

SLOVAK FOLK SONG IN THE COMPOSITIONS OF BÉLA BARTÓK

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Abstract: Several bonds connected the important composer of the 20th century Béla Bartók with the territory of present Slovakia – family relations, beginning of his music studies, his concert, artistic and ethnomusicological work. For the Slovak folkloristics his collection of Slovak folk songs is priceless. The submitted study presents those particular Slovak folk songs which Bartók arranged, or inventively used their melodic and rhythmic elements in his works.

Keywords: Slovak Folk Song, Béla Bartók, Composer, Composition.

1 Bartók and Slovakia

The affinity for using Slovak folk melodies in his compositions resulted above all from Bartók's family relations, and his later ethnomusicological activity on the territory of Slovakia. In this context it is necessary to expound his family background and professional bonds to Slovakia. His mother Paula, nee Voitová, and her family came from Bratislava. During his first stay in Bratislava (1892–1893) Bartók lived with his widowed mother and sister Elza with their relatives (at present No. 5, Obrancov mieru Street). Having spent one year in the (today Romanian) village of Bistrița, teacher Paula Bartóková settled in Bratislava in 1894 together with her children and sister Irma. Their stay in Bratislava strongly influenced Bartók's intellectual development. In Bratislava he became a student at the Royal Catholic Hungarian High School in the former Poor Clares Convent, from which he successfully graduated in 1899. Later Bartók taught several Slovak pupils, besides his second wife Ditta Pásztoryová, who came from Rimavská Sobota, also Alexander Albrecht, Helena Gáfforová and Štefan Németh-Šamorínsky.¹

Bartók played at school concerts, but he performed also in other cities on the territory of Slovakia: Košice, Prešov, Lučenec, Komárno and Rimavská Sobota. In the interview from 1941 his mother said his first public performance had taken place on January 22, 1904 in Bratislava. "For the performance I had a place reserved in the first row. But I remained standing in the rear for the whole time, till he was applauded and gave an encore."² Bartók had nine concerts in Bratislava, five in Košice and he appeared as a guest in Prešov twice. In Lučenec, Komárno and Rimavská Sobota he performed just once.³

1.1 Ethnomusicological Activities of Béla Bartók

Bartók was tied to the territory of Slovakia by his important ethnomusicological activities. He began to collect folk songs in Slovakia regularly in 1906 in the small villages of Gemer county and then continued in Nitra county (1906–1910), Komárno (1906, 1910) and Hont counties (1910, 1914), as well as in the villages of Pohronie and Zvolen counties (1915–1918). In the period of 1906–1918 he collected more than 3,409 melodies and approximately 4,000 lyrics of folk songs.

In collecting and ethnomusicological work Bartók was joined and assisted by Štefan Németh-Šamorínsky, Alexander Albrecht and Anton Baník. Their activities in Slovakia resulted in an extensive three-volume collection *Slovak Folk Songs*, containing not only 3,223 melodies collected by Bartók, but also 145 folk songs from László Vikár's collection, 113 melodies from Kodály's records and 73 folk songs from the collection by

Anton Baník.⁴ The time span between 1919–1928 Bartók dedicated to the finalization and analysis of the whole obtained song material including the Slovak collection which was taken up by Matica Slovenská in 1928.⁵

For the Slovak ethnomusicology Bartók's collection is of the utmost importance. It embodies the results of an immensely coherent method of work with the documentation material, used first in the field, then in transcription, analysis, assortment of material and a way of its preparation for the publication. In the 1920s, the editorial method used by Bartók occurred in Slovakia only sporadically. Although the collecting had a certain tradition in Slovakia even prior to Bartók's activities, and although many years of relentless and intense work of a number of ethnomusicologists have passed since the origination of this collection, the publication of Bartók's *Slovak Folk Songs* has remained one of the most important tasks of the music folkloristics up to the present.

For the work with the material Bartók devised a detailed system of assortment, based on the "formal, rhythmic, metric and cadential structure of the songs." The preparation of the whole Slovak material for publication did not take Bartók much time. He started to work on it in 1919 and as soon as in the autumn 1920 he finished the overall schedule of the publication and completed a part of the manuscript. He terminated the first volume of the collection in October 1922, the second one in August 1924 and the third one in May 1928. The particular parts of the manuscript were handed by him item-by-item to Matica Slovenská. However, the editorial as well as technical problems still delayed the print of the whole manuscript. The mentioned problems lingered on even after Bartók himself decided to set about the editorial work in 1935.⁶ The first two volumes of the collection were published only after Bartók's death, in 1959 and 1970 respectively, by the Department of Music Folkloristics of the Institute of Musicology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.⁷ Bartók's manuscript of the so far unpublished folk songs is still stored away by Oskár Elschek and Alica Elscheková, the scientific editors of the first two volumes, who also assumed the preparation of the two final volumes.

The presentation of the third volume took place on June 22, 2009 on the premises of the Euro Info Centre in Bratislava under the auspices of Ján Figel', member of the European Commission, responsible for the education, training, culture and youth. A concert took place on this occasion, presenting *fujara* (shepherd's pipe) tunes from Bartók's collection from 1906 rendered by Marián Plavec, then Bartók's phonograph recordings, as well as samples from documentaries tracking Bartók's journeys in Slovakia. The highlight of this outstanding event was the presentation of the publication by its editor Oskár Elschek, as well as the lecture *Bartók and Slovak Music* given by Ladislav Burlas. The collection is an important milestone of the scholarly and documentary work by Béla Bartók, a collector and internationally renowned expert on European traditional music. It was especially due to this fact that Bartók's collection of Slovak folk songs was nominated for the UNESCO international program *Memory of the World* in 2004. Bartók's collection contains 3,409 Slovak folk songs and instrumental pieces and 4,500 lyrics of the Slovak folk songs. The collection consists of various materials:

⁴ BARTÓK, Béla: *Slovenské ľudové piesne I*. Bratislava: Slovenská akadémia vied, 1959, p. 12.

⁵ Matica Slovenská is a national Slovak cultural organization based in Martin. Historically the MS was established at the First General Assembly on August 4, 1863, which took place in Martin. On January 1, 1919 its activities were revived. At present its functioning is ruled by the Act No. 68/1997 on Matica Slovenská and Statutes of Matica Slovenská. By its mission and position in the society Matica Slovenská carries out an irreplaceable task of integration of the Slovak society disregarding the social status, religion or political affiliation of its members.

⁶ BARTÓK, Béla: *Slovenské ľudové piesne I*. Slovenská akadémia vied, Bratislava, 1959, p. 13.

⁷ ELSCHÉKOVÁ, Alica: *Béla Bartók a slovenská ľudová pieseň*. In: *Hudobný život*, vol. 13, 1981, No. 5, p. 6.

¹ CSEHIOVÁ, Agáta: *Bartók alkotómunkássága a mai Szlovákia területén*. In: *Bartók – Verdi tanulmánykötet. Az SZTEJGYTFK Ének-zene Tanszékén 2001. november 8-án elhangzott előadások szerkesztett változata*. Szeged, 2002.

² e. k.: *Nemcsak nagy művész a fiám, de jó gyermek is*. In: *Bulletin of the Jubilee Concert Bartók Béla dalegyesület hangversenye 1941 április 29*. Bratislava: Concordia, 1941.

³ CSEHI, Ágota: *Bartók és a felvidék*. Komárom-Esztergom: Komáromi Lapok, Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Önkormányzat, 1994, p. 28–37.

1. Autograph, the complete manuscript of Bartók's collection of Slovak folk songs containing 1,200 pages.
2. Audio material of Slovak folk songs consisting of 220 phonograph recordings.
3. The collection of photographs made by Bartók during the research in Slovakia which document his way of work, as well as performers, singers, their way of life, costumes and architecture.
4. Printed volumes I – III and prepared volume IV, including analytical and systematic lists of melodies and lyrics, as well as comparative data.

The work is administered by the *Slovak National Library* in Martin. It is the biggest and most complete volume of Slovak folk songs collected by Béla Bartók. In it he presented an excellent knowledge of the Slovak language, which enabled him to write down also song lyrics of various dialects and difficulty. Due to its demanding and extensive comparative comments and references, melody records, it is one of the most complicated texts for editing which has ever originated in ethnomusicology; the collection is Bartók's masterpiece and one of the most significant works of European ethnomusicology.⁸ The project was presented and prepared by Prof. Oskár Elschek helped by the Slovak Committee of the *Memory of the World* on June 9, 2004 and it was unanimously approved that the project be submitted by the Slovak Republic to UNESCO as a proposal for the entry into the register of the UNESCO *Memory of the World 2004*.

1.2 Slovak Folk Song in the Compositions of Béla Bartók

In Bartók's compositions four kinds and methods of arrangement of folk songs can be found:

- A simple arrangement, transcription of a folk song;
- An arrangement of a folk song;
- Free usage of melodic or rhythmic elements of folk songs;
- Bartók's inventive independent works.

Bartók quoted and arranged Hungarian and Slovak folk songs collected on the territory of Slovakia in the following compositions: *Four Slovak Folk Songs* (BB 46, 1907), *Fourteen Bagatelles, for piano* (BB 50/5, 1908), *For Children – vols. 3 and 4* (BB 53, 1908 – 1909), *Slovak Folk Song "Krúti Tóno vretena"* (BB 73, 1916), *Slovak Folk Songs, for male chorus* (BB 77, 1917), *Four Slovak Folk Songs, for mixed chorus and piano* (BB 78, 1917), *In the Village, for female voice and piano* (BB 87a, 1924), *Three Village Scenes, for four (or eight) female voices and chamber orchestra* (BB 87b, 1926), *44 Duos, for two violins* (BB 104, 1931). Hungarian folk songs found and recorded in Slovakia can be detected in the following compositions: *For Children – vol. 1* (BB 53, 1908 – 1909), *Four Old Hungarian Folk Songs, for male chorus* (BB 60, 1910 – 1912), *Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs, for piano* (BB 79, 1914 – 1918), *Twenty Hungarian Folk Songs, for voice and piano* (BB 98, 1929), *44 Duos, for two violins* (BB 104, 1931).⁹ Bartók elaborated the first song from *Four Slovak Folk Songs* (BB 46, 1907) on the basis of a Slovak folk song tune *V tej bystrickej bráne...*, from his own collection from 1906. He recorded a 40-year-old singing woman from Gemer, Hrlíca village, on the phonograph. This folk song appears not only in *Four Slovak Folk Songs*, but also in the third volume of his instructive piano series *For Children*.



Music sample No. 1. *V tej bystrickej bráne*. Source: Slovenské ľudové piesne III, No. 1160b)

⁸ Information about the activity of the Slovak committee for the UNESCO programme *Memory of the World*: The present state and new nominations to the world register of the UNESCO *Memory of the World* [online]. [s.a.]. [Quoted 2008-04-08]. Accessible on: <<http://www.ulib.sk/index/go.php?id=1997>>

⁹ LAMPERT, Vera: *Něpzene Bartók műveiben: feldolgozott dallamok forrásjegyzéke*. Budapest: Helikon, 2005, p. 15.

The following song is based on the Slovak folk song *Pod lípkou, nad lípkou*, which was sung by Zuzana Drábová (then 17-year-old girl), also from Gemer, Hrlíca village, in 1906. This song, too, was elaborated in the third volume of *For Children*.



Music sample No.2: *Pod lípkou, nad lípkou* (Source: Slovenské ľudové piesne II, No. 531a)

The third song is based on the Slovak folk song *Nebanova bi*, sung for Bartók by an unknown child from Gemer, Filiar village in 1906.



Music sample No. 3: *Nebanova bi* (Source: Slovenské ľudové piesne I, No. 47b)

In the fourth song Bartók arranged the Slovak folk song *Priletel ťták* from Dražovce village, Nitra county. Jozefína Homolová sung for the record in 1907.



Music sample No. 4: *Priletel ťták* (Source: Slovenské ľudové piesne III, No. 1440g)

In the composition *Fourteen Bagatelles for piano* (BB 50/5, 1908) Bartók elaborated the folk song *Ej popred naš, popred naš, popred naše dvere*, sung by Zuzana Drábová from Hrlíca village, Gemer county.



Music sample No. 5: *Ej popred naš, popred naš, popred naše dvere* (Source: Slovenské ľudové piesne II, No. 692a)

The biggest number of Slovak folk songs were arranged in the third and fourth volumes of the work *For Children* (BB 53, 1908 – 1909). The complete title of the series is *Easy piano pieces for beginners without octave double-stop on the subject of Hungarian and Slovak folk songs (Könnyű zongoradarabok kezdők részére oktávfogás nélkül magyar, és szlovák népdalokra)*. Originally its four volumes contained 85 pieces, which were later (1945) reduced to 79 pieces in two volumes. The pieces in the collection are easy arrangements of folk songs. Bartók used here 43 Slovak folk songs and melodies in total. He derived them from his collection *Slovak Folk Songs I and II*, as well as from the printed collections of other authors as follows: *Slovak Songs I* (1880), *Slovak Songs II* (1890), *Detva* (K. A. Medvecký, 1905), *A Collection of Slovak Folk Songs, for middle voice and piano accompaniment II* (M. Sch. Trnavský, 1917). In his instructive compositions from the third and fourth volumes of the series *For Children* Bartók compositionally elaborated the following folk songs: *Keby boli čerešne...*, *Kalina, malina...*, *Pod lípkou...*, *Ej, Lado, Lado...*, *Lecela pava...*, *Stará baba zlá...*, *Ked som išol z vojny...*, *Hej, na prešovskej turni...*, *Zabelej še,*

zabelej..., V mikulášskej kompanii..., V tej bystrickej bráne..., Šuhajova mati..., Anička mlynárova..., Ore, ore šest' volou..., Tancuj, dievča, tancuj..., A keď bolo dievča..., Služilo dievča na fare..., Mav som tá, d'ovča, rád..., Ďateľ na dube žalostne d'ube..., Nechocže ty, Hanulienka..., Sadla dole, plakala..., Hnali švární šuhaji..., Já som bača veľmi starí..., Keď som išov cez horu..., Syroky jarček, Bistra vodička..., Už je noc, už je noc..., Ej, šija to džiaušina..., Sedí káčer na doline..., Dosti som sa nachodiu..., Spím, spím, spalabi..., Zahradka, zahradka..., Ej hory, hory..., Viem ja jeden hájiček..., Bol by ten Jánošík..., Kebych ja vedela..., Pri Prešporke pri číchom Dunajku..., Ešte raz sa obzrieť mám..., Pášou Janko dva voli..., Hej, pojukuj, povievaj vetriček..., Hej, ten stoličný dom..., Ňebanova bi...

Bartók worked with various sources of folk music in an endeavour to disclose their essence, differences, as well as common signs. Indubitably Bartók's interest in Slovak folk song inspired also the following generations of artists, composers and musicologists. In his preface to the first volume of the published *Slovak Folk Songs* Oskár Elschek wrote: "it is obvious his folkloristic work with its meaning, extensiveness and its innovative results in method and material brought the same permanent values to the modern ethnomusicology as his compositional work brought to artistic music of our century."¹⁰

The aforementioned facts and brief data prove that Bartók's relation to Slovakia was exceptionally intense, meaningful and contributive.

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¹⁰ BARTÓK, Béla: *Slovenské ľudové piesne I*. Slovenská akadémia vied, Bratislava, 1959, p. 8.