and did not have experience in sheep farming. The new occupation offered the illusion of a better life. So, they aimed to assimilate the elements of novelty offered by this work. In contrast, shepherds were the people who were anchored in the ancient way of life. They knew very well this occupation and were believing that it offered them a comfort that has been validated over time. They believed that shepherding involved customs aligned with the moral structure and normative system of the local community.

Therefore, in the interwar period, local communities were troubled by the conflicts between the divergent attitudes towards the new profession and by the chaotic transformation of common resources into individual properties seized by a group of more influential locals. The old communal



system was crumbling under the powerless eyes of the elderly. They understood better the difference between the past and the present way of living, but they had no strength to fight the increasingly influential and corrupt authorities. In other words, the community felt a decline on all levels, which came together with the important human and material losses caused by the First World War. However, people were could not find solutions to improve the situation.

The research carried out with enthusiasm by the members of the School of Sociology in Bucharest led by Dimitre Gusti revealed a pastoral world that was still very vigorous in many of the communities researched. Two research campaigns were conducted in 1927 and 1938 in the Vrancea region, in the village of Nereju, because sociologists considered this village was sufficiently isolated and characteristic for understanding of the entire region.⁶

The practice of shepherding had a unitary aspect in all the Romanian provinces, respecting a similar system of customs in organization and carrying out specific activities. Regardless of where it took place, sheep farming depended on the existence of rich pastures to provide enough food for the animals and enough products that could later be used to create value. This necessity led to the development of transhumance grazing that involved the seasonal movement of flocks of sheep in search of pasture lands, from high altitudes that were exploited only in the summer season when the climatic conditions were favorable, to the extensive pastures of the plains where the winters were gentler. The movement of sheep led to important human movements over considerable distances that frequently went beyond the borders of the country of origin. These movements facilitated cultural exchanges and lasting economic relations. The sheep were, therefore, an important medium to connect Romanian-speaking territories. At the same time, in each community shepherding functioned as a “musical laboratory,” an environment that

created and disseminated a vast series of songs. These songs were first known locally. Then, the songs circulated extensively, following the paths of transhumance.

In the Vrancea region, local music was tributary to the traditional shepherding environment that was declining. The most consistent part of the repertoire in circulation consisted of instrumental songs: “Vrancea (...) is the kingdom of the shepherd’s pipe, faithful companion of the shepherd. Nowhere could one find so many kinds of pipes and most people from Vrancea play pipe very well, if not wonderful, small and large pipes, twin pipes (*gemănate*), bagpipe-like pipes (*cimpoieșești*) and others, or from long pipes (*caval*) of various kinds” (Brăiloiu 1998, 178).

These songs were widespread in the sheepfold, in the family or in solitude, during the everyday activities, as well as in public events, such as feasts, weddings, communal works (*clacă*) or vigils for the deceased. It is considered that these songs used to be an individual good in the first place and then a community good that followed circuits of production and conservation. Most probably, the “journey” of a song started from inside the sheepfold, a micro-universe isolated to a good extent from the life in the hearth of the village. In addition to its vital economic role in the community, the sheepfold was a long-lasting educational environment that had a well-established and respected hierarchy. This hierarchy made people behave in predictable ways that depended on the context, age, and experience. Here, shepherds learned practices and beliefs aimed to secure the prosperity of the profession and their own well-being. The hierarchy started from the stage of novice, usually associated with childhood and adolescence, and ended with the leader of the flock (*baci*) at old age. Over time, shepherds acquired moral and physical abilities that were very different from those of ordinary villagers. These abilities used to help shepherds face harsh living conditions, isolation, and various caring responsibilities for the animals they oversaw, including protecting



animals from predators. At the same time, shepherds used to cook for the staff of the sheepfold, manage the daily quantities of fresh milk, prepare the dairy products in good conditions, and distribute the right amount of cheese to each sheep owner.

In this environment making music, even in simple forms, was part of daily practices. Most shepherds learned and developed this skill over time. Most melodies in the sheepfold performed a utilitarian function, that is, they were played to produce an immediate effect. For example, the important moments of a working day, such as going out to graze, were accompanied by music. Animals were trained to associate a certain action with a certain music, for example when leaving the milking pen and returning to it. For these actions, shepherds used a limited set of quite similar melodies or signals. The melodies had a rubato rhythm and could be repeated often to accustom the sheep and dogs to the sounds. Constantin Brăiloiu considered that “musically speaking, these are the most precious things that could be collected from Vrancea. They are closely related, on the one hand, to the instrumental Miorița,⁷ and on the other hand, to several songs, vocal in essence, which we call *doine*⁸ [my italics]” (Brăiloiu 1998, 182). Shepherds rarely used their voices to sing. More often, they would whistle or use musical instruments to create their own signals to call the animals. Animals would recognize and respond to these “sung” commands.

There were other types of songs in this environment, and their creation and perpetuation depended on a multitude of factors. The whole community lived in a space impregnated with similar sounds. Musical training began in early childhood, as children listened to adults playing music within the family, in the grazing fields, or at community events. Also, working as a shepherd was intended exclusively for men, women’s access to the flock being almost forbidden. It was believed that the life of the shepherds had to be clean, free from temptations, otherwise the flock would be bad: the sheep would get sick and not give enough

milk, and predators would attack more often, causing great damage to the flock.

Thus, the chants were familiar to everyone, from children to the elderly. However, by preadolescence, and sometimes even earlier, a clear difference between boys and girls starts to emerge. Traditionally, girls and women did not play any instruments; they only used to sing. They could listen to the men play and, in some communities, they were evaluating and approving the skills of male singers. Additionally, shepherding was exclusively a male occupation, with women’s involvement in tending the flock being nearly forbidden. It was believed that shepherds’ lives needed to remain pure and free from temptation, or else the flock would suffer, for example, the sheep would fall ill, produce less milk, and predators would strike more frequently, causing serious harm to the herd.

Fact that only men play pipe and only men can be shepherds are two attitudes validated by tradition, the decision-making body in this type of society. On a symbolic level, tradition articulates the close relationship between men in the community, the production and preservation of music, and the sheepfold as a generic space in sheep farming.

Shepherds were often celibate and would start to go to mountains in their teenage years, along with other more experienced people. Within this setting, the novice encountered a relatively small group of men of varying ages, all of whom were usually skilled players. He used to live among these men long enough to adopt their musical habits. Constantly exposed to men singing, the novice felt encouraged to join in to both facilitate his integration into the group and to allow him express different emotional states he experienced, such as joy, sadness, alienation, or longing. The better the individual’s ability to filter and assimilate musical information, the greater were the chances he would become a good performer himself. This process assumed a time he needed to learn, rehearse, and even compose new songs inspired by his practical experiences. The emotional state of each



player was in all cases an important catalyst in the production of any type of song.

When the shepherds decided to start a family, often at a relatively older age than other men in the region, they returned to the village and gave up their shepherding occupation. At this key moment, it was important that the husband-to-be was known as a reliable shepherd, which denoted a responsible man, but also a good instrumentalist with a jovial and “worldly” nature. These two attributes had a practical role, but in addition they fulfilled a social function. These attributes used to strengthen the personal prestige of the future head of the family in the eyes of the community and of the future wife. Each former shepherd returned to the village with a musical collection that he used to broadcast in the community apparently in an instinctive manner.

In this new context, he had the freedom to develop and refine his repertoire while being surrounded by several instrumentalists of all ages who shared similar attitudes toward local music. Even if their meetings were occasional, the process of musical assimilation could easily continue into old age. Different villagers memorized and circulated new songs. Villagers could imitate one or more individual styles of playing and singing, with varying degrees of fidelity that depended on the player’s preferences. Musical motifs were extracted and reintegrated in a different order in other musical pieces.

Often, musical contests arose spontaneously and without a defined purpose at various small gatherings, weddings, village games, and during the long nights of vigils for the deceased. These activities served several roles: they stimulated the creativity and virtuosity of the instrumentalists, entertained the audience, and provided role models for the children and young people who happened to be around. In turn, children were observing the adults with admiration and instinctively memorized what they saw and heard. While playing in small groups or when guarding the family’s cows and lambs, children

began to sing and imitate the music they had encountered.

The perpetuation of local instrumental music continued without much change if shepherding survived in its ancient form. As shepherding declined and archaic society disintegrated, people gradually adopted new music genres and attitudes. These new music genres competed with the local music that lost popularity. Travels outside the land existed before this moment, but before they were linked to transhumance routes and much later—towards the end of the 19th century—to military training. Even if the shepherds from Vrancea often accompanied shepherds from Transylvania, for example when descending towards the pasture lands in the plain, they shared similar musical practices that were common to the shepherding environment.

During the interwar period, the musical landscape of the region began to diversify, influenced by external factors that were no longer solely derived from the shepherding environment as had been the case in the past. A renewed repertoire, predominantly vocal, emerged alongside the existing instrumental traditions. The creation of new pipe tunes remained sufficiently rooted in tradition to persist, albeit on a smaller scale, even as the local character of the songs diminished. For the first time, *răzeși* from Vrancea had access not only to their own music that was responding to familiar aesthetic norms and catered to individual and communal needs, but also to music disseminated by the “music bands (*tarafuri*) that had spread throughout the villages” (Rădulescu 2002, 18). Even now, there is a differentiation of music according to the social category of those who perform it. Pipe music is now only played for the peasants. It is sung by men in a similar way it used to be in the past. On the other hand, music bands (*lăutari*) play music during feasts and other public events. Instead of the musical instruments that are typical to shepherds, *lăutari* use violin and *cobza* or violin and *țambal*. For the first time, some women in the community broke away from tradition and started to play musical



instruments—although not the pipe—along with men in their families. These women are Roma ethnics and they used to be a marginal category in the local community. Non-Roma women only sing and do not play musical instruments.

The communist regime, brutally established shortly after the Second World War, created conditions for the spread of a new way of life, strictly regulated by the authorities. Under this new social order, the Vrancea communal ownership (*Obște*) was suppressed and the peasants were dispossessed of their most valuable assets: pasture land and forests. Furthermore, the freedom that *răzeși* had known and cherished since ancient times was severely limited. Archaic forms of life and local customs that had always been above the written laws were partially abandoned and a new social order that was foreign to the region was adopted consciously or unconsciously.

Authorities tried to make villagers live according to the directives received from the outside. Even if these directives did not always work, they caused an important decline of the ancient values and beliefs.

Arriving at an impasse, the local community continually sought convenient survival mechanisms under the new regime, often at the expense of the natural development of traditional local life. Peasants always found various subterfuges to meet their basic needs, skillfully avoiding conflicts with party activists. However, it was impossible for any local resident, no matter how isolated they lived, to completely distance themselves from the political regime of their time and escape the watchful eye of the authorities. The confiscation of private and communal property, i.e., those belonging to the entire region and which were used according to the rules of *devălmășie*, and the confiscation of a significant number of animals, “was an act that destroyed the traditional bases of village musical life (...) Demoralized by the loss of their property them, some villagers were no longer ‘in the mood’ to sing and dance” (Rice 1994, 171).

The social importance of sheep diminished significantly under communism, decreasing with each passing decade. The shepherd, once viewed as the leader of the village, responsible for managing and caring for a large flock, became a person of lesser importance, especially in the eyes of party activists. The number of private sheepfolds shrank dramatically, with most now owned by the state. Shepherds found themselves in the position of financially dependent employees, functioning as servants within a vast state system. Shepherds started to feel disengaged from their traditional profession. Their affective involvement and satisfactions of any kind diminished greatly, leading to a common practice of avoiding responsibilities. In many cases, employees no longer valued the animals in their care, and some became shepherds just to secure a stable income. The love for animals became increasingly obsolete. In the long run, the reality of those times altered the peasants’ perception of their occupation itself.

As in other countries in Southeast Europe under the direct influence of the Soviet Union, the communist regime in Romania employed various methods to indoctrinate the masses. Peasant music became a tool and resource for the creation of other genres of music with strong ideological content. The authentic peasant music was considered too rough (*necizelată*) and not aligned with the “multilaterally developed” (*multilateral dezvoltată*) society being established and with the aspirations of the “new man.” Therefore, peasant music had to be “straightened out” (*îndreptată*) through a series of measures imposed at the national level. “Arranged music during the communist period functioned as an icon of the communist passion for command and control, a value transposed from the patriarchal family of the village to the national level” (Rice 1994, 184). Folklorized music was music modified or created according to the aesthetic and stylistic norms imposed by the party to the detriment of local traditions. This kind of music was supported by the entire state apparatus and gradually gained notoriety.



At the beginning of the communist dictatorship, in Vrancea pipe playing was the most popular musical activity. Pipe playing used to happen in sheepfolds and during all the important activities in the life of the community, such as parties, celebrations, feasts, communal work (*clacă*), vigils for the dead, hay mowing, in the construction sites of public road, in forest lodges that started to be built during the reforestation campaigns that started in the 1950s. The elderly still had a rich repertoire of melodies. They were the main source of inspiration for the young and the main authority that validated the musical skills of the young.

Starting in the 1960s, however, alongside the mass media's efforts to promote folklorized music, the first folklore festivals emerged with the aim to "valuing, on a higher level, the authentic, traditional and contemporary folklore creation" (Chirilă 2005, 158). Each commune was "encouraged" to establish its own artistic team to make the "popular treasure" known at local, regional, and national level.

To begin with, the renowned pipe players within the community were integrated into local amateur ensembles that were coordinated by cultural instructors. These instructors prepared the pipe singers for stage performances in accordance with the requirements established by the party. The largest and most famous ensemble of pipe players in the area was formed in the Paltin commune and comprised about 50 instrumentalists. The well-known songs of the village were partially incorporated into the ensemble's repertoire, albeit in a modified form. Some local songs were changed according to the preferences of the passionate composer D.D. Stancu. He "trained" (*instruit*⁹) the ensemble and sought to create a symphonic-style orchestra using pipes only, as a respected pipe player in the area told me. He remembers his interactions with the composer during his childhood when he accompanied his father, S.D. — one of the village's finest pipe players, to the ensemble rehearsals.

I remember that it was summer, and people

had work to do, it was mowing time, and they called us to rehearsals and kept us until 12 at night, until it came out right. The mayor didn't leave us, and to keep the people, to keep them from leaving, he kept promising them something, flour, cornmeal, which were not always available. Or, in order not to force some to concentration, they learned to play the pipe and joined the team, because they did not touch the team. They had something to gain, they were exempted here and there. (V.D, male, 54 years old)

The long-time leader of this pipe band remembers very well the life of a pipe player from that era,

I joined the band when I was 14-15 years old. At one point, there were 55 pipe players, when Professor Stancu was instructing us. I was 16-17 years old when he came and started training the team. There were people who sang much better than me, those older ones, but they kept forgetting [the melodies]. When the professor saw that I could remember [the melodies] and I got used to all melodies, he put me in charge... I started and together with the others we made different kinds of *hanguri*¹⁰ (...) with bells (*telenci*), with anything the professor asked us. We loved to play, we couldn't wait for rehearsal on Sunday. We had a very good mayor, a man like him will not be born again. As it was at that time, he kept an eye on us, if we were playing the pipe, he gave us bags of corn. It happened that when we were away in the winter, when the weather was bad, there was a meter of snow and he would send a man, from CAP,¹¹ where he was from, to bring wood with an ox cart: "Go to that woman because her husband is not at home, he is away with the pipe players; you go and take a cart of wood there." In '73, I was invited to the Maria Tănase Festival,¹² from Craiova. We took the third place at the national competition, a plaque with the face of Maria Tănase, a small rug, and a thousand lei. It was a lot of money at the time. Then, I went to different festivals, I don't even remember



them... I liked it the most when it was the Song to Romania¹³ in Bucharest, in '77, then it was the most beautiful. The 23 August Stadium was full, over 100,000 people were there. The Song of Romania was written with soldiers, the first edition was then. (...) We entered, pipe players from Paltin who were the best, no one took us [achieved a better result], as there were many of us, there were 40-50 pipe players, not a single team of pipe players took us. The spectators cheered and made the stadium tremble. It was nice, very good. I was so happy, I had no stress, no fear, because I had got used to it, I had no emotion. Mrs. Sanda Țăranu¹⁴ was the presenter. He told about me that I was a *șapinar*¹⁵ from Vrancea Mountains because she asked me where I was working, and I told her I was working in the woods, that I load trucks with *șapina*, so that's why she said that about me. It was very beautiful, I think that's the heaven that I saw, because on the other side I don't know what will be. (C.C., man, 76 years old)

The peasant on stage learned to accept the role of an amateur artist. Here he had a role to play and to sing exactly as his direct coordinator dictated—this was also the case in other aspects of public life. At home and with friends, he was free to express his musical preferences and style, influenced by his personal emotions. Observing his performances, the community perceived that their own local musical expressions could only be deemed valuable if they received validation and recognition from urban experts. The locals often regarded these experts as their superiors. People across the region quickly embraced the new interpretation of traditional music as it was showcased on stage and met with awards and applause. However, the seemingly minor regulations imposed by the promoters of the so-called authentic folklore managed to destabilize the way musicians understood their own cultural heritage from that moment on. The techniques that the pipers acquired through their engagement with the organized performance environment were emulated

by many local singers, particularly in public settings. For instance, all pipers who joined the ensemble were instructed by cultural activists to refrain from using the guttural drone (*isonul gutural*), the sound that typically accompanied the melody, on the grounds that it was considered unappealing. Consequently, group performances were often required to be in perfect unison, devoid of improvisation and individual expression, as such deviations would not be viewed favorably by the authorities in the field. The practice of singing for personal enjoyment, which depended on the mood and life experiences of the performer, has gradually declined in the collective mindset. This form of musical expression was no longer aligned with the music promoted via television, radio, and festivals.

The fall of the communist regime, nearly five decades after its establishment, marked the beginning of a new chapter in the social and cultural life of Vrancea. After learning to cope with a restricted way of life directed by the authorities, the local people finally found themselves in a position to be free. However, despite this newfound reality, the quality of life did not significantly improve. While the return of agricultural land and forests to the peasants sparked some revival within the local community, it failed to provide adequate resources for daily needs. Economic instability led to the gradual emigration of many young people to Western European countries in search of financial security to support those who remained in the village. This created a significant imbalance in a society already strained by recent political events, uncertainties, and shortcomings. For those who did not leave the region, the main occupation shifted toward the exploitation and primary processing of wood, while sheep farming could no longer regain its former prestige.

With each passing year, the herds of animals continue to decline, and with them, the number of sheepfolds also decreases. The elderly, who make up the largest segment of the local population, are those who have not completely given up raising sheep. They keep





between three and ten animals and send them to a sheepfold during the summer months. In recent years, sheepfolds have been built near the village, made possible by the large areas of meadows that owners can no longer mow. Shepherds rent this land for grazing and typically pay rent not in money but in a certain amount of cheese, proportional to the area of the rented land. There are a few families who only farm sheep. The current sheepfolds do not belong to the whole community or to the state as they did in the past. Rather, sheepfolds are privately owned by individual families. Much less frequently, in a dry year, the herds are taken up the mountain where the old sheepfolds used to be.

In almost every commune, a few families still pass down the occupation of shepherding to the younger generation. It appears that shepherding can still provide a prosperous livelihood, but only for those willing to put in significant effort to sustain the activity. The challenge lies in the fact that all the work required to maintain the flock and care for the animals is done by family members. The flock owner typically has between 100 to 1000 sheep, plus a variable number of sheep gathered from the village each year. Usually, the owner is the administrator and shepherd, which means that one person is responsible for all activities: grazing the sheep, milking the sheep two or three times a day, preparing the curd, and selling or distributing the products to the village. The man is usually assisted by his wife. Hiring shepherds from outside the family is less common, even though it might be a convenient option, because they are difficult to find. In addition to activities related to the sheepfold, the family has to collect fodder for the winter, which requires employing several day laborers.

Shepherding involves sacrificing the comfortable living that modern man has become accustomed to, in favor of a harsh life that requires the total dedication of the staff. There is a local saying that goes, "sheep has no holiday." The care of the sheep remains above the comfort of the shepherd, regardless

of the events that may take place beyond this small shepherding universe. In Vrancea, most young people prefer to look for work in the city or outside the country. In the last 20 years, people from Vrancea region have found work especially in Italy. Those who have been brought up in families of shepherds and who possess considerable expertise in the field are employed in Italian sheepfolds. The shepherds who work in Italy are only employed during the summer, and rarely in the off-season. During summer, shepherds are paid about a year's work at home (N.B., male, 61 years old). They prefer to work in Italy primarily because they are paid better than in Romania, even if shepherding is one of the lowest paid occupations they can have abroad. Sometimes life is easier for shepherds in Italy, where grazing is done with less effort thanks to electric fenced pastures. In these cases, the shepherd is left with the responsibility of overseeing the flocks, staying within the predetermined area of land, and milking the sheep as often as the employer decides (most often twice a day). The shepherd believes that he is more peaceful and freer as an employee who does not own sheep and who does not have to administer the flock in order to survive. This form of shepherding, which takes place in a completely new geographical space, represents a modern extension of the old occupation, illustrates the extent to which the current social and political environment has influenced the livelihoods of individuals in the Vrancea region.

In the eyes of the community, shepherding has lost much of its former prestige, and the shepherd—the central figure of this world—is often stigmatized. This occupation is frequently associated with poor formal education, an inability to adapt and succeed in other fields, and even laziness.¹⁶ Like any contemporary peasant, the shepherd inhabits a world shaped by various transformations from which he cannot escape. The isolation that once defined his existence and determined his connection to himself and those around him is now disrupted by several factors: relatively easy access to portable

radios, smartphones with Internet access, and off-road vehicles that enable quick travel along formerly long and difficult routes. As a result, his inner universe—that once guided his daily actions—continually distances itself from old customs and changes itself.

For several years, the familiar pipes have not been heard in the sheepfolds. In their place, a wide range of musical options has emerged. The Romanian Radio Broadcasting Company's station, *Antena Satelor* [Villages' Radio], is the most popular radio station and has a strong coverage in the region. It is an important source of information through its hourly news bulletins and serves as a platform that allows the folk-folklorized music, now familiar to the peasants, to flow. The circulation of music is no longer filtered by local aesthetic and stylistic norms, as it was in the past. Instead, it is now controlled by mass media, a virtual authority that cannot be contested. Deprived of the functions and significance they once held in the life of the community, archaic chants no longer have the strength to break through in the sound environment of the present.

The relationship between music and the individual is vastly different from the past, as it is now predominantly mediated. It no longer involves the concrete processes of learning instrumental techniques, memorizing songs, sharing them "with the world," and refining the repertoire based on the pipe player's skills and community validation. Instead, songs of all kinds are left to the artists—those capable to convey messages that resonate with the listener's emotional state,

When I was younger, I loved to sing, I would have had the pipe with me all day long, now it's like I don't feel like... I love you listening to others... I would pay someone to play to me and I would listen. I forgot almost everything I was playing in the (artistic) team. I can't start some melodies that I used to play well, at the same time, my fingers don't work anymore... The time for playing has passed... After we'll die, you'll see how empty these places will be, no one will come to live here the way we did...

To play, not even that, there's no one to play!
(I.G., male, 80 years old)

The perpetuation of melodies of shepherding origin appears to have stopped during the era of "socialist glory" due to a significant generational divide that widened after the 1990s. This divide hindered the transmission of instrumental practices and repertoire to younger generations. As a result, pipe music became frozen in time, existing only in the memories of older peasants. They still retain the music "in their fingers," unable to fully let go of it as they remain anchored in the musical past of the region.

The artistic teams that are still active have fewer and fewer members. Each year, fewer pipe players take to the stages of local festivals established during the communist era. The audience members feel a sense of joy when they hear their commune's name mentioned by the presenter, but they also grow slightly nostalgic as they notice that there are always fewer musicians. Some spectators listen indifferently and mechanically absorb music that feels familiar yet fails to impress them. On the same stages, renowned folk music stars from the region and beyond are invited to perform. Their musical performances are generally well-received, but they are often interspersed with flat speeches from festival jurors who speak of "preserving ancestral traditions, of cloths taken out from dowry chests, of authentic folklore."¹⁷ Even though this kind of discourse seems outdated and has little impact on the audience, most performers and cultural authorities remain appreciate it.

V.D., the youngest pipe singer from the old generation of pipe singers in Paltin, teaches village children to play pipe and long pipe (*caval*). He has successfully formed a new team of young pipe players, who are increasingly active and are invited to most local cultural events. Some of the instrumentalists are starting to enjoy playing the shepherd's pipe (*să prindă drag de fluier*), to the delight of their parents and their teacher. V.D. tries to teach young people as much as he knows with the hope that local



music may have another chance. He often reminds his students, "You're good for nothing if you keep your talent to yourself; there's no use in singing well if you leave nothing behind. Perhaps they'll remember me when I'm gone!"

On stage, the children in the ensemble sing a part of the repertoire proposed by D.D. Stancu, half a century ago.

Recently, I have been listening to a few pipers playing individually, offstage. Compared to a few years ago, I have noticed advances in their assimilation of instrumental techniques. The young pipers are increasingly aligning their performance styles with that of their coordinator, who remains well anchored in local tradition while also bearing the influence of the folklorised music that has been broadcasted heavily in the mass media during the 1980s. These new pipe players associate playing the pipe primarily with public contexts, such as community events, celebrations, and festivals,

and rarely connect it to their emotional states, that is they rarely play for themselves, an aspect that has almost disappeared from the life of community.

Keeping local shepherding tunes in circulation through this approach remains uncertain because the social environment no longer seems capable to support their survival. The case of the group from Paltin is singular. In other villages, only a few old people occasionally take the pipes out of dusty drawers when they want to remember their youth with nostalgia or when they form small ensembles to represent their community at festivals. Most likely, the music produced by the archaic society of Vrancea will die out with the quiet disappearance of the old pipe players. For a while, we will hear them on stage, the representative space for displaying "tradition," albeit in forms that remain more or less faithful to their original "model."



NOTES

1. Region in the southeast of Romania, located east of the Curvature Carpathians.
2. "Folkloric" or "folklorized" music is the "official" music proposed by the communist state as a "politicized alternative to peasant music" (Rădulescu 2002, 81) from which it originates. Thus, folkloric music has entirely different functions and characteristics compared to the peasant music that used to exist in village life. Today, most Romanians find it difficult to differentiate between the two types of music, peasant music and folklorized music, because they have become accustomed to this genre over almost eight decades). This happened to the detriment of genuine peasant music.
3. In 1918 these provinces united to create the Romanian nation state.
4. Free peasants, owners in *devălmășie* of land inherited from common ancestors, according to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Dictionary (dex.ro).
5. The closest cities, situated in the southeast of Romania, on the border between the historical provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia (*Muntenia*).
6. Both research projects serve as a basis for this essay. Some of the manuscripts collected from the field at that time are included in the Constantin Brăiloiu Collection at the Library of the National Museum of Natural History from Paris. I consulted this collection in 2020.
7. Widely circulated epic song of shepherding tradition, which was sung in a *parlando-rubato* style in vocal, instrumental, or vocal and instrumental form.
8. In the original text, Constantin Brăiloiu uses the term *doine-propriu-zise* that can be translated as "*doine* per se." The intention is to differentiate *doine-propriu-zise* from other kinds of songs that are not *doine*.
9. The term has entered the lexicon and the consciousness of pipe players from the old ensemble.

10. *Hanguri* = accompaniment, from *hang* = voice in Hungarian language.

11. Agricultural Production Co-operative was the collective farm under owned by the communist state and formed after the nationalization and forced collectivization of agricultural lands and means of production throughout Romania.

12. Festival and contest of folk music established in 1969, which has the name of the famous singer Maria Tănase who was promoted by the communist authorities as the "golden bird" of Romanian folk music.

13. The Song to Romania National Festival was a grandiose

propaganda festival established in 1976 under President Nicolae Ceaușescu.

14. Presenter at the Romanian National Television.

15. This term comes from *țapină*, a tool made of a steel hook fixed to a wooden handle, used for moving logs.

16. I heard several times parents or teachers threatening school students that: "if you don't learn, you will end up being a shepherd."

17. Stereotypes heard in several festivals and local cultural events between 2015-2024.



ÎNCEPUT



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brăiloiu, Constantin. 1998. *Opere* [Works], Vol. VI, ed. Emilia Comișel. Bucharest: Muzicală.

Chirilă, Toader. 2005. *Năruja-Inima Vrancei* [Năruja–Vrancea's Heart]. Focșani: Terra.

Stahl, Henri H. 1939. *Nerej, un village d'une région archaïque*. Bucharest: Institutul de Științe Sociale din România.

Stahl, Henri H. 1981. *Amintiri și gânduri...din vechea școală a „monografiilor sociologice”* [Memories and Thoughts... From the Old 'Sociological Monography' School]. Bucharest: Minerva.

Rădulescu, Speranța. 2002. *Peisaje muzicale în România secolului XX* [Musical Landscapes in 20th Century Romania]. Bucharest: Muzicală.

Rice, Timothy. 1994. *May it Fill Your Soul. Experiencing Bulgarian Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago.