

WHAT IS HUNGARIAN IN MUSIC?

By ZOLTÁN KODÁLY

WHEN I was asked to answer the above question, I remembered a series of articles which I had read in a French review thirty-five years ago.¹ The musical critic Paul Landormy put a similar question to the most outstanding French composers of the age: D'Indy, Bruneau, Duparc, Dukas, Debussy, and to Romain Rolland who was then still considered as an excellent critic and historian of music only.

I read the answers with great interest, all the more so because our generation was also acutely concerned with the problem. We were astonished that the question was also put by the French nation, which, in the course of its century-old musical life, had created more than once music that was original, different from everything else, that is to say—French.

The contradictory answers proved the difficulty of the question. According to one opinion, for example, Berlioz wrote the most characteristically French music; according to others, he is the least French of composers. Yet one would not think it so difficult to summarize the most constant and characteristic features of a people possessing a history of 1500 years, and then to define the peculiarities of its music which best reflect those features.

The problem is much more complicated with regard to Hungary. We have not yet succeeded in abstracting a coherent picture of the Hungarian national character from our history; and it is hardly 100—150 years since we know of a music which might be called more or less genuinely Hungarian. It is therefore almost impossible to investigate the connections between

¹ La Revue Bleue, 1904.

Hungarian character and Hungarian music. Besides, it is easier to express the national spirit by works of art than to approach it with scientific analysis.

But in our music we have got some solid ground under our feet when we try to answer the question: what are the characteristics of Hungarian music? This solid ground is our folk-music, especially its most ancient layers. If we select and cast aside everything in the songs of the people which is to be found in those of the surrounding peoples, or which is derived from higher music — Hungarian or foreign — or indicating the influence of any European culture: what remains, can hardly be supposed to be anything but the ancient, genuine music of our conquering ancestors. We have got immediate proofs of this: up to now we find similar music in the regions where the Hungarians lived before the conquest, in peoples whose ancestors have lived or even mingled with the Hungarians.

We know that the conquering Hungarians were not a racially uniform tribe, but more than that: a military, political and cultural organization of peoples of different origin and even of different language. It is possible that their music was originally different too. But, like the common language, common music developed, fusing into unity originally contradictory formal principles. Two of these contradictory principles are still alive in our folk-songs, combined as well as separately. The first is the principle of pentatonics, the other the principle of parallel construction. Our first example shows the first, the second both of them.

Here we see two melodic types, isolated and unknown in the present surroundings of the Hungarian people, but closely connected with an old musical culture of Central Asia, as its westernmost branch, reaching to the River Lajta.

The Hungarian people has various types of songs, but this kind is never missing where we find a genuinely Hungarian population. If we mark it on the map with red, we find darker spots on the Székelyföld, in Transdanubia, in the region of the Palóc people; but there will be no region inhabited by Hungarians where the map will not show by its pink colour at least sparser traces of this ancient Hungarian music.

12. $\text{♩} = 240$ $2 B c$ $\text{♩} = 232$

1. R - rö - pülj pá - va, rö - pülj
 2 Vár - mē-gye há - zá - ra,
 A szé-gény ra - bok-nak
 Sza - ba - du - lá - sá - ra.

25. *Rubato parlando* $4 B b$ $\text{♩} = 252$

1. U - gat a ku - tyám a Raj - na,
 Gyün a sze-re-töm a ba - r-na
 Ha bar-na ji-zs, de nē - m cigány,
 $\text{♩} = 216$
 Sze-ret az en - gēm i - ga-zán.

What do they testify? That the psychic basis of the Hungarian people remained unchanged in the course of 1000 years, that its original, ancient musical system, its musical way of thought has not been altered by the contact with other peoples.

The Turks lived here for a century and a half. We do not know what kind of music they brought with them, but if it was South-Turkish, its Arab-Indian-Gypsy gamuts have left but little trace. For 500 years, the gypsies have been living here, lamenting, singing, fiddling, asking for bread. The Hungarians listened, suffered them, gave them food, but did not accept their mode of musical expression, and only made friends with their music when the gypsy, with his mimicking gift, learned to play Hungarian music for the Hungarian people.

Like the Hungarian's language, his music too is laconic, lapidary. Its works of art are short but of great moment. They are melodies built of a few sounds, firm and stable as if they had been carved in stone to resist the storms of centuries. Their form is definitive, as if they had not changed in a thousand years. The exact parallel of some of them has been found in the music of kindred peoples — as if they had only yesterday ceased to sing them together.

The Hungarian has a genuine and specific musical mother-tongue. This music is still alive, still equally understood by every part of the Hungarian people — except the middle- and upper classes. These, if they do not want to exclude themselves from the musical community of the nation, must either learn *again* their ancient and forgotten musical native tongue, as Széchenyi learned the Hungarian language, or they must begin to learn it, like Ankerschmidt, if they have come from elsewhere and wish to remain here.

But how do these songs lead us to the higher forms of art? — so the sceptics asked thirty years ago. We have only to think of the mustard seed, which "indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof."

Three factors are necessary for the creation of a national musical literature. The first is: tradition, the second: individual talent, the third: the spiritual community of the

multitude, which accepts the manifestations of the individual talent as its own.

There is no fertile soil without tradition, but tradition in itself, however alive it may be, does not create higher forms of art.

In a talk on the wireless on April 10, 1938, Elek Petrovics spoke of pictures, where faces, arms, clothes, in short: every thing is Hungarian — except the picture itself. We often see the same in music: every single motif is Hungarian, but the whole is un-Magyar. Certainly, the putting together of popular motifs does not result in an organic, higher artistic form. Such a composition can only be brought forth by an individual talent, by a specific formative gift capable of higher conceptions.

Why is it then, that 30—40 years ago the study of folk-music was necessary? Because even the greatest talent cannot create in the void. There was at that time no uniform musical consciousness, no public spirit of music in Hungary. We had reached the climax of a fifty-year-old musical importation from abroad. Our musical life was flooded by foreign, especially Italian and German music. True, we were greatly advanced in musical civilization. But with the means and instruments of musical civilization we had imported the subject-matter, the whole atmosphere of foreign cultures. It overwhelmed every thing, in it every Hungarian effort seemed a Cinderella. At that time the national garments were assumed by dilettantism in music. A schism came into being: Hungarian music was put against classical, *i. e.* foreign music. The refined did not want to hear about Hungarian music, the others anathematized every kind of higher music, denouncing it as foreign. They did not want to know about the Shakespeares and Michel-angelos of music.

This schism had — and still has — to be bridged over: the musically refined must become more Hungarian, the Hungarians must acquire a higher musical culture. This task is indeed enormous and can hardly ever be accomplished; it demands the constant, watchful balance of cultural policy. Only so can an ideal community be built up, the active medium of every national art which is truly alive. This is taught and exemplified by the whole history of civilization.

In its golden age every nation was united in its emotions, in its taste. It is a characteristic of the ages of decline, that the cultured and the masses do not understand one another.

In the course of the past thirty years the importance of folk-tradition has become manifest, and to-day it is already beyond doubt that nobody can become a Hungarian composer without being fully conscious of it. But Hungary is at the same time an organic part of Europe, and must live in European traditions as well. Standing on the border between East and West, the aim of country and people must be to belong to both, to pacify and to fuse in its own self the antagonism of the two. From this point of view it is of no value to be Hungarian without being European at the same time; and to us it is worthless to be European if we are not at the same time Hungarians.

We may and we must learn of the music of every nation. The Italian is nearest to us in character, for it is also in the first place based on singing, like ours. But we must learn from the German and French as well. We must not forget that every great national school is the result of the crossing of different cultures and races. There are many examples of this in the history of music.

In the sixteenth century the Flemish musician Willaert comes to Venice (from Buda!) and there lays the foundations of the great Italian school. In the seventeenth century the Italian Lully starts a new French style in Paris. The German Schütz transplants the Italian school into his country, and the result is a new German style. In the eighteenth century a German of Alsace, Schobert, comes to Paris and creates a new style there, which is acknowledged by the French to be the most French of all. The pioneers of the national styles started in the nineteenth century are almost everywhere — also in Hungary — immigrated German musicians. Always the breath of a foreign genius seems to animate the national spirit. The great individualities following the pioneers also unite in themselves different cultures. The greatest of them, like Bach, Mozart, are linked with almost all the tendencies of their predecessors and of their own age, and are linked to posterity by their influence. Still these many-sided great personalities express the national character much more powerfully than the

minor ones depending with exclusive one-sidedness on their national traditions only.

It seems to be a contradiction at first sight, but it is true: the closer we are related to the culture of Europe, the better our own culture will develop. It is enough to cite the example of our great poets to be convinced of this. Boorishness, barbarism and shutting ourselves away from civilization will inevitably be followed by the decline of our national characteristics.

What are the musical qualities characterizing Hungarian folk-music? It is rather active than passive, the expression of will rather than of sentiment. It does not know aimless lamentation, "merry-making among tears." Even the *Székler keserves* (lament) is full of recklessness and energy. Its rhythm is sharp, resolute, manifold and variegated. In its melody there is much verve, free movement, it does not develop hesitatingly on a predetermined harmonic basis. Its form is short, clear, proportionate, transparent. The form is clear, because we always know where we are: even of a separate part of a folksong we can always tell whether it is beginning, middle or end of the whole. All these qualities have to be contained in Hungarian higher music if it is really animated by folk-music and wants to continue its traditions. Everything which is of indefinite rhythm, artificial melody, hazy or intricate construction, will always remain alien to the Hungarian taste. Of the two worlds of "Homer and Ossian" the first is much more akin to the Hungarian mind, the Greek-Latin sense of form and proportion is closer to it than the dim fogs of the North. Of the German composers, the Hungarian mind therefore only accepts those who lived in the Latin culture of forms — from Bach to Beethoven, from Schütz to Brahms. But Reger, for example, however admired he may be by the Germans, does not appeal to the Hungarian.

Among musical instruments, the Hungarian prefers the softer strings and wood winds to the noisy brass. Therefore he abhors the brass band and jazz. A symphonic orchestra may of course need every kind of instrument; but the traditional chamber-music composition of the gypsy-band, to which the Hungarian has been faithful for such a long time, betrays the peculiar bend of his instrumental taste.



Considering the Hungarian's artistic activities in every field as a whole, it seems that he is more inclined to intuitive flashes of ideas, to independence and originality, than to diligent and persistent work. This quality, and his preference for concise forms, related to the formal sense of the Latin races, prevents him from creating mammoth works like those of Bruckner or Mahler, and even the longwindedness of Wagner will almost be alien to him.

Nevertheless the Hungarian public must be raised from the present primitive level of its capacity of musical comprehension. The average Hungarian of to-day is incapable of understanding and grasping any musical composition exceeding the length of a song. Shall we accept this as another national peculiarity? No, this is merely the lack of musical education, it is musically fallow ground which has to be cultivated: this might well be the vocation of schools.

The cultural level of the whole nation has to be raised in order to enable the national spirit to express itself in a higher artistic form. Then the Hungarian nation will not be scared away from true classical music by sham, third-rate insipid stuff. The mistaken belief that only light music can be Hungarian, and the rigid antagonism of Hungarian and classical music will at last come to an end.

There may be different degrees of the Hungarian character in a musical composition. It is like wine mixed with water: a strong wine keeps its flavour even if mingled with twice as much water, and chemical analysis may show traces of wine in a mixture which does not taste of wine at all. Thus far even inferior music may be the bearer of Hungarian characteristics; a trace of it may even be found in mere dilettantism. But the Hungarian peculiarities can only subsist if they are supported by genuine artistic values.

The moment is favourable: unspoiled masses, whose senses are still intact, are to be introduced to musical culture. Why should one not begin by presenting them with the very best? And the more numerous the masses which come into touch with true musical culture, the more frequently works will be created which are truly Hungarian in contents, form and life. Then we shall no longer have to ask: "What are the characteristics of Hungarian music?" Everybody will know it.