

## BOOK REVIEW

István Pávai (2020). *Hungarian Folk Dance Music of Transylvania* (Budapest: Hungarian Heritage House / MMA Kiadó, ISBN 978-615-5927-14-0)

Reviewed by **Dániel LIPTÁK\***

© 2022 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest



Transylvanian traditional dancing and dance music have a relatively wide international audience. Still, this is the first book-length regional monograph on the topic, presenting it as separable from the contexts of Hungarian and Romanian national folk music research.

As for the Hungarian context, folk dance music, “a phenomenon at the intersection of the research fields of ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology” (p. 371), has never been assessed systematically before the author’s own research. This delay may seem surprising, given the broad perspective of Zoltán Kodály’s school of folk music research,<sup>1</sup> as well as György Martin’s school of folk dance research.<sup>2</sup> But the main focus of Hungarian ethnomusicology has always been on songs and singing. Most of the dance music, if deemed worthy of documentation, has been subsumed under “instrumental folk music” research,<sup>3</sup> according to the tenet that most Hungarian instrumental pieces are actually variants of songs. However, it turned out that many vocal records in fact document dance tunes rather than “songs” in the narrow sense, which means an altogether different mode of existence, even in the absence of instrumental music and dancing. Thus in Pávai’s view the distinction between dance music and music in other functions is more relevant than that between sung and instrumental music. Just as important for his concept is to separate folk music from other fields of ethnomusicological interest: “By folk dances and their music I understand pertaining elements of culture that have been formed and preserved through transmission from generation to generation” (p. 11). In other words, the criterion to include an element is not its presumed origin, age, or character, but its intergenerational transmission within the studied community, as a sign of adoption into the communal culture.

The study comprises the Hungarian communities of Transylvania, a region which has been part of Romania since the end of World War I but has a special significance in Hungarian

---

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [Liptak.Daniel@abtk.hu](mailto:Liptak.Daniel@abtk.hu)

<sup>1</sup>Olga SZALAY, *Kodály the Ethnomusicologist and His Scholarly Workshop* (Budapest: RCH Institute for Musicology, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>*Foundations of Hungarian Ethnochoreology: Selected Papers of György Martin*, ed. by János FÜGEDI, Colin QUIGLEY, Vivien SZÖNYI, and Sándor VARGA (Budapest: RCH Institute for Musicology / Hungarian Heritage House, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>Bálint SÁROSI, *Bagpipers, Gypsy Musicians: Instrumental Folk Music Tradition in Hungary* (Budapest: RCH Institute for Musicology / Nap Kiadó, 2017). See also Judit FRIGYESI’s review of three Hungarian books in English translation: *Ethnomusicology* 35/3 (Autumn 1991), 428–433.

traditional culture. Through centuries and changing regimes, it has been a relatively closed, but also highly diverse, cultural microcosm. Hungarian researchers have always regarded Transylvanian folklore as archaic and complex at the same time, and a source of important clues to the cultural history of East Central Europe in general.

Transylvanian dance culture was the main inspiration behind the Hungarian dance house movement in the early 1970s, one of the few bottom-up initiatives in the Eastern Bloc with a lasting impact, comprising Hungary, Transylvania, the western Hungarian diaspora, and recently also other countries such as Slovakia and Poland.<sup>4</sup> But most importantly from a scholarly perspective, it provided a fresh look at traditional musical culture as “[t]he importance of personal encounter with living traditions, also stressed earlier by Bartók and Kodály, was now re-experienced” (p. 15).

This movement had a decisive influence on the beginning of Pávai’s scholarly career. Born and raised in Transylvania, he had an early experience of traditional village culture. At the music academy of Cluj/Kolozsvár, he attended the classes of Hungarian and Romanian professors who had set up the Cluj Folklore Archive in the late 1940s, people such as János Jagamas, Ilona Szenik, and Traian Mârza. During his visits to Budapest, György Martin encouraged his interest in folk dance music. In 1994, he settled in Hungary and for five years led the music collection of the Budapest Museum of Ethnography, which includes most of Kodály’s and Bartók’s historic phonograph records. Currently he is working at the Institute for Musicology and teaching at the Liszt Academy of Music. One of the most prolific fieldworkers in recent decades, he set up a collection of more than 700 hours of audio records, film footages, and photos. He also played a crucial part in the Final Hour program, a long-term project launched in 1997, documenting Transylvanian musicians and dancers in Budapest. His fields of interest include the digital database processing of ethnomusicological data.

Although Pávai’s main concern is the Hungarian face of Transylvanian culture, he has the expertise and interest to adopt an interethnic perspective, and to assess each phenomenon with reference to the other ethnicities. Transylvania has a long history of coexisting Romanian, Hungarian, German, Romani, and many more ethnic groups, a history which has always included individuals and communities with dual, uncertain, or shifting, identities. Hence, the ways in which the users endowed certain elements of culture with an ethnic character (if any) produced complex, regionally and temporally diverse patterns. To understand any segment of that culture adequately, one has to consider the surrounding “interethnic cultural space” (p. 36). This feature has been celebrated by Béla Bartók<sup>5</sup> or György Martin, but later neglected in many ethnocentric investigations and representations on both the Romanian and Hungarian sides.<sup>6</sup> Pávai’s openness to interethnic issues thus offers a long overdue synthesis, as well as new discoveries, such as an exceptional “interethnic dance cycle” in the village Vajdaszentivány, where the inhabitants of all ethnicities used the same set of dances, which included items of various

<sup>4</sup>Colin QUIGLEY, “The Hungarian Dance House Movement and Revival of Transylvanian String Band Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Revival*, ed. by Caroline BITHELL and Juniper HILL (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 182–202.

<sup>5</sup>See e.g. Béla BARTÓK, “Race Purity in Music,” in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. by Benjamin SUCHOFF (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 29–32.

<sup>6</sup>Colin QUIGLEY, “Confronting Legacies of Ethnic-National Discourse in Scholarship and Practice: Traditional Music and Dance in Central Transylvania,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 53/3 (September/December 2016), 137–165.



alleged ethnic character. Pávai's command of the Romanian language, in addition to his native Hungarian, enables him to conduct detailed interviews, and map the background information and the cognitive aspect beyond the mere phenomena. In accordance with the focus on the Hungarians, the English text retains the Hungarian forms of geographic names, with the official Romanian versions given in a supplementary index.

Besides the interethnic awareness, the author is similarly conscious about the temporal dimension of a vanishing culture. Pondering the best possible time-frame of the research, he arrives at the conclusion that no temporal limits at all should be set in advance. For this culture (or rather, the knowledge about it) has still not come to a complete end, so we can still expect and uncover new data. The reason lies in the fact that

[t]he disintegration of traditional peasant society took place in highly diverse ways and at a different pace by regions, and within this process, dancing and dance music had better chances of survival than many other genres. That is why the intense fieldwork indispensable for the study of folk dance music was still possible in Transylvania in the recent decades (p. 365).

On the other hand, the earliest relevant data do not necessarily coincide with the advent of sound recording, as the author explains in the chapter about "Technical issues of documentation." With examples of early written, iconographic, and photographic sources, and a review of sound and film recording technologies from the phonograph to the digital era, he assesses each for the possibilities and limitations of the information they may provide, and the ways in which they can complement one another.

The social aspect of the investigation is set out mainly in the chapter "Status, role, ethnicity." Applying Ralph Linton's concepts of status and role,<sup>7</sup> the author models performances of dance music, both in traditional settings and in recording sessions, as interpersonal patterns where the agents may be assigned different statuses, or sets of rights and duties. Among these, the status of professional musician is of central importance. These people were expected to comply, for their money, with the implicit norms of dance music in a given community (often several ones), and serve any individual wishes that might arise. This required the knowledge of the latest fashion as well as of the traditional ways, even extinct tunes – perhaps a greater knowledge than any member of the dancing community might have. Professional musicians were usually, but not always, of Romani ethnicity. However, this in itself is no simple category, but rather an intricate bundle of identities and statuses, involving different strategies of interethnic orientation. For an adequate critical evaluation of a field recording, it is also important to understand the statuses and roles enacted by the informant and the collector on that occasion. The validity of such data may be checked by means of "functional recordings," i.e. recordings taken at real dance events, where the musicians interact with the dancers rather than the collector.

The chapter on "Instruments of dance music" is an up-to-date summary of a relatively well-researched topic with regard to Transylvania. As a new result, the author identifies the permanent instrumental ensemble models which counted as ideal in various local cultures, and presents them in their temporal and spatial variability. The section on the "Rhythmic accompaniment of dances" focuses on the choreological aspect of the music, as established in Martin's studies. Here, Pávai outlines the basic types of the rhythm of melodies, as well as the rhythm of

<sup>7</sup>Ralph LINTON, *The Study of Man* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936).



the accompaniment. He gives a remarkable new interpretation of the rhythmic asymmetry in the slow Transylvanian dances, setting them clearly apart from the aksak-type metre known in the Balkans and Asia Minor. Both melody and accompaniment contribute to the rhythmic effect of dance music, and in Pávai's view it is the relationship of this rhythmic complex to the dance rhythm that has (or should have) a decisive role in the metrical interpretation and the notation of any dance tune. The investigation of the "Melodic aspects of dance accompaniment" analyses the relationship between instrumental tunes and folk song types, and the ways in which tunes and interludes are chosen, combined, figured, and adapted to one or several dance genres.

The closing chapter, "Aspects for the research of folk polyphony," presents an issue scarcely addressed in scholarship, although widely practiced among revivalist musicians. The author establishes the main features of traditional accompaniment, identifying its distinct but interacting principles of harmonization, namely droning, melody-governed polyphony, and functional harmony. His critical awareness of recorded sources is applied here in minute detail, which leads him to distinguish between "performance" and "competence" in harmonization, in the sense used in linguistics. He argues that good professional musicians always have an idea of "right" harmonization depending on their local style, even if they apply it imperfectly in their actual playing, for various reasons. Pávai's aim is to reveal this implicit knowledge, which requires interviews in addition to musical recordings. The elements of musical performance that competent village musicians identify as "mistaken" may of course be relevant data in the ethnographic sense, for they are still accepted as proper music. But those solutions that they deem "right" have an additional validity in another, musical, sense. These preliminaries surely mark a coming of age in the research of instrumental folk polyphony.

*Hungarian Folk Dance Music of Transylvania* is a thorough, multifaceted, and clearly written introduction to its subject matter, essentially based on the author's own abundant field research. It is also a significant contribution to the research methodology of traditional dance music worldwide, synthesizing the pertinent results of Hungarian and Romanian ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology, and complementing them with carefully reflected new insights.

