

# “Songs of Pain”: Muzica Lăutărească and the Voices of Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă

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## Abstract

This article explores urban Romani song in southern Romania and how ethnicity and gender inform the repertoire and style of two 20th-century female vocalists: Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă. Both established their renown during the communist period, initially at in-group weddings in addition to family and other social gatherings and eventually at Romanian venues as well. Numerous songs that they performed were also issued on recordings. Puceanu and Luncă were best-known for their quintessentially Romani song genres and style of singing: *muzica lăutărească* (“lăutar music” – the music of Romani musicians), namely, *cântece lăutărești* (“lăutar songs”) or “songs of pain.” *Cântece lăutărești* are often characterized by a slow, heartfelt style and express anguish, suffering, and longing. How did ethnicity and gender inform the artistry of Puceanu and Luncă? Which themes in their song repertoires were they drawn to, and how did the lyrics and style of the songs that they sang reflect their roles as female Romani performers not only surrounded by a majority society that had enslaved Roma for centuries and in which anti-Romani racism was (and still is) widespread, but also within a patriarchal society and male-dominated profession? I examine how Puceanu and Luncă became icons of *muzica lăutărească* in a world dominated by men. I argue that as vocalists who were both Roma and women, they found nuanced ways to express ethnic and gendered identity through song.

## Romanian Abstract

„Cântece de durere”:

Muzica Lăutărească și Vocile lui Romica Puceanu și Gabi Luncă

Acest articol cercetează cântece urbane ale romilor din sudul României și modul în care etnia și genul informează repertoriul și stilul a două soliste vocale din secolul XX: Romica Puceanu și Gabi Luncă. Ambele și-au creat renumele în perioada comunistă, inițial la nunți și evenimente sociale și de familie ale romilor și, în cele din urmă, și la evenimentele sociale ale românilor. Un mare număr dintre cântecele pe care le-au interpretat a fost înregistrat pe discuri. Puceanu și

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case, these parts are clearly marked as such.

Luncă erau cunoscute pentru genurile și stilul lor de cântec aparținând prin excelență romilor: muzica lăutărească și, anume, cântecele lăutărești sau „cântece de durere”. Cântecele lăutărești se caracterizează printr-un stil lent și afectiv; ele exprimă angoasă, suferință, și dor. Cum au informat etnia și genul arta lui Puceanu și Luncă? Care au fost temele repertoriului lor de cântece? Cum au oglindit versurile și stilul cântecelor pe care le-au cântat poziția lor de interprete rome care operau, pe de o parte, în cadrul unei societăți majoritare care i-a înrobii pe romi de secole și în care rasismul împotriva romilor a fost (și mai este) larg răspândit, iar pe de alta, în cadrul unei societăți patriarhale și a unei profesii dominate de bărbați? Examinez modul în care Puceanu și Luncă au devenit icoane ale muzicii lăutărești într-o lume stăpânită de bărbați lăutari și argumentez faptul că amândouă, ca soliste vocale care erau atât de etnie romă cât și femei, au găsit modalități nuanțate de a-și exprima identitatea etnică și de gen prin cântec.

Translation from English to Romanian by Margaret H. Beissinger and Carmen Mateiescu.

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*Lăutari* (sg. *lăutar*) are male Romani professional musicians. They make their living in southern Romania performing mainly for the dominant population (ethnic Romanians) but also for Roma – at family celebrations such as weddings, engagement parties, and baptisms, as well as at restaurants and taverns. Most of what lăutari sing and play professionally is by request. They have dominated professional traditional music-making for centuries and typically pass on lăutar culture and skills within the family along the male kin line. Lăutari perform in small ensembles and excel in song and dance music; their repertoires circulate via oral tradition. Among the many genres that they perform is *muzica lăutărească* (“lăutar music”), a distinct style of Romani song and dance music that developed in 20th-century southern Romanian cities. It began as a genre for in-group gatherings and soon became popular among urban Romanians as well. Male Romani musicians in Romania have long monopolized professional traditional music-making. By contrast, Romani women overall have rarely been involved in the public performance of music.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I discuss Romica Puceanu (1927–1996) and Gabi Luncă (1938–2021), “legendary” Romani female singers who excelled in the urban *muzica lăutărească* song genre in southern Romania. They established their artistic reputations during the mid-20th century, when Romania was a repressive communist state and ethnic and racial minorities were not recognized. Similarly to their male counterparts, Puceanu and Luncă performed at family and social events held at urban venues, as well as at taverns (*cârciumi*) in neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities and towns, the *mahala*.<sup>2</sup> They both also sang on recordings. Puceanu and Luncă were born into an “elite” subgroup (*neam*) of Roma, lăutari – professional musicians. They were raised in lăutar families and communities in which male musicians and music-making surrounded them.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Romanian and transcriptions of song lyrics in this article are mine.

<sup>2</sup> The term “mahala” refers to the Romani quarters in the suburban zones between city and country in southern Romania in which many Roma settled in the latter 19th century after the abolition of slavery (1864).

As women who pursued music-making professionally in the mid-to-late 20th century, Puceanu and Luncă represented a small minority in the *lăutar* world. They were two of only a handful of female vocalists who performed, like the men around them, in public – a situation that was not uncommon among other Romani musicians in the Balkans.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, Puceanu and Luncă became “stars” in southern Romanian urban centers, ultimately achieving a type of “mainstream” status during the communist period due in part to the popularity of their recorded songs. In other words, despite the male dominance of *muzica lăutărească*, Puceanu and Luncă were central to the genre. As singers who were both Roma and women, they represented a “dual minority” status and bore a “double burden” of ethnoracialized<sup>4</sup> and gendered identity.

The “golden age” of *muzica lăutărească* in southern Romania lasted from the 1950s through the 1980s (Rădulescu 2017: 510). Several types of related sub-genres are recognized as *muzica lăutărească* songs. They are known by a variety of terms including *cântece de ascultare* (“songs to listen to”), *cântece de mahala* (“songs of the mahala”), *cântece de pahar* (“drinking songs”), *cântece de dragoste* (“love songs”), and *cântece de jale* (“songs of sorrow,” heard mainly at funerals). When I asked a well-known *lăutar* (Nicolae Feraru) from Bucharest in the late 1990s how he would characterize the songs of *muzica lăutărească*, he told me at once that they are “*cântece de durere*”: songs of pain. Most of them are meant (as the term *cântece de ascultare* indicates) to be listened to. They are not meant to be danced to but rather to feel and ponder; they are, by and large, songs that express heartache and sorrow. Indeed, *muzica lăutărească* songs, or *cântece lăutărești*, reflect, in ways large and small, the traumas of the deeply-embedded “Romani experience”<sup>5</sup> in Romania, including five hundred years of slavery (which ended in the second half of the 19th century) and the suffering and ordeals that Roma endured during the 20th century (the consequences of which continue to surface in the 21st). Ioanida Costache speaks of the collective need of Roma in Romania “to heal from centuries of persecution” through the songs of *muzica lăutărească*, pointing out that “[t]hese performative moments and the maintenance of musical repertoires are acts of resistance to policies of forced assimilation and genocide during the twentieth century” (2021: 186).

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<sup>3</sup> Among Balkan Muslim Romani musicians, for example, while male professional vocalists abound, women who sing professionally comprise a minority (Silverman 2003: 133).

<sup>4</sup> I find the terms “ethnoracialized” and “ethnorace” useful in my discussion of Romani identity as they allow for a fluid intersection and overlapping of the socially constructed categories of ethnicity and race (see Lie 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The “Romani experience” is, admittedly, a wide-ranging term, and I only refer to it as a shorthand for acknowledging the degree of persecution and marginalization that most Roma have endured for hundreds of years, first in the Romanian Principalities and later in what is today’s Romania (see Crowe 1991, 1994; Achim 1998). The “Romani experience” is further complicated by the marked diversity of Roma in terms of ethnic, racial, social, economic, political, occupational, and many other distinctions with which they self-identify, not to mention which non-Roma ascribe to them (see Ladányi and Szelényi 2001).

Lăutar songs “of pain” are virtually all conveyed through a male lens. Voices, usually first-person, are male, reinforced by grammatical gender (such as in nouns, pronouns, and adjectives). Indeed, lăutari – male Romani musicians – dominated the performance of the vocal muzica lăutărească repertoire during the 20th century. Well-known urban singers included Ion Nămol, Dona Dumitru Siminică, Fărâmiță Lambriu, Victor Gore, Mihai Nămol, Gheorghe Lambriu, Marin Doru, Florică Roșioru, Costel Hanțu, Gicu Petrache, and Neluță Neagu among many others. Notwithstanding the preponderance of male performers of muzica lăutărească, my purpose in the pages ahead is to explore female representation in the genre and how Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă introduced women’s voices and perspectives into a largely male-oriented field. I consider select songs of Puceanu and Luncă, the two most famous and important female performers of the muzica lăutărească vocal repertoire that circulated during the height of its popularity. They, like their male counterparts, expressed, often in abstract terms, the ethnoracialized plight of their collective Romani forebears and contemporaries as they assumed a form of “sonic healing” through song for the misery and suffering of Roma (Costache 2021: 186). But they also spoke to women’s identity and sorrows.

My fundamental questions here concern how female voice is expressed in the “songs of pain” that Puceanu and Luncă sang. What types of gendered identity did they assume in their singing? How did the lyrics and style of the songs that they sang reflect their roles as female Romani performers not only surrounded by a majority society that had enslaved Roma for centuries and in which anti-Romani racism was (and still is) widespread, but also within a patriarchal world and a male-dominated profession? These are questions that of course cannot be fully answered in an essay of this length. But I suggest that while many of Puceanu’s and Luncă’s performances were rooted in the muzica lăutărească songs that circulated among lăutari (with implicit “male” voices), there were also moments of distinctly “female” lyrics in their repertoires that expressed alternative gendered viewpoints. I base my discussion on extensive fieldwork among lăutari in southern Romania,<sup>6</sup> available recordings of the songs of Puceanu and Luncă, and the meagre literature that is published on Romani singers and muzica lăutărească.<sup>7</sup> I explore how Puceanu and Luncă embraced female voices and perspectives in the “songs of pain” that they performed. It will be evident in the discussion ahead that Puceanu sang, not infrequently, of unhappy and ill-fated romantic love and the loneliness and loss of hope that it engenders. By contrast, Luncă often related to songs that expressed tensions within family life: what parents and children both endure and how ruptures in family dynamics can cause anxiety and profound sadness. Despite

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<sup>6</sup> I have undertaken fieldwork on lăutari in southern Romanian villages, towns, and cities on a yearly (and sometimes biannual) basis from 1998 to 2019. I acknowledge IREX, NCEEER, and a Vilas Fellowship (University of Wisconsin-Madison) as well as support from Princeton University for funding my research visits to Romania.

<sup>7</sup> Although unpublished, Ioanida Costache’s (2021) Ph.D. dissertation also provides useful materials.

divergent “types” of female representation in their repertoires, both singers also frequently connected the pain about which they sang with destiny which, one could argue, is itself a trope of agony and despair.

My discussion includes, first, background remarks on *lăutar* history, gender, and music-making, followed by a consideration of vocal *muzica lăutărească* as a 20th-century urban Romani genre. I then explore the lives and careers of Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă and conclude with a commentary on a number of songs that they performed, with suggestions of how gendered readings illuminate meaning in them.

## Ethnorace, Gender, and Performance

Starting around 1000 AD and over the course of hundreds of years, Roma migrated northward from India into the Balkan Peninsula. By the 14th century many had arrived in the historic Romanian Principality of Wallachia, the southern zone of today’s Romania. Soon thereafter, they were subjugated and became “house” and “field” slaves for the Romanian ruling class (princes), in monasteries (for the clergy), and in the boyar manors (Achim 1998: 34–37). The enslavement (*robie*) of Roma persisted for roughly 500 years and was first attested in Wallachia in 1385 (*ibid.*: 21). *Lăutari*, as male house slaves, regularly performed (playing primarily stringed instruments and singing) for elite Romanian society.

The abolition of slavery in the historic Romanian Principalities (Wallachia and Moldova) was concluded in 1864 (Crowe 1994: 120). Following emancipation, *lăutari* in both regions continued by and large to make music for a living, performing primarily for Romanians in villages, towns, and cities (Rădulescu 2017: 510), a professional niche that they occupy to this day. Freedom from slavery, however, did not erase or resolve the racism, discrimination, and marginalization that had plagued Roma for centuries nor the racializing that was embedded and institutionalized through hundreds of years of subjugation (see Parvulescu and Boatcă 2022: 70–76). During the immediate post-emancipation decades (late 19th- and early 20th-century Romania), conditions for Roma were difficult (Crowe 1991: 67–70). The Second World War and the Romani genocide during the Holocaust punctuated the 20th century, as did the draconian decades of communism (1944–1989). The political climate in communist Romania was oppressive. Basic human rights were violated, and most Roma were persecuted (*ibid.*: 71–73). Furthermore, due to the efforts by the government during the communist period to create a “homogenous” Romanian nation, ethnic and ethnoracial minorities were not recognized. This included Roma, of course (in addition to the largest overall minority in Romania, Hungarians). Indeed, Romani cultural identity for all intents and purposes “did not exist.” Restrictions on artistic expression and freedom of speech, as well as on freedom of religion and travel were imposed. The government controlled virtually every aspect of life. And although Romanians also suffered, the conditions for most Roma

were grounded in systemic racism. In post-communist Romania, while objectively numerous freedoms were by and large restored, discrimination against many Roma and the inequalities that it generates persist (Szeman 2018).

As elsewhere in southeastern Europe, women in Romania have been subject to strongly patriarchal restrictions and codes of behavior for centuries. The influence of women throughout Romanian history has generally been limited to and defined by “their nurturing roles in the family” (Bucur 2000: 854). Long-established gender roles characterize much of traditional Romania as well as many traditional Romani communities. Romani men and women in families generally hold unequal positions of authority and privilege (Bitu 2011; Surdu and Surdu 2006). To be sure, women are empowered through their various domestic positions and the functions that they fulfill within the household and community, but Romani culture is traditionally patriarchal (Silverman 2012: 77–79; Pogány 2004: 115–123). Romani men normally enjoy more authority and liberties than women in everyday life and are the heads of families, which represent core social units (Silverman 2012: 78).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Romani women in Romania typically bear a “double burden.” They are both ethnoracial Other as well as gendered Other: racialized as Roma and marginalized as women, what Ioana Szeman terms “gendered racialization” (2018: 62–67).

For hundreds of years, *lăutar* music-making in southern Romania has been a predominantly male undertaking.<sup>9</sup> Historically, Romani women did not perform music in public, nor did they play instruments (they still rarely do).<sup>10</sup> As Carol Silverman notes, “instrumental music is primarily a male domain for all ethnic groups in the Balkans” (2003: 120). Singing in private certainly has long been a part of female culture in southeastern Europe. But Romani women’s assuming roles of public performance and joining *lăutar* ensembles as vocalists is documented in Romania only during the 20th century. Moreover, due to the overall stigma associated with female vocalists who perform in public in traditional Balkan – including Romani – society, they typically sang (and sing) in bands with male kin (ibid.: 133, 142n25). Husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, and even cousins “safeguard” and “keep an eye on” female family members who sing in their ensembles. This serves an economic purpose as well: having one’s wife or daughter perform in a family ensemble channels the earnings from events directly into household coffers, which men usually oversee. In other words, while Romani women in 20th-century Romania began to penetrate the closed world of male Romani musicians who had dominated the profession of traditional music-making for hundreds of

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<sup>8</sup> As Silverman points out, Romani “[m]en are the nominal heads of the family and occupy positions of authority” (2012: 78).

<sup>9</sup> Even in *manele*, contemporary ethnopop performed by Romani musicians in post-communist and 21st-century Romania, the instrumentalists are all men, as are the majority of the vocalists (see Beissinger, Rădulescu, and Giurchescu 2016; see also Rădulescu and Beissinger 2025).

<sup>10</sup> The Romani vocalist Cornelia Catangă (1958–2021), who at times played an accordion when she sang, was somewhat of an exception. See also Beissinger (2016: 226) regarding the views of rural *lăutari* on a female Romani accordionist.

years, their independence – both social and economic – was (and is) subject to male authority.

## Muzica Lăutărească as an Urban Romani Genre

### *The Nature of Muzica Lăutărească*

Muzica lăutărească is an urban musical style performed primarily in southern Romania at various festive events and social gatherings. It embraces both song and dance music, performed in small traditional ensembles (*tarafuri*, sg. *taraf*). Early vocalists of muzica lăutărească were men.<sup>11</sup> Female singers, however, with Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă at the forefront, also began to adopt the style, joining muzica lăutărească ensembles during the course of the 20th century. Songs are virtually always accompanied by male instrumentalists. While the *țambal* (“cimbalom”), *acordeon* (“accordion”), and/or *vioară* (“violin”) form the basis of the instrumental muzica lăutărească sound, traditional ensembles also sometimes include the *bas* (“bass viol”) and/or *clarinetă* (“clarinet”).

Textually speaking, some cântece lăutărești are stanzaic and isometric, while others are more loosely structured and are performed with anisometric verses. They are typically sung “with partially improvised rubato melodies freely set to strictly measured accompaniments” (Rădulescu 2017: 511). Robert Garfias points out that “the accompanying ensemble supports the free, lyric melody [of muzica lăutărească songs] with the fixed and regular quadruple pattern of the Rom style *hora*” ([1981] 2017: 11).<sup>12</sup> The vocal style of cântece lăutărești, especially cântece de ascultare, is distinctive and employs “a thin light voice quality which permits graceful maneuvering of the delicate ornamentation of the melody” (ibid.: 10). And although influenced by local Romanian traditional forms, cântece de ascultare are also distinguished by “many unique characteristics, such as more personally expressive melismatic character, microtonal pitch modifications and frequently an intense sense of drive” (Garfias 1981: 99). As “songs of pain,” cântece de ascultare are performed in an unhurried, melancholic, demonstrative manner that, as Costache notes, radiates “emotional intimacy” (2021: 154).

The most common ideas expressed in cântece de ascultare are love, family loyalty and anxieties, misery as a result of injustice or death, poverty and misfortune, enemies, and everyday struggles. Anguish, suffering, and longing in various forms comprise the thematic basis of the lyrics of the songs, lyrics that metaphorically index the Romani historical experience in Romania. The archive of professionally produced recordings of

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<sup>11</sup> Among the pioneers of the sung genre were lăutari such as Ion Nămol (1914–1985), Dona Dumitru Siminică (1926–1979), Fărâmiță Lambru (1927–1974), and Victor Gore (1931–2008).

<sup>12</sup> Garfias alludes here to *hora lăutărească* (the “lăutar hora”), a lilting, duple-meter music that is typically danced solo – to either instrumental music or vocal-instrumental *cântece de joc* (“songs for dancing”).

muzica lăutărească songs “is ripe with indirect allusions to Romani experience of suffering” (ibid.: 227). “Songs of pain” often make “no direct mention of persecution,” but they convey “the *Weltanschauung* of Romani life as life marked by suffering” (ibid.: 185). Moreover, as will be seen in the various songs analyzed ahead, what unifies many of these themes is the inevitability of fate.

In post-emancipation southern Romanian cities (especially Bucharest, but also elsewhere), Romani musicians gradually developed an urban Romani musical style (Garfias 1981: 98–99). Muzica lăutărească as a distinct genre evolved most likely by the first several decades of the 20th century (Rădulescu 2017: 510). It began as lăutar music and song performed by and for lăutari: a veritable in-group genre. During the 1930s it established a place in the urban lăutar repertoire and soon appealed to other Roma too; eventually it became a favorite among “ordinary” Romanian residents of cities and towns as well (ibid.: 510; Rădulescu and Beissinger 2025).<sup>13</sup> The “classic” era of muzica lăutărească spanned roughly forty years: from the early communist period in the 1950s through the Romanian Revolution in the late 1980s. It was performed at weddings, baptisms, engagement parties, and other family celebrations; moreover, it provided live music at restaurants and taverns. Furthermore, muzica lăutărească was recorded, only occasionally at first but later with increasing frequency, as the popularity of the genre spread. In fact the music and its most recognized performers grew in status precisely because of the recordings that were issued – by Electrecord, the state-run (and only) record company in Romania during the communist period. It was in the 1960s that Electrecord made available the first cuts of muzica lăutărească, “sneaking them in among pieces of ‘authentic folklore’ (standardized, state-controlled rural music)”; moreover, “[t]he 1970s and 1980s saw the release of records consisting entirely of muzica lăutărească, albeit no more than four or five yearly. From that time on, the popularity of several elite performing artists grew exponentially, and stars were born” (Rădulescu 2017: 510). Among the “stars,” of course, were Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă.

### ***The Popularity of Muzica Lăutărească: Ethnicity and Place***

Lăutari comprised the original coterie of devotees of muzica lăutărească and still virtually unilaterally consider it their favorite genre, even well into the 21st century. I have spoken with many lăutari about this over the years. There is no question that the genre represents for nearly all of them the epitome of music-making. A rural lăutar accordionist speaking “on behalf of all lăutari,” told me that “We love muzica lăutărească the best!” (Băiețică Zaharia, interview, 7 June 2004). And an urban accordionist whom I have likewise known for decades, Sile Dorel, has always said that while he “puts up with” *manele* (contemporary ethnopop, performed mainly by Romani musicians; see Beissinger, Rădulescu, and Giurchescu 2016), it is playing muzica lăutărească that he lives for.

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<sup>13</sup> I wish to thank Ioanida Costache for useful discussions on this topic.



In an interview that Speranța Rădulescu and I jointly held with Constantin Fărâmiță (an urban lăutar who played violin and bass viol), Rădulescu sought to clarify a point that he had just made by asking “So you’re saying that lăutari don’t go for manele, right?” Fărâmiță answered, “No, no [they don’t]. Lăutari love performing [cântece] ‘de ascultare,’ the old songs.” Rădulescu continues: “And this is what lăutari want to hear?” to which Fărâmiță emphatically responds, “Yes!! Of course!!” (Rădulescu 2004: 96).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in an interview in Bucharest with Victor Gore, when I asked him years ago what muzica lăutărească was, he answered, “The most beautiful music in the world!” And then, pointing to his heart, he said, “Music that comes from here!” (Victor Gore, interview, 25 June 1998). After all, muzica lăutărească began in the first decades of the 20th century as a genre that urban lăutari performed for each other, creating an intimate give-and-take between members of this distinct ethnoracial and occupational community. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that lăutari continue to express such feelings of loyalty to a genre that is truly beloved by them.

Both rural and urban Roma also by and large view muzica lăutărească favorably, while ethnic Romanians vary considerably in their tastes. In an interview in 2000 with Romani musicians (two women and three men) in a village in Oltenia (a southern Romanian region west of Bucharest), Rădulescu asked one of the women who used to sing in a taraf there during the 1960s–1980s, whether there were differences between what she called “Gypsy” and Romanian weddings. The woman responded: “Yes, yes – in terms of music, yes. We Gypsies sing muzica lăutărească – cântece lăutărești [lăutar songs] – I mean, more Gypsy-like, songs of sorrow.” Rădulescu continued: “So what you mean is that songs ‘of sorrow’ are more Gypsy-like?” The woman answered: “Yes – those about sorrow are. Like Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă sang. Romanians didn’t really like these Gypsy songs to listen to – the ones that Romica sang, that Gabi sang – the way they sang. [Romanians] wanted to hear Oltenian songs . . . by Irina [Loghin], by [Maria] Cârneli<sup>15</sup> – those were the ones they liked” (Rădulescu 2004: 60).

This exchange conveys how “Gypsy-like songs of sorrow” resonate more profoundly among Romani villagers than among their Romanian neighbors, who prefer the songs and style of local ethnic Romanian singers. It also reflects the complex relationship that Romanians have had with muzica lăutărească.<sup>16</sup> A style of music and song that is not held in particularly high regard among Romanians in rural communities, it nonetheless has appealed to many “ordinary” urban Romanians, who became latter-day fans of the genre during the communist period. At the same time, there are many an urban, educated, self-professed “intellectual” who simply scoffs at muzica lăutărească, refusing to acknowledge any redeeming qualities of it.

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<sup>14</sup> This interview took place in Bucharest on 27 August 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Loghin and Cârneli are both ethnic Romanian “folk” singers from Oltenia in southern Romania.

<sup>16</sup> And, I would add, the complicated relationship that Romanians have always had with all of the Romani music-making that they have patronized over the centuries.

One more tale paints yet a further picture, revealing how another class of urban Romanians admired and related to muzica lăutărească despite themselves. The Romanian communist government of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu (who ruled from 1965 until 1989) officially denied the existence of Roma as an ethnic minority and banned Romani cultural expression, of which muzica lăutărească was clearly an example. Yet unofficially, the Ceaușescus would apparently invite Gabi Luncă to their residence to perform for them. This can only reflect the fact that Luncă’s heartfelt songs about family, love, loneliness, betrayal, and so on spoke to the Ceaușescus – deeply enough for the obvious contradiction between policy and personal taste to be overlooked.

A newspaper article published in April 2021 (upon the death of Luncă) reports that Luncă’s “greatest concert” occurred when she “was specially invited by the president of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu, to provide entertainment for the local governing officials on vacation in Comorova” (Stănilă 2021), a resort complex on the Black Sea. Among the songs that Luncă sang at this performance was “Am crescut băieți și fete” (“I Raised Sons and Daughters”; see [Video 1: Luncă 1999a](#)). The lyrics of this well-known song convey the sorrow of an aging mother, who juxtaposes the effort of raising her many children with being deserted by them when they grow up, leave home, and forsake her to live their own lives:

Foaie verde solzi de pește,<sup>17</sup>  
 Un părinte poate crește  
 Șapte, opt copii sau zece;  
 Dar zece copii cu minte  
 nu poate ține-un părinte,  
 nu poate ține-un părinte.  
 Unul pe altu’, se lasă  
 și de părinți nu le pasă.  
 Unul pe altu’, se lasă  
 și de părinți nu le pasă.

Green leaf, scales of fish,  
 A parent can raise  
 Seven, eight, or ten children;  
 But ten able children  
 A parent cannot support,  
 A parent cannot support.  
 One after another they leave  
 And no longer care about their parents.  
 One after another they leave  
 And no longer care about their parents.

The song starts with an introductory formula in the first line, followed by the singer’s grievances. The mother then continues: when her son got married, he moved far away from home, and his wife took his parents’ place, while a daughter is just slightly better since even she only comes home to visit now and then. She describes how she raised sons and daughters and rocked their cradles with her foot while with her hands she spun hemp.

It is reported that these verses “made Elena Ceaușescu [the former first lady] burst into tears” (Stănilă 2021) when she heard them at the performance in Comorova. The song clearly expressed something that resonated with Madame Ceaușescu (who had three children of her own). Here ethnic identities coupled with the “artist” intersect in unexpected ways, which is just what generates the glaring hypocrisy. It is a common

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<sup>17</sup> Introductory verses in Romanian traditional poetry that demarcate the beginnings of songs, stanzas, or other sections in the text frequently include “Foaie verde. . .” (“Green leaf. . .”), followed by a three-or-four-syllable noun phrase with which the subsequent verse rhymes (here, “pește” [fish], at the end of the first line, rhymes with “crește” [raise], at the end of the second).

paradox: Others are disrespected by their patrons, but their artistry is admired. This is, however, taken to a jarring extreme when there is so much power in the hands of those who spurn the Other but covertly love their craft. Altogether, these examples illustrate telling intersections of urban versus rural and Romani versus Romanian ethnicity, resulting in nuanced combinations of ethnicity, place, and taste.

## Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă: Two “Queens of Lăutar Song”

Growing up in lăutar households was formative for both Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă. It paved the way for them to adopt the lăutar tradition as a calling, even as women (and fortunately living at a time when it was becoming possible to do so). Lăutari are, however, by and large male musicians; they cultivate a world of male music-making and a male-centered vocal repertoire. Yet the vocalists who were and continue to be remembered as among the most emblematic representatives of muzica lăutărească in its heyday were women. Luckily, a part of their legacy includes the many recordings of them made during their careers: precious moments of 20th-century muzica lăutărească immortalized for posterity. Indeed, through recordings, as Costache remarks, Puceanu and Luncă “form the vocal backbone of the [muzica] lăutărească repertoire as it was recorded on Electrecord and disseminated via television and radio during the communist period” (2021: 186).

### *Romica Puceanu (1927–1996)*

Known as *regina cântecului lăutăresc* (“the queen of lăutar song”), Romica Puceanu was born in Bucharest in 1927. She was an expressive female Romani vocalist who spoke, through her artistry, to the Romani community in her midst – but also to others. She was best-known for the songs of muzica lăutărească: cântece lăutărești. Puceanu grew up in a well-known Bucharest lăutar family. Her father, Constantin Puceanu, was a distinguished cimbalom player, and her uncle was the violinist Ion Puceanu (Wikipedia contributors 2023). Already in 1934 young Romica would join her father, singing in his ensemble. And by age 14 she was performing professionally with her lăutar cousins, the Gore brothers: Victor, a singer and accordionist, and Aurel, who played the violin. They were sons of the legendary violinist, Gore Ionescu, whose name had been synonymous with urban lăutar style since the 1930s (Friedrich 2006). Puceanu began her career singing with the Gore brothers in local cafés and taverns on the outskirts of Bucharest. They helped her to find performance venues, and she frequently sang with them. Their ensemble Taraful Frații Gore (“The Brothers Gore Taraf”) was one of the best-known Romani ensembles in mid-20th-century Bucharest and was key to the overall development of muzica lăutărească. Indeed, Puceanu performed with many celebrated lăutari. Moreover, like most female Romani singers, she married a lăutar, the noted accordionist Bebe Șerban (1939–1990), in whose ensemble she also sang.

Yet Puceanu evidently also experienced many disappointments and challenges in her own life and career. Nelu Ploieşteanu (1950–2021), a well-known *lăutar* (accordion and voice), who likewise excelled in *muzica lăutărească*, observed that Puceanu “was a sad person, unhappy in her personal life” (*Antena* 2011). Accordingly, some of her best-known songs reflect one of her signature themes, ill-fated love. And Garfias, who knew Puceanu, wrote, following the news of her death, that she was

the unfortunate victim of a number of circumstances which prevented her receiving the acclaim which she deserved. By the 1960s and 70s she had become in Romania, the unrivaled interpreter of the *cintec* [sic] *de pahar* [drinking song]. . . . Romanian state policy in effect during most of the years during which Romica was in her prime, made it difficult for most artists, particularly Gypsies, to be heard abroad. (2011)

In the end, Puceanu was able to tour beyond the borders of Romania but not until after the Revolution of 1989. She was eventually featured on forty recordings (Mlădinoiu 2023), the first of which was issued in 1964 (Stănilă 2016). Puceanu died in 1996 in an automobile accident, on her way from Bucharest to a wedding in Constanța at which she was to perform (Balan 2021).

### ***Gabi Luncă (1938–2021)***

Gabi Luncă, who was another, somewhat younger “regina cântecului lăutăresc,” was born in a village in Prahova County, north of Bucharest, in 1938. Her mother died when she was only three (Friedrich 2008), which apparently affected her deeply and was reflected in her song repertoire. Her father, Dumitru Luncă, was a *lăutar* violinist employed in the county capital, Ploiești, and she began singing with him in 1951. In the mid-1950s, Luncă, then still only a teenager, participated in and won a singing competition, which helped her to launch her career (*ibid.*). Already at age 19, she was invited to record several songs with Electrecord. In 1964, she married the well-known Romani accordionist Ion Onoriu (1937–1998), with whom she sang and recorded. She also performed and recorded music with the Gore brothers and many other well-known musicians of *muzica lăutărească*. Luncă began to tour abroad starting in 1980 (Stănilă 2021). She sang songs of melancholy and nostalgia that often expressed family themes. While Luncă performed frequently at weddings and various other celebratory events, she ceased singing secular *cântece lăutărești* in 1993 and sang only religious songs – often in “*lăutar*” style – at Pentecostal religious services in Bucharest. Luncă contracted Covid during the pandemic and died in 2021 (Stănilă 2021). Over a decade younger than Puceanu and perhaps benefitting from a world that was expanding for women, albeit in modest ways, Luncă evidently had more career opportunities than Puceanu, such as touring abroad already during the communist period and performing for the most powerful couple in the land, the Ceaușescus.

## Muzica Lăutărească: Words and Meanings

Puceanu and Luncă frequently performed cântece lăutărești at special events and venues where the urban, in-group genre of expressive songs was beloved. Both women were clearly adept, in the abject years of communism in Romania, at embracing and conveying the suffering and misery of the Romani community, although Romanians too found meaning in the wistful verses. Many, if not most, of the songs that Puceanu and Luncă sang were, at least in a formal sense, lyrics from the lăutar repertoire, with male protagonists and outlooks. Yet both women assumed the performance of them and “feminized” them in various ways. Some were male lăutar songs that they improvised with implicitly “female” themes or simply reinterpreted with their own, audibly female voices. In other cases they transcended gender due to the universality of the messages. Costache points out that “[s]ongs in the [*muzica*] lăutărească genre rarely speak to the lived experience of Romani women. They are subjects of the masculine gaze as mothers or objects of sexual desire, but rarely subjects with whom listeners may empathize” (2021: 217). And yet, as I argue here, there are songs sung by Puceanu and Luncă in which the female voice emerges and expresses the plight of being a woman. They explicitly articulate women’s concerns and reflect female perspectives, albeit within a traditional context of romantic relationships, family, and community.

### *Romica Puceanu*

Countless cântece lăutărești performed by Puceanu, and especially her cântece de ascultare, are songs of sadness and yearning. Many are about unhappy love and the longing, hurt, and loneliness that it generates. Profoundly emotional, they can be felt as songs about unlucky love but also about collective misery. They are songs that elicit grief, resentment, nostalgia, and catharsis.

Numerous songs that Puceanu sang were, true to the lăutar repertoire, told from the point of view of men. In a particularly dark song, “Deschide, gropare, mormântul” (“Open My Tomb, o Gravedigger”; see [Video 2: Puceanu 2001a](#)), the voice is male, yet Puceanu embraces it as a voice of universal pain. The male narrator speaks from his tomb, holding a conversation with a gravedigger and asking him to release him in order to visit his parents’ home where he can be reunited with his family and fiancée:

Gropare, deschide mormântul meu, Afară ca să ies <i>măi</i> <sup>18</sup>	O gravedigger, open my tomb So that I can get out;
La casa părintească să mă reîntorc aș vrea,	I’d like to return to my parents’ home,
Să-mii văd frați, rude, prieteni pe care mă dorea’,	To see my brothers, relatives, and friends who held me dear,

<sup>18</sup> I italicize all of the metatextual interjections and expressions that are present in the Romanian lyrics (such as *măi* in this verse). Although I discuss them in my readings here, I omit them in my English translations.

Logodnica-mi iubită care mă iubea.  
*măi*

And my beloved fiancée who loved me.

Part of the lexicon of cântece lăutărești is comprised of the metatextual interjections (in italics in the Romanian verses) that singers include in the poetry. While many of them serve metrical purposes (filling out lines), they also typically convey meaning. The syllable of completion *măi* is included in the second and fifth (Romanian) verses above. But it also expresses emotion. *Măi* is a vernacular interjection, “a word of address to one or more males” (Coteanu, Seche, and Seche 1975: 530), a device that brings the singer closer to the gravedigger whom “he” is addressing while also creating a connection with the audience. Begging the gravedigger to release him, the deceased entreats him, in graphic images, to

Ia-mi giulgiul de pe față,  
Scutură-mi țărâna de pe oase.

Remove the shroud from my face,  
Shake the dirt off my bones.

He is released and, at his parents’ home, observes:

Frați, rude, surori și prieteni, toți  
din pahar îmi ciocnea’;  
Logodnica-mi iubită la altu-n brațe-  
mi sta,  
Iar bătrâna mamă în fundul curții  
mă jelea. *dragă*

My brothers, relatives, sisters, and friends  
– all were toasting me;  
My beloved fiancée was in the arms of  
another,  
While my old mother was mourning me at  
the back of the courtyard.

While the voice in this song is the forlorn (albeit deceased) male, two other roles assume female identity: the departed’s mother and the fiancée who has now found love with another. The juxtaposition of the mother, who grieves for her lost son, with his love who has betrayed him, underscores the proverbial loyalty and insider bonds between mother and son in traditional patrilocal societies and the outsider roles that wives and fiancées endure. Through these secondary roles, Puceanu adopts female perspectives that enrich these gendered dimensions. Moreover, the vocative interjection *dragă* (dear) – addressed in an abstract sense to listeners – at the end of the third verse above underscores the mother’s sorrow but also the singer’s intimacy with her audience. Heartsick and embittered, the deceased returns to his grave. Reinvoking the initial verse of the song, but now with an inverted meaning, he entreats the gravedigger again:

Gropare, deschide mormântul meu,  
Fă-mi loc să intru înapoi. *măi*  
...  
M-oi împăca cu viermii,  
C-așa mi-a fost dat:  
Femeia credincioasă să n-o crezi  
niciodată.

O gravedigger, open my tomb,  
Make room for me to enter again.  
...  
I’ll make peace with the worms,  
Because such is my fate:  
Don’t ever believe that a woman is  
faithful.

Although this song is told from the point of view of a man, in the rendition by Puceanu, I suggest that its message of the agony of duplicity and the inevitability of death transcend gender. It is about betrayal but also about family, mortality, and fate. The deceased’s return back to the grave and resigning himself to it as a permanent abode of

darkness, seclusion, and eternal void, where worms are one's companions, is preferable to seeing his love in the arms of someone else, as the voice makes clear at the end of the song. This is a deeply pessimistic message and can be extended to refer to opting for the oblivion and isolation of death over the constant pain of life. It also represents a type of resignation since death is destined for all; no one escapes. Indeed, destiny, which surfaces at the end of this song, is frequently expressed in *cântece de ascultare*. It serves, in the songs of *muzica lăutărească*, as a trope of the inescapability of misery and persecution. As Costache points out, “direct critique of systemic oppression is never heard in [*muzica*] *lăutărească*. Instead, when the speaker of the text of a song bemoans her existence, she channels blame toward abstract entities like ‘fate’” (2021: 179). In the language of *cântece lăutărești*, as in this song, destiny represents inexorable pain in an intangible, yet simultaneously tangible and evocative sense.

Turning to songs that explicitly offer a woman's perspective, a well-known *cântec de ascultare* in Puceanu's repertoire – “Blestemat să fii de stele” (“May You Be Cursed by the Stars”; see [Video 3: Puceanu 2013](#)) – is likewise about disingenuous, unfaithful love. In Puceanu's frequent songs about romantic relationships, love is virtually always unhappy and unlucky: she falls in love and gets entangled with men who are not good for her or with lovers who are disloyal. This song starts with the female voice telling her man that she would have him cursed by the stars, implying a type of cosmic doom. She tells him:

Blestemat să fii de stele	May you be cursed by the stars
...	...
Fecior de muiere rea,	Son of a bad woman,
Părăsește ulița, <i>of, of, of</i>	Go away from my street,
Pleacă de la casa mea,	Get out of my house,
Să nu mă dai de belea.	Don't make trouble for me.

The female voice accuses him of being from a depraved family: son of a “bad woman” (*muiere rea*), a pejorative phrase in Romanian.<sup>19</sup> When Puceanu tells her man to get out of her life by leaving both her home and neighborhood, she punctuates this idea with *of, of, of*, syllables that convey grief in colloquial usage. And again, when she declares that she would never wish the “love” that she experiences with a man like hers on anyone, in the third line below, the vernacular interjections *of, of, of* again intensify these emotions. Puceanu laments her bad luck with men, declaring that

<i>dragă nenii</i> Dragoste fără de noroc,	Ill-fated love,
Dragoste cu neica mea	The kind of love I have with my man
N-aș dori la nimenea. <i>of, of, of</i>	I wouldn't wish on anyone.
Dragoste cu neica mea	The kind of love I have with my man
N-aș dori la nimenea. <i>măi</i>	I wouldn't wish on anyone.

Metatextual vocative exclamations consisting of nouns or adjectives plus nouns such as *Dragă nenii* at the beginning of the last cluster of verses above is a type of filler with an

<sup>19</sup> The noun for “woman” in this verse (*muiere*) is derogatory (Coteanu, Seche, and Seche 1975: 574); as a term for the lover's mother, it also subverts the traditional Balkan cult of motherhood.

expressive resonance. *Nenii* is a familiar, masculine kinship term (meaning uncle or brother), which is further intensified in this context by the adjective *dragă* (“dear”). The sense is the vocative “dear uncle” or “dear brother” – an interjection that is called out as an emotional utterance embellished by melismatic intensity. It simultaneously addresses a listener or listeners, thereby kindling familiarity between Puceanu and them.

Puceanu’s strongest female voice in the songs that she sings comes through as the doomed and unfortunate lover. In “De când te iubesc pe tine” (“Ever Since I’ve Loved You”; see [Video 4: Puceanu 2001b](#)), yet another romance has gone awry, and the singer tries to understand why:

Foaie verde mărgărit,	Green leaf of the lily of the valley,
Fir-ai, neică, afurisit!	May you be damned, man!
Atunci când te-am cunoscuti,	Back when I first met you,
Nu știu ce rău ți-am făcut;	I don’t know how I wronged you;
<i>dragă</i> Nu știu ce rău ți-am făcut.	I don’t know how I wronged you.
<i>nene</i>	

The song starts with an introductory formula in the first line, followed by the singer’s grievances. This love clearly is not right for her, and she regrets ever having met her unlikely partner. The feminine singular adjective in the fourth and fifth verses below (*fericită*, meaning happy) reinforces the female voice of the singer:

De când te iubesc pe tine,	Ever since I’ve loved you,
<i>dragă</i> Eu nu mai am zile bune.	I haven’t had good days.
Dacă nu te cunoașteam,	If I had never met you,
Mai fericită eram;	I would be happier now;
Mai fericită eram. <i>dragă</i>	I would be happier now.

At this point in the song, luck (*noroc*), akin to fate, is invoked and “blamed” for this love that has gone wrong:

Foaie verde trei migdale,	Green leaf of three almond trees,
<i>neică</i> Cine mi te-a scos în cale?	Who made you cross my path?
Puică, nu mai blestema,	Darling, don’t curse me,
Că nu este vina mea;	‘Cause it’s not my fault;
<i>dragă</i> Că nu este vina mea. <i>dragă</i>	‘Cause it’s not my fault.
De vină-i norocul tău,	Your luck is to blame,
Că te-a scos în drumul meu;	‘Cause it caused you to chance upon my
	way;
<i>dragă</i> Că te-a scos în drumul meu.	‘Cause it caused you to chance upon my
<i>dragă</i>	way.

The female voice in the cântec de ascultare “Nu mă amăgi, băiete” (“Don’t Deceive Me, Boy”; see [Video 5: Puceanu 1982](#)) addresses her love in yet another unhappy relationship. She tells her man not to betray her – although she knows that he already does – and tells him:

Nu mă amăgi, băiete,	Don’t deceive me, boy,
<i>mă nene</i> Și de vrei să mă iubești,	And if you want to love me,
<i>măi</i>	



Iubește-mă cu plăcere; <i>au, aoleu</i>	Then love me with pleasure;
Dar tu numai mă amăgeștii. <i>măi</i>	But you only [want to] deceive me.

She reminds him how much she loved and desired him but that he simply has not reciprocated.<sup>20</sup> The tempo of this song is extremely slow and unhurried. Puceanu masterfully negotiates long and ornate melismatic passages, lending a particular intensity to her delivery and underscoring once again how the female voice expresses humiliation and sorrow in love in deeply emotional ways.

Unfaithful, abusive, ill-fated, and unrequited love are among the main themes that resonate in the songs that represent women's perspectives in Puceanu's repertoire. These songs provide an opportunity for her to express, from a female point of view, the range of emotions that ill-chosen love provokes and in terms that speak to a collective sisterhood. Such "love" perhaps should not happen, but it relentlessly does; its near predictability relates to notions of destiny often embedded within cântece lăutărești.

### *Gabi Luncă*

Like Puceanu, Gabi Luncă also sang songs informed by life experience and pain as well as by ethnoracial and gendered identity. Many of the cântece lăutărești in her repertoire were marked by a female voice that spoke to family issues (especially mothers and children) as well as fate and luck.

In one of Luncă's well-known cântece de ascultare, "Supărată sunt pe lume" ("I'm Upset with the World"; see [Video 6: Luncă 1999c](#)), the voice is unmistakably female. The "plot" relates a woman's predicament. Moreover, the female presence is marked by feminine singular adjectives such as *supărată* ("upset," "sad") throughout the song. Luncă provides the setting in the first stanza in a third-person narrative voice:

Foaie verde de mărar,	Green leaf of dill,
<i>nene</i> Sus în deal, lângă stejari, <i>măi</i>	Up on the hill by an oak tree,
Plânge o fată cu dor	A girl is weeping with longing
Și spune păsărilor: <i>dragă</i>	And telling the birds:

After the introductory formula, the three-verse scene is framed by the interjections *nene* and *dragă*. *Măi* punctuates the second verse as well. The story then turns exclusively to the words and thoughts of the female protagonist in the first person. In the third verse below, *mă* is a variant of *măi*.

Supărată sunt pe lume. <i>aoleu</i>	I'm upset with the world.
Mi-aș face-o casă-n pădure: <i>aha</i>	I would make myself a house in the forest:
<i>Dragă neni, mă!</i>	
O căsuță de pământî,	A little house of clay;
<i>nene</i> Să stau în ea și să plângî. <i>mă</i>	I'd sit in it and weep.

<sup>20</sup> Special thanks to Carmen Mateiescu for help in interpreting this passage.

The girl (*fata*) wishes to forsake her world, and even her family, and be alone in her misery, to protect her mother and siblings from the shame that they may feel on account of her:

Să stau, acolo, pustie, Nimenia să nu mă știe, <i>dragă</i> Nici mama, nici frații mei, <i>aoleu</i> Să nu sufere și ei. <i>aha</i> <i>Dragă nenii, mă!</i>	I'd stay there all alone, No one would know where I am, Not mama, nor my brothers and sisters, So that they do not also suffer.
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Her sense of shame and a recognition that she does not “belong” are intensified by the fact that only she, among her female age-mates, is not married:

Că văd fetele ca mine, <i>Dragă nenii, mă!</i> <i>nene</i> Au bărbat și o duc bine, Au bărbat și o duc bine, <i>dragă</i> Dar eu nu știu ce-oi avea De nu-mi rostuiesc viața. <i>aha</i> <i>Dragă nenii, mă!</i>	Because I see girls like me,  They have husbands and are doing well, They have husbands and are doing well, But I don't know what's wrong with me Since I can't get my life in order.
--	--

As her despair comes to a head, she addresses *noroc* (“luck”) in the vocative, saying:

<i>Măi</i> noroace, <i>măi</i> noroace, <i>nene</i> De te-aș prinde, ce ți-aș face? <i>mă</i> Să te gălesc într-un loc, Din trei părți ți-aș pune foc, <i>dragă</i> Că la toți le-ai dat noroc, <i>aoleu</i>  <i>ah</i> Numai mie mi-ai dat focî. <i>aha</i> <i>Dragă nenii, mă!</i>	O luck, o luck, If I could catch you, what would I do to you? If I could find you somewhere, I'd set a fire on three sides of you, Because you bestowed good luck on everyone else, But you've only set me on fire. . .
--	--

This song positions a young woman in the midst of intense social pressure from her community and family; she is disappointed and ashamed that she has become an “old maid,” a miserable humiliation in the traditional world that this song evokes. She not only fails to fulfill a social expectation of getting married and having a family but will also not be personally fulfilled by loving and caring for a husband and children. In a world where women had few choices in life, and marriage was the norm and an emblem of social status, the female protagonist in this song feels her life to be profoundly meaningless. She is embarrassed and considers herself an outsider who must run away where no one knows or can find her, not even her own family members. The words and images of this song tell this tale, but embedded in them are questions, once again, of fate and luck, and how they can be “blamed” for life’s unfortunate experiences. Luck even becomes a tangible entity whom the female voice attempts to locate and burn, just as luck has burned her. It is as if the lamenting girl is wrestling with her own destiny.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> I wish to thank Costin Moisil for helping me sort out some of these interpretations.

This song is movingly rendered by Luncă. She repeats certain verses for effect plus fills it with a variety of interjections and phrases that intensify her delivery: *nene*, *măi*, *mă*, *dragă*, *aha*, and *aoleu*. “*Aoleu*” is an “exclamation that expresses pain, fear, longing, and wonder” (Coteanu, Seche, and Seche 1975: 43) and voices some of the deep emotions that are frequently articulated in *cântece lăutărești*. Lyrics that employ it are often associated with Romani performance and are called, by some, “songs of ‘*aoleu*’” (Costache 2021: 232). Here Luncă sings *aoleu* and *aha* at the end of certain verses in particularly expressive melismatic sequences. Her constant use of interjections connects her intimately with her topic and audience.

Luncă also frequently sang *cântece de ascultare* with maternal themes, some of which expressed the anguish of being motherless, something she herself experienced. They are typically sung from a female point of view. As songs “of ‘*aoleu*’” (not to mention of *dragă*, *dragă nenii*, *of*, *măi*, and *mă*), the emotional involvement on the part of the singer is movingly present. In “Am avut o măicușoară” (“I Had a Dear Mother”; see [Video 7: Luncă 2009](#)), Luncă’s song, which would appear to be quasi-autobiographical, begins with

Și-am avut o măicușoară, Și-a fost tare bunăioară, Și într-o joi de dimineață, A-ncetat mama din viață. <i>măi măi</i> <i>măi</i>	I had a dear mother, And she was such a good mother, And then one Thursday morning, Mama slipped away.
Țin-te, mamă, nu muri, Păi, mamă, că rămânem cinci copii,	Hold on, Mama, please don’t die, Hey Mama, ‘cause we’re five children left alone,
Că rămânem cinci copii, <i>aha aoleu</i> Cinci copii prea supărați, <i>măi</i> De tine, mamă, lăsații De tine, mamă, lăsații. <i>măi</i>	We’re five children left alone, Five really wretched children, Left by you, Mama, Left by you, Mama.
Dacă trăia mama noastră, Toți prea ți-am fi fost acasă. <i>aha</i> <i>aoleu</i>	If our mama had lived, We would have all been together at home with you [her].
Casa, mamă, ce-am avutii Niciodată n-am să uitii.	The house, Mama, that we had I will never forget.

Luncă goes on to reminisce about the home that the narrator knew in her childhood, ending with an image of a devastated “*fetiță fără mamă*” (“a little girl without a mother”), forlorn and forgotten. The song ends with: “Ea duce o viață amară. *măi*” (“She leads a life of sorrow”).

This song laments the premature death of a mother and the pain it brings to the children left behind, especially the first-person voice who recounts the heart-rending experiences that defined her childhood and life. Although focused on specific events, the sentiments evoked can be individual as well as collective – about both the hurt of losing a beloved mother as a child as well as the pain of being denied dignity and respect as a person.

Another song that expresses a universal female predicament recounts the confession and remorse expressed by a contrite young woman who tells her mother, “Dă, mamă, cu biciu-m mine!” (“O Mama, Whip Me!”; see [Video 8: Luncă 1999b](#)). Here a daughter tells her mother to punish her for not listening to her advice to guard her virginity before marriage. She regrets her own disobedience and promises to tell others like her to be more careful:

Foaie verde măracine,	Green leaf of the briar,
Dă, mamă, cu biciu-n mine!	O Mama, whip me!
Dă, mamă, cu biciu-n mine, <i>aha</i>	O Mama, whip me
Că n-am ascultat de tine! <i>dragă lelii</i>	‘Cause I didn’t listen to you!
De tine dacă-ascultam, <i>aha, aoleo</i>	If I had listened to you,
Ce fericită eram. <i>mă</i>	How happy I would be.
La toată lumea oi spune	I will tell everyone
Să nu se joace ca mine, <i>mă</i>	To not play around like I did,
Că eu m-am jucat cu focu’, <i>aha</i>	‘Cause I played with fire
Și era să-mi pierd norocu’; <i>mă, dragă lelii</i>	And was about to lose my luck;
M-am jucat cu dragostea, <i>aha, aoleo</i>	I played with love
<i>nene</i> Și mi-am distrus liniștea. <i>mă</i>	And destroyed my peace.

The daughter, who has alluded, in the text above, to her *noroc* or good luck, continues, remarking on fate (*soartă*): how it has spoiled her life and how she regrets what she has done:

Dacă-ai știi, măicuța mea,	If only you knew, dear Mama,
Cum mi-e inima de grea,	How heavy my heart is,
Cum mă rog noaptea la stele, <i>aha</i>	How I pray to the stars at night
Să spună gândurile mele, <i>dragă lelii</i>	To utter my thoughts,
Că-așa soarta ca a mea <i>aha, aoleu</i>	That a fate such as mine
<i>nene</i> Nu doresc la nimenea! <i>mă</i>	I don’t wish on anyone!
Cine-ascultă de părinții	Whoever obeys her parents
Plânge cu lacrimi fierbinți. <i>mă</i>	Weeps with burning tears.
Eu una n-am ascultatî, <i>aha</i>	I am one who didn’t obey.
Și numai de rău am dat. <i>mă, dragă lelii</i>	And so I’ve met only with misfortune.
În viața cât oi trăi, <i>aha</i>	As long as I live on this earth,
Mamă, la tine mă voi gândi! <i>mă</i>	Mama, I will think of you!

This cautionary message is also compassionate; Luncă lingers on and intensifies especially emotional thoughts through extra-textual syllables at the ends of lines as if to lend a tenor of anguish to the verses that comprise her tale.

Luncă repeatedly focuses in her repertoire on the figure of the mother in a variety of different roles. In the song that she sang for the Ceaușescus, “Am crescut băieți și fete” (“I Raised Sons and Daughters”); see discussion on pages 10–11), she references the disappointments and loneliness that motherhood can bring when children grow up and leave home. Here “O măicuță singurea” (“A Lonely Mother”); see [Video 9: Luncă 2002](#)), also tells of a “forsaken” mother who waits day in and day out for letters from her children, which never arrive. After many of the couplets, a verse-long refrain is invoked:

“*Au, au, au, inimioara mea!*” comprised of three extra-textual syllables plus, literally, “my dear (little) heart” (“*inimioară*” is a diminutive of “*inimă*,” heart):

O măicuță singurea Își ascunde lacrima, <i>Au, au, au Inimioara mea!</i> Că de când postaș m-așteaptă, A prins rădăcini în poartă, <i>Au, au, au Inimioara mea!</i> Stă în poartă măicuța Și în gând îmi zice-așa; <i>mă</i> Stă în poartă măicuța Și în gând îmi zice-așa: <i>mă</i>	A lonely mother Hides her tears, O my dear heart! 'Cause since the postman last stopped by, The roots have taken over the gate, O my dear heart! The mother stands at the gate And in her thoughts she says; The mother stands at the gate And in her thoughts she says:
Măi postașule om bun, Mă uit iar cum treci pe drum, <i>Au, au, au Inimioara mea!</i> Treci grăbit nu te oprești; Căsuța mi-o ocolești; <i>Au, au, au Inimioara mea!</i>	Hey postman, my good man, I'm watching you walk down the road, O my dear heart! You quicken your step, you don't stop; You pass by my little house; O my dear heart!
Tu la toți le duci scrisorî, Dar pe mine mă-nconjori; <i>mă</i> Tu la toți le duci scrisorî, Iar pe mine mă-nconjori. <i>mă</i>	You bring letters to all the others, But as for me, you pass me by; You bring letters to all the others, But as for me, you pass me by.
Spune, bunule postaș: N-ai pierdut nici un răvaș? <i>Au, au, au Inimioara mea!</i> Oare chiar nu ai nimic De la băiatul cel mic? <i>Au, au, au Inimioara mea!</i> Poate măcar o scrisoare De la fata cea mai mare? Poate măcar o scrisoare De la fata cea mai mare?	Tell me, good postman: Have you perhaps lost a missive? O my dear heart! Do you really not have anything From my youngest son? O my dear heart! Maybe at least a letter From my oldest daughter? Maybe at least a letter From my oldest daughter?

The age-old cycle of parents and children who themselves become parents with children, connects with a theme that fills so many of these songs although it is only implicit here: fate.

In Luncă's many cântece lăutărești that express the plight of women, it is frequently mothers and daughters whom she references, turning to their sorrows during various stages of their lives – moments that, in this repertoire, so often intersect with destiny. Pain in this context for them includes not getting married as society expects, the loss that children feel when mothers die prematurely, the shame of becoming pregnant before marriage, and the neglect that mothers feel when their children grow up, leaving them with empty homes and hearts.

## Conclusion

I have focused, in this article, on two women who gained considerable prominence in their lifetimes as traditional Romani vocalists: Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă. Both Puceanu and Luncă formed part of the southern Romanian urban *lăutar* world, the center of which is Bucharest, recognized for its rich tradition of Romani music and song. Moreover, they were best-known for their quintessentially Romani song genres and style of singing, *muzica lăutărească*. While ethnoracial identity provides a general backdrop to my discussion (and indeed to virtually any examination of Romani musicians), I have explored in particular the role of gender in the repertoires of the *cântece lăutărești* that Puceanu and Luncă performed. I have examined ways in which these pioneering female Romani vocalists performed songs about gender in a world in which Roma have not only been systemically persecuted, but where Romani women have also been marginalized.

My attention in this discussion has been drawn to the “songs of pain” in the repertoires of Puceanu and Luncă in which women and girls speak: songs that permit female voices and perspectives to be expressed and vented. Given the nature of the world of *lăutari*, professionals who make their living from performance “on call,” the *cântece lăutărești* that Puceanu and Luncă sang as women about women clearly resonated – with both Roma and Romanians. As metaphors for pain, the songs also conveyed “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990), not only about gender but also about the “Romani experience,” comprehensible to those whose own life’s knowledge enabled them to “hear” it. As Costache observes, Puceanu, Luncă, and other Romani voices of the mid-20th century “hid in plain sight their resistance to the totalizing force of communist-era fascist deterritorialization, erasure and silencing within their contemporaneous musical practices that have come to define, nostalgically, the era of late Communism for Romanians and Roma alike” (2021: 227–228).

The songs sung by Puceanu and Luncă are so moving partly because of the multi-layered lyric and sonic textures that they combine and the diverse ways in which audiences can experience meaning. They are powerful acknowledgements that range from the heartache of unfaithful, abusive, ill-fated, or unrequited romantic relationships to humiliating traditional social constraints imposed on women, the aching loss of maternal love, the shame of unrestrained passion, or the abandonment of aging parents. Embedded in these messages are meanings that transcend the personal and speak to the collective pain of living within a suppressed sisterhood and a spurned ethnoracial minority. The superb artistry of Puceanu and Luncă is attained through an intensity and absolute command emotion-wise of vocal technique, as well as a sensitivity to the human experience. Their songs are thus both routinely quotidian and profoundly universal. Ethnorace and gender inform the performances of Romica Puceanu and Gabi Luncă in powerful intersections of meaningful words and expressive sounds.

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