

**HYPERION**

On the future of aesthetics

**SOUNDING HOME: Selected Translations  
of Hungarian Folk Songs collected & arranged  
by Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály**



János Jankó, *Genesis of the Hungarian Folk-song*, 1860. Oil on canvas, 75 x 108.3. Hungarian National Gallery.

**Introduction, Translation, and Notations**

**Laura Ingram Semilian**

In 1905, Zoltán Kodály set off for the rural far reaches of the Hungarian Kingdom to collect primary material for his PhD dissertation, “Strophic Construction in Hungarian Folksong.” Born in 1882, in the small town of Kecskemét in the central part of the country, Kodály’s love for folk tales and traditions was rooted in a childhood spent amidst small villages, the son of a train stationmaster and amateur musician. Having already earned degrees in Germanic and Hungarian literature from Budapest University, and in composition and music education from the Budapest Academy of Music, the young Kodály was well-prepared for his ethnographic endeavors.

He soon gained a partner in his work: a fellow alumnus from the Academy of Music named Béla Bartók. Bartók’s own interests in rural folk music had quickened upon hearing the singing of a peasant girl from Transylvania, then a part of the Hungarian Kingdom (Bartók had himself been born in a region of shifting borders, in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary — now Sânnicolau Mare, Romania — in 1881). Her lilting interpretation sounded intriguingly different from the “Hungarian style” Bartók had been accustomed to hearing from urban Gypsy musicians, whose performances of popular melodies had long exemplified universal conceptions of Hungarian folk music. He himself had utilized elements of this style — by way of Franz Liszt — in his 1903 symphonic poem, *Kossuth*, dedicated to the then recently-deceased statesman. But this girl’s singing had revealed facets of a musical heritage largely forgotten beyond her world, one promising inspiration for new compositions. Thus began a quest in which, through listening to the voices of others, he, like Kodály, would articulate and invigorate his own.

Their work resonated with a zeitgeist pervasive during what would prove to be the closing years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, voicing questions of nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism, of search for identity within cultural assemblage, of frustration against continuing Austrian influence. In a Romantic quest for “pure” sources of inspiration, for singularity, they sought to discern ancient, intrinsic seeds of Hungarian folk music — or as they referred to it, “peasant music” — and, thus inspired, to develop a new, “authentic,” national style.

*" . . . in the search for the novel, the unaccustomed, and the outstanding, we not only outpace our times but also retrace our steps into centuries long passed." — Béla Bartók*

Previous enthusiasts had transcribed the words and, occasionally, the music of rural Hungarians, writing down what they heard on the spot. Béla Vikár's (1859-1945) pioneering work in the field introduced not only methodological systems, but the technology of American inventor Thomas Edison's talking machine. Bartók and Kodály emulated his example, recording voices in one short burst after another — laments, soldier's songs, ballads, many of them hundreds or even thousands of years old in origin, preserving them on wax cylinders. Each acoustic artifact was a data collected, a sounding towards bathymetries of the mind, charting soundscapes of a "home" both imagined and manifesting real.

Their field excursions broadened with their realms of interest and creative inspiration to include other central European countries; Bartók would venture even further, through the Balkans, the Near East, and North Africa. During their first collaborative years they collected several thousand folk songs, and within a decade had established a research program yielding the collection, classification, and analysis of over 100,000 songs, a cornerstone for the discipline known today as ethnomusicology. Their endeavors in aural cartography continued throughout the next three decades, as visual map-makers shifted boundaries to mirror the vast changes around them. Bartók departed for the United States in 1940, dying five years later, soon after the end of the Second World War. During the twenty-two years until his own death in 1967, Kodály continued his devotion to ethnographic collecting and research, while amassing formidable legacies as a composer, linguist, and, perhaps most famously, as a music educator.

Bartók's and Kodály's drive for collection and analysis manifested as an orientalist pursuit, confirming sensings of ancient echoes from the East, another East than that of the Indian subcontinent from which the ancestors of many musicians in urban bands had wandered, an East of the steppes, of yurts and horse-culture. Kodály concurred with prevailing classifications of Hungarian as a Finno-Ugric (Uralic) language, unique among its Germanic, Romance, and Slavic (Indo-European) linguistic neighbors. The ancient

Hungarian musical language proves similarly distinct, with its essence, preserved by peasants during and despite German and Italian aesthetic dominance in court and concert hall, rooted in modal melodies and the pentatonic scales found among peoples of Central Asia and Siberia.

*"The Hungarians are the outermost branch of the millennial tree of the great Asian musical culture, which has its roots in the soul of a large number of different peoples from China, through Central Asia, all the way to the Black Sea." — Zoltán Kodály*

Included here are songs selected from Béla Bartók's *Eight Hungarian Folksongs*, first published in 1922 (Boosey & Hawkes), followed by three selections from Zoltán Kodály's *Hungarian Folk Music*, a multivolume series published from 1924-1932, with a final volume in 1964 (Universal Editions). These are not the word-for-word translations prerequisite to integration and transmission of each lyrical component by the singer / resonator, nor do they propose to be an option for those wishing to perform the songs in English (such versions included with scores often necessarily emphasize rhyme and syllabic arithmetic over richness of translation); these are renderings offered for reading silently or aloud. Accompanying the translated songs are selected, more subjective, Notations.

The first three songs are concerned with love-life. Bartók did not, however, choose optimistic, seasonal "pairing songs" of courtship for this cycle, but ones of pairings interrupted, tricked, questioned. The next three are soldier's songs collected from troops in transit during the First World War, which had curtailed Bartók's field excursions. These are not examples of the familiar *verbunkos* (from the German *werben*—enlist) a "Hungarian style" incorporated by Western classical composers. Late 18<sup>th</sup>-century nobles employed bagpipers, and, later, Gypsy bands, to play *verbunkos* during recruitment tours, hoping to impress subjects into military service with splendid uniforms, wine, song, and dancing. The

songs here, however, sound the realities of conscription, instituted by Emperor Franz Joseph I (1830-1916), in which male subjects were obligated to active military duty for a period of three years and to a reserve period of ten.

Three more soldier's songs collected and arranged by Zoltán Kodály follow. The first dates from the Great War, collected soon after the battle it commemorates. The last two are battle-songs dating from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when armed Hungarian rebels sought independence from Hapsburg rule. The Transylvanian prince Ferenc Rákóczi, II (1676-1735) led these *kuruc* fighters from 1703-11. The Rákóczi period yielded a great deal of eloquent music and poetry; the "kuruc fourth" — a trumpet call motif — is one musical souvenir of the era subsequently utilized by Western classical musicians to evoke "Hungarian style."

*"Their apparel must be cut in a fashion that will not hinder their breathing ... the accompaniment should always be of such a nature as to make up for the lost fields and villages."* — Zoltán Kodály on composing settings for folk songs

The songs here are snapshots, in which time is of the essence; they are utterances of immediate experience, rather than ruminations or recollections. All but one are from first-person perspective, inclined to action and interruption; many assume a crucial moment *in limine* compelling the moment of resonance, the breath remembering that first, anonymous compulsion to transmission, voicing pure motivation, pure desire, naïve and profound, individual yet embodying a collective consciousness. Some invoke time-space travel and depersonalization: the protagonist witnesses of simultaneous events, or, at the threshold of departure, of awaiting fate; the protagonist seems depersonalized, witnessing the scene in which he features from a distance, as if in a dream.

## **Fekete főd**

Fekete főd, fehér az én zsebkendőm

Elhagyott a legkedvesebb szeretóm

Úgy elhagyott, hogy még meg sem siratott

Érzi szívem

Nemsokára meghalok

## **Black earth**

Black earth, white is my kerchief

My dearest lover left me

He left me, left without a tear

My heart, it knows it

Won't be long before I die

The song-cycle opens in a state of reactive disorientation, in the perception of a familiar object keeping realization of abandonment.

## **Istenem, istenem**

Istenem, istenem, áraszd meg a vizet,  
Had' vigyen el engem apám kapujára;  
Apám kapujáról anyám asztalára,  
Had' tudják meg immán, kinek adtak férhez.

Cifra katonának, nagy hegyi tolvajnak,  
Ki most és oda van keresztútállani;  
Keresztútállani, embért legyilkolni,  
Egy pénzér, kettőér nem szán vért ontani.



## **My God, My God**

My God, My God, bring down the flood,  
To ferry me there to my father's gate;  
From my father's gate, to my mother's table,  
That they know now to whom they have given me.

A flashy soldier, a big mountain thief,  
Who waits even now, a crossroads-man;  
A crossroads-man, killing people,  
One coin, two, blood spilled without pity.

The English version included with the Boosey & Hawkes score of Bartok's arrangement of *Istenem, istenem* — very simply, “My God, my God” — has, curiously, no “God” in it. This was one particularly significant motivation towards endeavoring new renderings into English. It is important for an interpreter to know that this utterance is not a grumbling to oneself or into nowhere, but a prayer, a pentatonic plea for supernatural deliverance.

The protagonist only names her husband as a soldier, but the actions she “sees” imply that he is what English speakers refer to as a highwayman — Hungarian folk art features innumerable depictions of these bandits — to be found standing in the crossroads,

Hungarian folk culture conceives the Devil at the crossroads (as do other folk cultures; perhaps the most famous example of this in the US manifests at one of the road-junctions of Highways 61 and 49 in Mississippi, a legendary place of pilgrimage for other musicians prone to pentatonic scales).

The song implies that the parents were tricked (another common crossroads experience) by the “flashy soldier” in the marriage deal giving their daughter away. Perhaps this is not a usual highwayman, but one who stands in the crossroads to meet the Devil, or/and is actually he to whom the traveler must give due.

## **Ha kimegyek arr' a magos tetőre**

Ha kimegyek arr' a magos tetőre  
Találok én szeretőre kettőre;  
Ej, baj, baj, baj, de nagy baj  
Hogy a babám szive olyan, mint a vaj!

Nem kell nekem sem a kettő, sem az egy  
Azt szeretem, aki eddig szeretett;  
Ej, baj, baj, baj, de nagy baj,  
Hogy a babám szive olyan, mint a vaj!

## **If I go up on the rooftop**

If I go up on the rooftop  
I find a lover or two;  
Eh, trouble, trouble, trouble, big trouble  
That my sweetheart's heart is like butter!

I don't need two, nor even one  
I love the one who's been loving me;  
Eh, trouble, trouble, trouble, big trouble  
That my sweetheart's heart is like butter!

Here the protagonist imagines himself in a place apart, in a moment of decision, atop the steep roofs of Transylvania, where roosters crow. In some regions of Transylvania, not only do the hills have eyes, but the roofs as well.

## **Töltik a nagy erdő útját**

Töltik a nagy erdő útját  
Viszik a székely katonát  
Viszik, viszik szegényeket  
Szegény székely legényeket

Úgy elviszik arr'a helyre  
Hol az út is vérrel festve  
Kit a golyó, kit a lándzsa, kit éles kard  
Összevágta

## **They are filling the big forest roads**

They are filling the big forest roads

Taking the Székely soldiers

Taking them, taking them, poor things

Poor Székely lads

Taking them all to the place

Where the road is painted in blood

Some by bullet, some by spear, some by keen sword

Hacked

The Székely (“border guards”) of Transylvania are a branch of the Hungarian people whose origins compel debate and legend to this day. Renowned fighters since the Middle Ages, the Székely resisted Austrian attempts to press them into service during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a resistance broken after Austrian forces massacred hundreds of them in 1763.

Commencing with trumpet calls, this song (another one of roads) distinguishes itself in the cycle in that its perspective is that of an observer, a witness and prophet, bringing to mind the folk-figure of the Táltos (also “tátos”). Reputedly originating in “tát,” indicating “wide open” (as in mouth), the word-image of *Tá(l)tos*, intoning openness and extraordinary comprehension, finds echo in the similarly-vowelled English word Fathom, the unit of expression for what soundings measured first by line and now by echo: originally the length of a man’s outstretched, open, arms, then standardized to six feet, as in deep six; in some sense even those laid in earth at the standard depth, six feet under, echo their fellows at sea; both are gone down.

## **Eddig való dolgom a tavaszi szántás**

Eddig való dolgom a tavaszi szántás,  
Kertekbe, rétekbe füvet lekaszálás.  
Immár ökröm hejgin lovam a nyeregbe;  
Szíjostorom hejgin kantárszár kezembe.

Eljött már az a nap, melyben kell indulni.  
Házamtól, hazámtól bús szivvel távozni.  
Kedves szüleimtől sirva elbúcsuzni,  
Kedves hitestársam árván itt kell hagyni.

## Up to now my task was the plow, in Spring

Up to now my task was the plow, in Spring,  
In gardens, in meadows, my scythe in the grass.  
Now in place of my mule, my horse, my saddle;  
Not my whip, but reins in my hand.

Already now the day I must go is come.  
From my home, my home-land, I leave with sad heart.  
My dear parents, I bid farewell to them in tears,  
My dear spouse, I must forsake her, leave her here.

At the threshold of departure for war, a man takes stock of that belonging to him, that which he must leave: farm tools, animals, surroundings, family. New object-trappings signifying his altered purpose seem to have suddenly manifested on their own, not through desire, but duty.

The second line of the second verse begins with the two words "*házamtól, hazámtól*"; an Anglophone's first glance may assume they are the same word, spelled the same way, with a moment passing, perhaps minuscule but still there, before subsequent perception of the little jots, the diacritics. Both words image "home": the first in the sense of immediate home, the second in the sense of homeland, in which the vowel-sounds of "from my mother" and "from my father" (*anyámtól, apámtól*) echo; between them a comma confirms a breath-take of sorrow swelling. The first two vowels of each home-word mirror in the mouth before resting at the third: darker, brighter, shifting back, front, but how far? What is the distance between words, vowels, the measure between little jots above or not above, in sounding "home"? A subtle hold on the moment translated here as hyphen as one would tense the reins of the departing horse, for one more gaze of the familiar, in this already altered state, before the leave-taking commences; after the final words initiate the soldier's wife into uncertainty of waiting, Bartók's setting is also uncertain, unraveling to its end in sinking trumpet call.

## **Olvad a hó**

Olvad a hó, csárdás kisangyalom

Tavasza akar lenni

De szeretnék kiskertedben rózsabimbó lenni

Nem lehetek én rózsza

Elhervaszt Ferenc Jóska

A nagy bécsi háromemeletes magos kaszárnyába



## **Snow is melting**

Snow is melting, my little *csárdás* angel  
Spring wants to be  
A rosebud in your little patch is what I'd like to be  
But a rose I cannot be  
As Franz Joseph shrivels me  
In the big Vienna barracks, three stories high

A *csárdás* is not only a dance, but a tavern, in the past often on the outskirts of town, where travelers — including outlaws and those on the margins — would pause for food and lodging. Again, the action takes place on the threshold of Spring turning, with a soldier obliged to take his leave.

## **Katona vagyok én**

Katona vagyok én, ország őrizője!  
Sír az édesanyám, hogy elvisznek tőle;  
Sír az édesanyám, a rózsám meg gyászol,  
Fekete gyászvirág búsul ablakában.

Falu legényei, kenyeres pajtásim,  
Az Isten áldása szálljon le reátok!  
Éljetek örömmel, mert én búval élek,  
De az én rózsámat el ne szeressétek!

Megpendült harangom, pallérozott kardom,  
Nem szabad énnékem az ágyban meghalnom!  
Forgatom fegyverem vitézek módjára,  
Áldozom éltetem az ország javára!

## **I am a soldier**

I am a soldier, the country's defender!  
My sweet mother weeps as they tear me away;  
My sweet mother weeps, my sweetheart mourns,  
Black dirge-flowers fret from the window.

Lads of the village, friends breaking bread,  
God's blessings fall upon you!  
Live in joy, for I live in sorrow,  
Just stay far away from my sweetheart!

Like a death-toll dangles the blade at my hip,  
Not for me, to die in bed!  
But with saber gallantly twirling,  
Down in the soil, for the good of the country!

The protagonist witnesses scenes of present and future fate, people and objects reverberating noisily around him.

## **Doberdói dal**

Keresik a, nem lelik a keresztelő levelemet,  
Még a pap se találja meg a nevemet.  
Majd megtalálja azt első Ferenc Jóska,  
Ki elvitet a harctérre, nem is hozat többé vissza.

Mikor szürkébe öltöztem, azon kezdtem gondolkozni:  
Ki lesz az én útitársam, ha ja harctérre kell menni?  
Majd lesz útitársam az én jó pajtásom:  
Ki megássza a síromat doberdói hegy aljában.

## **Song on Doberdó**

They search for it, but they don't find the paper from my christening,  
The priest, he doesn't even find my name.  
Yet our Franz Joseph, he helps to find it,  
To send me into battle, to never call me back again.

Dressed in grey I start to think: when I must go to fight  
Who is to travel with me on the road?  
The one to travel with me on the road is my good friend:  
The one who digs my grave, by the hills of Doberdó.

The Battle of Doberdó in August 1916 was one of the First World War's bloodiest, fought between the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies, the latter comprising mostly of Hungarian and Slovenian regiments. The Italians prevailed, while suffering even heavier casualties than those of Austria-Hungary. Featured here again are roads, and figures to be found upon them.

## **Körtéfa**

Körtéfa, körtéfa

Gyöngyösi körtéfa

Sok gyalog katona

Megpihent alatta.

Alúró szél fújja

Felúró nap süti

Jó annak nevetni

Ki egymást szereti.

## Pear-tree

Pear-tree, pear-tree

Pear-tree of Gyöngyös

Many foot-soldiers

Eased themselves beneath it.

From below wind blows

From above sun shines

It's good to laugh together

For those who love each other.

This tells of a legendary pear-tree in the town of Gyöngyös marking the site of a field hospital for Rákóczi's soldiers. The site is not a cemetery, a place for eternal rest and elegy, but a hospital, a place for recovery anticipating resumption. *Pear-tree* is an ode to pause, in linear time and latitude of travelled roads, in the vertical form of the tree according to conceptions of cosmic order, an eternal World-Tree of folklore, in the Middle World, simultaneously suspended and grasping into heaven and the underworld. Here past men caught breath between battles; today the wind looks across the landscape upon the fragile echoes of laughter, from round the tree-trunk transmitted through sun-sparkling air, volume and velocity in accordance with precipitation, resounding signs of life.

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Collaborative translations with her husband Julian Semilian include works by Ghérasim Luca, Gellu Naum, and Max Blecher. She has composed soundscapes for three of Julian's experimental films.

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