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5 CREATIVITY IN PERFORMANCE: WORDS AND MUSIC IN BALKAN AND OLD FRENCH EPIC

Margaret H. Beissinger

Oral epic has aptly been termed “story in song.”¹ Indeed, it is the *story*, not the song, which takes precedence in performance; singers of epic seek to tell good *stories*, not necessarily to sing pleasing songs. Yet music plays a fundamental role in epic. Without music, the words of epic would lack metrics and rhythm. Music elevates speech out of the quotidian and into the artistic and mythic; it heightens and empowers the messages that it conveys. At the same time, the music of oral epic has often been perceived as quite monotonous. In the Old French *chansons de geste* and in Serbo-Croatian oral epic, for example, we know that the music was repetitive and even at times tedious. Cecil M. Bowra expressed this viewpoint in the following way: “heroic poetry always seems to be chanted, usually to some simple stringed instrument The music to which poems are sung is usually not a real or regular tune but a monotonous chant in which the bard often keeps whole lines on a single note. Such indeed is said to be the regular practice in Albania, and the heroic Yugoslav chants recorded by Milman Parry are monotonous and lacking in melody Among famous Russian bards the elder Ryabinin knew only two tunes.”² As the ethnomusicologist Fritz Bose pointed out, “the melodies of folk epic are . . . comparatively simple. The singer’s intellectual energy is largely engaged in molding the text; he has little strength left for the deployment of a copious musical scheme. The tunes comprise simple, short strophes constructed of few but pithy motives.”³

In this article, I explore the nature of music in the Romanian oral epic. Do Romanian epic singers — like those of the Old French and Serbo-Croatian genres — likewise tend toward “monotonous” (or, perhaps more appropriately, repetitious) music as they focus instead on the words that tell their stories? What is the nature of this music? What types of creativity do singers engage in as they perform? And, when and why is musical creativity employed? I maintain that, like the performers of many other oral epic traditions, Romanian singers concentrate on the words —

¹Lord 1960, 99.

²Bowra 1952, 38-39.

³Bose 1958, 30.

not the music — of their songs, and for this, they produce a relatively secure and constant musical framework. I examine what “musical monotony” means in the Romanian context. But I also suggest that epic singers — especially those who are highly-skilled — periodically subvert the routine of their musical performances by generating variation in the music as they create and recreate the melodic passages of their songs. Finally, I argue that the “when and why” of the creativity that singers effect in the music is determined largely by the verbal content. Accomplished singers are directed by the words — by the poetics and narrative significance of the verses of the stories they tell. For these singers, the music responds to the patterns created through the poetics and narrative content of the words.

The Role of Music in Epic

As Albert Lord pointed out in *The Singer of Tales*, the study of epic verse begins with “a consideration of metrics and music.”⁴ The utilitarian function of music in epic is fundamental. It is music that provides the framework within which the narrative in verse is told; it furnishes the rhythmic backdrop for the composition of poetry in performance. But music also serves other purposes in the performance of epic; its aesthetic and emotive role is similarly central. Bose wrote that the fact that oral epic “is not recited, but sung, heightens the artistic and educational value for the listener.”⁵ Music places speech (unmarked) in the realm of song (marked). Gregory Nagy has noted that song is “special or marked language that is set off from speech,” while speech is “everyday or unmarked language.”⁶ Song, in the context of oral tradition, is poetry enhanced by rhythm and melody. As Dan Ben-Amos has noted, “common to all poetic expression . . . is the deliberate deviation from everyday speech, and with it the departure from the profane The delivery of [narrative] in a metric form” — and here I would clarify *in song* —

⁴Lord 1960, 31. Speaking of the young South Slavic singer assimilating and mastering the art of epic singing, Lord noted that “from meter and music he absorbs in his earliest years the rhythms of epic, even as he absorbs the rhythms of speech itself,” and that “basic patterns of meter, word boundary, melody have become his possession, and in him the tradition begins to reproduce itself” (32).

⁵Bose 1958, 29.

⁶Nagy 1991, 216. If we understand song as the stylized patterning of rhythm and melody, then their synchronization in effect results in what Nagy calls “a scheme where both rhythm and melody in song could be viewed as regularized outgrowths of speech that serve eventually to distinguish song from speech” (224-25). He notes further that from a functional point of view, “song would be any speech-act that is *considered* to be set apart for a special context” (216).

“indicates an intent to affect the audience emotionally.”⁷ Music thus enhances speech, engendering rhythmic and melodic messages of special artistic and emotive force. Finally, I would suggest that musical “monotony” and repetition also perhaps ultimately relate to ancient ritual contexts and meanings. Ben-Amos has written that “the usage of metric prosody can have a wide range of significance, varying from religious sanctions to magical power to mere play, each depending on the circumstances of delivery.”⁸ Epic — reaching as it does into the depths of ancient myth — is, in a sense, religious, imparting messages of profound cultural importance. Stephen Erdely observes that “the principles underlying the relation of text and music go back to times when mythic events and wonder working tales were part of ritualistic ceremonies, and reciting them in song form contributed to their effectiveness.”⁹ Indeed, as J. A. Westrup has pointed out, the “constant repetition” in the music of the Old French epic “has something of the character of primitive incantation, a form of magic.”¹⁰ Or, as Lord put it, it appears “likely that the story sung in verse had a magical purpose and was in some way connected with ritual. Such an origin would explain the pervasiveness of repetition of sounds . . . for such . . . characteristics are essential to the effectiveness of incantations.”¹¹

Even as music furnishes the requisite stable metrical framework and aesthetic conditions for the performance of narrative poetry, however, it also creates a formidable challenge for the singer.¹² Bose pointed out that music “imposes a considerable burden upon the performer. For poetry and music have each their own laws of formation, and thus every form of collaboration between word and sound, between poetry and music, is a kind of compromise.”¹³ The “simple” (in Bose’s words; others have said “monotonous” and “repetitive”) nature of epic music is, in a sense, a functional response to this dilemma; diminishing the “burden” of the singer’s task facilitates performance.¹⁴

⁷Ben-Amos 1976, 229. Ben-Amos suggests that “the metrical substructure . . . serves as the definitive [poetic] feature” (228) and that this “metric speech constitutes an ontological system objectively distinct from prose” (230). He asserts that “the very existence or absence of a metric substructure in the verbal message can signify the conception the society has of a particular theme or can provide clues to the narrator’s intent” (228).

⁸Ben-Amos 1976, 229.

⁹Erdely 1995, 632.

¹⁰Westrup 1954, 223.

¹¹Lord 1974, 542. Though Lord spoke here explicitly of the *words* of oral epic, there is no doubt that the “pervasiveness of repetitions of sound” in the *music* also provided an ancient vehicle for the perpetuation of prayer, incantation, and magic.

¹²I have discussed this with regard to Romanian oral epic in *The Art of the Lăutar*, see Beissinger 1991, Chapter 6.

¹³Bose 1958, 29.

¹⁴As Bowra noted, “heroic poetry puts the words first and subordinates the music to them. What it uses is really no more than recitative. To use a regular tune like that of a song would

The Music of Old French and Serbo-Croatian Epic

The Old French *chansons de geste* and Serbo-Croatian epic songs (*junačke pesme*) are well-known examples of traditional narrative poetry, both firmly in the “oral epic canon.” Yet, it is frequently recognized that the music of both genres was repetitious and even at times tedious.

The Old French *chansons de geste* were the great epic poems of medieval France performed by *jongleurs* in the vernacular as entertainment from roughly the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. The heroic *Chanson de Roland*, the most celebrated example of this genre, was probably composed in the latter eleventh century. Three main cycles and numerous texts of these *chansons* remain for posterity. They typically were sung in segments of poetry — variable in terms of length — termed “*laissez*.” The poetic line was customarily decasyllabic; final assonance often united either entire *laissez* or portions of them. As for the music to which the *chansons* were sung, only one fragment survives. It is a melody which was included in a late thirteenth-century pastoral play.¹⁵ It is a simple tune which spans only a fourth. In addition to this fragment, Johannes de Grocheo, a scholar writing around 1300, authored a valuable account of medieval secular music which helps to piece together (to some extent) how the *chansons de geste* were performed. He wrote: “The number of lines in a *chanson de geste* is not fixed, but can be extended according to the amount of subject-matter available and the inclination of the author. The same tune should be repeated for all lines.”¹⁶ Thus, as Gustave Reese notes, the music of the *chansons de geste* “appears to have consisted of a brief snatch of a melody, which usually had one note to a syllable, and which was repeated over and over.” He goes on to point out that “it was easy to fit the lines to the music since they were of equal length throughout.”¹⁷

In other words, the same short, simple melodic formulas apparently were sung over and over throughout the performance of the *chanson de geste*. Indeed, as Reese comments, “the scarcity of the material that

have made the task of heroic poets much more difficult and have interfered with the clear presentation of the tales which they have to tell” (Bowra 1952, 39).

¹⁵The melody is found in Adam de Halle’s *Le Jeu de Robin et Marion* (see Reese 1940, 204, 213). Elsewhere it has been suggested that the melody is possibly from the epic *Girart de Roussillon* (see Page 1986, 129 [includes melodic example]). It is actually a type of parody of the Old French epic but is considered a representative model of the music (see Wooldridge 1932, 262). Wooldridge also points out the existence of another extant *chanson de geste* melody for Thomas de Bailleul’s *Bataille d’Annezin* (262). On the music of the *chanson de geste*, see further the chapter by John Stevens in this volume.

¹⁶Quoted in Wooldridge 1932, 259-60. See also Reese 1940, 204, and Westrup 1954, 223.

¹⁷Reese 1940, 203. An alternative interpretation is furnished by Ian R. Parker, who claims that “the reiteration of the melodic formula is true of each *laisse* but not of the poem as a whole” (see Parker 1980, 146).

remains [on the music of the *chansons de geste*] is not surprising. Probably very little was ever written down. Notated copies could seldom have been needed as reminders: the short tunes, constantly repeated, would scarcely have taxed the memories of professional performers.”¹⁸ Assessing the genre in the mid-twentieth century, Westrup has suggested that “modern taste might find it intolerable to hear a long poem recited to a constant repetition.”¹⁹

Serbo-Croatian oral epic has been collected actively since the early nineteenth century, although it has effectively died out in today’s former Yugoslavia. Numerous transcriptions of texts from the *guslari* (singers) of both the Christian and Muslim epic traditions have been published and studied. The verses are generally decasyllabic and sung in a stichic manner. While the songs of the Christian tradition of Serbo-Croatian epic are typically only several hundred lines long, those from the Muslim singers are significantly longer, often spanning even thousands of lines. Very little music of Serbo-Croatian epic has been transcribed, though in 1995, Stephen Erdely published the first thorough musical transcriptions of entire Muslim epic songs collected by Albert Lord in Bihać.²⁰

It has long been recognized that the Serbo-Croatian epic — sung by *guslari* — was also rendered in chant-like, repetitive melodic lines “with few notes.”²¹ Béla Bartók commented in 1941 that the music of “the heroic poems makes an awfully monotonous impression at first.”²² The ethnomusicologist George Herzog noted that the “music of the Yugoslav epic poems could be called a form of chanting . . . [T]he function of music is probably more that of providing the medium in which the text is unfolded and carried along, rather than of contributing to a formation in which the autonomy of the words is balanced with that of the music.”²³ Herzog pointed out that although the number of melodic formulas in each epic song varies, four types of musical lines are generally found in the epic songs: introductory and final musical lines, “lines of continuity,” and “dramatic lines.”²⁴ The narratives are effectively rendered by way of what Herzog called “lines of continuity,” those repetitive melodic formulas which dominate the musical performance and in which the least musical variety and ornamentation take place. The impulse to diversify and modify the musical contents of Serbo-Croatian epic is evident nonetheless, most notably — as Erdely tells us — as singers create “couplets,

¹⁸Reese 1940, 204.

¹⁹Westrup 1954, 223.

²⁰See Erdely 1995; see also the contribution of Stephen Erdely to this volume.

²¹Erdely 1995, 9.

²²Quoted in Erdely 1995, 1.

²³Herzog 1951, 62.

²⁴Herzog 1951, 62-63.

triplets, and other strophic and stanzaic forms" as well as alter the contours of the melodies.²⁵

The music of Old French and Serbo-Croatian epic, then, "intolerably" or "awfully monotonous" as it may have been, was an indispensable "ingredient" of performance. Functionally, it placed the words of the narratives in a repeated metrical framework; aesthetically, it situated the verses in the realm of the marked discourse of song. It allowed for the singer's full concentration on the story.

Romanian Oral Epic

Romanian epic — in matters of both form and content — lends itself well to comparisons with the Serbo-Croatian and Old French genres. The epic songs are called *cîntece bătrînești* ('old songs'). Many of the narratives are heroic in nature. The poems are usually several hundred lines long (much like the Serbo-Croatian Christian songs). While the genre formerly flourished for generations, it is found at the present time only in villages in south-central Romania. The poetic line — corresponding to the melodic line — is normally a seven- or eight-syllable (generally trochaic) line. Like the *junačke pesme* and *chansons de geste*, the verses of the *cîntece bătrînești* are sung to few notes whose contours include small intervals; the tunes are predominantly pentatonic.

Romanian and Serbo-Croatian oral epic traditions — from neighboring Balkan cultures — reflect significant similarities in the larger historical and cultural continuum that they share. Both are attested from at least the late fourteenth century; their history as a genre during the past six hundred years is comparable. Like the Serbo-Croatian, the Romanian epic mirrors the Ottoman presence in the Balkans; the core of the heroic narrative deals with confrontations between native populations and Turks.²⁶ Indeed, the Romanians share many tales and heroes especially with the Serbo-Croatian Christian tradition.²⁷

²⁵Erdely 1995, 631. Erdely comments on how all of the singers — whose epic songs he transcribed — generated variation in performance and thus revealed their "own personal styles." One singer's talent "was in changing the contours of his melodies by varying its motives, the scale notes, the mode of his tunes." Another "created couplets, triplets, and other strophic and stanzaic forms as he changed the tempo of his singing." Finally, the third singer was "the most versatile, the most complete composer: he was equally at home when working with individual lines and strophic paragraphs, or forming couplets and diverse stanzaic structures" (631-32).

²⁶Needless to say, the cultural-religious orientation of the victor alters depending on the tradition, be it Christian or Muslim.

²⁷For example, narratives about Marko and Marcu; see also Fochi 1975.

Romanian epic is typically performed by traditional professional male singers — *lăutari* (sg. *lăutar*) — who are Rom (Gypsy).²⁸ The *lăutari* play stringed instruments (usually violin, though at times also *cobză* or its contemporary equivalent, guitar). The tradition of music and song — including epic — is transmitted within the family, from father to son, and performed for the community. Epic singers are accompanied by small ensembles of Rom musicians (two or three) who play other traditional instruments (such as violin, hammer dulcimer, and accordion).

But *lăutari* are not the only singers of epic in Romania. Non-professional singers — typically ethnic Romanian peasants — also at times sing narrative song. And while they occasionally sing the same songs as *lăutari*, *lăutari* and peasant singers are distinguished by major differences effectively rooted in the professional versus non-professional distinction. These include the singers' repertoires, the manner in which they learn their skills, the occasions at which they perform, and their styles of singing and playing.²⁹ Non-professional singers sing narratives that are generally shorter and more lyric than those sung by *lăutari*. They do not learn to sing and play within the family as do *lăutari*, who master their art within closely-knit male kin groups who perpetuate traditional professional music. Rarely do peasant singers excel in epic; epic is a genre for public performance, a context in which non-professional musicians less commonly play. As non-professionals, the repertoires of peasant singers generally lack the artistry of singers and musicians who market their skills of performance for their livelihood.

The repertoires of three representative Romanian singers from villages in south-central Romania form the basis for this study. They include two *lăutari* — Mihai Constantin (1912-70) and Costică Staicu (1913-83) — and one peasant singer: Nițu Voinescu (b. 1921); all were violinists.³⁰ The two *lăutari* (one of whom I worked with closely) performed at a variety of festive community events, particularly weddings, even through their last years. The peasant singer (also my informant) worked the land for his living; as an avocation, he sang and played the violin and performed on occasion.

The elementary unit of musical composition in epic is the melodic formula. In Romanian epic, sequences of melodic formulas make up "musical strophes." Musical strophes are structural units that are irregular in terms of length and organization; they are framed most commonly by a conspicuous final melodic formula which creates an overt cadence. Musical strophes are also frequently framed by an initial melodic for-

²⁸For a fuller treatment of Romanian Gypsy epic singers, see Beissinger 1991, especially Chapter 1.

²⁹See Beissinger 1991, 27-29, for a discussion of non-professional singers.

³⁰For biographical notes on these singers, see Beissinger 1991, 8-11.

mula. Both the initial and final melodic formulas resonate with the "introductory" and "final" melodic lines of the Serbo-Croatian epic.³¹ I have termed "medial" melodic formulas those melodic lines that are situated between the initial and final melodic formulas (reminiscent of the Serbo-Croatian "lines of continuity").³²

The epic performance includes an instrumental introduction, followed by vocal sections (each of which is comprised of one or more musical strophes) and subsequent instrumental interludes.³³ The musical strophes of Romanian epic are clearly analogous to the Old French *laissez*. Furthermore, Romanian musical strophes, like the *laissez* of the *chansons de geste*, are frequently marked by patterns of final assonance — usually consecutive lines that assonate in groups of varying lengths. At the end of the song, an instrumental "finale" (often dance music unrelated to the song) is performed by all of the musicians.

"Monotony" and Creativity in Romanian Epic Music

Do Romanian singers — like the Old French jongleurs and Serbo-Croatian *guslari* — tend toward repetitive, "monotonous" music as they sing epic? The answer — in a word — is yes, but it must be qualified: some sing less predictable and routine renditions than others. In other words, some are somewhat more creative than others. Creativity in performance is here understood as the antithesis of a fixed or labored patterning of musical ideas within the musical strophe. Creativity is innovation in performance, an artistic overturning of set and routine patterns of composition. It is moments of originality on the part of the singer. This is reflected in the number of melodic formulas that are employed, how the formulas are grouped together to form musical strophes, and how the words and music connect in performance.

Constantin, Staicu, and Voinescu each clearly exhibited individual styles of epic composition, revealed in any number of different ways. Relative to the Old French and Serbo-Croatian traditions, Constantin and Staicu customarily utilized a significant number of melodic formulas per

³¹Initial melodic formulas in Romanian epic typically begin on an octave or seventh above the tonal center and end on a third above it. Final melodic formulas — the most stable and consistent melodic feature of the musical strophe — usually descend from a fifth or fourth above the tonal center, arriving at the tonic by the second half of the line, where it is repeated, thus effecting a clear cadence.

³²Medial formulas customarily have an overall descending contour, frequently ending on a third above the tonic. A rough average number of medial melodic formulas per song is three or four. Taking into account the initial and final melodic formulas, singers typically employ between five and six melodic formulas in any given epic song.

³³Vocal sections in the repertoires of the three singers viewed here are highly variable in length, from Voinescu's average of thirteen lines to Staicu's ninety; Constantin's vocal sections were roughly forty lines long.

song — an average of seven, though at times they included as many as ten. By contrast, Voinescu typically negotiated as few as three per performance, reflecting his less complex approach to the music. However, all three showed a strong tendency to organize musical strophes in recurrent groupings of melodic formulas — mainly couplets and triplets, but also quatrains. These include both groups of the same melodic formulas (such as CC or EEE) as well as recurrent combinations (AB, DDF, and so on). In other words, melodic formulas in musical strophes figure — for the most part — in relation to other melodic formulas. Here a parallel with the music of Serbo-Croatian epic again is significant. In the style of several Muslim singers whose songs Erdely transcribed, couplets and various other short stanzaic forms were part of their musical lexicon. In the case of Ibrahim Nuhanović, for example, "single lines are combined or alternated with couplets, tercets and other forms of verse groupings."³⁴

Verses delivered in a spoken style of recitation (termed "parlato") function as alternatives to the melodic verses in Romanian epic. When employed in moderation, the parlato style is a hallmark of the so-called "authentic" epic style of traditional *lăutari*. It can provide an important stylistic device, furnishing an expressive break from the uniformity of sung passages or underscoring a dramatic narrative moment. But when it is excessive, it soon becomes a tedious alternative to singing. It is less taxing to speak long passages of poetry without a melodic counterpart than to sing them. For this reason, the extreme use of parlato is representative of less competent singers.³⁵

In a performance of the heroic song "Miu haiducu," the *lăutar* Mihai Constantin employed eight melodic formulas plus the parlato style of recitation.³⁶ In terms of the cadence of the musical strophes, Constantin usually employed the final melodic formula F (in some cases repeating it), sometimes followed by a parlato verse (indicated by +) plus a melodic cadence (resembling the vocal final melodic formula F) on his violin. This provided a concrete anchor in the musical structure. He approached the beginnings of musical strophes, however, with a great

³⁴Erdely 1995, 377.

³⁵The more highly-skilled singers in this study generally employed the parlato recitation style in their epic songs in somewhat less than one-fifth of their verses. In the repertoire of a peasant singer included in another analysis (Marin Dorcea), parlato accounted for four-fifths of his verses, causing his "songs" to be rather infrequently actually sung! For a discussion of this, see Beissinger 1991, 54-55, and 132-36.

³⁶"Miu haiducu" sung by Mihai Constantin and recorded by Alexandru Amzulescu on 22 February 1951 in Desa (Dolj county, Romania); text transcribed by Amzulescu (see Amzulescu 1974, 307-16) and music transcribed by me (Tape number 18a, Archives of the Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Bucharest). I am particularly grateful to the Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Bucharest (formerly the Institute of Ethnology and Dialectology) for furnishing me with this and numerous other copies of tape recordings of epic songs made by scholars in the 1950s and '60s.

deal less uniformity. Constantin sang the same couplet (AB) at the outset of only five (out of 53) musical strophes in this song. In other words, although AB was for Constantin a unit in his musical thought process that introduced musical strophes, it was used discretely, simply as one way — in addition to others — to begin musical strophes. The melodic formulas from the first ten musical strophes of the song excerpted below reveals at once the significant variation in Constantin's musical lexicon. (A = initial melodic formula, B = secondary and medial melodic formula, F = final melodic formula, C, D, E, and G = medial melodic formulas, and + = parlato; the number on the left refers to the musical strophe. The underlining of the couplets and triplets indicates that they are recurrent in the same recording.)

- 1 AB CC DE FF
- 2 DE CC GF FF
- 3 AA ACC DEC GF
- 4 AC DEF
- 5 + DE CC GF FF
- 6 BB CC + + DEC F + + [and instrumental cadence]
- 7 AB BCC FF
- 8 DE + + + + + [and instrumental cadence]
- 9 BB CC F + + + + [and instrumental cadence]
- 10 DE CF + + + [and instrumental cadence]

The musical strophes that Constantin sang were organized in an ever-changing fashion; he was not bound by fixed sequences of melodic groupings. It is almost as if he felt a discomfort with musical structures that constricted him too much; he circumvented patterns that were too fixed and routinized. And yet, he still operated within the confines of a limited number of melodic formulas.

In the same song ("Miu haiducu") recorded from a different *lăutar*, Costică Staicu,³⁷ eight melodic formulas (including the "recto-tono" style — designated by R — in which the same tone is repeated throughout the verse) were employed as well as the parlato style. The melodic formulas from the first ten musical strophes are excerpted below.

- 1 RR ARR ADF
- 2 RAR ABDF
- 3 ABA EEED DF

³⁷"Miu haiducu" sung by Costică Staicu and recorded by Alexandru Amzulescu on 31 March 1966 in Bucharest; text transcribed by Amzulescu (unpublished) and music transcribed by me (Tape numbers 2991b and 2992a, Archives of the Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Bucharest).

- 4 RA RAE ADF
- 5 AA RR AED HDF
- 6 CC DF
- 7 RR ARR ADF
- 8 CA AAA EEED DF
- 9 RA AC DF
- 10 RR AAA ADF

Despite the fact that short stanzaic groupings are evident, their sequence is not habitual or fixed in the musical strophes; each musical strophe is an individual and unique arrangement of melodic formulas. Furthermore, like the musical strophes from Constantin's performance presented earlier, a final melodic formula regularly provides a cadence for the musical strophe, while the beginning of each musical strophe is less uniform. The sequence of melodic formulas in each musical strophe is variable.

By contrast, singers for whom the burden of words plus music is especially taxing turn to the easiest and most dependable manner of constructing musical strophes in performance. Because they do not (or simply cannot) venture out of a relatively fixed musical mold, they pattern consecutive musical strophes which are so similar that they really resemble stanzas; in this way, they furnish a reliable framework in performance. In his rendition of "Miu haiducu,"³⁸ the peasant singer Nițu Voinescu employed three melodic formulas, an obviously smaller body of melodic material than in either Constantin's or Staicu's performances of the same song. Voinescu turned to strikingly similar groupings of melodic formulas in the musical strophes he constructed. Almost all of the musical strophes are framed by two consecutive final melodic formulas and an introductory couplet (usually AB or AA). The internal organization of the musical strophes is minimal, as the following chart — including the first ten musical strophes of the song — reveals. The density of repetitive groupings of melodic formulas (underlined below) is extremely high in this recording.

- 1 ABA FF
- 2 ABA FF
- 3 AA FF
- 4 ABA FF
- 5 ABA F
- 6 AF F
- 7 AA AF F
- 8 ABA BA FF

³⁸"Miu haiducu" sung by Nițu Voinescu and recorded by me on 9 July 1987 in Bărboi (Dolj county, Romania); text and music transcribed by me.

9 A A F F
 10 A B A F F

Voinescu repeatedly returned to an underlying musical strophe (A B A F F), varying it slightly at different times. In other words, he relied on a safe and familiar structure in the music. Furthermore, he sang short musical strophes. The average number of lines per musical strophe in Voinescu's "Miu haiducu" is between four and five, significantly below Constantin's and Staicu's (both about eight lines on the average). The longer length of musical strophes appears to mirror the singer's greater stamina for composition, as well as the tendency to compose more creatively.

Words and Music

Erdely argues that "music has, at times, its own mystical powers, its own atmosphere, but, mostly, it is adjusted in a semi-conscious, instinctive way to the poetic text and to the logic of its internal features."³⁹ Among skilled singers in the Romanian epic, it seems that while there is indeed creativity in the musical component in and of itself during performance, it is effectively the words which dictate the form that the music takes. What drives accomplished singers — in the moment of composition — to select the patterns of melodic formulas that they do is governed in large part by the poetics and content of the words. Distinct rhetorical and narrative patterns fashioned in the poetry frequently correspond to discrete recurrent stanzaic patterns in the music.

The most common poetic device that simultaneously connects with stanzaic groupings in the music is final assonance; when passages in the poetry assonate, skilled singers reinforce this rhetorical unity by corresponding musical couplets, triplets, and quatrains. Lord noted that "in those languages in which morphology and syntax conspire to make a series of lines ending in rhyme, there develops a convention of maintaining this rhyme as long as the singer is able."⁴⁰ Romanian, a language characterized by morphological rhyme and assonance, clearly promotes this "convention"; Old French did as well. Indeed, it is assonance corresponding to large structural units more than any other feature in Romanian epic that finds a resonant analogue in the *chansons de geste*. In linguistic and poetic traditions in which assonance and rhyme figure largely, then, they function as key devices in the compromise between

³⁹Erdely 1995, 632.

⁴⁰Lord 1974, 543. Furthermore, he pointed out that "Albanian epic tradition follows this pattern" and suggested that "it is entirely possible that this practice is the cause of the *laissez* of the *chansons de geste* with their assonantal verse endings" (543).

words and music that singers generate. The acoustic effects of final assonance in the poetry correspond neatly and aesthetically to melodic structures in both the musical strophes and *laissez*.

But it is not only assonance that guides the structuring of poetic and musical lines. In the compositional style of the Serbo-Croatian Muslim singer Murat Žunić, Erdely observes that "the texts of couplets, or tercets usually reveal parallelism or some other form of contextual or syntactic relationship."⁴¹ In like fashion in the Romanian genre, syntactic parallelism in two or more textual lines (particularly anaphora) as well as the repetition of textual lines are devices that correspond to musical groupings. Furthermore, the creative synthesis of words and music is effected through the actual mechanics of narrative verse construction: narrative ideas — reflected in discrete groups of clauses (main and dependent) and phrases — correspond frequently to distinct musical structures.

The following musical strophe (from a recording of "Tănislav" by Staicu⁴²) contains eight lines which include four assonating couplets. The passage relates how the Turks, in search of the hero Tănislav, meet up with a group of girls who will unwittingly tell them of Tănislav's whereabouts. The words in italics either preceding or following the textual lines are syllables of completion, unrelated to the narrative content.

A	Iară turcii că-m' venea.	And so the Turks arrived.
A	Și veneau dă poposeau:	They arrived and stopped for a rest:
B	Colea-n vadu Brăilii, <i>mă</i>	Over there at the ford in Brăilă,
B	Colea-n doșu to' șchilii.	Over there beyond the little river port.
C	Și iei, frate, cum șădea, <i>mă</i>	And when they stopped to rest, brother,
C	Peste trei fete dădea:	They came upon three girls:
P	<i>m</i> Trei fețițe velingence, <i>mă</i>	Three little girls from the valley,
F	To' la pînză mi-'nălbește.	They all were bleaching clothes.

Each of the four assonating textual couplets is rendered in a formulaic melodic couplet (AA-BB-CC-PF). In addition to the assonance, there are other rhetorical devices in this excerpt which find melodic reinforcement. In the first couplet (AA), each line is a complete idea that propels the narrative forward. In the second (BB), both verses are parallel descriptive phrases beginning with "colea-n" (over there in), an example of anaphora. In the third couplet (CC), the story again progresses as Staicu re-

⁴¹Erdely 1995, 241.

⁴²"Tănislav al mătușii" sung by Costică Staicu and recorded by Alexandru Amzulescu on 10 April 1966 in Bucharest; text transcribed by Amzulescu and music transcribed by me (Tape numbers 2995b and 2996a, Archives of the Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Bucharest).

sumes an account of what the Turks are up to. The last couplet — sung to (PF) — contains a descriptive image of the girls bleaching clothes at the shore. Each textual couplet in this example — bound by assonance and parallelism as well as units of narrative integrity — is further reinforced by the unity of melodic structure. Staicu is guided in this symmetrical synthesis of words and melody by the demands of the narrative.

In a musical strophe from a different performance of “Tănislav” by Staicu,⁴³ the words again chart the unfolding of the melodic formulas. The following musical strophe is composed of seven lines: an assonating couplet that offers narrative progression and corresponds to the melodic formulas AB, descriptive parallel phrases sung to the triplet CCC (and marked by anaphora as “cu” — meaning ‘with’ — is intoned three times), and a repeated textual line that corresponds to the melodic formulas PF. The passage relates how the Turks find the hero Tănislav who, even when asleep, is so ferocious that they are petrified.

A	Pă Tănislav că-l găsea.	They found Tănislav.
B	Culcat în apă ierea:	He was asleep in the water:
C	Cu caicu priponit,	With his boat attached to the shore,
C ai	Cu lănușu dă argint/	With his little silver dagger,
C	Cu paloșu gol pă piept/	With his unsheathed sword on his chest.
P	Nu-ndrăzneau ca să-l dăștept/	They didn't dare to wake him up,
F	Nu-ndrăzneau ca să-l dăștept!	They didn't dare to wake him up!
	<i>mă</i>	

Through this web of rhetorical and melodic verse devices, Staicu again effects a balanced compromise of words and music.

The interplay between sung and parlato verses can also be exploited expressively as the narrative veers between action and descriptive embellishment. In the following seven-line musical strophe from Constantin's performance of “Miu haiducu,”⁴⁴ two formulaic melodic couplets (DE and CF) are followed by three parlato verses. The first four melodic lines contain assonating verses that narrate what is unfolding in the story. The next three spoken lines depart from the actual narration and instead provide a parenthetical descriptive passage that assonates. This is followed by an instrumental final melodic formula. The passage below relates how the hero's sister (Calea) tucks in the prince (her brother's foe) at the

⁴³“Tănislav” sung by Costică Staicu and recorded by Alexandru Amzulescu on 10 September 1965 in Blejești (Teleorman county, Romania); text transcribed by Amzulescu and music transcribed by me (Tape number 2878, Archives of the Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Bucharest).

⁴⁴“Miu haiducu” sung by Constantin (see note 36).

banquet table after she has drugged him in order that she be able to depart and warn her brother of his plans.

D	Iară Calea ce m'făcea?	And so what did Calea do?
E	Cu brațale că-l lua. <i>măi</i>	She took him by the arm.
C	O plapomă-i așternea. <i>măi</i>	She spread a fine woolen blanket over him,
F	Cu salteaua-l coperea:	She covered him with a thick quilt:
+	Salteaua cu floricele.	A quilt with little flowers,
+	Mi-l gîdilă la sprîncene,	It tickled her eyebrows,
+	Făcu Calii pe plăcere.	It was a delight to Calea.
	[instrumental final melodic formula]	

Constantin was a master of exploiting parlato recitation style, frequently contrasting melodic lines with short spoken passages in order to underscore verses of embellishment, direct discourse, flashback, or progressive patterns of incremental repetition. He employed the parlato style in a discriminating and sensitive manner, creatively promoting its contrasting effect against the melodic frame.

Voinescu's performance style — unlike Constantin's and Staicu's — reflected the greater burden that balancing words and music posed for him. For instance, he customarily repeated large numbers of textual lines; in a performance of “Miu haiducu,” one fifth of the verses were repeated! And, a considerable number of the repeated verbal lines coincide with couplets in which the same melodic formula is also repeated (especially the ubiquitous FF at the end of nearly every musical strophe). Though repetition as a rhetorical device can be effective at times, the degree to which Voinescu employed it reflects composition that is easier and less taxing than more interactive verbal and musical negotiations. By contrast, the two *lăutari* repeated textual verses sparingly and selectively (especially Constantin), and when they did, those repeated verses were invariably sung to two different melodic formulas. In other words, the *lăutari* sought variation in the music even when the words were redundant, revealing yet another facet of creativity in performance.

The following passage from Voinescu's “Miu haiducu”⁴⁵ is five lines long and reflects his “standard” musical strophe, beginning with his conventional AB, moving to A again, and ending with his customary FF. The passage relates how Prince Stephen tries to escape once he realizes that Miu is pursuing him.

A	Ștefan-vodă că-m'fugea,	So Prince Stephen ran away,
B	Ștefan-vodă că-m'fugea.	So Prince Stephen ran away.

⁴⁵“Miu haiducu” sung by Nițu Voinescu (see Note 38).

A	Dară Mihi ce-m'facea?	But what did Miu do?
F	După iel că mi se lua,	He took off after him,
F	După iel că mi se lua,	He took off after him.

The first couplet (AB) includes a repeated textual line, followed by A, a rhetorical question. The musical strophe ends with the repetition (in both the poetry and music) of a verse that answers the question. There is a great deal of textual repetition in this short excerpt. The verses seem to be stretched to fit into the musical strophe. The repetition of groups of words, like the reliance on a fixed musical strophe, appears like a crutch for the singer; he employs these devices in order to facilitate his performance. And in performance, such “crutches” do not really enhance the delivery: the repetition of verses stalls the narrative movement, and fixed sequences of melodic formulas by this point in the song sound clichéd.

Voinescu sings a high number of paratactic verses within set melodic groupings. Paratactic constructions are, of course, representative of oral epic; and yet a reliance on them can become quite routine, especially within the context of repeated musical structures. In Romanian epic this is particularly apparent due to the short length of the verse: a verse of only seven or eight syllables allows for virtually no elaboration when complete sentences are the main pattern. Such is the case with Voinescu's songs, which included very little embellishment of ideas. He did not indulge in more creative narrative construction as did Constantin and Staicu, who consistently exploited a more elaborate style — where verses expressing complete ideas were surrounded by verses containing dependent clauses and descriptive phrases that developed actions and details.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of how professional (Rom) and non-professional (Romanian peasant) singers compose is revealing of the ways in which creativity is effected in performance. The Romanian singers who bring together the words and music in epic to form an elegant compromise are by and large *lăutari*. Even within the confines of the fundamental “monotony” of Romanian epic music, *lăutari* continually modify the structures that they sing; they are able to employ variation and innovative patterning within the traditional boundaries of epic song. By contrast, singers (typically non-professional) for whom the compromise is too great a challenge find solace in secure and predictable sequences of fewer melodic formulas. Their narratives as a whole are less creative and elaborate than those sung by *lăutari*. The peasant or non-professional singers do not sing epic for a living and do not perfect their skills for public consumption; they, as ethnic Romanians, are indeed *part* of the public. It

is instead the *lăutari* — distinctive in society due to both ethnicity and occupation — who have exploited the art of Romanian epic singing to its fullest.

What, then, is creativity in epic music? And, taking a step back from the distinctions we can make between greater and lesser skills in individual epic singers, what affects the extent to which the music of epic is marked by “monotony” as well as creativity? Unfortunately, the evidence about music in the Old French epic is too meager to come to significant conclusions about creativity. We know simply that it was very repetitive. The Serbo-Croatian epic music also was tedious, yet there are many instances of creativity embedded within the repetitive conventions of that music; Erdely's work attests to this. And as for Romanian epic, it is “monotonous,” to be sure, but relatively so, for there is also marked variety, innovation, and creativity in much of the music.

The Old French *chansons de geste* are known for their length, grandeur, and literary sophistication, presenting medieval narratives filled with personal, political, and religious strife. The Serbo-Croatian *junačke pesme* (the Muslim songs in particular) are also remarkably lengthy and include elaborate tales of return, rescue, initiation, and wedding. No one can rightly claim that either of these epic traditions is anything less than outstanding, especially when viewed from the perspective of oral composition. Although there is no doubt that the music of these two traditions perhaps was not — in an overall sense — especially complex, the narratives and their words were, and markedly so. One could argue, in fact, that the length and complexity of the *chansons de geste*, for example, find a balancing complement in the contrasting bounded and redundant music; this argument could be made to a lesser degree in the case of the Serbo-Croatian. After all, singers in both traditions wielded ten-syllable lines and sang songs of considerable duration and artistry. How could such great oral poems be accompanied in performance by anything else but music to which the singer gave little attention?

I would suggest that Romanian singers perform songs that are generally less demanding than those from the Old French and Serbo-Croatian traditions. Romanian epic is sung to shorter verses: seven and eight syllables must be filled, not ten. Furthermore, they are relatively short songs — only several hundred lines long as a rule. As a result, the narratives are not particularly complex in their development. The stamina needed to perform entire songs in the Romanian tradition, then, is somewhat less than in the Old French and Serbo-Croatian. Consequently, Romanian singers perhaps have more energy to devote to musical creativity than did jongleurs and *guslari*. It is as if the lesser demands of the poetry in the Romanian genre — with shorter verses, shorter songs, and generally simpler tales — allow fine singers to indulge in somewhat more creative

— albeit surely routinized — music-making. My hunch is that, even in the Old French genre, if we only had transcriptions, we would perceive subtle and effective modes of creativity in the music. After all, although Bartók did remark that the music of Serbo-Croatian epic was “awfully monotonous” at first impression, he also noted that once he became more familiar with it, he began to search “with great pleasure the lesser and greater . . . divergences amidst the uniformity.”⁴⁶

Oral epic is a genre in which the *stories*, not the music, are the essence. Singers of epic everywhere instinctively save their most exquisite creativity in performance for the words that comprise them. However, singers who are also adept at the finely-tuned compromises that must be made between words and music do not compose without a keen awareness of that music. Sensing the priority of the words that they sing, they sensitively adapt the music as it best serves the poetry.

⁴⁶Quoted in Erdely 1995, 1.

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