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The Folk-Song as a Work of Art

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The Folk-Song as a Work of Art

by

L. VARGYAS

All of our great composers highly esteem the artistic value of folk-songs. According to Kodály: "... the single song, or flower, of this folk-culture, is often an authentic masterpiece, ... It is not just the 'trésor des humbles', for it fulfils the most exacting of cultural requirements. It is no primitive product, but an art matured and refined by thousands of years of evolution." Bartók holds a similar opinion: "... The single tunes are so many examples of high artistic perfection. In their small way they are as perfect as the grandest masterpieces of musical art. They are indeed classical models of the way in which a musical idea can be expressed in all its freshness and shapeliness — in short, in the very best possible way, in the briefest possible form and with the simplest of means."

However, if we want to have more than a general sensuous experience and really wish to appreciate the beauty of folk-songs, we have to analyze them the same way as is usual dealing with larger creations of art. Thus can we find out why they affect us and why they have aesthetic value.

Let us examine a modest example: four times six tones in the same rhythm.

The tune could not have a more modest beginning, taking two steps at a time both up and down on the three central tones of the five-

Example 1





tone scale. This simple start makes a heightening in the second line possible: it begins as repetition, but — after the third note — the tune makes a sudden descent to include a fourth. After this, the pitch is lowered further until the tune reaches the intended lowest point, thus having fully outlined its shape in one direction. The peak follows in the third line. The tune jumps up to the middle by a sixth, wavers there, as if preparing for a swing, and ascends a third until it reaches the summit still more emphasized by an appoggiatura and a long note. But it still continues to move, and — after quick quavers — the two long fourths seem to be floating; taking a fifth, it then swoops down to the starting point. It has sweep. In a single line, we climbed from the lowest to the highest point then descended to the median, thus covering one octave and a half. The melody moved in great jumps not used at this point, the most distant parts of the tune were attained. This magnificent gradation would be breathtaking if it occurred in a grand composition. What can follow? The central notes move in the opposite direction and descend to the final tone with a so-far unused *do la* third. Up to this point the last two tones of the melody took different leaps, but now the note is repeated, so indicating that we shall go no further.

It is unusual to find such variety in a melody composed of the six notes of the scale and within the bounds of an octave. Every line contains something new, and even the repetition increases variety. The repetitive start of the beginning of the second line is like a well-planned trick to make the change more effective. The beginning of the third line differs from that of the first by a single note only and by this the motive seems to move in the opposite direction, giving a further swing to the tune. The repetition of the starting point is even more significant. The first line returns to it, the second begins there, but skillfully avoids it thereafter, and it is only in the cadence of the third line, after having made broad curves and taken great leaps, that it returns to it. Now, that the boundaries of the melody have been outlined, we feel we have come to the centre of the tune equidistant from both poles. The fourth line then suddenly changes direction. It descends and moves the balance of the

whole structure down by a third which gives the effect of a sudden closing gesture.

The next sample has a different structure.

Example 2



The one-time structure of a fifth transposition is still quite obvious. The first two lines move in the upper half; they are actually identical but end at different pitches. The two last lines are in the vicinity of the key note, with a similar difference in cadence. The fifth-relationship is still preserved by one or two notes. Many of our songs repeat two such lines with dissimilar cadences a perfect fifth below, but there are many in which minor variations reduce the rigidity of the structure. Our song has covered a long way in this direction. When closing the second line it does not advance toward *d*, the fifth of the final note, but descends to *b*. There are innumerable folk-songs showing such transposition. It results in a very pleasant rotating movement around the *d*-axis, the tune rising above and then swinging below it. Folk singers have instinctively changed the following line so as to save the already heard question and reply from becoming hackneyed. The slight rotating movement is reversed by the transposition of two tones at the beginning of the line. Where the first line should take a characteristic fourth leap, it makes a much greater swing, a sixth, and this tone which rises to a great height must, at the end of the line, make a greater descent without tone repetitions. This is a considerable change after the tone repetitions, and raises the emotion to such heights that the melody cannot simply come to a stop; something has to be done to have it gradually fade away. There comes a new wave with a very plaintive effect. Up to this point, every second bar of the

line indicates a second step. Now it rises a fourth to produce a very plaintive effect, and then descends once more. The motive, already repeated four times, is shown in a new light. There follow three repetitions of tones fading away. Two preceding endings were made by descend following repetition, the third swept down without repetition and this fourth faint repetitive ending is similar to a slowly ceasing heartbeat.

The folk-song "is an art matured and refined by thousands of years of evolution" said Kodály. We know the path of folk-song development which has led to its present refined structure. At an early stage, the rotating, repetitive movement of small motives is the only employed form, which sometimes provokes ecstasy. Our European neighbours possess even at present such ancient forms in which the period is marked only by a longer stop between the steadily repeated identical lines. Later development produced the different cadences of the two lines. The sequence a fifth below was the following great invention. For a period with two cadences this means a form with great variety involving the possibility of a proportional use of tones; a high and a low layer compose the two halves of the song. The Páva tune (see the main theme of Kodály's „Der Pfau flog“) and some parallels in Cheremis prove that even before the arrival of the Hungarians in the Danube basin a further stage of development had been reached by the peoples related to the Magyars: it was a departure from the rigid fifth response and a transposition of the melody of the first section by a fourth, third, second, and sixth. The singers always want more variety, and the repetition becomes increasingly different. The original construction serves as a mere basis for later performers who transform the melody more and more, and it is thus we come to songs as fine as the quoted example and many others.

In the following tune nearly all signs of a thousand years of development are effaced, and only the final result is obvious.

Only a few notes still show traces of the original fifth structure but several melodies prove that a cadence on *d* is substituted by the descent of the second line to *b*, the same as in the preceding example. The third line is known to be the most variable part of our folk-songs. The melody usually retains the pitch of the preceding line before reaching a fifth distance. The preceding line is often so emphatic as to make the two inner lines (but not their cadences) quite similar to one another. The last line, in most instances, is but a formula to reach the final note. We can think of an earlier developmental stage from which the present form has evolved according to the tendencies observable in many songs (see the

Example 3

Lento, rubato $\text{♩} = 48$

Tő - lem a nap úgy te - lik el,
Ha föl - jő, e - lig ha - lad el,
Nem vir - ra - dok ő - rő - mőm - re,
Nem ső - té - tő - lők ked - vem - re.

form below the tune). So much about development. What does the final form of the song tell us, how are its parts balanced?

The skeleton of the melody is composed of two fourths: it rises from *c* to *f*, and then descends to *g*. The first appears at the very beginning of the song, and the full-scale work in the second line smoothenes out the rough draught of the first one. The fluent shape given by the intermediary tones, as the drapery covering a statue suggests the outline of the living body. The motive extends at both ends and then this great arch begins again and expands still further. It reaches the lowest tone of the melody which so attains its final range. Doing so, it carefully avoids that other fourth, the closing section of the structure, substituting for it the neighbouring fourth which completes the beginning interval quite differently, a disjunct for the conjunct. Even the last line seems to be delaying the descent: it sways back and forth in the middle, as if it were uncertain of the next move or as if its intention were to recapitulate the central tones to emphasize the core of the scale. It is only at the last moment that it jumps four steps down where *g*, the final note, in which we sense the key, appears for the first time. It is the last stone set in the arch which permanently binds and supports the whole.

The same inherited structure is enriched by the fine differences of another memorable melody.

Example 4

Rubato

El - in - du - la há - rom ár - va

Hosz-szít út - ra, buj - do - sás - ra.

Azt kér - di a szép Szűz Már - ja:

„Ho - vá mét te há - romi ár - va?”

With short quick eights the melody reaches a peak where the rhythm is broadened and even heightened by melisma. The next fioriture changes the balance, slightly alters the proportions of long and short elements in the declining melisma. The second line, a repetition of the first with a different cadence, moves the ornamentation ahead by two syllables, down by one note and even increases animation. It seems as if it were a contracted form of the entire previous line above four syllables. But, before getting to the last note, the melody slightly wavers, expressing a magnificent flow of emotion, emits a sigh before descending a tone. So much movement and beauty should not be given only once; yet, a full repetition would make them trite. Therefore, the beginning has been simplified, so that only the main notes remain in order to reintroduce the florid melodic figures of the second part unchanged and to surprise by the falling end of the line. The last line reduces the motive almost to its basic outline. It brings surprise at two points nevertheless. The first two tones are higher than one might expect, and it does not begin with a fourth as do all the preceding lines. It is narrowed down to a third,

indicating that a closing note will come; ornamentation at a new point, on the fourth note, so emphasizing the dividing caesura of the eight syllable line which has been hidden by an asymmetrical division. Here two almost equal temporal units are facing each other: the rise and the descent. This is how the cadence gains emphasis.

We have heard almost the same musical thought three times in succession, even four times, although a few steps lower, and yet, it is full of variety. The final tones sound different in all instances, and so do the beginnings because the unvarying musical content changes its rhythm and ornamentation in a Protean form.

This frugal structure is retained even when the compass is enlarged.

Example 5

Poco rubato $\text{♩} = 116-132$

Hajtsd ki ró-zsám az ök - re-ket, le-gel - tesd meg sze-gé - nye-ket,

Bár-son fű-re ne hajtsd ü-ket (m) mer el - ve - szik a szű - re-det.

S ha j el - ve-szik a szű - ré-det, mi-vél ta-karsz bé j ön-ge-met,

Van ne - kem egy cif-ra bundám, bé - ta-kar-lak kedves ró-zsám.

The introductory motive is modest. It seems as if its purpose were to give the key by repeating the "tonic" and its lower "dominant". To avoid misunderstandings even the second tone is sounded. The following line repeats and heightens it; the tune swings up even more, and the tonality seems to be more determined. The melody unfolds hereafter in a surprising way: it reaches its peak, begins to drop, descends a depth and passes through notes which seem to violate our sense of modality. It makes us realize that the beginning note was not the root on which the whole tonal system is erected, but the centre from which we have descended to the bottom. The third line went longest also upwards, but has reached new regions in its descent. The melody extends here as it does in the third line of the first song. The fourth line establishes

the final tonality. The tones following one another establish the Dorian mode, then comes the final great wave reminiscent of the previous. It balances and quiets down the tremendous motion in the third line. A modest beginning, a slow rise, an unusual heightening, new regions, and finally a summary, a reducing motion, characterize the song.

Even entirely new elements contain such careful preparation to produce effect. It might be said that the construction is skillfully planned to have a climax. The quite modern minor tonality sounds in the century-old turn of the well-known recruiting song of Szatmár County — there is a melodic minor scale followed by a minor chord built on the fourth tone sounded in succession.

Example 6



For a long time I was unable to explain why the end of the third line made such a vivid impression. I first attributed it to the lively tone colour of the clarinet and to the dance rhythm. I discovered after careful examination the cause of its effectiveness: the minor sixth was avoided until this point. It is approached and snatched up at the proper moment in a manner that reminds us of a beast of prey. The melody starts slowly, hesitantly, from a distance, repeatedly retreats a bit, misses the minor sixth and starts back from the opposite side; it stops, then it takes a leap to the other side and a shorter one back, but it is closing in on its goal, within a hair's breadth, and finally pounces upon it, to withdraw after having had the possibility of mangling it.

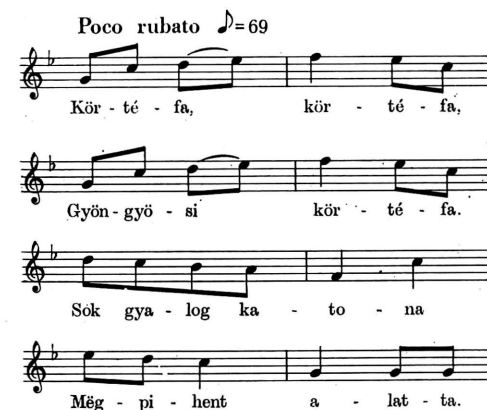
True, not all variants treat their material in a similar manner. Some of them use up the sixth sooner: their effect is correspondingly less. Many melody groups are excellent from beginning to end. In others,

only a few variants are perfect, maybe precisely those least similar to the rest. In such cases we are probably dealing with individual skill. Excellent songs are often unmatched, as the first example in this paper. It is of course, nevertheless related to more distant types, and its constituent elements may be found in other songs. Changing the second and third lines of the first example we discover a well-known recitative type (see Kodály, *Folk Music of Hungary* p. 53, example 62 "Szi-várvány havasán" (Over-the-rainbow). Is this, too, a successful individual composition or just a *pièce de résistance*? Future studies may answer this question. Constantly arising variants, possibilities and trends of the millennial style, undoubtedly provide the basis for, and establish high standards of, artistic creation which make it possible to attain the level of masterpieces by insignificant means of skill, incertiveness and taste.

Only the structure has been analyzed for aesthetic quality. This is the most readily traceable aspect of the matter, but other elements are less easy to determine. Why is a rhythm formula beautiful, why do we like a turn composed of only a few notes? What gives freshness to an insignificant melody in a certain rhythm? Why does a cadence express yearning when it leaps from the fourth step to the fundamental? Why is a certain tonal relation, for instance a Phrygian cadence, nice?

Let us analyze the next song as we did the others.

Example 7



We can show that the first two lines rotate around the axis of the fourth. They rise to a nostalgic septime and form the upper tetrachord. The third line takes the opposite direction and, after the first part (minor-like), it strikes a surprising note which brings about an unusual

tonal relation. Following this, the melody descends to its lowest tone and makes the greatest move, a fifth. It reaches the same point it did at the end of the first line, but the effect is entirely different. The notes of the first line, reversing the order, end it, and sum it up.

Although this analysis explains quite a few aesthetic qualities of the song, it cannot explain why the minor sixth and the major third within the same melody appear to be so delicate, a melody constructed differently from the usual tetrachords. It remains obscure why the final descent from the fourth step or the minor seventh is so nostalgic. We do not know what makes the starting motive so delicate and gentle that it is worthwhile to listen to it twice even without the surprises of the third line. This is still a puzzle to be solved by musical psychology which will have to provide an explanation of the aesthetic qualities of the whole shape and its components.

There are still other aesthetic qualities in the construction of music. Our old tunes are constructed of lines clearly dissected by cadences, and composed of lines at various heights. Their greatest merit is a proportional use of compass, a balance between low and high notes. Other styles permit the construction of songs from more or less identical tones which remain at the same height throughout minute differences between the lines, concealed similarities of smaller components, evoke the two-fold sensation of unity and newness as do so many French—Canadian songs.

We can find nearer illustrations. The construction of our newer songs, which contain so many features of the old, is determined by entirely different principles of form. The rule of repetitions and differences is predetermined; it ensures proportional arrangement. The recurring of the starting line gives a feeling of completion, of coming to a rest, and the "B" lines presenting new material emphasize the contrast by pitch differences. Here nothing but the line has to be composed. It uses a much wider compass and contains more tones than the old tunes. A single line may sometimes be as long as an entire old song. Construction is only concerned with the line, in most instances with the first. The second line is more modest, it has to provide only a motion in the opposite direction, without introducing unusual ideas. If the second line happens to be richer, the first will be less significant. It is unusual for both lines to be of equal rank. Therefore, if we have the first line, the others are composed mechanically. The difference between new and old songs is somewhat similar to that between romantic and classical music. In old songs, as in Viennese classicals, the construction, theme development, and the elaboration provide the artistic effects, while in the Romantic and in our

new songs it is the theme. The former requires much deeper concentration, the latter is more sweeping and graceful. Greater compass and more abundant means characterize the new as against the old music, which may also associate folk music with composed one. Were the two even temporally coincident changes due to similar causes?

We are beginning to recognize the development, relations and history of Hungarian songs, but ethnographical and historical approaches are not enough. An aesthetical study of songs has become imperative. Knowledge of historical development throws light on the development of aesthetic qualities, while aesthetical analysis may be helpful in the study of forces moulding the history of folk-music. Let us regard the folk-song as a work of art. It is significant for our national heritage, and it was originally for this reason that folk-songs were discovered.