

DLA Doctoral Dissertation Theses

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The Transylvanian Lead Cimbalom

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I. Background

The cimbalom enjoyed considerable popularity even before the development of the Schunda concert model in 1874. Given various features of its construction, the older, smaller-sized cimbalom—which sources indicate played a central role in aristocratic, liturgical, and rural folk music alike—was used not for providing a chordal accompaniment, but as a lead instrument, that is, for playing melody. With the cimbalom, however, lead play is not a matter of melody alone: depending on the instrument, the lead cimbalist produces a rhythmic interpretation of the tune, adding to it a variety of ornaments, embellishments, and recurring elements of form. This archaic playing style, presumably once common throughout the entire hungarophone zone, fell into decline with the appearance of the larger concert cimbalom and was eventually replaced by the standardised urban style favoured by a proliferating vanguard of Roma ensembles.

To date, no comprehensive treatment of the folk playing style has appeared in print. The first professional

audio documentation on the topic was recorded by János Seprődi and Gábor Veress, followed much later by László Lajtha, who made considerable analytical headway in his works. Further literature in this vein includes the books and studies written by Bálint Sárosi and István Pávai.

II. Sources

The most important resources for the purposes of this paper were archived folk music materials, most of which have been made available through online databases. A minor fraction of such materials have not yet been processed and are therefore not currently accessible.

Of the collected recordings referenced in this dissertation, the most valuable were those that included interviews and thus provided context regarding the lives of the musicians, traditional dance cycles, occasions for playing music, band structure, and instrument handling.

The field recordings of cimbalist Tamás Petrovits proved of especial significance in that—given his intimate familiarity with the instrument—he was able to

focus consistently on the sound of the cimbalom, even where registration was of a full ensemble, ensuring that it was both clear, and clearly interpretable. In the case of the cimbalists of Magyarpéterlaka and Nyárádgálfalva, Petrovits even went so far as to transcribe the cimbalom part heard in the recordings.

The other sources used herein were all iconographic: 18th-19th-century paintings and copper engravings and 20th-century photographs of musicians and their instruments.

III. Methodology

The analysis presented in this paper commences with a general description of the function of the cimbalom in folk dance music before moving to an overview of the instrumental dance music of Transylvania and characterisation of the cimbalom players of that region in particular. Specifically, the discussion proceeds from East to West, i.e. from the regions of Gyergyó, Csík, Kászon, Háromszék, Udvarhely and Keresztúr, to Sóvidék, the Nyárád riverbank, Marosszéki Mezőség, the

Upper Maros riverbank, and the Central Maros River Valley.

The dances included in the traditional cycles of each area are introduced by means of a representative transcription. Individual recordings were analysed in light of related source-critical data, meaning that where a given melody was recorded on multiple occasions, my transcription(s) reflect the version viewable as most typical.

Within individual microregions, I made special note of villages having traditional Roma or Hungarian folk ensembles. Cimbalist informants are always described in a separate paragraph that includes discussion of their lives and backgrounds, musical repertoires, and instrumental playing styles.

Having provided a detailed analysis of the playing styles of individual cimblists, I found it important to then dedicate a section to the topic of lead cimbalom play in general. To this end, a repository of tunes and motifs created on the basis of the repertoire of Magyarpéterlaka native József ‘Gunci’ Buta is offered as a means (in the manner of an ‘answer key’) to better grasping the

structure of Transylvanian cimbalom play. The collection, too, imparts some sense of the mental universe of a traditionally socialised musician, thus facilitating an improved grasp of the stylistic bounds within which the improvisational technique of authentic folk musicians operates.

IV. Findings

The stylistic essence of the folk music of the three regions studied for this paper—i.e. of Székelyföld, the region of the Central Maros, and Upper Maros riverbank—must be understood in terms of a number of instrument-specific ornaments associated with the authentic, archaic style of play, coupled with certain recurring melodic parts and cadences. These one or two bars of motifs composed of chords or even sequences act to frame the melody, which is then further ornamented with tremolos and arpeggios.

Having sketched out the panorama of Transylvanian lead cimbalists and analysed forty different transcriptions, it can be established that the

motifs, ornaments, sequences, broken chords, and cadences used by lead cimbalists exhibit a conspicuous unity—as if speaking the same archaic musical language, expressed through slightly divergent repertoires that accord slightly different rhythms to individual dance types. Some of these roving motifs—elements of a system of shared musical templates—are wholly identical, others simply variants of one another; and it is this type of simultaneous correspondence and variety that renders the styles and repertoires of Transylvanian lead cimbalists so boundlessly colourful.

V. Other activities relating to the subject matter of this dissertation

My scientific work on Transylvanian cimbalom traditions stretches back nearly twenty years. My thesis for the ethnography department at Eötvös Loránd University, for example, involved several weeks of preparatory fieldwork in Roma communities along the banks of the Küsmöd.

From the early 2000s onward, I have had the opportunity of studying with traditional cimbalists (ethnomusicological informants) on several occasions. Key individuals in this regard include Sándor Bóné (Vajdaszentivány) and Árpád Tóni (Vajdaszentivány).

In a publication filling a long-standing gap in the literature, my *Cimbalom Method for Hungarian Folk Music*, written in collaboration with Kálmán Balogh, placed considerable emphasis on providing an appropriate selection of tunes for use in study, a large number of which were representative of the Transylvanian lead cimbalom tradition.

My work on the present dissertation involved multiple study trips to Transylvania of varying duration, and the collection of music in Marosvásárhely, Mikóújfalú, Kászónújfalú, Kászónimpér, and Kézdimartonos.

In 2021, I published a compact disc of music entitled *Pázsint: Folk Music from Székelyföld and the Banks of the Upper Maros*, the material for which consists chiefly in music in the traditional lead cimbalom

style. The disc offers listeners a taste of the world of the most memorable Transylvanian cimbalom music.