

Liszt Academy of Music
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**Bartók and Romanian Folk Music:
Research and Composition
between 1909 and 1918**

PhD Theses

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1. Research background

Bartók's multifaceted relationship with Romanian folk music has long been a topic of interest in the Bartók literature. The survey of his compositions based on Romanian folk music commenced already in his lifetime: Bartók himself made a list of his relevant compositions, prompted by the Romanian diplomat Octavian Beu. It was in connection with this list that he elaborated shortly afterwards the three levels of using folk music in art music, which has been the standard ever since. His scholarly accomplishments achieved in the field of folk music research are fundamental reference points in Romanian ethnomusicology up to the present, even though some of his conclusions – due to the nature of this discipline – are considered outdated. Many aspects of Bartók's scholarly and artistic activity have been investigated in the Bartók literature, highlighting the close connections between these two fields. An important turning point in the study of compositions came with the first appearance of the Lampert-catalogue, containing the sources of the melodies in Bartók's folk music arrangements (1980); the identification of the actual folk melodies used in these works made possible a more profound understanding of the relationship between the source melody and its artistic reworking; significant studies have been written in this respect by Vera Lampert, László Somfai and László Vikárius, members of the Budapest Bartók Archives. The compositions written "in Romanian style", as well as some particular stylistic elements derived from Romanian folk music were discussed thoroughly by Ferenc László, the foremost expert on Bartók's relations with Romania; his doctoral theses written in Romanian about Bartók's activities and works related to Romanian folk music, is a comprehensive summary of the subject (*Béla Bartók și muzica populară a românilor din Banat și Transilvania*, 2003).

While the widely accepted method of manuscript studies in Hungarian Bartók research reveals unexpected details of the inner conception or genesis of the compositions, in the case of folk music-related works, investigations generally take into consideration only a restricted group of sources, that of the single folk melody which is closest to the one that appears in the arrangement. However, there is usually a far wider circle of folk melodies in the background of Bartók's choice for arrangement and for the way he arranged them; moreover, as earlier studies have pointed out, Bartók's scholarly findings also seem to have had an influence on shaping these works. Discussions of Bartók's Romanian folk music research rely essentially on his published folk music collections and relevant writings; manuscript sources, however, that allow a penetrating view into the depth of his folkloristic research and offer a nuanced image about his method of collecting, analyzing, transcribing and systematizing folk music, have only

occasionally been subject to examination. The systematic study of the manuscript sources of Bartók's extensive and complex Romanian folk music collection was hindered by the lack of specific linguistic and ethnomusicological knowledge on the one hand, and by the limited accessibility of the sources on the other. Careful examination and critical evaluation of the sources in their entirety would not only significantly widen our image about Bartók the folklorist, but at the same time could answer questions related to certain compositional, stylistic and notational decisions. My work wishes to provide a basis for these investigations, and to carry out some analytical experiments in that vein.

2. Methods

An essential part of the preliminary work of my dissertation was the close study of the primary sources of Bartók's Romanian folk music collection of about 3500 melodies. Its most extensive and, at the same time, most exciting part from the philological viewpoint is available for study at the Budapest Bartók Archives (Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Research Center for the Humanities [HAS RCH]), to which I had access as a junior research fellow of the Archives since 2013. The main source of the folk music collecting trips, the so-called field books contain essential information for our understanding of the collected material, Bartók's observations related to it, and for his method of collecting. The extant manuscripts of Bartók's folk music monographs, namely the so-called master sheets that served for analyzing and systematizing the folk melodies, bear witness to the transformations within the material; the most informative among these is the master-sheet-complex of the three-volume *Rumanian Folk Music*, comprising Bartók's almost entire Romanian collection. It contains several layers of notations: the earliest transcriptions together with their later revisions. The phonograph recordings are also primary sources of the collecting and are indispensable supplements of the field notations; I had the opportunity to study their digital copies thanks to the fellow researchers of the Archives for Folk Music and Folk Dance Research of the Institute for Musicology HAS RCH and of the Budapest Ethnography Museum. An interesting series of master sheets, preserved at the Kodály Zoltán Archives, offered important additional data about the early period of Bartók's folkloristic research. Finally, during a short research trip – realized with the support of a TÁMOP project of the Liszt Academy – I had the opportunity to glance through the final *lichtpaus* manuscript of the *Rumanian Folk Music* volume deposited at the library of Columbia University in New York.

The study of these sources consists of several levels. Above all a work of data exploration and identification seemed to be necessary, one that could also serve as a working tool for later investigations. Considering that the field books preserve the original chronology of the field collections, thus they contain material of mixed – mostly Hungarian, Slovak and Romanian – origin, it was necessary to analyze the content of these notebooks and to identify the first notations and recordings of the melodies that belong to each collecting trip. The more complex part of the research was the comparative analysis of different written and audio sources and the philological analysis of the transcriptions originating from different periods. In the course of getting acquainted with the material, many novelties and even more questions emerged. About the results of my investigations, focused mainly on particular collecting trips and their material, I have given scholarly lectures and published articles; in my dissertation only extracts of these appear. It was not a primary goal of my dissertation to give a full account of all the conclusions derived from this manuscript research – all the more since the research itself can not yet be considered complete.

I have gained further important experiences in the course of the preparatory works of the 4th volume of the complete critical edition series of *Béla Bartók Writings* [*Bartók Béla írásai*, vol. 1–8] carried out in close collaboration with Vera Lampert. Among the material of this volume, comprising articles and lectures on folk music mostly written for educational purposes, there were a number of essays related to Romanian folk music that belong to the subject matter of my dissertation. The philological examination of the manuscript sources of all the writings – including identification of the different layers of corrections, reconstructing several versions of a single essay, decoding sketchy notes concerning mostly music examples – besides bringing about important findings, revealed characteristic features of Bartók's scholarly personality. The lessons of this work also appear indirectly in my dissertation.

The examination of this large amount of source material proved to be an adequate starting point for a new approach to the subject matter. The relatively narrow timespan covered by my discussion was Bartók's most intensive period of dealing with Romanian folk music: the time of his Romanian collecting trips and the compilation of his first folk music monographs. This is also the same period when he composed his first arrangements of Romanian folk music and works written "in Romanian style". After giving a brief introduction to the sources of the collection (1.1) and a chronological survey on the collecting trips (1.2) I concentrate on certain focal points. On the basis of my preliminary studies it seemed that Bartók's first systematic collecting trip of Romanian folk music had

outstanding significance for his folkloristic as well as for his compositional output, the close study of which is not only illuminating but downright imperative even for the proper understanding of subsequent developments. Therefore, the second chapter deals with the scholarly results and compositional output inspired by the collecting trip to Bihor County in the summer of 1909. Following a short presentation of the circumstances of this collecting trip, the collected material and the history of its publication (2.1.1), – as a demonstration of my source studies – I provide an account of the main conclusions derived from the analysis of all the relevant source material (2.1.2). In addition, I enclose a table in the Appendix that supplies data and availability of the melodies of this collection in all the sources to which I had access.

The study of the folk music sources could also contribute to a better understanding of the folk music related compositions, uncovering the origin of their folkloristic aspects. From the unusually large number of compositions attesting the influence of the 1909 Bihor collection, I examine first the folk song arrangements, drawing a broader folkloristic background into my investigations (2.2.1) than did earlier studies. By discussing the four original compositions of 1909–1910, written at least partially under the influence of Romanian folk music, I endeavor to define the “Romanian character”, searching to answer such questions as: which are the common traits making us feel that these works are “of Romanian style” or, what could their potential folkloristic prototype be? (2.2.2) Finally, after the presentation of the genesis of the three well-known arrangement-cycles of 1915, I try to point out the folkloristic roots of some of Bartók’s compositional decisions (3).

3. Findings

The chronology of Bartók’s Romanian folk music collecting trips given in my dissertation is a novelty in the Hungarian language Bartók literature. The relevant chapter of Ferenc László’s Romanian language dissertation, which served for me as a model, already proved the importance of such surveys providing a basic orientation for those interested in the subject; I supplemented László’s register – that he compiled after decades-long biographical investigations – with a short description of each collection and their occurrence in the primary sources. In my summary I made use of the results of my source investigations but without considering them in detail. By evaluating the collected material, I relied on Bartók’s own relevant observations on the subject; consequently, the current findings of Romanian ethnomusicology could certainly complement or modify this picture in several respects.

The second chapter constituting the central part of my dissertation calls attention to the significance of Bartók's first Romanian collecting trip. I endeavored to point out that Bartók's encounter with the folk melodies of Bihor, foremost with the exotic-sounding old style non-ceremonial melodies – differing essentially from the folk melodies he was acquainted with until then – determined his attitude toward Bihor, or in a wider sense towards Romanian folk music. His first collection was followed by several others in quick succession, aiming at the ever wider folkloristic exploration of the Romanian language territory; moreover, he was quick about publishing their results immediately. I tried to give a more nuanced report on the circumstances of editing his first folk music monograph, the Bihor volume, containing the material of the first two collecting trips of Bihor County, based on documents to which less attention had been paid before.

The material of his first Bihor collection preoccupied Bartók essentially throughout his lifetime; this is shown by its unusually rich source material reflecting nine different phases of the material's scholarly study. Among these, the primary sources provide us with a vivid picture of the course of the collecting trip. By investigating the sources, it becomes more evident than before how characteristic the augmented fourth is for the folk melodies of Bihor, although in a certain sense it is difficult to grasp. This difficulty is due to the uncertainty of intonation of the performers. Although Bartók calls attention to this phenomenon only in his late work, the introductory study of *Rumanian Folk Music*, there are traces of Bartók being conscious of it already in his early notations. The comparative study of the recordings and the notations of the melodies accentuates the importance of the performances heard on the spot. The main difficulties of source interpretation are also discussed; the footnotes of the table in the Appendix draw attention to some of the contradictions between the sources.

The profound impression that the folk music of Bihor made on Bartók's creative imagination is demonstrated by the unusually rich compositional output of the ensuing period: two arrangements and four original compositions "in Romanian style" were composed between 1909 and 1910. Some particularly interesting sketches give us a hint of what the most appealing traits of this folk music could have been for the composer: Bartók notated some of the melodies in a notebook of Emma Gruber that also comprises his first compositional ideas. László Vikárius has drawn the attention to this entry previously; in my dissertation, I examine these sketches in the broader sense of the complete Bihor collection. Here Bartók drafted among others the 5th part of the *Sketches* for piano, considered to be his first arrangement of a Romanian folk melody, and which previous analyses have shown to be an exemplary case of adherence to the source

melody and its economical treatment. I supplement its examination by investigating the selection of the source melody and comparing its ten variants collected by Bartók during his first collecting trip.

The *Two Romanian Folk Songs* for women's choir is a lesser known arrangement preserved in manuscript (it will be published shortly for the first time in the 9th volume of the *Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition*). This miniature, written in a conservative style, intended perhaps for practical usage, and based on melodies connected to the wedding ceremony, was conceived presumably also around the time of the Bihor collecting trip, in the summer or fall of 1909. The choice of the source melodies and their manner of arrangement – according to the folk music and compositional sources – bear witness to the powerful impact that the living folk music made on the composer.

Bartók's early compositions written "in Romanian style" belong to the composer's emblematic original works of folkloristic inspiration. These works composed during 1909–1910 (*Sketches* no. 6 "In Walachian Style", *Two Romanian Dances*, *Two Pictures* no. 2 "Village Dance") have been subjects of investigation from many aspects, but no attempt has been made to define their "Romanian" character. The comparative analysis of relevant themes confirms the peculiarity which the literature describes usually in general terms, according to which the augmented fourth plays a determining role in the melodic and harmonic language of these works; this represents, however, merely the folkloristic equivalent of a compositional device Bartók was interested in long before. In addition, a certain melody type seems to be taking shape that through its structural, rhythmical and melodic features or even through its articulation is related to the dance melodies of the Bihor collection belonging to the *Mărunețel* type.

The compositions born under the influence of the Bihor collection – excepting the *Two Romanian Folk Songs* – attest that Bartók's interest turned primarily towards those peculiarities of the Bihar folk music that could offer him new compositional possibilities; the augmented fourth mentioned before is especially important in this respect. A few years later, the creation of *Romanian Christmas Songs* afforded him the opportunity to exploit another progressive compositional device, the changing meter. The three Romanian piano-cycles, proposed as a continuation of the Hungarian and Slovak books of *For Children*, show progress not only through a higher level of structural organization which also reflects folkloristic considerations; as the case of the *Christmas Songs* reveals, through the selection of the melodies Bartók also highlights the non-conventional examples of this custom, which he regarded so highly.

4. List of publications

“Adalékok Bartók 2. hegedűrapszódíájának népzenei forrásaihoz” [Reconsidering the Folk Music Sources of Bartók’s Second Rhapsody for Violin], *Magyar Zene* 50/2 (May 2012): 188–209.

“A nagy háború küszöbén: Bartók hunyadi gyűjtésének néhány tanulsága” [On the Eve of the Great War: Some Lessons of Bartók’s Hunyad Collection], *Magyar Zene* 53/2 (May 2015): 121–145.

“Lucrările lui Bartók din 1915 în spiritul *Pentru copii?*” [In the Spirit of *For Children?* Bartók’s Piano Cycles of 1915]. *Observator Cultural* XVII/820–821 (28 April–11 May 2016), Appendix: VI.

Bartók Béla írásai 4. Írások a népzénéről és a népzene kutatásról II [Béla Bartók Writings. Essays on Folk Music and Folk Music Research], ed. Vera Lampert–Dorrit Révész–Viola Biró. Bp: Editio Musica, 2016.

“Bartók about the Romanian Folk Music, to the General Public,” *Minority Studies* 19 (2017): 120–132.

“A román népzene »székelyes-magyaros« dialektusa: Bartók mezősegi gyűjtéseiről” [The Szekler–Hungarian Dialect of Romanian Folk Music: Thoughts on Bartók’s Mezőség Collections]. In *Székely népzene és néptánc*, ed. István Pávai–Emese Sófalvi. Énlaka-konferenciák V. Budapest, Pécs, Énlaka: Hagyományok Háza, 2018, 113–125.

“Tanulságok és ösztönzések: Megjegyzések László Ferenc Bartók-kutatásaihoz” [Lessons and Inspirations: Remarks on Ferenc László’s Bartók Research], *Certamen VI* (in press)

“Bartók and the Violin Music of Maramureș,” *Bartók and the Violin* (in press)

Unpublished conference papers (selection):

Bartók első bihari gyűjtésének forrásai – újragondolva [The sources of Bartók’s first Bihar collection – reconsidered]. “Source Studies”, 10th conference of the Hungarian Musicological Society, Budapest, 4–5 October 2013.

Vera Lampert–Viola Biró: *Challenges in Editing Bartók’s Writings: The Case of the 4th Volume of the New Hungarian Edition of the Collected Essays*. “Composition and Revision with the »Classics« of Twentieth-Century Music”, conference organized by the editors of the Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition, Budapest, 24 September 2016.