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Magyarnóta (Hungarian song) is a song form with a simple structure and Hungarian lyrics that first evolved in the cities of Hungary in the early 1800s, developed during the nineteenth century and emerged in its final form in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has continued in this form to the present day, with only small degrees of change but varying levels of popularity. Often regarded as a ‘popular art song’ or ‘half-art song,’ the music and the words of *magyarnóta* belong both to oral tradition and to practices of composed song, emanating from known poets and composers but written in folk style.

The Term *nóta* in Hungarian derives from the Latin ‘nota,’ meaning sign, from which it came to mean musical note and then notated song. By the sixteenth century it was already in use among educated, literate people, who would indicate the melody to which a verse was to be sung with an ‘ad notam’ to a wellknown song. Following that, the expression *nóta* was in use for several centuries as a general term for vocal and instrumental tunes. By the turn of the nineteenth century it denoted an instrumental Hungarian composition (often based on a vocal tune). At this time the word *nóta* (as in *magyarnóta*, or *régi magyar nóta* [Old Hungarian song]) was written as a separate attribute. By the end of the century, however, the term *magyarnóta* was being used to denote popular art songs (occasionally with instrumental accompaniment, or performed instrumentally), and by the twentieth century the word was regularly written as a single term, though the older *magyar nóta* is still in use to some extent. Throughout this time it was used to refer to a body of much-loved melodies. Since the end of the twentieth century it has been used also by the composers and players of the fashionable hits of light music and jazz.

Historical Summary

As a popular art song with a text and/or tune wholly or partly attributable to known authors, *magyarnóta* is a genre of urban nineteenth-century origin. One section of the higher social strata of Hungarian society, for whom *magyarnóta* represented their principal form of musical knowledge and familiarity, used it from its birth up to the turn of the twentieth century.

The reason for its appeal lay partly in the aftermath of Hungarian defeat in the war of independence against the Habsburgs (1848–9), when people were said to have ‘caroused sobbingly.’ Many folk and popular songs from the second half of the nineteenth century served as remembering songs – mostly accompanied by Roma/Gypsy musicians – of the historical events. The upper strata of society learnt these songs and passed them down, either in the traditional oral way (during merry-making at home, in restaurants with Roma music, or singing at weddings and other social gatherings) or via notated music (singing or playing from the score at home). In the first half of the twentieth century the music spread to all social strata via Roma musicians (bands, small instrumental ensembles or just solo violinists) playing in restaurants, small inns and other public places, as well as via Hungarian feature films, and, in the second half of the century, through the radio, TV, sound recordings and the stage. When compared to the dissemination of other genres (e.g., verbunkos in the eighteenth century, modish European dances at the end of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century) this diffusion came relatively late; on a smaller scale, the music was also disseminated among the peasantry at the same time, where its partial adherence to oral tradition made it attractive.

Major Historical Periods and Significant Individuals

Three major periods in the history of *magyarnóta* can be differentiated: (1) from its beginnings in the eighteenth century until the first formative period ended in the 1830s (see Kerényi 1961); (2) from the 1830s until 1867–70; (3) from 1870 to the 1920s/1930s. Thereafter there were no significant changes in the style but rather a continuation of practice, which has lasted to the present day.

1. From the Beginnings to the 1830s.

The beginnings of the genre are uncertain but can probably be dated to the second half of the eighteenth century. What is often referred to as *népies műdal* (popular art song or folk-like art song) borrowed elements from many sources: its simple strophic structure and certain folkish text motifs from the peasant song; humorous elements from eighteenth-century students' songs; sentimentality from the cozy urban middle-class *biedermeier* song of the period 1815–50; the dotted rhythmic character from *verbunkos* and its offshoot, the *csárdás* (the new national couple dance which appeared around the late 1830s, with its melodies in four-four time and its mixture of slow and fast tempi). The same two sources were to be drawn upon later (in the second period, after the 1840s) for a certain stiffness in their dance-like character and for the element of rhapsodic performance that characterized the slow songs, called *hallgató*, 'listening song' (The name '*hallgató*' alludes to the use of the melody not for dance, but only for singing and for listening to the melody without singing – the text being known to everyone.) The spread and variation of *népies műdal*, through oral tradition, largely resembled the dissemination of peasant folksongs, which was one reason why, in its heyday, it was regarded as folksong. *Magyarnóta* (the overall term, which, as noted above, came into use in the late nineteenth century) was based on the new tonal ideal – the minor-major tonality – that came to dominate music in Europe in the late eighteenth century. The Ionian and Aeolian scales are given a special Hungarian flavor by a number of elements: the augmented second steps, which give the music an oriental hue, and which first appeared towards the end of the seventeenth century (and were also used by *verbunkos*); the *tempo giusto* (strict time); and, in songs of a *csárdás* character, the typical closing rhythmic formula. From the beginning, whether performed as a vocal, with or without accompaniment, or as an instrumental, there was a strand of melodiousness in the music that was performed freely in a slow and sentimental style, and another strand of singing that was more brisk and dance-like in character.

2. 1840s–1867/70

By the 1830s, and certainly by the 1840s, the typical Hungarian song style described above had become predominant. Evolving in an urban milieu, these songs were partly used to accompany the new dance, the *csárdás*; several *magyarnóta* songs were first performed as inserts in popular musical plays. The first known composers include Benjamin Egressy, Gusztáv Szénfy and Károly Thern. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the use of syncopation, Hungarian scale passages with augmented second steps (alien to vernacular music), and the frequent addition of perfunctory verses abounding in platitudes. There was a tendency for *nóta* composers to select lyrics from the works of the most outstanding poets, among them Hungary's national poet, Sándor Petőfi, whose poems were used to an increasing extent. Popular composers of the 1850s who set Petőfi's lyrics to music included Gusztáv Nyizsnyay (for example, '*Elátkozom ezt az egész világot*' [I Curse the Whole World]) and László Zimay (for example, '*Boldog éjjel együtt vagyok rózsámmal*' [I Am Together with My Love]).

During the Night], ‘*Elvinnélek én, csak adnának*’ [I Would Like to Marry You] and ‘*A virágnak megtiltani nem lehet*’ [You Cannot Forbid the Flower]. The period between 1850 and 1870 was marked by the so-called naturalist *nóta* composers, amateur musicians belonging to the higher social strata. One of them was the most popular song composer of the 1860s, Kálmán Simonffy, whose songs were transcribed by others from his sung (or whistled) performance. (His most popular song was ‘*Szomorú fűz ága...*’ [The Branch of the Willow].) A prominent composer of the period was János Németh (who adopted the name Elemér Szentirmay in 1866). The melody of his popular song ‘*Csak egy szép lány van a világon*’ (There Is But a Single Nice Lass in the World) was used by the Spanish violinist and composer Pablo de Sarasate in his *Zigeunerweisen* (Gypsy Melodies) (1878). Fashionable tunes were already being incorporated into Hungarian and other European-composed music by the 1840s. Ferenc Liszt, for example, used such melodies for his *Hungarian Rhapsodies* (*Magyar rapszódia*k, 1846–53); they were also to be the basis for Brahms’s Hungarian Dances (1869). The melodious character of *magyarnóta* attracted many a composer brought up on and trained in classical music; besides adapting it to newer forms such as the rhapsody, they also produced paraphrases based on popular or folkish tunes (e.g., Jenő Hubay).

3. 1870–1920s/1930s

By 1870 Hungary’s noblemen, many of whom had been imprisoned by the Austrian powers after their defeat in the war of independence of 1848–9, had received an amnesty under the terms of the 1867 compromise between Austria and Hungary (the foundation of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy), but this left them without their earlier possessions. Obligated to move from their estates to big cities and earn a living as lawyers, physicians, officers, and so on, they not only used *magyarnóta* for entertainment but a growing number also became engaged in their composition. In the process the style became increasingly shallow, with superficial folklorism and sentimental lyrics, in order to make the songs more saleable. The composition of *magyarnóta* proliferated; having them published became a fashionable thing to do, and the authors strove to produce as many as possible. The period between 1867 and 1918 witnessed a general devaluation of *magyarnóta*: the popular stage plays became simplified and predictable and *csárdás* tunes ever more schematic, while in *hallgató* songs loss of form was masked through the practice of improvisation which would distort it, and the music was used incessantly in noisy, all-night revelries of the gentry (still crying into their beer for the losses of the 1848–9 war), all to the accompaniment of Gypsy musicians. By the end of World War I, the style of the genre had attained its present-day form. Its popularity was sustained but it ceased to develop. From the 1870s the prima donna most famous for performing songs inserted into popular stage plays was Lujza Blaha, who was honored later in the century with the title ‘the nightingale of the nation.’ Towards the end of the nineteenth century urban Roma musicians also began contributing to *magyarnóta* composition (till then they had mainly composed instrumental music). The most popular Gypsy musician *nóta composer* of the 1890s–1900s was Pista Dankó who composed over 400 songs, many of which became known all over the country and have remained popular to this day. He was not musically literate so his songs were transcribed by others (e.g. Ernő Lányi, Gyula Székács, Ferenc Gaál etc.). His most popular songs included: ‘*Eltörött a hegedűm*’ (My Violin Is Broken), ‘*Egy cica, két cica*, (One Pussycat, Two Pussycats), ‘*Szóke kislány csitt, csitt csitt*’ (Blond Girl, Listen), ‘*Vásárhelyi Béla cigány muzsikál*’ (Béla, the Gypsy From Vásárhely Is Playing), and ‘*Még azt mondják nincs Szegeden boszorkány*’ (People Say There Is No Witch in Szeged). Another famous *nóta composer* around the turn of the century was Lóránd Fráter. His songs included: ‘*Tele van a város akácfa virággal*’ (The Town is Full of Acacia Flowers [lyrics by Mihály Szaboleska]), ‘*Mit susog a*

fehér akác? (What is Rustling the White Acacia?) and ‘*Őszi rózsá, fehér őszi rózsá*’ (Autumn Rose, White Rose). Lyricists for Fráter’s songs included György Wass, Kálmán Pápai Molnár and Sándor Gyarmathy. Other notable composers included József Dóczy (‘*Darumadár útnak indul*’ [The Crane Departs], ‘*Nádfödeles kis házikóm*’ [My Little House with a Thatched Roof], ‘*Édesanyám kösse fel a kendőt a fejére*’ [Please, Mother, Tie the Scarf Round Your Head]) and Árpád Balázs (‘*Ahogy én szeretlek nem szeret úgy senki*’ [Nobody Loves You as I Do], ‘*Gyere velem akác lombos falumba*’ [Come With Me to My Green Acacia Village], ‘*Itt hagyom a falutokat*’ [I Leave Your Village Behind]). Lóránd Fráter’s brother Béla also earned a reputation as a *nóta* composer. His songs included ‘*Szerelemről zeng a madár*’ (The Bird Sings About Love), ‘*Szomorú a nyárfaerdő*’ (The Cottonwood Forest is Sad), ‘*Volt egyszer egy fehér rózsá*’ (Once There Was a White Rose), and ‘*Hervadozik a kis virág*’ (The Little Flower is Wilting). The leading Gypsy musicians of the early twentieth century, Imre Magyari the eldest and Béla Radics, also composed *nóta* that have retained their popularity.

The early twentieth century also saw the beginnings in Hungary of radio and record production, which were to have an important role in the spread of *magyarnóta* to wider sections of Hungarian society (although it took some time to reach the peasantry via these particular means). The first Hungarian radio station was established in Budapest in 1893 and the first record production factory in 1903. Record production itself, including *magyarnóta* songs featuring famous singers and Roma bands, began around 1905. The companies involved – Odeon, Diadal – were supplemented in the 1930s by Durum-Patria. Overseas record companies (Columbia, HMV) also recorded Hungarian music by performers such as Rácz Laci, including *magyarnóta*, as early as 1905. In the interwar period *magyarnóta* remained popular, though fewer new pieces were composed and fewer became generally known, having to vie for popularity with the new genres (light music, film music, as well as with operetta, which retained its popularity). Despite these changes, it was in this period that *magyarnóta* began to become popular with the poorer rural sections of Hungarian society, and, by the time of World War II, with an urban audience. It spread on a mass scale in the cities, as a result of radio programs and records (partly through films, performed, for example, by Katalin Karády and Pál Jávor) and grew increasingly popular among them. The most popular professional *nóta* singers of the years between the World Wars were Pál Kalmár and József Cselényi, who were regularly heard on the radio, in records and abroad.

***Magyarnóta* in the Later Twentieth Century**

An important change that took place during the second half of the twentieth century was a switch from active singing to passive listening. (The same change took place in other areas of musical life as well, e.g., in folk music.) Up to the 1970s it was customary for the guests in a restaurant who wished to sing to accompany the music of the Gypsy band with their own singing; then, later in the century, vocalists performing on the stage with a Gypsy band accompanying them came to the fore (e.g. Sári Gencsi, Vera Jákó, Gyöngyi Hatvani Kiss, Károly Solti, József Győri Szabó, József Miklóssy, László Tarnay Kiss, etc.). Some of the soloists (e.g., Katalin Madarász) chose *nóta* singing as their profession, others were amateurs. Men and women came from different social strata, quite a few from the Roma population (e.g., Margit Bangó, Gabriella Gaál, Apollónia Kovács). It also became fashionable to ask highly trained operatic singers and actors to perform *magyarnóta* (opera singers György Melis, József Gregor, Magda Kalmár, Katalin Pitti, János Berkes, Veronika Kincses; actors Antal Práger, Ferenc Bessenyei, whose recordings have frequently appeared on the radio). From the 1960s

to the 1970s *nóta* singing mainly involved stage performance before an audience. In private circles collective merry-making has continued to the present day, but in general the *nóta* singer is on the stage (radio, TV), being listened to by a separate audience. In more recent times a new format has emerged: towards the end of the program the audience begins to sing along with the performer (recalling the earlier custom of singing with the Roma band in a restaurant). The most popular *nóta* singers from the 1970s to the present day include: Imre Bojtor, Károly Solti, József Győri Szabó, Sándor Tekeres, László Tarnay Kiss, Vera Jákó, Ottília Máté, Klára Szentendrei, Erzsébet Talabér, Sári Vörös.

Magyarnóta Today

In the twenty-first century *magyarnóta* has continued to be both composed and performed in many spheres of public and private life (radio, TV, concerts, *nóta*-clubs, in family groups and in gatherings of friends). In addition to the popular older kind of songs in strict time and in the tempo of the *csárdás*, there are many slower, more lyrical *hallgató* songs catering more readily to general tastes. The genre is very popular across various social strata. *Nóta singers* and *nóta lovers* are united by the National Association of Magyarnóta Composers and Singers (with several local groups in the countryside), whose declared goals are to promote the training of singers and encourage the writing of *nóta music and lyrics*, in co-operation with the National Centre for Light Music (founded in 1991 by the *nóta singer* István Nógrádi Tóth, who is the current president). Eloquent proof of the popularity of the genre is the occasional televising of a *magyarnóta* and *primás* (bandleader) competition, which gives an opportunity for talented young *nóta* singers to introduce themselves to the wider public. Folk music collectors have found that in settlements where the old folk music of the peasantry is still in demand everyone has his/her favorite, emotionally surcharged *nóta* that he/she will gladly sing upon the collector's request. Most village bandleaders also have their favorite *nóta* songs, and several bandleaders have composed *magyarnóta*. The educated section of today's young people in their 20s and 30s have shown a revived interest in the genre, too. Dankó Radio, a 24-hour channel which started broadcasting on 22 December 2012, transmits many *magyarnóta* and popular operetta melodies. There are also many functioning *nóta* clubs as well as a variety of other places where *magyarnóta* is heard and sung.

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