

Theses of the DLA Doctoral Dissertation

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Comparative study of the playing style of
Hungarian hurdy-gurdy players

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I. Prelude to research

The European tradition of the hurdy-gurdy goes back nearly a thousand years, and it first appeared in Hungary on the coat of arms of a nobleman's letter donated by Leopold I. The first detailed description of the instrument was written by Béla Bartók, who in 1906, during his trip to Csongrád County, met the coachman József Váczi from the village of Szentes, from whom he notated several melodies played on the instrument. Zoltán Kodály mentioned the hurdy-gurdy in his summary work entitled *Hungarian Folk Music*, László Lajtha and Oszkár Dincser described the instrument, which existed in three copies in the museum collection, in their independent study written after the 1939 gramophone recordings known as "Pátria". They also dealt with the European and Hungarian history of the hurdy-gurdy, and also published three detailed melody scores. Bálint Sárosi only briefly touched on the hurdy-gurdy in his work entitled *A hangszeres magyar népzene*. In his opinion, the instrument did not develop a characteristic repertoire or playing style.

These works described the Hungarian hurdy-gurdy music as a unified tradition. In the early 1980s, Gyula Hankóczy was the first to point out that consistent characteristics could be observed in the hurdy-gurdy players' performance style. Subsequently, Béla Szerényi analyzed the playing of players from Szentes and Csongrád separately in his 1996 thesis, but his analysis was descriptive and did not involve detailed comparative work. As a result, in my thesis written in 2013, I analyzed the outstanding playing style of Rókus Papp from Tiszaalpár.

In my doctoral dissertation, I undertook to subject the playing style of the most important hurdy-gurdy players to detailed examination, compare them with each other, and identify the styles that can be outlined.

II. Sources

The basis of my work were the hurdy-gurdy collections from the 20th century. The manuscripts of Béla Bartók's collection in Csongrád County and the audio and video recordings recorded from 1939 to the 1980s were both part

of the data used for my analyses. Among the hurdy-gurdy players from Szentes and the surrounding area, I studied the playing of István Balla, József Kis, József Sipos and Dániel Szenyéri, and among the players living on the other side of the Tisza River, I examined and compared the playing style of Mihály Bársony and Rókus Papp primarily with reference to Bársony. The Archives and Department for Folk Music and Folk Dance Research of the HUN-REN BTK Institute for Musicology, the archive of Hungarian Television, the Ethnological Archives of the Museum of Ethnography, the archives and the private collections under the care of the Hungarian Heritage House provided the core material.

III. Methodology

For the purpose of the analysis, I created scores following a uniform set of criteria using the notations of previous researchers, and then selected those that were most characteristic of the given player. I examined two elements of the performance: the ornamentation of the melody and the percussive sound of the instrument called „buzzing”.

By analyzing the melody, I took into account the type, location and quantity of the ornaments, and for the buzzing, the rhythmic pattern and the dynamics. To identify and name the deviations of the melody from the undecorated frame, I used the book *A magyar népdal díszítése* by Katalin Paksa as a basis. To illustrate the connection of the Hungarian ornamentation method with the European tradition I compared the Hungarian ornaments with the forms found in the didactic publication *Principes pour toucher de la vièle* by Jean-Baptiste Dupuits.

I analyzed the buzzing using computer during which I determined the length of time between each buzzing and their deviation from metricity. I used the concept competence – performance to determine the conscious elements of the playing style. I presented the spectrum of the buzzing characteristic of each player together with the data obtained during the analysis thus illustrating their dynamic differences. Before analyzing the playing style I gave a short review of the performers and the circumstances of the collections made with them. My dissertation did not include those hurdy-gurdy players

whose collected material was not of the quality required for the purposes of the analysis.

IV. Results

Through detailed analysis of the recordings the specific ornaments of each hurdy-gurdy player were identified and compared. Béla Szerényi's earlier statement regarding the territorial separation of Hungarian hurdy-gurdy players was confirmed according to which musicians living on both sides of the Tisza River played in a similar way but differently from each other.

Regarding the melody it can be stated that the ornamentation characteristic of all examined hurdy-gurdy player is the passing tone which everyone played in different forms. The main ornamental element from Szentes and the surrounding area was the trill, while those living around Csongrád preferred to use mordents and turns.

The rhythmic tools of the examined individuals were roughly the same. The rhythms of Szentes side of the Tisza River were similar in three elements: they played

many eighth- and sixteenth-note dactyls, they rarely took a pause at the end of the lines in their csárdás music and in their fast csárdás the dactyl estam was transformed into an emphatic eighth-note pair. The players operating on the Csongrád side of the Tisza River used dactyls to a much lesser extent, they built each line as a discrete rhythmic unit and they almost always took a pause at the end of each line. They preceded this pause with a very powerful quarter buzzing.

My research has highlighted the similarities and the differences between the playing of prominent individuals of the Hungarian hurdy-gurdy. The identification of common technical elements may create the possibility of classifying the playing into uniform styles, while the differences highlight the diversity of individual performing characteristics.

V. Documentation of the activity relating to the subject matter of the dissertation

Permanent musical formations:

2010 - Tallabille

2010 - Istvánfi Balázs – Németh András Duo

More important concerts:

2025.04.13. Tenores di Bitti – House of Music (Duo)

2025.04.06. Táncháztalálkozó (Tallabille)

2025.03.11. Masters and Disciples Concert – Hungarian Heritage House

2025.01.05. New Year's Eve Concert – MÜPA (Duo)

2024.11.06-09. GPDnet Cultural Festival – Doha, Katar (Duo)

Lectures:

2023-2024. *Comparative analysis of the playing style and repertoire of Hungarian hurdy-gurdy players* – ÚNKP scholarship

2021.07.19. – "The role of the traditional E-flat clarinet – hurdy-gurdy duo in music education" – online conference

2018.11.06. – "Instrumental music - instrument and music" – MMA conference

2016.01.16. „The world of bourdon music today” – conference