

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR STOCK OF FOLK SONGS FROM THE TIME OF THE HUNGARIAN SETTLEMENT

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Among all our folklore traditions the melody of the lament and the style of the folk-songs which developed from it reaches furthest back into the past. This has been confirmed with Vogul-Ostyak parallels. This kind of melody preserved the still very primitive forms of the common European major-minor music: three or four notes descending to the final note. But even in the shortest pieces it used two alternating cadences for this and later even developed laments built with three or four final notes, repeated a fourth lower and often reaching a range of an octave. The most developed type of melodies arising from such laments – as well as the less developed ones – are used in a four-line closed strophic form.

Since the Vogul-Ostyak parallels use even these more developed degrees in the free improvisation characteristic of the lament with unrestricted, changing cadences, it follows that the Hungarian people had at that time already developed this structure with an octave range and repeated fourth. And they passed it on to the neighbouring related Ugrian peoples among whom this type is known in only a small area and where the more developed strophic forms are lacking. These were obviously developed by the Hungarians at a later stage, when they had moved away.

At all events, this tradition is the only one in Hungarian folklore which can be traced back to such an early period. Apart from this, only isolated and now very indistinct *elements* of belief can be associated with our Ugrian relatives. Only linguistic links can be traced back to a more distant past.

This oldest part of Hungarian folk music, the "Ugrian stratum", is not an isolated, minor element in our musical traditions, but an important element which survived until most recent times, ever after the later oriental pentatonic influence which overwhelmed everything. One example is perhaps sufficient to show this: the melody of the *Kállai kettős* dance which remained popular right up to the 20th century and which KODÁLY recorded on tape in the forties.

It can be seen that it is not yet the full melody which is repeated here a fourth lower, but only two line endings, the stressed cadence tapped out with repeated notes. Otherwise the melody changes freely and is actually nothing more than a kind of preparation for the cadences which are the only important element. Even so, it is a more developed form, one that the Hungarian people were able to develop at such an early stage and have preserved practically right up to the present.

It was after this more developed style of the Ugrian period had been created that the Hungarians were exposed to the influence of the Siberian-type pentatonic scale characteristic of the Turkic-Mongolian peoples.

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Nem va-gyok én sen-ki-nek se a-dó-sa, a-dó-sa,

Él még az én fe-le-sé-gem, i-pam-na-pam a-pó-sa-a-nyó-sa,

Eb fél, ku-tya fél, míg az i-pam, na-pam él,

Eb fél, ku-tya fél, míg az i-pam, na-pam él.

This also included a type of melody with a narrower range, the so-called “psalm type” characterised by melodies using the three full notes (*do-re-mi*) and descending from there to the final minor note (*la*) (naturally, with various expansions in the different versions). Since these too are always pentatonic (in cases, four-tone), and they exist among the Siberian peoples too as independent, four-line strophic melodies, they can also be regarded as part of the oriental pentatonic legacy. (Although they can now be found practically only in the most archaic areas of Transylvania and in Moldova.)

However, the tunes with a wide range, descending from the octave to the final note which make up the bulk of our folk songs are of far greater significance. These are melodies of a pentatonic kind in four-line strophes of very clear form, characteristically articulated with cadences, gradually descending from a height of 8–9 notes to the minor key note (*la*), sometimes first going even one note below the key note. An even more clearly articulated form also developed beside these: the so-called “fifth-shift” type in which the melodic line moving on the two top notes is repeated five notes (one fifth) lower.

This is an even more elaborated structure than the fourth repetition of the Ugrian period: in this case the entire two melodic lines, not just the cadences, are repeated lower down. This fifth-shift melodic type is very widespread in Hungary, indicating that the Hungarian people were very fond of it.

Does this mean that the Hungarians were attracted to this kind of repetitive structure? The earlier fourth-repetition of the Ugrian period was also a descending, repetitive melodic structure. Gradual descent in which the final goal is clear, and within this the use of clearly articulated and stressed cadences, as well as the repeated use of a (first fourth, then) fifth response in which the two parts build up the form in the manner of question and answer: is this what suited Hungarian taste? Clarity and balance of form? The development went even further than this. After a while the repetitive balance appeared a little rigid: changes could be made to it for the sake of an even better formal structure. Our singers sensed that if a song consists of four lines, the greatest emphasis must be on the third, at least in range, that after the first, introductory two lines, the third is given the greatest scope or expansion, to be followed by the closing. This is why many of our fifth-shift melodies introduce a change at the beginning of the third line to the exact response by not going down immediately to a repetition one fifth lower, but by

descending gradually from an even greater height at the beginning of the third line and giving the fifth response again only in the second half of the line. As a result this third line is expanded to an octave in range, the greatest compared to the other three. This is followed by the closing: this fourth line is again of narrower range, a precise repetition on a lower level to close the melody. In other words, the melody is first shown in two high, short lines, this is expanded with variation in the third, while the fourth repeats the beginning and closes the melody. It could be said that this is a microscopic condensation of the classical sonata form: the introduction of the main and secondary theme is followed by the elaboration – which means variation of the themes presented and other expansions – and then the theme returns for the closing. The following is a typical example.

Meg - is - mer - ni a ka - nászt cif - ra já - rá - szá - ról

Ü - zött - fű - zött bocs - ko - rá - ról ta - risz - nya - szi - já - ról.

Hüccs ki dísz - nó, a be - rek - böl! Csak a fű - le lát - szik,

Kanász - boj - tár bo - kor a - latt me - nyecs - ké - vel ját - szik.

This “new”, pentatonic folk music spread through Hungarian folk tradition on such a mass scale that it still determines its character even today. The pentatonic-descending melodies and the fifth-shift pentatonic songs are the most characteristic pieces of our old folk music and the ones surviving in the largest quantity.

It is interesting that, despite this, the earlier, Ugrian-type melodies have also come down to us, not to mention the archaic stratum of the lament, kept alive by a very persistent tradition linked to death. Even if they occasionally acquired pentatonic turns, these melodies from the Ugrian period preserved the non-pentatonic, diatonic character. These four styles and melody types – one Ugrian and three Turkic – have determined Hungarian folk music throughout the 20th century. Does this mean that the Hungarians have lived here for a thousand years without receiving any musical influence from Europe? That is not the case at all. Through the whole of this period the Hungarians have borrowed pieces from their neighbours as well as from more distant western peoples and from the general European stock of melodies. This has even included pieces exactly the opposite in structure to the ones we brought with us: melodies arching upwards and then descending. This type has been particularly closely associated in Hungary with French melodies and ballad texts. These were the opposite of our descending types not only in their movement but also in range: they generally move in a range of 1–5–1. Others weave the melodic line below and above the final note, that is, where the final

note is not at the lowest point of the melody but in the middle. Numerous other types of melody can also be found in our musical tradition differing from those brought from the East in form, key and range. However, these exist in fewer variants and more limited geographical distribution, often linked to just one particular custom: songs of greeting, wedding feast songs or church songs. Even so, they show that the Hungarians were open to all influences from their European neighbours, too. But all this was unable to suppress the old tradition we brought with us or even to reduce its decisive predominance in everyday life.

Even in the late 19th century when this “western” influence swamped the villages – mainly through the “Hungarian art songs” of the Hungarian upper classes – and the “new style” was shaped under its influence, it still drew on the old deep-rooted oriental tradition. Although these new songs include many melodies in major and minor mode, at least as many contain pentatonic elements or sometimes surprisingly pure pentatonic. The following is an example:

Tempo giusto Berzence (County Somogy) S.V.

Er - dő, er - dő, de ma - gos a te - te - je,

Jaj de ré - gen le - hul - lott a le - ve - le.

Jaj de ré - gen le - hul - lott a le - ve - le,

Ár - va ma - dár pár - ját ke - re - si ben - ne.

Sometimes we find in them the pentatonic form ending in *sol* – that is, ending in *f* rather than the *g*, generally found in notation – now rare in the old style, which has survived mainly among the Székely people and in Moldova:

A nagy bé - csi ka - szár - nyá - ra rá - szál - lott egy gó - lya,

Vi - zet ho - zott a szá - já - ba reg - ru - ták szá - má - ra.

Mozsd - ja - tok reg - ru - ták, mert po - ro - sak vagy - tok,

Azt csak a jó Is - ten tud - ja, mi - kor sza - ba - dul - tok.

(The note missing from the pentatonic scale has been marked with a *cross*: there is one in each melodic line. Movement around do *re-mi*, then a jump of a fourth down to *sol* is especially characteristic of the pentatonic.)

But this new style also preserved something of the original melodic form. The formula of the two most characteristic forms of the fifth-shift form are: A^5A^5AA and A^5B^5AB . The two most widespread forms of the new style are AA^5A^5A and $ABBA$ in which we also find two high parts contrasted with two low parts. It is as though one line has been shifted to copy the 1-5-1 arch – rising and then descending – borrowed from the West but which has been executed with the range of our songs, with a rise to the octave or even higher. However, the legacy of the high-low contrast has been retained in the structure and even in the line repetition within the song. As in the following example:

Tempo giusto Áj (County Abauj) 1940. V.L.

Áj - fa - lu - si bí - ró le - ve - let ka - pott,
 Szed - je ősz - sze mind a fi - a - tal - szá - got.
 Szed - je ősz - sze mind a fi - a - ta - lo - kat,
 A - kik be - ma - rad - tak, sejt haj a - zo - kat.

It is only in songs with an AABA structure that this legacy is not found (the former is: “A nagy bécsi kaszárnyára rászállott a gólya” [The stork flew down to the big Vienna barracks]). But even in that type there is something that reminded people, even if in a different way, of their own inherited structure with its closed form.

In other words, even in the change that occurred in the style preserved for a thousand years, the people were able to cling to the old legacy. The oriental stratum was able to influence the new style shaped under modern influences in the modern age.

Why were the Hungarians able to preserve such a tradition in music reaching back more than a thousand years? Why was the insistence on such old achievements able to prevail over all other traditions?

The reason almost certainly lay in the “timeless” nature of the music. Music without words – and since these melodies could change their text at any time they can be regarded as being without words – does not carry so many links to the level of development of a given period as the other traditions, in particular material culture where the more developed demands led to the suppression of more primitive traditions. This process of elimination accompanying “obsolescence” also applies to heritages with texts and linked with beliefs. Music does not have such a link to specific periods and stages of development.

Of course, there is another reason for abandoning a tradition: its lower level of development. If a society feels that such music is too primitive to be of use in expressing its emotions or what they have learnt from others, it will almost certainly be abandoned because it no longer meets the needs of society.

However, the Hungarians could not have felt this, either at the time of their arrival in Europe or since. What they brought with them was so developed that it was far in advance of most of the "new" music they heard here; they found only a few forms equal in value to their own. The Hungarians were not exposed to a shock impact in music that would have induced them to abandon their traditions for the sake of the more developed ones found here.

Summing up, it can be said that our stock of folk songs not only reaches back to a more distant past than any of the other branches of ethnography, but this tradition was also preserved the longest, practically right up to the present because the Hungarians entering the Carpathian Basin brought with them a greater value in music than in the other traditions. This is why they were able to pass on this value in the 20th century to renewed, modern Hungarian music, producing one of the outstanding achievements of the century: the music of Bartók and Kodály.

FURTHER READING

VARGYAS, L.: A magyarság népzeneje. (Folk music of the Hungarian people.) Budapest, 1981. In particular, the chapter: "Origin and chronology of folk song types" and the bibliography ("List of works cited and abbreviations").*

* (This paper was first presented at the conference "The Hungarian Conquest and Ethnology" 4-6. Dezember 1995.)