The Aromanian/Vlach Styles of Iso(n)-based Multipart

Unaccompanied Singing (IMUS)

In 396 AD the Roman Empire split into two; the western half was now ruled from Rome and the eastern half, which contained the lands which now make up Albania and Greek Epirus, came under Constantinople’s control. Diocletian reorganised these eastern lands into the provinces of Epirus Vetus, with its main centre at Nicopolis, and Epirus Nova, whose political-hubs were Dyrrhachium (Durrës) and Apollonia. It is to this area in the period of Roman rule that many of today’s Aromanian/Vlach peoples can trace their ancestors, their Latinised provincial heritage has been preserved in their distinct customs and Vulgar Latin-based language. They are still concentrated in considerable numbers around the Pindus Mountains and in Albania, North Epirus, Western Thessaly and North Macedonia.

The river Vjosa (the ancient Aoos) defined the northern border line of Epirus Vetus. The Vjosa continued into what was once the bordering province of Epirus Nova. Extending north up to the Mati river, and stretching east around the region of Ohrid Lake. Epirus Nova contained several cities of great importance including Dyrrhachium and Apollonia. To their west the Epiri (Epirus Vetus and Nova) faced onto the Adriatic and Ionian Seas; although the Island of Corfu, located just off the coast, is not generally regarded as being part of the southern province. This Province was dominated by a large Illyrian population but nevertheless contained a strong Roman presence. In South Illyria could be found settlements of mixed Romanic indigenous tribes who spoke a Romanin or Romance language and were known later as Aromanian/Vlachs.

It is important to point out that there are a number of studies, which suffer from a one-sided point of view made one-sided through national amour-propre. The multipart singing in Albania is usually considered as an only Albanian phenomenon, whereas in Greece, it is thought of as being Greek. The Aromanians too believe that the multipart singing has generated from their tradition. In fact, the multipart singing of the Albanian and Greek, as well as Aromanian and some Slavic populations is more intrinsically bound to the region than to any ethnic group. The distinct sound of the iso(n) singing echoes the internal and external historic influences on the region, interwoven with the complex modal idioms. As a result, in the regions of South Albania and north Greece (or that of ex-Roman provinces of Epirus Vetus and Epirus Nova, created during Diocletian’s reorganization), a distinct and rich local sound developed, echoing the voices and instrumental music of the East.

Since the Aromanian or Vlach ison-based multipart unaccompanied singing styles has been little researched in Albania, a general discussion of Aromanian/Vlach historic and linguistic features, terminology and musical culture may provide some useful clarifications and context.

***Historical facts***: There are many theories that explain the origins of the Aromanian/Vlachs[:](http://extentech.sheetster.com/knowledgebase/wiki_search.jsp?search=Romanians) in Romania they are considered to be the descendants of the Roman colonists mixed with Romanised Daco-Thracian people living in Roman Dacia area. After the Slavic invasions these peoples were split in two branches, Romanians and Aromanians; the latter migrated to the south of Danube River. In Greece, they are believed to be descended from a local Greek population that was [Latin](http://extentech.sheetster.com/knowledgebase/wiki_search.jsp?search=Latin)ised either immediately following the Roman conquest of Greece, or later, during the first centuries of the Byzantine Empire when Latin continued to be the official language.[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact, the area of origin of the early Aromanians, who were Romanic peoples and spoke a Romanian or Romance language, is what used to be the epicentre of the territories of the present-day Albania and beyond,south-eastwards. The Aromanian/Vlachs were originally mixtures of different indigenous tribes, who during Roman times were dwelling in south Illyria and lived in symbiosis with the autochthonous Albanian-speakers populace. Then, gradually they were fragmented and dispersed all over the Balkans. Being transhumant shepherds, they expanded over a vast area south of the lower Danube during the Slavic invasions.

The Aromanians or Vlachs are still living in ethnic areas in their original homeland throughout the Balkan region, especially in Northern [Greece](http://www.answers.com/topic/greece), [Albania](http://www.answers.com/topic/albania), Macedonia, as well as in Eastern Serbia, Northeast Bulgaria, Croatia and [Romania](http://www.answers.com/topic/romania) (mostly in [Dobrogea](http://www.answers.com/topic/dobruja)). Although they were generally known to be transhumant stateless herders, towards the mid-18th century some Aromanian/Vlach settlements such as Voskopoja (Moschopolis), Shipska, Grabova, Nica, Llënga, Gradishta, Gramoshtea, Linotopea, Nikolica, Vithkuqi became more   
prosperous and a powerful merchant class emerged through its trade routes of international connections leading to Venice, Austria, Istanbul and several other main centres of Europe. Around twenty-four churches, printing press and Academy, as well as other social-professional institutions such as businesses (*esnafe*), ‘Poor’s Depository’ (*Kassa ton Phtohon*) and ‘Orphanotrophy’ were built in Voskopoja and a cultural effervescence arose in this city. However, this was a brief period of time and Voskopoja was plundered and finally destroyed probably by the local people and its inhabitants fled the place and migrated in all directions by establishing several other settlements. Wherever the Aromanian/Vlachs settled in today’s Albania, they continued to share space and institutional order with the Albanian-speaking society, while at the same time maintaining their cultural identities, communal and spiritual life. The Aromanian/Vlachs were also integrated into other Balkan societies by preserving the legacy of the Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the mainstream religion, and vernacular based on the ancient Romanian origin.

Foreign travellers who visited Albania in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, such as Leake, Spencer, Tozer, Hammond and others, expressed their astonishment when they met in some villages ethnic groups that spoke a particular language, different from the local one, or maybe closer to their own language, an impression that they fixed in their own books.[[2]](#footnote-2)

***Linguistic Features***: The Aromanian/Vlach language is an eastern variant of Vulgar Latin (the spoken form of non-Classical Latin) or to put it simply, a Provincial Latin. Linguistic research has provided some evidence that the Romanian/Vlach language originated in the same substratum as Albanian (spoken in Southern Illyria) before the two languages began to be distinguished from each other. Just as centuries of Roman rule saw the Vlachs become thoroughly Latinised so the Albanian language has been strongly influenced by Latin. ‘Then, we suppose, pre-Rumanian moved north of the Danube and merged with a Daco-Romance dialect, which contained Thracian elements … Old loans in Rumanian from Albanian and shared Albanian-Rumanian developments from Latin point to an eastern origin. But the nomadic habits of the Vlachs and the herding culture of the Albanians would have brought them into contact for perhaps long periods in the past’ (Hamp 1963, 3). There is substantial evidence to suggest that it was in the 11th century AD that the Vlach language split into the present-day Romanian and Aromanian: Romanian, which was used in Romania, developed by its peoples dwelling in the lands north of the lower Danube, while Aromanian used in the Southwest Balkans continued its development separately; both languages are still understandable to each other. The Romanian and Aromanian languages seem to have followed the evolution of the spoken Latin that belonged to the Eastern Roman Empire before the Slavic invasions in the 7th century AD. From ancient times to the present day both branches of the Vlach language, Romanian and Aromanian, continue to exist. Yet, if the Romanian during the second millennium AD flourished in the land of today’s Romania as the language of the illuminists, universities, scholars and writers, the Aromanian, although it is still spoken in the original homeland of Vlach peoples has remained less developed, in a form of spoken dialect. However, it should be stressed that the earliest known examples of written Aromanian were manuscripts of the Patriarch Photius dating from around 860-870 AD, and manuscripts written by St. Naum of Ohrid at about the same time. In the early 18th century several liturgical books in Aromanian, written in the Greek alphabet, began to be published and at the beginning of the 19th century other materials appeared, written in the Latin alphabet. In the 1980s a new Aromanian spelling system began to emerge and has been adopted in most countries where Aromanian is spoken. The new system, which eliminates all the accented letters, with the exception of ‘ã’, was proposed by four Aromanian writers and first published in 1985.

***Terminological Facts***: According to the geographic area covered by the Balkan ethnic groups map, the Aromanians are dispersed in ‘ethnic islands’ among other populations. They can be grouped into those concentrated around the Pindus Mountains (in the Southwest of Macedonia, north Greek Epirus and Western Thessaly); those found around the town of [Farsala](http://extentech.sheetster.com/knowledgebase/wiki_search.jsp?search=Pharsala) (Pharsala) in Greece, called *Farshãrots*; those concentrated in the east of the Gramos Mountains (*Gramosteans*); and those spread out in Albania, mainly among the Tosks, with its people known by non-Albanians as *Farsherots* or *Frasherots*.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that some confusion has arisen regarding the term *Farsherots* (*Farshãrots*). However, in Albania the former and present Provincial Latin-speaking people are usually known as Vlachs of the Korçë, Kolonjë, Leskovik and Pogradec areas, as Vlachs of Myzeqe, as well as Vlachs of the Gjirokastër, Sarandë and Vlorë regions. Among the different interpretations offered by scholars we can identify two main views of the modern Aromanian term *Farshãrot*: one, proposed largely in my view by the Greek scholars, associates this denomination with the town Farsala (Pharsala) that represents the Aromanian-speaking population concentrated in the south of Epirus, in Aetolia-Acarnania, an area known in the Middle Ages as [Small Wallachia](http://brunodam.blog.kataweb.it/w/index.php?title=Small_Wallachia&action=edit). The other interpretation, proposed in my view by authors of an Aromanian/Romanian inclination, use Romanian spelling *Fărşerot* not only in order to differentiate it from those Aromanian/Vlachs of the Greek affiliation, but also to associate this denomination with the village Frashër in Albania.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The primary origin of the word ‘Vlach’ is Germanic and was applied to the Celtic tribes, meaning that is surviving today in the English name of Wales. From the Germanic tribes this term was transferred to the Slavs who employed it in specific reference to the Romanic peoples, including Italians, French and Latin-speaking Balkan tribes. The Slavs passed this word on to Greek ‒βλάχοι. *Vlach* also carried the meaning of ‘shepherd’, due to the fact that almost all Aromanian/Vlachs were herd-breeders. Albanians also call the Aromanian/Vlachs *çoban*, borrowed from Ottoman Turkish (چوبان), meaning ‘shepherd’. Greeks also call the Aromanian/Vlachs *chobani* (τσομπάνοι). In Serbia and Macedonia, they are generally known as *Vlasi* or *Tsintsari*; in English they are identified as *Vlachs*, in German as *Wlachen* or *Walachen* and in French as *Valaques*. In Albania Aromanian/Vlachs call themselves *Armãnji* or *Rrãmãnji* and their language *Armãneashti* (Armãneashce, Rrãmãneasht) or *limbã Armãneascã*. In the last thirty years or so many more Vlachs in Albania have preferred to be called Aromanians.

***Musical Tradition***: Pandi Bello provides a useful account of the dissemination, styles and inclinations of the Aromanian/Vlach traditional singing in the Southwest Balkans. According to him, the three main branches and dialects of the Aromanian people in the Southwest Balkans are the *Farshãrot*, the Pindean and the Gramoshtean. Between them they share more common elements than differences. Byzantine ecclesiastical music is another strong bond between the Aromanian/Vlachs and the other Southwest Balkan peoples. Bello states that ‘the Aromanian folklore is primarily vocal, *sui generis* vocal’ (Bello 1996, 8).

It can be said that there are two types of Aromanian singing (although this division cannot be rigidly applied): the monodic singing, which is practiced among the Aromanian/Vlachs in Pindus and neighbouring areas, and the multipart singing, which is widespread among the Aromanian/Vlachs of Albania and the Aromanian/Vlachs of Greece. The Gramostean Aromanians, who are situated in the north and between the Pindean and the Aromanian/Vlachs of Albania, have developed a two-part heterophonic singing as well as a monodic one, a kind of a mediatory musical practice between the other two. Since the topic of this research is the vocal iso(n) in the multipart singing, the focus will be on the Aromanian/Vlachs of Albania and the Vlach singing of Epirus, Greece.

In the Albanian territory the Aromanian/Vlach iso(n)-based multipart unaccompanied singing (IMUS)[[4]](#footnote-4) generally used to be practiced in both Albanian and Aromanian languages. The same can be said for the IMUS practiced in the Greek territory. Recently the Aromanian/Vlach IMUS of these territories has been practiced in Aromanian, as well as in Albanian and Greek. Although many of the Aromanian/Vlach iso-based multipart songs have not survived because of their difficult social and territorial circumstances, recent efforts at revival are increasing knowledge of the language and specific pastoral style of singing that were once widespread in the area. The Aromanian/Vlach IMUS very often bear a resemblance to the different ethnic areas in which they were practised. Following Rice’s argument that ‘musical style seems more tied to locale than to ethnicity’ (Rice 1987, 190) it is reasonable to support the argument that the Aromanian people have also contributed to the dissemination of the IMUS. The nomadic nature of life as shepherds allowed the Aromanians to act as mediatory practitioners; borrowing and sharing musical forms and styles between different ethnic populations across a large area. Çabej points out that ‘the wealth that the Aromanians and Albanians possess in their proverbs deriving from the shepherd’s way of life, is linked, I think, with the pastoral life of these two peoples’ (Çabej 1975, 119).

The Aromanian/Vlach IMUS generally occurs as a three-part type, as in the Tosk style. The iso does not break off during the melodic phrases. It pauses briefly only after a complete melodic improvisation and ornamental section led by both soloists, in order to make room for them (the solo voices) to re-enter, alternating and overlapping one after another, as in the first section of the song. A characteristic ending is the descending slide of the iso, from the basic tone to a roughly minor third, which gives the sense, in Sokoli’s words, of the ‘sound of bagpipe deflating’ (Sokoli 1965, 134).

The Aromanians of Dobrogea, mentioned above, owe their IMUS style to the Albanian Tosk populations from which they came. Constantin Secară,[[5]](#footnote-5) explaining the affinity and ‘relations between the Aromanians and Albanians’ in the field of multipart singing, has stated:

The Fărşerot repertoire consists mainly of *căntiţii di 'mpadi* [polyphonic songs], called also as songs with ‘e’. The simple, pre-pentatonic structures and the *giusto* syllabic system are dominant. Nonetheless, the polyphonic pattern is spectacular. Two performers develop the discourse in the form of a dialogue, which is here and there contrapuntal. They are supported by a numerous group singer accompanying them … The sonorous overlapping often creates dissonances, which are also stressed by the intemperate intonation. The powerful emission strengthens the audible image. Taking into consideration the geographical area in which Aromanians lived and the role of the Orthodox Church in defining their identity and culture, the obvious similarity of these songs with the old Byzantine songs is not a coincidence (Secară 2006, 131).

Secară’s treatment of the IMUS repertoire is quite intriguing and it is not difficult to find analogies between his vision and Baud-Bovy’s in his ‘Essai sur la chanson populaire greque’.

Traces of vocal polyphony also exist in the repertoire of another ethnic group who lived in neighbourhood with the Greeks: the Aromanians or Koutsovlachs of Thessaly, Epirus and west Macedonia. As in Romanian song, the trochaic verse – catalectic or not – of six or mainly eight syllables is the most common, but the influence of the Greek song is manifested in the songs of a 15 syllable iambic verse, where the strophe is very often a three-hemistich. Having the opportunity to study “in situ”, the musical language of the Aromanians of that part of Pindus, Thessaly, I found a clearly anhemitonic idiom and in spite of a particular colour of this language which is phonologically so different from the Greek, it does not at all distinguishable from the Greco phones of the region (Baud-Bovy 1983, 55).

There is a typical pastoral Aromanian/Vlach style of singing, with the second part falsetto, more or less as in the Andon Poçi village, north of Gjirokastër, which I also found in Kefalovriso, another Aromanian village in Greece.[[6]](#footnote-6) Both villages on both sides of the frontier were set up to make room for the Aromanian people as permanent residents. Since the distinctive feature of the Vlach/Aromanian song consists more in the performing style (in relation to their surrounding Albanian or Greek neighbours) rather than its formal structure, I have preferred to include only audio examples, one from Andon Poçi village in Albania, ‘A Lass Gazes at the Sea’ (Greek “Κoπέλλα αντίκρυ στη θάλασσα”, Aromanian ‘Featã mutreashti napãrti di amari’ and Albanian ‘Vajza që vështron nga deti’), Audio Example 7, and the other, from Kefalovriso village in North West Greek Epirus, ‘The First Morning of Anastasia’ (Prota diminiatsã a li Anastasii), Audio Example 8. It is supposed that the people from Andon Poçi have a common origin with the Kefalovrisians and that their IMUS is closer to the Tosk styles, and seems to match, particularly in the way they hold the vowel ‘e’ of the ison; it is an open sound, very characteristic of the Aromanian’s language open vowels. Their Aromanian language seems to have influenced the IMUS style by giving emphasis to the vocalization of the words characterised by guttural sounds and extended vowels, but also by the consonants such as the reinforced ‘rr’, a typical sound for the Aromanian/Vlach language. Another common feature which characterises both Aromanian villages is the descending glissando through the intervals of a major second and minor third. If the Andon Poçi IMUS style in the above example symbolises the shepherds yelling and shouting at their sheep (although it is a love story text!), while the Kefalovriso version seems to project a common conversation between the shepherds.

As discussed earlier, the origin of the Aromanian/Vlachs has been a question of some controversy and in recent times it has been reignited as an argument between proponents of the two main views; the pro-Greek and the pro-Romanian. The pro-Romanian camp refers to the Aromanian/Vlach IMUS as ‘Fărşeroţi’ (Secară mentions that ‘the Fărşerot repertoire consists mainly of *căntiţi di ‘mpadi* [polyphonic songs], called also as songs with ‘e’”), whereas those of the Greek view, for the same songs, use the terms ‘Vlachoi’ or ‘Arvanitovlachoi’ (Albanian Vlachs). In using the name ‘Fărşeroţi’, the pro-Romanian scholars intended to create a generalised term for the whole region inhabited by the Aromanian/Vlachs. At the centre of their definition is the language; Latinised and with roots in common Roman, this language spoken by the indigenous population was a powerful unifying force. On the other hand, the pro-Greek wing considered the Albanian IMUS to be an ideologically totalitarian form of music. However, they created their own version of this phenomenon by treating the Northern Greek IMUS as ‘one of the most ancient monuments within the Greek musical tradition’ (Zotos 1978, 5).

1. The Romanian-Greek polarization seems to be counter-productive by not only fragmenting the Vlachs, but also exposing the fact that their elite, locally and regionally, is still weak for self-organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Travelling in Albania in 1850, Edmund Spencer wrote about his impressions following a one-night stay in Kuchova, a small village at that time not far from the town of Berat: ‘As the shades of evening approached, we got to the village of Kouschova, inhabited by a tribe of Wallachians … This good people, who always regard a Frank from a similarity of language, as their compatriot, hospitably provided me with abundance of provisions. How singular is the tenacity with which man adheres to the language and the customs of his race. Although centuries upon centuries have passed since these people have been the slaves of successive tyrants, still they are enabled to hold converse with the stranger in the bold, graphic language of ancient Rome; and truly, Pope Michaeli in his long flowing robes, full patriarchal beard, hooked nose, strongly marked features, majestic person, and fiery eye, was not an unworthy representative of a people who were once the lords of the world’ (Spencer 150, 1851). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Until recently I have defended the view that the term *Farsherot* (Rom. *Fărşerot*, Arom. *Farshãrot*) is associated with the Farsala (Pharsala) area in Thessaly, Greece, and that some ethnomusicologists have mistakenly misinterpreted this term by thinking that it comes from the Albanian village of Frashër, north of Përmet. But, reading the Hammond diaries, kept by him in 1930, I extracted the following revelation which I found fascinating, but still did not sweep away the confusion:

   The Bouii are a cluster of Vlach tribes, one of which gave up the nomadic life many generations ago and settled down in southern Thessaly, where their descendents live today. They are called the Frasheriote Vlachs, a name that recalls their origin in Southern Albania; for Frater or Frashari (both forms are current) is an area northwest of Permet. It is very probable that the heart of Wallachia in the twelfth century was in the highlands by Lake Malik and Lake Prespa; for tradition associated the wealth of the Vlachs with two towns just the west of Lake Malik called Voscop (“shepherd’s town”) and Moskopol (“cowherd’s town”). When the crusaders of the First Crusade passed through the Vlach area on their way from “Adernobilis” (Hadrianopolis) in the valley of southern Drin to Kastoria in Macedonia, they must have been surprised to hear a form of Latin spoken as vernacular in these remote mountains’ (Hammond 1983, 38).

   Would the above quoted examination on the Frasheriot (Farsherot) Vlachs reflect reality? Nevertheless, despite the latter vague term, in this study I prefer to call this population either the more traditional denomination, Vlach, or a relatively recent denomination in Albania, Aromanian. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The abbreviation IMUS will be used throughout this part of the book [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Constantin Secară, a Romanian musicologist, studied Byzantine music at the National Music University in Bucharest and is a member of staff at the ‘Constantin Brăiloiu’ Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kefalovriso is an entirely Albanian Vlach village. In most houses, Aromanian/Vlach is still the dominant language. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)