“REAL” AND “IMAGINARY” FOLKLORE IN BÉLA BARTÓK’S MUSIC

László Vikárius

Musicologist, Head of the Budapest Bartók Archives, Institute of Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Lecturer at the Liszt University of Music. President of the Hungarian Musicological Society.

Béla Bartók advised conductor Ernst Latzko in 1924, who was preparing a lecture on the composer, not to overemphasize the significance of folklore in his music. He even stated: “I never use folk melodies in my original compositions.”[1] A strange testimony from a composer, whose most original contribution is simply unthinkable without the many folk elements integrated into his style and individual compositions.

But let us see a snapshot of Bartók taken at home on his private 50th birthday celebration.

Figure 1 Bartók at home at his 50th birthday, 25 March 1931

(As a matter of fact, no official celebration was organized at the time in Hungary.) The picture shows him at a rare moment of repose with serenity on his face. By 1931, he undoubtedly reached the zenith of his career. He had just finished a work he himself called his “most personal credo,” *Cantata profana* for double chorus, soloists and orchestra, whose libretto is based on a Romanian folk ballad. He was in the middle of composing his Second Piano Concerto that, from its world première in 1933 in Frankfurt, was to become a success with the composer at the piano. He was also working on a series of 44 Duos for violins, all based on folk melodies of varied origin collected by the composer, representative of the whole range of his ethnomusicological expertise, a commission from the modern-minded German music pedagogue Erich Doflein. It was also in this year that he became member of a permanent committee for intellectual cooperation within the League of Nations. Here he regularly met some of Europe’s leading intellectuals, such as the writer Thomas Mann or the poet Paul Valéry.

On the picture, he is shown with his own instrument the piano covered with objects from his many folk-song collecting trips. The marvelous contrast between the “high-culture” concert instrument and the objects of folk or “primitive” art is uniquely characteristic of the period. It is even more uniquely characteristic of this particular artist-cum-scholar personality.

One of the most progressive trends of twentieth-century art was characterized by a fascination with what was considered “ancient” and “primitive.” This had certainly much to do with a general experience of modernism in everyday life as well as an opposition to forms and expressive means of 19th-century art. For painters and sculptors “primitive” art suggested new ways of stylization, new formal types, new ways to represent and handle space, new patterns to use colours. In music, new scales, new rhythms and new forms were introduced. For an artist or composer from Europe’s periphery, like Bartók in Hungary, the most obvious source of inspiration came from indigenous folk culture and was more often than not connected with a “national” endeavour. Bartók’s folklore-based modernism was also imbued with the national cause – at least and especially at the beginning. Later on, however, it quickly overcame restrictive national definitions. In fact, it became an archetype of a multi-ethnic musical renewal.

It was exactly a year later in March 1932 that another photo was taken – this time in Egypt where Bartók, together with Paul Hindemith (later so important in Turkish musical culture), the German scholar Erich von Hornbostel and the Austrian composer and scholar Egon Wellesz, took part in the first Arab music congress.

Figure 2 Participants of the first International Congress on Arab Music, March 1932 (from left to write: Bartók, Mr. and Mrs. Hindemith, Erich von Hornbostel, Jenő Takács, Curt Schindler, Egon Wellesz)

Due to Bartók’s 1913 collecting trip to Algeria, about which he had published a long German article, he was considered as one of the authorities on Arab music. His scholarly interest in non-European “exotic” musical cultures, again, links him with more general artistic endeavours in the West. It was at this congress that he presented his most elaborate views on the establishment of a new “national” high art in music closely connected to scholarly work, collecting and analysis of indigenous folklore. Some of these issues were also discussed in Bartók’s series of lectures here in Ankara four years later.

> ... Most important would actually be the development of polyphony. European polyphony also originated in monophony.... A great Arab talent who is well versed in European polyphony and who has acquainted himself with Arab music through field research could accomplish this. I can only refer to our own example. The same was the case in Russia. This is how it happened in Hungary... [2]

What Bartók failed to mention in his sketched proposal is that he himself had just tried his hand in composing a piece solely based on an original Arab tune he collected in Algeria. “Arabian Song,” composed in 1931, recreates the original ostinato drum accompaniment on the accompanying violin using supplementary scale patterns similar to that used in the melody itself (note the essential augmented second interval), carefully chosen rhythmic figures (two-, four or three-note ostinatos) and particular performance instruction starting with pizzicato reminiscent of drum beats. By exploiting dramatic development and recapitulation within the small-scale form, he created a piece, which does not only presents musical ideas (melody, rhythmic accompaniment) and a style but also reflects on it.

***Example 1.** Bartók, “Arabian Song,” Forty-Four Duos for two violins (1931), no. 42, beginning*

Bartók’s inclusion of the “Arabian Song” in the series of Forty-Four Duos could appear unique in this varied collection of Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian and Serbian melodies all collected on territories of what had formerly been the Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This was, however, not his first attempt at integrating elements from his Arab collection into his own musical style.[3] As early as 1916, he composed two important movements within cyclic compositions that were based on stylistic features derived from Arab rural styles: the *Allegro molto* third movement of the Piano Suite op. 14 and the second, *Allegro molto, capriccioso* movement of the Second String Quartet. When composing his most radical stage work, *The Miraculous Mandarin* in 1918/19, following the First World War, Bartók based the breath-taking chase scene on a wild dance music of Arab inspiration combining it with fugue technique; the scales and continuous drum rhythm makes the identification of its source unmistakable. While the use of “exotic” music to depict the fantastic passion of the “exotic”(Chinese)

1 Cf. Bartók to Ernst Latzko, 16 December 1924, *Béla Bartók Briefe*, ed. János Demény (Budapest: Corvina Verlag, 1973), 2 vols, II, p. 50.

2 Bartók’s draft in French for his contribution to the Cairo congress on Arab music in 1932, first published as text “XII” by Denijs Dille, see “Bartók und die Volksmusik,” *Documenta Bartókiana* 4 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970), pp. 118–19.

3 On Bartók and Arab music, see János Kárpáti, “Bartók in North Africa: A Unique Fieldwork and Its Impact on His Music,” *Bartók Perspectives: Man, Composer, and Ethnomusicologist*, ed. Elliott Antokoletz, Victoria Fischer, and Benjamin Suchoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 171–84. Bartók’s complete surviving Arab collection, recordings, transcriptions, and articles, together with further documentary texts have all been published as *Bartók and Arab Folk Music*, CD-ROM, ed. János Kárpáti, István Pávai and László Vikárius (Budapest: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, European Folklore Institute, Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2006).

character in the pantomime is relatively easy to understand, it is more surprising that Bartók also included Arabic associations in his *Dance-Suite* for orchestra, composed in 1923 for a festive concert in Budapest. In one of his late lectures given at Harvard University in 1943, he described the first theme of this important work as his first "chromatic" melody inspired by chromatic Arab tunes but combined with a characteristic East-European dance rhythm.

The employment of authentic folk melodies in arrangements, the imitation of them and the most varied use and combination of elements derived from them all could be found in Bartók's compositions. It was again in 1931 that he summarized the possible influence of folk tunes on modern composition distinguishing between the use of authentic material and that of its artistic imitation. One of the prime examples of the latter was his *Dance Suite*.

The aim of the whole work was to put together a kind of idealized peasant music–you could say an invented peasant music–in such a way that the individual movements of the work should introduce particular types of music.–Peasant music of all nationalities served as a model: [Hungarian], [Romanian], Slovak, and even Arabic. In fact, here and there is even a hybrid from these species. Thus, for example, the melody of the first subject of the first movement is reminiscent of primitive Arabic peasant music, whereas its rhythm is of East European folk music... The ritornello theme is such a faithful imitation of a certain kind of Hungarian folk melodies, that its derivation might puzzle even the most knowledgeable musical folklorist...[4]

The "idealized peasant music" is what a French writer, Serge Moreux, who personally met and interviewed Bartók in 1938 and later published one of the earliest full-length study of the composer's life and work, termed as "imaginary folklore" or "*folklore imaginaire*."[5]

Bartók's interest in such a wide variety of folklore was not naturally given. As a matter of fact, his interest in folklore was itself gradually raised by 1903, around the time of his graduation from the Academy of Music in Budapest. After his and Zoltán Kodály's joint pioneer publication of the first arrangements of authentic peasant songs for a music loving lay audience, *Hungarian Folksongs*,[6] Bartók started to experiment with different kinds of sets mixing folk song arrangements, pieces of immediate folkloristic inspiration and modernist compositions. *From Gyergyó* for peasant pipe and piano was a unique experiment to integrate the use of an original folk instrument, too. This set also shows Bartók's interest in instrumental music, although this layer of Hungarian folk practice actually originated in vocal models.

More frequently did Bartók include individual or paired folkloristic pieces in mixed sets. *Ten Easy Piano Pieces* (1908), which includes the most famous example of *folklore imaginaire*, "Evening in Transylvania," an apotheosis of the recently discovered descending pentatonic style of Hungarian folk songs, the *Fourteen Bagatelles* (also 1908) and, finally, *Seven Sketches* (1908–10). In the *Bagatelles*, only two pieces are arrangements of folk songs, one Hungarian and one Slovak. The deeply felt sorrowful Hungarian piece, the setting of a cowherd's complaint, is balanced by a vigorous Slovak song. Since 1906, Bartók had systematically collected Slovak folk songs in Northern Hungary, and in 1909 he also started to collect Romanian folk songs and instrumental music in Transylvania. In the *Seven Sketches* Bartók put side by side a "Roumanian Folk Song" and a piece "In Romanian Style." The latter summarizes surprisingly new stylistic features discovered in Romanian tunes: with special emphasis on the melodic exploitation of the tritone interval.

The same characteristics were used in the second of the *Two Pictures* for orchestra, a work that was heavily attacked from a nationalist point of view at its first performance.

What we should like to know is nothing but why Béla Bartók, professor at the Hungarian Royal Academy of Music became a Scotus Viator? Is he not interested in any music which is Hungarian? He became an Apostle of Czech, Romanian, Slovak, and what not music only abandoning Hungarian music in which his talent originated and in which he can only strengthen and refresh himself.[7]

Although Bartók's commitment to Hungarian folklore had not changed, the hostile and even dangerous critique was in a sense actually right in detecting his interest in the culture of the minorities, problematic from a narrowly nationalist point of view: as early as the first concert devoted solely to Bartók's music the composer had included as a probably provocative item

4 Deleted passage in Bartók's 1931 lecture, "A népi zene hatása a mai műzenére" [The influence of folk music on today's art music], in *Bartók Béla Írásai* [Writings by Béla Bartók] 1, p. 249; in English, see Tibor Tallián, *Béla Bartók: The Man and His Work*, trans. Gyula Gulyás (Budapest: Corvina, 1981), p. 133.

5 Serge Moreux, *Béla Bartók: Sa vie – ses œuvres – son langage* (Paris: Richard-Masse, 1949), pp. 30–31.

6 Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, *Hungarian Folksongs for Song with Piano.* Reprint of the original manuscript with commentaries by Denijs Dille (London: Boosey and Hawkes; Budapest: Editio Musica, 1970).

7 Review of *Two Pictures* by h. e. [Emil Haraszti] in *Hírlap* [News], 27 February 1913, reprinted in János Demény, "Bartók Béla művészi kibontakozásának évei [The artistic development of Béla Bartók] (1906–1914)," in *Zenetudományi Tanulmányok* III, ed. Bence Szabolcsi and Dénes Bartha (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1955), p. 425.

the First Romanian Dance, yet another composition of "invented peasant music" that should have called attention to folklore of Hungary's minorities. The composer's oft-quoted *ars poetica*, also written in 1931, directly challenged the hostile review of the *Two Pictures* referring to the composer's alleged *scotus viator* role.[8]

In 1924, Bartók's denigration of the significance of folklore in his compositions was partly dictated by the realization that folklorism in general practice was often artistically questionable and ideologically restrictive. On the other hand, Bartók did indeed often prefer the creative possibilities of the combination of elements of different origin. The Bulgarian Dances, the final set of pieces in Bartók's great piano pedagogical work, the *Mikrokosmos* (1932–39), also show and emphasize the rich possibilities that can be discovered and created in "invented" folklore.

... these are not Bulgarian folksongs, rather, they have the so called Bulgarian rhythm; they are original compositions; no folk melody can be found in them.... By the way, the pieces in Bulgarian rhythm have mostly no Bulgarian character; the melody in some of them is rather of Hungarian make-up: Hungarian grafted on to Bulgarian rhythm.[9]

Bartók's "Bulgarian" rhythm is what was later renamed by the Romanian folklorist Constantin Brăiloi as *aksak* rhythm.[10] The most beautiful example of Bartók's reinvention of a Hungarian melody in Bulgarian rhythm is undoubtedly in the episode of the final movement of *Contrasts* (1938) composed just after the *Mikrokosmos* pieces.

***Example 2.** Melody, first played by the violin, in movement III of Bartók's Contrasts for violin, clarinet and piano (1938)*

This passage is a miraculously transformed version of a six-syllable parlando Hungarian melody; an "idealized" version. As a final example, that leads us back to Bartók's "oriental" chromaticism, a different stylization of an eight-syllable parlando melody type can be heard in the middle section of the third Elegy movement of the Concerto for Orchestra.

***Example 3.** Viola melody in the middle section of "Elegy," movement III in Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra (1943)*

What we find here is not simply a "combination" of two elements. The melody's extremely chromatic style is, of course, again inspired by Arab tunes. But here the whole declamatory character of the melody can wonderfully conjure up the essence of an East-European folk song. Bartók was correct in his 1924 letter to Ernst Latzko; he really did not generally use folk melodies in their original form in his later compositions. He restricted the use of actual folk songs to his precisely documented folk song arrangements on the one hand, and to his scholarly editions of Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, Arab and Turkish folk songs from his voluminous collections. In his "original" compositions, he rather used "invented" folk songs which were able to convey more complex and more personal ideas while preserving the authenticity of the sources of all their elements.

8 Bartók to Octavian Beu, 10 January 1931, *Béla Bartók letters*, ed. János Demény, trans. Péter Balabán and István Farkas (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1971), pp. 199–205.

9 Miklós Szentjóbi, "Bartók Béla a *Mikrokosmos*ról, az új Magyar zenészgenerációról és amerikai útjáról" [Béla Bartók on *Mikrokosmos*, the new generation of Hungarian musicians and his American tour], in *Beszélgetések Bartókkal: nyilatkozatok, interjúk, 1900–1945* [Bartók in conversation: statements and interviews, 1911–1945], ed. András Wilheim (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2000), p. 205.

10 Constantin Brăiloiu, "Le rythme aksak," in *id.*, *Opere* I [Romanian and French], trad. Emilia Comișel (Bucharest: Editura muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din Republica Socialistă România, 1967), 235–81.