

# Hungarian Art Song

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*Art music has existed in Hungary for centuries. However, often this music was imported or in styles that had developed elsewhere. During the nineteenth century with the rise of the independence movement came a nationalistic desire by the foremost composers in Hungary, to establish a unique Hungarian school of music. The initial attempts at this project left some notable pieces, but did not completely succeed. The twentieth century opened with the folk song expeditions of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály and it was under the influence of of this authentic folk idiom that these composers were able to truly put forth to the world a unique musical language. Songs were not an essential part of Bartók's output, but they were the heart of Kodály's. Often the composers would add their own harmonization to a collected song. They also wrote more traditional art songs in the sense of that music was added to works of poetry. These composers along with others such as Ernő Dohnányi, Ferenc Farkas, László Lajtha, Sándor Balassa, and György Kurtág built and continue to contribute to the both the Hungarian national school as well as internationally to the art song genre.*

## Introduction

Although art music and art song have been present in Hungary for hundreds of years, they did not truly come into existence as a separate indigenous musical entity until the twentieth century. Before that time, the music that falls into the classification of art music and art song<sup>10</sup> can be linked to other, foreign schools of music (i.e. Gregorian Church Music, Italian and German Classicism, or German Romanticism). It was only when Hungarian musicians, educated in western European music theory and practice, began studying their native folk music and wrote pieces influenced by the sensibilities of

<sup>10</sup> Art song is generally defined as music for voice and instrument(s) with an identifiable composer and which does not fall under the category of popular music. Historically, there has been a strong link between the arts of poetry and of art song.

both, that a truly Hungarian school of art music and by extension art song, began. Indeed, arguably some of the best of Hungarian art song is actually in the form of folk song melodies and texts with a more elaborate piano accompaniment added to it. Most of the major figures of the twentieth century worked in this genre. Besides these songs, many composers have written art songs of a more classic definition. These range from the relatively tonal Kodály songs to the post-tonal songs of György Kurtág. Unfortunately, the language of these songs poses a barrier to many singers and they often remain on the periphery of the repertoire. While there are some sounds unique to Hungarian, I have found that I can apply what I learned about singing in other foreign languages to my studies of Hungarian songs. Undoubtedly it has been extremely helpful to have native speakers help with issues of diction and style.

### The Nineteenth Century

Along with the patriotic movements for independence that flourished in the nineteenth century Hungary, came a corresponding movement in music to inaugurate a unique national identity. The two composers who best exemplified this desire were Mihály Mosonyi (1815-1870) and Ferenc Erkel (1810-1893). Mosonyi, inspired by Hungarian poets such as Sándor Petőfi and János Arany, contributed some numbers to the to the art song literature. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the collection *Hat Népdal* (Six Folksongs). Unlike compositions by later composers, Mosonyi's are not actual folk songs, but original works to verse by poet Kálmán Toth, written in the then contemporary popular style. One of these songs gained

such popularity that it even entered into the actual folk song repertoire.<sup>11</sup> While Mosonyi's songs elegantly led the way for Hungarian art song composers, they, like a lot of his other non-vocal works, display a strong link to the German Romantic style. Erkel's compositions also furthered the creation of a national style, but they too reveal foreign Italianate and Germanic stylistic influences.<sup>12</sup> However, Erkel did not write any songs.

The third and most outstanding Hungarian composer of this generation was Franz Liszt (1811-1886). In many ways, Liszt was a person who transcended national boundaries. Born in a German speaking part of the Habsburg empire to an ethnically Hungarian family, he never learned to speak Hungarian. His musical language reflects his cosmopolitan European life, containing German, French and Italian elements. His songs, the vast majority of which are in German, are typically classified as belonging to the German lied tradition. He composed just a handful of Hungarian language songs. In his other compositions, he used Hungarian elements to give the music a national identity, however, according to Bartók these elements are not authentic.

"It is the general view that only in the nineteenth century did folk music begin to have a significant influence, especially on Chopin's and Liszt's art... That is not absolutely correct in that this influence must be attributed not so much to folk music as to popular art music... Popular art music melodies generally lack the absolute perfection so very characteristic of pure folk music."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, while the idea and desire for a national school of music was born in the nineteenth century, it was still necessary to wait for its maturity.

11 *Felleg borult az erdőre* is its title. Bónis, Ferenc. *Mihály Mosonyi*, p.19.

12 The two composers had a falling out over, of all things, Wagner. Mosonyi wanted to promote Wagner's work as the wave of the future. Erkel did not. When Mosonyi publicly reprimanded Erkel, the latter, wielding considerable influence, shut him out of the mainstream musical life. Bónis, p. 23.

13 Suchoff, Benjamin, ed. *Béla Bartók Essays*. p.317.

## Song Collecting and Folk Song Arrangements

At the turn of last century, new, emerging technology teamed with desire to preserve the authentic Hungarian folk idiom spurred many collecting expeditions. The first person to scientifically attempt this was an ethnographer named Béla Vikár in 1896. Soon following in his footsteps were the young Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) and Béla Bartók (1881-1945). This work was still later continued by László Lajtha (1892-1963) and Pál Járdányi (1920-1966). The composers often took these collected melodies and texts and harmonized them. These harmonizations range from the fairly simple such as Bartók's and Kodály's joint collection of twenty strophic *Magyar Népdalok* from 1906 to the more extensive, through composed works of Kodály's great eleven volume *Magyar Népzene* collection composed between 1924 and 1932. Combined with these accompaniments, these folk songs also enter into the realm of art song. Bartók notes how the delve into authentic Hungarian folk music allows for an authentic school of art music as well.

"We had no traditions whatever in the Hungarian art music to serve as a basis on which we could have advanced further. The declamatory attempts in vocal works of our predecessors were nothing else but imitations of Western European patterns which were inconsistent with the rhythm of the Hungarian language... We Hungarians have nothing but our *parlando* peasant melodies as the means of enabling us to solve this question."<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately for the art form, most composers did not stop at harmonizing folk songs but went on, informed by those experiences, to compose original art songs.

## Individual Composers

Given how much the folk idiom, which is of course derived from song, penetrated Bartók's works, he composed surprisingly few art songs. Opus 15 and Opus 16, both composed in 1916 are the only non-folk song vocal compositions which date from his mature composing period. It has been suggested that these works arose out of a personal time of crisis in the composer's life: his opera, *A Kékszakállú Herceg Vára* (Bluebeard's Castle), had been rejected in a composition contest, his attempts to organize a concert series for the Society of New Hungarian Music came to nothing and the outbreak of World War I prohibited further planned folk song collecting expeditions.<sup>15</sup> The poems he selected to set share themes of night, longing and death. It has been suggested that perhaps at this low point in his life, Bartók sought expression through words as well as music.<sup>6</sup> Another particular point of interest with the Opus 15 is the authorship of the poetry. In his lifetime, Bartók did not want to have this cycle published because he wanted the author of the first, second and fifth poems to remain unknown. Research has revealed the author to be Klára Gombossy, a fifteen year old girl from the town of Kisgaram with whom Bartók had a relationship from the summer of 1915 through September 1916. The poem for song number four was a rewritten version of one of her poems and that of number three was written by another girl from that town. Later on, Kodály chose to set this cycle of songs for voice and orchestra. For Opus 16, Bartók chose a more renowned poet, Endre Ady. Bartók was known to be an admirer of the great Hun-

<sup>14</sup> Suchoff, p. 306.

<sup>15</sup> Béla Bartók. Complete Edition: vocal music, lp. essay by László Somfai (trans. by Rosemarie Prockl), p.11.

garian poet and here he pays his tribute to his passionate and often desperate verse.

Solo art song plays a slightly larger role in Kodály's entire output. Opus 1, 5, 6, 9 and 14 as well as an unnumbered set of four songs dating from 1925 are all that he composed in addition to his extensive folk song collections. Opus 1, entitled *Énekszó*, takes popular folk song poems and intertwines them with original folk-like motifs. For Opus 5 and 6, Kodály used nineteenth century poems by Berzsenyi, Csokonai and Kölcsey, while for Opus 9, he turned to the recently deceased Ady. For his final art song cycle, he reached to even older poetry than previously, setting a poem by Bálint Balassi and two other anonymous poems from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Opus 5 and 14 are voice accompanied by orchestra, while all the others are voice and piano.

Internationally, after Bartók and Kodály, probably the best known composer of the twentieth century was Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960). Opus 14 and 16, his only cycles of original art songs date from his stay in Berlin and are in German. His only Hungarian language songs is the group of seven folk songs he set in 1922. These simple, yet effective pieces are strophic, retain traditional major-minor modality and use the piano to emphasize the beauty of the melodies, which were chosen for special features such as tonal vagueness or asymmetrical rhythm. In two songs, number four, *Újfaluba, hazám földjén* and number six, *Az én ökröm a Virág*, he makes a theme and variations in the piano accompaniment which helps the intensity of these poignant songs climax.<sup>16</sup>

Ferenc Farkas (1905-2000) significantly added to the the Hungarian art song reper-

toire. Having done some song collecting himself, he is well informed by Hungarian art song while having a tremendous openness in his work. He set the works of great poets of many nations, often having editions of those works in two languages. He composed over twenty sets of songs, often using unique ensembles. A great example of these two qualities is his *Gyümölcskosár* (Fruit Basket), dating from 1946. Written for voice, piano, viola and clarinet, he set children's verses by Sándor Weöres. Some of these songs employ sophisticated devices such as unusual meters (such as 7/8 in *Altatódal*) or changing time signatures (between 5/4, 4/4 and 6/4 in *A Tündér*), but yet retain a simplicity that could captivate a child.

There are many other composers who to greater or lesser extent have augmented the repertoire of Hungarian art song. József Soproni (b.1930) freely experimented with serialism. He also played with tonal and non-tonal elements in the same work (for instance in his nine German language songs set to poems by Georg Trakl composed in 1993). His style has progressively simplified, often following the characteristics of the language he sets, and he expressed his thoughts in 1997 as follows:

“With the restoration to their rightful place of melody, harmony and singability, it is to be hoped that twentieth century song literature will find its way back to performers and audiences.”<sup>17</sup>

György Kurtág's songs come from a slightly different approach. Using highly unique medium, he has virtually created his own musical language which creates atmospheres which emphasize the meanings of the texts. A good example of his work's singularity is

<sup>16</sup> Dohnányi, Ernő. Complete Songs, cd. essay by Anna Dalos (trans. by Dávid Oláh), p. 4.

the *Attila József Fragments* Opus 20. For unaccompanied voice, he sets not poems of this great poet, but fragments he scribbled down. Another unusual pairing is that of voice and violin for his *Kafka-Fragmente* Opus 24.<sup>18</sup> Of all the Hungarian composers still writing, it is Kurtág who has gained a significant international audience.

### My Experiences

The above is but a sketch of the whole genre of Hungarian art song, touching on some of the highlights, but is by no means exhaustive. Obviously there is a great wealth of material with which to become acquainted. In my time here so far, I have mainly focused on the sub-genre of folk song arrangements. Given that I was a beginner with the Hungarian language, I found their musical straightforwardness as well as sheer beauty to be a good starting point. I have prepared a program that consists of the Dohnányi *Magyar Népdalok* cycle, a selection of seven pieces from Kodály's great *Magyar Népzene* series as well as three from the Farkas *Gyümölcskosár*. Overall, the Dohnányi folksongs have a decidedly feminine perspective, whether it is the betrayed protagonist in *Szerettek, álnok lélek* and *Ázok, ázok*, the desolate in *Újfaluba, hazám földjén* and *Az én ökröm a Virág*, the battered in *Tanuld asszony* or the furious in *Valaki jár udvaromon*. I have been especially haunted by the Kodály piece, *Ifjúság mint selyommadár*. Throughout the entire song, the piano plays strummed chords to resemble a lute, hearkening back to the early music, which I worked on for three semesters as a

undergraduate. In *Zöld Erdőben* the unsteadiness of the syncopation hints at the lack of certainty in this girl who begs her lover to wait. In *Este, Rózsám, ne jöjj hozzám*, the first three verses ceaselessly build up into a rage that expodes and spends itself. *A nővérek* gives the singer the opportunity to play with the contrast between a rich life and a poor one, with a surprising conclusion. In *Akkor szép az erdő*, there is wonderful piano interlude in which a singer can practise her acting skills and the spacial grandeur of *Magos kősziklának* is of almost operatic proportion to me. I have found the three Farkas children's songs I have worked on to be so enchanting, I am contemplating whether I have time to learn the other nine.

I have also studied some Bartók arrangements from the original Twenty Folksong collection he completed with Zoltán Kodály. These works are extremely bare and leave a great deal to the declamation. I found that they emphasized the text to an extent that was a little uncomfortable for me as a beginner with the language. The Liszt songs, while lovely, are so akin to the other German Romantic pieces I studied in my while a student in America that I have come to believe that although they can be technically classified as Hungarian, it is not necessary to study them here, specifically, to absorb the style. In my remaining time, I would like to learn at least one of the Bartók art song cycles, one of Kodály's and perhaps some songs by composers I haven't worked on yet, such as Sándor Balassa and András Mihály.

<sup>17</sup> Csengery, Kristóf. *József Soproni*. p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Halász, Péter. György Kurtág. p. 18.

## Catalogue of Selected Composers' Solo Vocal Compositions

### Balassa, Sándor:

*Dalok a Rottenbiller utcából, op.1* (words by the composer)

*Two songs, op.16* (poems by Dezső Kosztolányi)

### Bartók, Béla:

*Hungarian Folk Songs*, # 1-10 (1906)

*Eight Hungarian Folk Songs* (1907-1917)

*Five Songs, op. 15* (several poets)

*Five Songs, op. 16* (poems by Endre Ady)

*Village Scenes- Slovak folk songs*-for voice and piano (1924)

*Twenty Hungarian folk songs* for voice and piano (1929)

### Dohnányi, Ernő:

*Six poems by Victor Heindl for voice and piano, op. 14*

*Waldelfein* (1906) (poem by Victor Heindl)

*Im Lebenslenz, op. 16* (six poems by Conrad Gomoll)

*Hungarian Folksongs* for voice and piano (1922)

### Farkas, Ferenc<sup>19</sup>:

*Eszterlanc*- four songs with piano (1936) (poems by Ernő Számadó)

*Gyümölcskosár*- twelve songs for clarinet, viola, piano and voice (1946) (poems by Sándor Weöres)

*Zöld a kökény*- twenty Hungarian folksongs with piano (1954)

*Török dal júliához Berben*, with guitar (poem by Bálint Balassi)

*Gitár dalok* (1983) (poems by Jenő Dsida)

*Párisban járt az ősz*, with piano (1983) (poem by Endre Ady)

<sup>19</sup> This is only part of Farkas' solo vocal literature, as his output is quite extensive.

**Kodály, Zoltán:**

*Sixteen Songs, voice and piano, op. 1* (folk texts)

*Two Songs, voice and orchestra, op. 5* (poems by Endre Ady)

*Seven Songs, voice and piano, op. 6*

(poems by Dániel Berzsenyi, Ferenc Kölcsey and Mihály Csokonai Vitéz )

*Five Songs, voice and piano, op. 9* (poems by Endre Ady)

*Three Songs, voice and orchestra, op. 14*

(Bálint Balassi and anonymous sixteenth and seventeenth century poets)

*Hungarian Folk Music* 11 vols. (1924-1932)

*Five Songs of the Mountain Tschereemis* (1961)

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3. *György Kurtág*. Péter Halász, Magus P, Budapest, 1998.

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**RECORDINGS:**

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*Bartók: Five Songs Op. 15, Five Songs Op. 16, Hungarian Folksongs*: digital stereo HCD 31535. Hamari Júlia, mezzo-soprano, Prunzi Ilona, piano, Hungarian State Orchestra, Kovács János, cond. Hungaroton Classic, 1992.

*Dobnányi: Complete Songs*: digital stereo HCD 31949. Kertesi Ingrid, soprano, Gulyás Márta, piano. Hungaroton Classic, 2001.

*Famous Folk Song Arrangements by Bartók, Kodály, Lajtha*: mono stereo HCD 18242. Török Erzébet, mezzo-soprano. Hungaroton Classic, 1999.

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