

SHORT LEAD

BÉLA BARTÓK ESSAYS

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University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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On Hungarian Music

[1911]

According to the natural order of things practice comes before theory. We see the opposite with Hungarian national music: scientific works were already published years ago, dealing with the characteristic features of Hungarian music, an attempt to define something non-existent at the time.

We did not have, hitherto, a valuable and yet distinctive art music, characteristically Hungarian. Consideration cannot be given to the compositions by Bihari, Lavotta, and some immigrant musicians like Csermák, Rózsavölgyi, Pecsényánszki, and others who are more or less amateur musicians under the influence of gipsy music and not fit to delight people of good taste. Only amateur 'musicologists' can discuss seriously these amateur compositions, which, moreover, are not even representative of national music, since they are not Magyar but gipsy-type music. Specifically, its main characteristics are the melodic distortions of an immigrant nation, the gipsies.

On the other hand, the endeavours of our serious-minded musicians were also sterile, because, while several of them servilely imitated foreign styles, others, for instance Ferenc Erkel, tried to solve the task by wedging between musical items of Italian character one or two gipsy-type tunes or *csárdás*. The mixture of such heterogeneous elements does not produce a Hungarian style, merely a conglomerate lacking any style.

Although we did not have a Hungarian art music to date, we actually had prior to the present time—and still have—a precious folk music of special character. But our compatriots who are loudly enthusiastic about national specialities do not know, research, or love it. Out of the bulk of this music they know only those one or two hundred songs which our gipsy band leaders had the kindness to take over from the peasants and drum into the ears of the Hungarian gentry, and which are unimaginably marred almost past recognition by their oriental fantasy. I recommend to all those who do not know the enormous difference between the Hungarian-type and the gipsy-type ornamentation to listen to the music of a Hungarian peasant musician, whether it is played on the bagpipe or the peasant flute.

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We can discover among the songs adapted by the gipsies many melodies borrowed from some Slavonic neighbour, which slipped fortuitously into the Hungarian folk music. The supercilious Hungarian squires pay their due to these songs also with the compulsory national enthusiasm. On the other hand, they face as strangers, uncomprehending, the recently discovered and very valuable ancient Hungarian melodies from Transylvania, which are unlike any folk melodies they have heard before. They neither love nor understand this thoroughly Hungarian folk music.

Our 'musicologists' are similarly frivolous: they accept any melody sung in Hungarian as a Hungarian folk song. They attempt to prove in bulky volumes, sometimes with comical zeal, how characteristically Hungarian is some melody actually of foreign origin. (For instance, the tune beginning *Azt mondják nem adnak engem gulambonnak*—which is the archetype of a Slovak song.) Of course, they also believe that listening to the gipsy band in a Budapest coffee-house suffices for the study of Hungarian folk music.

They believe something else, too: that it is possible to produce a new type of original Hungarian music by making use of artificial rhythmic formulas derived from certain pre-determinate rules. How comical it is to read the recommendations of such musical scientists—who have never composed a single note—that 'characteristically Hungarian' rhythm formulas compiled by them, in accordance with their theories, are fitting examples for Hungarian composers to follow.

These scientific gentlemen should wait until a musical art grown out of the Hungarian soil has fully developed! And that event might come to pass if some composers appeared there—each a vigorous individual in his own right—who endowed their compositions with common features, which do not exist in music born on foreign soil, and which, for this reason, must be declared as general characteristics of the Hungarian art music. It might be that these common features will originate out of the interconnection of the composers leading a common life, or it might happen under the influence of genuine Hungarian folk music. Naturally this style will show also the influence of twentieth-century music. Those who have a faulty ear will call such influence as being of the Strauss, Reger, or Debussy type, for they will not be able to sense the subtle nuances.

In the last few years we have already perceived the signs of such a beginning. And isn't it amusing that the majority of our experts and critics list the names of all the fashionable Western European musical celebrities upon hearing compositions of such Hungarian character that never existed before? Of course, these compositions present something unfamiliar as do the others; and anything unfamiliar is equally 'obnoxious'. I even dare to say that the oddity built on the customary major-minor scales and chromatic motion of the West Europeans is closer to the Hungarian 'critic', than the Asian 'frightfulness' of a simple ancient Székely melody. God forbid

that their ears would accept an ancient Hungarian melody; then music would be done with everything and would fall to decay! Stay always with the customary pattern, never anything new.

All the new and Hungarian music composed here in the last few years is but a start, not yet sufficient to draw conclusions as to general features, common trends, and so forth. In other words, the heyday of Hungarian music theory, conceived years ago with prophetic inspiration, has not as yet come true.