

**Jacques Bouët – Bernard
Lortat-Jacob – Speranta
Radulescu: À TUE-TÊTE:
CHANT ET VIOLON AU PAYS
DE L'OACH, ROUMANIE.**

Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie,
2002, 533 pp., CD-DVD.

Starting in 2000, the French Ethnomusicological Society (*Société française d'ethnomusicologie*) published, in the edition *Hommes et musiques*, several remarkable monographs dedicated to the music of various parts of the world and covering a range of basic contemporary ethnomusicological research topics. Their common characteristic is thorough field research, with the aid of which were brought to light not only musicological, but mainly cultural anthropological aspects of the problematics which were investigated.

Fourth in the series of this edition was *À tue-tête: Chant et violon au Pays de l'Oach, Roumanie* by three distinguished ethnomusicologists (Jacques Bouët, Bernard Lortat-Jacob and Speranta Radulescu), who, in the course of the nineties, set out a few times for this poor agricultural Oach region on the northern border of Romania with Hungary and Ukraine. Here music is mostly heard at weddings and at Sunday dances, but it is also heard during work in the fields. It is sung in a particular way, "at the top of one's voice," that is, in an unusually high position with characteristic initial exclamation or shouting, after which follows a descending melody. According to local custom, men play the violin either alone or with a peculiar accompaniment of the

guitar; in addition, a flute, leaf or Jew's harp may be used. The area is famous for its musical tradition; in the introduction to the book the authors characterize it as "extremely unusual and bewildering, unfamiliar to West Europeans and even to Romanians from other regions" (p. 7). Local people point out with certain pride that scholars barely understand their music: not one of the researchers was born in this region, so they could not "absorb" it from their childhood. Despite that, or even for that reason, it is necessary to carry out research. When one says, "music of the Oach," however, one uncertainty emerges: did not the famous Béla Bartók (and after him a few other researchers) already investigate this region from a musicological point of view and make tens of transcriptions which are legendary today?

Not only the world and, along with it, musical tradition, but also the methodological approach to both, however, change. Facts in the publication corroborate both. Despite considerable esteem for Bartók and his remarkable work, the authors feel a certain need to juxtapose themselves with his and Constantin Brailoiu's methods and goals. The time of one-shot forays with the purpose of "a hunt for a tune" collected from peasants, from whom it is necessary to get to know "only" their name, age, religion and marital status, is over. Replay of Bartók's transcriptions of local musicians, nevertheless, will help to nail down certain findings.

From the information of researchers, it is clear that the music of the Oach was still, in the 1990s, a component of daily life; it accompanies both special and ordi-

nary occasions. For all of this to come to light, it is often necessary to obtain and maintain the fragile confidence of the people and spend hours and hours in the field, from which gradually, as from a landscape covered by fog, there emerge miscellaneous facts that it is necessary, with initial insecurity and confusion, to *(re)construct*. According to the authors, the contents of the publication were produced in the field, where the researchers became witnesses to a considerable number of weddings, watched Sunday dances, conducted interviews with a number of people, with the aid of their own sense of hearing and modern technology recorded hundreds of musical performances, lived in village buildings and, with local people, drank *horinka* spirits out of a common glass, as was the custom.

In the introductory part we find a synopsis and the above-mentioned methodological assumptions. The authors conceived the publication deliberately to corroborate the approach of their research work. The uniqueness of the monograph is the segmentation of its chapters into two parts, of which the first is often perhaps too literary, while the second is a professionally conceived presentation of the problem or situation described in the first part. In the "literary" parts of the chapters the researchers do not hesitate to depict subjectively tuned perceptions of observed facts, impressions of the people researched and their assumptions; they admit occasional doubts, dilemmas and fatigue caused not only by a musically specific and for them foreign environment.

All of this, although not always outwardly admitted by a number of research-

ers, undoubtedly belongs to field research. Although in the text one finds diverse and rather disturbing allusions, for example, to oppressive social and economic conditions of the local inhabitants, one does not get bogged down in an interpretation of details which would exceed the field of relevant information. The publication is mainly about the music of the Oach, but without knowing the people, their fates and the world in which they live, it could not exist, nor could its interpretation be formulated by the researchers. Although the authors claim that the first part of the chapters can be left out during a reading of them, they have their importance in their ability to confirm the contextual background, formulations of ethnomusicological conclusions.

At first, readers are also shown the equivocality of the first information obtained and key questions of the researchers which are clarified in the following chapters. At first they cause considerable difficulty as various informants conflictingly defined musical terms such as *dant*, *pont*, *figura*, and *tipurit*, whose role in local music is, however, basic. The authors of the book decided to hold onto original Oach terminology, supplemented by their Western musicological characteristics so that there would not be a flattening, a simplifying of reality in the field. All things considered, the goal is not to *take possession* of music in our way, but to get to know and understand it as a peculiar tradition, a system organized according to its own, not coincidental rules.

The first chapter is oriented toward the musicological side of the problem: Which Oach musical expressions are considered

music and what distinguishes it? At first, researchers are confused: everything, whether it is about solo singing, violin playing or playing another instrument, during dance or without it, is termed as *dant* by the locals. A second crucial term is *pont*, which evidently is immediately connected with *dant*. With increasing knowledge, researchers are capable of ascertaining that the *dant* is the emblematic musical form for the region, whether sung or played on an instrument, which is composed of various numbers of eight-beat melodic-rhythmical segments (*pont*) and is similar to another Romanian (and also Balkan) form (*strigatura*), for which “shouting” verses in dance rhythm is typical. Each *dant* has a range of one and a half octaves and characteristic progression: at the beginning there is the introductory “shout” (*tipuritura*), along with a descending melody whose range of intervals narrows toward the conclusion. A *dant* that is sung seems to be a relatively simple form which increases in complexity if it is played on a violin or sung with guitar accompaniment. Basically it has two forms: the “dance” *dant de jucat* – in a lively, quick tempo, while a slower *dant* is interpreted locally with characteristic singing “at the top of one’s voice.” The higher the singing and the noisier or “rougher” the singing, the better the *dant*. In private, however, it is possible to sing more quietly and in the middle position. Every *dant*, nevertheless, has its appropriate position – some should be sung/played low (*dant pe jos*), while others high (*dant pe sus*). The delimitation of the position is, however, relative: with singers, the category of “low” or “high” depends on the abilities of the individual;

just as with instruments, it depends on the highest or lowest playable position. This basic information complements a detailed musical analysis of all parts of the *dant*, which are the introductory *tipuritura*, the “beginning” *inceput*, the *figura/refren* = ritornel (typical for music and dance in Transylvania) and the concluding *terminat*.

The basis for all interpretive assumptions is the thoroughly worked transcription of sound materials along with transcripts of sung texts in the original version and in a French translation. A valuable supplement of the monograph is a DVD on which there are sound and audiovisual examples which capture a Sunday dance, a wedding, the course of an evening visit to some girls, and an excerpt of an interview with one of the informants. Musical transcriptions can also be heard in sound form. Scholars’ information of field research suitably complements the basic, broad characteristics of the region studied and an essay about predecessors who carried out research here. Mainly, the musicological information confronts the authors with the results of research done in the past and also records basic changes substantiated with facts which showed organological research of local musical instruments. The authors refer to the findings of Béla Bartók in the years 1912 and 1913, the research of Constantin Brailoiu of the ’30s and the development studied in the ’60s and ’70s. Despite the disappearance of many musical forms, the *dant* has been the core of local music since the beginning of the twentieth century and it still plays a dominant role today. With the advance of time, however,

violin playing and the way of accompaniment, both the pitch of tone and the speed of tempo have had an ascending tendency. The violin is an important musical instrument here. Despite the fact that in the Oach region Roma are in the minority, the introduction of violin playing has been attributed to them. The people of the Oach themselves consider the Roma the best violinists simply because they "have no other work." At the time of Bartók's research, violinists, *ceteras*, were almost exclusively "Gypsies"; later, however, the number of Romanian violinists increased. A most interesting fact is, however, that there was a considerable shift in playing and singing, in comparison with the time of Bartók's research; today the singing and playing are in a much higher position, which enabled an important modification of construction of the Oach violin and *zongora* guitar. So that violin playing resembled the strenuous singing "at the top of one's voice" at the limit of the physiological possibilities of a voice, violin tuning and the position of the individual strings were adjusted, which also permitted typical local playing with progression of parallel fifths.

Musicological character soon alternates with interesting cultural anthropological findings. The authors pay special attention to the fact that the performance of the *dant* is personal, but it is also a family matter. It turns out that the *dant* is passed down in the family through the male line to descendents, including to women. *Dants* are thus some sort of historiography of the area and credit for their maintenance goes mainly to the violinist (*ceteras*) who remembers many *dants* that are the "emblem" of

local families and thus he also preserves them for his descendents, who would forget them. After puberty, thus, each has his "own" inherited *dant*, to which, however, he must add something personal. Therefore one *dant*, according to informants, has so many varied forms. Researchers further find that the *dant*, concretely singing "at the top of one's voice" and dance music, are mostly performed by young people and they notice its important role in the period of courtship, described evening visits to girls and Sunday dances, and during a wedding ceremony. There appears again the well-known hypothesis about the connection of musical performances with the period of youth, i.e., concurrently with sexuality and preparation for entrance into marriage. It is confirmed by the fact that especially young people sing in a high position with considerable vocal tension; at the same time, however, they do not use a suitable head register. High, but, despite that, chest singing "at the top of one's voice" has, namely, according to the authors, a relation to the lower part of the body connected with sexuality. The *dant* also belongs not only to the world of youth but mainly to that of the *living*. Music proclaiming death and crying over the dead is not a *dant*, which is evident from the musical instruments used and also from the way of singing/playing and the shape of the melody.

The authors attempt to confirm the very understanding of the *dant* and its peculiarities by having *dants* composed by themselves judged by one of the most skillful local musicians. How surprised were they when Gheorghe Meti considered a *dant* composed by Sper-

anta Radulescu as original, typical for a certain village of the region. Meti also considered other *dants* as indigenous if there did not vibrate in them elements that were atypical for the people of the Oach. Scholars then came to the conclusion that the *dant* must become whatever fills certain local musical criteria. The people of the Oach can adapt any melody to their own musical taste and, thus, accept it as their own. And so can also be explained the initially confusing variability and quantity of verses of the *dant*: the people of the Oach do not inherit a precise form of a melody, but a form or way of its formation. The *dant* is basi-

cally an “open” musical form which characterizes, apart from a few relatively common musical features, mainly a (cultural anthropological) *context* of its performance.

The epilog is a rather nostalgic musing over the future of this very unusual musical tradition that has been appearing in Europe to date. Does the music of this small region, despite the influences of modernity and the growing emigration of the inhabitants of the Oach, have a chance to survive? The conclusion ends ambiguously, but the validity of contemporary speculation can be confirmed only by the future.

Zita Skořepová Honzlová