

*Not about Nationalism:*  
**The Role of Folk Song  
in Identity Process**

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*Nationalism has been one of the preferred topics in both academic and popular discourse within the last few years. However, its vagueness and significant emotional content often muddy the arguments surrounding it. Taking one step back and looking at national identity through the lense of folk music, particularly as it has been used in Hungary by Bartok and the Dance House movement, one can see the process by which folk music has helped to create and afterwards maintain a sense of identity. This paper looks at how Bartok and the Dance House Movement defined a Hungarian population, how the two used age or historic factors in doing this and how they reacted respectively to Hungary's multi ethnic population in the context of categorizing and working with folk music. This discussion takes into account Hungary's history with its triple legacy of desire for unification, a multi-ethnic character, and the role of the nobility in Hungarian life, particularly their attempt to create a national song type called "verbunkos." Finally, it examines the actual use of folk music itself to create an identity and the consequences of this mechanism for the future.*

## **Introduction**

Nationalism has been the topic nouveau for the past ten years in a variety of disciplines. Yet despite its popularity, there remains little agreement about the definition of the word. Used not only in academic but also in person-

al and political discourse, the word has gained substantial emotional content as well. To either encompass its vagaries or attempt to objectify them, most papers about nationalism argue the use and merits of the label.

However, little has been done to clarify the force that nationalism describes and even less to understand its process.

To begin to do so, this paper will take one step back and examine national identity, a more concrete concept. Identity can be defined as the characteristics that individuals use to group themselves with some people and differentiate themselves from others. National identity, thus, includes those characteristics that bring together as well as differentiate those people who live within the borders of a nation-state. Folk music, from the birth of the idea of the nation-state, has been one means of expressive culture used to generate, define, and reinforce national identity. In twentieth century Hungary, both Bela Bartok, the composer and early ethnomusicologist, and a movement that has become institutionalized and known as the Dance House Movement have been instrumental in this process. By analyzing and contextualizing how Hungarian folk music has been used to define identity, one can begin to understand how folk music actually helps to create and afterwards maintain identity.

## History

### Unified States

Hungary's geography and lengthy history cannot be ignored in the exploration of twentieth century ideas about identity. Situated in the Carpathian Basin, surrounded by mountains on all sides, it is truly the center point of Europe. Budapest is roughly equidistant from Rostok on the Baltic Sea, Genoa on the Ligurian Sea and Burgas on the Black Sea and in the horizontal direction equally distanced from Moscow in Russia and Loire in France.<sup>1</sup> Besides its strategic appeal, its central location has also made it

the meeting place of Christianity's two branches, Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism. Indeed, Hungary has been occupied by non-Hungarians wanting to utilize its central location for tactical or religious reasons for much of its history.

Hungary was first invaded in 1242 by the Mongols, who ravaged the countryside and left behind fear of further invasion. Following the death of the last king from Hungary's original Arpad dynasty in 1301, came two centuries of foreign rule, power struggles, war and border fluctuation as Hungary tried to maintain its ground. In 1526, at the Battle of Mochacs, the Ottomans conquered central Hungary, dividing the country into three parts: Royal Hungary, controlled by the Austrian empire; Central Hungary, Ottoman-controlled; and independent Transylvania. From this point in time, Hungary's foreign policy focused on reuniting Hungary under Hungarian rule.

The Ottomans were forced out of Budapest in 1686 and withdrew completely in 1718. However, Hungary was still unable to realize its dream of unification under Hungarian rule because in 1691, the Austrian King Leopold had himself crowned as Prince of Transylvania and issued the *Diploma Leopoldinum* of 1690 making Transylvania an independent principality within the Austrian empire. It was not until *The Compromise* between the Austrians and Hungarians in 1867 that Hungary was once again united. Despite unification at this time, Hungary did not gain complete sovereignty until after the First World War because it had submitted to Austrian rule in order to stave off the Ottomans. Not surprisingly, the idea of unification was (and arguably remains) central to Hungarian thinking.

<sup>1</sup> Sugar, P. F. (1994). *A History of Hungary*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

### **Multi-Ethnic State**

Constant fighting in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries decimated the Hungarian population, leaving the country in need of human resources. Efforts to repopulate from 1720 to 1787 caused an increase from three and a half to nine and a half million people. However, this influx of people drastically changed the demographic mix with the result that over half the population became non-Hungarian. With no ethnic majority, Hungary became a truly multi-ethnic state. However, these groups did not intermingle in the American melting-pot style. Instead, they remained in ethnic enclaves with significant homogenous populations in different parts of the country, Slovaks in the North, Serbs in the South, and Romanians in the East. A gradual assimilation of these new people never occurred. When the idea of the nation-state became popular in the eighteenth century with its goal of assigning each ethnicity its own borders and government, Hungary faced the problem of combining a successful multi-ethnic population with the idea of the nation-state.

### **The Nobles' State**

The nobility maintained a special place in Hungarian society throughout its history, significantly influencing economic and cultural development. The Golden Bull of 1222, similar to the United Kingdom's Magna Charta, established as nobility anyone who owned land, giving them significant rights. A very clear and deep chasm subsequently developed between the peasants and the nobility. This dichotomy has been maintained through the twentieth century. Furthermore, the system of land-ownership prevented the feudal system of Western Europe

with its share-cropping practices from developing in Hungary, causing its economy to lag behind that of the rest of Europe. When the international economy forced structural changes upon Hungary in the nineteenth century, nobles who continued to refuse to work were left penniless or obligated to serve as bureaucrats in the administration of the government. Consequently, the petty nobles reconstituted their role in the nineteenth century as Hungary's political class and its self-appointed culture bearers.<sup>2</sup>

The above summary of events in Hungary's history does not do justice to its complexity, but does serve to highlight the major issues affecting the creation of a national identity. The desire for unification underlies Hungary's continuing need to have and protect such an identity. In the past this has been called nationalism, with pejorative connotations. However, for the moment we will put aside this potent label in order to understand the implications of the desire for identity. Two particular hurdles in creating a national identity have been the multi-ethnicity of the population and the question of who constitute the actual "Hungarians" – the nobles, the peasants, or some mixture of the two. This paper will pay specific attention to how these issues have been addressed and thus have affected the process of identity creation.

### **Identity**

In eighteenth century Europe, the idea of nation-states, ethnically homogenous political entities joined in brotherly union, began to develop. Although the idea reached Hungary, it caused little change in the country's actual political organization. Different ethnicities continued to live side by side as they had for centuries. The factor that separated people remained class or noble status rather

2 Frigyesi, J. "Bela Bartok and the Concept of Nation and Volk in Modern Hungary." *Music Quarterly*: 255-278.

than ethnicity. However, the decision of King Joseph of Austria to switch all of the empire's governmental proceedings from Latin to German in 1784 caused a reaction in Hungary that resulted in a sense of national identity based on language.

The majority of the nobles in central Hungary (as opposed to the German speaking Austrians of Royal Hungary) were Hungarian-speaking, making the Hungarian language the basis of Hungarian identity. The nobility began to support the creation of an Hungarian literature and soon the establishment of a suitable history followed in the form of Andras Dogonics's best-selling Hungarian novel of 1788, *Etelka*, a fictionalized portrayal of Arpad's conquest and establishment of Hungary. As the nobles looked to develop this identity by incorporating the culture around them, they had two options: local folk traditions, which though unique in Europe, were a peasant phenomenon, or to Hungarianize famous works. The latter was more acceptable for the nobility considered the peasants a dirty, uncultured lot. Thus, Mihaly Vitez Csokonai notes the indiginization of one of Voltaire's metaphors, saying [it has been] "dressed in new clothes and Magyarized."<sup>3</sup> Slowly, a specifically Hungarian expressive culture began to emerge.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the nobles developed a third option, and that was to create a national music called *verbunkos*. Songs of a patriotic character, *verbunkos* were composed by individual members of the nobility and passed around at gatherings and disseminated by gypsy bands. The intention of the songs was to create a national music not restricted to any one group but that all Hungarians could share. *Verbunkos* were sung at celebrations but also

used in military recruitment. Although such songs affected the peasants somewhat, *verbunkos* remained the music of the patriotic nobility, helping them to fulfill their new responsibility as the bearers of Hungarian culture.

At the same time as Hungarian speakers began developing their ethnic identity, so too did the other language groups in Hungary. For example, the Slovaks began to demand the right to use their language in official proceedings and started creating a literature written in Slovak. However, since most of Hungary's nobility in the eighteenth century were ethnic Hungarian, and they constituted the governmental bureaucracy, the Hungarian national identity and its supporting language and expressive culture superceded other ethnicities in the political realm. Indeed, Hungarian speakers assimilated the entire governmental zone, giving it a Hungarian identity without acknowledging other ethnic groups. Yet, those other ethnicities, although not wanting to break-off from Hungary, saw themselves as culturally distinct.<sup>4</sup>

The nobility all but ignored the multi-ethnic composition of Hungary. Thus, when the Treaty of Trianon of 1920 split up Hungary into relatively homogenous ethnic nation-states, decreasing "old Hungary," the term often used, to 1/3 of her previous size, Hungarians, were deeply shocked. Moreover, it precipitated an identity crisis that has complicated the issues of unification and plural ethnicities in the construction of identity as approached by both Bartok and the Dance House Movement..

3 Sugar, P. F. (1994). *A History of Hungary*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

4 Hodson, B. (March 10th, 2003). Interview.

## Bartok

Bartok, in his prolific writings, painstakingly and repeatedly defines peasant music. His first distinction is between popular art music (*verbunkos*), which he also calls urban folk music, and rural, or peasant folk music. Although to many they appear the same, as both are oral song traditions, the first is usually created by a single composer, where the latter, handed down from generation to generation and freely improvised around in performance, is considered the “spontaneous expression of a people’s musical instinct.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, peasant music, because of its communal nature, was thought of as more reflective of the group than the individual. Certainly, this was Bartok’s perspective and he privileged folk music over the nineteenth century *verbunkos*. He rejected the nobility as the bearers of Hungarian identity, transferring this responsibility to the peasants, who were in the majority. In this situation, Bartok’s simple choice of repertoire became a powerful indicator of identity.

His second distinction between the music of the nobility and the music of the “folk” was age. As with all entities, age and history lend credibility and give rights to a people. Bartok suggested that folk music represented the “ancient psyche” of the Hungarian people, imbuing Hungarians with a defining uniqueness. The expression of this Hungarian quality in folk music rendered it more important than the more recent, “nobility-created” *verbunkos*. The most important implication of this statement is that identity does not change and develop in the same way as people do. Further, despite its identity’s being an inherent part of the folk, or peasant population, urbanized people are

unable to maintain it, only retaining it symbolically through folk music.

Within folk music, Bartok not only defined the Hungarian character by indicating who “the people” were, but also addressed the idea of an ethnically based state by analyzing the relationship of Hungarian music to that of the other ethnic groups living in the surrounding area. For example, he calculated exactly the influence of Slovaks on Hungarians and vice versa. He even extended his research as far as Turkey, “establishing” Turkey and Hungary as ancient relatives. In a sense, Bartok tried to create a family tree for Hungary in order to determine how groups did and should relate to each other. Bartok also confronted the “multi-ethnic state” question directly by arguing that “racial impurity” in music brought about Hungary’s incredibly diverse repertoire. He explains this diversity as the result of Hungarians’ learning new songs from the neighbors and relearning from the neighbors songs that were originally Hungarian. Through his musical research and arguments then, Bartok offered a solution that provided for both a multi-ethnic state and the nation-state ideal of the “brotherhood of nations.” However, as in his solution to the problem of identity, he considered the relationships between ethnicities fixed. Therefore he did not leave room for any negotiating of identity.

Bartok’s Hungarian identity was based on language, history, a population base that was rural, and music. Indeed music was not only an aspect of the identity but like language, a principle metaphor. This becomes clear when one examines the mechanisms through which Bartok presented his case. Prevalent in Bartok’s work is an emphasis on the scien-

5 Suchoff, B., Ed. (1976). *Béla Bartók Essays*. London, Faber & Faber.

tific process of collecting and systematizing his data. His use of science became a means of finding and legitimating answers to the question of what it meant to be Hungarian. He used folk music to clarify the relationships between the peoples of Eastern Europe. Bartok explicitly stated that the ultimate aim of folk music research was to “clarify problems of settlement [and] history. [By using folk music], one could point to [the] form of contact, to the relationship or contrast of the spiritual complexion of neighboring nations.”<sup>6</sup> Bartok, for example, predicts very exactly the influence of one people on another through an analysis of their respective folk musics. He states that 25% of Romanian folk music is influenced by the particular Hungarian group called the Szekely; 20% of Slovak music by Hungarian music; and 40% of Hungarian music shows foreign influence. At a time of political unrest, this method gave concrete, “scientific” answers of what the Hungarian identity was in a credible and unquestionable way.

From 1934 until 1940, before Bartok took political asylum in the United States, he developed his categorization system and researched the connection between the music of neighboring ethnicities with support from the Academy of Arts and Sciences. Although he published many articles on the topic of what constituted Hungarian folk music (defining the Hungarian identity) and the music of other ethnic groups and their musical relationships, he never published the full collection of songs that he collected and transcribed. One might argue that he did not have enough time to finish this work, or that the songs themselves were not as important to him as the research itself. Although the songs carried Hungarian identity, that identity could only be elucidated

through research. Publishing the songs was merely for people’s enjoyment. Publishing the research was the means for building and maintaining Hungarian identity.

## Dance House Movement

The Dance House movement began in the early 1970s to revive Hungary’s folk music. The establishers of the movement focused not only on the music, as Bartok had, but also on the institutions that surrounded it, notably the village dance house. It is now a highly developed movement with *tanchaz*, an evening of dancing and teaching with live music, occurring several times a week in Budapest, summer camps every week from mid-June through the end of August, numerous professional dance and music groups, even more amateur groups, and many traditional music schools throughout the entire country. Now in its third generation, about 50,000 people participate in this community. Interviews with musicians who have been participants and organizers from the movement’s beginning reveal the nature of the identity they sought through its creation.<sup>7</sup>

The seventies brought several important events to Hungary: significant industrialization, a dramatic shift of population from rural to urban environments, the loosening of political restrictions, and the introduction of disco music. Disco music frequently incorporated snatches of folk music. This phenomenon caused some Hungarians to wonder about their own folk music, according to Kiss Tamas, the director of the Obuda Nepzenei Iskola. It stimulated many first generation revival musicians to go in search of that music, “their music.” They had become convinced that what they had learned about Hungarian folk music in

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> An examination of the present movement goes beyond the scope of this paper.

school was “not the whole story, [because] the feeling was just not there.”<sup>8</sup>

Many Hungarians, having grown up in the city in the cement high-rise housing typical of the Communist era, had not experienced the village world of their parents and grandparents. In particular, they had never experienced the joys of communal gathering to sing and celebrate because such communal gathering was illegal during the 1950's and 60's. Furthermore, travel restrictions prevented many Hungarians with grandparents in “old Hungary,” from seeing them. With the loosening of political prohibitions, people began to make pilgrimages back to the village to collect music and learn about village life. The people who participated in these activities came from many walks of life; some were university professors, others urban poor, and still others from villages without a strong musical tradition. In this case, as distinct from Bartok's folk music or the nobility's *verbunkos*, the inherited repertoire did not define “the people,” the bearers of Hungarian identity, but rather voluntary participation in the Movement and the learning of the songs did. Thus, identity was not fixed but something one could acquire.

Although playing the music was the activity undertaken in these village pilgrimages, focus was on the learning process. Many musicians describe the importance of their village teachers. Few revival musicians traveled to many villages with the aim of just collecting. Many focused on one village and several performers, spending significant amounts of time learning one person's specific repertoire and way of life. Similarly in the dance houses, the teaching of others, particularly children, is the most important activity. The passing on of the music, and thus identity, from one person to another

becomes the focus. The songs as a result become less important as signifiers of age, (as with Bartok), than as providers of continuity between the generations.

In contrast with Bartok, the revivalists brought back not only the music, but the whole context in which it existed, the Dance House. However, they did not try to replicate village life in the city, but to incorporate elements of it into their own lives. The revivalists used the songs to establish and structure a community.<sup>9</sup> Like the village, the dance house in Budapest serves to bring people together in a community within which they can structure their own identity. The flexibility of adapting one's identity in the dance house also allows for a different set of responses to Hungary's multi-ethnic character than did Bartok's rather rigid definitions. Revivalists, for example, were able to mediate their relations to other ethnicities by the interactions that took place within the Dance House and festivals. In contrast with Bartok's definition of ethnic identity based on prescription, ethnic relations did not need to be fixed because there was a community that could negotiate them.

## Conclusion

The difference in the process of identity creation by Bartok and the Dance House Movement respectively leads ultimately to different uses of these identities. Bartok conceived identity as part of the “ancient psyche,” old and unchanging. He argued that this spirit had been lost in the cities, or modern Hungary, and had been preserved only in rural areas and in the folk songs. He did not suggest that one could continue to renew this identity by singing the songs, but rather that Hungarian identity was held in the songs

<sup>8</sup> Kis, T. (March 20th, 2003). Interview.

<sup>9</sup> Morrison, C. (2002). *Culture at the Core: Imagined Communities and Invented Traditions in Scottish Traditional Dance*. *World Dance/Ethnomusicology*. New York, Barnard College, Columbia University.

themselves. The folk songs functioned as a primary metaphor or trope of Hungarian identity. When Bartok was faced with the “ethnic question,” he dealt with it in the same way. It was a static problem that could be solved once and for all through researching the connections between different ethnic groups’ folk songs. This paper will call this kind of identity, *symbolic identity*. *Symbolic identity*, once determined, remains static.

In contrast, identity in the Dance House Movement functions differently. Instead of focusing on finding the crux of Hungarian identity as Bartok did, its participants concentrate on the continuity of a living identity and its transfer from the elders to the youngsters. Through this transmission, identity adapts itself to new conditions, the urban environment, for example, and rejuvenates itself. It is a constantly changing entity. Likewise, the treatment of the “ethnic problem” is fluid. As the Dance House Movement has begun to find its place within a European-wide folk revival, it continuously re-negotiates its identity. Such *lived identity* stands in opposition to *symbolic identity*, since it continually changes, absorbs, and adapts.

This paper only begins to examine the process of creating and maintaining identity. Yet, the distinction between *lived* and *symbolic identity* can be used to make preliminary predictions of how Hungarian identity will change in the face of continued globalization and EU integration. Identity, as Bartok and the nineteenth century nobles before him defined it, will continue to be symbolically Hungarian but unused in daily life. Thus, it will do little to assimilate foreign influences into something peculiarly Hungarian. However, the revival movement will be able to do just that. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bartok distinguished between urban and rural folk music for just this reason, that folk music was a living tradition as opposed to the artificial *verbunkos*. Perhaps now we can make the same distinction between music used to live identity and that used to symbolize identity. Only the former will allow Hungarians, as Hungarians, to assimilate the ever-increasing information received from outside communities.

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