

Theses of DLA dissertation

László Kelemen

The music of the „magyar” dances in the
Transylvanian Mezőség in the light of the „Final
Hour” program

Advisor: István Pávai, PhD

Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music

Studies in History of Art and Culture, Doctoral Program

No.: 28.

Budapest

2022

I. Preliminaries

As a student at the Gheorghe Dima Academy of Music in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), I got acquainted with the peasant life as it still existed next to the city in the 1980s. I gained my first experiences on folk music in the field, but I had outstanding professors as well, Ilona Szenik and Traian Mîrza, who added the theoretic background to them. It was also in Kolozsvár that I met Zoltán Kallós and György Martin, two of the most excellent folklorists of that time. Besides my field research, I first met with dances called *magyar* [‘Hungarian’] in their studies, and I started playing them at *táncház* events. During my years in Transylvania, I delved into the related Hungarian literature, such as the anthology *Magyar néptáncagyományok* [Hungarian Folk Dance Traditions], or the study of 18th-century Hungarian instrumental dance music by Pál Péter Domokos. Later, as editor of a music publisher, I had access to the folklore studies issued there, and the writings of Béla Bartók called my attention to the question of a Hungarian character in music. In 1986, I moved to Hungary, and in 1996, I started organizing the Final Hour (*Utolsó Óra*) recording program of Transylvanian traditional bands, which I led between 1997 and 2000, taking part in recording and interviewing 38 bands out of the total 46. The idea to bring village performers to a studio in Budapest was not new. Between 1936 and 1944, similar recordings took place with the support of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Hungarian Radio and

the Museum of Ethnography, under the supervision of Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, Oszkár Dincser, László Lajtha, Gyula Ortutay, and others. Most of these records were released in the “Patria” series of gramophone discs. In the Final Hour program, we recorded on PC hard discs with a much larger capacity, which resulted in an immense collection. István Pávai, author of those summaries on Transylvanian folk music which greatly inspired me, was also actively involved in the program. However, I found only sparse information about the *magyar* dances in the literature.

II. Sources and literature

Bartók’s scholarly attitude and writings are still highly relevant in many issues of ethnomusicology, including folk dance and interethnic relations. His findings were later revisited in János Bereczky, Mária Domokos and Katalin Paksa’s study on Hungarian–Romanian melodic relations in Bartók’s Romanian collection. I also studied the writings of Kodály, Martin, Kallós, and Ernő Pesovár. In the historic aspect of my topic, I relied on the above-mentioned collection of Péter Pál Domokos, and Mária Domokos and Katalin Paksa’s *The High Peak of Mount Parnassus Resounds with Delight*, a collation of 18th-century Hungarian musical sources with folk music data. I also drew on Pávai’s books on the Hungarian folk dance music of Transylvania, as well as his articles on the region’s cultural division. The digital databases edited by him, such as the

collection of János Jagamas, were invaluable sources. Sándor Varga's doctoral thesis and other publications display a clear and comprehensive image of the Mezőség region and its dance tradition.

The fundament of my thesis, the tune stock of the Final Hour program is held by the Folklore Documentation Centre of the Hungarian Heritage House (Hagyományok Háza), and is available online in its Folklore Database. During the program, we started to publish compilations for a broad audience, but with respect to academic requirements. The series was named Új Pátria [New Patria], embracing the legacy of the Patria gramophone discs. By now, 68 CDs and a DVD of dance films have been released. I used the written records and the interviews recorded during the program, but I also draw on my personal field or participatory experience. The Final Hour program is still but scarcely exploited in scholarship, therefore the doctoral thesis of Péter Árendás on Transylvanian *kontra* accompaniment and the booklet texts of the Új Pátria series provide substantial data.

III. Methods

As has been set out, I synthesized results from a range of publications, including historical-ethnographic aspects, ethnochoreology, interethnic and musical factors. In the first part of my thesis, I started out from a general frame which I gradually narrowed towards the analysis of the *magyar*

dance tunes. I attempted to find the relations between historical processes and their impact in the folklore of the researched region. In musical analysis, I used Bartók's comparative methodology, which seems appropriate regarding the interethnic aspects and the multi-layered character of the research topic. I also referred to Romanian researchers, even if they do not use Bartók's methods. I further relied on the works of Martin and Pávai. I did not find any academic musical summary of the *magyar* dances in Mezőség, but similar attempts in the field of dance research provided starting points. I studied the interviews of the Final Hour program for information on the lifestyle of Romani musicians and on the *magyar* dances. As a field collector, I had known most of the program's musician participants before the Final Hour recordings. All this brought personal experience and impressions, which I attempted to verbalise and share in my thesis. For my comparisons, I consulted various concepts of folk tune systematization, synthesizing them with my own observations.

IV. Results

I noticed the frequent occurrence of *magyar tánc*, *magyaros*, and similar denominations for dances in the Transylvanian recordings of the Final Hour program. Even Romanian informants call these dances *ungurește*, *de ungurime*, or similar names. During the program, we discovered new data on this issue, most of which has not been processed yet, except for the

thesis of Árendás. My thesis is probably the first compilation of the *magyar* dances in the Mezőség.

The starting point of my work was the general practice of traditional instrumental music in the Carpathian Basin, which we may call a single “language,” since within a traditional community, there are only minor differences between Romanian, Hungarian or Romani instrumental music, while similarities are much more striking. Many of the tunes may be applied by either of these ethnicities, sometimes in different variations, tempo, or metric character, in different regions.

The *magyar* dances and their melodies are not linked exclusively together. Similarly, the origins and possible ethnic relations of a given tune may be independent from the name of the dance it accompanies. The recorded melodies appear in dance accompaniment in various functions; many of them have multiple variants spread through the Hungarian language area, representing various historic-stylistic strata. With the comparative analysis of examples, Hungarian origin, or Hungarian mediation of tunes can be detected. The label *magyar*, which seems an ethnic one on the surface, does not necessarily mean that a tune has Hungarian origin, nor does it prove that it is a folk tune rather than a composed one. The same applies for the Transylvanian Romanian or Romani tunes called *românește* or *chingardi*. I presume therefore, that before the prevalence of *csárdás*, the local communities were aware of

what belonged to their own repertoire, and named certain dances with an ethnonym only under special circumstances. One reason may be the multi-ethnic character of a community, where a given dance could belong to one particular ethnic community. Sometimes newly introduced, foreign dances were named after ethnic groups. The forming of national identities could be another reason behind ethnyonyms as dance names. Bartók, generally acknowledged by the Romanian scientific community, was the first who pointed out the real value of interethnic transmission in traditional music. Transylvanian folklore as a whole offers a value to all people in Transylvania and beyond, as all ethnicities took part in its formation.

The material, comprising many villages in Mezőség, proved the emphatic presence of the *magyar* dances in the past. However, the once thriving musical and dance folklore, is disappearing due to media influence, and often exists only in the passive repertoire of the last village musicians. This is the reason for the fragmented musical image we gained of these tunes. Field and studio experience, along with the related interviews, helped to introduce the cognitive musical processes of the last generation of Romani village musicians. The assimilation of these people into the dominant ethnicity is now accelerating. The Romanian language now gradually replaces the former diversity of communication, and supersedes even their native Romani. In terms of religious denominations, the Roma usually followed the denomination of the local majority. In the

last decades however, the influence of the Orthodox Church and neo-Christian churches increased among them. Although many of these musicians have passed away, I still hope that I can contribute to a coherent image of their musical world, which now belongs to our past, but continues to enrich our present and future musical culture.

V. Activities related to the thesis

During my years in Cluj-Napoca in the 1980s, I met with the still thriving musician society of the surrounding countryside. I collected their music and regularly played together with them at weddings. After moving to Hungary, I was a founder of the Ökrös band, which often performed with village musicians in concerts and CDs. I edited the music for several performances of the Kodály Chamber Dance Ensemble and the Budapest Ensemble. As leader of the Final Hour program, I recorded the Transylvanian bands involved, edited several CDs of the Új Pátria series, and wrote booklet-texts for them. During my twenty-year service as director of the Hungarian Heritage House, I edited comprehensive concerts such as “Transylvanian violins,” or “Hungarian cimbalom,” with village musicians as guests, and I composed and edited music for the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble. I published several studies and promotional articles. (For more information, see <https://hagyományokháza.hu/hu/kelemen-laszlo>).