

# TRADITIONAL HUNGARIAN ROMANI/GYPSY DANCE AND ROMANIAN ELECTRONIC POP-FOLK MUSIC IN TRANSYLVANIA

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**Abstract:** This fieldwork-based ethnochoreological study focuses on traditional dances of Hungarian Romani/Gypsy communities in Transylvania (Romania) practiced to electronic pop-folk music. This kind of musical accompaniment is applied not only to the fashionable Romanian *manele*, but also to their traditional dances (named *csingerálás*<sup>1</sup>, *cigányos*). Thus Romanian electronic pop-folk music including Romani/Gypsy elements provides the possibility for the survival of Transylvanian Hungarian Romani/Gypsy dance tradition both at community events and public discos. The continuity in dance idiom is maintained through changes in musical idiom – a remarkable phenomenon, worthy of further discussion from the point of view of the continuity of cultural tradition.

**Keywords:** csingerálás, pop-folk, Romani/Gypsy, tradition, Transylvania

## INTRODUCTION

This fieldwork-based ethnochoreological study focuses on traditional dances of a Hungarian Romani/Gypsy<sup>2</sup> community at Transylvanian villages (Romania) practiced for Romanian electronic pop-folk music. Besides *mahala*, *manele*-style dancing prevailing in Romania in Transylvanian villages, also the traditional Hungarian Romani/Gypsy dance dialect – *csingerálás* – is practiced (‘fitted’) for mainstream Romanian pop music, the

<sup>1</sup> See ORTUTAY 1977.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I follow Anca Giurchescu (GIURCHESCU 2011: 1) in using ‘Rom’ as a singular noun, ‘Roms’ as a plural noun, and ‘Romani’ as an adjective. Furthermore, as some Romani musicians consider the name ‘Rom’ an insult and prefer to be called Gypsies, we can also make use of the latter term. [After 1989, the Gypsies’ aim for a modern ethnic consciousness was symbolised by the adoption of the name Roma instead of *tigani* (Gypsies). However, many prefer to be *just common Gypsies* who do not speak Romani and may not be politically involved with any of the Romani political parties. There are also older musicians who do not want to be called *Roma*. (GIURCHESCU 2001: 187–188)]

combination of the different elements often resulting in remarkable improvised variations worthy of the further inspection proposed here.

While Romanian and Hungarian folk dance is practiced exclusively for traditional authentic folk music accompaniment, and Romanian and Hungarian young people in Transylvania dance Occidental-type, modern dances for pop music at balls, discoes and public events, Romani/Gypsy dance heritage can be safeguarded and transmitted to subsequent generations also within the new frames given by disco and electronic pop-folk music – an especially remarkable phenomenon from the point of view of cultural anthropology and ethnochoreology.

As my field research since 2008 with the Romani/Gypsy community at the Transylvanian village Pava (Zabala/Zăbala) under the guidance of Ferenc Pozsony, Professor of the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca/Kolozsvár and Director of the Csángó Museum at Zabala has revealed, in the inter-ethnic social landscape of Transylvania not only the strongly disputed, fashionable *mahala-manea/manele* dancing, but also the traditional Hungarian Romani/Gypsy dance dialect (*cigányos, csingerálás*) can be practiced for the mainstream Romanian pop-folk music.<sup>3</sup> Romanian electronic pop-folk music implying Romani/Gypsy elements provides the possibility of the organic survival of Transylvanian Romani/Gypsy dance tradition both at traditional community events and discoes.

As interviews have revealed, talented young Romani/Gypsy dancers conserve their dance traditions with surprising consciousness and awareness of the importance of their knowledge, bringing them reputation and fame in balls and discoes. The combination of different dance elements can result in remarkable improvised variations worthy of a structured movement analysis.

Following consultations with experts I consciously selected the following villages and places for the fieldwork in Transylvania, Romania: Kolozsvár/Cluj Napoca (Judetul Cluj), Kommandó/Comandău (Covasna County), Zăbala – Pava (Covasna County).

My fieldwork has resulted in interviews with informants, video recordings and transcriptions and analyses of local dances at the selected villages with focus on spontaneous or organized local dance events and the appearance of the dances in different contexts: *manele* dance and music clubs/bars, discoes, folk camps, festivals and dance houses.

My research questions during the project in progress are the following:

- What is the significance of the dances of ethnic communities in the inter-ethnic social landscape of Transylvania?
- How is Romanian electronic pop music fit for traditional Hungarian Romani/Gypsy dances in Transylvania? How can dancers perceive this music as a natural medium for traditional dances and perform traditional dances at discoes, thus preserving and transmitting their tradition under ‘modern’ conditions?
- What kind of interactions can be observed between the Transylvanian Hungarian Romani/Gypsy dances (*csingerálás*) and the dominant *manele*?

<sup>3</sup> KORZENSZKY 2011: 313–328. Documented in the film documentary: KORZENSZKY – TÖRŐ – VARGA 2011.

## QUESTION 1

### WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DANCES OF ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN THE INTER-ETHNIC SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF TRANSYLVANIA? THE ROLE OF DANCE IN EMPHASIZING ETHNIC IDENTITY IN TRANSYLVANIA

As researchers point out, in the inter-ethnic social landscape of Transylvania dance can play a special role in emphasizing ethnic identity.

Colin Quigley, ethnomusicologist at the University of Limerick (Ireland), claims that ‘Notions of cultural revival and the representation of cultural identity are powerful engines driving the current practice of dance in Transylvania. [...] dance events there can have special significance in emphasizing Hungarian, Romanian, and Gypsy identity’.<sup>4</sup> During his field research in Transylvania since the 1990s Quigley has discovered a remarkable contrast between dance tradition practiced among different ethnic communities. He finds it ‘remarkable not so much for the structural or stylistic distinctions that may be discerned among the dancing of these groups (although these do exist), but rather for the contrastive uses to which these traditions are currently being put’.<sup>5</sup> He outlines the situation as follows: ‘At a very general level within which dance is situated within a Hungarian assimilative and integrative attitude toward cultural identity which reaches out to incorporate the disparate traditions of its external national minorities meets in Transylvania a very different Romanian exclusionary boundary making strategy. The Gypsies as a stateless, often landless “transnational” population occupy an ambiguous position between the two and struggle to find their own niche. Cutting across and intersecting in interesting ways with these larger patterns of group identity formation and boundary marking are differing approaches to configuring these identities through music and dance.’<sup>6</sup>

According to Anca Giurchescu’s observation, even the mutual exclusion of ethnicities in Romania from dance occasions can represent ‘a sharp affirmation of ethnic and cultural identities’.<sup>7</sup> ‘Dance occasions for both Gypsies and non-Gypsies are generally the same: weddings, baptisms, name-days, family parties, Christmas, New Year, Easter and other calendric celebrations. The way Gypsies and Romanians participate at these events varies from community to community and is strictly dependent upon the interaction on social level of two ethnic groups. There are instances when the presence of Gypsies is not compatible with given event, the same being true for Romanians in Gypsy communities’.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> QUIGLEY 2002: 1.

<sup>5</sup> QUIGLEY 2002: 2

<sup>6</sup> QUIGLEY 2002: 2.

<sup>7</sup> GIURCHESCU: 2001: 181.

<sup>8</sup> GIURCHESCU 2001: 181.

## QUESTION 2

WHY IS ROMANIAN ELECTRONIC POP MUSIC FIT  
FOR TRADITIONAL HUNGARIAN ROMANI/GYPSY DANCES  
IN TRANSYLVANIA? WHY CAN DANCERS PERCEIVE  
THIS MUSIC AS A NATURAL MEDIUM FOR TRADITIONAL  
DANCES AND PERFORM TRADITIONAL DANCES AT DISCOES,  
THUS PRESERVING AND TRANSMITTING THEIR TRADITION  
UNDER “MODERN” CONDITIONS?  
THE POPULARITY OF THE POP-FOLK AMONG ROMANI/GYPSY  
IN ROMANIA AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS

One of the decisive factors in this phenomenon must be the popularity of pop-folk in Romania and its socio-cultural connotations for the Romanian Romani/Gypsy ethnicity.

Pop-folk, the fusion of commercial folk music and pop music, a mixture of traditional tunes with electronically synthesized music and most advanced recording technology, often referencing among other genres the Turkish arabesque, the Greek Skiladiko, Bulgarian Chalga, the 'Yugoslavian' turbo-folk, or the Romanian *manele* is – though often disputed – for various reasons (including historical causes) extremely popular and in many cases the mainstream music, dominant in the musical market in the countries of the Balkans.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the heterogeneity of the genre it is difficult or almost impossible to establish clear cut categories, as we shall also see in the case of the *manele* (singular form: 'manea', plural: 'manele')<sup>10</sup> According to Anca Giurchescu the word is 'possibly of Turkish origin (*aman* = mercy), probably entered the Romanian vocabulary in the first half of the nineteenth century, when *amanes* (pl. *amanedhes*) designated a lyrical genre in the musical practice of Greeks and other peoples in the Ottoman Empire'.<sup>11</sup> Music rose 'as a form of symbolic opposition by the Romani communities from the slums of the big cities on the Danube to their exclusion from Romanian society'.<sup>12</sup>

According to Robert Garfias, Professor of Anthropology at the School of Social Sciences of the University of California, Los Angeles, 'Gypsy musicians often travelled to the big cities to seek employment either voluntarily or under orders from the lord of the house. Gradually, increasing numbers of Gypsies – musicians as well as those from other professions – came to settle in these large cities. They tended to gather in the settlements that grew up on the edges of the city center. These neighborhoods were known as *mahala* (pl. *mahalale*). Although these *mahalale* were not specifically Gypsy slums, they were heavily populated by Gypsies. It is in these areas, surrounded by the Greek, Turkish, and

<sup>9</sup> PULAY 2008.

<sup>10</sup> GIURCHESCU 2011: 1. See section 2.2.

<sup>11</sup> GIURCHESCU 2011: 1.

<sup>12</sup> GIURCHESCU 2011: 2.

European elements of the city nearby, that the special urban popular forms arose. The music of these districts came to be called *cintec de mahala* or songs of the *mahala*.<sup>13</sup>

In the Communist period the Roms/Gypsies were not on the list of ‘co-inhabiting nationalities in Romania. [...] The existence of their music was formally denied. [...] Roms needed a new music, a more “modern” and accessible one that would provide immediate satisfaction and with which they could indirectly challenge those who had ignored or despised them. [...] this is how *manele* appeared, which later conquered not only Romani/Gypsy communities, but also the world of non-Roms across Romania’.<sup>14</sup>

According to a survey of the National Audiovisual Council of Bucuresti (Consiliul National al Audiovizualului) in 2006 *manele* ranked as the favorite music of 32.8% of children between 11–14, and 21.9 % of the grown ups.<sup>15</sup>

It should also be noted here that *manele* is a strongly disputed genre, and the *manele* industry that has evolved in the meantime, is harshly criticised and rejected by intellectuals, purist cultural bureaucrats and older people.<sup>16</sup>

*Manele* is often regarded as ‘scandalous, [...] loud, perverse, ostentatious’ and considered as “cultural pollution” appealing ‘the gangsta-wannabes and the proper gangsters’. However, nowadays *manele* is playing ‘a dominant role in public and private events, as weddings, baptisms, funerals, anniversaries and all kinds of parties organized in restaurants and clubs, as well as from the high visibility it receives on private TV channels, the Internet, commercial CDs and DVDs, concerts, and shows’.<sup>17</sup>

The socio-cultural connotations of pop-folk for the Romani/Gypsy ethnicity in their emancipation and self-assertion, and its high level of popularity in Romania can play an important role in Transylvanian Romani/Gypsy dancers’ approach to Romanian pop-folk: they perceive this music as a natural medium for traditional dances and perform traditional dancing for pop-folk at private and public events and at discoes, the ‘modern’ opportunity for dance.

#### THE EASILY ADAPTABLE, ‘PATCHWORK’ CHARACTER OF POP-FOLK MUSIC AND DANCE

In Anca Giurchescu’s view, *manele* ‘is a form of popular dancing, with oriental roots that connects: Orient, the local tradition and the Euro-American popular dances’.<sup>18</sup>

Pre-eminent Romanian cimbalom artist Giani Lincan has expressed the same idea this way: ‘Music from the East, image from America’.<sup>19</sup> Though he is aware of the significance of this music, as a *lautar* he is determined to consciously safeguard authentic Romani/Gypsy music.

<sup>13</sup> GARFIAS 1984: 87.

<sup>14</sup> GIURCHESCU 2011: 2.

<sup>15</sup> COBUZ 2006.

<sup>16</sup> GIURCHESCU 2013.

<sup>17</sup> GIURCHESCU 2011: 278.

<sup>18</sup> GIURCHESCU 2013.

<sup>19</sup> KALI 2007.

‘Nowadays *manea* is danced mostly by mixed couples to Bulgarian, so-called Yugoslav, or general oriental music played on modern instruments, especially electronic organ, guitars and accordion. Old professional *lautari* consider *menae* *bad music* played only by second-class musicians’.<sup>20</sup>

Musicians however, ‘play an ambivalent role: on the one hand they are the keepers of tradition, on the other they are instruments for changes [...] Their crucial contribution to the dissemination of the oriental and the Serb influence in the Romanian’s musical life of the last two decades, in both urban and rural setting, is well known’.<sup>21</sup>

Though the roots of the *manea* are to be found in the Oriental (Turkish and Balkan) dances, *kiöçek* and *çifteteli*, with which it shares basic syncopated rhythmic patterns and a substantial part of the kinetic vocabulary, disseminated by the Roma/Gypsies, for which they are considered Romani in origin, Giurchescu stresses the heterogeneity of the music. She suggests the following categories: 1. Oriental close to Chalga (Bulgaria), Turbofolk (former Yugoslavia), Arabesk (Turkey), Laiko (Greece), Tale-Valle (Albania); 2. Occidental drawing from the Euro-American pop; 3. Autochton (Gypsy, rural, Transylvanian). She emphasizes, that ‘it is almost impossible to establish clear cut categories’.<sup>22</sup> The genre allows the coexistence of various stylistic categories both in music and dance and a great variety of individual performance with improvisations. The overall form of dancing is heterogeneous, unpredictable and open.<sup>23</sup>

Anca Giurchescu claims that, ‘the melody and rhythm indicate the dance type and implicitly, the style of dancing’.<sup>24</sup> She carried out an interesting experiment ‘with Gypsy dancers of Bucharest, by alternating dance melodies from Transylvania (Central Romania) and Muntenia (Southern Romania) to which the dancers seemed to be automatically, but were in fact consciously, responding with changes between two contrasting dancing styles’.<sup>25</sup>

When analyzing the collected material, in each concrete case a detailed analysis of dance structures in parallel with the underlying musical structure is necessary (the use of the space, the formations, the improvisations and regulations, the kinetic agents, the movements and the gestures, the dynamics, the forms and the creativity, the relationship between the male and female gender specific movements, language, melody, rhythm, accompaniment, instrumentation, harmonies, timbre, etc.).

This openness and versatility of dominant *manele* and pan-Balkan pop-folk music in general can also contribute to its becoming easily accepted by Transylvanian Romani/Gypsy dancers and perceived as a natural medium for their traditional dances. This way their tradition can be preserved and transmitted via modern electronic pop-folk music.

<sup>20</sup> GIURCHESCU 2001: 183.

<sup>21</sup> GIURCHESCU 2001: 179.

<sup>22</sup> GIURCHESCU 2013.

<sup>23</sup> GIURCHESCU 2011: 25.

<sup>24</sup> GIURCHESCU 2001: 181.

<sup>25</sup> GIURCHESCU 2001: 181.

## QUESTION 3

WHAT KIND OF INTERACTIONS CAN BE OBSERVED BETWEEN THE TRANSYLVANIAN HUNGARIAN ROMANI/GYPSY DANCES (*CSINGERÁLÁS*) AND THE DOMINANT *MANELE*?

The definition of *csingerálás* in Néprajzi Lexikon<sup>26</sup> is limited to a short description of the dance in the article '*cigánycsárdás*'. With reference to this article we can say that *csingerálás* dance in general is a richly figured form of the older type of the *csárdás* dance, one of the most developed types of the new (Hungarian) dance style, mainly of its quick version, rich in figures, danced by individuals or couples without embracing each other. These most highly evolved dances are found in Transylvania, in Romanian, Hungarian and Gypsy communities. Its name in Romanian is *țigănesca*. As we have seen earlier, in central Transylvania, where most villages are mixed from the ethnic point of view, music and dance are shared. The dance is in a quick tempo 4/4 time signature (140–180 BPM/beats per minute), characterized by a rhythm of eighth note division. It is generally accompanied by instrumental music.

According to Gusztáv Balázs, pre-eminent expert of Hungarian Gypsy dances, Gypsy dance is generally of soloistic character and as such it is never danced in groups. The dance is characterized by individuality, improvisation and freedom. The behaviors of both partners are reserved, modest, not provoking during the dance. The dance is also characterized by subtle hip movements. Researchers (György Martin, Edit Kaposi, László Maácz, Ernő Pesovár) studying the Gypsy dance have so far differentiated two types: the man's solo dance and the couple dance. An analysis of the most recently collected Gypsy dance material, however, reveals that the woman's solo dance has a more significant role than it has among the Hungarians and other nationalities living here.

'By observing the people who dance to *manea* tunes, it is difficult to disclose a stable, valid model that could be formalized as "*the manea dance*", with a clearly defined kinetic vocabulary, structured by specific rules. Rather, one can speak rather of an improvised succession of small movement units (motifs/cell-motifs), which each dancer selects from his or her own stock of stereotyped movements, depending on the social context and his or her competence and skill.'<sup>27</sup>

In the traditional Transylvanian Romani/Gypsy dance, the movements involve the abdominal muscles without the characteristic pelvis movements of the classic (especially Egyptian) belly dance. In their disco dance for electronic pop music, however, 'isolated' up-and-down movements of the abdomen performed with virtuosity by both Romani men and women, specific to the improvisations of the Romani/Gypsy *manea* can also be observed.

As I observed, dancing at the *manele* music and dance pub/disco, characteristic movements revolve around the abdomen and pelvis moving in separation from the rest of the body. These include the following rich and diverse movement vocabulary: circu-

<sup>26</sup> ORTUTAY 1977.

<sup>27</sup> GIURCHESCU 2011: 22.

lar (up-and-down) movements of contraction and relaxation, undulations and vibrations ('shimmies'), independent curvilinear movements of the hands and arms, starting from the shoulders and flowing down to the fingertips. The consistently syncopated rhythm of the musical accompaniment is marked visually by hip rotations and vibrations, wriggling arms, shaking shoulders and by audible handclapping and finger snapping.

To analyse interactions, the description of the elements of the distinct traditions based on archive materials and recordings of authentic Transylvanian Romani/Gypsy dances and *manele* dances is necessary, followed by the detailed analysis of the dances of Transylvanian Roma/Gypsies as performed to the dominant electronic pop-folk music.

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