

# **In the Wake of Classical-Antiquity Metric Feet (A Comparative Ethnomusicological Study)**

*by prof. Nice Fracile*

Book Summary

Comparative ethnomusicological studies in the traditional music of Southeastern Europe reveal the existence of essential relations, cross-influences, permeation and common morphological elements therein, but also the specific national/ethnic features of each particular culture – since earliest ages until the present time. In the said region, like in others settled by many different nations, the ethnomusicological research carried out so far has shown presence of identical/similar, i.e. characteristic, folklore genres, subjects/storylines, versification types, styles of performance, forms and cadences, tone series and rhythmic systems, melodic and metrorhythmic patterns. Identification of metrorhythmic types and patterns in the traditional melodies has been made through the studies in the relation between lyrics and tune, as well as through the ascertainment of those types of metric feet practised in classical antiquity which provided basis to the formation of traditional tunes and instrumental melodies. These ancient feet can be said to make the core of the unity of the metrorhythmic pulse of the poetry, music and dance in classical antiquity; comparative studies in the feet have shown that they used to be orally passed from one generation to another and – over time – became incorporated in the traditional and, also, art music of a far broader cultural territory, historically and geographically.

As a result of the analysis of a corpus of 33,421 melodies from the musical/folkloric heritage of the national/ethnic communities in Serbia (Serbs, Hungarians, Slovaks, Romanians, Ruthenians, *Bunjevci*, Vlachs), Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, FYR of Macedonia (Macedonians and Vlachs known under the name of *Armănesci*), Albania, Greece, Turkey and the Republic of Moldova, 28 classical-antiquity metric feet have been identified in the folklore music of these cultures: 4 disyllabic ones (trochee, iamb, spondee and pyrrhic), 8 trisyllabic ones (dactyl, anapest, amphibrach, cretic, bacchius, antibacchius, molossus and tribracchius) and 16 quadrisyllabic ones (ditrochee, diamb, dispondee, dipyrrhic, choriamb, antispastus, ionic a maiore/greater ionic, ionic a

minore/smaller ionic, first epitrite, second epitrite, third epitrite, fourth epitrite, primus paeon, secundus paeon, tertius paeon and quartus paeon).

Although the objective of this study primarily focuses on the research in classical-antiquity metric feet in traditional music, the author has moreover pointed out their occurrence in art music. As quadrisyllabic metric feet quite rarely occur in the literature analyzed and the scores of art music, particular attention has been given to the disyllabic and trisyllabic metric feet used by composers in various periods. In the arias, suites and sonatas for piano, concerti for piano and orchestra, and especially in the themes of the famous symphonies by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Franck, Ravel, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Bartók, Enescu, Konjović, a broad spectrum of classical-antiquity metric feet (trochee, iamb, spondee, pyrrhic, dactyl, anapest, amphibrach, cretic, antibacchius, molossus) has been observed in their fundamental, augmentative, diminutive and evolved forms.

In folk music, especially vocal, the metric feet which occur in their fundamental, augmentative and diminutive forms correspond to classical-antiquity poetic feet, while the evolved musical metric feet (e.g. dotted, cumulative, ligatured, modified) do not correspond to classical-antiquity poetic pulsation. Naturally, these feet generate some metrorhythmic patterns of traditional melodies whose compositional structure depends on the types and modes of their combination in the course of developing a melodic line, and also on the frequency of repetition with some types of metric feet, and the structure of refrain. This is directly reflected on the building of melostichs and melostrophes, and – consequently – metrorhythmic patterns and types. For that reason, the Author has made a general systematization of classical-antiquity metric feet, metrorhythmic types and patterns whereupon melodies are built; thereby, three modes of formation have been ascertained in the analyzed traditional melodies:

1. melodies based on a single metric foot;
2. melodies based on alternation of two or more elementary metric feet;
3. melodies based on combination of diverse metric feet.

1. A large number of melodies in the musical-folklore heritage of Southeastern Europe has been built by way of constant repetition of a single classical-antiquity metric foot, with an identical metrorhythmic pulse from the beginning to the end of the tune. The most frequent metric feet include iamb (in its fundamental, augmentative and dotted forms),

followed by quartus paeon, primus paeon, ionic a minore, second epitrite and fourth epitrite (in their fundamental forms). Melodies based on these feet have been recorded in the folkloric heritage of Serbia, Romania, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, and they fall within diverse genres: *koledarske* (Christmas carols), *lazaričke* (Lazarus Saturday songs), *dodolske* (rain-invoking songs), *svatovske pesme* (ritual wedding songs), lyric and mass-popular songs, lullabies (with Romanians particularly), but also dance songs and tunes of traditional dances (Examples 77-104).

The metrorhythmic types of the melodies from this group mostly occur in the tunes of octosyllabic, heptasyllabic and decasyllabic poetic basis; they usually manifest isometric and isorhythmic structure, as well as even metrorhythmic pulsation. Iamb is the most frequent and characteristic metric foot on the basis of which a great many melodies are built; it is ideally present in a large number of tunes (with or without refrain) from Serbia, Romania, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and Bulgaria. Quartus paeon is one of the significant and recognizable feet in the traditional melodies from Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Montenegro, FYR of Macedonia and Albania, while primus paeon is a feature of the tunes in Serbia, Romania and Greece. Small ionic/ionic a minore is ideally and prevailingly found in the tunes of Christmas carols from Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. Although not so frequent, second epitrite and fourth epitrite have been sustained mostly in dance songs from Macedonia ((Macedonians and Vlachs – *Armăneșci*), Serbia, Turkey and Albania. The important feature of these tunes is that they are often formed by alternation of two differing types of versification (VIII + VI), and rather rarely based on heptasyllabic verse wherein – in the second hemistich – cumulation of the metric units of these two four-syllable feet often takes place.

2. A representative number of melodies from the folkloric heritage of Serbia (Serbs, Ruthenians, *Bunjevci*, Slovaks, Romanians, Vlachs), Romania, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Republic of Moldova and Bosnia-Herzegovina has been created by alternation of the fundamental forms of dipyrrhic and spondee, dipyrrhic and anapest, spondee and amphibrach, quartus paeon and third epitrite, quartus paeon and second epitrite, and tertius paeon and spondee. They fall into diverse folkloric genres: *kraljičke pesme*

(post-Easter to Pentecost ritual festival songs, performed by 'queen-girls'), *jeremijske pesme* (Jeremian/lamentation songs), *koledarske/božićne pesme* (Christmas carols), *svakidašnje pesme* (quotidian songs) – mostly love songs, dance songs and traditional dance tunes (Examples 105-122).

In the corpus of melodies of the traditional music in a number of national/ethnic communities of Serbia and the Southeastern-European countries – those which have been built by the abovesaid forms of alternation on the basis of hexa-, hepta-, octa-, decasyllabic, 11-syllable and 12-syllable poetic pulse – the following characteristic metrorhythmic types have been identified:

- a) melodies based on alternation of two isochronic metric feet ;
- b) melodies based on alternation of one isochronic and one heterochronic metric feet;
- c) melodies based on alternation of two heterochronic metric feet; and
- d) melodies based on alternation of three (or more) different metric feet.

It has thereby been ascertained that the former two categories display a more homogenous structure and more even pulsation, occurring more frequently in the corpus analyzed, while the third and fourth categories are less representative of the folk music of the cultures that underwent this study.

a) The most frequently encountered type within this group has been developed through alternation of the fundamental forms of dipyrrhic and spondee (two isochronic metric feet) in the melodies with hexasyllabic poetic basis. As a large number of the analyzed traditional tunes of the Ruthenians living in Vojvodina is built on the said alternation of dipyrrhic and spondee, this metrorhythmic type can justifiably be taken as one of the most representative types in their vocal tradition. It is also found in the folklore of Vojvodina's *Bunjevci* and Slovaks, as well as in Romania, Croatia and Albania (Examples 105-109).

b) The metrorhythmic type built by alternation of dipyrrhic and anapest (one isochronic and one heterochronic metric foot) in the melodies with heptasyllabic poetic basis and with identical metrorhythmic pulse – that is what interconnects the traditional music of Serbia's Serbs, Vojvodina's Romanian and Slovaks, Croatia's Croats and Molodovan Romanians (Examples 114-118).

c, d) The metrorhythmic types built by alternation of two heterochronic metric feet (quartus paeon and third epitrite), or by alternation of three or more different metric feet (second epitrite, tertius paeon, spondee) differ entirely from the previous two. The melodies based on these metrorhythmic types are performed in the *aksak* rhythmic system, generating a horizontal polymetry (Examples 121-122).

3. A separate group is made up of the melodies based on combination of diverse metric feet. Compared to the above-mentioned types, their peculiarity lies in the fact that they have not been created in compliance with the unwritten agelong rules, but through free combination of diverse types of metric feet in their fundamental, augmentative, diminutive or dotted forms. Therefore, the metrorhythmic structure of their melostichs or melodic units in instrumental tunes differs from one performer to another, from one folkloric region to another, from one nation/ethnicity to another. This group comprises the tunes from the vocal and instrumental traditions of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania and Serbia (Examples 123-132) which abound in diverse disyllabic, trisyllabic and quadrisyllabic metric feet (spondee, pyrrhic, dotted iamb, dactyl, anapest, primus paeon, tertius paeon, quartus paeon, second epitrite, third epitrite, antispastus). The prevalence of heterochronic metric feet, with a variety of musical accents, introduces change and freshness in the metrorhythmic flow, generating a peculiar pulse in every tune.

Despite their formation based on fundamental metric feet solely, the metrorhythmic patterns with decasyllabic and octosyllabic poetic basis from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania and Serbia entirely differ mutually (Examples 123-126).

A greater degree of kinship among metric patterns, i.e. metrorhythmic types, occurs in all five variants of the tunes of Valachian dance which have been recorded in the folkloric heritage of the Vlachs and Serbs in Serbia (Examples 126-128), or the Romanians from Romania (Examples 129-130). Two metrorhythmic types of the Valachian dance have been ascertained: one lacking any significant process of variation, the other where variation of the melodic line has been applied.

On the micro-scale, the metrorhythmic structure in all of the five variants displays a striking contrast of asymmetric pulse in the first and second parts of the tune which generates horizontal polymetry. On the macro-scale, the metrorhythmic structure proves to be

incomparably more vital than the melodic line, thus constituting a unifying basis which links all of the variants found in northeastern Serbia and in Romania.

Classical-antiquity metric feet can be observed even in the relatively recent instrumental tunes which have appeared owing to the aspirations of the gifted instrumentalists to demonstrate their creative potential, technical skill and virtuosity. Most of such melodies have prevalingly been built upon diverse combinations of diminutive forms of dactyl, anapest, dipyrrhic and spondee. They often display even metric pulse throughout the melodic line, while some of the metrorhythmic patterns can be extremely similar or even identical (Examples 131, 132). In relation to the previous two groups, this one is peculiar in that most of its melodies possess an asymmetrical metrorhythmic structure and metrorhythmic patterns which are specific for each individual example.

Examination of the analyzed corpus of tunes has shown that the classical-antiquity metric feet can be most easily detected in ritual songs. These are performed in the giusto-syllabic, distributive and aksak rhythmic systems. Comparative ethnomusicological research in the classical-antiquity metric feet led to the discovery of the regularities which govern the metrorhythmic formation of the tunes in traditional music, and these regularities are found with not just one nation but with most of the peoples living across the territory of Southeastern Europe. The fact that most of those melodies have isorhythmic and isometric structure, small ambit and stereotyped metrorhythmic patterns, indisputably indicates their strong and agelong mutual ties.

Language being one of the constituents which define nation(ality)/ethnicity, comparative studies in the relations between the stich/line/verse, melody and rhythm in the traditional music of different peoples prove to be of extreme importance for casting light onto the morphological peculiarities of their music. From that standpoint, there is a highly significant fact: the octosyllable with the symmetric structure (4+4) is a morphological element of the vocal music shared by the Serbs, Romanians, Montenegrins, Croats, Albanians, Bulgarians and Greeks (Fracile: 2012:110-11). This accounts for the identicalness or great similarity of metrorhythmic patterns, as well as of some metrorhythmic types in the traditional music of these peoples. The situation facilitates interpenetration of vocal traditions, that is, the adaptation of lyrics according to the melodic type taken over from another national/ethnic corpus whose song follows the same type of versification, with an

identical metric structure yet not always an identical metrorhythmic pulsation. A number of such examples has been recorded in the traditional music of Vojvodina. To what extent the *aksak* rhythm is rooted in the soul of genuine performers of the Romanian music can be seen from the fact that the Romanians living in Vojvodina – when they adopt Serbian tunes in two-four time – sing these in their own manner, that is, in the *aksak* rhythm of 7/16 (3+2+2), while the Serbs in Vojvodina who rarely practise the *aksak* – when adopting Romanian melodies in the *aksak* rhythm – 'automatically' sing them in the symmetrical pulse of two-four time (Fracile 1994:47). In other words, the melodies with symmetrical octosyllabic poetic basis can be 'shaped' following the metrorhythmic patterns which are mutually entirely different.

The types of versification and the metric structures of lyrics often highly influence the formation of a melody and – thereby – the structure of metrorhythmic patterns within a melostrophe. Namely, in the tunes with the symmetrical octosyllabic poetic basis (4+4), disyllabic and quadrisyllabic metric feet are represented ideally, most often in their elementary forms, while in the tunes with heptasyllabic poetic basis (4+3), cumulation takes place of the metric units in the second hemistich which is reflected in the metrorhythmic aspect. The metric feet on the basis of which a melody is built thus get adapted to the lyrics by way of cumulation. This unwritten regularity has been detected in the traditional music of Serbia (Roganović 2002, Example 7), Macedonia (Example 84), Albania (Example 61) and Turkey (Example 103).

A completely opposite regularity occurs in many a Romanian tune: the poetic verse is adjusted to the musical metric feet. In order to retain the identical metrorhythmic pulse throughout a melody, as well as an unaltered elementary form of the metrorhythmic feet, singers often complete the catalectic form of the octosyllable. They do that in a couple of ways: by adding one syllable, e.g. '*dai*' (Example 43), by insertion of the eighth syllable separating the speech sound '*t*' from the seventh syllable and adding '*u*' to the line (Example 51), or by separation of the vowel '*i*' from the seventh syllable so that the eighth syllable consists merely of the vowel '*i*' (Example 96).

The regularity noticed in the traditional music of the Slovaks and Hungarians in Vojvodina is of an entirely different nature: the morphological element they share in common in the tunes of their traditional songs is the dotted iamb. Although this metric foot occurs in the music of other cultures as well (either sporadically or with greater or lesser frequency), an

unprescribed regularity has been detected in the Hungarian and Slovak four-part songs: the exact placement of the dotted iamb within the melostrophe (which does not imply that it cannot occur at some other points in the course of the melody). As a constituent part of the metrorhythmic pattern of the tune and, moreover, of the performing style, a constant pulse of the dotted iamb occurs preceding the last syllable in the first, second and fourth melostich (Examples 133, 134). Another regularity concerns permanent marking of the Hungarian and Slovak tunes by the dotted iamb, yet this time preceding two last syllables – in each melostich. It is noteworthy that in the vocal music of both of these peoples the said techniques are practised regardless of the type of versification serving as the basis for the formation of Hungarian and/or Slovak melodies (Examples 135, 136).

Accents take an important position among the morphological elements in folklore music. They define the pulsation of the rhythm in poetry, music, traditional dances. The pulse can be isometric or heterometric, symmetrical or asymmetrical.

Disyllabic, trisyllabic and quadrisyllabic feet take part in the building of formal units within traditional tunes on both macro- and micro-scale. The melodies based upon a single metric foot usually possess identical metrorhythmic pulse throughout a melostrophe and, thereby, identical musical accentuation within a certain metric foot. The structure of pulsation in such tunes and the placement of the accent are determined by the type of the metric foot. However, if a tune has been created by alternation of two or more metric feet, the accents shall depend on the metric structure of each foot in particular. Naturally enough, the number of accents is greater and the metrorhythmic pulsation is more diverse when a tune is built through combination of several different heterochronic types of metric feet.

In the ancient ritual songs of numerous cultures in Southeastern Europe, identical metrorhythmic types have been ascertained, with identical line/verse structure, yet not always with identical musical accents. In such cases, there is a non-correspondence between the lexical and the musical accents, especially (Examples 8, 9) if the lines of the lyrics are formed by one type of poetic metric foot (e.g. trochee) and the melody by another (e.g. iamb).

Some of the principles of musical theory do not apply fully on the traditional music because in traditional music different rules and prescripts are in effect. However, under the influence of art music (following the emergence of metric division into measures), some metric feet were given accents at the same points as in art music. Namely, tribrach began to increasingly occur with the accent on the first metric unit (Popov 2004:24, Example 6e). Over

time, this and other changes in accentuation have taken place, with a tendency of further growth.

Based on repetition, alternation or combination of classical-antiquity metric feet, some peculiar, and also some identical, metrorhythmic patterns have emerged in the structure of both vocal and instrumental tunes in numerous cultures which are even nowadays one of the substantial and recognizable features of the metrorhythmic structure and pulse in the traditional music of this European region. The results of this study reveal that identical or peculiar metrorhythmic patterns can be identified in a number of different vocal and instrumental tunes. Gradually, over time, they became deeply rooted in the consciousness of performers, often associated with various folkloric genres. However, comparative studies have shown that identical stereotyped metrorhythmic patterns occur not only in some ritual songs, but also in other folkloric genres; what is more, this has been happening in the folklores of various national/ethnic communities.

Unlike the melodic types which undergo changes and adjustment (not only within one culture, but in the traditional music of different cultures across a far broader folkloric area), metrorhythmic patterns are significantly more vital and durable: in the folklore treasury of many peoples they have preserved their basic forms and pulsation over centuries.

As typical phenomena in particular folkloric regions or national/ethnic communities, metrorhythmic patterns are part of collective consciousness; they are orally transmitted from one singer/instrumentalist to another, from one generation to another. Anonymous authors need not create new metrorhythmic models as a rule, for they can take these over from the existing 'repository' of the traditional heritage. Likewise, the stereotyped metric feet of the poetry of classical antiquity used to be adopted and absorbed in the pulse-basis for the rhythms of traditional melodies. In the beginning, the pulse of poetry and the pulse of music fully corresponded to each other, but the musical metric feet evolved over time to the point of a loss of their correspondence with the elementary forms of poetic pulse. Changes were gaining in intensity and undergoing modifications, at times so much that – for instance – many composers and melographers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century erroneously wrote down the traditional tunes based on the *aksak* rhythm.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> These metric feet are beyond the subject of the study. For more, see: Fracile: 1994:34-35.

Being one of the fundamental and recognizable features of the traditional music of numerous national/ethnic communities in Serbia and other countries of Southeastern Europe, the metric feet from the age of classical antiquity still provoke an inescapable interest by ethnomusicologists. The features of the voluminous corpus of melodies analyzed for the purpose of this study have reasserted the creativity, inventiveness and imagination of gifted individuals and groups, as well as the wealth, diversity, vitality and flexibility of folklore-related meter and rhythm; moreover, they have made it possible to ascertain and systematize disyllabic, trisyllabic and quadrisyllabic classical-antiquity metric feet in the vocal, vocal-instrumental and instrumental traditions of various cultures. Identical or similar metrorhythmic patterns and types which have been identified in the analyzed corpus have confirmed the strong historical ties in the traditional (music) art of these peoples, providing evidence to the claim that folk music and, consequently, the classical-antiquity metric feet are incorporated in the foundations of the cultural heritage they share in common.

Thus, the way is paved for the future comparative research in the folkloric heritage of other European peoples, as well as those from other continents, to show that rhythm – with all of its specificities and varieties, and both peculiar and universal structural elements – is one of the undeniable and most vital bonds in traditional music across a much vaster folkloric area.

*Translated from Serbian by*  
*ANGELINA ČANKOVIĆ POPOVIĆ*