

# *The New Hungarian Quarterly*

**A Special Number in Commemoration  
of the 80th Birthday  
of  
ZOLTÁN KODÁLY**  
with Autobiographical Notes, Essays  
and Musical Scores

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The Changing Image of Hungary  
in the Western Press

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Neurology, psychology and musical morphology, still in its infancy, having joined forces, may one day progress to a stage where the correlations between objective features of musical forms—musical processes—and physiologically discernible states of mind—mental processes—can be studied on a scientific plane. This lies in the remote future. For the present we have to be content with less spectacular results. In being able to see, though only from the aspect of form, the art of this or that great master more clearly, a gratifying step forward has been taken.

## KODÁLY'S ROLE IN FOLK-MUSIC RESEARCH

by

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**A**t eighteen years of age Zoltán Kodály enrolled in the Academy of Music and the Arts Faculty of the University of Budapest, wanting to prepare himself as a musician, scholar and teacher all at once. This start was symbolic, for all three of these objectives have remained important to him throughout his life. The research of a musicologist, the creative work of a composer and the cultural activity of an educator and politician are integrated in his life-work. To the fortunate combination of teacher and composer we owe a whole series of works which today influence a wide strata of Hungarian youth, giving them a musical education and a deeper understanding of their national traditions. Kodály's propensity for scientific research coupled with his artist's insight has given us outstanding creations from the national tradition which he himself uncovered. Finally, it took his ambition as composer as well as his scholarly interests to carry to the conclusion the great project of investigation of Hungarian folk music, which he has intended to use as a firm groundwork for the building up of a new Hungarian musical art and culture.

All these intentions were already apparent in Kodály's make-up at the start of his career. While the same pioneering enthusiasm led the young Bartók to compose the Kossuth Symphony and study Liszt's works, Kodály, exploring new fields in the library of the Eötvös College, became interested in old Hungarian literature and folk poetry. He chose "The Verse Structure of the Hungarian Folk Song" for the topic of his doctoral dissertation, and to write it he made good use of what was then the newest treasure of the Museum of Ethnography: folk songs recorded by Béla Vikár. No doubt Vikár's phonograph recordings played a part in sending Kodály off on his first collection trip in 1905. A year later Bartók, so receptive to all new ideas, went too, and together they began to explore

for and survey the treasures of Hungarian folk music. New Hungarian music and a new branch of science—Hungarian folk-music research—were the results of their activity.

The artistic and national assets inherent in the newly discovered folk music, plus the kind of enthusiasm that makes one ready for all sacrifice to save and preserve these assets, provide the explanation for the passionate work of collection which in itself would have been sufficient to give Bartók and Kodály lasting names in science. In the wake of their joint activity, folk music became the best-known field of Hungarian ethnography. They explored the entire territory of the country, and even the Hungarian-inhabited area of Bukovina beyond the border, recording all lyrics, songs, ballads, folk customs and children's games accompanied by singing, songs of lament, instrumental dance music, and songs of beggars that they could discover—all the musical manifestations of the people. This comprehensive attention was still more consistently maintained when they started to direct their successors. The fact is that all later research proceeded under Kodály's guidance and as a continuation of his program—the collection of instrumental music, the work of specialists recording customs accompanied by singing, the collection of church folk singing and the writing of monographs about single villages.

Collecting is, of course, only the first step in a science, a step which can be made in many ways and in different directions. Eastern European folk-song collections were published prior to Kodály—Hungarian, Slovak, Rumanian and Croatian collections—which give with some degree of professional understanding more or less authentic folk material, mixed to some extent with written urban music. It is precisely these collections that lead one to understand the significance of Kodály's and Bartók's work, where, for the first time, thoroughly trained, high-ranking musicians, in fact composers, investigated Eastern European folk music.

Among several other results of their concern, the exact transcription of the typical Eastern European *rubato* style of singing is particularly important, for the older collections were rather primitive in this respect. With this a high standard of folk-song transcription was introduced that has remained the yardstick for all similar attempts in musicology. The recording of *rubato* melodies is both an artistic and a scientific question. An artist will immediately understand that the varied performance of these songs, their embellishments, according to the momentary inspiration of the singer, and their free and unspecified rhythm, is an important aspect of the melody; if this has not been noted, the essence of the musical style has not been noted. On the other hand, as soon as we want to perpetuate all these

changes, all the subtle variations in rhythmic pattern and tempo, we are no longer transcribing a melody but giving its presentation by a performer. Recognition of this fact is at the same time recognition of an ethnographic problem: a folk melody, like almost every manifestation of folklore, lives only in its performance and can be captured only in the variations of a given rendering. In written music there is the authentic form of the melody, the "original" whose slight modifications in performance have only secondary importance and can always be related to what was written by the composer. In folk music there is no such preliminary model, no original score. The idea of the melody, whatever idea of it exists in the general consciousness, is expressed only in its ever-varying interpretation. If that is what we wish to record, we are up against the problem of accurate transcription of the verse-by-verse modifications.

These considerations led Kodály, after the detailed and exacting *rubato* recordings of *Erdélyi magyar népdalok* (Hungarian Folk Songs of Transylvania)\*, to the precise showing of every variation in the several-verse recordings of the *Nagyszalontai Gyűjtés* (Nagyszalonta Collections)\*\* and finally to the publication of *Kőműves Kelemen balladája* (Ballad of Clement the Mason), which can be regarded as a model. This latter publication, issued in 1926, gives the accurate recording of all 36 stanzas of the ballad, with every difference in shading, every momentary modification of the rendering. Here again the inseparability of the artistic and scientific approach is evident; this method of publication aims to perpetuate an artistically built-up composition, every variation of which has artistic significance. Rhythm, tempo, embellishment and even the melodic line itself are modified according to the demands of mood, words and artistic variety, and thus the conscious idea of the melody gets a new and different emotional setting with every repetition. Scientific authenticity and aesthetic value are inseparably bound together in this publication, just as in any given composition. In the science of musical folklore it would in fact have been impossible to create anything fine without artistic stature. (It did, in fact, take artistic stature to create something fine in scientific folklore.) The explanation for the high development of Hungarian musical folklore probably lies in this happy welding of aesthetic and scientific interest.

Just what does it take to record such a long ballad in an artistic performance? It should not be forgotten that the transcription was made when phonographs were used, before the new era of the tape recorder. The disks

\* *Népies Irodalmi Társaság* [Folklore Society], Budapest, 1923. Also in French: *Chansons populaires hongroises de Transylvanie*.

\*\* *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény XIV* [Collection of Hungarian Popular Poetry, Vol. XIV], Budapest, 1924.

had to be changed after every four or five verses, and the performer had to be stopped at every change. Under such conditions the collector had to use all his tact and experience to get an even, representative recording of a given artistic rendering of a long ballad. It took a great deal of organizational skill and intellectual effort indeed to produce this publication, and in general all the results of Kodály's folk-music collections and research.

Recently some criticism has been voiced from abroad of this recording practice. "Too complicated," "conceals the essence of the melody," "the accidental features of the performance are perpetuated instead of the constant elements of the melody"—these are some of the objections. Without a doubt there is some truth in these statements, and for similar reasons a reaction has been seen in Hungary too against the over-intricate notations resulting from an exaggerated emphasis on detail. In fact, Kodály himself represents this trend toward simplification. Nevertheless, there is a great difference between the two reactions. Kodály wants to simplify *after* several thousand detailed transcriptions have been made, when the different types of Hungarian melodies, with all their variations in style, intonation and performance, are perfectly known, while musicologists abroad propose to do it *before*.

Bartók's experience with "Bulgarian rhythm" and certain Rumanian melodies is a case in point. Bartók also regarded certain modifications in rhythm in some of his Rumanian recordings as "accidental inaccuracies" and therefore neglected them in transcription and publication. Later, when he became more familiar with Bulgarian rhythm through his reading of theoretical writings and transcriptions, he became more aware of certain phenomena in his recordings. He listened to the original recordings and annotated them again, now with full and accurate details of their "complex" rhythm, their genuine rhythm.

It is interesting that no such reaction has been forthcoming from Eastern European folklorists. The Rumanians and Turks do not seem to think that detailed notations are superfluous; in fact, they would like to indicate still additional subtleties (chiefly in the pitch differences of intonation) through a perfection of their recording technique. Evidently they keep coming across new phenomena which they regard as important.

But do not other folklorists meet with similar problems in their own folk music? Whoever recalls the novel ideas raised by Samuel Baud-Bovy in *La strophe de distiques rimés dans la chanson greque*\* will realize that the same problems of rhythm may be latent in Western material as were at first neglected by Bartók. An examination of the rich ornamentation and protean

\* *Studia Memoriae Belae Bartók Sacra*, Budapest, 1956. Aedes Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae.

changes verse by verse in French-Canadian melodies—changes which are more marked than those found in Hungarian melodies—will leave serious doubt as to the justifiability of the incomplete sketches which we sometimes see even in important American ballad publications, where in some cases the words cannot always be sung to the melody. These sketches resemble the notations from the first year of Kodály's and Bartók's work: equal, naked eighths above every syllable, the sort of notation they found unsatisfactory a year later because they realized that instead of reproducing the essence of the melody it misrepresents it.

The ideal procedure to follow, then, is first to record all the details as much as possible, to study from the details of hundreds and thousands of transcriptions the essential elements of the style, and then to simplify—as has been done by Kodály.

In addition to their advances in the method of transcription, Kodály and Bartók achieved another great result in Eastern European musicology: a system of classification. It is owing to this system that the Hungarian collections are not merely a disorderly conglomeration of melodies, unsuitable for comparative work, in the use of which reliance would have to be placed on notoriously unreliable individual memory. Even the early Hungarian and Rumanian publications presented the musical material according to a logical system—an achievement by which Hungarian researchers preceded all other nationalities, except the Finns, whose initiative they in fact perfected. The Hungarian adoption of Ilmari Krohn's system of arrangement is also a result of Kodály's many-sided interests. He studied the Finno-Ugric languages, compared Finnish and Hungarian melodies and analysed the rhythm of the Kalevala runes as early as 1906.

In the large folk-song collections many melodies cropped up among the treasures of popular tradition which people's memories retained from the written music of different periods. Kodály, who knows old Hungarian literature very well and has kept careful account of the smallest relics of Hungary's musical history, was of course greatly interested in these. In fact, these relics furnished him with the circle of problems most natural to his inclinations—interest in history being the most decisive trait of his personality—and in their solutions he made important contributions to musicology. In folklore he found the ancient traditions preserved and developed by the people side by side with all the fine stylistic trends that appeared in Hungarian musical culture; that is, within a small framework he found together the entire Hungarian musical past and the musical culture integrally connected with it. In the examination of this co-existence and the exploration of all its interrelationships Kodály was able to satisfy both



his main interests: he could unite folk-music collection and research with historical and philological investigations. In the wake of his discoveries all Hungarian musicological research took to new paths. Hungarian secular music history could rely on few data referring to periods prior to the 19th century. The vast majority of the few records that did exist were incomplete or erroneous. The outline-picture could be completed only by the relics passed down by folk tradition: richly embellished lyric and ballad melodies, dance melodies in artistic presentation with the traditional adornments and diminutions of instrumental rendering. The study of folk music has greatly increased the archives of Hungarian music history. It became possible to attach the proper melody to words whose melody had been missing, to decode illegible notations, and to fill out sketchy melodies with the fulness of live performance. Many long-debated issues were solved, new interrelationships were revealed, and the styles and development of entire periods became clearer through the elaboration of the new material.

Kodály, in 1933, first summarized the significance of the traditions for music history in *Néprajz és zenetörténet* (Ethnography and Music History).<sup>\*</sup> In this work he demonstrated through interesting examples how the folk data and historical records had a bearing on Hungary's particular position in music history. This realization, however, has its significance not only for Hungarian research. Recently, the fact has received increasing emphasis that European music history is also in need of the testimony obtainable from folk music, that the comparative study of folk music opens up sources which may throw light especially on the problems of the music history of the early and late Middle Ages, where even the sources of peoples with a wealth of written records run dry. It is generally believed that the first formulation of this working principle took place in the above-mentioned study by Kodály.

The actual formulation was the result of almost twenty years of preliminary work. Kodály's pioneer works—*Három koldusének forrása* (Source of Three Beggar's Songs)<sup>\*\*</sup>, *A hitetlen férj* (The Unbelieving Husband)<sup>\*\*\*</sup> and *Árgirus nótája* (Song of Argyrus, a *bella istoria* which the Hungarians of Bukovina sang from a tarpaulin as late as 1916)<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>—began to be published from 1915 on. Each of these three papers treats a different field of music history, at the same time suggesting new research problems for his students, from which later they were to produce results. "Song of Argyrus" shows the common features in the style of the "recitative twelve," a type

<sup>\*</sup> Ethnographia XLIV, Budapest, 1933.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Ethnographia XXVI, Budapest, 1915.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Ibid.

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Ethnographia XXXI, Budapest, 1920.

of folk song consisting of four twelve-syllable lines in strongly recitative *parlando* delivery with lengthened tones at the ends of the lines, and the 16th-century verse chronicle; from this analysis Kodály deduces the characteristic manner of delivery of a 16th-century Hungarian minstrel, Tinódi, explaining the apparently primitive rhythm in his works. The fact is that some scores of compositions by Tinódi and about a dozen of his contemporaries have come down to the present, and the rhythm is noted only in a perfunctory way. Nevertheless, in certain cases it is evident that theirs is a type of recitative melody similar to the "recitative twelve" which still exists as part of the Hungarian folk heritage. "The Unbelieving Husband" shows the appearance of a 16th-century rhythmic and strophic pattern in a contemporary Hungarian and Slovak ballad, a pattern whose history constitutes an interesting chapter in Hungarian verse and melodic history. Both papers have formed the basis for further research on Tinódi and on melodic and verse history, and, through the verse chronicle, they may provide inspiration for research into still earlier times. The paper on the beggars' songs calls attention to the material of old psalm books, from which the beggars' songs, modern popular church songs and even secular folks songs have retained a considerable amount. At the same time this paper has become a point of departure for research on popular songs, which may increase interest in another special area of music, and has drawn additional sources into research on music history.

These provocative studies and findings by Kodály, together with the personal inspiration and guidance which he is always ready to give, have inspired his students and set into motion music history research on a large scale, as a result of which Hungarian music history studies have become a significant part of those on Hungarian cultural history as a whole.

The reserved, unassuming titles of Kodály's studies are typical of the man and the scholar. He always designates an existing thing, something that is evident from the material and from which interesting conclusions may be drawn. Kodály is averse to theories incapable of proof, to reckless jumping to conclusions; he is always ready to wait until he can come forward with results that can be supported with proved data. With him this attitude does not set a barrier to imagination, only to unfounded statements and unprepared conclusions. Probabilities and bold hopes determine the direction of his further probing but are not proclaimed as results until they are well supported by facts. This discipline, factual realism and ability to wait is characteristic of scientists who need not rush ahead with shaky theories because they have plenty of firm results to stand on. Every new work by Kodály surprises the student with its multitude of new

results. The historical chapter of his book, *Folk Music of Hungary*\* (published in English by Barrie and Rockliff, London, and Corvina Press, Budapest, 1960; first Hungarian edition 1937), the most complete summary that exists on the interrelated problems of written music and folk music, is full of proved relationships and their logical corollaries.

There are still more complete results in his contributions to the narrower field of folk-music research. From the comprehensive area of comparative musical folklore, he has been most interested in tracing back the oldest threads that connect the Magyars with related peoples. There was ample room for guesswork and even a good many promising clues along this line: the Finnish songs and some Volga Finn (Cheremiss) melodies that found their way into the Hungarian museum offered parallels at first sight from which a less settled person than Kodály would have soon drawn his conclusions. Kodály, however, who was most interested in these very relationships, had the patience to wait for several decades until he could dig up material which absolutely provided certain similarities to prove the eastern origin, prior to the conquest of present-day Hungary by the Magyar chief Árpád, of certain strata of Hungarian melodies: those pentatonic melodies that descend by a fifth in the third line, or more gradually.

Certain well-grounded results have a way of growing and multiplying, leading to a wider and wider circle of new findings. The Hungarian research which relates to the interconnections and common problems of the Hungarian and of the Eastern European and Siberian pentatonic melodies (the chapter entitled *The Primitive Stratum of Folk Music* and his essay *Sajátságos dallamszerkezet a cseremisz népzeneben* (Peculiar Melodic Structure in Cheremiss Folk Music)\*\* have furnished the finest results of Hungarian musicology and are assuming increasing significance from a historical point of view. However much his students have added and are still adding to this field, the main results and practically all the initiative are attached to Kodály's name. The fact that recently the relations of this melodic style are becoming more extensive as more or less similar melodies have been found in the archaic border areas of Europe, detracts nothing from the significance of his results. The greater purity of style of the Hungarian and Eastern melodic strata, the greater volume of melodies, and chiefly the large amount and often surprising melodic similarity, eliminate any doubt as to the fact that the Magyars brought the larger part of these melodies with them from the East, even if this style may come to be called Eurasian in the future. The larger the area to which the cultural phenomenon

\* Title of the Hungarian original: *A Magyar Népzene*

\*\* *Balassa József emlékkönyv* (József Balassa Memorial Volume), published in Budapest, 1934.

extended in the past, the further it reaches back into history, thereby strengthening the assumption that in the case of a given people it can be traced to very distant times and historical relationships.

The most important factor in Kodály's work is, however, that he introduces the idea of historical development into folk-music research. By defining the main strata of Hungarian folk songs (the "old" or largely pre-Hungarian-Conquest songs and the "new" songs which evolved in the course of the 19th century) and by showing how great has been the effect of the music of the different centuries, Kodály sets a new, constantly changing and developing series of traditions—a series which absorbs newer and newer elements and is even able to become radically transformed—in the place of the old concept of "ancient" and "eternal" folk song. Thus he demonstrates the existence of a historical process and works out the correct and modern historical approach to the folk song.

But Kodály's creative imagination is stirred not only by the life cycle of popular tradition, and he studies not only the ancient features of Hungarian folk music and the voice of distant centuries in Hungarian history. The same passion attracts him to the *verbunkos*, the period of Hungarian recruiting songs (as is shown by his works adopted from old scores and folklore collections, such as "Dances of Galánta," "Dances of Marosszék" and the dance music in "János Hány" and "Evening in the Spinnery"), to the romantic Hungarian dance music that developed at the end of the 18th century and inspired so many great foreign composers—Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert—and even to the popular written songs of the 19th century, which Hungarian and foreign audiences at large know under the term "gypsy music" and which even Franz Liszt mistook for Hungarian folk music. In Kodály's library entire cases are filled with the printed works of well-known and barely known song writers. He devotes a surprising amount of time and energy to investigating the sources of nameless songs and tracing the origins of "Hungarian songs" borrowed from and attributed to various sources. And if he did this merely out of "scholarly" interest for its own sake, we could regard it as a piece of eccentricity, for it was Kodály who, against this music and its devotees, championed genuine folk music which he believed could revive Hungarian music. But he regards even this less genuine type of music as part of the Hungarian musical heritage that is so dear to him. Since he has already overcome it, since he has restored the more valuable part of our heritage to its rightful place, he no longer has reason to inveigh against the less valuable, and now he respects in it whatever contribution it can make and whatever it may have drawn from the national heritage. A fine product of this 19th-century melodic philology

is his editing of the folk-song collection (in manuscript) of János Arany, the great Hungarian epic poet.

Our picture of the scholarship and significance of Kodály's work would not be complete if we restricted it to his own works and neglected the guiding and inspirational influence of his spirit in the papers he encouraged others to write. Kodály himself never wrote monographs about the music of a given village; a superficial observer, noting his unusual interest in history, might believe that such functional investigations, the make-up, life and laws of folk culture, remained outside his ken. And yet it is owing to him alone that today there are three complete Hungarian village descriptions—the first in this area of research. Outside of Hungarian contributions in this genre, I know of only one other, Brailoiu's posthumous book, published in 1959.

It was to me that Kodály for the first time assigned the task of realizing what he set as a target in his preface to his *Folk Music of Hungary* in 1937; he gave the theoretical foundations and designated the problems to be examined, and so his contribution was the greater part of the work, for the elaboration of the study would naturally give less than the problems posed. Moreover, Kodály's was the will which started the work. In fact, when I returned from the field work and, having presented the material to the master, wanted to start on the actual writing, I received an envelope from Kodály containing slips of paper, notes on the backs of letters and other *pro tempore memoranda* which gave a complete outline for the work. Through these notes one could actually trace how the skeleton of the work developed, becoming more exact from year to year, for the slips all bore dates. "Use them just in case something of it hasn't occurred to you," said the attached note.

And I was not the only one who received such an envelop with the "use-it-just-in-case" note attached. Kodály was just as ready to give data, tips for papers and source books to his pupils as he was willing to assign tasks and to bequeath some of his incompleting plans together with the results of what he had done until then. *The Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae*\* is based on Kodály's and Bartók's collecting, arranging and comparative work; it represents the two great masters' insight and plan, even though the successive volumes include a great deal of new ideas contributed, and a vast body of new material collected, by his students and by the members of his research team, and even though Kodály has been giving an increasing amount of independence to the "young generation"—

\* Akadémiai Kiadó (Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences), Budapest, 1951.

which is becoming no longer so young. His pupils are advancing on trails blazed by him, making them broader and easier to walk, whether they are dealing with children's games (for which his first children's choruses gave the inspiration) or with the volume of laments now under preparation, whose core consists of Kodály's early collections from Northern Hungary. (He prepared this collection for the press in 1924, and then when he realized that it still posed a great many unsolved problems he refused permission for publication; thus, some forty years later, he was able to publish a volume several times the size of the original, one which is the result of the collecting and documentation work of a whole research team, setting an example in the strict and unselfish service of scientific truth.) And now if his research team will carry out the plans for the "European Folk-song Register," and we shall have the chance to compare our material with that of Western folk music and even to investigate the specific problems of the latter, we shall only be going on with something that he began in the historical chapter *Folk Music of Hungary* when, relying merely on his memory, he compared the Gregorian chants, the medieval Spanish, French and German songs, Volta dance melody and others with Hungarian folk music and traced the development of the form-principle of the "new style" through the history of European written music.

Kodály is interested in the entire range of Hungarian traditions. He absorbs every relic of Hungarian music, from whatever period it may spring, and imbues it with his scientific and creative interest, either putting it in its proper place—if it is only of historical value—or adapting it in a work if it is of aesthetic value. In the same way he has imbued folk music with his scientific interest and built on it his whole life work as a composer.