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## A British Journalist on Modern Romanian Music

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper will provide an overview on how Romanian music is presented in the works of William Beatty-Kingston (1837-1901), a British author who served as a correspondent for *The Daily Telegraph* in Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 19th century. Beatty-Kingston visited Romania on several occasions in the 1860s-1880s and witnessed its profound transformation in terms of infrastructure or politics. But he was equally fascinated by Romanian arts and detailed in his volumes his encounters with local music. Beatty-Kingston left us with valuable information on Romanian music, with reference to types of melodic airs, their historical roots, instruments used, famous minstrels of the time or the social importance of this profession. This paper will analyse Beatty-Kingston's accounts and place his musical interest in a larger context related to the artistic heritage of peripheral nations.

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

William Beatty-Kingston was 18 when he embarked on a journalistic career as on-the-scene reporter during the Crimean War. By the 1860s he was a regular contributor for *The Daily Telegraph*, acting as official correspondent to Vienna and Berlin. Beatty-Kingston visited Romania several times in

the coming decades to report on the country's political turmoil; he was in Bucharest in February 1866 when Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the maker of modern Romania, was ousted, so his reports are full of interesting details about the *coup d'état*. The journalist returned to Romania in 1874 as part of an international mission to independently survey the status of Moldavian Jews, who at the time were busily lobbying in western capitals for an improvement of their community's social and political condition. Beatty-Kingston stayed in Bucharest during the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-1878, when Romania proclaimed its state independence. He met on several occasions the princely family and became an admirer and confidante of Princess Elisabeth of Romania, better known under her literary pseudonym of Carmen Sylva. During one of their meetings, Beatty-Kingston, who spoke good Romanian, translated into English the poem *Crăiasa din povești* [The Queen Legend] by Mihai Eminescu, now regarded as Romania's most talented poet. Such details prove that Beatty-Kingston was a good connoisseur of Romanian politics and arts, both of which figure prominently in his journalistic pieces and in his memoirs (Beatty-Kingston 1888b: 85-103).

One of Beatty-Kingston's biggest passions was music. As "the child of musical parents, who taught me to sing before I could speak, and to play before I could spell" (Beatty-Kingston 1887: VII), he stayed in permanent contact with musicians and music-lovers in Vienna, Berlin or Rome. He was extremely knowledgeable of the newest trends in European music, and he also tried his hand in popularising continental music to English audiences. He was librettist of *Frivoli* at Drury Lane, adapter for the English stage of Verdi's *Falstaff*, and translator into English of *Tosca* shortly after it premiered in Rome in 1900. But Beatty-Kingston was equally fascinated by the artistic skills of "exotic" Oriental people and published interesting chapters on Indian and Japanese music ("Death of Mr. Beatty Kingston" 1900). In the 1880s he published regularly in *The Lute* (Beatty-Kingston 1885), a bimonthly journal printed in Great Britain to popularise the variety of world music to London audiences.

## ON NATIONAL AND INDEPENDENT MUSIC

This is the context in which Beatty-Kingston wrote about Romanian music. He started from a simple question: Is there "such a thing as Roumanian music?" Music, the journalist believed, is a feature of the national character, much like language and dance. Beatty-Kingston agreed that there was "unquestionably something about the songs sung throughout the length and breadth of the Dacian lands", which covered most of what would later be called Greater

Romania. “Surrounded on all sides by warlike and rapacious neighbours”, Romania had been for a thousand years “an oppressed and downtrodden land”, and Turkish, Hungarian and Slavonic influences were clearly visible or rather audible in Romanian music (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 112-114).

Though Romanian music bore such signs of servitude, it had also managed to preserve its originality. There existed indeed “Roumanian music”, which despite its borrowed “tricks and manners” and clear Hungarian and Turkish influences, displayed distinguishable melodic features, such as the fact that it was “essentially, almost exclusively, melodic”. “Harmony does not enter into its being; it has never created a vocal duet, trio, or part-song; its *horas* (*derivatur* chorus) are sung in unison, the time being marked by the stamping of feet and swaying of bodies”. Like the music of backward and subjugated peoples, Romanian music was mostly in the “minor mood”. There were some exceptions, but they were rather modern, being the result of “innovations” made by Gipsy musicians (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 114-115).

With the national revival of the mid-19th century, music started to be emancipated too, as national elites aimed to show that Romania was a modern and civilised state. Beatty-Kingston was however unimpressed with the quality of modern Romanian compositions, “a vast amount of the weakest rubbish that ever put forward a claim to rank as vocal or instrumental music”. The *doinas* and *horas* of Gheorghe Scheletti, Grigore Ventura or Mihail Polizu-Micșunești were “rickety or wishy-washy compositions and musical platitudes” (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 115).

### THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE LĂUTARI

Beatty-Kingston had more reasons to admire the truly authentic local music, that of *lăutari* or wandering minstrels, who had managed to accurately transmit across time and space traditional music. His interest in Gipsy *lăutari* and their exotic musical culture was timely, and in the line of Franz Liszt and Ciprian Porumbescu he greatly romanticised this social group, which had acted as the guardians of Romanian national music (Cosma 2009, Loya 2011).

The journalist left several descriptions of inborn Gipsy musicians who played by instinct in manners that displayed both exoticism and authenticity. With few exceptions, the profession was reserved to males. Master singers such as Nicu Moldoveanul or Grigore Rucinoara, heads of some of the most famous minstrel brotherhoods, “would scorn to tolerate the presence of petticoats amongst the tuneful fraternities submitted to their sway” (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 121).

The author equally noticed the exhilarating effect produced by music on the physiognomy and social bearing of these humble people. When not playing, they used to bear themselves cringingly. But, once music was on, “a surprising change accrues to their demeanour and facial expression” and they became emancipated men, joyously conscious of their natural gifts and developed powers (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 124).

The minstrels’ authenticity came from their lack of formal musical education and their relying completely on natural skills. Minstrels made music “as the birds do, they know not why or how”, and their talents at improvisation were equally pure and exquisite. Their instruments were as primitive, which turned the entire performance into a visit into the past (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 116-118).

Beatty-Kingston mentioned other instances in which their music was taken by elites as a way of saving it for the danger of disappearing. While in the company of Carmen Sylva, Zoe Rosetti played several pieces, such as “Gianul” or “Cinel, cinel” (Beatty-Kingston 1888b: 98).

## MUSICAL REPERTOIRE

The musical repertoire was equally representative for older times. Beatty-Kingston classified traditional Romanian music performed by *lăutari* into four categories:

1. *cântece bătrânești* or historical and legendary ballads. They dealt with the predatory exploits of celebrated bandits (*haiduci*), whom Romanian peasantry still consider heroes and hold them as important as Stephen the Great or Dracula, Vlad the Impaler. References to Iancu Jianul, Ștefan Bujor, Tunsul, Andrii Popa and Groza show the influence of Alecsandri’s writings. Beatty-Kingston especially appreciated this sort of popular ballads that allowed interpreters to improvise.

2. *doine*, love-songs and elegies. Some of them were published by trendy Romanian poets like Vasile Alecsandri, Mihai Eminescu or Dimitrie Bolintineanu.

3. *hore*, lively lyrics used for dancing.

4. *colinde* or carols, sung in unison by bands of children on Christmas and New Year Eves, under the windows of boyar houses. Two of these *colinde*, *Florile Dalbe* [Strange Flowers] and *Plugul* [The Plough], were of unknown antiquity (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 114-116).

Most of these tunes were “gently melancholic” both in music and lyrics, a feature that made exceptions even more remarkable. Beatty-Kingston paid a special attention to a piece made famous in George Enescu’s *Romanian*

*Rhapsodies* – “Am un leu și vreau să-l beau” [“I’ve a piastre ’tisn’t mine / Nevertheless I’ll spend it in wine”] –, which he considered to be almost the only Romanian melody composed in an exclusively major key. He tracked the song as originating from Transylvania, “where the influence of Magyar musical joviality had been effectively brought to bear upon the languorous plaintiveness of the Romanian melodic method”. This song was always a heart opener and so representative for the Romanians’ character that it invariably raised a sympathetic smile on a boyar’s countenance, but also opened its purse (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 133-134, Beatty-Kingston 1888a: 16-17).

### THE MINSTRELS’ SOCIAL STATUS

In former times, minstrels frequently became rich men before they attained middle age (Beatty-Kingston 1888a: 17-18). The generosity of wealthy boyars was the main source of their income, and minstrels used to travel the country and provide entertainment to provincial boyars. At such feasts, they sang equally their newest and oldest lays or improvised upon themes propounded to them by their employers or chanted extempore couplets, dealing humorously with the characteristics of their auditors. Considerable licence was accorded to minstrels, as to the medieval jester. They followed a social etiquette that allowed them a central place in the boyars’ display of prosperity and power (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 122-123).

But the nineteenth century came with important changes in Romanians’ prosperity and generosity. The fortunes of many families were lost, and minstrels needed to entertain the *nouveau riche* in various urban milieus. Minstrel bands hung about hotels or pleasure gardens where the wealthy classes spent the evenings (Beatty-Kingston 1888a: 14-18).

Several bands abode permanently in Bucharest, where during the fashionable season they were in considerable request at evening receptions or diplomatic dinner parties. Earnings were still consistent, and the best bands would easily get 5 to 10 pounds for a performance of six hours. To have some perspective on this, the prefect of Bucharest police earned 40 pounds a month and a clerk in the Ministry of Home Affairs about ten pounds a month (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 123-125).

Beatty-Kingston insisted on another characteristic of these minstrels that explained their good payment, which was derived from their important social role as discreet witnesses. Minstrels had knowledge of intrigues and conspiracies, scandals and love affairs, but preserving the confidence reposed in them was part of their code of honour (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 121).

### A MOLDAVIAN BAND

The British journalist also touched on their ability to play without music sheets. He described in detail his meeting with the band of Nicu Moldoveanu, which consisted of eight performers, each of whom could play more than one instrument, whilst one and all were tuneful and passionate singers. He listened to them in a summer-garden in Iași, with Nicolae Țăranul, a slender young Gipsy singer, as the main vocalist. To any of them “a page of printed notes would have been about as intelligible as a chronological brick from Mesopotamia”, so Beatty-Kingston tried to look closer at their improvisation technique. Nicolae Țăranul was not only an accomplished vocalist, but also “a composer and improvisatore, extravagantly proud of his compositions”, which seemed to Beatty-Kingston “the ravings of insane tonality”, though there was unquestionably “method in their madness”. When he extemporised, his “brothers” accompanied him by ear and intuition, hitting off the just harmonies with “a surprising pre-science of the most improbable melodic transitions” (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 126-127).

Beatty-Kingston invited the band to his hotel and noted their excitement when he played on a grand piano some sketchy souvenirs of Wagner, Berlioz and Liszt. It was a treat to observe their intense appreciation of harmonic methods and treatments absolutely new to them, and to listen to their intelligent attempts to fish out the novelties on their own instruments afterwards (Beatty-Kingston 1887: 128-129).

### CONCLUSIONS

Beatty-Kingston viewed Romanian music through orientalisng lenses. His interest was directed equally towards music and musicians, both regarded as relics of past centuries. His focus on Gipsy music can be linked to its display at the world exhibitions in Paris, when it was acclaimed for its exoticism and authenticity. Beatty-Kingston generally embraced the Romanian version of nation-making, in which music was viewed as an important component of its historical heritage. Music had been subjugated, and it gradually re-gained its freedom, which however came with many challenges. But he was most fascinated by the Gipsy minstrels who managed to preserve musical glimpses of past centuries. Beatty-Kingston is not extremely original, but he was a close observer of Romanian realities, who managed to show how linked music and politics were.

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