

# The *Aksak* Rhythm, a Distinctive Feature of the Balkan Folklore

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**Abstract:** The asymmetrical *aksak* rhythm represents one of the distinctive and most vital features of the musical traditions on the Balkans. This rhythm system has almost been unknown. Owing to inadequate transcriptions of most of the musical notations of the vocal and instrumental music from the beginning of the 20th century, it was hardly possible to perceive the presence of this asymmetric rhythm in the Balkan area. My intention is, on the basis of the available literatures and musical notations, to point out the most frequent forms and the distribution of the *aksak* rhythm, its earliest appearances in the works of composed music, as well as the continuity and changes of this rhythm in the vocal and instrumental tradition of the Balkan peoples.

**Keywords:** aksak rhythm, folk music, musical tradition of the Balkan region

The “primitive”, “exotic”, “peasant”, “non-European music”, as folk music was called in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was not a subject of serious scholarly research until the first decades of the last century. Yet composers and musicologists were not indifferent to the specific features of traditional music, especially to the rhythms of Bulgarian folk music, so, Béla Bartók has, in one of his papers, pointed out (Bartók 1966: 505):

When one of our famous musical researchers heard tunes with Bulgarian rhythm for the first time, he shouted: Are all the Bulgarians lame, their songs having these limping lame rhythms? That may sound as a joke, but if we wish to explain this phenomenon from a psychological aspect, the remark is not acceptable.

Indeed, at that time, the Bulgarian rhythm seemed to be a real wonder. The prominent scholar Curt Sachs spoke in a report about “the supercomplicated rhythms in Bulgaria” (Sachs 1936: 24), and Bartók about a “hyper-Bulgarian-rhythm” (Bartók 1966: 502). If we add to this statement that Bartók wrote in his studies about the newly-discovered “so-called Bulgarian rhythm” it is understandable that this name resounded intensely throughout Europe (Brăiloiu 1967: 238).

In spite of the fact that the Hellenistic philosopher and music theorist Aristoxenos discussed the elements of this rhythm naming it *choreios alogos*,

e.g. ‘illogical trochee’ as early as in the 4th century B.C. (Rădulescu 1972: 186), this asymmetric rhythm was not discovered before the beginning of the 20th century in Bulgaria, thanks to the suggestive studies by the Bulgarian experts Dobri Hristov (1913) and Vasil Stoin (1927) who spotlighted the phenomenon and drew the attention of both to the musicological, ethnomusicological sciences, and the world of serious music.

Owing to inadequate transcriptions of most of the musical notations of the vocal and instrumental music from early 20th century, it was hardly possible to perceive the presence of this asymmetric rhythm in the Balkan region. Therefore, the ethnomusicological results of this paper are based primarily on the records and transcribed musical-folkloristic material dating from the second half of the 20th century. But, regardless of that or other difficulties, the musical material available has enabled me to ascertain the presence and different forms of the *aksak* rhythm in the Balkans. Along this guideline, my intention is to point out, on the basis of available literatures and musical notations the most frequent forms and the distribution of the *aksak* rhythm, its earliest appearances in the works of art music, as well as the continuity and changes of this rhythm in the vocal and instrumental tradition of the Balkan peoples.

Brăiloiu was engaged in research on this rhythm; in his well-known study “Le rythme aksak” (1952), he pointed out the following (Brăiloiu 1967: 238):

Although Bulgarian musicologists were the first to describe, or, rather, to perceive this rhythm – we know today with certainty that it exists in Turkey, Greece, Albania, Romania, Yugoslavia, with the Turkmens, Armenians, Berbers / Tuaregs, Beduins, black peoples of Africa, the Basques and in Switzerland”.<sup>1</sup>

He also considered the term “so-called Bulgarian rhythm” inadequate and changed it, upon an agreement with the prominent connoisseur of the Turkish music Adnam Saygun, into the Turkish name “*aksak*” meaning literally “lame” (Holý 1972: 5). Had Bartók been alive at the time, he would have learned that not only the Bulgarians, the Romanians, the Turks, and to some degree the Hungarians keep limping, but many other nations worldwide as well.

What makes the *aksak* rhythm different from the classical/distributive rhythm is its fundamental asymmetry reflected in the invariable use of two duration units – a long one and a short one – instead of one unit only. As Brăiloiu further explains, between those two units there is an ‘illogical’ arithmetic relation (2:3 or 3:2) which attaches that ‘lame’ or ‘stumbling’ characteristic to the tunes in *aksak*, thus justifying the name itself (Brăiloiu 1967: 243–244).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brăiloiu claims that numerous Latin American dances are also founded on the *aksak* rhythm.

<sup>2</sup> In the last time we can observe the other relation between two duration units e. g. 4:3, in the tunes based on 10/16 measure with schema: 4+3+3. See example 1.

On the basis of about 6.000 analysed musical notations written down in the Balkans,<sup>3</sup> I have managed to find some identical, but also some different forms of aksak rhythm – an impressive treasury of asymmetric rhythms: from simplest ones, via the compound (*Figure 1*), up to combined various forms of the asymmetric *aksak* rhythms within a single song (Ex. 11) or folk tune.<sup>4</sup> The presentations and explanations of them would take more place and time than now available. For that reason this paper will focus on two most frequently used forms of aksak rhythm which have been identified in the Balkan folklore: a) the dactylic form ♩ ♩ ♩, in which the prolonged unit is at the beginning of the rhythmic pattern b) the anapestic form ♩ ♩ ♩, in which the prolonged unites at the end.

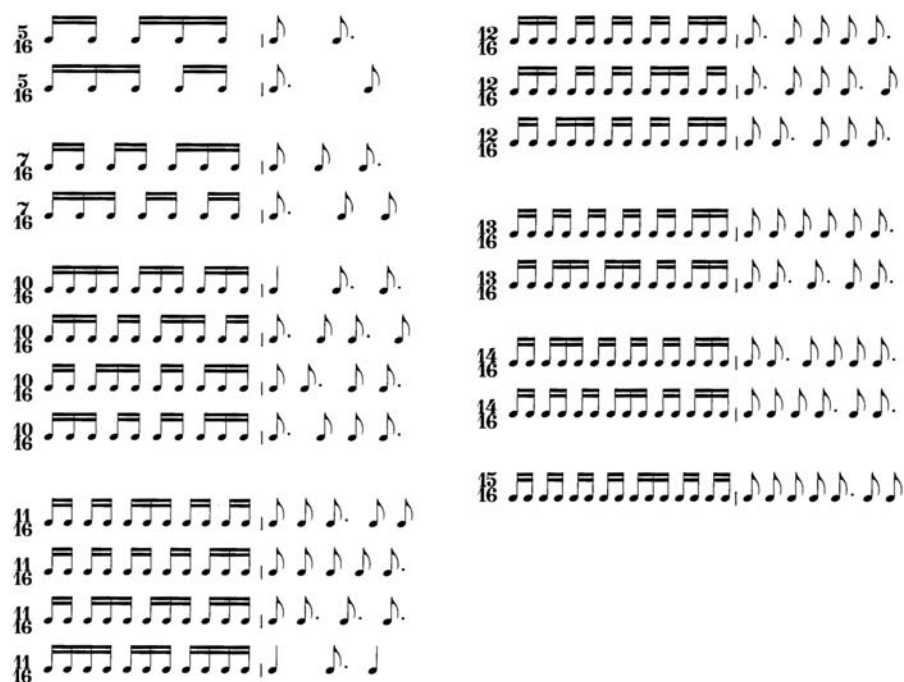


Figure 1

<sup>3</sup> Owing to the fact that the ethnomusicologists on the region of the Balkan have paid a much less attention to the instrumental tradition, the greatest number of the analysed musical notations belong to the vocal tradition.

<sup>4</sup> There are various combinations of aksak forms in one song or tunes e.g. 7/16 (2+2+3) + 11/16 (2+2+2+2+3); 11/16 (2+2+2+2+3) + 5/16 (2+3) + 5/16 (2+3); 7/16 (2+2+3) + 9/16 (2+2+2+3) + 9/16 (2+2+2+3) + 9/16 (2+2+2+3). More about such combinations of aksak rhythms see: Dshidshev 1978:256–257.

### The most frequent forms and the distribution of the *aksak* rhythm

I *The dactylic form* of the *aksak* rhythm (3+2+2), which appears in the ethnomusicological transcriptions as 7/8, 7/16, but rarely 7/4, I have identified in the folklore of several Balkan nations starting from the phonographic recordings of Bartók, through various melographic notations, up to the present appearance of this rhythm in the performances by the contemporary amateurs as well as by professional singers and musicians.

At the time when musical experts transcribed down folk tunes of the Balkan region after their hearing, or, better to say, from the performers directly, Bartók recorded first the folk material by phonograph and later, with the help of this recording, which he could make “half slower for listening and studying it” (Bartók 1966: 503), he transcribed the tunes with the most precise ornaments, which was then a true rarity (Фрациле 1995: 53). However, speaking about the melodies in *aksak* rhythm, Bartók said (Bartók 1966: 502):

In my old notations by the phonograph there were such dances which I self-confidently noted as 4/4 measure with equal quarter-notes – but in fact I was not completely sure because I added such a remark: “the ends of the measure are prolonged in a Gipsy way”... Afterwards, I corrected my old phonograph notations and perceived that in the Romanian material 5% of the tunes were performed in the Bulgarian rhythm, too.

Among the Romanian tunes which Bartók noted down by phonograph in Banat, in 1912 (today, this region belongs to Vojvodina, Yugoslavia), I have found one dancing melody in which the ‘prolonged in a Gipsy way’ is the first unit – the dactylic form of the *aksak* rhythm (*Example 1*).<sup>5</sup>

This dactylic form of *aksak* rhythm is often found in both the vocal and the instrumental traditions of Vojvodina’s Romanians (Фрациле 1996: 145–155): in the folk dance tunes which belong to certain customs e. g. *Cără-bășește*, *Brâul rădușelor*, in the dancing songs which are usually based on the melodic types of pair couple dances e. g. *Ardeleană*, *De doi*, and in the tunes of folk dances performed at customary village dancing parties e. g. *Pră loc*, *Dă mână*, *Ardeleană*, *De doi*, *Fecioreasca* (Фрациле 1994: 39) (*Example 2*).

In the folk music of the Romanians from Romania, the dactylic form of *aksak* rhythm also appears very often, especially in Banat, South Transilvania and Western Oltenia – three folklore regions which lie along the borders of Ro-

<sup>5</sup> In December (21–31) 1912, Bartók made his phonographic recordings of Romanian folk songs and tunes in four Romanian-settled villages of Banat (nowadays in Vojvodina): Uzdin, Alibunar, Vladimirovac and Seleuș. From that corpus, Bartók transcribed 89 musical examples. The number of recordings is evidently greater than the number of note transcriptions. So far, I have not ascertained with accuracy how many of Bartók recordings were produced in the said four towns. For more, see Фрациле 1995: 53–76.



Example 1: "Pre loc". Recorded by B. Bartók. Transcribed by N. Fracile, 1994.  
F. MH 1971. Orig. Seleuș, 1912. Musician: "old gipsy man" (violin)

mania with Yugoslavia and Hungary. It has been noted down in several Romanian ritual songs rain-invoking ones, carols, as well as in many Romanian dance tunes: *Brăul bănățean*, *Purtata*, *Ardeleană*, *Pe loc*.<sup>6</sup>

One of the relevant characteristics of the Macedonian folk music represents, before all, the riches and variety of asymmetric rhythms. It is interesting to point out that in the collection of Миодраг А. Васиљјевић, from the total of 400 noted Macedonian songs, even one fifth is based on 7/8 measure with the structure of 3+2+2 (Васиљјевић 1953: XXXI, LXXIII–LXXIV). Although there does appear the anapestic form of the *aksak* rhythm, the dactylic form is typical of the vocal and instrumental tradition of Macedonia. The conclusion is based on the frequency of this rhythm in different folklore genres: dances with singing, love and wedding songs, harvesters, shepherds', patriotic songs,

<sup>6</sup> This rhythm is present as well as in other Romanian dances: *Măruntelul*, *Pe picior*, *Poșovaica*. More about it see: Фрациле, 1994:38.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "De doi". The score is written for a flute and consists of ten staves of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 16/6. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 384. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and is decorated with numerous ornaments such as trills (tr), grace notes (gr), and slurs. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

Example 2: “De doi”. Recorded and transcribed by N. Fracile. Mg. VI/A11. Orig. Sočica, 9 January 1977. Musician: Petru Kršovan, 74 years old (flute)

humorous (merrymakers’), children’s songs with dancing, as well as in the instrumental tradition, especially in the tunes from the family of dances called “*Oro*” (Цимревски 1996: 196; Цимревски 1985: 417) (*Example 3*).

In Greek folk music, the dactylic form of aksak rhythm is characteristic for the folk dances of *Kopanistos* and *Kalamatiano* families. But it also often appears in the vocal tradition as well as in the songs with dancing (*Example 4*).

In certain folk zones of Serbia, both forms of the aksak rhythm are found only in several examples, primarily near the frontier with Macedonia and Bulgaria (*Example 5*). An exception is the vocal musical tradition of Kosovo-Metohia, where the dactylic form has been registered in 26 songs from a total of 400 included in the collection of Миодраг А. Васиљјевић (1950: 21, 92, 100). This form of *aksak* rhythm (7/8) is present in almost all folkloric genres of this area: love songs, migrant workers’ songs, lullabies, family songs, patri-



♩ = 364

O.F.

Example 3: «Ситно оро»/bagpipes/ (Цимревски, 1996, p. 450, ex. 62)

to vle - pis ki - no to vu -  
no to pi - o psi - ta (a-) po  
ta - la pu'hi an - da a - ri an - da  
ri - tsa sting gor fi a - man pu'  
hi an - da a - ri an - da  
ri tsa sting gor - fi

Example 4: “Kalamatiano” (Manuel, 1989, p. 81, ex. 3)



Example 5: «Рипалъка» (Девић, 1990, p. 228, ex. 158)

otic songs, and some ritual songs. All this indicates a very strong relation with the Macedonian folk music (Фрациле 1994: 40).

A three-part measure with *hemiole* on the first place 3+2+2, as the dactylic form is also called, is the most frequent asymmetric form of the *aksak* rhythm in the tradition of the Albanians from Kosovo-Metohia (Example 6) (Lorenc 1971: 27). It often appears in Albania, too, in the melodies of folk dances, as well as in the songs of earlier older and more recent layers. Some rare ones have been registered in the traditions of the Albanians from Albania, when the *hemiole* comes at the end of the rhythmical form with the structure of 2+2+3.<sup>7</sup>

II The *anapestic form* of *aksak* rhythm which appears in the musical nota-



Example 6: "Lula jonë" (Lorenc, 1971, p. 28)

tions as 7/8 or 7/16 is well-spread and frequent in the musical tradition of Bulgaria. It is noted down in *lazarice*<sup>8</sup> (Манолов 1976: 14, 48) and carols (Джиджев 1981: 129), in the songs with dancing, but especially in the musical-choreographic repertoire: e.g. in the melodies of the rich family of folk

<sup>7</sup> The performing tempo of the Albanian traditional melodies is, in general, slower than the Macedonian and Bulgarian tunes in this rhythm (Lorenc 1971:28).

<sup>8</sup> *Lazarice*, songs of the custom practiced on the Holy Saturday, their name referring to Lazarus raised from the dead by Jesus.



dances called *Рченица*, *Повърнато хоро*, *На плешене*, *Пешачка*, *Посеница*, *Посадник*, *Чепница* (Example 7).<sup>9</sup>



Example 7: «Чамчето» (Тодоров, 1976, pp. 49–50, ex. 97)

The traditional music of Turkey is outstanding in abundance of asymmetrical rhythms. They are still present in vocal traditional music and in a certain number of folk dances, e.g. *Laziko*, *Serra*, *Letsina*, *Ikosi ena*, *Horon* (Rădulescu 1972: 38, 55, 77). Although there appears the anapestic form, in the diversity of asymmetrical rhythms, the dactylic form of aksak rhythm takes a special place (Example 8).

In Romania, the anapestic form of aksak rhythm is spread in Dobrogea, Muntenia, Moldova and the eastern part of Oltenia. It is found in some wedding songs, rain-songs, in dancing tunes with masks (Oprea, Agapie 1983: 87, 89), but especially in the melodies of folk dances e. g. *Brîul şchiop*, *Marama*, *Maşamaua*, *Căţeaua*, *Pandelaşul* (Georgescu 1984: 573, 575–576, 580–582). The folk dance *Geamparalele* is very popular in Romania and it is almost always performed with the same rhythmical structure. One could say that this

<sup>9</sup> More about metro-rhythmical structure in the Bulgarian folk music see: Dshidshev 1978: 245–261.

DEVR-I HINDI §

Der di min ni der ri mâ ni sen  
sin ni yâ Mu ham med Mus ta fa  
yâ re sâ lai lât  
Gön lu mün nû sul lu tâ ni sen  
sin ni yâ Mu ham med Mus ta fa  
yâ Re sâ lai lah

Example 8: “Segâh” (Üngör, 1999, p. 133)

dance is something of a “synonym” of the anapestic form of aksak rhythm (*Example 9*). The brilliant Serbian flute-artist Bora Dugić plays this dance with perfect skill and artistic glamour, accompanied by the Folk Orchestra of Radio-Television Novi Sad.<sup>10</sup>

Example 9: “Geamparalele” (Georgescu, 1984, p. 577, ex. 536)

<sup>10</sup> This melody is on the CD of Bora Dugić, *The Allures of the Rumanian Folklore*, 16, 21.

As to the use of the aksak rhythm in the works of art music, Brăiloiu states that this rhythm penetrated the world of that sort of Occidental music owing to the Fifth String Quartet by Bartók (1934) and in “Mikrokosmos”, VI (1926–1939) (Brăiloiu 1967: 238). In these compositions Bartók used Bulgarian tunes based on various measures, e. g. 9/8 (4+2+2), 7/8 (2+2+3), 5/8 (2+3) of this asymmetric rhythmical system. Having analysed a number of classical pieces by Yugoslav composers, I came to the conclusion that this rhythm had been used in art music much earlier, in 1911 when the opera «Кнез Иво од Семберије» [*Prince Ivo of Semberia*] by the Serbian composer Исидор Бајић came into being (*Example 10*). The author used the tune of the well-known dance called Чочек, based on the asymmetric rhythm of 9/8 (2+2+2+3).<sup>11</sup>



Example 10: «Чочек» (Исидор Бајић, 1911), Кнез Иво од Семберије, Score for violin I

Searching for the *aksak* rhythm, I found that as early as in 1892, the Serbian composer Стеван Мокрањцац perceived and noted down very correctly two forms of this rhythm. This was in the song of Хајдук Вељко (*Example 11*), *VI руковет, Из моје домовине* (“Hajduk Veljko”, the 6th Wreath of Songs, “From My Homeland”), which follows two alternative asymmetrical rhythmical patterns 5/8 (2+3) + 7/8 (2+2+3).

My further ethnomusicological researches led me to the discovery that the Croatian composer and ethnomusicologist Franjo Kuhač registered folk songs in asymmetrical rhythms (7/4; 5/4; 7/4 + 5/4), across the former Yugoslavia, even earlier—in 1878 (Фрациле 1994: 46).

It is well-known, that in the traditional music of not only the Balkans (under the influence of mass-media as well as various musical events), there has of recently been a tendency to speed up the performing tempo in both vocal and in-

<sup>11</sup> И. Бајић, at the beginning of 20th century, perceived quite well the pulse of this rhythm, but instead of 9/8 measure at the beginning of the tune Чочек, he wrote two measures: “3/4 3/8” (Фрациле 1994: 45, 56).

Andantino

*f* Knji-gu pi-še Mu-la pa-ša,

Haј, haј! *mf* pa gu ša-lje

*itd.*

u Ne-go-tin,

Example 11: «Хајдук Вељко» (Стеван Ст. Мокрањац, VI Руковет, Из моје домовине, Хајдук Вељко, tenor voice)

strumental music. We have in mind the leaders/managers of folk ensembles who often, because of the competitive spirit haunting all sorts of musical events go astray from the genuine tradition. And this is one of the reasons why the aksak rhythm is changing into the distributive one ( $4+3 = 4+4$ ), although thus far not to many such examples have been registered; some ethnomusicologists think that this process has been slowing down (Georgescu 1984: 86).

*Conclusion.* The available literature, musical notations, and rather scarce topical studies allow for the conclusion that research work dealing with asymmetrical rhythm in the Balkan region has proved useful yet inadequate if we bear in mind its richness and diversity in both vocal and instrumental traditions. In some countries great attention is given to studies of this rhythm, in others very little. In some countries it was discovered rather early, in others much later. The situation has influenced the results of this paper which is aimed primarily to underline strong historical cultural communication among Balkan peoples by way of the dactylic and anapestic forms of aksak rhythm, and to stress the necessity of further ethnomusicological research on this “supercomplicated rhythm” which, as Bartók said: “the composers have not just taken out of their pockets”, “neither have they sucked this headache out of their fingers”. These are natural rhythms which trouble the minds of to educated musicians (some even to professionals), but they are very close to those who have grown up with them.

Even today, aksak is one of the most striking and, at the same time, the most vital forms of the musical traditions in the Balkans. We are fortunate that we can feel the pulse of the antique and of the Balkan up to date in the similar or even identical metro-rhythmical forms of the aksak rhythm which as a long red stripe binds the musical creativity of all nations in this part of Europe. Further researching will show whether the nest of the aksak rhythm is within the spiritual area of the Balkans or in some other regions of the world.

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