

DLA doctoral thesis

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The Viola as an Accompanying Instrument in
20th Century Transylvanian String Folk Music

Liszt Academy of Music

Doctoral School No. 28,
Classification: History of arts and culture

Budapest

2017

I. Research Background

The goal set by the dance house movement that began in Hungary in 1972 was not only the acquiring and mastering of stylistically authentic folk dancing and vocal and instrumental folk music, but also propagating its use. It involved looking up the still living village performers, interviewing them on folk customs from the earlier period, and through personal relationships learning their repertoire and playing style first-hand, observing the most minute details of the instrumentation. Numerous young folk musicians have chosen this musical path over the past 45 years, and acquired by autodidactic methods the knowledge discovered in this manner. The achievements by multiple generations underscores that the instrumentation and musical thought process that in many ways diverges from classical music can be acquired by those who grow up in an urban environment. The existence of abundant literature aids in passing on the knowledge to musicians performing on stages or in dance houses. Dance house musician training courses and folk music education within an institutional framework can now use numerous educational materials and collections of melodies to teach folk music. Examples are the volumes of the *Hangszeres népzenei példatár* [Instrumental Folk Music Collection] series first published in the mid-1980s by the Institute of Popular Culture and later by the Hungarian Heritage House, such as *Bonchidai népzene*

(1991), *Vajdaszentiványi népzene* (1992), *Kalotaszegi népzene* (1998), *Ördöngösfüzesi népzene* (2008), *Palatkai népzene* (2013), *Gömöri népzene* (2016), and *Kapus vidéki népzene* (2017). For some of these works I was a contributing author or editor myself. The volumes introduce the repertoire and playing style of each village band, with brief descriptions and a large quantity of sheet music notation. These, however, primarily serve practical aims and were not prepared with scholarly care. In addition to this, the scholarly processing of folk music is ongoing, which has produced substantial literature for those interested. The fundamental summary work for the subject of my thesis is István Pávai's *The Folk Dance Music of the Transylvanian Hungarians* (2012), as well as the book *Hungarian Folk Dance Music* (Eds. Márta Virágvolgyi – István Pávai, 2000), which is the product of essays written on this topic over the previous decades.

II. Sources

The pioneering works published by Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály are the starting point for theses on folk music, even if they focused primarily on vocal folk music and its classification. These works are Béla Bartók's *Hungarian Folk Music* (1924), Zoltán Kodály's *Folk Music of Hungary* (1937), and the twelve volumes of *Collection of Hungarian Folk Music* that have been published since 1951. There is significantly less data with

respect to instrument playing, especially string instrument performance methods. Despite this, there were several volumes and studies that assisted me in the first part of my thesis, which introduces viola-type instruments, viola rhythms and harmonisation methods. Such studies are László Lajtha's folk music monographies (1954–1962), Béla Avasi's *A széki banda harmonizálása* (1954), György Martin's *A néptánc és a népi tánczene kapcsolatai* (1965) and the chapters on instrumental music in Lajos Vargyas's *Folk Music of the Hungarians* and on the band from Szék by Béla Halmos. In István Pávai's comprehensive volume *The Folk Dance Music of the Transylvanian Hungarians*, the author makes findings and draws general conclusions based on his enormous collections.

In contrast to a music history thesis that only uses written documentation, in this case a large amount of audio and audio-visual recordings were available, from which we can specifically study village folk music's instrument playing and conformance to the rules. The largest part of these collections can be found at the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Research Centre for the Humanities, as well as the Hungarian Heritage House's archives, which are easily accessible online. Over the previous years many multimedia DVD-ROMs have been produced, which make instrumental material that was previously scarcely known now easily available and in an organised format. Three such works were also published, of which two must be mentioned from the perspective of examining the playing

of the viola: István Pávai's *The Ethnomusicological Collection of János Jagamas* (2014) and *The Folk Music of Magyarózd* (2015). A countless number of CDs featuring original folk music collections are now commercially available. In regards to string bands, we can mention the 11 CD series *Antal Fekete's collections* issued by FolkEurópa, and the original collections issued by the Fonó Music Hall or the Hungarian Heritage House. Other institutions and private collectors also have original instrumental collections in smaller numbers. The primary difficulty with the musical expressions heard and seen in the latter collections is their proper interpretation as well as their precise formulation.

III. Methodology

In this thesis I studied the individual playing styles of the violists that appear in the Transylvanian section of the *Utolsó Óra* [Final Hour] collection. As a collector, I met the majority of them in person, having met many of them previously or on many an occasion since. Additionally, I had access to the sound and video recordings prepared there. I compared these to the general stylistic characteristics of this small region (viola rhythms, harmonisation methods), and I examined which ones are similar or different. The stylistic characteristics also appear slightly differently depending on the musician's personality. I also sought to establish the reason for the

difference, for it matters whether they derive from individual deficiencies, if they are musical elements from another region, or if they are the result of other external influences. Frequently the situation surrounding the collection process can also change the performance at hand. On this basis, it can be determined if individual solutions modulate the given style, or if on the contrary they are not authentic from an ethnographic perspective. I organised the musicians by small regions according to the digital version of *Anthology of Hungarian Folk Music*, where I used the chapter *Subregions of Transylvanian Folk Dance Music* by István Pávai as the foundation. Knowledge of other instrumental collections recorded in a given small region is essential for determining the stylistic characteristics typical for a given region. As a musician, playing together with a band is the best way to feel the cohesion that operates among them. Fortunately, I have had countless such opportunities over the previous 30 years.

IV. Findings

In my thesis, I sought to summarise the cumulative knowledge on folk viola playing that had been previously assembled, since a study specifically on Carpathian Basin viola playing had yet to be written. In addition to the general conclusions of the scholarly literature published earlier, in 1962 in the foreword to *Dunántúli táncok és*

dallamok [Transdanubian Dances and Melodies] László Lajtha drew attention to the importance of thoroughly studying the individual peculiarities of the performers in addition to the music typical for a community. For this I used the *Final Hour* collection from 1997–2001 as a basis. On one hand, I participated in the collection and in processing the expansive material, on the other this well documented material had previously not been the topic of a thesis. Considering that the entire Carpathian Basin collection runs 1,250 hours, I selected the Transylvanian section of *Final Hour*, since that part contains the most playing styles, the best types of violas, and also I was most active in that area as a collector. The 68 publications of the *New Pátria* series contain a representative sample complemented by introductory essays, of which I was one of the editors. Aside from this the literature of the *Final Hour* collection has not been published. As an assistant professor in the Department of Folk Music for 10 years, and a jury member at national folk music competitions, I possess up-to-date insight on which small region's string folk music is trendy, and which awaits discovery. On this basis, I can confidently declare that among the unfamiliar collections found in *Final Hour*, many are deserving of more widespread attention. A stated aim of this thesis is to contribute to this increased exposure.

V. Documentation of the Activities Related to the Subject of the Thesis

I have been involved with instrumental folk music from the Carpathian Basin for nearly 35 years. As a founding member of the Fonogram Award-winning Tükrös Band that celebrated its 30th anniversary last year, I have performed hundreds of concerts with the group in Hungary, Europe and across the world and released seven independent albums. As a professional folk musician with the Budapest Dance Ensemble and the Honvéd Ensemble, for 20 years I collaborated in hundreds of stage performances, and as the group's music director I assembled the music for numerous productions. With the Gázsa Band that formed from the ensemble's musicians we made an additional eight albums. Our folk music trio, together with tárogató player László Gy. Kiss, has recorded five albums so far. As a musical editor and director, I have made 46 albums of folk music. As an author or editor, I have published eight technical publications. For years now I have hosted folk music programmes on Bartók Radio *Néphagyomány zenész mesterei* from 2008–2010 and *Népzene itthonról* since 2012. My professional activities and the specific details of the albums mentioned above can be found at the following address (in Hungarian):

<http://hagyomanyokhaza.hu/oldal/12718/>