Fabricants d’émotion

Musique et malice
dans un village tsigane de Roumanie

par

VICTOR ALEXANDRE STOICHITA

NANTERRE
Société d’ethnologie
2008
Summary

Zece Prăjini is a small village in the centre of the Moldavian region. It is special in two ways: firstly, unlike most Romanian villages, the majority of Zece Prăjini’s inhabitants describe themselves as Gypsies or Rroma; secondly, music making is their main source of financial income. Such professional musicians are called lăutari (in Romanian) or bagajăria (in Gypsy language). They perform at weddings, chrismenings, funerals, village feasts and fairs. Most of their clients are Romanians who live in the countryside or in one of the small towns in the area. The Moldavian lăutari currently play in two kinds of bands: brass bands — named fanfare — and smaller amplified ensembles, named orchestre. Both of them are described page 203.

Şmecheri and ciorani The Prăjinians say that technical creativity, but also lying, camouflage, speculation and fantasy all stem from a single intellectual aptitude, which is also an attitude towards the outside world. Several words can be used to refer to it, either in Romanian or in Gypsy. Two of them cover this entire semantic field: « şmecherie » and « ciorânie », which can be translated respectively as « cunning » and « slyness » (« ruse » and « malice » in the French text). This translation and the way the two terms stand for the rest of the vocabulary of trickiness are discussed on page 2 and following.

One can be şmecher or cioran by manipulating village gossip, family intrigues, or the hopes and fears of the others, by outsmarting someone in negotiation (although the şmecher avoids plain fraud), or by mending a car engine through a clever but unlikely fix. In their broadest sense, şmecherie and ciorânie refer to a kind of cleverness and a way of interacting with humans or with artefacts. They do not suggest, by themselves, anything musical in particular.

However, the lăutari and their friends explain that professional success in the lăutărie involves the same principles as negotiating, repairing and inventing. A lăutar can be cunning when dealing with his

1. Throughout the text, I use Gypsy and Rrom as equivalents, for reasons explained p. 13 ff.
listeners, but also while performing a tune: one can say that he plays «with guile» or «with cleverness», and it is possible to isolate portions of his performance as «tricks». This trickiness may serve to camouflage technical inabilities or to conceal memory gaps. But it is also — and more frequently — considered as the grounds of the best musicians’ virtuosity.

By combining ethnography with musical analysis, I have tried to shed a light on cunning and slyness, as ways of using and understanding circuitousness. This study draws on previous works on this topic. The most important influences were Détienne et Vernant (1974), Certeau (1980: 12,22) and Jullien (2002 et 2005), as well as manuals for military strategists (Clausewitz 1886, Sun Tzu 1972) and compilations of enthusiastic amateurs (like the famous Book of ruse, translated by Khawam 1976). What the Prăjinians bring into focus is the link which binds cleverness to a certain conception of pleasure, emotion and, perhaps, beauty.

1. The music factory

The first part of the book is about being a lăutar and a Rrom in this part of Romania. As far as statistics are concerned, the link is clear: most professional musicians are Gypsies. Various historical arguments have been proposed to explain this statistic. However, the Prăjinians (agreeing in this respect, with their Romanian neighbours) also give another reason: they say that Rroma are specially «gifted» for emotional manipulation. This is usually a negative characterisation. But in relation to music, such a «natural inclination» tends to be considered as an advantage for them.

In a Moldavian feast, the lăutari are hired to act, not to communicate. As a result, in their own words, neither «talent» nor «pleasure» matter: emotional efficiency simply involves knowledge and devotion to the work (both may be more or less developed). For the audience, good music does not necessarily reflect the musicians’ inner sentiments. Listeners do not attribute their own feelings to the supposed «sincerity» of the performance but directly to the sonic properties of what is being played.

Considered alone, melodies are supposed to have «characters»: some are said to be mournful, others are happy, others lively, some are good for walking, some for drinking, some for dancing… A good lăutar understands what kind of emotion is needed for a given moment and
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ENGLISH SUMMARY

seems to « adapt » the music to his listeners’ expectations. But when the
musicians talk about their activity, they do not appear to « serve » their
listeners: rather, they manipulate them.

An important feature of musical cleverness consists in this capacity
of insinuation and surreptitious action. The lăutari deploy techniques
to impress, to urge listeners to dance, to obtain a break by tiring the
dancers, to make a tip (bacşiş) unavoidable… Some techniques have to
do with speech and general presentation of self, while others unfold
only through music. Some are well known and conventional, while
others are recent, innovative and rather individual. Usually the latter
are also more efficient.

To put it briefly, musicians like to speak about themselves as
« emotion makers ». Comparing their activity to a craft allows them
to present it as a « proper job », to negotiate its status and remunera-
tion, in a society consisting mainly of peasants (who sometimes play
music but treat it as a mere hobby). This can be understood even
without reference to the actual detail of what they play. However,
professional musicians also qualify as « tricks » and « mischiefs » some
specifically musical behaviours.

2. **What is a melody?**

Everything I play is *ciorânie*. Everything is stolen, from one guy or another…
*Ciorânie* means that you listen to someone and you steal his *şmecherii*, you try
to copy him. For me, this is just what music is about. If I had to invent it
myself… Well, sometimes ideas also come to my mind, things that I have never
heard before. This is my own fantasy. But if you rely on this to play… No,
you rely on what you hear from others. You take a bit from him, a bit from
another, you mix in a bit of yours… That is *ciorânia*.

Didic, saxophone player (quoted p. 135).

**Tunes and motives** Every time it is learned and played back, a tune
goes through a process of sectioning and recombinant, which may
be more or less accurate. To replay or modify a tune, the musicians
break it up into smaller segments, which they treat as elementary units.
Most tunes seem to be obviously divided into separate parts and motifs,
linked by multiple patterns of symmetry, inversion, repetition and other
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formal processes. This analysis is discussed in chapters vi and viii, and illustrated by several interactive documents on the DVD.

This kind of modular composition has already received attention in several ethnomusicological studies. What I bring into focus is the fact that musicians’ freedom is not limited to combining pre-defined elements. It relies even more on a subjective partitioning of the performances heard.

In Zece Prăjini, there is no consensual stock of motifs, which would be transmitted by tradition. The motifs cannot even be numbered, for two reasons at least. Firstly, there is no clear-cut limit between the variants of one motif and those of another. Secondly, many musical forms (tunes, parts, etc.) can be decomposed in different ways, and these are not always compatible (see for example fig. 8 page 144). This means that what is perceived as the minimal organisational level of a given performance is prone to vary from one listener to another. All lăutari being primarily listeners, what some of them treat as a unit may be broken with greater detail by others, or even by themselves at another moment.

In the end, each performance stands as a highly structured ensemble where improvisation is not supposed to play any role. Between performances however, the tunes dissolve and recompose with an astonishing facility. This is the gap in which « cleverness » develops.

Music and technical invention The lăutari tend to treat music as grounds for competition and to view it as a constantly improving technique. One often hears that this or that tune has « progressed » (a progresat). Other metaphors are common such as « to speculate [on] the melodic line » (a specula linia melodică) or to « yield profit from the sound’s value » (a fructifica valoarea sunetului). Underlying these expressions, the logic of (pretty) enhancements is that they are discovered in the tune, not added to it (see chapter x p. 184 ff).

The idea that music is a technical device, progressing through astuteness and contextual imagination, allows the lăutari to think the constant renewal of their repertoire. Their « melodies » (melodii) are not made up ex-nihilo. As Didic says, « everything is stolen, from one guy or

2. This kind of document (see docs. 1, 2 or 3 for example) allows a « paradigmatic » listening of the performances. The reader can either listen to the whole tunes or isolate small musical sequences in order to compare them acoustically. Some of these analyses are backed by conventional transcriptions in the main text. However, the interactive examples have the advantage of being close to the kind of mental operation that the lăutari practice daily (also, as a side effect, they do not require the reader to be familiar with musical theory).
another… ». Nevertheless, it is still frequent to hear that this or that tune is « new ». A dozen of « new » melodii thus come into fashion every summer, while others sink imperceptibly into oblivion.

What the melodii are should be easy to understand — at least nobody in the region is surprised by their properties — but it appears to be difficult to conceptualise in musicological terms. In Zece Prăjini, it is common sense that the same melodie can be played as a horă or as a sârbă (two different musical genres, see p. 205 for a description and doc. 3 for an example), that changing a part for another does not necessarily change the melodie, that it can be played on an instrument or another… But few listeners are able to keep track of this chain of variants (and few actually try to). At some point, they stop speaking about one melodie and start counting two. It is impossible to identify the degree of variation beyond which the melodic models break apart and multiply.

What gives consistence to the melodii identified by the Moldavian listeners is not their acoustic shape. The role these entities assume in musical interactions is more decisive: they are invested with an agency which allows them to persist in-between performances and act in ways perceived as autonomous. These qualities fill in the gap between the technical skill involved in the production of the tunes and the pleasure felt by the listeners. Through these « musical beings » the guests can let themselves be acted upon by the music, while keeping the musicians at a distance. The third part of the book discusses the involvement of cunning and slyness in the actual construction of these sound devices during performance.

Variation and speculation To play the tunes they hear around them, young musicians begin by deriving easier variants from them. There is no special repertoire for beginners. One learns through tinkering with what others play, and the first step is to find ways to circumvent one’s technical weaknesses. This art of « camouflage » will later become, for the virtuoso, an art of cunning and « speculation ». Chapter IX deals with the link between the trickery of the beginners and the brilliant inventions of the elite lăutari.

Chapter X presents the facet of « cleverness », which is needed for collective playing, as well as individual fantasy. In spite of the fluidity of the repertoire, and even with a small number of rehearsals (the common sense in Zece Prăjini is that good musicians need not rehearse), several musicians still manage to agree upon a common path during
the performance. Visual communication is not the most important. It is usual for professionals to perform in spatial configurations in which they hardly see each other. For coordination, the lăutari pay more attention to clues embedded in the music itself. To be able to insert these clues (without spoiling the tune), to discover and interpret them, constitutes a kind of « sixth sense », which is commented upon as yet another way of being clever. This premonitory ability is linked with the exuberant fantasy of the virtuosos, in that both of them create links which tend to contradict the parcelling of the melodies into motifs. They both contribute to the natural, unavoidable logic which makes the tunes seem autonomous.

Zece Prăjini should not be seen as a « representative » community. It is peculiar in several respects. For example, it is quite rare to find such a concentration of Gypsy musicians in a single village. However, the ideas discussed by the Prăjinians have many echoes in other parts of Romania, the Balkans, and even the world. They are representative of a certain way of treating music: as a craft aimed at economic benefit, linked to emotions but rooted in technique, as a set of tools more than a system of rules, etc. Due to the unusual number of musicians and the high degree of competition amongst them, many matters that would be implicit elsewhere are made explicit in Zece Prăjini. As a conclusion, I suggest that these ideas should be treated as a kind of popular musicology, specially designed by and for professional musicians.
# Table des matières

**AVANT-PROPOS**  
7

**DOCUMENTS**  
11

**CONVENTIONS LINGUISTIQUES**  
13

## Première partie  
**La fabrique de musique**

### Chapitre premier — L'art de la feinte : introduction  
17
1. Tout le monde en parle  
   Radio-şanț  
   Rumeur et musique  
   17  
   20  
   21
2. Ruses, malices, feintes et astuces  
   Un réseau sémantique  
   Les rusés et les malins  
   22  
   23  
   24

### Chapitre II — L'histoire de l'ours qui dansait  
29
1. Qui est Tsigane?  
   Statistiques  
   Les ethnies et leurs frontières  
   29  
   30
2. Noms et étiquettes  
   « Chaudronniers », « cuilleriers », « montreurs d’ours »…  
   « Căldărari » et « Zavragii »  
   « Modorani »  
   « Lăieşî »  
   « Lingurari » ou « Caștale »  
   « Ursari »  
   « Gaje »  
   32  
   33  
   35  
   35  
   36  
   37  
   38
3. Quelques hectares de finesse  
   La brève histoire du village  
   Une fine poussière de distinction  
   41  
   41  
   43

227
FABRICANTS D’ÉMOTION

CHAPITRE III — Un mariage à Lugani
Courtois (obicei) 51
Nuit (noaptea) 57
Vers le matin (spre dimineață) 61

CHAPITRE IV — Fabricants d’émotion 63
1. Service public, faveurs privées 63
   Cachet et bakchich 63
   Crieurs publics 65
   Pour qui joue-t-on? 69
   Pour quoi joue-t-on? 70
2. Les étrangers de la fête 71
   Travail des uns, plaisir des autres 72
   Professionnels et amateurs 74
   Ruse et fantaisie 78
3. Un métier de pouvoir 80
   Des artisans comme les autres? 80
   Violence et persuasion 81
   Renversements 84

CHAPITRE V — Musique tsigane et Tiiganes musiciens 89
1. Une définition improbable 89
2. Tout est aux Roumains 92
3. « Avec le cœur, pas avec les pieds » 94
   Calme et agitation 94
   Style et non-style 97
4. Pureté et perversion 100

DEUXIÈME PARTIE
Qu’est-ce qu’une mélodie?

CHAPITRE VI — Une brocante d’éphémères 107
1. Définir les mélodies 107
2. Incertitudes 109
   Nommées? 109
   Modulaires? 110
   Adaptables? 116
   Reprises? 118
   Composées? 120
   Apprises? 121
3. La marchandise des lautari 124

CHAPITRE VII — Le juste, le faux, la ruse 127
1. L’erreur est-elle possible? 127
### Table des matières

Des différentes manières de se tromper 127  
Erreur et laisser-aller 130  
2. La variation essentielle 131

**Chapitre VIII — La musique en morceaux** 135  
1. Les constituants du jeu musical 136  
   Suites (cântări) 136  
   Mélodies (melodii) 137  
   Parties (parti) 138  
   Bouts (capete) 142  
2. Les ritournelles 145  
   Des fleurs de perle 145  
   De lâches liens 147  
3. Ce qui tombe sous le doigt 150  

**Chapitre IX — Bricolages et inventions** 153  
1. L'apprentissage des débutants 153  
   Premiers pas 153  
   Premières ruses 157  
2. L'apprentissage des lăutari accomplis 163  
   Du cerveau jusqu’au bout des doigts 163  
   Imaginer en fredonnant 165

**Chapitre X — Le sixième sens** 169  
1. Une cohésion miraculeuse 169  
   Lire autrui 169  
   Politesses 172  
   L’art du lien 177  
   Signaux et indices 180  
2. Spéculations musicales 181  
   La fantaisie se prépare 181  
   Fleurs et fruits 184

**Conclusion** 191  
1. Les déclinaisons de la ciorânie 191  
   La vérité et ses variantes 191  
   Une musique commerciale 193  
2. Une musicologie populaire ? 194

**Index des documents** 197

**Guide d’écoute** 203

**Glossaire** 209

**Conventions de notation musicale** 211