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Folk instruments in Mat territory and traditional folk orchestras

Mat region lies in the Northeast area of the country and borders Mirdita on the North, Dibra and Bulqiza on the East, Kurbin and Kruja on the West, Tirana and Librazhd on the South.

Mat region is a well-known and honored area of national heritage for its richness, diversity and density of spiritual and material values. Being at the natural center of Albania, Mat is a gate that links two Albanian areas known as High Albania and its South. Since a long time scholars, researchers, albanologists, archeologists, sociologists and linguists have been referring to this “deep folkloric well”, as defined by the honored Professor R. Sokoli and have been enchanted from its archeology, history and culture, from its personalities and historic assemblages, and the beautiful nature of this territory, like a natural amphitheater.

The richness of musical instruments: idiophone, aerophone, chordophone and membranophone; skill of performance; their varied artistic function; production tradition from local artisans, the capacity of sound mixing in creating orchestral formation for accompaniments of familiar ceremonies and various events, expansion of repertoire and extension of fusional functionality; all these definitely deserve the rightful attention and consideration from scientific mediums as an achievement of Albanian culture. The tradition of this instruments has followed the same steps as that of the surrounding areas, in cooperative and coordinative relations, especially during the second half of 20th Century. This period signs the institutionalization of research, development and promotion through folkloric ensembles.

As an area with rich lyricism, it holds “on its heart” treasures of artistic tradition, where prevails the diversity of musical instruments, richness of rhythms and melodies, the style of sound, etc. **Lauria**¹ is a chordophone instrument with bow, which still continues to accompany traditional songs and dances, also part of the famous folk instrument orchestra of Mat, awarded many times in National Festivals.

The tones of this orchestra have immortalized the creative spirit of Mat population, its most human and intellectual sensations, even in most difficult existential times.

Many scholars, experts and artists have been marveled from the sound unity, playing style, clean lines, tone characteristics and original sound of each instrument, by elevating it into an artistic value of the national tradition.

I think that introducing this artistic contribution into an expert panel will help in fulfilling the institutional and scientific duty toward artistic heritage.

Tradition...

Culture traces in Mat and their development in different social periods are a living proof of its habitant’s values and their huge contribution in our cultural heritage corpus.

The tradition of musical creativity development of this region is pretty ancient. The folk musical instruments, as part of its artistic talent and skill, and their artisanal production in continuous evolution are an indicator of the creative capabilities and aesthetical taste.

¹ Albanian musical instrument with 3 strings similar to the Byzantine lyre.

Mat region has always preserved and developed its material and spiritual culture. Matjans have poured out their soul pearls on their songs, dances, melodies and on their musical instruments. Ballads and folkloristic poetries eternalize big historical events and famous personalities of local and national level.

Archeologists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and other scholars have relied on data from archeological findings, drawings, ancient remainings, carves, etc. The high number of ornamental exhibits for men and women found in Illyrian barrows of Mat are an uncontestable proof of this ancient cultural development.

Different stages of society development have been accompanied by musical instruments and music, which has followed their historical development level. Of course, world ethnomusicology and ethnoorganology literature has had a very weak reaction toward this contribution, while that of Albania is quite recent and poorly promoted. These institutionalized studies and publishings were first encountered in the start of the second half on the 20th century, with the establishment of special folkloric and heritage institutions.

Researches have find out that since around two centuries, in Mat were used **aerophone** music instruments like kaval, flute, whistle, river cane flutes, zurna; **chordophone** instruments like çifteli, *lauria*, and later šargija; **membranophone** instruments like drum (*tumalek*), and later dayereh.

The variety of these instruments, their production technique from locals and their continous improvement, high execution technique and the circulation between regions are important factors in the tradition creation and its permanence.

In this paper we will not focus on history and the accuracy of their autochtonity or the implantation itinerancy, but we will be refering to the literature and the testimonies brought forward by well-known Albanian researchers, musical instruments artifacts, research data from local and national expeditions, performance techniques by execution and production masters, sound mixing of orchestral formations and their evolution, style of sound, etc.

Traditional musical instruments are spread on all ethno-cultural ares and have played different artistic functions. In Mat there is a saying: “*he is the kind of man, whose çifteli plays music for him, even when hanging on the wall*”.

Even today special names are mentioned carved in generations’ memory as virtuous performers, remaining as reference points for different kinds of instruments.

According to research and documentation in ethnoorganology and ethno-musical science, aerophone instruments have been the first in use, evolution and widening of their musical function.

Kaval and flute (*imported instruments from Asia and African countries*) having as precursor horns and river cane flutes invented by using native objects, became the first accompanying instruments of herdsmen in our mountains.

Instruments of this kind are spread in the whole territory. In the pastures of Kryemata, brides and young girls used to go to the village fountain, not only to fill water, but also the emptiness of their souls with these sounds. “*Selim’s flute is playing*” or “*stop talking, you are sounding like Selim’s flute*” are sayings that reached our times, like e proof of the use of this instrument, its popularity and the need for entertainment.

We know instruments like flute, kaval, *lauri*, çifteli, drum, zurna, dayereh and river cane flutes since circa 200 years (19th Century) as well as the musicians playing them, masters of performance, mainly in familiar ceremonies and different feasts.

Likë Gjata, a tall handsome man, with a *lauri* worked by juniper wood and *Tun Xhipi*, his relative with a drum belong to this period in Kryemat. **Beqir Ferra** the Senior in Pleshë village of Kryemat is the founder of the travelling orchestras with two drums and two *zurnas*. Their descendants spread with their families in different villages like Ketë, Xibër, Gurë i Bardhë, Fshat, etc. **Lit Bajrami** well known with his zurna, passed away on the national philharmonic stage, during preparations for the International Folk Festival held in Moscow on 1957. Drummer **Daut Bajrami** has performed as a selected artist, but also as an authentic expert in accompanying motifs of the dance used in the artistic feature “Skënderbeu”, at the start of the 50’s.

These musicians generally belong to Balkan Egyptians ethnicity, settled in Albania around 10th Century, during the Barbarian invasions. In Mat region people addressed them as “*ustallare*” (“craftsmen”).

The early use of these instruments, the organological improvement and circulation, their irreplaceable function in accompanying songs and dances, among other functions, have led to the creation of interesting orchestral structures and variations. The personal use of musical instruments in village settings merged into a collective fusion. The active artistic life of musicians has led to the creation of a variety of combinations between traditional instruments, regarding which little has been written. In this multitude of orchestral structures, two main groups have been identified from researches, studies and up to date ethnomusicologists and ethnoorganologists conclusions,

1. *Village traditional* and
2. *City traditional*.

What comes out from our research in Mat Region?

In this paper we will attempt to put under spotlight the musical traveling formations of Mat region and surroundings, where we encounter a myriad of rural traditional varieties.

It is known that the usage of these instruments and the formation of folk orchestras originate from some “*craftsmen families*”, which had also an impact on and influenced the Albanian musical arts. Since Barbarian invasions and their migration from Egypt, their establishment, spread and activity were not synchronous and uniform.

Two were the priorities of this community: **First**, they were blacksmiths and good connoisseurs of iron; **second**, they were well known for their talent and skills in using and producing musical instruments, which for sure is their heritage.

This community, along their instruments had brought also the repertoire from their place of origin, adapting and intertwining it with the artistic heritage of the place of settlement.

Two formations of traveling folk orchestras:

Step by step, depending on the environment where family ceremonies took place and local artistic tastes, ethno-psychological factors, folkloric tradition, etc. there would come out **two kinds of traveling folk orchestras**. Mat territory is divided in 6 ethnographic areas: *Rraza*, *Topalltija*, *Përtej Uji*, *Prelli*, *Kryematja* and *Guri i Bardhë*.

Even though we spent a long time in tracking and researching in ethnomusicology field, there is still much to do in the future on further clarifications and realizations. Mat territory is rich in ancient sites, cities, fortresses and Big Families. Mati is the “King’s

valley". There are many traveling folkloristic family orchestras: Ceni, Kurti, Selimi, Radani, etc. in the area of Prell; Zeka in Shaban, Rrazë; Dali Fasliu in Përtej Uji; Ferra and Gjata in Kryemat, etc., any of them with specific characteristics, not only in musical instruments structure, but also in repertoire, still considered as milestones to guide future performers and instrumentalists. The practice of executing their talent "by ear" is a priceless experience and archive.

a. Traveling folk orchestra: drum and zurna

The traveling folk orchestra to which scholars have been mostly referring to, especially from the second half of the 20th Century, is the one with zurna (aerophone) and drum (membranophone).

This musical formation is the most preferred in the major part of Mat, (*Kryemat, Përtej Uji, Topallti, Gur i Bardhë*). Many musicians have left deep impressions and marks in inhabitants' memories.

This musical formation had two (*zurna and drum*), three (*two zurna and a drum*) and four (*two zurna and two drums*) instruments, never leaving one alone. We hypothesize that this relationship is connected to the economic interest of musicians, but also to the settings where familiar ceremonies were held. The set-up in close places demanded for the music fusion to be compatible with circumstances and intention. The arrangement of these ceremonies in open air, the expansion of these orchestras functions (*let's recall the accompaniment of the wedding guests, the bride or a specific atmosphere*) dictated the need of this structure enrichment sometimes with three and sometimes with four instruments. From this pleiad of musicians in Mat there are still sayings like: "The feast does not stop, if the gas of the lamp does not drain out", "The drumstick does not stop, if the Turk's lira does not fall from the balk" or "with Plesha's drum, dances Patin". The drummer Daut used to say: "When S. Kërçova dances, not a drum hit goes wasted", etc.

b. Traveling folk orchestra: lauri, çifteli and drum

The *ahengs* of Prell area, since the first half of the 20th Century have as elements only the drum, the *lauri* and the çifteli, sometimes even the flute.

This musical formation consisting of traditional chordophone instruments with a bow (*lauria*), and with *pendë* (çifteli with three strings) and membranophone (drum, *tumalek*) is the other group of traveling folk orchestra. The most classic one is the orchestra of "Shahin Ceni" from Derjan, which was the most honored and popular, because of its quality and high performance technique, chosen repertoire, beautiful songs, especially for the skillful accompaniment of men and women dances. We can say the same for "Kurti" in Rremull and Rukaj. This formation has also its variations, having been practiced in: **a** - *lauri* and drum; **b** - *lauri*, flute and drum; **c** - *lauri*, çifteli and drum (*tumalek*); **d** - *lauri*, çifteli, flute and drum (*tumalek*).

This kind of traveling folk orchestra with its variations has been performed by the so called "ustallarë" ("craftsmen") even in Lura, Zall-Dardhë, Qafë-Murrë of Dibra (*according to up-to-date administrative map*) and in Bulqiza areas.

Why did people prefer two kinds of folk orchestras? Where do they differ from each other?

Music artifacts always relate to music specifics, which differ from one area to another. Through the improvement of sound quality, timber empowerment etc. improved even the repertoire quality, as an important and inseparable part of the spiritual culture.

Common point of both orchestras' structure and their variations is *the drum*. This percussion instrument is an inseparable part of these formations and constitutes the

backbone and the rhythmic base, dynamics and fusion, introduces and elevates all the celebration and emotional atmosphere.

We should stress out the fact that rhythm is one of the main elements of music, dance and poetry. But, almost **common** for these orchestras is the musical **repertoire**, which relates to the dancing skills of each area, having become a well-known tradition in Mat region, Traveling folk orchestras have generally **codified** their musical repertoire. All orchestras perform “*Kajden e parë*”, “*Kajden e dytë*”, “*Të Terziut*”, “*Molla e kuqe*“, “*Kajde e re*” “*Dibrançe*”, “*Zerqanshe*”, “*Zebekshen*”, “*Shpalmadhçe*” etc. All orchestras know the three variations of “*Kajde të Udhës*”, which are a must in the accompaniment of the bride and the wedding guests. What we mentioned above are “men” dances, but also “*vençe*” or women dances are as well codified. Even for women there are “*Kajde e parë*” or “*Kajde e dytë*”, related to their tempo and rhythm dance. We mentioned “dance”, because especially after the Second World War, even in Northeast areas started to spread men and women dances (even played together), which were added on repertoires, like: “*Lule Sofo-lule djali*”, “*Bashkohu shokë*”, etc.

Are there differences in the repertoire?

Naturally! The strict observance of these differences related to the folkloric tradition of the region has brought the types or variants of orchestras and has almost created area differences by preference. Each ethnographic area favours its own folkloric orchestra.

The above-mentioned proverb says: “*The feast does not stop, if the gas of the lamp does not drain out*”, because in Lis, Kurdari, Kryemat, Gurë të Bardhë and Gurra the non-dancing men are very rare to find. Therefore they ask for drums and zurna. They even get double instruments (*two drums and two zurna*), as they have to play for 4 hours without interruption, in a room with three sofra of men (36 persons).

Distinctive feature of the other area (*Prell, Përtej Uji*) is the fusion of chordophone instruments, mainly with the lyricism of women dances, and the accompaniment of lyrical and epic-lyrical songs, etc. Man dances are performed in Prell area, there were even noted soloists, but still they were not as widespread as in Kryemat. Weddings in the Prell area are mainly set up in closed areas; therefore they do not prefer high dynamics and high-pitched aerophone sonorities. Locals want from folk orchestras to “*raise money from the ground*” or to be “*weddings’ sherbet*”. Hence, common and difference points relate to local tradition of ceremonies arrangement and artistic dispositions, with artists’ capabilities to adapt to regional inhabitants musical tastes.

An important element in this tradition shaping is definitely the *absorbing level* and the natural musical tendencies of popular bearers. In order *to absorb* an advanced culture, one must definitely have a certain elevated cultural level, furthermore to adapt and transform it in local shapes.

Craftsmen’s instruments not only in Balkan Egyptians hands!

They used to say in Mat, back in the 50’s that Valxhiu orchestra in Macukull, consisting of çiftelia, flute and *lauria* “*raises money from the ground*”. The Nelaj kin is native in the village. The “Meritorious Artist”, the virtuoso flute player **Ymer Neli** – Grand Master, is an offspring of this family and even in his seventies (1938-) keeps “planting seeds” of instrumental art in Burrel.

In the 30’s the renowned Dali Fasliu (Balkan Egyptians ethnicity) from Burgajeti was popular even in Kosovo as a virtuoso in songs and *lauri*. Same for **Hajrulla Ceni** (1916-2010) from Shëlli, a rhapsodist - with *lauri* - of historical and slow songs, awarded in

many folkloristic festivals. **Qamil Beshku** from Shëlli, since the 60's has been spotted with his *lauri* in all National Folk Festivals as a soloist, song and dance accompanist and part of the famous Mat's folk orchestra. **Veri Koburja** from Patin with his zurna is "brother" (vllam) with the renowned zurna players of Balkan Egyptians ethnicity. He is ever-present in festive familiar ceremonies and concerts within and outside Mat, awarded in many festivals. **Avni Hoxha** from Klos, teacher and famous rhapsodist with çiftelia, chosen from professional conductors of dances in Tirana, along other younger talented drummers, like **Sejdin Ceka** and **Hysni Stafa**.

How was created the folk orchestra of Mat?

This well-known musical orchestra came as a result of the presence of folk musical instruments in Mat, used by famous masters, improvement of production techniques and the guidance of this orchestra by professional musicians.

The establishment of this artistic phenomenon in the start of the 60's was grounded on the early tradition of traveling folk orchestras of this area. The originators and conductors of this folk orchestra, artfully and with professional competence, took advantage of the variety of instruments and richness of rhythms; the variety of the area motifs; performing skills of Mat instrumentist; musicians passion and talent, and the experience from stage and promotional contest on national level.

By knowing and respecting tone-modality specifics of these instruments, conducting masters made possible their logical and organic sound mixing, almost at full match of sounding microtones.

The melodic base of the creations and performance of this folk orchestra were aerophone and chordophone instruments, as well as the performance skills of virtuous musicians like Ymer Nelaj, Ibrahim Minxhozi, Shaqir Hazizi, Hysen Koxherri, Sali Kurti etc. along the excellent experience of traveling folkloric orchestras and the popular tradition they had created.

Its beginnings as a reduced orchestra were in 1965 in a performers meeting, but only a year later, in 1966, in the National Folk Festival in Elbasan it would present itself with dignity, especially in the accompaniment of time hits like "Laçi-Bruçi dhe Uraka" and "Liqenit të Ulzës".

These songs with music and lyrics composed by Munir Shehu were performed with originality by the well-known singer Feride Kurti.

These songs, with a clear and simple music line, with a full tone-modal structure, totally based on lyrics from Prell territory in Mat, became the first hits for the wide audience of the time.

In the First National Festival in Gjirokastra, in 1968 there was already a clear and positive judgment on Mat values. In this festival this folkloristic orchestra, set-up and conducted by Munir Shehu, with the noted Ymer Neli in flute as the central artist, would deserve the first prize and would be honored with the Gold Medal of the First National Folk Festival. Later they will attract audience, scholars, researchers and professional juries attention, getting constantly awarded, up to the "Naim Frashëri First Class Order".

This musical folk orchestra, with a prestigious career of 45 years has created a huge stage experience and has enriched the musical archive of different local and cultural-artistic institutions, becoming "a school" for many similar orchestras.

To come to praise an artistic formation, first we should start from its musical product, performing skills, the material where it gets inspired from and above all the

performing ability of each instrument master and the organological characteristics of each instrument as production skill.

Musical compositions usually played by these orchestras, seen from their emotional --point of view are oriented in **three main styles**:

a – logogenic (word-born) style, which includes parts of vocal songs. In the logogenic style the main role was played by *lauria*. This is because of the special timber of this rare instrument, which was always seen as the most significant in giving the original message of this traditional music.

b- melogenic (melos-born) style, connected directly with typical instrumental melodies, the mostly used are flute and çiftelia repertoire.

c- pathogenic (pathos-born) style, relates to a repertoire connected to powerful feelings, made up by melodic pieces, based on musical atmosphere of dirges, but adapted and modified with artistic feelings. These musical arrangements were mainly two or three pieces, alternating in such way even the instruments. It is important to enhance that each instrument was left to wander in its own repertoire, by preserving structure, extension, rhythmic ruptures, crescendos, accelerations, sometimes in “tutti” and sometimes in solo, crating thus an impressive musical landscape. The professional musicality in these pieces composition and the introduction of dayereh (*percussions*) in orchestras gave a more clear impulse, stability and structure, compared to all other alike folkloric orchestras in national level.

What makes its tone sound different from other orchestras?

Mat traditional music is expressed through the same instruments as in other territories of North and Northeast Albania. If organologically these folk orchestras are almost similar, can we say that anything of them is similar?

I think not.

Sound, as a natural-acoustic phenomenon is everywhere the same. But reaching a wider and more complex dimension rather than only an introductory one, furthermore connected to living processes, which determine and give functional aspect to a region music, assign to this music distinct qualities and attributes. A trained ear spots immediately the difference between the instruments and some distinctive elements like (*color*), power, ambitus, performance technique, etc., which constitute what is called **sound style**. This is the national originality of a population culture and distinctive authenticity.

The German Ethno-musicologist **Fritz Bose** says that: “music, not only has other functions... in different populations, but it even sounds differently”. And it is exactly the **sound style**, studied in details that defines specific characteristics of music in a certain space.

There are many Ethno-musicologist that with professionalism have expressed kindness on the material and music originality of this folk orchestra. The careful professional work of musicians like Munir Shehu, Shefqet Doda, Naim Gjoshi or of the well-known folklore trackers and researchers like Shefqet Merra, Ymer Neli, Sabri Alia, Esat Ruka etc., and the precise, virtuous, clean and tuneful performance of all musicians, made possible for this traditional music orchestra to have its distinguished style on national level. The initial stage presentations of çiftelia, flute, kaval, *lauri*, drum etc. came by utilizing the knowledge brought by these value bearers. Their stage preparation process made possible for the performers to have a more focused qualification. The new gained

experience in contest stages induced predisposition, talent, and will that have somehow imposed their musical style.

We have known and felt the new style of çifteli performance by *Ibrahim Minxhozi, Shaqir Hazizi or their precursors: Sali Dika in Rremull, Lam Kryekurti e Shahin Doçi in Macukull, Muharrem Koxherrit in Martanesh, Fran Cekës in Stojan, Hasan Xhaferri in Klos etc.; flute and kaval performance by Y. Neli, Xhemal Lela; lauri performance by Sali Kurti, Mersim Ceni; zurna performance of Lit Haxhiu, Met Saliu, Can Ferra, Ramazan Alia, Veri Koburja, etc.*

As soon as one hears the sound of their musical instruments knows and traces their style.

Why?

The skill in fingers movements, harmonization of both hands, glissandos and tremolos, the right hand deftness in doubled tremolo or the usage three-four fingers of the left hand, acciaccaturas and appoggiaturas, the total use of the instrument key-frame, tone sharpness, rhythmic richness, performance certainty, breathtaking method or the full realization of a musical phrase or sentence in aerophonics are some specifics that **define each style** in instrumental music and gradually change that style from local to national.

These artist have created with passion, talent and insistence their style, through the complexity of musical elements: rhythm, musical scales, ambitus, music function in everyday life, etc. The whole artistic experience of these traditional music bearers has been enriched and transmitted in a practical way, out of academic direction, without musical scores.

The noted virtuous influence has deeply traced the population memories because of performance skills and music archive enrichment, thus creating a school that one can find in the popular sayings: “*play the melodies of Sali Dika*” or “*relish it a bit more, like...*” (is mentioned the name of the best) ore, the ones that are not deft enough are advices like: “*do not mix it*” etc. The capability and professionalism of **folkloric orchestras conductors** are of a vital importance in preparing and promoting these values, which are defined by preserving original sound and distinctive style development.

As conclusion:

First, in Mat has been seriously taken into consideration the exploitation of traditional music. Therefore its repertoire is totally based on the melodic and sound tone heritage of this territory.

Second: the pieces connected as two and three piece suites have been created on a classical orchestral template, with rationality and complementary rhythmic richness.

Third: each solo instrument has the required performing space, without forcing or denaturing them, exploiting with rationality the sound of *lauri*, dayereh, etc.

Fourth: The virtuosity and sound quality have been guided by special performance skills of Ymer Neli in flute and kaval, Behar Neli in whistle, Qamil Beshku in *lauri* and Xhevat Lishi and Isuf Gjoka in dayereh.

Fifth: A very careful introduction of çifteli and tempered flutes is done, in order to eliminate clashing or incoherencies of popular tone-modality systems with chromatic ones. Their coordination and alternation has helped the sound and artistic emotion of the folkloristic orchestra.

Last: this folk orchestra, with its original bringings and sound, richness of used material, rhythms, timbers, and unique instruments’ kinds, high performance quality and its continuity, deserves the attention and consideration of scientific and institutional panels,

as well as its promotion in prestigious areas and stages, as a rare value of the Albanian national spiritual heritage.

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