

# HUNGARIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO MUSIC

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Hungary's geography and history have contributed to a sense of cultural ambiguity. While firmly planted in Central Europe with its German-Austrian-Italian traditions, Hungary's nomadic roots provided it with an identity more exotic than that of its neighbors to the west. This effect is evident in its politics, social structures, and, of course, in its culture. In the area of music, Hungary has adopted the *forms* of the west while bringing to them *content* influenced by the east. Indeed, Hungary has often served the art music of Europe as a safe broker providing exotic elements to composers from other countries and by adopting their conventions through which Hungary has expressed its own unique musical spirit.

The contributions of Hungary to music can be found in folk and popular music, as well as among the composers, compositions, and performers in the field of art music. This paper identifies the innovations Hungary has brought to the art of music through its own creations and points to those "Hungarianisms" that can be found as borrowings in the music of others.

As Hungarians reached Latin Europe at the end of the ninth century, they brought with them their traditional music, the most ancient of which often had a narrow range, an overall descending line, and rhythm derived recitative-like from the text. Remnants of this style can be found in folk laments collected in the twentieth century, but certainly derived from the most ancient styles.

A somewhat newer style could also be found among the Hungarians' folk melodies: more metric, with a more diverse pitch set, and pentatonic in arrangement. The overall shape of the melody still descended, but was based on an initial motive repeated, in sequence-like fashion, the interval of a fifth below the original.

What the Hungarian settlers in Europe found was a musical practice somewhat similar to that which they had brought with them from their Ural mountain and Volga river homeland. The "Gregorian" religious chants of St. Gall in Switzerland, for example, had a narrow range, few notes moving stepwise, and a rhythm derived from the text. During the Middle Ages, as Hungary was Christianized, it developed its own "dialect" of plainsong chant, which preserved some of the pentatonic instincts of the folk style. Esztergom also developed its own variant on chant notation, which is somewhat different from that found in Italy and Germany.

A particular performance practice came about in Hungary and persisted into the later periods. Cathedral and parish schools in Hungary taught musical skills to the boys who formed the choirs. In other countries specialized singing and music reading skills were learned by only a small select group of singers who sang the chant verses and later the polyphonic compositions, with the whole group joining in only on relatively easy sung and easily remembered responsories. In Hungary everyone received the same education, and therefore the whole congregation was able to perform the whole of the music. This "democratic" tradition owing to unusually effective instruction characterized Hungarian musical life for centuries.

In the late Middle Ages, the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, Hungary enjoyed a rich cultural life. In 1483 a Spanish nobleman wrote, concerning a visit he had made to King Mátyás, that he "has a choir the better of which I have not yet seen. It resembles the one we had at the papal court before the devastation of the plague. When the king had a high mass sung in his chapel...I had to realize with embarrassment that they have surpassed us in the things that belong to divine worship." (Dobszay, 39)

Although polyphony came relatively late to Hungary, the reign of Mátyás was, indeed, the golden age of Hungary's late medieval music during which the intense musical life of the court was comparable with any of the Renaissance courts of Europe. This flourishing was due, at least in part, to Queen Beatrix of Aragon whom Mátyás married in 1476. As the daughter of the King of Naples, her music master had been Johannes Tinctoris, and it was through him that many musicians of international repute visited Hungary and influenced its music. One of them, Pietrobono wrote in 1488, "I am made welcome here in Buda, and my playing is listened to with pleasure, and if it should please Their Highnesses I would never leave this place." (Kárpáti, 5) Works from this period were published by the famous French printer and publisher Pierre Attaignant.

The establishment of towns and middle class during this period also enhanced musical life. In addition to singers of chant and polyphony, instrumentalists also flourished. The Pauline order in particular excelled in the building of organs for the growing number of churches in towns. A variety of other instruments, including string, wind, and percussion were used. It was considered a particularly Hungarian speciality to have mounted timpanists in military ensembles.

Lutenists were considered the elite of instrumentalists and, it appears, that they were able to make a profession of music. Foremost among Hungarian lutenists was Bálint Bakfark, who was court musician of János Zápolya, Prince of Transylvania in the sixteenth century. Bakfark's performing skills and his transcriptions for lute, as well as his own compositions for the instrument won him fame in his travels elsewhere, and the reputation of Hungarian musicians spread throughout Europe. There is a Polish saying, "To take up the lute after Bakfark," which means attempting something that one cannot do well enough.

The sixteenth century also saw the development of verse chronicles, epics sung on Biblical and historical themes. These historical songs were sung by minstrels, who traveled the country rather as the medieval troubadours had. The most famous of the chroniclers was Tinódi Sebestyén, also a lutenist, who served the nobleman Bálint Török.

With the collapse at the battle of Mohács in 1526, not only did most of Hungary fall to the Turks, but musical life changed dramatically as well. For a time the Transylvanian court tried to sustain an active musical culture, but its influence was limited. Much, if not most, of the written legacy of Hungarian music from the Renaissance and Medieval periods was destroyed during the Turkish occupation. The codices that remain come primarily from the borders of the Hungarian state: Croatia, Slovakia, and Transylvania.

In the instrumental music of the Baroque period in Europe a variety of dance movements of a more or less national character played a prominent part: for example, the French courante, the German allemande, the Italian *padovana* (*pavan*), and so on. This explains why the lure of the exotic led Europe to take an interest in the countries to its east and to develop the two most common Polish and Hungarian dance forms, the *polacca* and the *ungaresca*. It is characteristic that these national dances did not come into being in their own countries first, but abroad, as if typifying how the German or Italian musicians of the time imagined such "foreign," particularly East European dances. The first pieces of this kind, entitled "Ungarisch Tanzi," "Passamezzo Ungaresca," and the like appear as early as the sixteenth century in German, Dutch, French, and Italian lute tablature manuscripts and printed editions. These foreign examples were, of course, followed by a continuing fashion in Hungary too, particularly where urban culture played a major role, as in Transylvania (Kolozsvár, Csiksomlyó), Western Hungary (Sopron, Győr) and Upper Hungary (Lócse, Kassa).

The name of János Kájoni (1629–1687), a Franciscan monk, an excellent organist and organ builder, is associated with an important manuscript known as the Kájoni Codex. It contains Italian and German church music, French suites, and church vocal and also a number of Hungarian secular songs and dances in a simple two-part arrangement for virginal, with organ tablature notation. Kájoni also compiled a mass book called the Organ Missal, which contains sacred music.

The devastation of 150 years of Turkish occupation was not easily overcome. In the process of musical rebirth, the aristocratic families played a pivotal role. The interest in music shown by the princely Esterházy family of Western Hungary is well known from the biography of Joseph Haydn. Pál Esterházy was a very talented amateur musician; and his name is associated with an extremely interesting work, which is also very important from the point of view of Hungarian music history, the *Harmonia caelestis*. This collection of fifty-five short cantata-

tas dates to about 1700, and Esterházy enlisted the help of several professional musicians as he wrote these works.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the Esterházy name and that of the palace at Fertőd (Eszterháza) were most closely associated with that of Joseph Haydn, who from about 1766 served the family as *Kapellmeister* and musical director. Under Haydn and his successor, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Eszterháza brought the finest music of the day to Hungary.

The proximity of Vienna to Pozsony and Buda ensured that all of the musical developments of the period were immediately heard and assimilated in Hungary. The chamber music, symphonies, and operas of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven were performed throughout Hungary within a year or two of their premieres. In Kolozsvár, for example, a debate surrounding Beethoven's music degenerated into a free-for-all early in the nineteenth century.

This picture of high culture should not be construed to characterize the whole of Hungary. Only a relatively narrow geographic band and even narrower social stratum enjoyed music of the quality of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven or even that of Péter Stärk, Druschetzky, or Fusz, to name Hungarian composers of the period. The a significant part of the population came under the strict cultural dicta of the Calvinist church. The establishment of the Calvinist colleges brought about a demand for secular songs among amateurs, eager to learn music notation. "Melodiariums," or books of simple songs were produced for this new social stratum. One of these is the huge collection of 450 songs compiled in 1813 by Ádám Pálóczi Horváth (1760–1820) entitled "About 450 Songs" [Ötödfélszáz Énekek] which typifies the somewhat banal literary and musical taste of the provincial Hungarian nobility and middle class of the period. Remarking on this situation, Dobszay says, "When one remembers that about 200 kilometres away from these schools, urban audiences listened to Haydn's music, while [in the country] a battle had to be fought – and unsuccessfully at that – for the introduction of a most simple chordal technique, which was 200 years out of date, then the picture is quite depressing" (124). In later describing this anomaly, Kodály remarked that "educated people were not Hungarian enough and the Hungarians were not educated enough." What was of a higher quality musically had a much too narrow social foundation in Hungary, and what the broader middle classes cultivated was musically of little worth and unsuitable for development. While down below (at the "third level") folk music lived on, preserving its ancient beauties, and being affected here and there by the newer influences.

Around the middle of the eighteenth century a change took place in which the *ungaresca* dance type of the previous centuries developed into the new romantic dances known as the *verbunkos*. In Hungarian dances of this new type the "slow" and "quick" (*lassú-gyors*) dances characteristic of the *verbunkos* were juxtaposed. Sets of Hungarian dances arranged for the piano and entitled Ungarische Tänze, Hongroises, or even Zinagrese can be found in considerable num-

bers in Vienna as well as in Pest and Pozsony. This *verbunkos* style can be found being used as local color in works such as Haydn's Piano Concerto in D major; Mozart's Violin Concerto in A major; Beethoven's Third Symphony, and Diabelli's Hungarian Dances.

At the same time the Hungarian dance itself was gradually influenced by the art music that surrounded it and adapted itself to the harmonic, melodic, and formal characteristics of the period. "The mutual interaction between art music and popular music that prevailed from the inception of the style led to the cherishing of the veritable apotheosis of "*verbunkos*" as the foundation of a Hungarian art music that had never existed before." (Dobszay, 129)

The peak of the development of the *verbunkos* style coincided with the nationalist spirit that flared during the nineteenth century in Hungary. The *verbunkos*, as performed with fiery virtuosity by Gypsy musicians, seemed to embody all that was truly Hungarian and thus became the virtual background music of the revolution of 1848. Although many composers of the period set the *verbunkos*, it is Franz Liszt (1811–1886) who most fully captured and idealized its nationalistic spirit in his Hungarian rhapsodies and fantasias.

Franz Liszt, one of the greatest of nineteenth-century composers, spent most of his life abroad but took a keen interest in everything in music that was known as Hungarian. In 1859 his book on Gypsies was published turning many in the press against him. "Shall I put it in words? The uproar surrounding my volume on the Gypsies made me feel that I am a much truer Hungarian than my adversaries, the would-be Magyars..." (Dobszay, 151). Liszt was certainly a universal European figure, but in his incorporation of national elements into his music, he began the establishment of a truly Hungarian national musical style that was to be achieved only in the twentieth century.

Second only to Liszt in the nineteenth century was Ferenc Erkel. Creating an operatic culture became part of the fight for independence. The Pest National Theater was established in 1837, and in 1838 Ferenc Erkel was named its conductor and musical director. As a composer he was influenced by Hungarian songs, the *verbunkos*, and Italian opera. It was his grand operas that brought him national fame and success, the first being *László Hunyadi* (1844) which was to the Hungarian national movement what Verdi's *Nabucco* was to Italy. Even more successful was *Bánk Bán* (1851), and both of these works continue to be performed in Hungary today. But even if some Hungarians are not familiar with his stage works, everyone knows his setting to melody the poem of Kölcsey, which became the Hungarian national anthem and is widely thought to be one of the most beautiful of the national hymns.

Nineteenth-century Hungarian music was perhaps more successful in creating musical institutions and developing a functioning musical life than in producing composers. Modern public concerts developed first in major cities and then in provincial towns. Musical societies and choirs were formed, which brought local

audiences into contact with professional musicians. There was a rapid development of virtuoso soloists, chiefly violinists who won recognition across Europe — Ede Reményi, József Bóhm, and József Joachim — and began Hungary's tradition of internationally renown string stars. Music educational institutions were also established. These ranged from municipal schools to the National Royal Academy of Music (today the Liszt Academy) with Liszt as the president and Erkel as the director. Music educational literature, the growth in musical instrument making, the printing of music, and a growing number of musical periodicals all attest to the burgeoning of world-class musical activity in Hungary.

By the end of the nineteenth century this "high musical culture" was supplemented by some more widely accessible forms. Among these was the Hungarian operetta, which in the hands of Ferenc Lehár and Imre Kálmán, achieved success world-wide.

Another highly "Hungarianized" form was the *magyar nóta* or popular song. The nineteenth-century fascination with the fabled past and idealized rural life brought about the first efforts at collecting folk poetry and music in the 1830s. These first researchers committed all of the scientific "sins" possible including selectivity in what to take down, a lack of skill—and, of course, technology — in recording information, and an absence of scruples when meddling with the material. The sources of these folk songs were often the country gentry rather than peasants, and what was considered "folk" was what was popular among this group, the simple eighteenth-century student songs. Many of the so-called Hungarian folk songs were actually sentimental tunes. These popular *magyar nóta* became so completely identified as Hungarian folk songs, that even today, after nearly a century of research into authentic Hungarian folk music, many Hungarians are incensed by the suggestion that the *magyar nóta* is not the essence of Hungarian music. The *magyar nóta* is sentimentally loved by most non-musicians and almost universally despised by musicians. Dobszay's characterization is typical: "A fashion of lengthy, sentimental tunes relying on romantic harmony brought a great change, bringing an expression of individual, indeed exhibitionistic attitudes. At this point the *magyar nóta*, which until then could only be condemned for its emptiness and its power to distract people from what was better, turned into a force inimical to good taste" (Dobszay, 166).

The Gypsy band, which had been known since the eighteenth century, provided the ideal medium for the *magyar nóta*. The remarkable ability of the Gypsy people themselves and of these bands to adapt to their surroundings meant that they had no real Gypsy repertoire of their own and readily took up the *magyar nóta* as well as popular dance music. The special style of playing with its displays of virtuosity and unabashed sentimentality enshrined the music they played as *the* Hungarian music in the minds of many Hungarians and surely those of much of the rest of the world.

The non-Hungarian nineteenth-century composer most profoundly influenced by Hungarian musical elements was Johannes Brahms. Although in some ways Liszt and Brahms are viewed as two poles of an aesthetic axis, their music shares some striking similarities, and Brahms was surely influenced by the color of Liszt's style. Their personal friendship might have developed as well, but for an event described by István Lakatos:

A group of well-known artists, writers, and statesmen had invited Liszt and, at his intervention, Brahms as well. The company asked Liszt to play something for them at the piano. Liszt played a composition of Brahms's, which delighted the audience. Afterwards Liszt played his own B-minor sonata. At a particular point, which had great meaning for him, he turned toward Brahms to indicate his respect; he looked at him with a smile but Brahms — had fallen asleep. This hurt Liszt very deeply; he stopped playing and stood up. (Lakatos, 4)

Not only was Brahms influenced by Liszt but also by József Joachim, the great violinist. The *Variations on a Hungarian Song*, Op. 21 and his *Zigeunerlieder* are well-known, but "magyarisms" can be found in many of his compositions, notably in his chamber music. The first piano quartet, Op. 25 in G minor, for example, has "Rondo alla Zingarese, Presto" as the indication for its last movement. Among the piano compositions the B minor Capriccio, Op. 76, No. 2 displays a decided Hungarian character. Although he could know only the popularized *verbunkos* style of the *magyar nóta*, Brahms brought a concept of Hungarian music to the rest of Europe and beyond.

While the *magyar nóta* suffused coffee houses and restaurants, quite a different musical tradition continued in the villages. Ancient Hungarian folk songs had continued to develop and change with the centuries. By the nineteenth century a "new" style of Hungarian folksong had emerged, which combined church hymns, the *magyar nóta*, ancient folksong traditions and echoes of art music. In a general sense it consisted of four lines, each with 11 syllables set syllabically, and in an ABBA or AA5A5A structure.

The Hungarian folksong formed the bridge to twentieth-century art music, just as it had done in other periods and with other styles of art music. The two composers who launched Hungarian composition into the new century are, Béla Bartók (1881–1945) and Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967). They, along with Ernő Dohnányi, who was a few years older, studied composition with János Koessler, an Austrian student of Brahms whose influence can be felt in the early compositions of all three.

Although the names of Bartók and Kodály are often spoken in one breath, they share as many differences as they do commonalities. Each felt an obligation to the task of creating a truly Hungarian art music style. Both found a "pure

source" for that style in the ancient and newer folk music that was just coming to consciousness among musicians. Kodály's collecting efforts concentrated on Hungarian music, but Bartók's interests quickly took him to Romania, Turkey, and even Africa. Both wished to revitalize Hungarian musical culture, to make it more authentic, and to bring it to more people. It is characteristic of Bartók that his means toward this goal were primarily compositional, while Kodály's were also scientific and social. Bartók's view, and indeed, his life, became international in experience and influence, while Kodály's remained more steadfastly Hungarian. Bartók's primary medium was instrumental music, while for Kodály the voice informed all of his compositions. Kodály is said, with some exaggeration, to be the last nineteenth-century Hungarian composer, while Bartók was the first Hungarian composer of the twentieth century. With Bartók, his music is the focus; with Kodály, the man himself is at the center.

From World War I Hungary endured wars as well as political and social changes that at the very least distracted from the rapid experimentation and change that characterized music composition elsewhere in Europe. The parallels with the effects of the period of Turkish occupation are inevitable. During the twentieth century, just as in the Renaissance, many talented Hungarian musicians – composers, performers, and conductors – sought opportunities elsewhere. America was an especially fortunate beneficiary of the talents of this musical diaspora some of whom have become household names. Curiously, however, Géza Anda, Antal Doráti, Annie Fischer, György Ligeti, Eugene Ormandy, Miklós Rózsa, György Sebők, János Starker, George Szell, József Szigeti, and Ede Zaturecky are not always recognized as Hungarians.

At the same time many Hungarian musicians remained in their country and contended with a kaleidoscope of changing political – or, rather, musical – correctness. Among the first generation or two to emerge after Bartók and Kodály were László Lajtha, Lajos Bárdos, Ferenc Farkas, Pál Kadosa, and Sándor Veress. A later generation includes János Viski, Ferenc Szabó, Endre Szervánsky, Pál Járdányi and György Ránki. It can be debated whether they were successful or not in taking this new Hungarian art music beyond Kodály and Bartók, but no one can deny the courage it took to walk the political and cultural tightrope that stretched across the middle decades of this century.

The current generation of composers as well as performers seems to have slipped into the easy internationalism where most art music exists today. The generation of violin virtuosi seems to have given way to internationally acclaimed pianists, Zoltán Kocsis, Dezső Ránki, and András Schiff among them. The music of György Kurtág is as well-known, or perhaps better known in Tokyo today as it is in Budapest. The analytical techniques of Ernő Lendvai are argued alongside those of Heinrich Schenker, and the musicological writings of János Kárpáti, György Kroó, and László Somfai turn up in *Acta Musicologica* on a regular basis. Kodály's efforts at reform in Hungarian music education may be facing economic



difficulties in his native land today, but adaptations of his ideas continue to be made from Argentina to Zimbabwe.

Just as our aging eyes have trouble seeing clearly things that are quite close to us, it is difficult to make judgments about the current musical scene in Hungary. On the one hand less "steely" oversight in cultural matters has given musicians greater freedom to look around and ahead, without having to glance back over their shoulders constantly. On the other hand it might be argued that economic difficulties pose a less-noble adversary, than did those of principle and politics. Were it not for the language, it might be difficult to discern anything particularly Hungarian in current pop music or in current art compositions.

Perhaps this internationalism is just another swing in the balance between foreign effects on Hungarian music and the assertion of Hungarian influences on the music of others. It may be a sign of cultural health that Hungarian self-identity, at least in music, need not take the form of nationalistic "magyarisms." In fact the value of national music in this day of multicultural music is very high indeed; and in consulting the Top-Ten list, one is likely to find Spanish monks singing Gregorian chants or Bulgarian women's choirs, or a Hungarian folksong with a techno-pop accompaniment.

Hungary has benefitted by the influence of other countries on its music, but it has made its contribution as well — and not an insignificant one at that.

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