

# RESULTS OF RESEARCHING INDIVIDUALITY IN HUNGARIAN INSTRUMENTAL FOLK MUSIC

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*"Songs are not public assets, not the entire nation sings.  
It is the individual there as well". (Kodály<sup>1</sup>)*

**Abstract:** Individuality and community form a dialectic pair of categories within ethnomusicology, which symbolizes the unity of personal creation and its reception by the community. In the early years of modern research, ethnography and ethnomusicology only looked at folklore as an undifferentiated product of the community, that was characterized as either a passive heritage or a reception from higher social levels ("Gesunkenes Kulturgut").

Today's opinion is that individual creation and the reception of the community are integral. Besides the product of the community there is a significant role of personal creativity, which is, while following the heritage of the community, still creates individually, without limits, and thus affects the community.

So individuality and community go hand in hand like vocal and instrumental music or old and new performance styles. It is due to such a pair of categories that the real specifics of a given category can be established by making comparisons to the others, and vice versa.

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<sup>1</sup> Kodály 1993: 241.

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While in art music we compare a given artist to his/her era or style, in folk music we examine characteristics in view of the given country, territory, village, and the relation of vocal and instrumental music. This presentation looks at the question of individuality in Hungarian folk music first of all from the aspect of the instrumental music but also the vocal music affected by it from different territories of historical Hungary. It is guided by one of Kodály's earliest observations (*"Outstandingly talented individuals are the depositaries of folklore, not the whole people. The rest just learn from them."*) and also looks at the studies of other researchers (Rajeczky, Vargyas).

≈ GENERAL REMARKS

All living beings are unique from a biological aspect, and also unique individuals, no matter what race they belong to. It is enough to watch any of David Attenborough's films about wildlife to get an understanding of that. There are signs of uniqueness typical for plants as well. Two plants of the same species grow in a different way, even if they are in the same soil and under the same weather conditions. This phenomenon is well represented in Hungarian folk songs as well, as the following two quotations show, where the plant rosemary is being referred to. Even though they are used as metaphors, the lyrics also represent the unique features of the plants as well. (Figure 1–2.)

Zoology, botany, human etology and to some degree psychology examine the individual from a behavioral aspect, how it relates to the community. This is what folklorism, ethnomusicology and folk dance research do as well. Individuality and community form a dialectic pair of categories within ethnomusicology, which symbolizes the unity of personal creation and its reception by the community. In the early years of modern research, ethnography only looked at folklore as an undifferentiated product of the community that was characterized as either a passive heritage or a reception from higher social classes (*"Gesunkenes Kulturgut"*).

Examining the role of the individual in Hungary was an early thought dating back to the early days of ethnomusicology but it only grew into a clearly defined category in relation to phenomena where the role of the individual was much more obvious.

First results in examining the role of the individual were achieved in 1940 in researches about folk tales<sup>2</sup> then folklore research of handcraft trades. In the second part of the 20th century, folk dance research joined this branch as well.<sup>3</sup>



Szivárvány havasán felnyőtt rozmaringszál  
 Nem szereti helyit el akar bujdosni.  
 Ki kell onnat venni, s új helybe kell tenni,  
 Ki kell onnat venni, s új helybe kell tenni.

*A rosemary that grows on the snow-capped rainbow-mountains  
 Doesn't like where it is, and wants to hide away.  
 It must be taken from there and put in a new place,  
 It must be taken from there and put in a new place.*

Figure 1. A rosemary that grows on the snow-capped rainbow-mountains...<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ortutay 1940, Voigt, Katona 1998: 63, 245–248.

<sup>3</sup> Martin 1959, Martin 1969, Martin 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Collected by Zoltán Kodály 1910. (ex. Csík county). Archive number in the Institute for Musicology RHC of HAS, Folk Music Archive: BR\_03210\_01.

Tempo giusto.  $\text{♩} = 80$ . Látatlan, (Esztergom vm.) 1922.K

Roz- ma- rin- got ül- tet- tem ese- rép- be,  
 Be- tet- tem a ker- tem kö- ze- pé- re.

Roz- ma- ring- szál föl- nőtt az ég fe- lé,  
 Gyön- ge vá- gyok a sze- re- tőm mel- lé.

Rozmaringot ültettem cserépbe,	<i>I planted the rosemary in a pot,</i>
Kitettem a kertem közepére.	<i>Put it in the middle of the yard,</i>
Rozmaringoszál fölnőtt az ég felé,	<i>Rosemary grew up to the sky,</i>
Gyönge vagyok a szeretőm mellé.	<i>I'm too weak for my lover.</i>

Figure 2. I planted the rosemary in a pot...<sup>5</sup>

The recognition of the value of the individual skills of dancers within a community could especially be highlighted following the technical evolution and the ability to capture dances on film. György Martin stated in 1969:

Because of the improvisational character of the Hungarian dances with considerable personal variation, the method of the personality study is of paramount importance to dance research.<sup>6</sup>

Good dancers consciously strive on building their dances in various ways, lining up new and diverse moves. Their performance is colored by different elements to add extra impression. The greatest dancers had huge influence on the dance knowledge of their community, the overall dance life, especially in Kalotaszeg (now in Romania). Their knowledge was the greatest power behind the folk dance movement.<sup>7</sup> Such outstanding dancers were János Fekete Sr. and Jr. from Bogártelke (Băgara, Romania), who were filmed in 1968. (Video 1–3)

<sup>5</sup> Collected by Zoltán Kodály 1922., published in Kodály 1937/1960<sup>3</sup>: Nr. 185.

<sup>6</sup> Martin 1969, Martin 2004: 31, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Tari 2013: 258–259.

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≈ THE VALUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

But when did ethnomusicology recognize the value of the individual? The value was always appreciated, however, without putting emphasis on the word individual, and without dedicating a special research wing to put it in focus. Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály and their two forerunners, János Seprődi<sup>8</sup> and Béla Vikár<sup>9</sup> were consciously looking for the best performers, the most outstanding individuals, singers, instrument players with the greatest knowledge during their field trips. Even though in their studies they did not use the expression “individual,” it is clear that Kodály talked about it when he was listing the various research tasks in his work “*Folk Music of Hungary*” (1937):

A separate topic for research: music in the life of the community. How much it respects it, how important it is... Does it respect the greatest singing talent... Do they not consider somebody a good singer who just sings popular art songs in a mannered way?... We do not have knowledge of the people’s hearing, and understanding. What is the average knowledge of songs, where does the special talent for memory begin, and does it always come with outstanding performance skills?<sup>10</sup>

Kodály raised such questions that we actually still cannot answer in full detail. He also touched the question of the different types of performers, when he stated that singing is for everybody, but there are many differences: one is an independent, leading type, the other is unstable by itself, a third one is passive. There are also singers who only know one song, others, however, know several songs. Benjamin Rajeczky stated that the folk

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8 Seprődi (\*15 August 1874 †6 March 1923) music historian, music folklorist, music pedagogue and composer. He was one of the few modern researchers before Bartók and Kodály who tried to explore the oral tradition of the village life, within the role of Gypsy musicians (Almási, Benkő, Lakatos 1974, Almási 2003).

9 Vikár (\*1 April 1859 † 22 September 1945) Finno-Ugrian linguist, translator of the Finnish Kalevala, the first ethnographer who used the phonograph for collecting folk music and folk poetry. See Gergely 1947, Kodály 1959/2007, Vikár 1984, Tari 2001a, 2002, Sebő 2006, Pávai 2011.

10 Kodály 1937/1960<sup>3</sup>: VI.

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performer is a specialist to a small extent, where the signs of the individual and the community are in interlock.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 3. György Szabó Varga<sup>12</sup>

According to the register of the Patria sound recordings,<sup>13</sup> József Marosi (1879) Bözöd (ex Udvarhely county) from Székelyföld, strengthens Kodály's observations: "I learned [the songs] myself, but the others rather learned from me"<sup>14</sup> – stated Marosi. At the same time, it can also be read that many singers were respected by their communities. Mrs Péntek born Ilona Szabó (1896), one of the best singer from Bartók's folk music collection is "known to be a good singer in the village" in Körösfő (Izvoru Crişului, Romania). The Mrs. Ferenc Józsefné Simon's (Lészped/Lespezi, Romania) name was soared and remembered for her singing.<sup>15</sup> Another great singer individual, György Varga Szabó<sup>16</sup> (Szék, today Sic Romania;

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11 Rajeczky 1960: 245.

12 See in Sebő 2001.

13 Somfai 1981, Tari 2002.

14 Sebő 2001.

15 Sebő 2001.

16 Lajtha 1954: 8–9. For the recordings of this singer, see: <http://db.zti.hu/24ora/dalok.asp>

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Figure 3) implied to László Lajtha politely, but without a doubt, that he was an individual, so he sang different versions of the same song before the recording and into the phonograph. One recorded version was closer to how the others sang it – this was without repetition of the lines –, and Lajtha asked why he sang it like the rest, was it the excitement of the recording? The singer's response was “because I already sing it like the rest.”<sup>17</sup>

Among the skills of this singer we can list the well-selected tone, overwhelming knowledge of the genre, exceptional feel for the tempo, a touch and ability for coloring, great respiration, and just the perfect intensity of sound variation, which is not vibration but just enough to nourish the sound. We can also mention the proper level of dynamics and perfect knowledge of the lyrics. All in all the whole delivery fills the song with emotion and lifts it to the heights of lyre.<sup>18</sup>

This performance, paired with a strung gorge, intense sounded singing, and filled with long but never empty interludes, provides a great artistic essence in each features, which takes the audience to a catharsis.

That performance is something only outstanding individuals, the real great artists are capable of doing, and such that makes people recognize the performer after just a few sounds, just like with art music, when hearing the play of Glenn Gould, Maurice André, or hearing Jessy Norman sing. Surely we hear their very strong personalities shine from the first moment. (Music 1)

Of Bartók, Kodály and László Lajtha, it was Kodály who was interested in this question. One of his memoirs tells upon how clearly he saw and emphasized the importance of the individual in folk music. He wrote:

Soon, after a few years of research it was clear that songs are not public assets, not the entire nation sings. It is the individual there as well. Outstandingly talented individuals are the trustees of folklore, not the whole nation. The rest only learns from them.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Lajtha 1954: 326. Footnote to Nr. 59.

18 Tari 1983.

19 Kodály 1993: 241–242.

RP: meg kell nézni a Lajtha-kötetben, hogy pontosan hogyan van magyarul, mert szerintem valami félre lett fordítva, illetve így nem értem az angolból, hogy mi is az idézés lényege. Lehet, hogy csak egyszerűen present perfectbe kellene csak tenni, jelen időben sehogysem jön össze. (Legalábbis nekem.)

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Kodály's memoirs were released with editor Lajos Vargyas' forewords where he expressed his disagreement with Kodály's afore-cited comment. He thought "this strict opinion [was] only formed because he [Kodály] mostly recorded amongst the elderly to save the dying old style, while the new style living in the youth was only recorded in addition."<sup>20</sup> In fact it is true that the new-style songs were mostly recorded from younger people and mostly in a group performance. Researches from later decades show, however, that there are signs of individualism in the new style as well. Benjamin Rajeczky (Figure 4) draws the attention to the fact that the heterofon solutions of the monodic group songs show signs of individuals.

In group singing, one or another singer consistently keeps to the version he/she best likes, or applies ornamentation where he/she is used to.<sup>21</sup>

These and other facts verify Kodály's views about personalities, especially in instrumental music.

Within all of folklore, the role of the individual, and within our field the role of the leading singers, individual instrument players, and families living a musical life, is obvious.<sup>22</sup> These persons and families not only instinctively but also consciously pass on the family tradition to their youngest family members, and usually they are also the leading musicians of a given community. At the same time they are mostly outstanding in several other folk arts as well.<sup>23</sup> Since the previous traditions ceased to exist, the good performers, creative individuals subconsciously feel how important their role is in passing on the tradition. It is obvious, however, that their role was always definitive in their communities. The most outstanding professional instrument players were always well respected in whole regions, both in the past and the present. First violinist Márton Ferenczi was considered as the best in Szék and its area between the two world wars and also known to

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<sup>20</sup> Vargyas 1993: 7.

<sup>21</sup> Rajeczky 1969: II/2-1b liner notes: 22.

<sup>22</sup> Tari 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Some of them got a state award, see Tari 2013.



Figure 4. Benjamin Rajeczky<sup>24</sup>

be the one who knew the most of Hungarian songs, just like István Ádám later on.<sup>25</sup> Pál Járdányi detailed in his musical village monography in 1943 why a Hungarian farmer, an exceptional, talented musician and his band were the most famous around the area of the village of Kide.<sup>26</sup>

#### ≈ THE INDIVIDUALITY AMONG INSTRUMENTALISTS

The leading individuals with the greatest repertoire are often the only keepers of some tunes that the community did not keep alive. In the village of Kürt (north to the Danube, Strekov, Slovakia), when researching the repertoire of the Gypsy band led by Sándor Anyalai in 1994<sup>27</sup> I had the

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<sup>24</sup> Photo: Gábor Miháltz, March 1989. In private photo collection of Lujza Tari and Gábor Miháltz.

<sup>25</sup> Lajtha 1954: 9–10.

<sup>26</sup> Járdányi 1943: 8. cites Tari 2010a: 38.

<sup>27</sup> Tari 2010b: 45–50, CD I. 21.



Figure 5. The Gypsy band, led by Sándor Anyalai<sup>28</sup>

chance to experience the way a leading violinist leads the education of the younger ones in a fast, high-level and straight way. Only he knew one of the tunes that I asked him to play. He replied: “It’s not the right in solo, but I’ll teach it quickly to the others”. The real knowledge, prestige, leadership and educator role of the first violinist became clearly visible in that moment. The whole band followed his directions and quickly learned the tune in a couple of minutes, however, the leader did not allow me to record it on tape until he felt like their performance was worth it. This moment also deepened the unconditional respect towards him by the band, as he only allowed the best version to be recorded. (Figure 5)

The requirements for a first violinist educating his band, how much he needs to know other instruments, have already been described by László Lajtha earlier.<sup>29</sup> István Pávai’s book shows records attesting that a good first violinist also plays other instruments and often is a good dancer as well.<sup>30</sup> Quoting Kodály again: “Some multitalented musicians can play several instruments ... [but] only one can be played perfectly.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Photo: Gábor Miháltz, October 1997, by fieldwork of Lujza Tari.

<sup>29</sup> Lajtha 1955: 7.

<sup>30</sup> Pávai 2012: 80–82.

<sup>31</sup> Kodály 1960: 112.



Figure 6. From left to right: Lujza Tari, Samu Boros, János Cilika and Gábor Miháltz.<sup>32</sup>

It is common among violin players that first violinists can play the violin as accompaniment instrument (in this case the violin, or in Hungarian: “hegedű” is called “kontra”) or play the viola (the playing of both accompaniments is called: “kontrázás,” “kontrázni”). Stepbrothers Samu Boros and János Cilinka of Egeres (Aghireş, Romania – Figure 6) were leading violinists for different bands in different villages. However, when his own band dissolved, the younger brother found a place in his brother's still active group. When we visited them with Bálint Sárosi on a joint field trip on 1974, they showed evidence of their masterful knowledge by easily changing **the leading and accompanying role**. Also they were keepers of a tune with a unique harmony that is typical of art music but not existing in Hungarian folk music. This song for St. Stephen's day had only one known vocal version from the area. The monodic Hungarian folk song was enriched with multipart tunes, which most probably taught by somebody of a higher education, to their ancestors, since the brothers only knew it from oral tradition. It is interesting to hear how the Germans influenced the tune with a Western European harmony and the soft violin play switches over to the familiar harmony and a bit more confident, stronger sound in the csárdás. (Music 2)

RP: Ők ketten nemcsak úgy játszottak együtt, hogy a másik hegedűkontrázot volna (lásd fentebb a kíséretre vonatkozó megjegyzést), hanem primás és másodprínás kettőseként játszották mind a ketten a dallamot

<sup>32</sup> Photo: Bálint Sárosi, by fieldwork of Sárosi and Tari in Egeres (ex. Kolozs county), Feb. 1974.

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On the basis of his 1911 research describing the Hungarian bagpipe, Béla Bartók drew attention to the motive-repeating interludes and improvised preludes.<sup>33</sup> We know today that the introductory and closing improvisations are holding community-specific signs to the bagpipe type, nation and geography, however, these plays are aiming at warming up, to probe the instrument, but they are very unique. As Felix Hoerburger wrote:

Die einleitende Spielfigur beim Dudelsackspiel bildet, wie bei Tschechen und Polen, so etwas wie eine klingende Visitenkarte des Spielers.<sup>34</sup>

The same applies for thematic interludes, which are especially significant among Hungarian bagpipers, and show the most individual features.



Figure 7–8. Albert Mikó<sup>35</sup>; János Zerkula<sup>36</sup>

33 Bartók 1911/1966, 60–61. For more about Bartók's Hungarian bagpipe music collection, see: Tari 2011: 82–206.

34 Hoerburger 1966: 71.

35 See Sebő 2001.

36 Photo: Gábor Miháltz, by fieldwork of Lujza Tari, August 1997.

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The following recordings show interludes by four different individuals, from exactly the same narrow territory within the same county Nógrád. (Music 3 a–d) The manifestations of the personality are significant and outstanding. Those who are talents above average, have a need to have his/her knowledge appreciated by their peers. Their inner need to show it drives them to manifest their talents for the others. They are leaders and thus earn respect of their peers. Albert Mikó (Figure 7) viola player started playing music in a band at the age of 13 and “didn’t deserve to be a leading violinist.” “I couldn’t, even if I wanted” – he said.<sup>37</sup>

That person, who wants to stand out from the community’s musical life, usually finds a new element that can help him/her to make that extra step. The success of this emergence depends on his or her own talent and taste, and the acceptance of the community – does he become a real personality or just a crank person?

In the 1970s some zither players who tried to stand out, started using third parallels in originally monodic Hungarian folk songs. But only a few managed to master this with such taste as the performer of the next recording from the southern part of the Great Plains of Hungary. So was Imre Magda, a peasant. (Music 4)

Using of the pizzicato is not typical of Hungarian folk violin play. Among leading violinists of Gypsy bands it is a form of individualism because it is an expression of virtuosity which is appreciated by the audience.<sup>38</sup> This is well observable in the play of a small-town Gypsy band from Balassagyarmat, North-Hungary.<sup>39</sup> (Music 5)

An outstanding individual re-creates but does not stop at variation the rhythm and tune of a given piece. Their performance includes a free choice of tonality and tempo as well – in other words the performance allows for a wider range of variation, even in a strictly set genre. This shows the great freedom of the personality. The greater the personality, the greater the performing freedom is.

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37 Sebő 2001, see Szék (since World War I Sic, Romania)

38 Tari 2006–2007.

39 About the band and the fieldwork: Tari 2001b.

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The creative individual creates in the spirit of the community's tradition, and its performance is always staying within the boundaries of the given nation, minority, territory, musical style, genre and function. Individual creation and acceptance of the community go hand in hand. Thus personality and community are a category pair like this, such as vocal and instrumental music or the old and new performance styles. But this dual concept, the specific features of the two components are only truly visible when they are compared to each other.

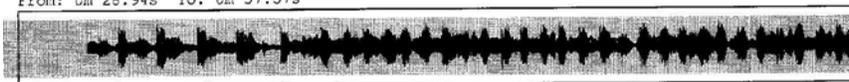
These ideas show how difficult it is to catch and describe the essence of personality. It is applicable for all outstanding instrumentalists that they have excellent knowledge of the instrument, they possess great repertoire and virtuosity, and good physical condition, good temper and soberness, etc. Why does one still stand out from the rest of the good musicians, even from the same village? Such were Mihály Halmágyi, János Pulika and János Zerkula from Gyimesközéplök (Lunca de Jos, Romania) in the same time. Each three of them were excellent Gypsy violin players, who knew about the same repertoire, and served the same layer of audience with their performances. However, they were all different musical personalities. Why? Because usage of the instrument, choosing the timbre, manner of the ornamentation and tempo, their skills for variation and improvisation, and at last but not least how they could meld one tune in another in performance.

A good example for their unique personality is a *Verbunk* dance tune, within the same motive-repetition part of the piece. Each three are playing in D major. János Pulika plays the slowest tempo. A quater = 128. (Music 6a). Mihály Halmágyi's tempo is much faster: A quater = 155. Thick motivic waving, use of spontaneous, but still conscious staccatos, tones, double stops are the characteristics of this violin play. (Music 6b)

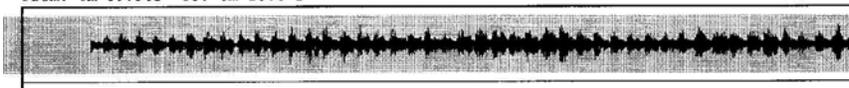
Zerkula (Figure 8), who lived the longest, and travelled the world, was more open to modernization. This is probably why he let his own student, the blind peasant Zoltán Antal spontaneously join in on contra play during this recording, which is not common in the region. His thick and rich sound, the tight use of double stops and bringing them in the run of the playing are also specific to his play. (Music 6c) The following computer sound-picture shows well the differences. (Figure 9)

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Transcription: D:\TL\Egyéniség\8698d.Pulikaverbunksaj.xsc  
Sound File: D:\TL\Egyéniség\8698d.Pulikaverbunksaj.wav  
From: 0m 28.94s To: 0m 37.57s



Transcription: D:\TL\Egyéniség\3527c Halmagyiverbunk.xsc  
Sound File: D:\TL\Egyéniség\3527c Halmagyiverbunk.mp3  
From: 0m 09.94s To: 0m 18.57s



Transcription: D:\TL\Egyéniség\8694a ZerkulaVerbunk..xsc  
Sound File: D:\TL\Egyéniség\8694a ZerkulaVerbunk..wav  
From: 0m 55.73s To: 1m 04.36s

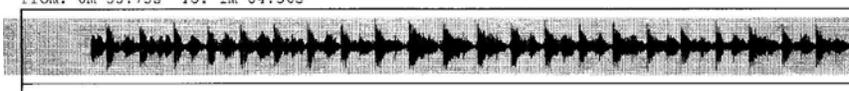


Figure 9. The sound picture of the same dance tune, played at the same point in the same village by three professional violinists of the community<sup>40</sup>

## ≈ CONCLUSION

To sum up it can be noticed that in art music the composer's unique, sometimes innovative signs can be highlighted, but it is much harder to discover the secret of the performing artist's personality. Many critics have tried to explain for example the individuality, the personal art of Maria Callas, but her secret is hard to describe, and the expressions that are used, usually apply to other outstanding performers as well.

So it is among the folk singers and instrumentalist as well. Every instrument has its most outstanding individual performer among the amateurs (mostly peasants) and professional musicians (here in Hungary mostly Gipsy musicians) as well, whose performance reaches beyond his own boundaries, beyond his own community. The performance is something only outstanding individuals, the real great artists are capable of doing, and such that makes people recognize the performer after just a few

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<sup>40</sup> The sound picture above shows the melody as played by J. Pulika (Archive number AP 8689d), the second example as played by M. Halmágyi (Archive number AP 3527c), and the third one as played by J. Zerkula (Archive number AP 8694a)

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sounds, just like with art music, when hearing the play of Glenn Gould, Maurice André, or hearing Jessy Norman sing, or hearing János Zerkula play. Surely we hear their very strong personalities shine from the first moment.

This topic has several layers, depending on where somebody's true personality shows. One thing is, however, for certain: each instrumental musician and singer personality who would become an outstanding performer, whose career was respected during and after their life's, is just glowing with the imperishable love of music and their profession.

Überall, wo die Musikanten noch über eine gewisse selbständige Schöpferkraft verfügen, kann man auch eine persönliche Note, einen persönlichen Stil antreffen. Hier erweist es sich, daß Volksmusik keineswegs nur kollektiver Ausdruck der Gemeinschaft ist, sondern sich durchaus auch auf die individuelle Phantasie, den individuellen Gestaltungswillen stützen kann. So versteht man wiederum, daß die Musik, die der Spielmann vorträgt, persönlichen Eigentum ist, ... (das es vor der Veräußerung zu schützen hat).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hoerburger 1966: 71.

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