



# KODÁLY SEMINAR

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FOLK SONG IN HUNGARY

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#### FOLK SONG IN HUNGARY

Until the end of the last century the Hungarian public hardly knew anything about folk song. What they did know as folk song was in fact the product of contemporary song composers: art songs with more or less "popular" features. There were no folk-song publications either. What was meant to serve this aim, contained mostly fashionable art songs also sung by the people with only a very small proportion of real folk songs among them. Even the latter were, for the most part, less typical pieces, transmitted only on the surface of popular tradition. And if there happened to be a few genuine, old popular items among them, they were hard to recognize because of the deficiencies of notation. It was especially the rhythm that was often distorted in these records. They hardly suggested the way these songs were performed by the people. But all this is, as a matter of fact, not really important as these collections in any case remained completely outside the interest of the public and did not affect its taste at all.

It was only at the end of the century, in the nineties, that the collection of genuine popular traditions was begun, and in a way which made it possible to record the typical features of popular performance. The folklorist and translator Béla Vikár wanted to collect materials of popular speech and poetry for his Kalevala translation, and he was the first in the world to apply Edison's phonograph in this work. He

recorded hundreds of folk songs and folk ballads on wax cylinders. But not being a musician, he could not write down the tunes. This was done by somebody else, a chorus conductor, a certain Kereszty, who put them down in a sketchy notation form. But both the wax cylinders and these notations remained locked up in the cupboards of the Museum of Ethnography, and no notice was taken of them either by the public at large or the musical circles. Musicians were needed for the Hungarian folk songs to be discovered and take the place they deserve in our musical culture. This was done in the first years of our century when Zoltán Kodály started his career as a composer and musicologist. As he himself says in his memoirs, he had already known, from his childhood in the country, a great number of folk songs when he first came across old folk-song collections. But his memories of them were in no way reconcilable with what he found there. It was already at that time that he determined to do something for these songs. His determination was further strengthened by his acquaintance with Béla Vikár's collection. It was at an exhibition held on the occasion of the Millennium of Hungary that he saw some pieces of Vikár's collection, and subsequently heard the recorded tunes. A new world opened up before him and set him on the path of hunting up the tunes that still survived in various parts of the country. His work soon became known to Bartók who also sought new ways of laying the foundation for genuine Hungarian musical art. The years 1905-1906 mark the beginning of a large-scale collecting work which was to lead to the complete discovery of Hungarian musical tradition. Their collecting tours meant not only the beginning of the

discovery of folk songs but also a method of recording and classification appropriate to their peculiarities. Both of them being not only excellent musicians but also brilliant creative artist and scientifically trained researchers, they were able to cope with this task.

It is to this happy coincidence that we owe

1. the adequate method of an authentic recording and notation of folk music appropriate to its true nature;
2. the scientific editing, classification and comparative arrangement of folk music;
3. national art music developed on the basis of folk music, which raised Hungarian music to world level;
4. a system of music education based on and derived from folk music, which has transformed the whole Hungarian musical culture.

When Kodály and Bartók started collecting the first folk songs they were of course not yet aware of all these implications. When they first found a great number of beautiful new tunes which were not only completely unknown to them but did not even display any similarity with anything they knew, they were struck by their novel tonality, their richness of rhythm, the terse, simple beauty of their melody and the style of their performance.

These tunes opened up a new world to them, transformed their notion of Hungarian music and stimulated them both to further develop these tunes musically, and carry on their scientific investigation, and go on collecting them relentlessly. Every collecting tour, every newly discovered part

of the area examined provided new surprises, and the richness of Hungarian folk song emerged from their collections on an increasingly large scale.

These novel but as yet fully unknown types of tunes, especially those ancient ones which were impossible to put into the regular, taut measures of music known so far, called for a new way of recording. Their fresh-flowing, unbound rhythm was determined partly by the words, partly by the momentary mood and musical taste of the singer. These are tunes of the so-called parlando rubato-type of rhythm whose recording is often made difficult by their melismatic character and which are almost impossible to put down in writing because they sound different in each performance. Their accurate recording was made possible by the use of the phonograph; the records, after repeated hearings, could be put down faithfully in writing. This method of recording is one of the achievements that has scarcely been attained or even accepted by international musicology. In this respect Bartók went the farthest, expressing such niceties in his recordings as constituting the ultimate limits of the perception of the human ear. This resulted, however, in such a complicated notation that it is almost illegible and, instead of expressing the essence of the tune, it often conceals it. It was for this reason that Hungarian folk-music research, influenced primarily by Kodály, has adopted the practice of substituting for these detailed notations a simplified summary of them. Nowadays we desist from recording the duration of each long note by repeatedly connected notes with an accuracy of 1/64 as we are fully aware that these values

vary from performance to performance, and also from stanza to stanza even with the same singer. After the hearing and transcription of innumerable tunes we know now how a tune sounds when the instruction "parlando rubato" is put above it, or when a long note with fermate above it appears among the eighths. We can even sing it in the appropriate style. This would not of course be possible if previously hundreds of notations had not given a true picture of the way these tunes are performed. These recordings were also important from another point of view. The wax cylinders are very short-lived: they get spoiled just by standing, let alone by using. After a detailed notation from them they hardly have any tone on them to enjoy or even make out. At the time when this device alone was available, people justly supposed that the only possibility for succeeding generations to get acquainted with a tune and the style of its performance was by way of graphic representation. Nowadays the magnetic tape, the micro-groove record safely preserve for a long time every subtlety of performance, which, along with the written records, enables us to study it better. It is thus not necessary to put down in writing a tune with all its details, with a microscopic accuracy. The main requirement today is easy reading. We prefer to give in our notations a summary picture of the common features derived from hundreds of individual performances rather than a minute recording of all accidental features of each performance.

When after hundreds and even thousands of tunes were brought together, the question arose of how to arrange this immense material and how to ensure easy reference? A new

problem was even raised by the variants. When the various collections produced newer and newer forms of the same tune, which were never identical, it became necessary to put the kindred types side by side. Thus a demand for musical classification sprang up. An order based on music had to be found in which the tunes were classified according to their musical characteristics. Until then, and partly even today, folk songs were classified according to their words, and kindred tunes were placed far from another. After reading hundreds of items of music, the identification of a given musical characteristic was left to the memory. There was only one single example of a classification based on musical characteristics: the method developed by the Finnish folklorist Ilmari Krohn. This was adopted, presumably on the advice of Kodály who was versed in Finno-Ugric studies, and made suitable, with certain modifications, for the classification of the Hungarian material. The essence of this method is that all tunes are transposed to a common terminal note and then classified according to several musical characteristics, their line-endings, metrical structures, etc. It was according to this system that the first folk-song publications appeared, such as Bartók-Kodály: Hungarians in Transylvania. Folk Songs, Bartók: The Hungarian Folk Song, and later even Bartók's Rumanian publications. The classification applied in these books makes it easy to trace a given tune, and causes even certain characteristics of the tunes to stand out in relief.

Since the appearance of the first publications Hungarian folk-music researchers have refined the method of musical classification and developed new systems for different

materials. They have soon come to realize that not every style can be classified in the same way, and that every specific folk-song material requires a special treatment even within the tradition of a single nation. Thus e.g. this method of classification does not sufficiently emphasize the characteristics of Hungarian children's games and funeral dirges while being suitable for other folk songs. Therefore special solutions were applied to them in the big publication "Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae"; it was also for that reason that Bartók arranged the Rumanian folk songs of Máramaros differently so that similar types could be grouped together. Unfortunately, no attempts have as yet been made abroad to classify published folk-song collections according to similar musical considerations. But how greatly the musical principle of classification facilitates orientation in an unknown material, can be experienced by anybody who first picks up Bartók's recently published big three-volume collection of Rumanian folk songs, whilst in the Hungarian collection of nearly one hundred thousand folk songs it would be absolutely impossible to orientate oneself without a logical musical system.

The working out and consistent carrying out of the classification of a large material by musical criteria is in itself a great scientific achievement. Yet it is not the ultimate aim of science, only the first step towards scientific understanding, just the beginning of science. It makes it possible to get acquainted with the description of musical tradition, identify in it the various types and styles, describe and summarize the peculiarities of the wealth of tunes. In this

respect the Hungarian material is many-sided. Right from the beginning the researchers became aware of two major styles: the so-called "old style" and the "new style". The first is that richly decorated style of song with a free rhythm in which the pentatonic scale is very frequent and which, with its descending line of melody and its artistic structure, stands out from the rest of the songs. Even at the time of the first collections these were known only to very few people, mostly the older generation, while they were the most valuable items from a musical point of view. The second type was and is still sung by young people. They are fresh tunes with a march-like or dance rhythm, their typical characteristic being the recurring form: at the end of the tune the first line always recurs and embraces the whole melody creating thereby a unity of form. When compared with the ancient tunes, they are looser, lighter, fresher, more romantic. This style still prevails in our villages. In addition to these easily discernible styles there are still a great number of styles and individual types in the Hungarian folk music. They are impossible to define by common features. There are among them groups containing a lot of related tunes and isolated types as well each widely different in style. This richness provides ample opportunity for scientific investigation.

When we had got acquainted with the peculiarities and types of Hungarian tunes, comparative and historical research was set the task of finding out the sources and kindred variants of these styles and types. This task made it vitally important to get to know the music of the neighbouring peoples. This was, at that time, just as unknown as Hungarian music.

Our musicologists wanted to know what were the common and what were the specific features in them. To do this they also had to collect their folk songs. It was for this reason that Kodály and Bartók set out to collect Slovak folk music. Later when Kodály saw how much Bartók was engrossed in this work, he himself gave up collecting the music of the neighbouring peoples and began to concern himself with comparing our folk songs with specimens of music history. Bartók, on the other hand, kept up his collecting activity in the neighbouring countries, and soon thousands of Slovak and Rumanian folk-song recordings were stored in the Museum of Ethnography. He went even further: on hearing certain Arab tunes he decided to collect them in the field, and soon he recorded on the wax cylinder Arab songs in the Gelfa oasis near Biskra. He discovered a close relationship between these songs and certain ancient Rumanian tunes. Later, when searching for the relations of ancient Hungarian tunes, he also conducted field collection in Anatolia, Turkey, in collaboration with the Turkish composer Adnan Saygun. In this way, Hungarian folk-song collection developed into ethnomusicology with a wide, international horizon. To this must be added the work Bartók did to classify by musical criteria the folk-music collections of the neighbouring peoples, the Ukrainian, Czech-Moravian and Croatian collections, as well as the work performed during his exile in America when he transcribed the recordings of Parry's Yugoslav collection.

He summed up the results of his comparative studies as early as 1934 in his work "Our Folk Music and the Folk Music of the Neighbouring Peoples" in which he systematized or made

the first survey of, the complicated relationships of the music of the East-European peoples. He stated that the ancient Hungarian tune style was unknown in other countries, and had penetrated only into two very small territories of the neighbouring countries, Muraköz in Croatia and Mezőség in Transylvania. He also traced the German, Czech, Moravian, and Slovak sources of several Hungarian types of tunes, and discovered the spread of the new style of folk song beyond the country's frontiers as far as Galicia and Bosnia.

The task of tracing the source of the ancient style of folk song was left to Kodály. He studied the published folk songs of the related peoples and discovered that a style similar to our ancient folk songs had survived among the Turkish peoples in the Volga area and the Finno-Ugrian peoples living there under Turkish cultural influence. He even found the exact parallels or close variants of many a Hungarian folk song there. Since the Hungarians have not been in touch with these peoples since they moved from that area to their present country, and since these tunes are not known to the peoples living in between, this melodic style could have been brought by the Hungarian tribes only from their original home in the pre-conquest time. This statement seems all the more authentic as this ancient style of song is widespread among the Turco-Mongolian peoples in Siberia as far as East-Asia, and can even be found close to the eastern border of North-China; at the same time tunes only slightly reminiscent of those can be found but sparsely in Europe.

Besides songs of the ancient style Kodály also traced the origin of a great number of our songs back to old remnants

of music history. Hungarian recorded tunes or the old music of the West. Thus we begin to realize how many styles of music have swept over the Hungarian village in the course of centuries, and which types of them have survived up to the present day.

Bartók's East-European comparative studies and Kodály's researches into music history and the comparison of the musical traditions of related peoples are great achievements complementing each other. It is owing to their investigations that we now also have a fairly clear insight into the historical questions of Hungarian folk song, an accomplishment that can scarcely be rivalled by any other nation.

But the two great musicians were not primarily scholars but artists, composers. They appreciated folk song primarily as music, as a basic material suitable for use in making composed music. They valued it also as artistic creation, often perfect in itself. They considered it as their foremost task to diffuse these songs and make them known to and popular with the Hungarian public and music lovers all over the world. There were two ways to set about this popularization: The first was to make these songs accessible in their original form, without adding any comments on them, in well-edited authentic collections. This was the aim of the two early publications abudly mentioned "The Hungarians in Transylvania" and Bartók's book *The Hungarian Folk Music*. They had also intended to publish the entire "Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae", the plan of which they submitted to the Ministry of Public Education as early as 1913, without any success. Instead of the great work a popular series of booklets

appeared in which their students tried to acquaint the public with the most important items of the collections.

The other way of disseminating these tunes was by their arrangement. As early as 1906 a booklet of 20 folk-song arrangements was published for vocal performance with piano accompaniment. Later both of them published several series of such arrangements for vocal performance with piano accompaniment. This is the most natural way of artistic utilization of folk songs: an arrangement for direct singing with the accompaniment constituting the only difference from the original style of performance. But both authors went farther than that. Kodály arranged the folk songs mainly in his choral compositions and evolved an original style of music, the choral composition consisting of cycles of folk songs /Mátra Pictures, Songs of Karád/ or the choral arrangement of ballads "durchkomponiert" from stanza to stanza /Székely Lament, Molnár Anna/. He put the most beautiful folk songs in even larger settings: in one-act or even full-time operas /Spinning Room, Hány János/. It was in these settings that songs got the atmosphere the absence of which Kodály had always felt in folk-song arrangements, namely that they appear deprived of the surroundings in which the individual songs were born and which explains them and adds to their effect: the background of the peasant life with all its joys, sorrows, games and many troubles.

Bartók, with his leaning for instrumental music, preferred to make use, not only of Hungarian folk songs but also Rumanian and Slovak too, rather in instrumental arrangements, especially in his suite-like piano pieces /15 Hungarian Peasant Songs,

Rumanian Dances, etc./. But in addition to these arrangements he also contributed a few cycles of choral compositions to Kodály's style of arrangement /Four Old Hungarian Folk Songs, Four Slovak Folk Songs/.

Besides representing artistic creations of a high order, these works were primarily intended to make known the folk song arranged in them. And this aim has also been attained: our most popular songs today are those that a successful artistic creation has acquainted with the public. Especially Kodály's choruses and Hány János have ensured the great dispersal and popularity of a large number of beautiful folk songs all over the country, though the famous "aria" of the Spinning Room, the song "At the Foot of the Csitár Hills" surpass perhaps all their rivals in popularity. Bartók's piano pieces made the most beautiful items of the wealth of Hungarian folk songs popular in a narrower but no less important circle, among the students of instrumental music.

But all this is only the beginning of the artistic utilization of folk songs. It attains its real significance when a great composer absorbs the style of the folk songs to such an extent that it becomes his own musical idiom enabling him, even without making direct use of folk songs themselves, to create such works that are tied to the style of folk songs with unbreakable threads. Both artists, each in their own way, carried out this transformation. Kodály evolved from it a national classicism, Bartók a revolutionary, new musical idiom. The possibility of both developments was given in the folk song. Bartók developed a new tonality of his own from the tonic possibilities of folk song, more exactly from the versatile,

old and yet boldly new tonic possibilities of the East-European folk song, a tonic system which we are only now beginning to appreciate with all its implications. He did the same with the peculiar rhythmic forms of our East-European folk music. Kodály did not go that far in the innovation of the tonic system, but he drew much more than Bartók on the melodic possibilities of the folk song to create a pure, classical musical language. However great the difference may be in the approach of the two composers, and between the two works created by them, they have one thing in common: the basis in each case is a sound human attitude to life. Both of them were fully conscious of the necessity of having a human community around them, and both wanted to express deep human experiences. They found stimulating possibilities for this in the folk song: human, collective experiences and natural means of musical expression satisfying great communities, which, compared with the contemporary musical idiom, also had a considerable effect with their novel features. This music was suitable to make new music from without losing its human character; not by forging a new system in a speculative way but by drawing the final conclusions from the existing, the natural. This basically distinguishes Bartók's music from the works of his western contemporaries, and in this respect his music is close to Kodály's, despite all the other differences. This common, basic attitude and their close connection with the folk song make their style an easily recognisable national style differing from all other music. It is owing to this new, national style that Hungarian music has developed into an exquisite and yet an entirely specific style of European music.

Prior to their appearance there had existed nothing like that in Hungary. Though Liszt's music contains a great many truly Hungarian elements and his music was certainly one of the most outstanding musical creations of his time, yet his art cannot be considered Hungarian national music to the same extent as Bartók's and Kodály's, not to speak of the fact that between Liszt and them there was no Hungarian composer of European stature.

With the creation of a new musical art of a high order it was not all problems of Hungarian musical life that were solved. The new music was isolated; the circle of its adherents, though enthusiastic, was very small, and was surrounded by masses of the musically uneducated. It was Kodály who was also ready to face that problem, who could not reconcile himself with the idea that Hungarian musicians should compose or play for a narrow élite, or, if this did not satisfy them, should go abroad to make their living and gain recognition. He also saw clearly that it was impossible to make music accessible to the wide masses, especially the poorer classes, by way of teaching them instrumental music. Therefore he composed as a first step children's choruses to give school children a share in musical experience right from the first responsive years with the help of an "instrument" available to everybody, and with works in which the poorest masses, the peasant children of the villages would recognize their own voice. With the artistic arrangement of the tunes of popular children's games easy for singing, he supplied a tool for teachers to win over their pupils in the early years of their childhood to the new Hungarian and thus to a higher music too.

The success of these children's choirs was the first decisive breakthrough in Hungarian musical culture. But Kodály was also capable of advancing even further. When he saw that the movement of children's and adult choirs had won the support of the more talented teachers for his endeavours, he found it opportune to change the whole basis of Hungarian music education. With the help of his students and fellow music teachers he evolved step by step a method of teaching singing whose two pillars were folk song and relative solmization. Folk song means first of all a musical language, easy, known and accessible to the community, with the help of which they can get acquainted with the musical fundamentals without any difficulty. In addition, pentatony still widely used in Hungarian music ensures a further advantage for the teaching of singing: there are no semi-tone steps in it so difficult to intone. Pentatonic tunes and the exercises based on them are especially suited to develop a good musical ear in children learning sight reading.

Kodály and his disciples carefully built up this graded system in which the child gradually reaches a high level of music knowledge, while making use of the well-known tones of its own people from the simplest, tone-repeating ditties to complet, wide-ranging melodies from pentatony to chromaticales, from Hungarian through foreign folk songs up to the great musical masterpieces of various ages. This concept was elaborated more and more methodically in the subsequent textbooks of singing, and singing teachers applied it with increasing success in the schools. Hundreds young people capable of reading music began to leave our schools, young people who

in the school choirs had become fond of the highest sort of music, from folk-song arrangements through Kodály's and Bartók's most difficult choruses to Palestrina's, Bach's and Liszt's masterpieces, and who, when grown up, were to fill our concert halls.

In the course of half a century we have changed from a musically illiterate country into a music-loving and music-making country, and have reached at the same time a high level of musical education and the understanding of our own deep-lying national characteristics. Those who are acquainted with the history of human civilization and Hungarian civilization in particular, will admit what a great achievement this is. Backward countries and nations reach a high cultural level first by imitating foreign examples, and it is only later, after strenuous work, that they can reconcile foreign culture with their own traditions and make their culture national. We Hungarians have managed to reach this high level of musical culture expressing our identity directly, without having to go in a roundabout way. A fascinating concept has come to be realized because a strong will-power and the intention of a nation-wide education have been achieved without the two great creative artists, the international fame of their works and their well-complementing division of labour. And without, as a further precondition, the cooperation of three capabilities, a force working simultaneously in three directions in each of them: the complementing and reinforcing power of the creative musician, the scholar and the teacher. But one more requirement was needed to achieve this superb aim: the folk song, the marvellous collective creation of the Hungarian people. The

joint power of a great individual and collective achievement  
has made up for the centuries-old lagging behind of our  
society, enabling us Hungarians to take our place among the  
nations with a highly developed musical life.