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Sphinx Riddles for Zamolxes. Ethno-Politics, Archaic Mythologies and Progressive Rock in Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania

The study investigates the intricate mingling of the Romanian echoes of the Western Counterculture, on the one hand, and the nationalist-Communist ideological elaborations of the Ceaușescu regime, on the other. The perspective is that of the young alternative musicians of the 1970s and the early 1980s, who, confronted with the necessity of constantly adapting to an uncertain and hostile political environment, where simultaneously oscillating between pre-Communist forms of exalting an archetypal national soul and the Western countercultural blend of futuristic and regressive utopias. The manner in which this nexus of tensions could be packaged into a relatively consistent expressive lingo is analyzed through the evolution of the lyrics of the progressive rock act Sfinx/Sphinx.

After experimenting with mixing folk & pop with classical musical forms (e.g. the 1972 *Șir de cocori/* Line of cranes contains the rhythm and blues transposition of one of the modernist Romanian-French composer George Enescu's seven Lieder on the love verses of the 16th century French protestant poet Clément Marot) with its first LP *Lume albă/* White World (1975) the Romanian act *Sfinx* (its name meaning, quite intuitively, sphinx) decidedly opted for progressive rock. Even if *White World* was not exactly a conceptual album, its general structure being rather eclectic, it conveyed a sizable intention of reaching a higher degree of elaborateness, in point of both form and "visionary" content. But the album is also highly instructive in the ways of accommodating the countercultural sensitivity with the official ideology of the Communist regime. Once an act aspired to exit the niche of quasi-informal student festivals and acquire a truly public status through the state controlled media channels, the level of political monitoring was upgraded accordingly. Which implied for the young musicians the introduction to the game of a multilevel ideological negotiation.

In the case of *Lume albă*, the marks of this interaction are immediately perceivable in the very fact that the musical pieces carrying the message of the album display the image of a very abstract Progress, devoid of historical-political or personalizing features. The more neutral the notion, the lesser the risks of disturbing the ideological orthodoxy. But, at the same time, the higher the possibilities of articulating diverse and even opposing figurative semantic connotations. At least two of the main pieces recorded on the album, *Secolul vitezei/* The Century of Speed and *Magelan/* Magellan are instantiations of this communicative policy.

Secolul vitezei / The Century of Speed¹ (Music and lyrics: Dan Andrei Aldea)

Viața aleargă mai iute Cu fiecare ceas, Anii devin minute, Timpul e-n greu impas Și în lume e-o	Life keeps on speeding up With each and every hour, Years are turned to minutes, Time is in dire straits, The whole world's in
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¹ For better or worse, the translation of the lyrics belongs to the present author.

<p>continuă goană Fără popas. Omule, nu mai privi înapoi peste umăr, Gîndul să-ți fie-mpreună cu fapta mereu. Mergi înainte, chiar de ți-e greu, Este drumul tău.</p>	<p>perpetual hurry Without a brake. You, man, stop looking back over your shoulder, o, do stop, Make sure you always bring thought in accord with your deed. Keep on advancing, even when hard, This is your true way.</p>
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Magelan / Magellan (Music and lyrics: Dan Bădulescu)

<p>Da, rămîneți toți cu bine, Meleaguri noi ne-așteaptă. Soarele-a vestit că vine</p> <p>Clipa plecării iată!, iată! Primejdii multe te vor încolți,</p> <p>Arșița cruntă te va face scrum,</p> <p>În bezna adîncă te vei rătăci,</p> <p>Cît mai e vreme, copile, te-ntoarce din drum! Mîine visul meu se va împlini,</p> <p>Drumul îl voi găsi, Orice-ar fi! Da, da, da, mîine Alții vor veni-n urma mea, Mai departe vom colinda,</p> <p>Adevărul îl vom afla. Da, rămîneți toți cu bine,</p> <p>Planete noi ne-așteaptă. Spre o nouă galaxie Plecăm îndată, iată!, iată!</p>	<p>Yes, yes, farewell to you all, folks, New realms wait for us. Th' Sun has just announced the moment Of our departure, lo!, lo!, lo!, lo! Countless dangers will threaten you, The dreadful heat will turn you to ashes, In profound darkness you will lose your way, While there's still time, my child, pray do come back! Tomorrow my dream will come true, I will find the way, No matter what! Yes, yes, tomorrow Others will follow me, We will wander further and further, We will find the Truth. Yes, farewell now to you all, friends, New planets wait for us. Towards a brand new galaxy We're about to take off, lo!, lo!</p>
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Severed from their musical background, the above lyrics seem quite elementary. But it has to be said that these two pieces, composed by Aldea, respectively by the bass-guitar prodigy Dan Bădulescu, are considered landmarks in the Romanian rock music. Another member of the band, Cornel "Muzicuță" (Harmonica) Ionescu, who was also one of the most active rock journalists of the time, later on glorified Aldea's technical performances in *Secolul vitezei* as having anticipated, and even as having remained unsurpassed by such guitar giants such as *Queen's* Brian May. A judgment which almost certainly emerged from an overflow of

nostalgic enthusiasm, but that still indicates the excellence of Aldea's both musical ideas and interpretative dexterity (C. Ionescu interviewed in D. Ionescu, 2005, p. 151). At the same time, Bădulescu's *Magellan* is also a sophisticated composition, one of the first in Romania that introduced the cosmic sonorities of a moog synthesizer. It also shows an influence of the dodecaphonic music – difficult to say whether received through a direct contact with the “high” musical culture (a group of experimental Romanian composers were teaching at the Bucharest Conservatory since the 1960s) or mediated by the influence of some of the most sophisticated British progressive rock bands (it has been suggested that the composition might have been influenced by *Emerson, Lake and Palmer* – Plămădeală, 2002). The song is intentionally broken in its very middle: the first two stanzas are associated with an insurgent self-confidence, while the third one, rendering the voice of doubt and fear before the unknown, brings a note of psychedelic strangeness. The last stanza, that moves the reference from the historical maritime explorations of Magellan to the modern conquest of the cosmic space, comes back to the initial purely “progressive” tune. But the abrupt cadence and the use of the counterpoint induce a nuance of irony to this otherwise decided and self-confident march chanting the scientific enlightenment. Actually *Magellan* is one of the few pieces from *Lume albă* that directly anticipates the experiments of the group in the coming double LP *Zalmoxe*. Therefore it is somehow strange that Dan Bădulescu was no more a part of the *Sfinx* lineup at the time of their full-fledged progressive rock phase. But his musical thinking has fundamentally marked the evolution of the act. It has to be added that Bădulescu seems to have nurtured intellectual and spiritual interests that associate him with the mystic branch of the Romanian counterculture (Oișteanu, 2006; Dobrescu 2011). It suffices to say that, after 1989, he returned from his Swedish exile to become an Orthodox priest (Ionescu, 2005, p. 151).

But besides all that might be said to the credit of the 1975 musical aesthetics of *Sfinx*, the messages of the two songs are expressive of a calculated ambiguity dramatically departed from the candor characteristic of the initial phases of the rock movement. The acclamation of the universal benefits of Progress in both *The Century of Speed* and *Magellan* was meant to send signals in many directions at the same time. It hinted at the old guard of the Communist party, who could identify here a remembrance of the proletarian Titanianism of the 1950s. At the same time, it seemed to vibrate with the more liberal circles of the Party bureaucrats, who were entertaining an interest in frontier disciplines of the 1970s as for instance the American “futurology” (besides having facilitated a number of book translations, these circles also made possible the visit of Alvin Toffler to Romania). But the “progressive” touch of the *Sfinx* sound was also expressive of the sensitivity of the Union of the Communist Youth, headed by Nicu, Nicolae Ceaușescu's younger son. This “new wave” Party bureaucrats were directly in charge with approving rock concerts and tours (they had for instance approved *Sfinx*'s participation, in the same 1975, to the Youth International Festival of Engaged Music, held in the German Democratic Republic - Caraman Fotea & Nicolau, 1979, p. 277), and it is more than plausible that they vibrated with the idea of covertly identifying with the spirit of “The Century of Speed”, or with the implication that they, the young *apparatchiki*, were called to carry on in the next century a modernization process symbolized by the intrepid explorations of Magellan. At the same time, the Aldea and Bădulescu lyrics sent signals on the other side of the political border, to the rock fans community, who might have felt itself secretly honored as a privileged receiver of the *Sfinx* message of allegedly daring progressivism. Last but not

least, the lyrics were ambiguous enough to accommodate even what was left of the countercultural spirit, by pretending to send to the children of the 1960s liberalization the vaguely subversive message that, in spite of the momentary closure, they should not lose hope, but stick together and persevere in following their Flower Power ideals.

The most spectacular *Sfinx* ideological hybridization was to be gradually crystallized in the *Zalmoxe* project. According to Aldea, the lyrics and the music were written in 1976, and in the following years parts of it were staged within the ordinary concert tours of the *Sfinx* group, but the censorship systematically refused permission to the recording of a double album. The official reason offered for the repeated cuts on the structure of the concept album was that it manifested “mystical” tendencies (Aldea & Stratone, 2002). In the end, the censors have agreed with the recording of a normal LP, so that the whole *Sfinx* body of work had finally to be reduced by a half. The album was released in early 1979.

Zalmoxe is a very strange mélange of themes and value systems, sometimes intended as such, sometimes probably exceeding the control of its initiators. The album should be a goldmine for all cultural studies scholars that follow in the steps of Stuart Hall’s theory of negotiation and articulation. We could start to understand its structural paradox by saying that it fused the futuristic visions of the British progressive rock and the obsession with the roots and origins of the ethnic identity of, on the one hand, a line of philosophical thinking inherent to Romanian modernism (Ornea 1980, 1995), and, on the other hand, the official discourse of the Ceaușescu nativist and indigenist ideology (Tismăneanu 2003, Malița 2007, Dobrescu 2007).

The concept album follows the imaginary and ideal stages of the biography of the alleged founder of the religion of the ancient Dacians, a Thracian tribe that, in the local official narrative, are considered the older registered ancestors of the modern Romanians. The Dacians were mainly a Romantic discovery (Merlo, 2011), partially a logical consequence of the emulation of the French national identity discourse, which derived the French sense of political freedom from the character of the ancient Gauls, partly a contamination with the German cultural trend that fused the exploration of ultimate ethnic origins with the very idea of personal introspection, of self-revelation. Later on, the interbellum Legionnaire movement managed to accommodate their aggressive call to an anti-Semitic Christian Orthodox fundamentalism with the cult of the Dacian “spirituality” (Ioanid, 2004). In the interbellum epoch the theme was also resonantly approached by the ethno-phenomenologist Lucian Blaga, a philosopher who had no connection to the xenophobic right-wing movement (Blaga, 1921). The 1960s nationalist turn in the Communist politics gradually projected the Dacians to the forefront of the regime’s legitimation discourse (Boia, 2001, pp.102-106).

It is impossible to assert that, as far as the creators of the *Zalmoxe* album are concerned, the theme choice implied a cold political evaluation. It is a fact, for instance, that Aldea has sung already as a teen-ager in a band candidly called “Dacicus” (Aldea & Stratone, 2002). But it is equally unlikely that the sudden resurrection of his interest in local archaic mythologies could have been completely unrelated to the surrounding political atmospherics. By choosing to elaborate on a Dacian theme, he consciously placed himself on the ideological orbit of the epoch.² But by placing the Dacians in a utopian-surrealist perspective, he tried to stay

² It should be noted that Cornel “Harmonica” Ionescu, the *Sfinx* member who was already evoked above as a musical journalist, collaborated at first with the nationalist-populist *Flacăra*/The Flame magazine, and then with the most aggressive nationalist publication of the epoch, *Săptămîna*/The Week, whose policy was to alternate virulent attacks on liberal and Westernizing intellectuals with attempts of seducing the young public with the

connected to the mental universe of the Western avant-garde rock music.

For the observers of the musical scene, *Zalmoxe* was the effort made by *Sfinx* to level the record with the rival *Phoenix*, whose legacy, even if erased from the public sphere after the escape of its members to Western Europe, was more alive than ever in the hearts of the rock fans. But according to Dan Andrei Aldea, he and his *Sfinx* collaborators had a totally different artistic reference in mind:

[...] the whole *Zalmoxe* album is to some extent our answer (a timid and imperfect one, marked by our paucity of means) to Jon Anderson's album *Olias of Sunhallow*. To this day, *Olias* has been for me the best album ever released on this planet (Aldea & Stratone, 2002).

What the two albums, *Olias* and *Zalmoxe*, hold obviously in common (besides the ethereal, cosmic, otherworldly moog-synthesizer sonorities) is that they both chant and cherish a providential political and spiritual leader. Jon Anderson's character *Olias* is the unifier of the tribes of an unnamed planet threatened by an imminent and complete disaster. His moral fiber and charismatic beaming help his race to overcome its despair and to build the glider that will carry them both to a safer place and to a state of pantheistic ecstasy (Snider, 2008, p. 232). *Zalmoxe* (or "Zamolxe", the variation of the name in ancient sources having fueled unending battles among the Romanian scholars) might have been a historical character turned by his countrymen into a god after his physical death. The most notorious mentions of his existence are to be found in Herodotus' *Histories* (Book IV, 93-96), and in Plato's *Charmides* (156 D -157 B).

The *Zalmoxe* album was born at the intersection of Aldea's fascination with the *Olias* futuristic mystique and of the fascination with the *Zalmoxe* myth re-sparked by the interest a part of the Romanian intelligentsia took in Mircea Eliade's speculations on the crucial importance of the alleged Thracian/Dacian god as a European forerunner of monotheism (an evolution analyzed in Antohi, 2000: xx). Initially chastised by the Communist regime for his involvement with the Fascist Legionnaire movement, the exile Romanian scholar of creeds and religious ideas affiliated with the University of Chicago was gradually recuperated as a central figure of the national Romanian pantheon. Even if Eliade's book dealing directly with the figure of the founder of the Thracian religion, *De Zalmoxis à Gengis-Khan*, published in France in 1970, was permitted the Romanian translation and publication only ten years later (Eliade, 1980), it should have circulated in Romania previously to this date, since it is quoted in the bibliographies of several books that appeared during the 1970s.

The creator of the *Zalmoxe* lyrics, Adrian Hoajă, an author without other noted poetical contributions and a rather discreet editor and contributor of the popular science monthly *Magazin istoric*/The Historical Magazine, was most certainly representative for the segment of the public touched by this wave of Eliade enthusiasm. His treatment of the *Zalmoxe* theme is not without resonance with the fundamentalist agenda of the so-called "Protocronism". This ideological group hailed, in defiance of the interbellum theory of the necessary synchronization with the West (Lovinescu, 1924-1925/1997), the alleged anticipation within

coverage of the rock and pop domestic stage (C. Ionescu, quoted in D. Ionescu, 2005, p. 38-9). In order to give a closer idea of the substance of the *Săptămîna* magazine, we should add that one of its main editors and contributors, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, became, after 1989, the director of the publication *România Mare* (Greater Romania) and eventually the president of the homonymous party, a political organization which epitomizes chauvinism and primitive populism on the Romanian political stage.

the Romanian and proto-Romanian cultural space of some of the most important breakthroughs in European history – i.e. monotheism, or... the discovery of writing (Tomiță, 2007). This mystique of the ethnic *Urgrund* is obvious in Hoajă's case in the very choice of his pen name: on the cover of the *Zalmoxe* album he appears as “Alexandru Basarab”, an obvious allusion to the 14th century Basarab the Founder, the first recorded *voievod* of Wallachia.³

It should be noted that the implicit reference to Eliade's exploration of the Dacian religion had also a cosmopolitan side. As an internationally acclaimed scholar and as a widely learned comparatist of religions, Eliade also talked to the aspirations of the Romanian intelligentsia towards both universality and cultural globalism. According to the Wikipedia article on the *Zalmoxe* album, which most probably is due to the *Zalmoxe* lyricist himself, the research for the project implied besides the scrutiny of the ancient Greek and Roman sources on “this mysterious character”, also the exploration of “other texts, on different topics, of the Ancient Orient (from Egypt, Babylon, India)”. The numerous blanks in the symbolic life story of the Thracian enlightener have been filled with corresponding elements taken from the sacred texts of other Indo-European cultures. The resulting portrait brings *Zalmoxe* in line with major mythological themes. Thus, his origin is the one of a “bear-god” (see *Ursitoarele/ The Fortune Tellers*, *Blana de urs/ The Bear Fur*, *Mierea* - the honey, an aliment preferentially enjoyed by bears, becomes a divine nourishment that the god takes to his cave – see *Mierea/ Honey*, *Peștera/ The Cave*), and his doings turn him into a civilizing hero: he educates his people and leads it to victory against its foes (The Bear Fur), than he disappears at the peak of his glory, retiring for three years in a cave on the sacred mountain of Kogaion (“The Cave”). He returns at the head of the Dacian nation (*Epiphania/ Epiphany*) for a last victory (*Furtuna cu trup de balaour / Dragon Shaped Storm*), and finally he comes to live only in the ever more blurred memories of the mortals (*Călătorul prin nouri/ The Cloud Traveler*, *Epilog/ Epilogue*).

Although, it might have been the intention of the lyricist to balance arch-nativism with a suggestion of esoteric cosmopolitanism. But, anyway, a too narrow focus on the lyrics would not do justice to the sophistication of the album, to the effort of harmonizing the archaic percussion with the futuristic sound of the synthesizer, or to its embroidery of recurring musical motives (Plămădeală, 2002). And, beyond the commercial leanings of Mihai Cernea (who composed two of the pieces), and the technical fascination with the electronics of the keys performer Nicolae Enache (who composed one piece), it is obvious that the leading musical conception of Dan Andrei Aldea (who composed the rest of the pieces) was driven by his infatuation not with the Dacian mythology, but with the British prog-rock, and primarily with Jon Anderson and his *Olias of the Sunhallow*. But in order to approximate the *Zalmoxe* ideology, or, better-said, ideological nebula, we will have to abide by our limited means and shortly analyze some of the texts. Not necessarily those that accompany the most accomplished musical segments, but those which are more relevant for understanding the symbolic discourse and policy underlying the project.

Mierea/ The Honey (Music: Mihai Cernea, lyrics: Alexandru Basarab)

³ This being a telling example of the chaotic eclecticism hidden behind the boisterous representations of ethno-cultural continuity, since “Basarab” is an Asian (Cuman) name, which could not be plausibly associated with the ancient Dacians.

<p>Lîngă noi, lîngă mine stă Și cîntecul vremii se-aprinde-ntr-un roi. Lîngă noi, lîngă mine stă, Ca mii de albine pretutindeni pătrunde, În orice ungher, Oglindă de cer, Mai blînd ca lumina, mai dur ca securea de fier. Stă lîngă noi, stă lîngă voi</p> <p>Și cînta...</p> <p>Lîngă voi, lîngă mine stă Și viața în faguri de miere descîntă. Lîngă voi, lîngă tine stă, Tăria durerii, dulceața mierii,</p> <p>Gîndind să pătrundă Prin fapta rotundă, Mai stins ca tăcerea, mai greu ca un munte Stă lîngă noi Stă lîngă voi Și cînta...</p>	<p>Next to us, next to me he sits And the song of time flames up in a swarm. Next to us, next to me he sits, Like thousands of bees he reaches allover, In every corner, Mirroring the sky, Gentler than light, harder than an iron ax. He sits next to us, he sits next to you, And was singing...</p> <p>Next to you, next to me he sits And charms life out of the honeycombs. Next to you, to you all he sits, The burden of pain, the sweetness of honey, Meaning to reach out Through his thorough deed, Fainter than silence, heavier than a mountain, He sits next to us, He sits next to you, And was singing...</p>
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The text is built, on the one side, on the pronominal ambiguity, between us/me, you/me, plural you/singular you, playing on the physical approach-distance (the verses are partly sung in a canon, very much in the Gregorian style of *Yes*, each voice uttering a different pronoun). On the other side, on a verbal tenses ambiguity ("He *sits* next to us / An *was singing*...), which projects the approach-distance play on the temporal line. The sense of this shifting perspectives is to show that the charismatic leader is a paradoxical personality that both unites the people by giving them a communal object of worship, and creates the sense of a personal bond between him and each member of the organic community (represented by the beehive). At the same time, he moves in time, he is both presence and memory, which indicates that, essentially, he is an entity placed outside of and above historical contingency (it was a favored idea of Eliade, largely repeated in the milieu of his Romanian admirers, that the myth has a time of its own, opposed to the historical one). But we will certainly remember that these lyrics, quite similar to Jon Anderson's celestial worship of his imaginary Olias, were not performed in the liberal UK, but in Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania. A contextual detail that certainly modulates the *Zalmoxe* theme of the providential leader in a quite specific way. It was said actually that Aldea's compositions have been several times saved from interdiction by highly-placed intermediaries who convinced Nicolae Ceaușescu that he himself was the secret object of the rock bard's arcane praise songs (Ionescu, 2005, pp. 41-2).

The ceremonial celebration of the supreme leader is equally obvious in the song *Furtuna*

cu trup de balaour/ The Dragon-Shaped Storm, where Zalmoxe, freshly returned after three years of initiatic isolation, leads his people in a battle against cataclysmic natural forces. The refrain of the song expresses the ecstasy of solidarity against Evil enhanced by a sense of the immediate presence of a quintessentially good and protective solar divinity. And, at the same time, it sounds like a sublimation of the “Comrade Ceaușescu’s fearless struggle for the world peace” propaganda theme.

Furtuna cu trup de balaour/ The Dragon-Shaped Storm (Music: Nicolae Enache, lyrics: Alexandru Basarab)

Lăsați bolta senină fără venin Lăsați ochiul lumii fără suspin Lăsați Soare S-adune popoare Să umple hotare!	Let the pure sky untouched by your venom, Let the eye of the world untouched by suffering, Let the Sun Bring together the peoples, And fill the lands with them!
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Of course, the verses are absolutely ambiguous and could even support the intention of reading a subversive intent into them: by underlining the complexity and spiritual fullness of an authentic spiritual leader (who unites in his being, as we have seen above, the conflicting attributes of tenderness and unflinchingly severe fairness), they might be supposed to point to the huge gap between this ideal vision and Romania’s Communist dictator. But the fact is that the ambiguity is so consistent that it seems utterly impossible to have evolved spontaneously, without a careful calculation. Does this suggest a political program? Most probably this high level of symbolic cunning, this obvious acquaintance with the sycophantic multilevel meaning strategies of the ripe phase of the Ceaușescu regime rather points to a blatant political indifference (as far as “political” is understood as having to do with some kind of personal creed).

The *Sphinx* alternation of “creative” ideological compliance and forms of unexpected insubordination is distinct also on the *Zalmoxe* album, one of the most obvious examples being *Călătorul prin nouri/ The Cloud Traveler*. A piece that, under the excuse of alluding to the Dacian’s shamanism, offered probably the only instance of a musical representation of a hallucinogenic experience in the whole Ceaușescu epoch. The first stanza of the text is enough to substantiate the former assertions:

Spre orice colț al lumii poate să zboare, Din vârful de munte cu ochi de cicoare, Din peștera oarbă cu ochiul de ceară, Din șarpe de apă cu duhul de sare, Călătorul prin nouri...	He can fly to any corner of the world From the chicory-eyed mountain crest, From the bee wax-eyed blind cave, From the water snake with a salt soul, The clouds traveler...
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The ecstatic mood is then continued in the purely incantatory piece *Kogaion* (the alleged sacred mountain of the Dacians), where Aldea clearly borrows elements from the “high” experimental music. Then, the final thematization of the ambiguity between the divine and the human nature of the central character (which had aroused the attention of the Communist censors who suspected an allusion to Jesus Christ – Aldea & Stratone, 2002), allows Aldea to

reveal himself as a guitar prodigy.

But it is a fact that, no matter how we evaluate the musical dimension of the *Zalmoxe* album, we have to insert it in a continuum that, at one end, is marked by Mircea Eliade-inspired personal explorations of both “countercultural” and “establishment” artists and intellectuals into an alleged Daco-Romanian mythology, while at its other end is marked by the agenda of the propaganda officials who were experiencing the preparation fever of a grandiose event meant to mobilize all the nation’s creative resources. The phrase that ritually designated this surrealistic 1980 jubilee was “2050 years since the foundation by Burebista of the Dacian unitary and centralized state” (Petre, 2010).

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Recordings of all the musical pieces to which the present paper refers can be found at the official site of the *Romania 3 Net* national radio program - www.radio3net.ro.