

## INTERPRETATIVE FORMULAS IN CAROLING IN THE SOUTHERN AREA OF THE APUSENI MOUNTAINS

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**SUMMARY.** Many folklorists have analyzed traditional carols and caroling over time, but most of them focused on the development of the custom or on the morphology of carols. In this article we will present the various interpretative formulas that we encountered during a folklore gathering session in the southern area of the Apuseni Mountains: men's group, mixed group, individual performers, and children's group. Each formula has interpretative particularities, with some formulas being constituted only for the purpose of communicating carols, despite not being encountered in the practice of caroling. The importance of each formula is presented with arguments, together with an exemplary sample of carols performed.

**Keywords:** caroling, interpretative formula, traditional music, folk singing

### Introduction

Within Romanian folklore, the carol represents one of the most important musical genres, given that the caroling custom is attended by the entire village community, as carol singers or hosts. Since the nineteenth century, folklorists have been interested in the Romanian carol, and most of them mainly gathered and commented on the lyrics and literary themes. A smaller part followed the unfolding of the custom or the musical analysis of carols.

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Béla Bartók wrote in the preface to his volume of carols: “Unfortunately I did not have time in the early years of my research work to attend Christmas caroling in order to observe, in addition to music, the custom of the people.”<sup>2</sup> Sabin Drăgoi, in *303 Carols with text and melody*, summarily describes the antiphonic caroling and the arrangement of the carol singers in the hosts’ house. He states, regarding their number, that “there may be more or fewer than 12”<sup>3</sup>. In the past, adult caroling was practiced exclusively by young men who made up the group of carol singers, organized according to very strict rules. The structure, activity and organization of the group is amply documented by folklorists such as Ovidiu Bîrlea<sup>4</sup>, Traian Herseni<sup>5</sup>, Iosif Herțea<sup>6</sup> or Mihai Coman<sup>7</sup>, constituting an important imprint of the Romanian traditional culture, which is why, in December 2013, *Men’s group Colindat from Romania and The Republic of Moldova*<sup>8</sup> became part of UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage. However, in the last half a century, the custom of caroling has changed, due to factors such as: the aging of the population in the villages, the reduction in the number of inhabitants or the emancipation of the woman.

### Caroling in the south of the Apuseni Mountains

Without the pretense of creating a general image of caroling in Transylvania, we start our approach from carol collection sessions conducted in 1996 and 1997 at the border between Alba and Hunedoara counties. The field research was organized by the TerrArmonia Cultural Foundation and the “Gheorghe Dima” National Academy of Music and took place just before Christmas, with the custom being observed in progress. Six villages were investigated, five of which belong to the commune Almașu Mare from Alba County (Almașu Mare, Almașu de Mijloc, Cib, Glod, Nădăștia), to which was added Almașu Mic de Munte, currently being part of the Balșa commune, Hunedoara. The area is quite isolated, and access was possible on county or local roads, while the closest city was Zlatna, located 16km from the

<sup>2</sup> Bartók, Béla. *Ethnomukologische Schriften Facsimile-Nachdrucke IV – Melodien der Rumänisachen Colinde (Christmas songs)*. Editio Musica, Budapest, 1968, pag. xxx.

<sup>3</sup> Drăgoi, Sabin. *303 Colinde cu text și melodie (303 Carols with Lyrics and Melody)*. Editura Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 1925, pag. XLIV.

<sup>4</sup> Bîrlea, Ovidiu. *Folclorul românesc (Romanian Folklore)*. Vol. I. Editura Minerva, Bucharest, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Herseni, Traian. *Forme străvechi de cultură poporană românească (Ancient Forms of Romanian Popular Culture)*. Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Herțea, Iosif. *Romanian Carols*. The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, București, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Coman, Mihai. *Studii de mitologie (Mythology Studies)*. Editura Nemira, Bucharest, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/mens-group-colindat-christmas-time-ritual-00865> (09.03.2023)

communal center. 102 carols were collected, which were later published in the volumes *Romanian Carols*<sup>9</sup>, awarded with the “Ciprian Porumbescu” Prize of the Romanian Academy (Musicology section), 2003. This vast repertoire is very unitary in terms of musical morphology, containing structures based on a nucleus with two melodic lines AB and very rich in the thematic sphere, with over 22 literary themes, according to the classification made by Prof. Doina Bocşa, after the model offered by Monica Brătulescu. However, we are interested in the structure of the interpretative formulas which, in this case, is a very diverse one, comprising a male group, a mixed group, a group of children, an individual interpreter (man or woman) – **Table 1**. From all these variants, the female group is missing, while a variant that is rarely found in the practice of caroling was mentioned especially in the case of the interpretation of carols at the Sitting (șezătoare). However, during the collection of carols, years later, we encountered the interpretation of a female group, which was recorded in practice at the antiphonic caroling “at two windows” (la două ferești), where one group is made up of men and another of women, in the village of Silivaș in Bistrita-Năsăud county. Monica Brătulescu mentions the presence of the female carolers in the area of Moldova, in Muscel, where “the bands of girls and wives assume the role of main agents of caroling.”<sup>10</sup>

**Table 1**

	Almașu de Mijloc	Almașu Mare	Almașu Mic	Cib	Glod	Nădăștia	TOTAL
Male group	20	4		15	8	10	57
Male group, antiphonic		10					10
Soloist - male	6		23				29
Soloist with group	1	1					2
Mixed group	2						2
Children's group						1	1
Soloist - female						1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	29	15	23	15	8	12	<b>102</b>

**The carols collected from Southern Apuseni Mountains and their interpretative formulas**

<sup>9</sup> Bocşa, Ioan. *Colinde Românești (Romanian Carols)*. Editura MediaMusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2003.

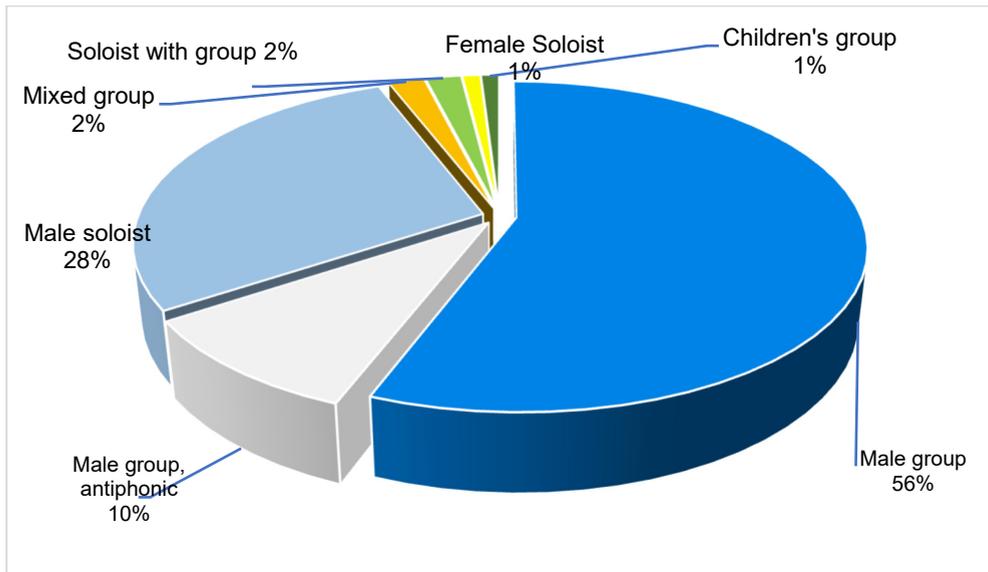
<sup>10</sup> Brătulescu, Monica. *Colinda Românească – The Romanian Colinda (Winter Solstice Songs)*. Editura Minerva, Bucharest, 1981, p.22.

Whenever we do not talk about a collection performed “in situ”, there are factors that can alter the interpretative formula, the character or even the morphological aspects of carols (we will mention them where appropriate). However, the purpose of collecting carols is a documentary one, aimed primarily at obtaining the material itself, with the other aspects being secondary to this desideratum, even if the carols and the caroling are synergistically linked to each other.

### Male group

The most common interpretative formula is the male group, i.e. the traditional *ceată*<sup>11</sup>. From the total number of carols collected in the researched area, 66% were performed by male groups, i.e. 67 carols, of which 10 were performed antiphonally. From the 6 investigated villages, in two of them (Cib and Glod, see **Table 1**) the male group was the only interpretive formula encountered.

**Graphic 1**



**Interpretative structures and their percentage**

<sup>11</sup> Group of carolers, band of singers, all being young men.

Starting with the very first collections of carols, the interpretative formula is specified, with the number of performers being variable. Atanasie Marienescu mentions between 5 and 7 young men<sup>12</sup>, Sabin Drăgoi 12 “drummers”<sup>13</sup>, and Ileana Szenik “groups of 8-10 people”<sup>14</sup>. In the case of our research, the male groups included between 5 (Glod) and 13 carolers (Almașu Mare). Following demographic changes, the group is no longer composed only of unmarried young men<sup>15</sup>, but includes men of all ages. In Almașu Mare, for example, where the carols were performed only by men, the average age of the carolers was 43, with the youngest being 24 and the oldest 75.

**Table 2**

Age Group	Number of people
20-40	6
40-60	3
60-70	1
70-80	1
Total	11
<b>Average Age</b>	<b>43 years</b>

#### **The structure of carolers from Almașu Mare according to age group**

Within the male groups we noticed in most cases the presence of a group leader, with an important role in interpretation. Each time, he starts the carol alone, being followed by the rest of the carol singers after one or two syllables, and in case of inconsistencies, regarding the lyrics or the melody, the rest of the group corrects him. To help the group, he stands out through a vigorous interpretation. One of the ways in which they conserve their energy until the end of the carol (since it is an epic genre, we often have over 50 stanzas in a carol) is the omission of a part of the chorus, as can be seen in **E.g. 1** (present in most carols; for example, in Almașu Mare, from 14 carols

<sup>12</sup> Marienescu, Atanasie. *Colinde culese și corectate (Carols, Collected and Corrected)*. Imprimeria Națională, Bucharest, 1861, p. XIV.

<sup>13</sup> Drăgoi, Sabin. *303 Colinde cu text și melodie (303 Carols with Lyrics and Melody)*. Editura Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 1925, p. VI.

<sup>14</sup> Ileana Szenik, *Folclor Muzical- Modul de studiu pentru studii universitare prin învățământ la distanță (Musical Folklore - Study Module for Distance Learning)*. Editura MediaMusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Drăgoi, Sabin. *303 Colinde cu text și melodie (303 Carols with Lyrics and Melody)*. Editura Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 1925, p. VI.

only 2 do not have a chorus and in Almașu de Mijloc out of 20 carols 4 are without chorus). This technique enables an energetic entry with the next verse, which starts by taking the last syllable from the chorus.

### E.g. 1

Grup /96  
Almașu de Mijloc, Almașu Mare, AB

Î - na - in - tea ces - tor cur - ți, Doam-neo, dai, Dom - nu - lui, Doam - ne,

### Example showing the part omitted by the group leader in grey background (Ioan Bocșa, *Colinde Românești*, vol. I, no. 1081)

In addition to this practice, we have also encountered carols in which the group leader enters with the next verse over the end of the chorus or of the previous verse, to suggest the lyrics that follow (Almașu Mare, Almașu de Mijloc). In some cases, the group leader is missing, the interpretation suggesting a compact group (Glod), or 2-3 carol singers constitute a leading group (Cib).

### Male soloist

The second interpretative formula, regarding the number of carols collected, is the male soloistic interpretation, which is not found in the practice of caroling, and has only a documentary role. Sabin Drăgoi wrote that “carols are sung in some places by one person or 3-4, with the purpose of begging”<sup>16</sup>, in contrast to the “group of drummers”<sup>17</sup>, who “sing for the traditional custom”. We encountered this type of interpretation in Almașu de Mijloc and Almașu Mic de Munte, the latter being a more secluded village with a small population - in 2011 it had only 58 inhabitants, compared to Almașu Mare, which had 394. In this village, the keeper of the carol repertoire was Father Ioachim Danciu, who, at the time of our research, was 71 years old. 23 carols were collected from him (see **Table 1**). Although Danciu was a representative of the Church, this did not significantly influence the repertoire of carols collected from him. Out of the 23 carols only one had as a theme the Birth of Jesus, and another 7 focused on other religious themes

<sup>16</sup> Drăgoi, Sabin. *303 Colinde cu text și melodie (303 Carols with Lyrics and Melody)*. Editura Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 1925, p. XLV.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. VI.

(The Holy Mother with the Son, the dispute of the Saints, Judas in Heaven), while the remaining 15 had secular themes. These proportions are part of the zonal trend (for example, in Cib, out of the total of 15 carols collected, 4 have religious themes). Regarding the interpretation, Father Danciu sang the carols with a full voice, a very well-pitched intonation, and a surprisingly long breath, being able to sing a stanza consisting of three melodic lines in a single breath, with the inhaling between the stanzas being a short one (about an eighth note). In the presented case (see **E.g. 2**) some stanzas do not contain a chorus, as the breath is necessary only for two melodic lines, but in other examples consisting of three melodic lines the technique used is similar (*la fie-ți de-aminte - Hey, remember this*, Ioan Bocșa, *Colinde Românești*, vol. I, no. 280).

**E.g. 2**

Danciu Ioachim 71/96  
*Almașu Mic de Munte, HD*

Fe - ri - cu-i, fe - ri - cu,      Da - ci - ne-i fe - ri - cu?      Da!, Dom - nu - lui, Doam - ne,

**In his interpretation, Father Danciu shortens the last quarter note to about a half and breaths in enough air to sustain the next stanza (Ioan Bocșa, *Colinde Românești*, vol. I, no. 153).**

There are also carols where, in addition to the eight-note rest taken by shortening the last note of the melodic line, the breath is prolonged by a quarter note (*Mânică, mânică – Wake up early*, Ioan Bocșa, *Colinde Românești*, vol. I, no. 152). In fact, in the only carol consisting of a single melodic line, collected from Danciu, he breathes only at every two stanzas (Ioan Bocșa, *Colinde Românești*, vol. I, no. 142). Another important thing to mention is that Danciu does not personalize carols by adding ornaments characteristic to individual interpretation, but keeps a reduced ornamentation, characteristic to group singing.

In Almașu de Mijloc, the individual interpretation intervened when one of the carol singers in the group remembered a carol that was no longer part of the group's repertoire and sang it individually. Thus, the solo performance was circumstantial.

**Mixed group**

The interpretation of carols by a mixed group is more and more common in Romania, for various reasons, from the lack of a cohesive group of men who know the repertoire well to the desire of women to actively



**E.g. 4**Jurj Viorica Dorina 51/97  
Nădăștia, Almașu Mare, AB

Co - bo - ră - t-a, co - bo - ră - t, Zi - uă - rel de zi - uă - rel,  
Mai - ca Sfân - tă pe pă - mânt, Zi - uă - rel de zi - uă - rel.

**Coborât-a, coborât, collected in Nădăștia.**  
(Ioan Bocșa, *Colinde Românești*, vol. I, no. 1382)

The carol, belonging to the *giusto-syllabic* rhythmic system, is performed in a rather slower tempo than the carols sung by the group. Throughout the 23 stanzas (4 and a half minutes), the interpretation is constant, more ornate than the carols collected from the group, with the notes in the acute register being bright and strong. The intonation suffers to a small extent, due to the passion and energy with which it is sung, as the last stanza is one tone higher than the first one (C-E-G than B flat-D-F, in the original interpretation, before the application of the principle of relative transcription). As for rhythmicity, a technique close to the recitative (characteristic of the ballad and *doina*) is taken from the song itself, by which the succession of three or more-quarter notes is precipitated or retained, just like the pronunciation of that sentence in current speech. This gives naturalness to the interpretation and is much more evident in solo than in group interpretation, in which it is difficult to synchronize the whole group.

**Children's group**

The interpretation of a carol by the group of children was circumstantial in our field research (they insisted on singing something to us). The interesting part is that they sang us a carol from the adult repertoire, although there is a repertoire of carols especially for children, probably because they wanted to show us that they would be worthy descendants of the male group of carol singers.

**E.g. 5**Grup copii /97  
Nădăștia, Almașu Mare, AB

Joi - ne - lui ti - ne - re - lu, Ce stai, joi - nel, nu te-n-sori,

**Ce stai joinel, nu te-nsori, children group.**  
(Ioan Bocșa, *Colinde Românești*, vol. I, no. 719)

In contrast to the woman's interpretation, the children sang very simply, with each syllable being pressed and exaggeratedly clearly pronounced, whilst the quarter notes to which a single syllable corresponded were always equal. The melisma made on two sixteenth notes was always lingering, with the second eighth coming later and being a little prolonged, in all 16 stanzas of the carol.

### Soloist with group

An unexpected thing was that we encountered two carols performed by a soloist accompanied by the group, an interpretative formula that is not mentioned as being present in the custom of caroling. The logic of the appearance of this formula, however, is a very simple one. Everything starts from the circumstances of the individual interpretation, previously described, but in these special cases, the rest of the group learns the chorus while the performer sings a few stanzas, intervening, then, in the remaining stanzas of the carol, singing the chorus, and thus offering a welcome moment of rest to the soloist, between the stanzas. In the next example, from *Almaşu de Mijloc*, the group sings the chorus starting with the fourth stanza, noticing the fatigue of the soloist, who begins to breathe during the chorus, just as the leader does in the group performance. However, the presence of the group is not constant, depending on the soloist's involvement in the chorus, but they sing the chorus partially or entirely until the carol is over.

### E.g. 6

*Grup /97*  
*Almaşu de Mijloc, Almaşu Mare, AB*

*Cris - tos, Dom - nu - lui nos - tru, Co - lo su - su-i, mai din su - su,*

### Colo susu-i, mai din susu, male soloist with group. (Ioan Bocşa, *Colinde Româneşti*, vol. I, no. 533)

In *Almaşu Mare*, the circumstances that led to this interpretative formula are different. In this case, the group starts the carol together with the group leader, but not knowing the lyrics, they gradually give up after the first stanzas, and the leader becomes a soloist. Starting with the fifth stanza, the group sings only the chorus.

Since it exhibits great adaptability to the different problems that may arise during caroling, to solve them on the fly, we consider that such an interpretative formula can be constituted for the reasons mentioned in the practice of caroling, but it still falls short of being an organized interpretative variant.

## Conclusions

The male group is the formula implied by the interpretation of carols, with the term *carol singers* referring directly to it, regardless of the title it has, depending on the ethnographic area. For practical reasons, however, other interpretative formulas have been added to this one, some formed on the spot for a single interpretation, and others coming to support and/or take over from the duties of the male group. As long as the repertoire is not distorted and the functions performed within the custom remain those inherited from the forefathers, over time, we consider all these changes to be both natural and useful in the space of village communities.

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