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Back to Basics: The Social and Cultural Implications of Hungarian Modern Classical Composers and Their Music

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Introduction

"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are." -Anais Nin

Living in Hungary has allowed me an insight into better understanding Hungarian composers and their world. This, in turn, has given me a more complete comprehension of their music. My original goal was to better grasp what I perceived to be a sense of honesty in Hungarian classical music, an immediacy and direct purpose that classical music from some other areas of origin does not often display. I found that this honesty does indeed exist in the works of many varied Hungarian composers, and I began the interesting process of trying to determine why. Why did these composers search for a direct means of expression and unusual uses of instruments and the voice to display with greater accuracy the exact mood they meant to communicate? Not a simple question to answer and one which I will continue to explore; however, I have learned that the musical exploration of these composers is tied largely to the political and governing history of Hungary. The changing borders and shifting governmental structures led many to look inward for a sense of defined purpose and personal clarity.

As a singer, my work is focused primarily on performing, so the guiding motivation of my research has been to enhance my ability to communicate with an audience. It is difficult to sum-up an entire year's exploration, however, here I would like to share a bit of what I found to be of particular interest and relevance and I will touch on a few of the experiences that have shaped my view of the modern Hungarian composer.

The Men, Their Music, and Their Homeland: an Overview

"Everything of their thoughts and experience is given to us in their music"

Béla Bartók, Zoltan Kodály, György Ligeti, György Kurtág. These Hungarian men helped to define and redirect the shape of modern classical music. Bartókth was active in the first half of the 20th Century as a performer, composer, and folk song collector. Kodály, friend and contemporary of Bartók, was also a composer and collector of folk songs, as well as an important educator who developed a method of teaching music currently used worldwide. Ligeti was a forward thinking, sometimes radical, practically unclassifiable, composer of classical music living from 1923-2006. György Kurtág, also a composer, is still living and actively changing the modern landscape of classical music composition. Why? Why have these Hungarian men all realized such a profound impact on modern music? And what? What moved these composers and musicians to such

creative revelation? During my short time in Hungary, I've come to witness the immense bearing a nation's history lays on its people; a burden compounded by disparate political systems, altering governing rulers, and quick societal shifts. These men were all profoundly affected by the political and social structures in place in Hungary during their lifetimes, and it is this very affect which led them all back to their roots. They each maintained a great need to define themselves and the art form in a way that communicated the very uniqueness and singularity of their perspective as Hungarian musicians¹.

I'll begin where they returned. Béla Vikár started to record and collect folk songs in the Hungarian countryside in 1895, and he introduced these songs to Kodály and Bartók which ignited a life-long and important interest in this "music of the people". It was indeed folk song that changed the direction of not only Hungarian art music, but also played a large role in transforming all Contemporary classical music. There were many appealing aspects of folk

1 Notably the world famous Hungarian 'cellist Janos Starker, who was a child prodigy and later in his own journey for personal understanding asked himself the question "What happens to the bird who sings and doesn't know how it sings?" leading him to analyze every aspect of his performing technique, and as a result he wrote one of the most important treatises on string playing in modern times. He also said, in regards to the fact that his comments cause occasional controversy, "I was just stating the truth as I saw it. I went through hell in my youth because of the war... and having lived through it I stopped being afraid. I couldn't care less what others think if I'm speaking out against something that runs contrary to my fundamental beliefs. I don't play political games, and I never have" (Internet Cello Society Interview, 2004). I think this sentiment sums up what would have been the viewpoint of not only Starker, but Bartók, Ligeti, and many others as well.

music to these men; it represented the search for the self in both a collective and an individual way. Folk music provided a sense of connection and helped to define a national identity for a Hungary where borders and political construct were failing, changing, and unreliable.

Bartók and Kodály were simple, unassuming men, who without grand intention had started a change in perspective in composers worldwide. Their work was born out of an important need for exploration and understanding. These men were not seeking international fame; they looked inward, focusing on themselves, their families, and their homeland. Unfortunately, their focus on Hungary (which did, incidentally, bring them international recognition) and the debt they felt to it was not reciprocated from a nation in strife, leading to the exile of Ligeti and Bartók, and many other artists including not only composers but also performing musicians. It was not exactly a directly forced exile by the government, but these men had a need to create, their voices were their music, and when their ability to speak was choked with governmental mandates, it was not only their music but also their lives that were suffocated. They concerned themselves with the *experience* of music making; it was something to be *felt*, beyond just being heard. This was the lens through which they understood the greater world and its inevitable truths. Bartók was not a religious man. His searching was very much secular; rather than being dominated by an ethereal voice of a distant world, his process was personal, in-depth, probing, and firmly planted in reality.

In all facets these men held little

pretense; there was nothing false or showy about them, no barriers to their honest approach. In exploring their own lives and dispositions these men became the voice for a greater Hungary and its realities. Life in Hungary was truly difficult, and to this day it remains challenging for many, with exceptionally high rates of alcoholism, mental illness, and suicide. Many cite rapid and intensive social changes as having created this deep impact on Hungarian society. Béla Balázs, early experimental cinematographer and friend of Zoltan Kodály, is quoted as saying "art is born at the point when life becomes aware of death; art stems from the transcendental instinct of man, from a longing to overstep the limits of everyday reality". The Hungary of the last century has been an especially fertile ground for artistic exploration. Hungary's vivid traditions and art have had influence at times from Austria or the Ottoman Empire, but it has retained its own vibrant and unique way of life. To these composers it was essential that the music represent the 'distinctive experience of their country. As Hungarian composers they sought to redefine musical language so that it suited their own experience.

Even in times of political or social strife, the essential element of culture would not be allowed to disappear in Hungary. In fact, just the opposite occurred. Interest in and links to a cultural identity became stronger as borders and politics fluctuated. Culture became a form of nationality for a homeland that did not fit neatly within externally imposed borders. Within Hungarian folk music there can be found

a sense of the people, a total experience of the pain as well as the rejoicing they felt. Through genuine exploration these composers were unafraid to depict the darker aspects of life and represent the whole truth. This portrayal of realism in the music guides also the performing, and hopefully too the appreciation. It strives to make the greater world a more truthful place in its simple and humble way, one song at a time.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) and His Buddy Kodály

“Create excitement. Don’t get excited.”
-György Sebők²

Bartók’s demeanor was penetrating and thoughtful, reserved and considerate. He rejected the given norms, preferring instead to analyze, understand, and decide on his own what best suited him. This trait was also apparent his own piano playing, “nothing was stereotyped, according to formula, but individually shaped, molded in a most convincing manner.”³ He was quoted as saying “the mind must be free to devote all its energies to the task of giving life to music.”⁴ Some other signs of Bartók’s inquisitive nature are his atheist beliefs at age 22, and living for years as a vegetarian (at a time when neither were quite so in vogue). Outwardly appearing to be a private and guarded man, Bartók was not without humor; he did not laugh often, but when he did it was unforgettable.

² Sebok was an internationally renowned pianist and teacher born in Szeged, Hungary

³ Gillies, Malcolm (1990). Bartók Remembered.

⁴ Gillies, Malcolm (1990). Bartók Remembered.

One incident arose when he saw a mistake, from his foreign publisher in one of his compositions. The title that was meant to read, “Tót legények tánca” (Dance of the Slovak Youths) but had instead been set in the first proof as “Tót lepények tánca” (Dance of the Slovak Pies).

For Bartók the act of music making was essentially sacred, “he sought to integrate the physical with the spiritual in a life affirming totality.”⁵ Bartók “always mentioned the miraculous order of nature with great reverence”⁶ and this attention to a natural law and order, a sense of the detailed workings of nature, were also evident in his music. On his daily walks in the outdoors he would pay close attention to a pile of dung and the many beetles that fed on it, noting a connection to all of the cycles of life. The importance of nature is a key point to understand when looking to gain insight into Bartók as a composer. Bartók often wrote his music outdoors. He preferred to be alone or with family and in nature, to being in formal crowds of people.⁷ The larger and total idea of nature also included a comfort with the body and with nudity, “the whole being”. Bartók endured a lifetime of ill health beginning with his childhood when he encountered a number of diseases; because of this “he regarded physical wellbeing essential for any other accomplishment.”⁸ Kodály and Bartók, along with their wives, took

⁵ Gillies, Malcolm (1990). Bartók Remembered.

⁶ Brown, Julie (2007). Bartók and the Grotesque.

⁷ Gillies, Malcolm (1990). Bartók Remembered.

⁸ Bartók was not alone in this, other composers like Hugo Wolf also composed their music outdoors.

⁹ Bartók, Peter (2002). My Father, Homossa, Fl., p. 48

a holiday together in Switzerland that involved nudist activities.¹⁰ It was there that Bartók worked six to eight hours a day on the score of his psychologically thrilling opera Duke Bluebeard’s Castle. The work is unafraid to go into a dark, abstract world where little is known, with its many doors acting as metaphor for hidden secrets and the heart. To think he composed it all-the-while in the solarium wearing only a pair of sunglasses!¹¹ While Bartók was not a devoted nudist like his friend Kodály, he was certainly against what he viewed as the artificiality of modern life and its progression away from unspoiled nature. It was not just the body, but also the physical dimension of music-making that was very important to Bartók. He viewed the voice as the closest means of making music to the bodily ideal; having no instrument obstructing the musical expression from the audience. Some of Bartók’s contemporaries were concerned with primitive experiments using technology in creating sound.¹² However, aware of these experimentations Bartók had little interest in what he viewed as separating the body from music. He wanted instead a pure and honest representation of the human experience and generally steered clear of the phonograph for hearing music (unless it was for Folk music research) in favor of live performances with their many nuanced tone colors and full range of expressive capabilities. The Kodály

¹⁰ Brown, Julie (2007). Bartók and the Grotesque.

¹¹ Zsuffa, Joseph (1987). Béla Balázs: The Man and the Artist.

¹² including Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) with his use of the Ond Martineau, a very basic early electronic instrument.

Method of education for music involves movement and the body as a key element of the musicmaking experience. The quest for balance and the search for simplicity were represented in every aspect of Bartók and Kodály’s lives.

Bartók’s Journey Back to Basics

“penetrating into the real throbbing heart of the music” - Bartók

As a young man who was eager to prove himself, Bartók wrote the Kossuth Symphony and as a result, Lajos Kossuth (perhaps the greatest man in Hungarian history) was defined musically with the vocabulary of Vienna at the time. Bartók’s youthful understanding of style did not yet afford a firm voice of his own, or of his country’s experience. The quest for his unique voice would later lead to a rejection of the Germanic and Austrian influenced composition models of the time. Within his own compositional style he soon shed his awkwardness and gained a greater importance, giving all of Hungary a voice. Bartók’s search for a real and soulful music, which he felt was absent in the music scene of his day, led him to the peasants of Hungary and their folk music – the Magyar népdalok. He regarded “each folk-tune as a model of high artistic perfection.”¹³ Bartók was happiest when collecting songs with the simple peasant people of the countryside; people that were connected to nature

¹³ Manga, János (1969). Hungarian Folk Song and Folk Instruments.

and a “natural order” in a way that he understood, and to which he could easily relate. One example of Bartók’s poignant folk song arrangements is *Elindultam Szép Hazámbúl*. This song embodies the whole of the Hungarian sentiment: sadness at the loss of a homeland, the definite sense that it is not possible to return, looking back with tears in one’s eyes. It is short, powerful, honest, and real. The occasional well placed dissonant note by Bartók has an amazing amount of power, conveying the text of wandering and loss.

*Elindultam szép hazámbul,
Hires kis Magyarországbul.
Visszanéztem fél utambul,
Szemembül a könny kicsordult.*

*Far behind I left my beautiful homeland
Fair among her valleys sleeping
On the roadway once I looked back,
Looked, and found that I was weeping.*

This unassuming (and by all accounts rather unattractive) man was true unto himself and as a result became a national hero. There is a street in Budapest named after him, he was on the 1000 Forint bill until 1983, and there are countless other examples of how he is admired both in his homeland and abroad. In the Mid 1950’s “reformist intellectuals demanded the right to hear Bartók’s music; they also reclaimed him as a speaker of difficult truths, and therefore as significant symbolic ally in their quest for personal and political freedoms.”¹⁴ The poet Gyula Illyes claimed Bartók’s most modern music as a site of active resistance to

tyranny. Dissonance in music was a form of public revolt and in that way, Bartók was the voice of a united revolution. “His oeuvre and personality signify much more; they are the symbol of political radicalism, of a modern, democratic, “European” Hungary.”¹⁵

It is heartbreaking to know that this man of such great importance to music and to Hungary, in 1942 with much personal consternation emigrated to the United States, where he later died of Adult Leukemia in poverty.

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

“I could try to write music which preserved the great ideals of liberty and justice”¹⁶

György Sándor Ligeti is the primary reason I came to study in Hungary. His music captures my imagination with its sense of pure individuality. I believe his curiosity and constant pursuit of an innovative voice is truly inspiring. For me the fascinating concept is that his awareness of innovation climbs far beyond shocking squeaks and effects, it comes from a place of meaningful understanding

¹⁵ Frigyesi, Judit. *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*

¹⁶ Kerékfy, Márton (2008). “A “new music” from nothing”: György Ligeti’s *Musica ricercata*”

– Ligeti, like Bartók and Kodály, studied and arranged folk music early on his in career. Most of Ligeti’s family, with the exception of his mother, was casualties of the Nazi concentration camps, and he himself worked as forced labor during WWII. He began his studies at the Liszt Ferenc Academy in 1945 under Ferenc Farkas (who was also interested in Hungarian folk song and had set many folk-type tunes in his own compositions). Ligeti’s early compositions, such as, *Bölcs t l a sírig* (From Cradle to Grave - 1948) are already dealing with the larger question of life and mortality. From 1947-1989 Hungary was under Communist rule which was one key factor prompting Ligeti’s quest for his own unique identity; this is another example of the link to politics and the artist’s search for the self. Ligeti left Hungary in December of 1956, fleeing in the brief window of time when Hungary was not under Soviet occupation after the 1956 Revolution. This was a significant event in Ligeti’s life and the sorrow and sense of wandering he felt are apparent in many of his compositions, such as *A bujdosó* from his *Öt Arany dal*. Like Ligeti, many have fled Hungary in hopes of a better life, and *A bujdosó* or *Elidultam* of Bartók have spoken with song their profound loss.

I think it was inevitable for Ligeti to be on a quest for personal meaning having experienced a number of life-defining events at such an early age. A quest for self knowledge and artistic insight was at hand; the question in his mind, “What is my voice? Under Communist cultural policy folk songs were encouraged, and in his youth Ligeti found income creating

non-controversial folk song arrangements for choruses in Hungary. The heritage of folk music and its connection to the people and their lives organically infuses it with a sense of earthly reality. Ligeti learned this reality early on, and it was sustained as paramount with all his later compositions.

One such set of compositions *Négy Lakodalmi Tánc* (Four Wedding Dances), with their lyrical and sometimes mysterious sound-colors, paint a picture of traditional village life and the trepidations and merriment of a young girl’s wedding. These songs have been important to my own acquaintance with Hungarian folk music, as they were the first I heard and came to love, prompting me to explore further. The previously mentioned *Öt Arany Dal* are also a good example of this style of Ligeti’s composing, originally banned in Hungary for their open questioning of authority (*V. Az Ördög Elvitte a Fináncot*, *The Devil Took the Tax Man Away*) and the sentiment of loss of a homeland (*A bujdosó*, is a style of song that originated after the Turkish occupation of Hungary and displays a profound sadness and sorrow for the loss of a homeland). These pieces show a strong Hungarian identity and would have encouraged in the people dissonance away from the Communist ideal. For Ligeti, Bartók, and others, the connection to folk song became the roots upon which the new tree of original composition could grow. Their new pieces were distinctive and often experimental, but they were still grounded in the Hungarian traditional music, giving it a purpose and a heart.

Ligeti's Journey Back to Basics

"What can I do with a single note? With its octave? With an interval? With two intervals?"

*With certain rhythmic relationships?"*¹⁷

Ligeti felt dissatisfaction with previous styles of composition, trying them on and experimenting but never finding the right fit. He felt a need to emerge as a distinct entity representing his own thoughts and views. The idea of "back to basics" was embodied by him and was essential for self discovery; he had to start from scratch and evolve in order to find his voice. He rejected everything that was previously given, ready-made, or stereotyped in order to be free to find himself. This sense was also strong in Bartók and goes hand-in-hand with a questioning of authority. The most one could say when trying to pinpoint Ligeti's style of composition is simply that he has none. His music has represented constant growth and change, looking at each piece as a new endeavor and using whatever compositional method was needed to communicate effectively the idea at hand. His lifelong pursuit was to continuously seek out what was new and real to him in that moment.

Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata* of 1951 is a set of eleven short pieces that begin in the first movement with one pitch and add a note of the chromatic scale in each progressive movement until the eleventh, which uses

17 Kerékfy, Márton (2008). 'A "new music" from nothing': György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata*"

every note available to the composer in the scale. "In 1951 Ligeti recognized that his task was to leave his former style and to create his own expressive means and language from elementary musical material."¹⁸ Ligeti completely redefined his style by exploring in this way until he had, for himself a language for communication that felt personal and "true" instead of simple regurgitation. Others have also experimented with these small, even "micro-movement", forms such as Kurtág in his piece *Kafka Fragments*, Bartók with his six volumes of *Mikrokosmos* for piano, and even Arnold Schoenberg with his modern music landmark *Pierrot Lunaire*, but few have limited themselves to such basic building blocks as Ligeti.

An interesting duality occurred in Communist era Hungary. There were no public performances of dissonant music, yet to maintain pace with the innovative progression of classical music in general, composers did still write utilizing dissonance. These discordant pieces were also performed, but for small appreciative and understanding audiences in a private home rather than a public concert hall. This encouraged an obvious distinction between the public and private lives of Hungary's artist citizens. One example of Ligeti's specific compositions written with his own voice in a modern way but with a folk song influence is *Gyümölcs für*, from the *Harom Weöres dal*. With this simple and mysterious song Ligeti gives voice to the breeze. As with the *Musica*

18 Kerékfy, Márton (2008). 'A "new music" from nothing': György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata*"

Ricercata, he demonstrates an economy of means and utilizes only five pitches (C, A flat, D flat, F, and G) and provides simple movement in the melodic line with the use of smaller notes, known as "grace notes," between pitches. This creates an understated but absolutely effective depiction of the wind shaking a cluster of fruit that hangs from a tree.

Ligeti was a master of innovation; his opera *le Grand Macabre* is an excellent example with its political themes and cacophonous overture and interludes utilizing nothing but honking car horns for minutes at a time. One of Ligeti's main characters, Prince Go-Go, is a petulant young ruler, concerned only with his own basic needs and satisfaction. He mandates high taxes to pay for his personal luxuries, he has a secret service that periodically delivers intelligence messages, and he makes tongue-in-cheek reference to "our dear nation", all modeled after Ligeti's own political views and the gross abuse of power he saw in Hungary's Communist government. With another small jab to the censors, in the original German language version Ligeti named two key figures *Clitoria* and *Spermando*¹⁹ The opera is full of ironic overtone and ambiguity all-the-while dealing with a most serious subject matter, death and mortality, in a playful and humorous way.

The *Lux Aeterna* is a Ligeti composition for unaccompanied chorus, entirely different from *le Grand Macabre* in its displays of innovation. Close knit harmonies and compact pressure are particularly powerful as a musical

19 for the English language version, these characters' names were subdued to *Amando* and *Amanda*.

depiction of the "light eternal"; this music is completely atmospheric, concentrated, and intense. It is specifically felt rather than listened to, it is understood as much by one's racing heart rate and visceral sense as it is by the ear drums. Perhaps the height of Ligeti's innovation can be evidenced in his *Poeme Symphonique*, a composition that does not even use traditional instruments or musicians. Instead, it is written for 100 ticking metronomes, all triggered at the same time by a mechanical switch. Ligeti is unafraid to explore and create new boundaries, posing the question for the audience, "what is music?," seeking inherent beauty, form, and pattern, in what might seem to be at first easily discounted as only chaos.

Ligeti's new ideas of music certainly paved the way for out-of-the-box thinking and compositions by other composers who followed, like recent Pulitzer Prize winner Steve Reich with his famous piece *Clapping Music*²⁰ or his rhythmically driving and meditative *Music for Pieces of Wood*.²¹

20 As you might guess, this piece is for an ensemble of performers who clap for minutes on end creating various and subtle permutations in their rhythmic patterns.

21 The simplicity of two pieces of clacking wood is a very "Ligetian" concept.

György Kurtág (1926-) and the Gang

György Kurtág is another Hungarian composer who uses the power of simplicity to make his statement. “Short but meaningful” would easily describe a movement of his work *Kafka Fragments*. His music is like a short meditation encouraging heightened awareness in the listener with the use of small but poignant musical gesture. Kurtág is also unafraid to explore microtonal scales and new uses for creating sound with the voice and instruments. There are many other important composers of Hungarian decent or with ties to Hungary that unfortunately I have space only to mention. Haydn (lived and worked in the employ of Hungaro-Austrian Royalty), Beethoven (who famously gave concerts in Budapest), Schubert (who was influenced by the uniquely Hungarian style of music known as *Verbunkos*²²), Liszt (who is one of Hungary’s most famous composers and who was himself interested in collecting songs of the peasant people, though it never came to fruition). Many others visited Hungary to perform or conduct including: Mahler, Wagner, Berlioz, Brahms (whose Hungarian Rhapsodies are well known worldwide), Delibes, Massenet, Saint-Saëns, and Richard Strauss.²³

22 *Verbunkos* was an 18th Century Hungarian dance music that was often used specifically during military recruitment events, which were quite frequent at the time.

23 Benjamin Rajeczky, et al (2001). *The New Grove Dictionary of Music, Hungary: Art Music, & Hungary*.

Look at My Heart

Great art concerns itself with the larger human emotions and experiences: love, hardship, our own mortality. Hungarian music plants its focus in this realm. The uniting power of misery or the sadder side of life is an emotion we as humans can all relate to and understand on many levels. Oppression is experienced by people the world over. This truth in song is tangible in Hungary because of its long and riddled history with external occupation and warfare, as well as internal political strife and corruption that continues to segregate Hungary from the rest of the world and isolate its resources and wealth from Hungary’s own people. This leads to a specific and unique Hungarian identity in art song, which is not necessarily the case with the song of other countries such as France or Germany where it can tend to be much more metaphorical, mythical and romanticized and less connected to a prominent reality experienced by the people. Though Cabaret music from World War II Germany does deal with political topics, making bold statements against the reigning regime, it does so in a popular, rather than a classical musical realm, and lacks the connection to history and to the people that is felt in Hungarian folk music. Hungarian music is different in that it is not about being voyeuristic or ostentatious with the shout of “look at me”, rather, it calmly states “look at my heart.” The prevailing mood imparts, “this is how I am feeling, you can look in at my life for a minute if you want to feel it too”. It is very internal, and as such, no obstructions exist for the audience to sense the truth of a deeper understanding

and connection. While searching for examples of Hungarian folk songs I came across something interesting, the Hungarian Suicide Song. The actual title of the song in Hungarian is *Szomorú vasárnap* (Gloomy Sunday) and the lyrics talk of the untimely death of a loved one and the singer’s contemplation of suicide. Composed in 1933 by the Hungarian Jew Rezső Seress, this song has become incredibly famous, or rather infamous. I feel that *Szomorú vasárnap* is a contemporary folk music of sorts, it tells of hard times and the modern experience, of the sad truth and the reality of what Rezső Seress was feeling.

Though melancholy, this work has captured the imagination of countless artists and has been recorded dozens of times since the 1930’s by such notables as: Billie Holiday, the Kronos String Quartet, Branford Marsalis, Sarah Brightman, Björk, Sarah McLachlan, Sinéad O’Connor, Elvis Costello, Ray Charles, Mel Tormé, and the famous African-American operatic bass Paul Robeson. It has also inspired several movies and novels, and is mentioned in the poetry of Charles Bukowski. In addition, it has been performed in many languages including Vietnamese. Why so much interest in this old song? The urban myth, partly propagated by an intentional marketing

*Szomorú vasárnap
száz fehér virággal
vártalak kedvesem
templomi imával.
Almokat kergető
vasárnap délelőtt,
bánatom bintaja
nélküled visszajött.
Azóta szomorú
mindig a vasárnap,
könny csak az italom,
kenyerem a bánat.*

*Szomorú vasárnap
Utolsó vasárnap
kedvesem gyere el,
pap is lesz, koporsó,
ravatal, gyászlepel.
Akkor is virág vár,
virág és - koporsó.
Virágos fák alatt
utam az utolsó.
Nyitva lesz szemem, hogy
még egyszer lássalak.
Ne féj a szememtől,
boltan is áldalak...
Utolsó vasárnap.*

(Jávor László, text)

*Gloomy Sunday,
With a hundred white flowers,
Beloved one,
In the chapel I waited,
In prayer,
That Sunday morning
I was chasing my dreams,
Yet the chariot of my sorrow returned without you,
Forever since then so sad
are all my Sundays,
Tears are my drink,
And the bread I eat is sorrow.*

*Gloomy Sunday
On my last Sunday
Beloved, oh come to me,
There’ll be a priest too, a coffin,
on a platform, a shroud.
Also then flowers will await you,
Flowers and – a coffin.
Beneath flowering trees
I will take my last ride.
And my eyes open wide
For a last glance upon you.
Don’t be scared of my eyes,
Still in death I will bless you...
Last Sunday.*

(Translation by A.W. Tüting)

campaign, says that anyone who listens to it all the way through will commit suicide. The legend came about in part because Seress, who was taken for forced labor during WWII but survived the Holocaust, committed suicide by jumping out of his apartment window in Budapest at age 68. It is not particularly surprising that there would be a Hungarian suicide song. The depth of emotion and the complicated experience of the people in this country are multifaceted, and it is palpable in every aspect of society. There is something incredibly poignant about this song - it is a real testament to the power of music to make us feel, in this case, perhaps too deeply and addressing what we may want to avoid. The simple heartfelt beauty of *Gloomy Sunday* is admirable, along with its ability to capture in music the honest experience of enduring hard times.

The Cultured Nation

In Hungary there is a true and real pride of the people in their culture, significantly their unique music and dance. Dance Halls and their emphasis on reconnecting once again with folk music emerged in the 1970's and they hold a visible place in the cultural scene of Budapest. This movement owes its roots to Bartók, who popularized folk music for all Hungarians and brought it in to a collective conscience. Going to a dance hall in Hungary is something that is for all ages, including many of the Hungarian youth, who participate in this aspect of their culture.

The opera by Ferenc Erkel, *Bánk Bán* and its rousing and patriotic aria *Hazám*

Hazám (My country, My country), is something that every Hungarian knows; there is a collective understanding and shared sentiment of the Hungarian people represented. The opera itself is really something special, and it can only be seen in Hungary. The orchestra plays folk music inspired tunes, including an entire interlude in Csárdás form.²⁴ The staging includes folk dance and the orchestra has a unique addition, a very typical Hungarian folk instrument called the Cimbalom (similar to a hammer dulcimer) which is featured prominently for an entire act.

The financially ailing arts community in the United States could take a lesson from Hungary. Every concert to which I have been has been sold-out months in advance and the eager audience has rewarded the performers with numerous clapping ovations. Hungarians certainly value the arts!

Conclusion: My Own Journey Back to Basics

"In order to feel the vitality of this music, one must... have lived it" – Bartók

Experiencing Hungarian life has helped me to better understand Hungarian music: a Christmas season with all its nuance and depth, other rich and uniquely Hungarian occasions like Luca's Nap or All Saints' Day and their accompanying folk tales and traditions (the fodder of song texts), even sharing in the traditions

²⁴ The Csárdás is a typical Hungarian dance named after the old Hungarian word for pub, "Csárdá".

of pre-meal pálinka, Hungarian wine, and palacsintas has helped me to feel and understand the music I am learning and performing. It may sound simple, but when my only previous experience with goulash was a jeer within a German operetta mentioning "goulash juice," it was an experience of truth to enjoy real goulash and to come to know something other than the stereotype. Astonishingly, the research and performing I have done has led to many more questions than answers. A constant path of discovery which started with the folk gems of Bartók and Kodály has now led me to a further web of curiosities so that I might better understand their work: Ottoman influenced folk song, Romanian and Slovakian Folk Song, knowledge of folk dance, etc. Doors to new exploration are now open in many different directions.

This time in Hungary has also been one of self exploration and deeper inward personal understanding. I am always working to make my creative communication as honest as possible, and I think that is why I was initially drawn to Hungary and to these composers. I saw in them a kindred sense of artistry. My personal mission is to connect to a broader world and to better understanding it through shared experience, and all my research and work has been to enhance the practice of performing, hopefully not only for myself, but also for an audience. The greatest success for me comes when I know I have given an audience a gesture of simple truth and deep reality.

Performing is a living museum of sorts and my research, in order to make

my own personal museum's current exhibition more interesting, has involved attending concerts as much as going to libraries. Seeing displays of dance, music, opera, and art has added to my store of understanding. Knowing Hungarians and something of their experience has been, and will continue to be invaluable. Being aware of people whose grandfather's were heroes from the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and hearing their stories, makes singing these songs more real. Knowing something of the complicated past and present that makes Hungary what it is, understanding and sharing that with others, as Bartók and so many others did, through song – that is my real purpose.

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Italian Influence on the Hungarian Renaissance

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In researching the Hungarian Renaissance and its relationship to artistic and intellectual developments in Italy, I have observed the developments in visual styles from the court-centered works in the Matthiasian period (1458-1490) through the sixteenth century with a particular emphasis on the period from 1490-1526 when Hungary was ruled by the Jagiellonian dynasty. A mixture of Hungarian traditions and Italian innovations allowed the Renaissance to flourish in a manner unique to Hungary. This paper gives a brief overview of Renaissance art in Hungary from Matthias's reign until the mid 16th century, using three prominent examples to illustrate different styles and stages of development: the Bakócz chapel in Esztergom, the town hall in Bártfa (Bardejov, Slovakia), and the castle at Sárospatak. I conclude with a short description of my research and time spent in Hungary.