

The Real Being of the Folk Song: Actual and Virtual Forms

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Abstract: The structures, or architectural forms can be very various. They are independent both as to text and tune, are inconceivable by lyrics or melody taken separately, have nothing to do with the conscious intention or representation of the singers themselves, and are spontaneously actualized during the singing. Due to such immaterial structuring possibilities, and using only the formal possibilities of the syntagmatic repetition, in Romanian traditional/folk singing a single poetic text can receive 64 formal treatments/versions. For establishing the existence of these variants I have started from observations such as the one belonging to Bartók, who noticed that Romanians had the peculiarity of singing the same verse four times. Other observations spoke about three times repetitions of each verse, while in some other circumstances verses are repeated just once. If we logically establish all possible forms of syntagmatic repetitions we obtain this sum of 64 variants, which constitute the equally real and virtual being of each and any folk song. These structures were important to the old, peasant aesthetics, and their actualization was essential especially to ceremonial repertoires. By giving up devices such as verse repetition and stanzaic refrains, and by shortening the time for performing the epic songs of the peasant carol, what was lost was the immaterial aspect of unconscious constructing, the abysmal pleasure for implied mathematics, was lost one of the essences of the sacred experience, which is 'experiencing the Number'.

Keywords: Romanian folk music, carol, structural variants, mathematical instinct, analytical aesthetics, architectonic potentiality

„Two Stones built two Houses. Three Stones built six Houses. Four Stones built twenty-five Houses. Five Stones built one-hundred-twenty Houses. Six Stones built seven-hundred-twenty Houses. From here on, you go and think on what the mouth cannot tell and the ear cannot hear.”
(Sefer Jesirah)

General presentation

A sung poetic text never looks like a scholarly written poem, i.e., as a succession of different lines or syntagmas. During the singing, verses are repeated, refrains are periodically intermingled, lyrics are broken and prolonged by vowels and pauses, the whole, which is the Song, acquiring new/different dimensions and structures. And these structures, or architectural forms, can be

numerous and various. They are independent both to (poetic) text and tune, are unconceivable by both lyrics and melody (taken separately), have nothing to do with the conscious intention or representation of the singers themselves, and are spontaneously actualized during the singing. Due to such immaterial structuring possibilities, and using only the formal possibilities of the syntagmatic repetition (i.e. the entire verse repetition, and the strophic refrain), in Romanian traditional/folk singing a single poetic text can receive 64 formal treatments/versions. For establishing the existence of these architectural versions I have started from observations such as the one belonging to Bartók, who, at the beginning of the 20th century, noticed that Romanians had the peculiarity of singing the same verse four times. But other observations spoke about three times repetitions of each verse, while in some other circumstances verses are repeated just once. If we logically establish all possible forms of syntagmatic repetitions we eventually obtain this sum of sixty-one more forms, which constitute the equally real and virtual being of each and any folk song. These structures and architectures were very important to the old, traditional/peasant aesthetics, and their actualization was essential especially to ceremonial repertoires such as Winter-Solstice-Songs (carols). During the second half of the 20th century, by giving up devices such as verse repetition and stanzaic refrains, and by shortening the time for performing the epic songs of the peasant carol, what was lost was the immaterial aspect of unconscious constructing, the abysmal pleasure for implied mathematics, was lost one of the essences of the sacred experience, which is – as philosophers put it – *experiencing the Number*.

The last mentioned aspects and meanings are part of a large demonstration already communicated.¹ In the present paper I will focus only on the architectonic variety of the folk song, exposing more of the virtual mathematical combinations of architectural units which are the poetic and musical syntagms.

Explanation

The Romanian noun “colind/colindă”, and the verb “a colinda” as well, refer to a musical genre spread almost all over the traditional-cultural area of Eastern Europe, i.e., to a melopoetical repertoire and calendric custom. The repertoire and custom seem to be best represented, and with the largest complexity preserved, in the Romanian rural tradition; and it is particularly the Romanian repertoire and context that constitute my referential and analytical field.

¹ See Marin Marian Bălașa, *Colinda – epifanie și sacrament* [The winter-solstice-song – Epiphany and Sacrament], București, Editura Minerva, 2000.

The notion *colind/colinda* is sometimes translated by “carol” or “Christmas carol”, but I prefer the translation, *traditional winter-solstice-song*, thereby emphasizing the genre’s specificity.² In the festive context of Christmas celebrations in Eastern Europe the songs sung by itinerant adult groups considerably transcend – by complexity and variety, by composition and performance, as by poetic, musical, formal, and functional aspects as well – the Christmas carols known in the West. As this essay proves, East European carols are pieces of an exquisite composition, complexity and functional archaism. Accordingly, I prefer to separate the subject from children’s seasonal naïve songs and singing, avoiding the term carol, thus referring only to traditional winter-solstice-song and retaining the term *colind/colindă* (for the plural, *colinde*).

The fact that the ceremonial performance of *colinde* remains in practice even in our own times means that their *functional* role and character still survive. Their genre functions not only by virtue of the tradition’s inertia or of the (mostly forgotten) venerability of the pieces’ origin. *Colinde* persist also by virtue of an imperishable *rationale*. Often independent of the subject (the narrative text), of the melody and even of the quality of performance, the *colinda* represents something that communicates and satisfies *now*, whereby I mean *in the very moment of its actualization*. To me, it is particularly this *functioning* reason, or *rationale*, which deserves the name, function.

Demonstration

Here is the numeral figuration of a poem (which, presumably, has eight lines):

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

During the singing, and because of the musical form – which is bipartite, tripartite or quadripartite – the poetic text actually appears as packed in sets of two, three or four lines. Thus, the poetic text acquires the following forms:

1 2, 3 4, 5 6, 7 8

1 2 3, 4 5 6, 7 8...

1 2 3 4, 5 6 7 8

Things would be very simple, if they stayed just like that. Where Romanian folk song is concerned, there is a much more varied structural sense, the sung text appearing under a great variety of expanded versions. Hence, more than

² The version Winter-Solstice-Song was used and promoted also by M. Brătulescu, the author of the first literary typology of Romanian traditional carols. See Monica Brătulescu, *Colinda românească. The Romanian Colinda (Winter-Solstice-Song)*, București, Editura Minerva, 1981.

often, lyrical verses are simply repeated. Consequently, our experimental poem of 8 lines, when sung might appear like:

1 1, 22, 33, 44, 55, 66, 77, 88
1 12, 233, 445, 566, 778

Only that these repetitions are not always rigorously/simplistically implied. For instance, successions such as:

122, 344, 566, 788, or 121, 343, 565, 787,

are equally valid, realistic, thus possibly identifiable in fieldwork, in archival records and in current performance practices. Following the same repetitive pattern, in the case of tetrasyntagmatic forms one can encounter:

1122, 3344, 5566, 7788
1212, 3434, 5656, 7878
1221, 3443, 5665, 7887

If there are simple repetitions of complete verses, there are also double repetitions. Which engenders other – at least virtual – forms:

11, 12, 22, 33, 34, 44, 55, 56, 66, 77, 78, 88
111, 222, 333, 444, 555, 666, 777, 888
1112, 2233, 3444, 5556, 6677, 7888

At the beginning of the 20th century, Béla Bartók noticed that Romanians have the strange particularity of repeating the same verse four times.³ If taking his words literally, it follows – and we must also take into account – the next combinatorial possibilities:

11, 11, 22, 22, 33, 33, 44, 44, 55, 55, 66, 66, 77, 77, 88, 88
111, 122, 223, 333, 444, 455, 556, 666, 777, 788 (88...)
1111, 2222, 3333, 4444, 5555, 6666, 7777, 8888

But in folk melopoetic compositions, I mean within traditional folk songs, one could rarely find such plain structures. For instance, characteristic of folk song is the syntagmatic refrain (noted by “R”), which is a more or less nonsensical formula, having more or less similar metro-rhythmic length as the poetic text and the melodic line do. Therefore, one often meets structures such as:

³ See Béla Bartók, *Cântece populare românești din comitatul Bihor* [Romanian Folk Songs from Bihor County], București, Socec, 1913, p. VII; *Însemnări asupra cântecului popular* [Notes on the Folk Song], București, ESPLA, 1956, p. 145; *Romanian Folk Music II. Vocal Melodies*, Haga, Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p. 30; *Carols and Christmas Songs (Colinde)*, in *Romanian Folk Music IV*, ed. by Benjamin Suchoff, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1975. The possible use of the same verse four times resurged also from earlier observations, such as T. Popovici's assertion that “every line of the text is sung on the entire melody” (Timotei Popovici, *Dicționar de muzică* [Music Dictionary], Nagyszeben, Tipografia lui W. Krafft, 1905, p. 65). As ceremonial tunes can be of three or four lines, it follows that poetic lines are repeated three or four times, too.

1 R, 2 R, 3 R, 4 R, 5 R, 6 R, 7 R, 8 R. Or:
R 1, R 2, R 3, R 4, R 5, R 6, R 7, R 8 And respectively:
1 2 R, 3 4 R, 5 6 R, 7 8 R.
1 R 2, 3 R 4, 5 R 6, 7 R 8
R 1 2, R 3 4, R 5 6, R 7 8

As well as, in four-syntagmas architectures:

1 2 3 R, 4 5 6 R, 7 8 (...) R
1 2 R 3, 4 5 R 6, 7 8 R (...)
1 R 2 3, 4 R 5 6, 7 R 8 (...)
R 1 2 3, R 4 5 6, R 7 8 (...)

Only that it so happens that, in many songs, inside one single stanza, as determined by musical syntagmas, we often meet pieces having two refrains. Melopoetic stanzas made of three and four melodic lines, look, in such cases, like:

1 R R, 2 R R, 3 R R, 4 R R, 5 R R, 6 R R, 7 R R, 8 R R
R 1 R, R 2 R, R 3 R, R 4 R, R 5 R, R 6 R, R 7 R, R 8 R
R R 1, R R 2, R R 3, R R 4, R R 5, R R 6, R R 7, R R 8. And:
1 2 R R, 3 4 R R, 5 6 R R, 7 8 R R.
1 R R 2, 3 R R 4, 5 R R 6, 7 R R 8.
R R 1 2, R R 3 4, R R 5 6, R R 7 8.
R 1 2 R, R 3 4 R, R 5 6 R, R 7 8 R.

Now, if one takes structural formulae which make use of the syntagmatic refrain (refrain covering a full melodic line) and combines them with forms that repeat full poetic lines, there are – in the traditional folk performance – architectural varieties, such as:

1 1 R, 2 2 R, 3 3 R, 4 4 R, 5 5 R, 6 6 R, 7 7 R, 8 8 R
1 R 1, 2 R 2, 3 R 3, 4 R 4, 5 R 5, 6 R 6, 7 R 7, 8 R 8
R 1 1, R 2 2, R 3 3, R 4 4, R 5 5, R 6 6, R 7 7, R 8 8
1 R R, 2 R R, 3 R R, 4 R R, 5 R R, 6 R R, 7 R R, 8 R R
R 1 R, R 2 R, R 3 R, R 4 R, R 5 R, R 6 R, R 7 R, R 8 R
R R 1, R R 2, R R 3, R R 4, R R 5, R R 6, R R 7, R R 8
1 1 R R, 2 2 R R, 3 3 R R, 4 4 R R, 5 5 R R, 6 6 R R, 7 7 R R, 8 8 R R
1 R R 1, 2 R R 2, 3 R R 3, 4 R R 4, 5 R R 5, 6 R R 6, 7 R R 7, 8 R R 8
R R 1 1, R R 2 2, R R 3 3, R R 4 4, R R 5 5, R R 6 6, R R 7 7, R R 8 8
R 1 1 R, R 2 2 R, R 3 3 R, R 4 4 R, R 5 5 R, R 6 6 R, R 7 7 R, R 8 8 R
1 R 1 R, 2 R 2 R, 3 R 3 R, 4 R 4 R, 5 R 5 R, 6 R 6 R, 7 R 7 R, 8 R 8 R
1 1 1 R, 2 2 2 R, 3 3 3 R, 4 4 4 R, 5 5 5 R, 6 6 6 R, 7 7 7 R, 8 8 8 R
1 1 R 1, 2 2 R 2, 3 3 R 3, 4 4 R 4, 5 5 R 5, 6 6 R 6, 7 7 R 7, 8 8 R 8
1 R 1 1, 2 R 2 2, 3 R 3 3, 4 R 4 4, 5 R 5 5, 6 R 6 6, 7 R 7 7, 8 R 8 8
R 1 1 1, R 2 2 2, R 3 3 3, R 4 4 4, R 5 5 5, R 6 6 6, R 7 7 7, R 8 8 8

1 RRR, 2 RRR, 3 RRR, 4 RRR, 5 RRR, 6 RRR, 7 RRR, 8 RRR
 R 1 RR, R 2 RR, R 3 RR, R 4 RR, R 5 RR, R 6 RR, R 7 RR, R 8 RR
 RR 1 R, RR 2 R, RR 3 R, RR 4 R, RR 5 R, RR 6 R, RR 7 R, RR 8 R
 RRR 1, RRR 2, RRR 3, RRR 4, RRR 5, RRR 6, RRR 7, RRR 8

In the Romanian, earlier ethnomusicological literature only ten of such possibilities were usually mentioned. This number must be expanded, by including the rest of all possible arrangements. As for a final account, we should register that in a melody formed by two melodic syntagmas (lines) the lyrics could be ordered in six different architectonic arrangements; in a trisyntagmatic tune there are fourteen more other possibilities; while a quadrisyntagmatic melody theoretically offers thirty-seven additional formal versions.

Real, unreal, possible, virtual

Undoubtedly, many of these forms listed above are unrealistic, in the sense that they could hardly – if ever – be found in reality, I mean in the “field” of folk performance. Some might not be found, but many others, not listed herein, surely are. I refer to the mixed, or hybrid forms, which during the performance of one single melopoetic piece combine different reiterative patterns. In the arithmetical representations listed above I have just followed the logic development of reiterative forms, because my purpose was also to illustrate the structuring *virtual* possibilities. Which of the forms are implied in each particular – local, regional, linguistic, national, repertorial, or individual – case, this is a matter of specificity, and perhaps each piece, notional and musical language, ethnic group, temporal period, and geoculture, has its own sets of architectural expressions.

In past times, folklorists were deeply and enthusiastically involved in identifying features that could support and illustrate ethnic and regional specificities. Such a purpose for research is no more in fashion, today, myself I am not pleading for its revival, but I am only observing that the comparative domain, as well as the huge national and nationalist trend, simply passed by and never noticed the *architectural repetition* I am analyzing here. Such outdated researchers would have taken greater benefits – provided they would have observed and systematized the kinds of reiterative formulae which were crystallized and employed by each particular people, genre, geoculture, or piece.

My stress is that the entire architectural variability expressed by the different reiterative patterns, which are known by a song own to (a) local patterning, i.e., well-established tradition, as well as to (b) circulation – represents the real Being of a melopoetic entity, of a song. The fact that a song is represented by the multitude of its versions, and that each rendering of a song commits a new

(variant-like) version – is already classic, set, and well-known. But to the materialistic positivism of the traditional folkloristics I must add now the holistic true that, actually, the real being of a song is given not only by its actual renderings, but also by its potential, virtual forms.

Redefining the aesthetic content of music

Traditionally, scholars have divided or identified the content of a song as being made out of music and (poetic/discursive) text. To me this empiric/positivist/materialistic perspective and definition is satisfactory no more. There is also a third, immaterial element, equally consistent, moreover, essential, which intervenes in order to compose the real being of a song. It is, perhaps, this very spirit, appetite, instinct, or sense for construction, for elaborating with and managing of time units – which are the melopoetic lines (here-called syntagmas).

At the level of consciousness, we have the sonic experience and the poetic discourse. Besides that, there is the formalizing/architectural process, which is a form of ceremonializing, of setting in an augmented time the sonic and poetic units and ensemble. This dimension belongs and addresses itself no more to the consciousness, but rather to the subconsciousness. At this level of the reality, the sonic + poetic body, divided and processualized by repetitive time units, dominated by the subconscious spirit of architectural building, achieves itself as a work of art, and functions as sacred experience.

Redefining the aesthetic sense of music

Definitely, some of the last statements place us in a deep philosophical discussion. In fact, with such outlook and approach we *are* in the subtle field or in the core of philosophical understanding. In this light, one should assume that the final meaning of a song, of its performance, is to establish this immaterial realm of diversely chaining/constructing with temporal patterns which are the melopoetic syntagmas.

The fact that the hugest variety and availability of the architectural spirit is best implied in and illustrated by the traditional genre and repertoire of *colinde* (traditional winter-solstice-songs), is highly revealing. The act of performing the traditional winter-solstice-songs has a hierophanic and sacramental function, this being also the ultimate reason, sense, use and meaning of the *colinda*'s "materialization".

Aestheticians have often observed that one of the motives and, therefore, one of the primary functions of creation – of the act of creation – is the very assessment, mani-

festation or expression of an instinct for proportion, of a construction of logical, mathematical coherence, of a *constructive sense*. In fact, it has always been recognized that the artistic substance's essence and meaning does not consist of and does not aim at the sensitive matter, the concrete product, of material immediacy, but of an 'ideal', formal principle.

Besides the affect's and the intellect's satisfaction accomplished by the sung rendition and communication of a poetical text, the spirit is satisfied as well by the mathematical reality of formalizing, and by the (formalized) harmony of certain symmetries, ratios, and rhythmically stressed temporal intervals, or by the harmony in certain periods and proportions. The old belief in the power of numbers and quantitative accumulation is exhilarated in itself by the psychological effect of intuitive understanding of the natural or construction-incorporated ratios, proportions and geometries. *A melopoetic discourse, and especially that like folk singing, (re)constituted and expressed with the aid of the formal reiterative devices and techniques, offers a lavish possibility for experiencing certain periodicities and proportions, and, finally, the Number.*⁴

Conclusion

I opened the present article with a hermetic quotation. That was suggesting that the combinatorial possibilities of a building system create a function and meaning beyond the reach of senses, yet subtle and essential to the human spirituality. Then I displayed the systematic potentiality of the architectural versions one single poetic text can register when processed by the stanzaic forms of folk music. The ultimate knowledge we have to extract from this demonstration is that the spiritual, aesthetic, and sacramental functions of such highly structured forms (such as those played by the Romanian *colinde* singing) rely also on such immaterial, combinatorial/mathematical potentialities. Definitely, this constructivist spirit – untalked about, ungrasped by the ordinary audition, but spontaneously actualized during the performance – is one of the most important meaning, function, and incorporated sacredness that ceremonial songs such as the *colinde* set in motion, make real, provide.

⁴ Marian Bălașa, *Colinda...* (cf. note 1), pp. 25, 91, 217–218.