MONOPHONY IN MULTIPART INSTRUMENTAL HUNGARIAN FOLK MUSIC

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Abstract: Hungarian folk music is basically monophonic. Even within multipart instrumental music, the ancient way of harmonization strictly follows the melody, playing only mixtures of major chords on every tone of the tune. The other, newer type of harmonization is more or less similar to the Western functional one. Between these two extremes there are several transitions using harmonies in Hungarian instrumental folk music. However, the most important effect is the appearance of time gaps between the structural tones in the parts of the instruments playing the ornamented melody (the leading part called *prím* in Hungarian) and the accompaniment. These gaps cause a kind of eventuality in harmonization. Several examples analyzed from the of view of harmonies will show the role of the leading instrument player *(prím)* in this eventuality.

As it is commonly known, the founding fathers of Hungarian ethnomusicology have already established – and they rightly did so – that Hungarian folk music is basically monophonic. During the first period of folk

music research this observation was reinforced by the fact, that the research was focused almost exclusively on the vocal tradition, while the instrumental practice had been considered only as a subsidiary phenomenon of vocal music. Kodály began the relevant chapter of his 1937 study on *Folk Music of Hungary* by stating:

> The Hungarians are not particularly fond of musical instruments. Relatively few people are good at them: even poorer people would hire instrumentalists, rather than playing personally. Therefore, in comparison to the richness of our vocal folk music, we have a small amount of instrumental folk music.[1]

Furthermore, according to his observations

> [t]here are home-made instruments such as the Jew's harp *(doromb)*, swineherd's horn *(kanásztülök)*, herdsman's horn *(pásztorkürt)*, short and long shepherd's pipe *(furulya)*, bagpipe *(duda)*, zither (citera) or cittern *(tambura)*; less common instruments are the dulcimer or cymbalum *(cimbalom)*, hurdy-gurdy *(tekerő or nyenyere)*, that is the French *vielle*; and there are manufactured instruments such as violin, clarinet, cymbalum, bugle, accordion and mouth-organ.[2]

More than two decades earlier, Béla Bartók made a similar statement in his study written in 1911 on *The Folklore of Instruments and their Music in Eastern Europe*, where he gave only a narrower interpretation of the term "folk instrument":

> Our interest, of course, is only in music performed on folk instruments, as originating from peasant hands. A general rule: folk instruments – as we designate them – are only those instruments produced

1 Here the text of the official English translation (the 1971-edition, see below) has been considerably modified.

2 Kodály 1971: 126. The original text in Hungarian can be found here: Kodály 1937: 81. (9th edition, 1969)

in the villages by the peasants themselves, without imitating some artificial manufactured instrument.[3]

As we can see, Bartók's definition omitted the manufactured instruments wide-spread among the people (such as clarinet or violin), and it only included the peasant flute, bagpipes, zither, hurdy-gurdy, and herdsman's horn. It must be added that Bartók's opinion reflected the general position adapted by the research of the time. However, the ethnographic collections made later and extended to other ethnic groups have shown that certain manufactured musical instruments became an integral part of the folk tradition, as a few decades after their appearance they became increasingly popular. As a matter of fact, soon enough these instruments were consistently used by traditional peasant communities in many places.[4]

In any case, an important characteristic of Hungarian instrumental folk music remains that the Gypsy performers, who provided their musical services in a professional manner, never played the zither, the peasant flute, the bagpipe, and the hurdy-gurdy (that is the instruments primarily hand-made by peasants or shepherds).[5] They used instead manufactured instruments such as violin, clarinet, or dulcimer, etc. As regards polyphony, one can say that the so-called *bourdon* instruments, preserving an archaic harmony and sound, remained in the use of peasants and shepherds, while the chamber ensembles that can be traced back to the Baroque and the Classical era of the European music history, primarily the family of string instruments, became the main area of professional Gypsy musicians. This study deals with the latter category of instruments.

It is remarkable that Bartók as a composer, when writing his own folk music arrangements, linked possible harmonizations to the melodies. This meant, that the way he applied his accompanying harmonies depended

3 Bartók *Bartók Essays* 1976: 239–41, 244–65, 270–83, here: 240. The Hungarian original: "Természetesen csak népies hangszereken előadott, parasztkezekből származó zene érdekel bennünket. *Népies* hangszereknek vesszük általában véve azokat, melyeket falun maguk a parasztok készítenek, anélkül, hogy valamilyen mesterséges gyári hangszert utánoznának." Bartók: [1911] *BBI* 3: 46–47.

4 About the change of Bartók's and Kodály's attitudes as scholars in the context of musical instruments see Tari 1984, ibid 2001: 18, and 2011: 13–14.

5 Sárosi 1978: *XXX*

oldalszám!

on the musical characteristics of the melody. He realized, that the melodic simplicity implied fewer boundaries, whereas the lack of triads in stereotyped succession and that of functional relations deriving from the melody, all these taken together permitted a substantial degree of liberty:

> These primitive melodies show no trace of the stereotyped joining of triads. That again means greater freedom for us in the treatment of the melody. It allows us to bring out the melody most clearly by building round it harmonies of the widest range varying along different keynotes. […]
>
> Similarly, the strange turnings of melodies in our Eastern European peasant music showed us new ways of harmonization. For instance the new chord of the seventh which we use as a concord may be traced back to the fact that in our folk melodies of a pentatonic character the seventh appears as an interval of equal importance with the third and fifth.[6]

In Bartók's description we find a fundamental concept of harmonization: that is the analogy between the horizontal or melodic qualities *and* the vertical or harmonic layer. But his findings, no matter how relevant for the compositional practice, say nothing about the existence of a possible harmonization in the folk practice. However, we must take into consideration that while collecting folk music, Bartók actually experienced the phenomenon of folk harmonization.

The three-stringed viola, designated as *kontra*, was first described by him. Bartók heard this instrument for the first time in 1912 in the village of Mezőszabad (in Romanian: Voiniceni) in the Great Transylvanian Plain. Two years later, in 1914, he recorded a further occurrence of the *kontra* in the Görgény Valley (in Romanian: Munții Gurghiu). See figure 1 showing Bartók's own transcription of a tune from Mezőszabad (Voiniceni) which

6 Bartók: "The Relation Between Folk Music and Art Music" see *Bartók Essays* 1976: 342–343. On the consonant seventh interval to be found in Zoltán Kodály's choral works see my own study with an abstract in English: Richter 2008.

actually served as the folk music source for the first movement of his *Romanian Folk Dances* (1915, BB 68).[7]

For this reason we must think, that Bartók did not consider the use of harmony essential for the style of this musical culture. It was only much later, that issues of folk harmonization were subjected to a comprehensive examination. (Figure 1)

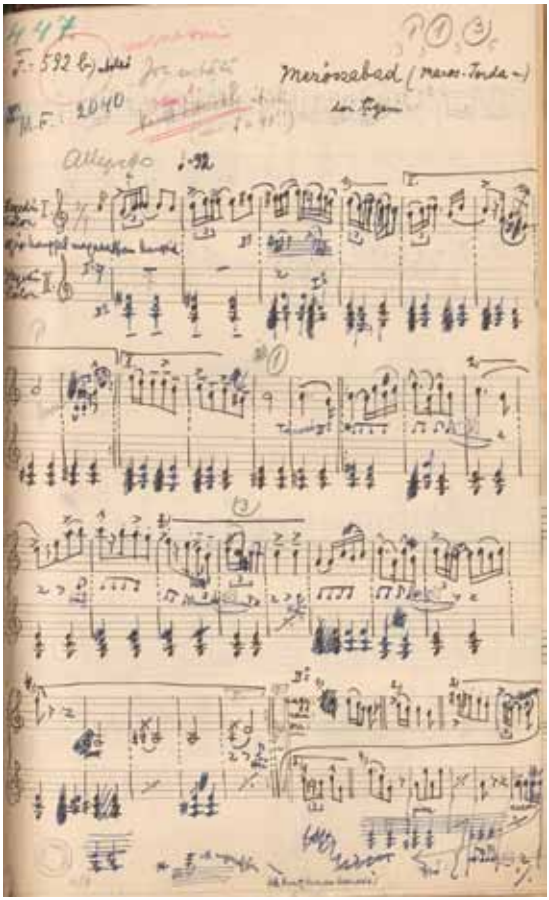

Figure 1. Romanian dance tune – Bartók's transcription from his collection[8]

7 Published in Lampert 2008: 113–114.

8 Bartók Archives Budapest, sign.: ROinstr_4_447; recording: MF 2040.

István Pávai outlined a detailed compendium of folk harmonization and the use of chords as practised by instrumental folk ensembles (that is: string orchestras).[9] Pávai proposes, in essence, a set of six criteria to be taken into consideration to achieve a proper interpretation of folk harmonization and folk polyphony, respectively. These criteria are as follows:

1. The authenticity of the musical material to be examined,
2. The principles of harmonization applied at certain points of the musical process,
3. The technical constraints and possibilities of the instruments providing the harmony,
4. The way the accompanying instrumentalists manage to follow the soloist playing the melody in his or her intentions to repeat the same melody or switching to another; (with other words: the metacommunication between the first violin [played by the leading instrumentalist called *prímás*] and the accompaniment),
5. The accompanying rhythmic formulas traditionally used in a given genre (that is: type of dance) and the impact the *tempos* related to these rhythmic formulas have on the harmony;
6. The style, character, and typological characteristics of the melody.[10]

A material is considered by Pávai as authentic from a musical point of view, if

> the harmonic solutions, when listened subsequently by an experienced and talented village instrumentalist, will be qualified as correct. Further, if someone whose knowledge and skills go back to the tradition will comment the different variants resulting from improvisation by saying "You can do it like this as well!."

On the other hand he believes the chordal structures differing from the applied harmonization method to be mistaken. Nevertheless, a claim like

9 First in his doctoral dissertation *A tánczene és interetnikus kapcsolatai az erdélyi magyar néphagyományban* (Dance Music and its Interethnic Connections in the Hungarian Folk Tradition of Transylvania) from 2004, than in his book published in 2012.

10 See Pávai 2012: 334., chapter entitled *Szempontok a népi többszólamúság vizsgálatához* (Criteria for the examination of folk polyphony).

"Even like this it suits the dancers." can justify the ethnographic authenticity of false musical solutions.[11]

When dealing with the topic of authenticity, Pávai examines the authenticity of the collaborator (including the quality of the ensemble playing), the authenticity of the collector, and that of the collection itself. He emphasizes already at this point that in folk harmonization (especially within the old style) the accompaniment of the violin is generally performed by two instruments: the *kontra* viola and the double bass. However, it would be wrong to consider the accompaniment played by these two instruments as a single harmonic unit, as it is the case in classical art music. For the two musicians do not intend to provide together the harmony and the bass as an integrated totality.

The second criterion (referring to the principles of harmonization) is applied to the examination of sound recordings which seem to be polyphonic. It must be established "whether there are elements of actual harmonic intent, or we only have the so-called uncoordinated polyphony." This study does not touch upon the uncoordinated polyphony. However, it must be emphasized that in the performance of instrumental folk ensembles certain eventuality, the actual intonation of unintended notes must always be taken as granted.

Pávai classifies the coordinated or intentional folk polyphony according to the style of the harmonization. In the Transylvanian practice, examined by him, basically two types of harmonizations are used:

1. Tune-oriented [i.e. the harmonization follows the tune],
2. Governed by the functional relations known from classical art music.[12]

In the practice, of course, these two styles of harmonization appear together, mixed into various degrees. In the case of tune-oriented harmonizations, the accompanying instruments will also seek to play the melody in their own manner: with double stops [*Doppelgriffe*, or: *doppia corda*] and longer notes according to the dance rhythm. The most common form of this principle of accompaniment, as it is practised by bands consisting of violin, three-stringed viola and double bass, is the harmonization moving

11 Pávai 2012: 335.

12 Pávai 2012: 344–345.

in mixtures of parallel major chords. In this type of harmonization, minor chords are only rarely used, or not at all (Figure 2). If it is not the major triad that they use, they prefer an incomplete seventh chord, the so-called "consonant" (i.e. not functional) seventh chord. (Music 1)

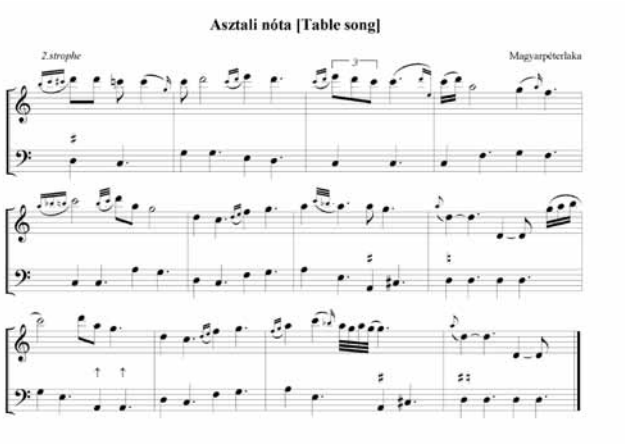

Figure 2.[13]

The so-called functional harmonization is used in a different manner as compared to its practice in art music. All accompanying instruments, and sometimes also the melodic instrument, will play the main melodic step of the dominant followed by the tonic, that is the move from the leading note to the fundamental note, thus amplifying the functional attractions. Most harmonic successions involve authentic steps, where the main melodic notes are preceded by some kind of a dominant chord, usually the incomplete seventh chord (with the leading note in the bass!) or, in the urban practice, the chord with the diminished seventh (Figure 3). Parts progressing in parallel intervals (consecutive fifth or octaves), banned in art music, are completely natural in folk music. (Music 2)

So in theory, the harmonization of traditional peasant dance music is a result of two styles of harmonization which are mixed into various degrees.

13 Aladár Csiszár and his band, Magyarpéterlaka (Transylvania – Petrilaca de Mureş, Romania). The recording was made by Tibor Rostás (after the collections of Antal Fekete) in Budapest, 26–28. 03. 1989, transcribed by Pál Richter. The recordings were published: Fekete 2009. Prime violinist: Aladár Csiszár.

The ancient manner is the tune-oriented harmonization showing the influence of (early) monophonic structures. Once chords with subdominant, dominant, and tonic character appear in the cadence, this archaic harmonization begins to reflect the impact of functionally used harmony.

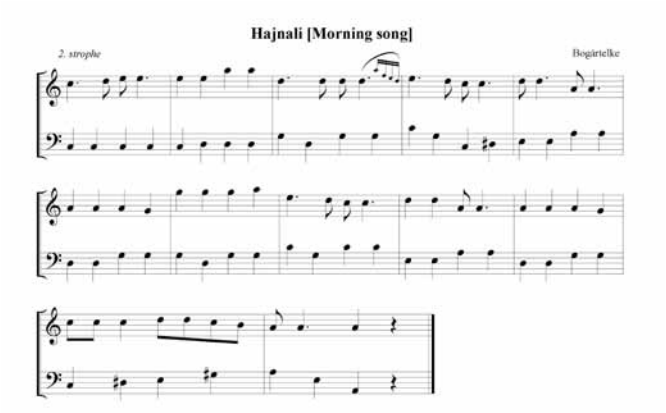

Figure 3.[14]

In the tradition of the Hungarian dance music from Transylvania, however, the influence of monophony prevails even in the case of functional harmonizations, because each instrumental part seeks to intone the main melodic step, the move from the leading note to the fundamental note. When it comes to the listener accustomed to art music, this style of folk harmonization in itself offers particular colors, and has a somewhat exotic effect.

This impression is reinforced by further peculiarities of the performance practice: 1) the leading part is played by several instruments, and 2) the instrumentalist playing the leading part does not move together with the harmonic accompaniment, but deviates rhythmically from it. As a result, what we actually hear becomes structurally much more complex than the theoretical construct depicting the musical thinking of the performers.

14 The Czilika Band (with two prime violinists: Samu Boros, János Czilika), Bogártelke (Transylvania – Băgara, Romania). The recording was made by István Pávai in Bogártelke (Băgara, Romania), 28. 07. 1993, transcribed by Pál Richter (melody played by the two violins is a schemata). The recording was published: Pávai István. 2005.

On the other hand, this complexity of eventual nature is the warrant of the true and authentic style of a folk performance. Two recordings are presented to highlight this phenomenon. (Video 1–4)[15]

On the first one students of the Budapest Liszt Academy of Music are playing. However, the leading cittern *(tambura)* player is the descendant of a Roma dynasty of musicians from Southern Hungary, Bátmonostor. He did not learn his performance style at school; he only acquired the theoretical basis to complete his instrumental skills that equal him to an authentic collaborator. Note that sometimes, as new melodies appear, he takes after the accompaniment, but soon afterwards he will perform wonderfully ornamented versions of the melodies in a free manner, with slight fluctuations of tempo, and employing subtle use of agogics.

On the second recording two prime violinists from the Transylvanian region of Kalotaszeg (West from Cluj, Romania) are playing with the accompaniment of a *kontra* viola and a double bass. One can notice here as well the accompaniment providing the (rhythmically) solid basis for both violinists. In this particular case pretty interesting suspensions and acceleratings take place not only between both soloists and the accompaniment, but also between the two melodic versions performed by the prime violinists.

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15 Metadata of videos: Video 1–2: Graduation concert of the Folk Music Department Liszt Academy of Music 2013, prime tambura player: Attila Csurai. Video 3–4: Czilika Band from Bogártelke, prime violinists: Samu Boros, János Czilika. The recording was made by István Pávai in Bogártelke (Transylvania – Băgara, Romania) 28. 07. 1993. The recording was published: Pávai 2012b: MNA 1_4_012.

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