Dance House under the Socialist Regime in Hungary

Pál Richter
Institute of Musicology
Research Centre for the Humanities
Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Táncsics Mihály u. 7, H-1014 Budapest, Hungary
E-mail: richter.pal@btk.mta.hu

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 1970s there was a drastic turn in the history of Hungarian folklorism brought by the 'dance house' [táncház] movement. This movement, based on civil initiative, aimed to evoke and revive the patterns of peasant dance and music culture of local communities, preserving its aesthetic values. Within its confines, many young people followed the example of the initiators, Ferenc Sebő and Béla Halmos through the intensive appropriation of instrumental folk music. Their professional leaders were such folklore researchers as Lajos Vargyas, Imre Olsvai, and György Martin, later the amateur activity ignoring scientific requirements came to play a determinant role. (N.B. the "dance house method" was inscribed in 2011 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.) As an urban subculture rooted in the peasant traditional culture, it expanded independently from the centrally supervised cultural establishment – without the control of the communist party. It seemed to be dangerous from ideological point of view, because it could have involved the ideas of nationalism, liberty, and self-organized communities as well.

Keywords: táncház [dance house] movement, Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, cultural policy

> The next time I went on Tuesday, 17 December 1974, when the Sebő club had a programme. [...] I was very surprised that when I got there, the hall was totally dark and the ensemble played the Christmas song *Mennyből az angyal* [Angel from Heaven]. Then two young men performed a Nativity play. And then came the dance teaching. After the dance, a literary debate evolved which [...] had as the main theme the counter-revolution of 1956. There was such a great

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> activity connected to the subject that instead of the next dance they wanted to continue the discussion. [...] I wish to remark that I was very surprised by the enthusiasm for Transylvania I experienced at the club, which manifested in music and dance.[1]

In the beginning of the 1970s there was a drastic turn in the history of Hungarian folklorism, brought by the *táncház* [dance house] movement. This movement was based on civil initiative, it started as an experiment, as a private event of a group of friends, and aimed to evoke and revive the patterns of peasant dance and music culture of local communities, preserving its aesthetic values. Later it became a public cultural programme and spread rapidly in Budapest, in the province towns, and beyond the borders of Hungary. Within its confines many young people followed the example of the initiators Ferenc Sebő and Béla Halmos by the intensive appropriation of instrumental folk music.[2] The dance house soon attracted the attention and the professional support of eminent representatives of Hungarian ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology. Folklore researchers Lajos Vargyas, Imre Olsvai, and György Martin[3] became its professional leaders. In 2011, almost 40 years after the beginning, the "dance house method" was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. As an urban subculture rooted in the traditional peasant culture, the dance house movement expanded independently from the centrally supervised cultural establishment, without the control of the Communist Party. It seemed to be dangerous from ideological point of view, because it could have involved the ideas of nationalism, liberty, and self-organized communities.

The report quoted earlier was written about an evening at the club where the Sebő Halmos band played and held a dance house. The programme usually consisted of literary or social-themed conversations inserted between music and dance teaching. This provoked in multiple ways the interest of communist authorities: they tried to collect as much information as possible about the events and pro-

1. Report of a secret agent writing under the code-name "Liliom" [Lily]. In Tamás Szőnyei, *Nyilván tartottak. Titkos szolgák a magyar rock körül 1960–1990* [Registered. Secret servants around the Hungarian rock 1960–1990] (Budapest: Magyar Narancs, Tihany-Rév Kiadó, 2005), 469.

2. Ferenc Sebő (b. 1947), Hungarian folklorist, musician, and ethnomusicologist and Béla Halmos (1946–2013), Hungarian folklorist, violinist, and etnomusicologist. On the dance house movement see Irén Kertész Wilkinson, "Hungary, II, 6 (i): Recent trends: Dance house movement," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, [2]2001), vol. 11, 867–868. A television recording of the Sebő Halmos duo from the year 1973 is available online under https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPlhqqUBwOo and so is a short documentary directed by László Kovács, entitled *Nádihegedűvel* [With the reed violin], containing the recording of a 1974 dance house event in the Kassák club https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX6w1_OSpkM

3. On Hungarian ethnomusicologist Lajos Vargyas (1914–2007) see Lujza Tari's entry in *The New Grove Dictionary,* vol. 26, 282–283; on Hungarian ethnomusicologist and composer Imre Olsvai (1931–2014) see Maria Domokos's entry ibid., vol. 18, 401–402; finally on Hungarian folklorist, ethnochoreologist, and ethnomusicologist György Martin (1932–1983), see eadem et ibid., vol. 15, 912–913.

grammes of this new trend in folklorism by employing the secret police and – as it was usual in the countries of the former Soviet bloc – by targeted mobilization of the informer network.

The Bolshevik dictatorship re-installed in Hungary after the defeat of the 1956 revolution with the support of Soviet military presence. The Hungarian Bolshevik party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, similarly to its Eastern Bloc counterparts was oriented ideologically towards Moscow and put the directives of the Soviet Communist Party into domestic practice. By the early 1970s, the regime had actually passed through the repressions and a social consolidation phase ensuring the country's relatively peaceful operation. By then, the informer network was extended to cover all segments of society. One focus of the observations was directed, naturally, towards the entertainment and community venues of the youth. It was particularly important to monitor the concerts of popular music and the musicians performing pop, rock, and jazz, as well as to collect continuously information about them. At the beginning, the new trends of popular music coming from the West were generally identified as products of Western imperialism; they were proclaimed as totally incompatible with socialist morals and – as far as possible – there was a fight against them. First they were banned then tolerated and finally, after some ideological and formal remodelling, they were introduced into the sphere of the socialist popular culture. In the case of the dance houses started in 1972,[4] however, the Hungarian communists were faced with a more complex problem.[5] Obviously they could not treat the dance house movement as a decadent craze of Western bourgeois origin, as it was a completely autochthonous initiative. The issues of Hungarian identity, freedom, the interests of the Hungarians as a community, that is, the Hungarian national interest has always been subjected to the official ideology of proletarian internationalism. The servile leadership of the Hungarian party for example was very careful not to offend the leadership of the neighbouring countries with a significant population of indigenous Hungarian minority by anything related to Hungarian identity, Hungarian culture, and Hungarian history. Therefore, they immediately labelled the people and the initiatives they considered excessively Hungarian with a series of

4. The first dance house private opportunity where non-professional dancers gathered to dance for their own amusement took place on 6 May 1972 at a book club on Liszt Ferenc Square, in the vicinity of the Liszt Music Academy.

5. About the way this system was operated, cf. Bence Csatári, *A Kádár-rendszer könnyűzenei politikája* [Politics on popular music of the Kádár regime], (PhD Diss., Budapest: ELTE, 2007), 6; also available online under http://doktori.btk.elte.hu/hist/csatari/disszert.pdf: "The thematically organized sub-committees of the MSZMP KB [the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party] had the biggest role in preparing the decisions – which, incidentally, served as a model for the operation of similar bodies of the KISZ [Hungarian Young Communist League]. This implied, in the case of the popular genre, the TKKO [Tudományos, Közoktatási és Kulturális Osztály (Department for Science, Public Education, and Culture)]… the Agitation and Propaganda Department, as well as the Agitation and Propaganda Commission, integrating and managing both organisations mentioned above."

adjectives: nationalist, chauvinist, irredentist, Horthyst,[6] and fascist. Therefore, they tracked not only the performers and audiences of the popular musical genres of Western bourgeois, decadent, and imperialist origin for – in their view – these were loosening the socialist ideology, but they monitored with the same intensity also the representatives of the domestic musical genres, which were carrying in their opinion the national idea, genres that expanded from the Hungarian art folk-like song *(magyar nóta)* and the operetta to the music culture of the dance houses, that is, to the folk music.

The security services began to actively deal with dance-house events in 1974, two years after the first dance houses were held, and tried to mobilize secret agents and to recruit informers from those who went to the dance houses. The police of the party state did not apply a value-based discrimination – in fact all musical genres were treated as equals. This is indicated by a report of the agent with the code-name "Pier," sent on 22 October 1974, about Sebő's programme held in the Kassák club, as well as the reaction of the liaison officer and his superior. "Pier" wrote about the Regős ensemble, also playing during the club evening:

> The style of their music, since it doesn't resemble the known categories, could be approached by elimination as follows. It is not sure, that it is Hungarian, but it sure, that is *not* German, nor Czech, Russian, Polish, Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, or Albanian. So it can be Slovak, Serbian, or Transylvanian (or of such influence).

Based on this report, Lieutenant Mihály Romhányi, the liaison officer wrote in the *Assessment* addressed to his superior:

> The secret agent [i.e. "Pier"] attended the club's programme once. His musical training is not satisfactory [...]. Even so, he described well the musical style of the Sebő–Halmos and the Regős ensembles.

However, the superior stopped this musical "adventure" with a brief remark:

> Comrade Romhányi! We do not care about the style of the music, but the text spoken in-between; the political opinion of the members, Nógrádi, and the Sebő ensemble. Such a work plan shall be elaborated … for "Pier."
>
> 4 November 1974
> Major Benjamin[7]

6. Miklós Horthy de Nagybánya was the regent of the Hungarian Kingdom (1920–1944) before, and partly during, World War II.

7. Szőnyei, *Nyilván tartottak,* 468–469.

The reports and assessments indicate in all cases that generally around 15 March and 23 October – our two biggest national holidays now – the operational activities increased. They were hunting for programmes with a political content, or differing from the official cultural policy. They were trying to explore some kind of network of those interested in folk culture and to demonstrate the existence of an organized nationalist opposition. As an antidote they relied on the contribution of secret agents, who aimed through various actions (for instance, targeted discussions) to dissolute the community and to influence the content of the programmes. As a result, already in May 1975, they were pleased to note that fewer people went to the Sebő club and more people dropped out. At the same time they perceived that part of the audience – as a result of the "dissolution" – began to attend the cultural house on the Bem quayside, in the 1st district of the city, where the Sebő ensemble performed regularly, too.

The words of police sub-lieutenant József Gyulafi, who wrote reports and assessments in November and December 1975 on the Sebő club and the dance houses, reveal the mechanism of the authorities' disruptive actions. (The quotations originate from reports on several events that took part at the Bem quayside club and the Kassák club.)

> At the performances and workshops can be seen that they overemphasize the past. This circumstance in the given company expresses – even if implicitly – an opposition to the present. Such an approach of folk architecture – and folk culture in general – can lead in certain circumstances to nationalism.
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> It can be concluded that the implemented conversations have achieved their purpose, Sebő himself became aware of them. The club members and Sebő, too, try to act to avoid the appearance of nationalism.
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> ... it can be concluded that the disruptive measures conducted during the confidential investigation were successful. In 1974, a similar event was held at the club before Christmas and then the programme had ecclesiastical connotations (for instance, the Sebő ensemble performed the hymn *Mennyből az angyal* [Angel from Heaven]). No such thing was observed on this year's Christmas show. It is also remarkable that this was the second session, which did not engage in political discussions.[8]

Even though the members of the Sebő ensemble themselves thought around 1974–1975 that their further activities would be banned, this did not happen. It did not, because in addition to the security services, actually the party's cultural

8. Ibid., 478–479.

politicians and the representatives of folk music research and ethnography also fought their battles about the dance houses. One location of these battles was the review *Tiszatáj*, itself under constant surveillance and considered a centre of the nationalist opposition.[9] Ethnomusicologist Lajos Vargyas, cultural historian László Kósa, and Iván Vitányi, the director of the Institute for Public Education, sociologist and politician, member of the Party argued several times in favour of the dance house as a new form of public education for the youth.

In September 1974, Vargyas wrote in the review about the dance houses:[10]

> Young people suddenly realized that everything they liked about modern dances: the elemental power of the rhythmic movement, which in its virtuosic forms was to be performed alone, releasing and 'showing off' each other; the very same elemental power of rhythmic movements could be found in folk dance, but in aesthetically superior and clear-cut forms. That is, it has become obvious that folk music and folk dance is 'modern,' and totally capable of expressing the feelings of today's youth.

Regarding the resistance and fear expressed by some, he replied:

> Our contemporaries still prone to suspicion believe to discover the phantom of nationalism as soon as a national feature of our existence comes into discussion. As if a straight path would lead from the folk song to Fascism ... Yet, back then, the devotees of folk song did not increase the fascist camp, but the opposition of Fascism. ... The present also refutes these concerns: our youth discovered the song and dance of the peoples without a distinction of the origin. ... They find joy in it, because it enriches their human individuality. And perhaps it's not chauvinism, but rather natural that young Hungarians are happy, if something nice, something they like, happens to be Hungarian?

In the same issue of the review *Tiszatáj*, László Kósa placed the dance houses in a broader socio-cultural context as the latest phenomenon of folklorism. He offered a long analysis of the social movements, the characteristics and consequences of sudden industrialization, and the moving to the cities of a large peasant population. But he also addressed the concerns about nationalism with a special emphasis:

9. The periodical *Tiszatáj,* issuing articles on literature, art, as well as social and scientific subjects, has been published since March 1947 in Szeged.

10. Lajos Vargyas, "A népdal helye a közművelődésünkben" [The position of the folk song in our public education], *Tiszatáj* 28/9, (1974), 46–51; repr. in the special issue of *Folkmagazin* 22/11, (November 2015), 21–25, here: 21–22.

> Some sceptics are troubled by the current interest in folklore [i.e. dance houses] because they are afraid that it might generate nationalism. ... Their concern is justified because, as it is an important area of the national culture, it can always be accompanied by such hazards. ... The love of folk culture is not nationalism. The ethnographical fashion is a European phenomenon that in Hungary and in every other country is tied primarily to the own past given in the most natural way, to the folklore defined by the mother tongue. In the same time, however, it is open towards other peoples. ...
> Young people do not prefer the dance house because they want to worship Hungarian peasant dances out of some kind of national exuberance or nostalgia, but because these dances ... entertain and move, like any Western ballroom dance does. In addition to the slow dance, the *négyes* [four], and the *csárdás* (from the Transylvanian village of Szék), Greek, Romanian, and Bulgarian dances are performed, too. ... Of course, no one should be offended by the primary attraction to the treasures of Hungarian folk tradition, the twin brother of the attachment to the mother tongue.[11]

Iván Vitányi, the director of the Institute for Public Education, gave lectures on the evenings of the Sebő ensemble held at the Kassák club. Vitányi demonstrated the legitimacy of the dance houses by a dialectical reasoning typical for the period, according to which the more revolutionary new a phenomenon, the more it is rooted in the distant past:

> The wonderful thing about looking for something new is that one can never figure out something new. So, if you are looking for something new in physics, mathematics, or anything, you will always need a catalyst. And in general, the catalyst can only be taken from the old. ... When Bartók wanted to transcend the major-minor music inherited from his predecessors, he wanted to do something new. To be able to do so, he had to go back to the old, because the old was the catalyst, out of which he was able to create something new. ... Someone who has a longer past will have the longer future. We can only go forward on the long run, if we go back way deeper. ... When, therefore, we turn not only to the folk art, but to the old style of folk art, I think, that is really the need of the community. And its essence is not the turn to the peasant past, but the fact that it is an artistic material which has proven during tens of thousands of years that it can be owned by everyone. ... Folk art has to be used today in a different way than it was used by the peasants; their world is gone for good. But I can

11. László Kósa, "A népi kultúra új hulláma" [A new wave of folk culture], *Tiszatáj* 28/9, (1974), 38–45; quoted by László Siklós, *Táncház* [Dance house], (Budapest: Hagyományok Háza – Timp Kiadó, 2006), 121–122.

> still sing a folk song, because I can also read Homer and I may like it ... I can do everything, so I can rely on folk art just like on anything else.[12]

A similar opinion was expressed by Dénes Zoltai, the Head of the Department for Aesthetics at Budapest University who commented on the discussion "Workers' song, mass song, and dance house," published in 1975 in the journal *Kritika*:

> ... small, closed communities exist today, or may be formed in the future, which revive the ancient elements for the internally meaningful self-expression of their own members and integrate these ancient elements spontaneously into their contemporary artistic consciousness; not denying that spontaneity can always have a dead end leading to pseudo communities where nationalist overtones can also be heard [...]. Just by the way, let me say: I know several dance houses, and wherever I went, I strained my ears, but I did not hear such overtones.[13]

The sociological, aesthetical, and technical analyses and their conclusions as formulated by the theoreticians are in perfect harmony with the contemporary and retrospective statements of the dance house musicians, the dancers, and the dance houses visitors themselves. The participants of the dance-house movement turned to this particular musical culture because they felt the sound, the rhythmic complexity and the dances were incredibly inspiring, dynamic, archaic – and yet modern. They discovered this tradition not only among the Hungarians of the Transylvanian Plain but, for example, also among the Romanians of Méhkerék, Hungary (the first two dance orders performed initially by the Sebő ensemble originated from these two regions). Or in the Danube Bend: the young people of the village Pomáz did not find a proper Hungarian tradition in the area, so they turned to the music of the Serbs living there. This is how the *Vujicsics ensemble* cultivating South Slavic folk music in Hungary, and still existing today, came into being.

The public of the dance houses was equally open to both the Hungarian and the neighbouring or distant non-Hungarian tradition. Dance houses were not ideology-driven, they were not established as some sort of oppositional national conspiracy, and in particular they were not directed against other peoples. Their motivation consisted rather in the amazement at the cultural heritage of the Hungarians and the neighbouring peoples, as well as in the revival of this heritage in the modern urban environment.

12. Quoted in Siklós, *Táncház,* 115–116.
13. Ibid., 122.

By the spring of 1978 all this was finally recognized by the regime and within its machinery by the secret service. In his report on the Inner City Youth Dance House, Captain Gábor Jámbor already wrote like this:

> Based on the network report it can be concluded that the dance house event differs deal from our previous knowledge in both its content and organization. They engage in dance teaching; other performers are not invited to their events. If spontaneous conversation in any topic occurs, they will finish it to an end, but they do not initiate debates, and nothing like this has happened lately. No action is required.[14]

14. Szőnyei, *Nyilván tartottak,* 480–481.