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DANCE PRACTICES IN BANAT:
'CONTRA-TIMP' FROM THE BANAT MOUNTAIN
VILLAGES IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

In the Banat region of Romania the 'traditional' dance forms of the Banat mountain region are currently practiced in the social dancing within the urban context of Timisoara. Currently, in the city of Timisoara, there is a regenerated interest in dance practices in the ensemble context and for participation at public events. This paper considers an ethnochoreological example of the 'contra-timp' way of dancing which was popular in some villages of the Banat mountain zone, and the adoption of this into the ensemble repertoire during the early 1970s. This 'contra-timp' way of dancing has expanded in popularity in the city whilst declining in the villages. I have examined dancing in 'contra-timp' from the historical context using prior publications and research archives, and by analysing the repertoire and choreology using participant observation, and interviews with choreographers and dancers to examine their dance understanding in the ensemble and social contexts.

Keywords: **dance practices, urban context, transfer and change, Banat (Romania).**

My area of research is the Banat region of southwestern Romania. This region appears to have had less recent ethnographic research compared to some other parts of Romania even though there is a continuing popularity for all generations of the population to actively participate in the local music and dance at events, parties and in ensembles. In Romanian regional administrative terminology the Banat plain and Banat mountain zones are considered jointly as 'Banat' although they represent two different ethnographic zones [Giurchescu; Bloland 1995:264]. This current region of Banat is named after the 'Banat of

Temeswar' (1718 to 1778) which became a Habsburg province following the acquisition of the Ottoman province of *Eyâlet-i Temeşvar* [Haşegan 2003:27].

My research is centred on an urban context in the city of Timișoara, a city of around 300,000 people and the second economic centre of Romania, and considers the participation in styles of local dancing that have their origins in the Banat mountain villages some 100 kilometers away. In this region, including in the city of Timișoara, the 'traditional' styles of music and dance are still known and respected by much of the population who participate in dancing at festivals and weddings. The continuing participation has an acknowledged Romanian 'ethnic identity' and is acknowledged to be 'traditional' by the participants, but the continuation of past ideas is merged with change to meet the expectations of the new audience.

The relationship between dance in the community and the amateur ensemble network is close. The choreographers are mostly of village backgrounds and concentrate on teaching the basic local dances. These basic dances are transferred to the festival stages with minimal creative changes; however, the most notable change is the use of dancing in unison. This ensemble network provides a training ground for hundreds of children and teenagers, plus the municipal culture house has a role as organising the visibility of this genre in the community.

WHAT IS 'CONTRA-TIMP'?

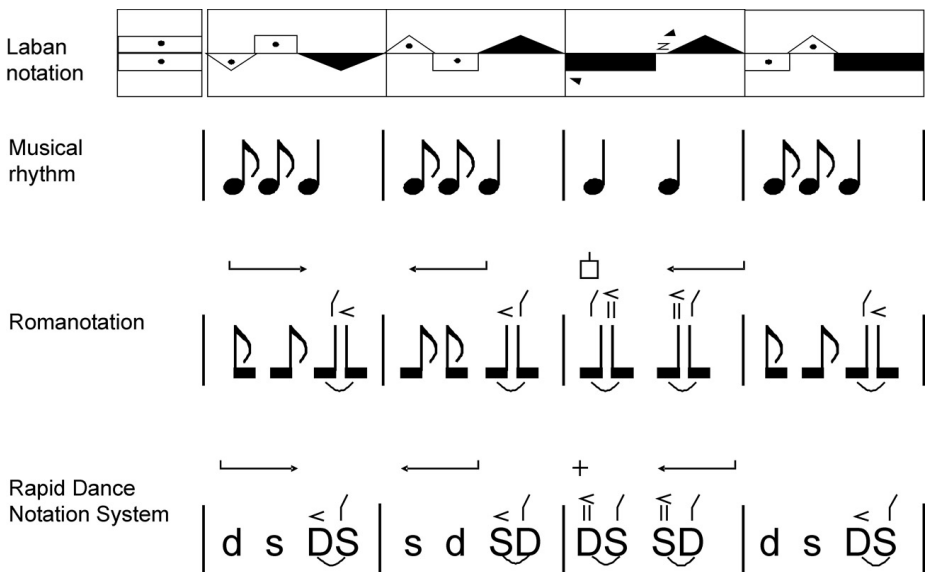
In the context of southeast European dancing traditions, rhythm is key to dancing and is linked closely to the music being played or sung for the dancing. This rhythmic connection and syncopation to music is typical of Romanian dancing, but is particularly strong in the Banat mountain zone. This is considered difficult due to the stretching and timing in parallel with an up and down motion of the body, which is often at odds with the steps. Giurchescu describes the 'musical feeling' for Banat dancing [Giurchescu; Bloland 1995:148], and the locals evaluate a 'good dancer' based on an ability for exactness to the music, termed as having an 'ear for the music'. The dance is very closely linked to musical rhythm, the steps being tied and flexed exactly to the musicians' notes, this being closer to the training of a musician than that of some dance disciplines.

Dancing in 'contra-timp', or counter point, is the positioning of the steps a beat late to the music, so on the musical off-beat, relative to the 'timp' (on time) version of the dance. This is essentially the same as Leibman's [1992:300] 'shifted articulation' where dancers in some Macedonian villages start the sequence with a lift and consequently dance one beat late compared to dancers from other villages. The skilful dancers from the Banat mountain region use dancing in 'contra-timp' as an option for the dances: *Hora* (circle dance), men's

Brâul bătrân (line dance) and *De doi* (fast couple dance). This is seemingly easy but subtly hard and a point of pride from those who can dance ‘contra-timp’, but I personally think it is more that the conversion from learning first in ‘timp’ is a substantial part of the difficulty. These dances are all structurally related, whereas the structurally unrelated slower couple dance *Ardeleana* is never danced in ‘contra-timp’. There was a regional separation in the use of ‘contra-timp’ within the Banat mountain area. *Hora* and *Brâul* could be danced in ‘contra-timp’ in both the southwestern and northeastern valleys, but the use of ‘contra-timp’ for *De Doi* is restricted to villages to the northeastern side, however, ‘contra-timp’ was not practiced in the regional town of Caransebeș.

THE DANCE *DE DOI* IN ‘CONTRA-TIMP’

To explain the operation of ‘contra-timp’, Figure 1 shows the basic step pattern for *De doi* in Labanotation, the Rapid Dance Notation System [Giurchescu; Bloland 1995:359] and the Romanotation scheme of Sever and Vasilescu used by the Romanian choreographers [Vasilescu; Sever 1972:8–45]. The later schemes have an advantage in the ease of connection between the musical notation and steps, which is at the heart of dancing in ‘contra-timp’. Generally this step sequence has some floor direction dependent on the figures, for example lateral movement when *De Doi* is danced in a column of couples. When dancing in ‘contra-timp’ there is a pause on beat one, causing the whole step sequence to be shifted by one beat against the music. This way of dancing for *Hora* and *Brâul bătrân* is practiced in most of the mountain Banat villages.



(a) *De doi* motif in ‘timp’ [Giurchescu; Bloland 1995:359]

Laban notation

Musical rhythm

Romanotation

Rapid Dance Notation System

(b) De doi motif in 'contra-timp'

Figure 1. Motif of 4 measures for De doi showing (a) 'timp' and (b) 'contra-timp' versions

The Banat choreographies danced by the Bucharest folk ensembles are all danced on the beat, in 'timp', probably with a history back to research trips by the leading choreographers in the 1950s (such as Gheorghe Popescu-Județ [1953]), for example I first learnt a Banat choreography in 'timp' from Bucharest ensemble 'Doina Studenților' whose choreographer was Ion Gubernicu. This was also the case for the Timișoara based ensembles in the 1950s and 1960s who only danced in the town style of 'timp', on the beat.¹ The choreographer Toma Frențescu introduced 'contra-timp' to the Timișoara ensembles in the early 1970s, first to ensemble 'Doina Timișului' then to ensemble 'Timișul'. Toma is from the village of Borlova which appears to have almost continuously danced in 'contra-timp' within living memory, whereas his choreographic predecessors in Timișoara were mostly not from Banat mountain regions and danced only in 'timp'.

Through the teaching of Toma Frențescu 'contra-timp' is now common in Timișoara, although dancing in this way is unfortunately fading out in some mountain villages. For example in the village of Ciuta dancing was in 'contra-timp' in the 1950s, but by the 1970s this had changed to dancing in 'timp'. As with other villages in the area, this happened predominantly due to the start of the schooling of village children in the town. Dancing in 'contra-timp' has spread from ensemble 'Timișul' via the network of teachers and choreographers to other ensembles in the region. Toma Frențescu also taught this way of dancing to the Bucharest ensemble 'Doina Carpaților' and