

“HE EXTENDED HIS LOVE TO NEIGHBOURING PEOPLES AND THEIR DESTINY”

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Dr. László Vikárus, professor at the Liszt Academy and the director of the Bartók Archive of the Institute for Musicology, evokes Bartók’s collections and concerts in Carpathian Ruthenia and Ukraine on the occasion of the 141st anniversary of the artist’s birth.

Bartók published an article in English entitled “Hungarian Music” in 1944. In the article, he briefly discussed the fundamental difference between the sources of his own music and that of Kodály: “Kodály studied, and uses as source, Hungarian rural music almost exclusively, whereas I extended my interest and love also to the folk music of the neighbouring Eastern European peoples...”

Bartók’s life was deeply interlinked with the entire region due to a range of factors, including his childhood, his work as a collector, which had reached a scientific level, and his concert tours as a pianist. His entire activity, and not just his sources of music, are testament to the fact that his interest had encompassed the peoples of neighbouring Eastern Europe. From Sannicolau Mare through Oradea (both in Romania) to Bratislava, we could list many places, which became the starting point and the venues of his early years and then his concert performances and even his folk music collections.

I would like to focus on an area that features less prominently in Bartók’s biographies, namely his relationship with the region of Carpathian Ruthenia and Ukraine, especially against the backdrop of the tragic events that are unfolding there and which are causing deep concern to all of us as we commemorate the 141st birth anniversary of the composer, pianist, and folk music researcher.

One of the venues of his childhood is Nagyszőlős in Carpathian Ruthenia (the name of the town is now Vinohradiv), where he performed at a concert for the first time as a child prodigy at the age of 11 in 1892. He deemed the event important enough to include it in his autobiography written in 1921: “I began writing piano music when I was nine years old and made my first public appearance as a ‘composer’ and ‘pianist’ at Nagyszöllös in 189[2] ...” (Bartók marked the words composer and pianist in quotation marks himself.)

The few months he spent in Nagyszőlős were enough to make him return there on one of his collection tours. In November 1911, he visited the area and collected music in five villages: in Veresmart, Száldobos, Szeklence, Dolha, and Lipcsemező. This is how the local newspaper called Ugocsa County reported about his work (quoted by Béla Bartók Jr.): “Béla Bartók, a well-known musician, came to Nagyszőlős to study Russian folk songs in our region.” These are Russian folk songs that Bartók refers to as “Ruthenian” in his collections and sometimes in his correspondence, he adds “Ruthenian (Ukrainian)”. When he arranged a violin duo composed from one of the four Ruthenian melodies for the piano and inserted it into the Petite Suite, he called the Duo No. 16 “Russian”, even though it was originally entitled “Burlesque”. Among the Duos, there are certain Ruthenian pieces that are not rooted in folk music: Duo No. 35, entitled Ruthenian Kolomeika, depicts a certain type that plays a particularly important role in Bartók's folk music work on a topic of his own invention.

Even more important than the use of collected and re-worked folk songs is the virtuoso violin piece he recorded on a phonograph cylinder in Szeklence, which he incorporated into his Violin Rhapsody No. 2 as a long, exciting episode.

Ukraine – or “Ukrania”, as he wrote in his letters - was an important venue for Bartók's only concert tour to take place in the Soviet Union in January 1929. He gave his first concert in Kharkiv, from where he travelled on to Odessa. This is how he described his experiences to his wife, also referring to the difficulties he encountered: “So that was how we amused ourselves for some days, hovering about in constant uncertainty. But apart from this, they are very charming people, and they have loaded me with scores and folk-song publications (I shall have plenty to drag home with me). The audience also proved to be very enthusiastic at the end of the concert; they shouted, bis! bis! (encore! encore!), and there were 3 encores.”

His collection of Ruthenian melodies is preserved in his melody and lyrics booklets, and there are fair copies of all the melodies. Although this relatively small collection has never been published, it is obvious that it was an important first-hand experience, as references to the special features of Ruthenian folk music keep reappearing in Bartók's scientific writings. He also made systematic references to the accessible editions of Ukrainian folk songs. His correspondence with Philaret Kolessa, a composer and folk music researcher living in Lemberg (then Lwów in Poland, today Lviv) paints an accurate picture of his comprehensive knowledge.

They exchanged several letters between 1935 and 1937. Bartók contacted him in connection with the folk song categorization work he was doing at the Academy of Sciences. He first sent him as a gift his own newly published monograph on folksy Christmas songs, told him which Ukrainian collections he had in his possession, and asked how he could order the folk music collections he still needed. He also indicated that he would need a Ukrainian-German or

Ukrainian-French or Ukrainian-English dictionary. Although he already had a Ukrainian dictionary, the volume had only 20,000 entries, which proved insufficient. In his scientific report dated September 1937 and sent to Géza Voinovich, Secretary General of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, he mentions Ukrainian as well as “Bulgarian, Serbian-Croatian, Slovak, and Polish” among the partially arranged materials used for comparison with neighbouring nations.

Carpathian Ruthenia and Ukraine played a role in Bartók's biography. He visited these areas as a collector, composer, and later as a concert pianist. This is further confirmation, although the fact barely needs any proof, that Bartók truly extended his interest and love to the folk music of the neighbouring peoples in Eastern Europe; and not only to their folklore, but to the peoples themselves and to their destiny.

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