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**Oszkár Dincsér, a Forgotten Hungarian Researcher
of Folk Music**

Theses of a PhD dissertation

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I. Subject and antecedents of the research

The accomplishment of Oszkár Dincser (1911–1977) is all but missing from the literature on the history of Hungarian folk music research. The reasons include the short duration of his activity, the scarcity of its surviving documentation, and its abrupt end with his emigration to Switzerland. That coincided with the traumatic events of 1944–1945 and the beginning of a new era in Hungarian history. The oblivion surrounding Dincser is in sharp contrast with his importance in Hungarian folk music research between 1937–1944, the rich material he collected during these years, and the great novelty and high standards of his study *Két csiki hangszer – Mozsika és gardon* [Two instruments of Csík County: fiddle and *gardon*] (1943). The informal research group around László Lajtha at the Museum of Ethnography, from about 1930 onwards, marks the second great epoch of Hungarian folk music research. The second half of this period was characterised by Dincser's contribution, as well as the project of 78 rpm folk music recordings. This cooperation with the Hungarian Radio not only resulted in top-quality recordings at that time, suitable for public dissemination, but also in unprecedented financial support for the fieldwork with the phonograph. The historical research and re-edition of these recordings has been going on since the 1970s, but it still cannot be considered complete. This process is connected to Melinda Berlász' pioneering work on the ethnomusicological achievement of Lajtha and his circle. It was also Berlász who published in 2002 the first article on Dincser's work.

II. Sources and methods

As Dincser worked from 1937–1944 at the musical department of the Museum of Ethnography, an important group of sources comes from the collections of that museum, chiefly the Sound Archives, the Photo Archives, and the File Department. The museum also owns the series of 78 rpm records, while their documentation mostly survives in the ethnomusicological part of the Lajtha estate at the Hungarian Heritage House.

Dincser's papers left behind in Hungary were discovered in 2018, and purchased by the Institute for Musicology in 2019. The first phase of my research was ordering the material, which came in a disorganised state and partly in poor physical condition. Especially valuable are the musical field notes written on separate slips of paper. If a fieldwork resulted in a recording session, these notes were also used in the studio to collect more data or even new melodies, usually added in Dincser's or Kodály's hand, so they count as sources for the 78 rpm recordings as well. Further novelties are a system of Hungarian folk songs assembled by Dincser on thousands of music sheets, and the manuscripts of several unpublished works.

Beyond the history of research itself, I also aimed to contextualise Dincser's material in the history of ideas in ethnography and ethnomusicology. To outline the horizon of Dincser the scholar, I reviewed the contemporary situation of Hungarian folk music research, and of the Museum of Ethnography, as well as Dincser's early life and education. He studied at the Music Academy both before and during his research work, while his studies at the Faculty of Arts of Budapest University were, from the beginning, interconnected with his work and colleagues at the museum.

In the archives of the Liszt Academy and the Eötvös University, I found the data of the courses that Dincser attended. This provided a key to the relevant contemporary literature of ethnography, which in turn proved useful in analysing and contextualising Dincser's publications and unpublished writings. To the few examples of his correspondence known earlier, I have added letters found in the Manuscript Archives of the National Széchényi Library, of the

Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and in the Sándor Veress Archives of the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel. I obtained the file of Dincser's naturalization from the Bern police, and used further documents of Swiss refugee care organizations published online.

Of course, Dincser's horizon encompassed much more than intellectual and scholarly trends, so my research was necessarily connected to the approach of microhistory. His career rose in the context of the Horthy Era, as Hungary regained some of the formerly lost territories through the Vienna Awards, and declined with the German occupation of Hungary, the Holocaust, the Siege of Budapest, and the making of the Cold War system. Many facts of the political, cultural, and social background have proved important in understanding Dincser the scholar. A case in point is the new role assigned to folk culture in contemporary politics and popular culture, as the Gyöngyösbokréta (Bouquet of Pearls) Movement showcased groups of villagers dancing in their picturesque costumes for an urban and international audience. My online press review yielded many data about all these processes, and even about Dincser's life, or the activity of folk music researchers.

Finally, my research includes the approach known as historical ethnomusicology, as I evaluate my data not merely as sources of a scholarly career, but also as historical sources of the local musical cultures that Dincser encountered. A key method in this field is the fullest possible reconstruction of each field trip or collecting session, involving several types of sources such as sound records, manuscript and printed records, and photos. This is a prerequisite for a critical evaluation of the data collected by Dincser, an aspect which attracted much less attention in earlier ethnomusicology due to the different priorities and opportunities of the time.

III. Results

On the level of the history of research itself, I have reconstructed the circumstances of each collecting session as far as it was possible, and accordingly distinguished two groups of the data collected by Dincser. One group comprises the material of the field trips, and of the Budapest studio recordings based on them and validated by them. The other group contains the research that Dincser conducted only in Budapest, with informants staying outside their home culture. Early examples of the latter group are his recordings of Bulgarian singers, and of a band of musicians from Ákosfalva, Transylvania, neither of which has been identified before. However, most Budapest recordings were made as by-products of staged folklore shows such as those of the Gyöngyösbokréta Movement. Many ethnographers and music collectors frowned upon this lavishly subsidised project as a destructive interference in traditional culture, but still used the opportunities for data collection that it offered. It is primarily such data that raise questions of source criticism, like, to what extent they document the revival itself, rather than a local tradition that the revival is supposedly based on. As the beginnings of Hungarian folk dance research are interwoven with the Gyöngyösbokréta, the critical evaluation of the movement has been a well-established process in that field. However, Dincser's corresponding collection suggests that such investigations would be relevant in the history of ethnomusicology, too.

On the level of the history of ideas, I have shown that Dincser attended university courses of the time's leading ethnographers István Györffy and Károly Viski. The courses of the young ethnographers Béla Gunda, Gyula Ortutay, and István Kovács brought a relatively broad and up-to-date international horizon, a high methodological consciousness, and the influence of approaches like British functionalism. Even more important in Dincser's writings is the impact of German comparative musicology, and of Bartók the musical folklorist. At the Faculty of Arts, Dincser also studied Turkish, Romanian, linguistics, philosophy, aesthetics,

and art history, while at the Music Academy, he was a pupil of Kodály in Hungarian folk music and composition.

I wrote a separate chapter on the research in Csík County, Transylvania, which is of central importance in Dincser's work. That includes two field trips in 1942, with sound recordings and photos making up the largest and most complex monographic material of its time in the field of traditional Hungarian instrumental music. Equally significant was the large-scale studio recording based on this fieldwork, conducted in February 1943. However, the sound material of these sessions was destroyed during the Siege. Dincser's doctoral dissertation, *Two instruments of Csík County*, adds useful information on the archival data, and documents their cultural context with an ample interview material. This study contains the most numerous references, even if implicitly, to ethnographic ideas, and shows Dincser's full array of methods from music recording to description of instrumental technique to musical iconography. I have reconstructed the content of the lost recordings tune for tune, based on the written material, and compared it to my analysis of genres in the phonograph material. The synthesis of the sources has yielded a rich material for the history of research, including Kodály as the other editor involved in the studio recordings. On the other hand, it is an equally rich source of the musical culture of Csík, and particularly the Gyimes Valley. Dincser's set of data makes it probable that the local dance music tradition was practically unaffected by the New Style of the Hungarian folk song, and the fashion of the *lassú csárdás* dance and music, in the early 1940s, a situation which changed somewhat later, according to György Martin's data from the 1960s. In addition, Dincser documented the practices, individual styles, and opinions of a generation of musicians who mostly passed away by the time of the major collections with magnetic tape recorders.

The next chapter comprises Dincser's desk work at the museum and those writings which are not directly connected to a specific fieldwork. A debate with Bence Szabolcsi on the prehistoric significance of descending fifth-shifting pentatonic tunes, a topic with strong symbolic implications, testifies Dincser's sceptical stance in the face of Szabolcsi and Kodály's opinion, a scepticism which was later verified by László Vikár's field research in the Soviet Union. Dincser's mostly unpublished musical transcriptions were of a high scholarly standard, but included very few of his own recordings. Major works in this field dealt with the pioneering collection of Romani songs by Imre Csenki, whose original phonograph cylinders were destroyed later, and István Ecsedi's recordings of Hortobágy herdsmen's songs from the 1920s. Both of these series are incomplete, but the Dincser papers may yield valuable contributions to future work on their reconstruction and editing. Dincser also worked as co-editor and translator on the first Kodály festschrift published in 1943. His manuscript of a popular pocket book of folk songs is a testimony of his views about the popularisation and revivals of folk music. His system of folk songs is a hitherto unknown experiment in the history of ethnomusicological systematization, based on Bartók's systems.

The end of Dincser's career roughly coincided with the Siege of Budapest. Four months later, he crossed the border of Switzerland as a refugee, with the aim to continue his journey to the United States and join Bartók as an assistant, a plan never fulfilled. These events mark the end of my investigations in the history of ethnomusicological research, so my last chapter completely shifts to the field of microhistory, and only retains connections with the history of ideas, or cultural history, of ethnomusicology. The process outlined from Dincser's correspondence and newly discovered documents reveals a resignation about continuing a researcher's career in Hungary during the late days of the war and after the war. The reasons seem to be partly personal and incidental, but also, on the other hand, related to an ever narrowing field of opportunities that Dincser had been experiencing all through his activity.

The appendix contains, in tabular form, a number of data that my text is based upon. I prepared separate tables of the musical material on the ethnographic 78 rpm's 1936–1944, of Dincser's phonograph records, 78 rpm records, and photos, as well as his field trips in chronological order. I also added the inventory of his papers as I arranged them.

IV. The author's scholarly publications in the topic of the dissertation

- „Dincser Oszkár 1942-es Csík megyei népzenei gyűjtése és az amerikai zenei antropológia” [Oszkár Dincser's collection in Csík County, 1942, and the American school of musical anthropology]. *Ethnographia* 130/2 (June 2019), 274–291.
- „Hungarian Ethnomusicologist Oszkár Dincser (1911–1977) as a Pioneer of Musical Anthropology.” *Studia Musicologica* 59 (2018 [!2019]), 79–98.
- „Egy elpusztult népzenei gramofonfelvétel nyomában. Gyimes, 1943” [In search of lost gramophone records: Gyimes, 1943]. In *Zenatudományi dolgozatok 2021–2022*, ed. Katalin Kim, 179–238. Budapest: ZTI, 2022.
- „Monographic Research and Anthropological Perspective in Hungarian Ethnomusicology, 1937–1943”. In *Pathways in Early European Ethnomusicology: Pioneers and Discourses*, ed. Ulrich Morgenstern, Thomas Nußbaumer, 241–265. Wien: Böhlau, 2024.
- „»...talán eredetileg ellentmondó formaelvek kiegyenlítésével«. Szabolcsi Bence és Dincser Oszkár esete a kvintváltó pentaton dallamokkal” [“...fusing into unity originally contradictory formal principles.” A debate between Bence Szabolcsi and Oszkár Dincser on fifth-shifting pentatonic folk songs (1940–1941)]. *Magyar Zene*, in preparation.