

WHY IS THE »SPIRIT« OF FOLK MUSIC SO IMPORTANT? ON THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BÉLA BARTÓK'S VIEWS OF FOLK MUSIC¹

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Abstract — Résumé

We use terms like »nationalism« and »modernism«, when we try to characterize a certain cultural movement. However, not every cultural movement is as monolithic as these terms may suggest. And it is not free from its historical background. In this essay on Bartók we examine how a single artistic endeavor can become »national« and »new« at one and the same time. The nationalist Bartók and the mod-

ernist Bartók may not necessarily be »incompatible«, although it is true that the terminology relating to this question is still yet to be refined. In any case, when we think of Bartók's lifework, we should consider above all the complex nature of this composer's strategy.

Key words: Nationalism; Modernism; Folk music; Bartók

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) was not only a composer but also an enthusiastic researcher of folk music. During the first two decades of the 20th century he collected more than 10 000 folk songs in the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy and in North Africa, and later wrote many articles and essays, among other, on Hungarian, Slovakian, and Romanian folk music. Thus, it is not surprising that many scholars have dealt with the influence of folk music on his music from a stylistic point of

¹ An earlier version of this paper, which was written in Japanese, appeared in the 53/2 (Autumn 2002) issue of the *Bigaku [Aesthetics]* Journal. The present paper is based on the original version, but it contains several new parts, because of the recent development of my research.

view. However, on the historical background of his creative activity, which was closely related to his own research, it can be said that only a small number of scholars have specialized in depth.² So, in this paper, I will examine the historical background of the composer's views of peasant music, by concentrating on his use of the word »spirit«.

1.

Bartók repeatedly argued that composers should acquire the »spirit« (in Hungarian, *szellem*) of folk music, if they wished to compose their music under its influence. Mere use of certain melodic or rhythmic formulas of folk music did not make sense to him, if it was without a deep understanding of the materials. In his 1920 article for *Sackbut*, the British music periodical, for example, he wrote as follows:

»When I speak of the influence of peasant music, I do not mean as it were a mere whitewash of it, nor the mere adaptation of peasant melodies or snatches of melodies and their piecemeal incorporation in musical works, but rather the expression of the real spirit of the music of any particular people which is so hard to render in words.«³

It may seem that the composer merely speaks of his own compositional activity, but one should note that the composer applies this theory also as a criterion, when he evaluates music by others. For instance, in another article from 1920 he appreciates Stravinsky and Kodály from a similar point of view:

»This should be noted: it is not a question of the mere use of folk melodies or the transplantation of single phrases therefrom; a deep comprehension of the spirit of the respective folk music, difficult to put into words, manifests itself in these works [by Kodály and by Stravinsky respectively]. This influence is therefore not limited to single works; the results of the respective composer's entire creation are impregnated with this spirit.«⁴

A composer should acquire »the real spirit of the music of any particular people«. Then, according to Bartók, »the results of the respective composer's entire

² As to this topic, Judit Frigyesi's study still seems to be the most comprehensive and informative. See J. FRIGYESI, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998). See also J. FRIGYESI, Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and Volk in Modern Hungary, *Musical Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 2 (1994), 255-287.

³ The Relation of Folk Song to the Development of the Art Music of Our Time (1921). In: B. Suchoff (ed.), *Béla Bartók Essays* (hereafter *Essays*) (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 324. For practical reasons, I will use the English translation of Bartók's texts in *Essays*, wherever it is possible. As to the other texts, however, I will myself translate Hungarian into English.

⁴ The Influence of Folk Music on the Art Music of Today (1920). In: *Essays*, 317-318.

creation« become »impregnated« with this spirit. From 1920 on the Hungarian composer repeatedly discussed this idea, usually using similar vocabulary.⁵ Without any doubt, the question of the »spirit« of folk music was one of the most important topic to the mature Bartók.

What is this »spirit«, and how does it work? The composer was obviously reluctant to verbalize the whole idea about these questions. The gesture of mystification (for example, »so hard to render in words«, »difficult to put into words« and so on) is persistent in his text. However, it is certain that in Bartók's opinion the influence of peasant music on art music should involve the entire process of creative activity. His main interest did not lie in the elaboration of folk songs as end-products, but in the acquisition, or interiorization of the spontaneous way of expression, which was found in folk music.

It should be noted that this reading is well compatible with the folklorist Bartók's views of peasant music. In his main work of musicology, *Hungarian Folk Songs*, for example, Bartók defines the nature of »peasant music in a narrower sense«—the music quite essential to him—as follows:

»Peasant music in a narrower sense is the entirety of such peasant melodies that belongs to one or several uniform styles. The peasant music in a narrower sense is therefore a result of transforming work of natural power, which functions spontaneously: it is the instinctive product made by the mass of the people without every kind of learning.«⁶

In »peasant music« Bartók sees »transforming work of natural power«, which results in the uniformity in the styles of melodies: According to him, it is peasants as a collective who establish styles of peasant melodies by changing the shapes of

⁵ Here are several other examples: In 'The Folk Songs of Hungary' (1928) he discusses as follows: »I should, in fact, stress one point: in our case it was not a question of merely taking unique melodies in any way whatsoever, and then incorporating them—or fragments of them—in our works, there to develop them according to the traditionally established custom. [...] What we had to do was to grasp the spirit of this hitherto unknown music and to make this spirit (difficult to describe in words) the basis of our works.« (Cf. *Essays*, 333.); In 'The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music' (1931) he writes that »the character of peasant music, indescribable in words, must find its way into art music« and that »peasant motives (or imitations of such motives)« lend the music nothing more than »some new ornaments« (Cf. *Essays*, 341); In his 1944 article he writes as follows: »In the second category [which consists of works with original themes] our compositions do not use specific folk melodies, yet they nevertheless mirror in their minutest details the spirit of rural music. [...] Even the most abstract works, as for instance my string quartets [...] reveal a certain indescribable, unexplainable spirit—a certain *je ne sais pas quoi*—which will give to anyone who listens, and who knows the rural backgrounds, the feeling: 'This could not have been written by any but an Eastern European musician.'« In: *Hungarian Music, Essays*, 396; Lastly, from his sketches for lectures at Harvard University we learn that Bartók had planned to discuss 'General Spirit (connected with folk music)' in one of the unrealized lectures (Cf. *Harvard-előadások, Bartók Béla Írásai*/1 (hereafter *BBÍ*/1) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1989), ed. by T. Tallián, 181.).

⁶ *Bartók Béla Írásai*/5 (hereafter *BBÍ*/5) (Budapest: Editio Musica, 1990), ed. by D. Révész, 11.

foreign melodies step by step. In Bartók's theory the spontaneity of expression found in every performance of melodies does not contradict the uniformity of the style. Rather, it is the very source of the uniformity. Why? Because, according to him, »it is unquestionable that in the case of the peasants, who live in a single mass in a geographically uniform region, and who speak in the same language, the propensity for transformation similarly will work in each of them, as a consequence of the similarity of their mental disposition.«⁷ As this comment shows, Bartók believed that in folk music there exists a propensity common to the people: In his eyes, the formative principle, which brought about the uniform style of melodies, was something immutable. One should not forget that one of the main topics in his musicological works was nothing but to clarify how this »transforming work« functioned in the process of formation of melodies.⁸ Therefore, it is very likely that the composer's argument of the »spirit« was closely related to his own scholarly observations of folk music.

True enough, the »spirit« of folk music had been very important to Bartók. But one should not forget that there still remains one more question: Did Bartók really believe that this kind of »spirit« was necessary for progressive music? And again, we tend to regard Bartók's use of stylistic features of folk songs as one of the major modernist endeavors for enlarging the idiomatic possibilities of expression. It seems that the composer himself also wished to be appreciated as such. But, if the invention of new musical idiom is a really important task for composers, why must they undertake *another* hard task as the acquisition of the »spirit« of folk music on the other hand? Why was the mere adaptation of formal irregularities of peasant music unsatisfying? Why did the composer continuously mystify his own artistic endeavor? His argument does not give a clear-cut answer to these questions.

There must have been various reasons for his adherence to »peasant music«, while Bartók himself did not explain all of them. In my opinion it is now necessary for us to abandon a one-sided, exclusively modernist reading of his texts, in order to have an insight into the complex nature of his strategy. In the following chapters we will examine the context of his argument, especially its historical background.

2.

Why was the »spirit« of folk music so important?

Bartók's essays written for the music journals outside of Hungary do not necessarily help us to answer this question, for in these writings the composer does

⁷ *BBÍ/5*, 11.

⁸ In *Hungarian Folk Songs* one can see a host of examples about this. See his discussion of melody no. 299 and footnotes of melodies no. 80 and no. 92 (*BBÍ/5*, 70, 177, and 177 respectively). It should also be noted that Bartók himself mentions the existence of »a certain regularity in the divergencies of melodic variants« in his 1936 essay 'Why and How Do We Collect Folk Music?'. See *Essays*, 9.

not deal so much with his own relationship to the political and cultural background of the turn-of-the-century Hungary, which in reality must have deeply influenced the ideological aspect of his artistic endeavor. At first, in this chapter, we will see the domestic cultural situation of Hungary at the beginning of the century and the discourse on the relationship between art music and folk songs.

It is well-known that at the beginning of the 20th century there was a strong surge of anti-Hapsburg nationalism in Hungary: Various movements were organized for ensuring the military and political autonomy of the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy.⁹ In serious genres of music, a number of composers also responded to the call for »Hungarian symphonic music« by writing music in a modern but distinctively Hungarian style—without any lasting success.¹⁰ Through newspapers or everyday conversations, young Bartók must have been more or less informed of these attempts and the debate surrounding them.¹¹

It was a natural consequence that the role of folk songs came to be highlighted, while, as to the treatment of them, there was the argument that the emphatic adaptation of formal features of Hungarian folk songs was insufficient for establishing a national »symphonic« style. The discourse of the music criticism of the day often reflected evolutionist views and the critics had become conscious of a difference between the nature of high art and that of folk art: While folk music was regarded as something constant, they thought that Hungarian art music had to be a consequence of historical development, that is, something personal, original and new. For example, Géza Csáth, a young critic of the literary journal *Nyugat* (»West«), articulates the relationship between folk music and art music as follows:

»Every art music originated from folk music.

This does not only mean that the composers transformed and extended the folk songs for new and greater forms; not only that they took the melody or the rhythm of folk songs and consistently used them. But it also means that the composers developed this

⁹ As to the military and political issues, see *Magyarország Története (History of Hungary)* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1964), vol. 2, ed. by E. Molnár, E. Pamlényi, and Gy. Székely, 155-161, 197-215.

¹⁰ At the end of the 19th century, many Hungarian intellectuals supposedly believed that serious music with a truly national character did not yet exist in their country. In the article on »nemzeti« (»national«) of the *Pallas Encyclopaedia*, which was published between 1893 and 1897, we read about national music as follows: »Hungarians had to advance for a long time, before their poetry became national. [...] In music and fine arts the characteristics of our nation did not yet manifest themselves, while we advanced continuously.« In: *A Pallas Nagy Lexikona (The Pallas Encyclopaedia)*.

¹¹ For example, in 1903 Bartók wrote to his mother about the première of Dohnányi's *Symphony in D minor* as follows: »In the Thursday issue of *Esti Újság (Evening News)*, there appeared a leading article with the following title: 'Ernő Dohnányi'. This was written by Aurél Kern. This good gentleman really errs, however, in the judgment that Dohnányi creates Hungarian art music. He [Dohnányi] has the slightest intention of so doing. Only the second movement of his symphony has a Hungarian character. Perhaps one could suspect the presence of this element in the first movement, but it would be impossible to do so in connection with the third.« Cf. *Bartók Béla Családi Levelei [Béla Bartók's Family Letters]* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981), B. Bartók Jr. (ed.), 81.

simple art of music to formulate what they had to say. The composers whose music had not been nourished from this soil, hardly achieved anything.

The great composers rendered the spirit and feelings of folk songs into the new forms of music. This is why in every magnificent music we find among other something that is characteristic firstly of the composer himself, and secondly of the race to which he belongs.«¹²

As the words »originate« or »develop« suggest, Csáth's argument reflects the evolutionist mindset of his day. According to him, a good composer must express »the spirit and feelings of folk songs« in the »new forms«. The composer's whole creative activity, including a personal way of expression, should have a racial character and it should have its root in the »soil«, that is, in folk music. Consistent use of a certain melodic or rhythmic formulas was not regarded as a decisive factor for judging the influence of folk music on a composer.

One should note that Bartók's discussion of the »spirit« of folk music is very similar to Csáth's argument in several aspects: a firm belief in the values of folk music; a clear distinction between »folk« music and »art« music; an assumption that art music should have its origin in a folk tradition;¹³ and lastly, a tendency to see the influence of folk music in a composer's »whole creative activity« rather than in motifs or melodies. It is particularly important to note that both Csáth and Bartók classify and evaluate art music according to its relationship to the folk tradition. In this sense, one can suspect the impact of cultural nationalism in the broadest sense of the word.¹⁴

Nonetheless, it would be misleading if we were to take Bartók's endeavor as a part of a monolithic cultural movement. Firstly, in his case, comprehension of the »spirit« of folk music was inseparably related to the enlargement of possibilities of musical expression and it was the latter that justified the former. Secondly, Bartók's argument pronouncedly reflects the democratic character in its consistent emphasis on the role of the »peasant«: By specifying the class, he makes his position clear on the debate on whose culture represents the »authentic« Hungarianness. Thirdly, we should not forget the fact that Bartók not only studied the folk music of the

¹² A Dalról [About the Song]. In: G. CSÁTH, *A Muzsika Mesekertje: Összegyűjtött Írások a Zenéről* [»The Fairy Garden of Music: Collected Writings on Music«] (Budapest: Magvető, 2000), 92-93.

¹³ For instance, in his 1931 essay, Bartók writes as follows: »For an artist it is not only right to have his roots in the art of former times, it is a necessity. Well, it is peasant music which holds our roots.« (In: *Essays*, 346.) Quoting Kodály, he argues in the last paragraph of the same essay that they found in the villages such a »continuity of a national musical tradition« that a German musician would be able to find in Bach and Beethoven.

¹⁴ Ernest Gellner defines the term »nationalism« as »a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent«. In this paper I will modify this definition, and use the term »cultural nationalism« to mean »a principle which holds that the cultural and national unit should be congruent«. See J. HOBBSAWM, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; second edition, 1992), 9.

ethnic Hungarians, but also the music of other peoples (Slovaks, Romanians, and so on). Therefore, if his endeavor may have been nationalistic in the broadest sense, it was not chauvinistic in character.

What do these idiosyncrasies suggest? To answer this question, it is necessary for us to broaden the range of vision and to consider the change in the definition of Hungarianness in the social and cultural context of the day.

3.

One of the central questions of cultural nationalism lies in how to define the »national« culture. As to the case of the turn-of-the-century Hungary, there were opposing views on the definition of the nation's cultural identity.

According to Frigyesi, in the second half of the 19th century the lifestyle of the gentry, the impoverished Hungarian aristocrats, had been associated with the cultural concept of Hungarianness.¹⁵ It was the gentry who had been considered to form the core of the Hungarian »political nation«, to which all the inhabitants in the territory of Hungary were expected to assimilate socially and culturally. As the historian György Kövér points out, a considerable part of the middle class at that time took the gentry's behavior pattern as a model and imitated it,¹⁶ whether they were from noble families or not.

The rapid growth of the domestic economy after 1867, however, changed the social structure of the country, and enabled the formation of a new middle class: the modern bourgeoisie. This change gradually relativized the prestige of the gentry as a cultural symbol, for the »semi-feudal« backwardness of the society, which had socially and culturally supported the gentry's way of life, became the main target of criticism. Instead, the progressive intellectuals came to highlight the culture of the lowest class in the society as a point of reference for Hungary's cultural identity.

¹⁵ In her article Frigyesi argues that the gentry lifestyle was »the cornerstone of the nationalist ideology.« I basically accept this part of her argument, although here I use the word »nationalism« in much broader sense—whether the movement in question was related to the left or the right politically. See J. FRIGYESI, Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and *Volk* in Modern Hungary, *Musical Quarterly*, vol. 78 no. 2 (1994), 255-287.

¹⁶ Kövér argues that the gentry, in the sense of the word at the turn of the century, cannot automatically be associated with noble birth, but rather with a »behavioral category of a social status group«. He sees a classical example in Kálmán Mikszáth's novel *Gavallérok* (*The Cavaliers*), in which the heroes rent costumes and hire coaches to behave as if they were really gentry by birth. On this topic Kövér points out as follows: »The category of lower clerk in the county was the locus where, as regards background, the traditional nobility mixed with everybody else. The model of behavior, however, is provided by those with a noble background.« In: G. GYÁNI, Gy. KÖVER and T. VALUCH, *Social History of Hungary from the Reform Era to the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 167-168.

It is well-known that some of young artists, who were susceptible to this change of trend, played an active role in the debate on the question of »Hungarianness«.¹⁷ While they saw remnants of the feudalistic past in the contemporary social and cultural life, they tried to find a way to realize a more democratic and modern Hungary. One of the most influential figures in this movement was Endre Ady, the poet. In his 1905 essay »On the Margin of Unknown Corvin Codex«, for instance, the poet harshly criticized the social inequality and the erroneous way of modernization as follows:

»They urged us forward, and we were not allowed to look back and to see from which we were rushed to depart. We were not allowed to see that this country was the property of several pharaohs and that they forced millions of people to live a dirty, animal-like life«¹⁸

Caricaturing the contemporary Hungary, he argued the necessity of establishing a more democratic, more modern Hungarian society. Admittedly, it may seem that the poet simply insisted on implementation of a social system similar to that of west European democracy. But his discussion was not so simple, for, while interiorizing the values from Western Europe, the poet still clung to the idea that the Hungary-to-come should play a particular role in European civilization. In fact, the country which he idealized in the essay, was not the West European countries but Transylvania in the Renaissance Era:

»It was Transylvania that had deeply understood Europe for the first time [in Hungary]. [...] It [read: Transylvania] connected itself with Europe and accepted in spirit everything that came in. It produced the most daring and the least Hungarian thing: something totally new. At that time the great Kulturvolk still burned Jews on the banks of the Rhine and the Dominican bloodhounds barked everywhere in the West. In Transylvania, however, old and primitive Hungarians were not afraid of asking for circumcision from roaming rabbis. Almost on the verge of Asia there was a small country, which could proclaim that the people's belief belonged to their own affairs.«¹⁹

¹⁷ See L. HOOKER, *The Political and Cultural Climate in Hungary at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ed. by A. Bayley, 7-23. See also J. FRIGYESI, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ E. ADY, *Költészet és Forradalom* [Poetry and Revolution] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1969), ed. by J. Varga and M. Szabó, 94.

¹⁹ E. ADY, *ibid.*, 98. To the poet, the friendly relationship between ethnic Hungarians and Jews was a sign of the progressive character of the society. It may be possible that the poet gave this example in order to give voice to his sympathy for the Jewish intellectuals in Hungary. It is well-known that Ady supported the cooperation of the progressive Magyar intellectuals and their Jewish equivalents. See Gy. ROMSICS, *Magyarország Története a XX. Században* [History of Hungary in 20th Century] (Budapest: Osiris, 1999; 3rd edition: 2001), 93.

The poet argued that Hungary in future also should become like Renaissance Transylvania, which accepted new ideas from foreign countries and which produced something particular. In the last part of the essay, he wrote of the future as follows:

»[...] it would be nice to believe that we were brought here to bridge—the gap [between the East and the West]. When the gap is filled, we will settle down there and give the sign to Asia: Send new tribes, and we will teach them how one should produce an original culture.«²⁰

In short, Ady characterized the Hungarian culture as something yet to be realized, but both modern and original. The fact that there is no reference to the gentry's lifestyle suggests how radical the poet's vision of Hungarianness was.

Although Ady never used the term »nationalism«, this writing shows us several characteristics of a certain type of cultural nationalism: the recognition of the nation's distinctive role in cultural history, and the idea that one should fulfill his/her own role as a member of the nation in this history. In this sense one can say that Ady proposed an alternative model of cultural nationalism against the conservative chauvinism of that time.²¹ As the expression »least Hungarian« in the quotation suggests, the poet sometimes ironically used the word »Hungarian« to mock his opponents. But, on the other occasions, when he used the word to describe his own creed, the adjective »Hungarian« represented a positive value yet to be realized. For instance, one should remember that when Ady passionately defended a »new song of a new age« in one of his most famous poems, he glorified it as »victorious, new and Hungarian.« In a context like this, the word »Hungarian« became almost a synonym of the word »new«.

As the example of Endre Ady shows, the ways of articulating the nation's cultural identity were drastically changing at the beginning of the 20th century. Instead of defining Hungarian culture as something innate and self-evident, progressive intellectuals began to take it as something yet to be realized, but modern and original at one and the same time. When we think of the nationalistic aspect of Bartók's argument of peasant music, we must consider this context.

²⁰ ADY, *op. cit.*, 100.

²¹ As to the political nationalism between ca. 1870 to 1914, Hobsbawm argues that the various principles on which the political appeals to the masses were based—»the class appeal of the socialists, the confessional appeal of religious denominations and the appeal of nationality«—were not mutually exclusive, in spite of the common assumption that the appeals of nationalism and socialism are »mutually exclusive« (See J. HOBSBAWM, *op. cit.*, 123). Although it may seem strange to apply the term »cultural nationalism« to the activity of the radical intellectuals like Ady, I would like to argue that, in reality, »nationalism« could not be a monolithic phenomenon, and that there could be different appeals of cultural nationalism.

4.

It is not difficult to see that Bartók and Kodály attempted the popularization of peasant songs as a part of their strategy for spreading a new sense of cultural identity. For the two composers, the notion of »Hungarianness« was something that one should acquire anew through music. In fact, in the foreword of their first attempt of folk song arrangements, Kodály argues that »most people in Hungarian society are still not Hungarian enough to become fond of these songs« and insists that the songs should be played in concert halls »like folk songs from foreign countries«. ²² As if it were one of the necessary conditions for modernization, he asserted that peasant songs should become the common cultural good for the Hungarian society.

Kodály's argument may seem to be a simple program for cultural nationalism. But it is important to note that what he chose as the common cultural good was not the genre of the 19th-century popular urban songs known as *magyar nóta*, which had been regarded as »folk songs« among the middle class at that time. Instead, he chose peasant music, the music hitherto unknown. While *magyar nóta* and its instrumental version, 'Gipsy music', were the gentry's favorites, Kodály refused to see particular cultural values in them. In this respect his discussion apparently reflected the contemporary trend towards the reformulation of cultural identity, which we had seen in the previous chapter.

Many documents attest that Bartók also had been deeply involved with this shift of the cultural trend. The composer was an enthusiastic reader of Ady's works and he was particularly in sympathy with the poet's zeal for political and social reform. In fact, as one of the sources of Bartók's aesthetic ideal of rendering »the brotherhood of neighboring peoples« into music ²³ one can suspect the influence of Ady, who, according to the composer, asserted that in Hungary »the Hungarians, the Romanians, and the Slovaks must be united, because they are brothers under the oppression«. ²⁴

There were also other relationships between Bartók and the progressive intellectuals in Budapest. For example, it is well-known that Bartók had been a subscriber to the progressive literary journal *Nyugat* (»West« in Hungarian), in which

²² Z. KODÁLY, *Magyar Népdalok: Előszó* [Hungarian Folk Songs: Foreword], *Visszatekintés/1* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1982), ed. by F. Bónis, 9-10.

²³ In one of the letters written in 1931 Bartók wrote as follows. »My own idea [...] — of which I have been fully conscious since I found myself as a composer—is the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflict. I try—to the best of my ability—to serve this idea in my music.« (Transl. by Gyula Gulyás and Paul Merrick) In: T. TALLIÁN, *Béla Bartók* (Budapest: Corvina, 1981; English version, 1988), 163.

²⁴ *Bartók Béla Levelei*, 186. The title of the poem which Bartók mentioned in his letter is 'Magyar Jakobinus Dala' (A Song of the Hungarian Jacobin), which is found in: *Ady Endre Költményei* (Budapest: Helikon, c2000), 179.

Ady and the other radicalist intellectuals like Ignotus regularly wrote their articles.²⁵ The relationship between the composer and the journal was reciprocal to a certain extent: While the journal's music critics—Géza Csáth, Aladár Bálint, Antal Molnár and Aladár Tóth—had consistently supported Bartók's music for decades, the composer took part in their ceremonies and events, and even contributed his works to the journal.²⁶

Besides, we must consider that mature Bartók consciously and continuously used the term »peasant music« instead of the much more familiar term »folk music«, although the word »peasant« (*paraszt* in Hungarian) had a clearly pejorative meaning (such as »uneducated person«) at that time:²⁷ To his contemporaries, the composer's position on the debate of Hungary's cultural identity must have been unmistakable.

Among various attempts at redefining the cultural identity of Hungary, it may be possible to say that Bartók's endeavor had relatively succeeded in drawing the attention of critics. While most of the audiences rather coldly received his new works,²⁸ there were several supporters in radical circles: Already in 1908, Csáth argued the parallelism between Ady's poems and Bartók's music and thus he counted the composer among the representatives of progressive artists.²⁹ In the eyes of the radical intellectuals like Csáth, the significance of Bartók's attempt was obvious (»This [Bartók's and Kodály's] collections of folk songs is not only new but also 'new'. [...] These songs [arranged by the two composers] do not tell us how a gipsy plays the genuine Hungarian songs, but how a peasant girl sings them.«³⁰). Consequently, they treated Bartók's music also as something »new« and »Hungarian« at the same time (»this [Bartók's] music is really new in form, in elaboration, and in sound. But its basis, its root exists in all of us [read: Hungarians]«³¹).

Bartók had a quite concrete knowledge of the formal characteristics of Hungarian folk songs (pentatonic, modal scales, and so on). Each of these individual stylistic features, however, only partly explained the positive role that the influ-

²⁵ According to the composer's son, Bartók subscribed to the journal from 1908. In 1931 he stopped the subscription because of economic reasons, but the editorial board of the journal continued to send him a free copy until 1940. See B. BARTÓK, Jr., *Bartók Béla Műhelyében* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1982), 520.

²⁶ See B. BARTÓK, Jr., *op. cit.*, 519-20. See also J. BREUER, *Zenei Írások a Nyugatban* [Writings on Music in 'the West'] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1978).

²⁷ For example, the critic Aladár Schöpflin argues in his 1916 article as follows: »Folk. We name them so, when we kindly want to speak of them, summing up the class as a whole [...] Peasant. In our mouth this word sounds like a curse. [...] It is a heavy insult to call someone 'peasant'.« (A. SCHÖPFLIN, *A Paraszt* [The Peasant]. In: *Nyugat*, no. 6, 1916). See also J. FRIGYESI, *Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and Volk in Modern Hungary*, 264.

²⁸ D. SCHNEIDER, *Hungarian Nationalism and the Reception of Bartók's Music 1904-1940, The Cambridge Companion to Bartók*, 180-181.

²⁹ G. CSÁTH, *Bartók Béla* [Béla Bartók], *op. cit.*, 90.

³⁰ G. CSÁTH, *Új Népdalgyűjtemény* [New Collection of Folk Songs], *op. cit.*, 217.

³¹ G. CSÁTH, *Bartók Béla Új Kottái* [Béla Bartók's new music], *op. cit.*, 217.

ence of folk music played in his music. On the ideal level, therefore, Bartók and his supporters had to discuss the importance of folk music in his creative activity, in order to justify his artistic endeavor as a whole. These circumstances probably led the composer to pick up the ideas of the »spirit« of folk music, which had been commonly used in the contemporary music criticism.

The key piece of writing would be Bartók's 1911 article, the one entitled 'On Hungarian Music', which was written for *Auróra* (Aurora), the journal for art and philosophy. In this short essay the composer defends his artistic endeavor by clarifying its relation to the social and cultural context. As to the question of cultural identity, Bartók's discussion is even more radical than Kodály's, for he openly denies the existence of the Hungarian art music before him:

»According to the natural order of things practice comes before theory. We see the opposite with Hungarian national music: scientific works were already published years ago, dealing with the characteristic features of Hungarian music, an attempt to define something non-existent at the time.«³²

Since he was skeptical about the use of particular rhythmic and melodic formulas, the young composer argued that spontaneous expression by composers should come first for establishing Hungarian national music:

»They [musicologists] believe something else, too: that it is possible to produce a new type of original Hungarian music by making use of artificial rhythmic formulas derived from certain pre-determinate rules.

These scientific gentlemen should wait until a musical art grown out of the Hungarian soil has fully developed! And that event might come to pass if some composers appeared there—each a vigorous individual in his own right—who endowed their common features, which do not exist born on foreign soil, and which, for this reason, must be declared as general characteristics of the Hungarian art music. It might be that these common features will originate out of the interconnection of the composers leading a common life, or it might happen under the influence of genuine Hungarian folk music. Naturally this style will show also the influence of twentieth-century music. Those who have a faulty ear will call such influence as being the Strauss, Reger, or Debussy type, for they will not be able to sense the subtle nuances. [...] All the new and Hungarian music composed here in the last few years is but a start, not yet sufficient to draw conclusions as to general features, common trends, and so forth.«³³

It is not difficult to see that the above discussion of »a musical art grown out of the Hungarian soil« relates to his later argument of the »spirit« of folk music in two ways: Firstly, he argues that the use of motif or rhythmic formulae does not make sense in itself; Secondly, he writes that the influence of folk music must be

³² On Hungarian Music (1911). In: *Essays*, 301.

³³ *Ibid.*, 302-303.

detected only in the spontaneous expression by composers.³⁴ Already at that time he didn't see the influence of folk music in a conscious use of certain melodic or rhythmic formulas.

As to the debate on cultural identity, Bartók's attitude is unmistakable: While he denied the Hungarianness of urban popular songs, he considered peasant music »genuine« Hungarian music, which was hitherto unknown; while he radically denied the existence of Hungarian art music before him, he asserted that the results from his and Kodály's endeavor were at once »new« and »Hungarian«; while Bartók's intention to create a new type of progressive music is clear, the claim for justification in the context of nationalism was also indispensable to him.³⁵

In the article for *Auróra* we can recognize a theoretical prototype of the composer's later argument: redefinition of »Hungarianness«, objection to the use of certain rhythmic or melodic formulas, and an attempt of justification, not only in the context of international modernism of music, but also in the context of domestic cultural nationalism. He took both the newness and the Hungarianness as ultimate values yet to be attained. The fusion of these two values would continue to be the main characteristic of the composer's writings, while later he argued repeatedly about the »spirit« of peasant music in justification of his endeavors, both in the domestic context and in the international context.

It is important to note that because of this fusion Bartók could not omit mentioning this »spirit« of peasant music, even when he had been expected only to sketch his program for new music: He had to mention it to make readers conscious of the mutual relationship between cultural nationalism and modernism, which was so characteristic of the composer's strategy. In this sense the discussion of the »spirit« was an indispensable part of Bartók's program for compositional activity.

As if it were to accompany Bartók's own activity, the discourse of »new« and »Hungarian« music had been persistent around him. For instance, we read that already in 1917 the critic Antal Molnár praised Bartók's and Kodály's compositions as »the establishment of Hungarian folk-national [*népnemzeti* in Hungarian] music and the lifting-up of it to the level of Europe«.³⁶ A nationalistic overtone is

³⁴ It deserves attention that, in the manuscript Bartók originally wrote, the musical art grown out of the Hungarian soil might happen under the »unintentional« influence of genuine Hungarian folk music. Cf. *A Magyar Zenéről* (In English: *On Hungarian Music*), *BBÍ/1*, 101. The word »unintentional« was deleted in the printed version. The reason for the deletion is unclear.

³⁵ In the manuscript of this article Bartók actually wrote as follows: »The compositions written in the last few years raise such a hope that the Hungarian national music in this sense [read: modern music with the influence of Hungarian peasant music] will be established in the near future.« Even if these words were deleted afterwards in the printed version, they suggest how much Bartók was interested in the creation of national culture—one of the most important topics of cultural nationalism. Unfortunately, no documents clarify the reason and circumstances of the deletion. Cf. *BBÍ/1*, 101.

³⁶ A. MOLNÁR, Bartók Béla. *Táncjátéka alkalmából*, 1917. május [Béla Bartók. On the occasion of the performance of his ballet]. In: *Bartók Breviárium* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1958; 2nd Edition, 1974), compiled by J. Ujfalussy and ed. by V. Lampert, 205-208.

unmistakable in Molnár's words, while the concept of modernity (»the level of Europe«) is also present here. Further, in the same text, Molnár also argues that the composers from Eastern Europe »not only use folksy motifs, but also begin to feel the people's spiritual world itself and to lay the foundations of a new, truly *reinemenschlich* [purely human] art.« As this example shows, Bartók's argument of the »spirit« of peasant music had been at once connected to the discourse of the cultural nationalism, and to that of the modernism of his day.

Conclusion

We use terms like »nationalism« and »modernism« when we try to characterize a certain cultural movement. Every cultural movement is, however, not as monolithic as these terms may suggest. And it is not free from its historical background.

In this essay on Bartók we have seen how a single artistic endeavor can become »national« and »new« at the same time. The nationalist Bartók and the modernist Bartók may not be necessarily »incompatible«, although it is true that the terminology relating to this question is still yet to be refined.³⁷ In any cases, when we think of Bartók's lifework, we should consider above all the complex nature of this composer's strategy.

Summary

ZAŠTO JE »DUH« FOLKLORNE GLAZBE TAKO VAŽAN? O POVIJESNOJ POZADINI NAZORA BÉLE BARTÓKA O FOLKLORNOJ GLAZBI

Termine kao što su »nacionalizam« i »modernizam« upotrebljavamo kada pokušavamo karakterizirati neki pokret u kulturi. Međutim, svaki pokret u kulturi nije tako monolitan kao što bi to sugerirali ovi termini, jer nije slobodan od svoje povijesne pozadine. U članku se pokazuje kako pojedinačni umjetnički pokušaj može postati istodobno »nacionalnim« i »novim«. Bartók nacionalist i Bartók modernist nisu nužno »inkompatibilni«, premda je istina da terminologiju koja se odnosi na ovo pitanje još valja pročistiti. U svakome slučaju, kada se govori o Bartókovu životnom djelu valja prije svega uzimati u obzir složenu prirodu strategije ovoga skladatelja.

³⁷ Frigyesi points out »the incompatibility of the ideology of the young Bartók with radical, avant-garde thinking of the mature composer«. In the former, she justifiably sees the influence of »official nationalism«, while, in the latter, it seems to me that she overlooks the nationalistic aspect of mature Bartók's endeavor. See J. FRIGYESI, *op. cit.*, 255-257.