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# HUNGARIAN SURVEY

VOLUME II, 1967

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Lajos Vargyas

## The Last Legacy: the Bartók-Kodály Corpus of Folk Music

The *Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae*, designed to be the complete compendium of Hungarian folk music, of which five bulky volumes have already appeared, is the most ambitious project accomplished by Hungarian folk music research. Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály regarded it the crowning achievement of all their scholarly efforts, and, apart from their work as composers, the main object of their life. This great undertaking not only offers a picture of the tremendous scope of the music collected, but by their mode of publication the volumes reflect the standards of research applied throughout the project. It represents the sum total of years of theoretical research and the most important results of mature, scholarly analysis.

It took years of work, I repeat, to bring this series of volumes into existence, and behind them lie even longer years of the painstaking work of collection and analysis. After eight years of collecting music and songs, Bartók and Kodály submitted a request to the leading Hungarian cultural

authorities in 1913, directing their attention to the significance of the several thousand folk songs they had already gathered and asking for help in their publication. The request was premature. Neither the official circles nor the wider public could appreciate the importance of the work at that time. Had it not been for the achievements and success of the two men as musicians and composers a real awareness of what it all meant might never have arisen. It was only in fact in 1934 that the Academy of Sciences offered them an opportunity for the publication of the songs, and entrusted Bartók with the task of preparing the material. From that time on Bartók was relieved of the burden of teaching music, and was able to devote all his time up to 1940, when his decision to leave Hungary became final, to the publication of the folk songs. It was, however, only six years after the war, and after the death of Bartók, that the first volume of the series came out in 1951, forty-six years after the work of collecting had begun—a period of nearly two generations!

It is worth considering whether a long delay harms or benefits a work of this kind.

Undoubtedly every year of delay is also an opportunity to make use of newer ma-

terial and newer results. In other words, the more modern and up-to-date it will be. If we take into account the fact that in 1924, when Bartók finalized his book for publication, the number of songs awaiting publication was 8,000, and it is now about 100,000, the long delay in the date of publication would appear to be a gain: gaps have been filled in, the greater number of variants and types of songs more recently discovered have made the picture of Hungarian folk song more complete. On the other hand, if we consider that during all these years the work was deprived of influence in either scholarly fields, or in Hungarian music, and the greater mass of accumulated material makes the working of this influence even more difficult, then we can assess the disadvantages of the delay.

These considerations, however, do not alter the fact that the war, and slow restoration of normal living after the war acted like the lack of understanding in the earlier period, in again delaying publication to a later date, and when the volumes did begin to come off the press the work had to be undertaken under the conditions then, and still, prevailing.

Kodály, who by that time had become responsible for launching the originally joint project by himself, was faced with a new set of alternatives: he had to choose between his own and Bartók's theories of classification for the arrangement of the songs, because at the time of Bartók's death this question had not been settled. The musical system devised by Kodály was based in the first place on the melodic characteristics of the songs, which he defined by a grouping of the final notes in the lines, that is, classification by cadence, and

only in further subdivisions of the groups he obtained by this method did he give metrical characteristics a rôle to play. Their first scholarly publication of folk songs, 150 folk songs of Transylvania,<sup>1</sup> was arranged according to this system. But in an extremely important book<sup>2</sup> published in 1924, Bartók proceeded first and foremost on the basis of metrical classification, and gave classification by cadence a secondary place. Before he left Hungary he had worked out the detailed metrical-rhythmical system of classification of Hungarian folk songs. All the material collected up to then existed in two copies, arranged according to each of the two systems of classification, awaiting a final decision as to which method would be followed.

This decision was expected to provide an answer to a question of no small importance. It was a cherished dream of both Bartók and Kodály, and their often repeated demand, that the folk songs should be published according to a musical system of classification. This would have been the magnetic force disentangling the inchoate and tangled mass of melodies, and putting them into an obedient system that would reveal their secrets. Almost every scholarly benefit required would follow from such a system, if it could be built on the real characteristics of the songs. Without it the widely scattered variants of the songs would lie undiscovered amidst several hundreds and even thousands of melodies, and the styles, types and specific characteristics of a mature folk music developed from a great diversity of influences would

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<sup>1</sup> Béla Bartók-Zoltán Kodály: *Erdélyi magyarság. Népdalok* (The Hungarians of Transylvania. Folk Songs). Budapest, 1923. (With introductions in English, French and German.)

<sup>2</sup> Béla Bartók: *A magyar népdal*. Budapest, 1924. In English: *Hungarian Folk Music*. London, 1931.

remain completely undeterminable. The greater the mass of songs the more hopeless the task of coping with such musical material, recognizing its characteristics and comparing it with other musical styles only by relying on memory. As soon as the material accumulated in the early period, in which variants of some song or another occurred by tens and hundreds, the necessity for some kind of musical classification immediately arose. An example was set by a people related to the Hungarians, the Finns. Their ethnographical collection is extremely large, and they were consequently the first to deal with the problem of working out a rational system for all kinds of folklore material. Kodály, oriented by his Finno-Ugrian linguistic studies, adapted Ilmari Krohn's system, and the two of them, Kodály and Bartók, elaborated it further as required by the Hungarian material.

But the system was still not satisfactory. In the first place, every system of classification in fact stresses only one characteristic of the songs, and the others to a lesser extent, or not at all. For this reason they formulated two different systems, according to two main characteristics crossing each other. But both systems only realized their specific aims to a certain limited extent. However important the cadence of the lines in the structure of songs may be, on occasion they change, and then two essentially identical melodies may be separated by classification of hundreds of songs away from each other; or if in the meantime it had been noticed that they were identical and they had been placed side by side, then the consistency of the system had been ignored. A slight diminution of the rhythm could easily result in a distance be-

tween two related melodies as great as within the other system. After the mechanical classification of the melodies further acquaintance with the material revealed more and more irregularities of this kind. In the course of time a more profound knowledge of the material, made possible precisely by this classification, threw more and more light on these irregularities and made further refinements inevitable.

Kodály was perfectly aware of these possibilities of error. But it was not this alone that made him hesitate in making his decision. Had Bartók lived his choice would have been easier to make, but as it was, without him and his consent, a great responsibility fell upon Kodály—the decision would possibly have to be made contrary to Bartók's ideas on the subject. Kodály insisted that the great common venture remain their joint work even after Bartók's death: for this reason the series bears both their names, and for this reason he tried to arrange everything to take Bartók's views into consideration in every possible way. When the state made funds available, and the undertaking was to be launched, Kodály called a conference of all the musicologists interested to listen to every possible argument. That was when the proposal was put forward that the series ought to begin with ritual melodies—songs of New Year's masquerades, songs of children's games, laments—and grouped according to the function of the song, that is, according to the custom with which they were associated. By this means the final solution of the classification of melodies not associated with any formal occasion could be postponed. It was just these customary songs, moreover, that had been most neglected in folk song publi-

cations up to that time, whereas the general body of song were already quite well known and had been published in several volumes, accompanied by scholarly notes and classification, as well as in a number of smaller popularizing pamphlets. And it is true that these special song categories represent an independent musical style, which differentiates them from the great mass of folk songs; and if they are published in separate groups, the requirements of musical classification are realized, because songs are classified in some style group in which they are closely related to each other, and published *en masse*.

After these preliminaries the series began with the songs of children's games. It soon became evident, however, that a dear price had to be paid for the time gained for a final formulation of the order of songs: these special types constituted a newer task in classification, for which not even as much preliminary work had been done as on the folk songs proper. Their collection, moreover, were by no means as complete as the other. And therefore not only work on their classification, but a large-scale supplementary work of collection had to be undertaken to make up for the deficiencies, and as a result, the volume containing the songs of children's games<sup>3</sup> only appeared in 1951.

But in the meantime, these songs had acquired special significance through Kodály's educational activities. In reviving the teaching of singing and introducing a whole new choral culture into the schools based on the folk song he made use of these play songs—the music of the smallest chil-

dren—to introduce the youngsters in kindergarten and primary school to the higher realms of music. For the curriculum he built up singing exercises from little rhymes repeating two notes, through motives of three, four, five and more notes, adding the difficulties, and a knowledge of music, gradually. At the same time he used these little melodies for small choral works for children. But when it came to a truly scholarly publication of a large mass of children's songs, the task of classification presented a completely new problem. It was Pál Járdányi, after a mechanical attempt by György Kerényi, who discovered—by continuing Kodály's educational practice—the original and pioneering system under which the volume was finally published. Here the play songs made up of several motives were grouped according to their principal motive—the core of the melody—starting with the simplest, and advancing to the most developed ones; singing on one note was followed by primitive melodies consisting of two adjacent notes, and then motives of *mrd*, *sls*, *slsm*, *smd*, etc. Separate indexes were made of the other melodies attached to the principal motive. This volume contained the first musically comprehensive system of classification of children's songs, which have an extensive kinship with similar songs throughout Europe, and was received with wholehearted recognition throughout the world.

Two years later it was followed by an even more bulky volume, the ritual songs which accompany the seasons.<sup>4</sup> One section of these songs consisted of melodies previously used and made popular by Kodály in his lengthier and very effective children's

<sup>3</sup> *Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae I. Gyermekjátékok.* (Children's Games.) Arranged for publication by György Kerényi. Budapest, 1951.

<sup>4</sup> *CMPH II. Jeles napok* (Calendar Customs' Songs). Arranged for publication by György Kerényi. Budapest, 1953.



choral works: the *Whitsuntide*, *The Straw Guy* and others like them. For a proper appreciation of them a full knowledge of Western folk customs, from carnival time to Whitsun or the Spring Solstice, is indispensable: carrying out the winter, the choice of the Whitsun queen, the medieval student songs for the namedays of St Gregory and St Blaise, the ceremonial songs or very ancient songs connected with the mysteries of Midsummer Night, the magical ritual of leaping over the fire and similar traditions. So are the previously familiar New Year's songs, already known, but revealed in tremendous abundance, about the Winter Solstice, the clowning, magic-making, greetings and customs of the New Year, that have shed new light on their French and Mediterranean-Byzantine connections. The volume also makes it possible to compare the Christmas custom of Nativity plays as carried out by the different peoples of Central Europe. These Nativity plays were formulated in Baroque times, but they perpetuate very ancient traditions.

The year the second volume was published was identical with the official founding of the Research Group. This was when the Hungarian Academy of Sciences organized the Folk Music Research Group from the staff which until then had functioned as the "editing committee." It was one of the first research institutes of the Academy.

The next subject in the series, weddings, divided into two sections, appeared under the auspices of the new organization. In the first section were the songs of wedding ceremonies, and in the second the dance melodies and descriptions of dances.<sup>5</sup> The

most valuable material in this volume was again Kodály's early collections from Northern Hungary (today Slovakia), where the richest Hungarian traditions and the greatest number of songs dating from medieval times had survived. In this area the old marriage customs had remained untouched up to our days, together with their ancient ritual melodies. These songs differ from other types of folk melody as much as do the songs of the New Year and the songs of children's games. These songs provided the initial impulse for the publication of a separate volume dealing with such material. Unfortunately the editors went much too far in their obsession with consistency and completeness—they even added material that should have been classified by style among the other folk songs, and which were connected with weddings only in a sporadic way. This criticism is even truer of the following volume, known as "match-making songs."<sup>6</sup> These volumes gave some justification for the mistaken criticism we heard from certain foreign scholars to the effect that the Hungarians had abandoned any form of musical classification and had adopted a system of classification exclusively according to function, that is, according to the occasion when the songs were sung. But this was a misunderstanding: we only used function as a basis for classification (disregarding the excesses already mentioned in the two volumes), in so far as it served to separate an independent musical style such as these calendar customs' songs; in everything else, a musical classification was followed.

It was precisely the experiences of the third and fourth volumes that prompted

<sup>5</sup> *CMPH III/A. Lakodalmok* (Weddings). Arranged for publication by Lajos Kiss. Budapest, 1955. *III/B*: 1956.

<sup>6</sup> *CMPH IV. Párosítók* (Match-making Songs). Arranged for publication by György Kerényi. Budapest, 1959.

the Research Group to end the ritual songs with a single volume, the laments, and so to begin at last the tremendous series of lyrical and ballad songs in the system of musical classification that had evolved in the meantime.

The lament is musically the most interesting for folklorists among all the ritual types of song and as a type has the longest history. Customs associated with death are more conservative than any other; the custom of mourning is a tradition going back to man's prehistoric past; the nearest woman relative of the deceased was expected to mourn the departed one, singing with an improvised text. This improvised singing, therefore, has preserved, together with texts that are virtually in prose, a very early stage of melodic construction: a non-strophic, motive-repeating chainlike form in which only the outlines of the melody are given, and only certain stationary points are connected with definite notes, but these follow each other alternating rather freely. In only a few border areas of Europe where archaic customs are still to be found, have similar types of melodies survived, most strikingly among our direct linguistic relatives; the Vogul, the Ostyak and Mordvinian peoples. It appears that this musical style has survived amongst us from the time that we lived together with them, and preserved a very ancient European musical tradition.

This volume<sup>7</sup> is even more closely linked with the collecting of songs and the research once undertaken by Kodály. It was he who discovered the lament, again in the Zobor region of Slovakia, and he was also

the first systematic collector in the northern fringe of our language frontier, among the *palóc* (Palots) people—and later in other sections of it. He not only recognized the great significance of this type of song, but had also intended to write a separate book about it, and by 1921 its publication had already reached the stage of engraving the musical examples. But he gave up the idea because he saw its shortcomings, and the difficulties that needed to be solved. As it was, only his collection and results were to hand when a comprehensive paper on Hungarian folk music<sup>8</sup> had to be prepared in 1934, and what was known about the lament also had to be included. When the introduction of the tape recorder opened up new possibilities in the recording of improvised types of songs, examples of this type of song, which was extremely difficult to collect, tremendously increased in collection of the Research Group, and soon several hundred authentic songs, among them a great wealth of subtypes, taken from the entire territory where Hungarian is spoken, were available for large-scale research work.

The Research Group was anxious to publish this material which was expected to attract great interest, along new lines. In view of the importance of the type, they wished to publish it with extensive comparisons with the laments of other peoples. This proved to be extremely difficult, because there had hardly been any publication of lament melodies among other peoples, and only descriptions of the custom were available to any extent. At the same time the Group wished to satisfy in-

<sup>7</sup> *CMPH V. Siratók* (Laments). Arranged for publication by Lajos Kiss and Benjámín Rajeczky. Translated by Imre Gombos.

<sup>8</sup> Zoltán Kodály: *A magyar népzene*. Budapest, 1937. In English: *Folk Music of Hungary*. Budapest-London-New York, 1960.

creasing requests from abroad that this highly important series or at least the explanations and commentaries should appear not only in Hungarian, but also in a language widely spoken throughout the world. We accordingly issued all the laments in two languages. Experts of other countries can now read both the explanatory material as well as the texts of the laments in English translation. The English is by the Hungarian translator of English and Scottish ballads, who approached his task with great care. The text was revised by our folklorist friend in Cambridge, Lawrence Picken.

Once again we can thank Járdányi for the most suitable arrangement of the melodies. This time the classification has been according to territorial distribution, since the lament and its subtypes show quite striking territorial distinctions. This system of classification, with the intelligent system of indexes, revealing this almost Protean form of music in its changes and variations through full type-sketches and extracts, the notation faithfully following all the nuances of the performance, and not least, the musical material itself, the moving, sometimes poetic texts and their humorous parodies, all go to make this volume an outstanding representative of the series.

With the laments, the publication of ritual songs has ended for the time being. The melodic material of a few less significant customs is under preparation, as well as the songs of peddlars, beggars and tradesmen; in the meantime, however, the new system of musical classification to cover the general folk songs had been completed, and Kodály's foremost efforts in his last years were directed towards the publication of the most important sections

of the folk songs in the series, under this system.

This new system was again worked out by Járdányi, who carried it to perfection through discussions with colleagues, and then a "trial publication."<sup>9</sup> His very first consideration was that the system should reflect the historical-comparative results that had been obtained in the meantime, and in particular that the style known to be the oldest, the melodies agreeing with those of related peoples in the East, repeating a fifth below, based on the pentatonic scale, with a descending melodic line, would be together, and separate from the rest. The other types should follow each other, possibly chronologically, and according to the degree of kinship. Such a system of classification, divided by styles, can never be as automatic as, for instance, the older system based on cadences, where the place of each melody is determined with almost mathematical precision and can be unequivocally located. Járdányi separated the two requirements that could never be quite reconciled: the indication of the style elements from the easy discovery of the melodies. According to his system the songs can be found through the use of indexes, which enable them to be located according to cadence, strophic structure, tonal range and form; and the actual classification of the songs can then be devoted entirely to revealing the style elements and relationships. The newer system gives both, and reveals in particular the family connections of the song expressed in the melodies, whereas the rhythmic system is often of secondary character. For this reason the system is built upon melodic characteristics.

<sup>9</sup> Pál Járdányi: *Magyar népdaltípusok* (Types of Hungarian Folk Songs), Budapest, 1961.

It is based on the premise that the vast majority of Hungarian songs consist of four lines, and these follow each other, clearly separated, with differences in pitch and well divided by cadences. Thus if we make difference in pitch between the lines the basis of the system, and within this the upwards or downwards direction of the melodic line, then we can grasp the most characteristic feature of the melody, and are in a position to gather all related songs together, and arrange the various families of melodies in a logical system according to the degrees of relationship which link them to one another.

The system of classification begins, therefore, with songs in which the first line lies in the upper octave; it starts with the highest note in the octave, describes an elliptical curve and finishes up on a high note again; this is repeated in the second line, but the end of the line is on a lower note; this two-line period with its two kinds of cadences then repeats itself a fifth lower, that is, the third and fourth lines are lower and the line ends gradually sink to the closing note. This is the family of melodies that Kodály elaborated in his composition of variations for orchestra; a folk song expert in Cheremissian music in Moscow exclaimed on hearing it: "Why, this is a Cheremissian melody!" The Research Group was also aware of variants of it widespread in the Volga region.<sup>10</sup> This identity of style, together with many other Hungarian-Cheremissian-Chuvash melodic parallels, indicates that such melodies have been preserved in Hungarian tradition ever since the Magyars left their ancient land, the Volga region, at least 1,500 years ago.

After such melodies—the variants of which may possibly fill even two volumes—come other songs with a different melodic line, but also gradually descending, and then those whose first two lines are similarly pitched, then songs in which the third line is higher than the first, again gradually songs where the difference in pitch between the first and fourth lines decreases; these are followed by those in which the first line and the last are in the same pitch, and the two between rise like a cupola—which is, incidentally, a characteristic of the new style of Hungarian folk music, and finally, types where the last line is highest, which is found in songs which are in fact art songs in their origin or which is peculiar to songs coming to us from other countries.

This system accounts for the whole trend of the melodic line, not just the position of an important note, or two, which might on occasion be changed; and the change would alter the place of the song in the whole system. This system finally solves the indication and classification of the styles and types of Hungarian folk music.

Under this system the Research Group has already issued a selection of songs,<sup>11</sup> where the chief types follow each other with one or two of their most characteristic variants, accompanied by an explanation of the system. At the Budapest conference of the International Folk Music Council, Járdányi outlined his system to a body of international experts. All preliminary indications—the advantages observed in the course of testing the system out, as well as its favourable reception in professional circles—go to show that at last the enormous aesthetic and historical qualities of

<sup>10</sup> See: Kodály: *Folk Music of Hungary*, song example No.6.

<sup>11</sup> See note 7.

the Hungarian folk song can be revealed in a suitable setting.

It is sad that neither Kodály nor the inventor of the system, Járdányi, lived to see the appearance of the first volume classified under the new system. It almost appears as if the whole venture had been plagued by fate; three men working on it died before they glimpsed the "promised land." Before the whole series was even started, Bartók died abroad; Kodály, who had a long life, brought the series into existence, but not the section that had for many years been his particular task to classify and publish; just before it was ready to go to the printers he died, without experiencing the joy of seeing in print what he had worked so long to prepare. Even more tragic was the fact that Járdányi, who was only in his forties, died even before his teacher, Kodály, and he also never saw his greatest work in full completion. It almost looks as if fate meant the work to pass from hand to hand, from the older to the younger, to become a collective creation like the folk song itself; that from the personal life-work of two great men, it should broaden out to become the common product, the collective accomplishment of many people.

Kodály held the relay baton longest of all. He was there at the start, when the first ideas were formulated, he was present at every stage of the undertaking, and without his judgement, precision, organizing ability, constant attention and supervision the work would never have been born, would never have come this far and would never have grown to this extent. Without him there would have been no successors to carry it to final realization, for the people working on the project are all his pupils. The extraordinary work he accomplished

on the project gave the dominant tone to the whole collective creation.

His entire life was one long demonstration of an incredible intellectual flexibility and capacity for work. Even as he struck out on a new road at the start of his career—with the rediscovery of the folk song—so he oriented himself with equal assurance before the tasks of scholarship that faced him. In the course of his career he was capable of renewing himself again and again, of widening his knowledge with new horizons, of acknowledging the results of others, of revising his own, and of devoting his life unconditionally to one great purpose. This is the real reason why he was able to develop his plan for the publication of the folk songs from a splendid individual accomplishment into the vast work needing a full research group for its accomplishment, and to further research into folk music beyond the horizon he and Bartók had first envisaged when they took the first steps: they had embarked on a search for the national roots of Hungarian music, and the more deeply they penetrated their material the wider the prospect grew (and the more urgent the need for comparative studies). Bartók investigated the music of the peoples of neighbouring nations; Kodály turned to the geographically remote peoples related to the Hungarians, seeking connections in the distant past on the one hand, and to more distant European relationship and folk music survivals deriving from earlier art music in Hungary, on the other, discovering broader European and later historical relationship. These widening horizons convinced him that the exploring instincts and recording abilities of individual researchers were not enough, and that a European comparative catalogue

must be built up by collective effort for the use of Hungarian research workers. Thus Hungarian research arrived, finally, through East European and then Northern Asian connections to entirely European problems.

And if we see Europe in the Hungarian folk song, undoubtedly the foreign scholar will see it as well. And not only Europe, but also Asia, though indeed that part of it which had always been associated with it geographically and historically. If in our ancient songs it is rather the East European-Asian relationships, that is, the Eastern features that emerge in greater relief, they are after all not entirely alien to the West: similar features have also appeared there, and more than once our melodies have served to illuminate the wider and older riches of the body of European folk music. If we place Cecil Sharp's collection of the wonderful Appalachian pentatonic songs beside our melodies, then perhaps from the differences will emerge the large territorial units, groupings in the musical history of

Europe. In our ritual songs many of the songs of ancient Europe are recognizable, and in other Hungarian folk songs there are a number of medieval specimens which may even be of more interest to workers in the general European field than to Hungarians. Even a specifically Hungarian song, or something new, like the new style of Hungarian folk song, may serve as an example of how a modern, national style of song can arise among a people through an amalgamation of various European art music influences and old national melodies. The Hungarian treasury of folk song, and the work of scholarship in which it has been assembled and made available, the *Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae*—the splendid work of Bartók and Kodály—has gone far beyond any national significance: it has become a source publication for all European folklorists and students of folk music. It can moreover serve as a guide and reminder to all the nations looking for the expression of a general humanity in their own musical heritage.