

NEW MUSIC FROM OLD

BY ZOLTAN KODALY

HUNGARIAN music means gipsy music to most of the world even today. It was with something of a shock that an Englishman recently in Budapest heard the gipsy bands play nothing but jazz and songs of the *Why Did I Kiss That Girl* type. As a matter of fact, many a day has passed since the gipsies have been outstanding interpreters (never, it should be noted, composers) of Hungarian dance music and folk-tunes. The gipsy leader now attracts audiences to his café by announcing that he is just back from London with the latest hits. Exactly like the milliners.

Budapest, however, is a foreign island in Hungary. Our "civilizers" feel that we have achieved culture when the capital re-echoes with the international street songs, differing as little as possible from any other big city of Europe.

To ears that are open, Hungary, however, is as rich in melody as ever.

For more than a hundred years, so-called "Hungarian music" has spread abroad through every possible channel, and it is truly surprising that people have not yet wearied of it. Its range is limited, it has little emotional power, is more pleasant than profound and fairly sentimental besides. As a rule, it is the product of our popular song-writers, the half-dilettante composers of the nineteenth century, and has almost no relation to the traditional folk-song of the race.

Its success has inspired some of us with the hope that the old music of the folk, richer by far and more vigorous, has but to be made known, to win the public. Up to the present it has been available only in the small edition of Bartók's *A Gyermekeknek*, nursery songs which already have achieved some deserved measure of popularity. Our joint collection (Bartók and Kodály), of about three thousand original folk-melodies with a great number

of variations, begun in 1900, is still unprinted, owing to the war and resultant economic conditions. But three recently issued publications give us some insight into the nature of this music. *The Hungarian Folk-Song* by Bartók, a book containing three hundred tunes, is a systematic summary of the material, classifying it according to style and period. *Nagyszalontai Gyutjós*, my own work, is a collection of about fifty melodies and their variations gathered exclusively in Szalonta. Finally there is the collection of *One Hundred and Fifty Transylvanian Folk-Songs*, by Bartók and myself, which is devoted to examples of the oldest and most valuable type of song, the pentatonic. How little the pentatonic by itself determines the essential character of these songs, it may be pointed out here, is obvious from the most cursory comparison with others in that form, the Chinese, the Scotch or the Indian, which are worlds apart. Their true distinctiveness has deeper roots.

During the last thousand years the Hungarian race has undergone great changes. It has, however, retained a few primitive forms in its language as well as in this ancient music which still link it with the primitive peoples from whom it sprang.

To dispute the authenticity of this Hungarian musical tradition, one must reject homophonic music as art. But such a denial means the ruling out, as a consequence, of the Greek, the Gregorian and all Oriental music. And is not the national character of even polyphonic music expressed chiefly through melody and rhythm? It might even be claimed that the homophonic is, as a rule, richer and freer in its development of melody and rhythm than polyphonic music. All polyphony has developed from homophonic music.



Acquaintance with these old songs facilitates an understanding of modern Hungarian music. Almost everything written since 1910 shows the fruitful influence of this re-discovered ancient

tongue. It is the foundation, the fertile soil of our new music, a far greater inspiration to our native composers than the inspiration of any European school. It does not supply us with themes; folk-tunes are almost never found in original compositions. It is rather the atmosphere, the original material, that is recaptured in these works. Here lies the promise of a natural fusion of European with Hungarian racial tradition. It remains to be seen whether this fusion will be organic. Aside from the production of an occasional successful work, will the amalgamation of the Hungarian homophonic tradition with the polyphonic forms of Europe produce a new, authentic style? A beginning has been made, it is true; the rest is a question of time and genius.

The movement to create a national Hungarian music is not new. Erkel, in his time, quite successfully solved the problem of the opera. It was a great achievement to find expression for even a few features of the national character. When Erkel wrote, the national musical consciousness was only just awakening. The great renaissance of the Hungarian spirit, beginning in 1790 at the end of a long period of decadence, is yet in process, and, despite its several lapses, makes a steady advance.



There are many who dispute the importance of the folk-song to the higher forms of music. These are usually people of a special intellectual type whose approach is purely rationalistic. To maintain that the average European folk-song is too primitive to have a relation to higher art, or to serve as the expression of a differentiated and complex spiritual life is doubtless correct. Most of the German, French or Slavic folk-songs are not above the level of pleasantness and grace. They are pretty and without depth.

There are Hungarian melodies, however, which have given me and many others the same profound aesthetic experience as a motif by Beethoven.

To the Hungarian composer a knowledge of his native music offers greater inspiration than do the German, French or Italian songs to composers of those nationalities. In all countries of an older cultural tradition, the substance of folk-music has long since been absorbed into the masterpieces. Great artists have always been huge reservoirs of racial power. Bach is a condensation of German music such as no other nation has. The German student who knows his Bach need not concern himself long with folk-songs.

This is not our situation. Our only tradition is of folk-music. And though it cannot replace Bach, it may yet produce a great interpreter. Our folk-music is not that of a crude unlettered class. It is, or has been until very recently, the music of the whole nation. Elsewhere in Europe great music flourished at the courts, or under the protection of rich communities. In Hungary no foreign dynasty ever encouraged the idea of a national culture. The aristocracy cherished only foreign art. During the centuries of continuous fighting the middle classes and the peasantry, left entirely to their own resources, had no opportunity to create a great art themselves. This was a period of flowering for folk-art. Later, when the middle classes "elevated" themselves sufficiently to do homage to foreign ideas, when they were denationalized and mixed with foreign immigrants, the old music became the exclusive treasure of the peasantry.

Certain modern Hungarian works apparently have created the impression abroad of a musical revolution. They are more accurately to be described as conservative. Our intention has been not to break with the past, but to renew and strengthen the links by re-creating the atmosphere of the ancient, forgotten melodies, by erecting new structures from their scattered stones. These old songs are our heirlooms; their creators, long since silent, are our true ancestors.

It is but natural that our new works should be markedly different from any other music. Those who find in the German classical style the single mold of real music—and there are many such—unconsciously accept the mother-tongue of Germanic-Italian folk-music, on which it is based, as the only orthodox foundation for music. It is necessary to decide at the outset, for or against

the right to existence of other musical idioms, before further considering modern Hungarian music. Much that is strange in it can be traced back to the peculiarities of the old songs.

I have often had occasion to observe that these strange sounds and inflections are, at first hearing, repellant to ears attuned only to Italian-German melodies. Repeated hearings render them natural. A foreign language must be studied. It is necessary to learn even a slight variant of one's own language. Ady, a modern Hungarian poet, reconstructed a remarkable speech of his own out of the old racial tongue. At first criticized as absurd, unclear, incomprehensible, even un-Hungarian, it later converted the skeptics into enthusiasts. From the foreigner our music exacts an effort both in interest and understanding. It is only after mastering its idiom that he can discover therein the portrait of the nation, and can respond to its expressive power and heroic emotional force.

