

Various artists. *Ultimele cântece bătrânești din Olt / Last Old Songs From Olt.* Bucharest: Ethnophonie, Series: Colecție de muzici tradiționale (Vol. 29), 2018. Recorded and annotated by Speranța Rădulescu, translations by Adrian Solomon. 16-page booklet with notes in Romanian and English. Illustrations. 6 tracks (56:39), CD.

Review

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On January 21, 2022, we lost a dear friend and an extraordinary colleague, Speranța Rădulescu, known for her lifelong devotion to the traditional music of Romania. At the time of her death, Rădulescu was the leading contemporary Romanian ethnomusicologist, a distinction she had held for decades. Born in 1949 in Buzău (Romania), she moved to Bucharest and studied at the Conservatory (now the National University of Music). She was an ethnomusicologist at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore from 1973 until 1990, during which time she earned a doctorate (in 1984) from the Academy of Music in Cluj. Following the Romanian Revolution of 1989, Rădulescu became a researcher in ethnomusicology at the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest and in 2005 assumed an associate professorship at the National University of Music. Rădulescu was perpetually involved in the study, teaching, and presentation of Romanian traditional musics. It was her mission to explore, understand, appreciate and publicize the rich and diverse traditional musics and musicians in the many ethnic and religious communities in virtually every corner of Romania, a commitment that she took very seriously.

Rădulescu was exceptionally prolific, publishing countless book chapters, articles, and books during her nearly fifty years of research. But she did not only write about music; she also documented it and released numerous recordings of traditional music and musicians from her extensive fieldwork. Rădulescu's audio publications are among her most valuable contributions to the study and exposition of the variety of traditional

musics in Romania. As early as between 1982 and 1984, she brought out six LPs in the Document series Romanian National Collection of Folklore. Later, from 1992 to 2005, she released five cassettes of music from all over Romania in the distinguished Ethnophonie series. Between 2000 and 2020 she launched another series with Ethnophonie, *Colecție de muzici tradiționale* (Collection of Traditional Musics) in which she released 30 more CDs, 17 of which were distributed abroad. These included recordings of the fabled Taraf de Haïdouks (an ensemble Rădulescu discovered in the southern Romanian village of Clejani in the 1980s), brass bands (*fanfare*) from Zece Prăjini in Moldova, and Taraful Bucureștilor.¹ This impressive array of 30 recordings featured not only these and other Romani musicians but Romanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Aromanian, and Jewish performers as well. It was a 20-year venture that Rădulescu painstakingly devoted herself to, aided by the technical assistants Costin Moisil and Florin Jordan.

Rădulescu's penultimate CD in this series was volume 29, *Ultimele cântece bătrânești din Olt / Last Old Songs from Olt*, issued in 2018. It is a recording that foregrounds a genre called *cântece bătrânești*: old or ancient songs (primarily narrative, also called epic) – and its performers, *lăutari* (sg. *lăutar*): male Romani traditional professional musicians who pass on their occupation from father to son within the family and have dominated the performance of traditional music and song in Romania for centuries. Rădulescu was arguably best known for her work with *lăutari*. They are featured in a large number of the recordings that she made during her roughly 40 years devoted to bringing audio publications of traditional music to both academic and general audiences. During these many years, she located, befriended, and documented countless *lăutari* for the numerous series that she contributed to. *Lăutari* adored her; she was a most charming, sympathetic, spirited, and genuine advocate for them and of their music. She treated them like equals, and they fondly called her *Doamna Speranța* (Mrs. Speranța). Even as a young scholar Rădulescu connected with *lăutari* and made them and their music-making a major part of her ethnomusicological agenda. This was considerably before the repressive regime of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu – when Roma were neither recognized nor entitled to basic human rights – was toppled in 1989 and before “Gypsy music” became popular in Anglo-European circles.

Four *lăutari* singing six *cântece bătrânești* are showcased in Volume 29. The songs were recorded at the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest in January 2001, at the sixth-week memorial concert for Horia Bernea (1938–2000), the director of the museum

¹ Rădulescu received the prestigious Coup de Coeur Award of the Charles Cros Academy in 2005 for the first ten CDs of her initial Ethnophonie collection, the Schallplatten Kritik Award in 2007 for the CD *Armănjli di Andon Poçi: Cântitsi Shi Isturii / Aromanians of Andon Poçi, Albania: Songs And Stories* (Various Artists 2006) co-edited with Thede Kahl, and a second Coup de Coeur Award in 2020 for *La musique des lăutari tsiganes de Bucarest / The Music of the Gypsy Lăutari of Bucharest* by Taraful Bucureștilor (2020).

from 1990 to 2000. While *cântece bătrânești* had formerly been a vibrant part of Romanian folklore, by 2001, more than 10 years after the Romanian Revolution, they were rarely, if ever, performed in public.

Lăutari have long had a virtual monopoly on music-making, particularly at family celebrations – most importantly life-cycle events (weddings, engagement parties, baptisms, etc.), but also calendrical-cycle and other celebratory events as well as fairs, markets, and pubs. Lengthy three-day-long Romanian village weddings were, until the late 1980s, the key event at which *cântece bătrânești* were performed in southern Romania. The wedding banquet, which was the culmination of the celebration, customarily took place on Sunday evening after the Orthodox church wedding ceremony and would continue all night long. Several hours (and courses) into the evening, typically around midnight, requests would be made to the lăutari by the wedding guests for *cântece bătrânești*.

Cântece bătrânești are now no longer performed at weddings. The changes in popular culture due to modernization and globalism after 1989 were so sweeping that “ancient songs” had little chance of surviving. Rădulescu’s decision to feature *cântece bătrânești* performed by lăutari at the memorial concert was a way of paying tribute to both Bernea and “tradition” – traditional lăutari performing traditional genres on traditional acoustic instruments. And to publish them in an audio recording, even 17 years after the concert, was a gift from her to posterity. True, the recorded songs represent the Romanian narrative song tradition in its waning years. Yet they still manage to offer a sense of earlier grandeur and hint at a time when lăutari, who formerly boasted large repertoires and finely crafted stories in song, frequently sang *cântece bătrânești* to eager listeners at weddings and other social gatherings. Rădulescu’s liner notes are informative, expressive, and colorful (and ably translated into English by Adrian Solomon). They are also “pure Speranța”; one can “hear” her lively and inimitable voice, thoughts, and sense of humor throughout. Moreover, they are graced with telling photographs of the musicians.

Many of the characteristics of “classic” *cântece bătrânești* are evident in the six recorded songs on the CD. To start with, *cântece bătrânești* are generally stichic and unfold in linear fashion. They are typically composed of trochaic septi- and octosyllabic verses, often with passages of varying lengths marked by final assonance. *Cântece bătrânești* begin with an instrumental introduction played by all of the musicians in the *taraf* (small ensemble of traditional instruments). The singer, most frequently also a violinist in the *taraf*, may then call for the attention of his listeners, after which he begins the song with introductory verbal formulas that usher the audience into the realm of stories, often including the proverbial Romanian “Foaie verde” (“Green leaf”) that makes use of plant imagery and informs the audience of periodic narrative beginnings and/or transition points within the story. Lăutari employ this and other metanarrative devices such as questions addressed to the audience, as they both structure the story and “reach out” to their listeners.

The verses specific to *cântece bătrânești* are rendered performance-wise in three different ways: in melodic formulas, “recto-tono” style (in which the same tone is repeated for every syllable in the line), and “parlato” recitation (in which metrical verses are spoken instead of sung). Every performance is somewhat different. Vocal sections of dissimilar lengths are punctuated by instrumental interludes and comprise the large structural divisions of each song. Within each vocal section there is one or more musical strophe, a group of lines framed by introductory and final melodic formulas. Final melodic formulas end with a marked melodic cadence. At the end of the performance, the singer typically sings a few concluding formulaic verses that bring closure to the narrative “journey” that his listeners have taken as well as urging them to tip him for his services, suggesting that if they remunerate him well, he will sing another “even better song” for them. After the concluding verses, the ensemble characteristically plays an instrumental finale, often a lively dance melody.²

The *lăutari* whom Rădulescu assembled for the concert included eight musicians – some clearly from the same family – who joined up in varying combinations of not more than four musicians at a time. They were from three villages in south-central Romania: Vitănești, Colonești, and Morunglav, all of them in Olt County, the southern border of which is the River Danube. Olt forms part of a whole swathe in southern Romania that was traditionally a rich zone for *lăutar* performances of *cântece bătrânești*. The *lăutari* who sang and played the violin were Mișu Langă, Dumitru Zamfir, Radu Țițirigă, and Titel Țițirigă. Dorel Langă was the double bassist; Constantin Enache and Constantin Ilie played the small (portable) cimbalom; and a rare *lăutăreasă* (female *lăutar*), Ionela Ilie (sister of Constantin Ilie), played the accordion. These four instruments – violin, double bass, cimbalom, and accordion – represent a “classic” *lăutar taraf* in south-central Romania. The vocalist-violinists were elderly *lăutari* who still knew some *cântece bătrânești* that they likely had performed in their youth when the genre was still an essential part of traditional wedding banquets. The songs reflect a variety of topics: the plight of shepherds, the exploits of heroes, and the trials of romantic love.³

Mișu Langă is accompanied by Constantin Enache on the first two tracks of the CD. The first song, the well-known “Ciobanul care și-a pierdut oile” (“The Shepherd who Lost his Sheep”), is a “pastoral” narrative song.⁴ It begins with the introductory formula “Foaie verde fir mărar” (“Green leaf, sprig of dill”), followed by a brief description of a bucolic setting: a shepherd has fallen asleep while his sheep graze. Meanwhile, a wolf arrives and devours his flock. The shepherd wakes up, realizes that his sheep are missing, and sets off to find them. Into the valley he goes, and in a series of incremental repetitions reminiscent of a ballad, he meets a Jew, then a German, a cimbalom player,

² See Beissinger (1991) for a fuller discussion of performance and parameters of *cântece bătrânești*.

³ The song types and topics referred to here are based on Alexandru Amzulescu’s (1964) “Thematic and Bibliographic Index” of Romanian oral narrative songs and the “Motive index and typology of the Romanian oral poetry of love” by Sabina Ispas and Doina Truță (1985).

⁴ It is #207 in Amzulescu’s Index (1964: 182–183).

a lăutar, and a Hungarian (Transylvanian) shepherd, asking each whether he has seen his sheep and whether any of them can sing a song that will please him. None of the songs satisfies the shepherd except that of his fellow shepherd. Langă provides a different little ditty sung by each of those whom the shepherd meets. Finally the shepherd resigns himself to the fact that his sheep are lost, and he resolves to assemble a new flock starting with a lamb that he buys at the fair. Langă sings the entire first vocal section, but by the second, his musical strophes have become a combination of melodic formulas and brisk parlato-recited verses (invoked each time the shepherd encounters someone to question about his sheep), interspersed with their ditties.

The second track, “Neghiniță neagră” (“Black Corncockle”), is a lyric song that conveys desire for love within a sub-category of songs expressing “imaginary metamorphoses” (Ispas and Truță 1985: 70). It includes a touching back-and-forth romantic dialogue between metaphoric male and female voices marked by incremental repetition. Tailored to fit the performance parameters at the memorial concert, Langă only sings a fragment on the CD. Normally it is a longer though highly repetitive song.⁵ Enache’s lilting cimbalom accompaniment blends expressively with Langă’s lyric-melodic style.⁶

Dumitru Zamfir performs the third song on the CD, “Radu Anghel din Crâng” (“Radu Anghel from the Wood”), accompanied by Titel Țițirigă, Constantin Ilie, and Ionela Ilie. It is a very popular *haiduc* song, a heroic sub-genre that relates the adventures and misadventures of social outlaws and freedom fighters during the Ottoman period.⁷ Radu Anghel was a legendary haiduc who lived from 1827 to 1866. In this song, he chastises his fellow haiducs, hitting them when they become inebriated. They then avenge his treatment of them, and a gendarme gravely wounds him. Radu withdraws to his beloved “crâng,” the thicket being an iconic image in haiduc songs, where he attempts to heal his wounds by stuffing them with leaves, but eventually dies. Zamfir’s delivery is energetic and distinguished by a dynamic combination of melodic formulas and recto-tono verses. He periodically introduces musical strophes with “Foaie verde” formulas or formulaic metanarrative questions addressed to the audience, most commonly “Dară Radu ce-m’ făcea?” (“And so what did Radu do?”). Zamfir’s vocal sections also frequently begin with a high, strong, and sustained “Oh!” preceding the first line and end with a refrain-like verse, “Na, na, na, Radule, na.”⁸

The fourth track, “Vulcan” (also known as “Tănislav”), exemplifies one of the most representative types of *cântece bătrânești* – the epic songs composed in response to the hegemonic Ottoman Empire, which Amzulescu terms “the cycle of Turkish and Tatar invaders” (1964: 95–96).⁹ “Vulcan” is performed by Radu Țițirigă, along with Constantin

⁵ See Ispas and Truță (1985: 205–207) for other versions.

⁶ Rădulescu (2004: 47–58) includes a lively and engaging interview held with both Mișu Langă and his longtime performance partner Costică (Constantin) Enache, both from Morunglav, Olt, in her wonderful book of 12 interviews with lăutari.

⁷ It is #101 in Amzulescu’s Index (1964: 159).

⁸ “Na” is an interjection sometimes heard in refrain verses in Romanian traditional songs, equivalent to “Poftim” (“Here you are”), while “Radule” is “Radu” in the vocative case.

⁹ It is #51 (Amzulescu 1964: 136–137).

and Ionela Ilie. It is a popular tale of a mighty hero (Vulcan) and how his servant, Pandealea, betrays him to a band of marauding Turks who sail down the River Danube. Bribing Pandealea, the Turks succeed in hurling Vulcan into the river, assuming he will drown. Vulcan heroically survives, finds and slays his treacherous servant in “Țarigrad” (Istanbul), and then marries the maiden who ran for help as Vulcan sank into the Danube. Țițirigă’s narration alternates between sung and parlato verses, turning more often, as the song progresses, to the less taxing spoken recitation style. He repeatedly poses formulaic metanarrative questions such as “Iară turcii, ce făcea?” or “Iară Vulcan, ce făcea?” etc. (“And so what did the Turks/Vulcan/etc. do?”) as the story moves from one character’s actions to another. His rendition, furthermore, includes only two vocal sections, which is unusual: the first relatively short, and the second very long.

The fifth and sixth songs on the CD are performed by Titel Țițirigă, accompanied by Constantin and Ionela Ilie as well as Dorel Langă. They are “balladic” narrative songs, in both cases about romantic love (ibid.: 197, 211).¹⁰ Milea beseeches each of his family members to pull out the snake tormenting him under his shirt. They all refuse to help him, not wanting to put their own hands in peril. Finally, Milea’s sweetheart gladly risks the loss of her hand to save his life. She is richly rewarded with his love and a wedding when she sticks her hand under his shirt and pulls out not a snake but gold. “Milea” is reminiscent of a ballad in its incrementally repetitive, stanzaic-like structure. Țițirigă sings much of the story but relies increasingly on parlato recitation style as the performance persists.

The last track, “Voinicel Oleac” (“Brave Young Oleac”), is also balladic in its depiction of family themes. It tells the tale of Oleac, who marries the beautiful Ioana and then must pay a toll to the Turks. Poor Oleac puts Ioana up for sale at the fair to so that he can pay the tax. A Turkish merchant buys her, but he and Ioana both soon realize that they are brother and sister, separated when they were children. The merchant returns his sister to Oleac along with a fine dowry, and the song ends on a happy note. Țițirigă creatively combines all three recitation styles in both of these songs: melodic, recto-tono, and parlato. Moreover, both performances acquire a thick, rich texture thanks to the depth of sound provided by the double bass joining the violin, small cimbalom, and accordion.

Speranța Rădulescu’s *Ultimele Cântecce Bătrânești Din Olt / Last Old Songs From Olt* represents a variety of snapshots of the previously vibrant narrative song tradition in southern Romania. We witness the musicians on this CD remembering, admittedly at times with some difficulty, a few of the cântece bătrânești that they used to effortlessly perform when the songs were still actively in their repertoires. Yet even so, they present a superb and indeed moving performance. The album is a masterpiece, a precious memory of the past – not only of the songs and musicians, but of Speranța Rădulescu herself. We are infinitely grateful that this CD became part of the final series that she so creatively, carefully, and lovingly put together.

¹⁰ “Milea” is #242 in Amzulescu’s Index (1964: 197–199), and “Voinicel Oleac” is #287 (ibid.: 211–212).

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