

Jakub Puchalski

THE NATIONALITY OF MUSIC?

‘Folk music is always considered a good thing. There is a catch, however: it has to be “real” folk music, anonymous, evoking not an individual but a communal personality, expressive of the soil. True folk music is produced only by farmers and shepherds; only this can guarantee its mythical status, its down-to-earth contrast with sophisticated urban music. [...] The composer who turns to folk material is like the landscape artist who paints out of doors: they both reject the artificial for the natural; they start not with what is invented but with what is given by reality.

Folk tunes have been used in art music at least since the fifteenth century. However, the special status of folk music as fundamentally different from art music, as an innocent art that had not yet eaten of the Tree of Good and Evil and suffered the corruption of learned and sophisticated culture, dates from the latter part of the eighteenth century [...]. Collections of folk poetry, ancient legends, and fairy tales were made at this time in most European lands. They were a patriotic manifestation of Romantic nationalism, a protest against the authoritarian forms of academic classicism. The French and the Irish hoped to recover their legendary Celtic past. The Germans and the English attempted to revive their medieval and pre-medieval Nordic civilizations as a way of asserting an individual cultural identity against the dominance of modern French culture and the worn-out academic models of Greek and Roman art and literature. Folk art was not only picturesque but morally and politically liberating.’¹

The above synthesis of the circumstances in which thinking about the musical national identity began with the onset of romanticism may be confusing as to the basic

conditions. Art, whatever its kind, is by no means an obvious space for manifestations of national identity. Music is no exception. Suffice it to mention the unifying role of the Gregorian chant or the international character of the music by Franco-Flemish composers of the 15th and 16th centuries. Folk music, to which Rosen refers, often recurs in artistic compositions in a way that is unrecognisable by the human ear, then gradually turns into a curiosity, a rhythmic or melodic concept which is attractive through its exoticism, and finally reflects the local colour through its illustrative function. It is only since that point, which may be placed in the second half of the 18th century, that music started to be consciously associated with nationality. To Johann Sebastian Bach, a gigue or bourrée were still standard components of a suite rather than French music, and the polonaise was first and foremost a pleasant sounding dance. The borderline ran along the stylistics of artistic music: the famous *Querelle des*

conditions. Art, whatever its kind, is by no means an obvious space for manifestations of national identity. Music is no exception. Suffice it to mention the unifying role of the Gregorian chant or the international character of the music by Franco-Flemish composers of the 15th and 16th centuries. Folk music, to which Rosen refers, often recurs in artistic compositions in a way that is unrecognisable by the human ear, then gradually turns into a curiosity, a rhythmic or melodic concept which is attractive through its exoticism, and finally reflects the local colour through its illustrative function. It is only since that point, which may be placed in the second half of the 18th century, that music started to be consciously associated with nationality. To Johann Sebastian Bach, a gigue or bourrée were still standard components of a suite rather than French music, and the polonaise was first and foremost a pleasant sounding dance. The borderline ran along the stylistics of artistic music: the famous *Querelle des*

¹ Ch. Rosen, *Romantic Generation. Chopin, Schumann, Liszt*, Harvard University Press 1995, pp. 410-411.

Bouffons resulted from a confrontation of the recitative nature of the French opera as opposed to the melodiousness of the Italian opera, and, in the heat of the polemics, made Rousseau claim (in *The Letter on French Music*, 1753) that 'the French do not have music, and [that] if they ever do have it, it will be all the worse for them'. Protestant music was viewed separately, yet even in this case it is notable that a master such as Bach (and not only Bach) could easily employ the Italian style (instrumental concerts). Händel was also essentially an Italian composer of German origin who worked in England.

Permanent association of music of a certain character with ethnos starts only in classicism, for instance in different kinds of Mozart's 'Turkish music'. Obviously, true imitation of a janissary band (nonexistent anyway) is not important here; what matters is that the music evokes an association in the listener's mind between a certain sound and a nationality. Before classicism this relation had appeared only incidentally and for illustration purposes only; since then it became a permanent element of music and its reception. This is only one step away from the sentimental compositions by Irishman Field or the mazurkas by Maria Szymanowska, followed by the true folk inspirations in Chopin's music.

Romanticism in music did not finish in the mid-19th century. The values it brought turned out to be particularly fruitful for



BARTÓK ARCHÍVUM

music: they developed throughout the century, bringing the tonal language to an extreme, which led to border crossing and its eventual abandonment, a feat accomplished by composers in the 1920s. However, another idea outlasted the long period of romanticism: deeply-seated belief in the national character of music. The artistic achievement of the 19th century was Chopin's success, assimilation of the idiom

of genuine folk music (without direct quotations) and elevating it to the status of valuable artistic music. Thus understood, the task proved impossible to other composers. A typical example of reception – and creation of 'national music' – were *The Hungarian Rhapsodies* by Liszt. Rosen corroborates that they 'have been all too often condemned because they use Gypsy, not peasant, tunes.'

Béla Bartók recording folk music



BARTOK ARCHIVUM

Assessment of Liszt's attitude to folk music was not obvious at the start. Throughout the 19th century he was regarded as an authority (his status was not shaken even by his explanations about the book *Des Bohémiens...*, which was signed with the author's permission by Duchess Caroline Sayn-Wittgenstein) so the image of Hungarian music as essentially Gypsy music which he promoted was reinforced. The style had previously been tried by Beethoven (merely as a sound variation); Berlioz captured it exquisitely in his arrangement of the *Rákóczi March* in the *Damnation of Faustus*, Brahms, the very same Brahms to whom 'folklore' was the highest sanctity and who was happy if even one song of his became universally popular (which to him meant that it perfectly reflected the genius of the

German people) crowned it with a substantial collection of dances. The situation required a fresh perspective and deliberate exploration of folklore, a new impulse.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries Hungary was still striving to gain autonomy from the imperial house in Vienna. After the union with Austria, the more the Hungarian culture was losing its vernacular character, including the language which was being supplanted by German, the stronger independence aspirations grew. Acting in a nationalist spirit, a certain young patriot not only rebuked his mother for using German in family conversations but also walked around Budapest in the national costume, even though he felt alone in that. It was a conservatoire student, Béla

Bartók. He was already a distinguished pianist and author of Richard Strauss-inspired (definitely avant-garde) compositions, which, however, followed the well-known 'Hungarian style' dating back to Liszt's *Rhapsodies*, and the universally recognised style of traditional songs called *verbunkos* (connected with soldiers' recruitment). In 1905 young Bartók overheard a song sung by a servant; intrigued, he decided to visit the Hungarian countryside to collect melodies he could not recognise. At the time he met Zoltán Kodály, a slightly younger pupil of the conservatoire who, armed with some knowledge and Edison's phonograph, undertook the same ethnomusicological task. The results of this joined effort came soon: in the same year they discovered for certain that the music previously considered Hungarian actually did not have much to do with it. They came across archaic modal scales and rhythmical systems, and they observed that recitative parts, typical for folk music, were heard only occasionally in songs of the *verbunkos* kind, the most authentic material for Gypsy compositions. Working in the multicultural territory of the then Hungary (including Transylvania, Vojvodina, Slovakia and the Subcarpathian region), they listened to the music of the Romanians and Slovaks, and discovered affinities between them. However, their academic work was not widely recognised (apart from a handful of specialists). The reception of Bartók's ethnomusicological research in his homeland is marked by its dependence on the political situation

and its current needs rather than by the willingness to find true national identity in music. The superficial but popular image of a Gypsy violin and dulcimer proved more convincing than authentic music, so extensively, scientifically documented and artistically corroborated by the brilliant composer's work. It turned out that Gypsy music, Liszt's *Rhapsodies* and Brahms's *Ungarische Tänze* were sufficient to satisfy the need for the vernacular music. The intended first (and eventually, the only) fascicle of Hungarian folk songs collected by Bartók and Kodály (1906) did not sell for three decades. Hungary had already identified itself with the music of a pavement café.

At the same time, studying Romanian or Slovak music, particularly in the context of the secessionist movements of the two nations, was simply interpreted as an act of national betrayal. Such opinions were voiced when Bartók made the results of his research available to Romanian or Slovak ethnographers, publishing articles on the music of the Hungarian Romanians or Slovaks in their journals (also in Germany). Much later, in 1934, he wrote in a letter, '80 or even 90 per cent of the honourable Hungarian public consider me and my associates some kind of traitors of our homeland, merely because I study and promote countryside music (instead of doing so about the popular artistic music called "Hungarian melodies"!}'. Bartók was driven not only by his scholarly passion but also by a strong wish to create national music. He

had expressed it already in 1905, just after having discovered authentic folklore, '[...] I must say that Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner wrote so much music and in such original character! [...] Liszt is the closest to the four Greats but he seldom wrote in the Hungarian style. My *Funeral March* might, for example, enter the competition in this or that respect but a nation cannot enter the arena with a four-page-long piece. [...] In short, we are still a long way from being ready. We need to work, to learn. [...] When we compare Hungarian folk music with that of other nations, we shall find the result exceedingly advantageous to us. [...] Ours is considerably richer and more expressive. If the peasant who, having spent his childhood in a peasant cottage, composed such a melody [...] had had education, he would certainly create valuable and extraordinary pieces'.

However, it is possible to understand what difficulty the Hungarian public had to identify with Bartók's music. The composer and ethnomusicologist belonged to the avant-garde. At the time when the post-Wagnerian language of Richard Strauss (with which Bartók started) was finally universally accepted, the composer was already way ahead, looking for new sound qualities and was again completely incomprehensible. Easy, appealing music based on the Gypsy scale and catchy czardas rhythms, well-known for a century, seemed to be a more attractive basis on which to build wide, universal self-identification rather

than the experimental piano *Bagatelles* or *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*. The public was put off mostly by orchestral music: the ominous opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, and especially the violent ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin*, which was on a par with the notorious 'barbarian' manifesto of *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky. The fact that they are considered masterpieces today should not belie the astonishment or downright shock that the public, unable to follow the innovative artist (how could they, anyway?), must have felt at their reception. And yet the earlier, fairytale fantasy ballet *The Wooden Prince* had been successful. However, Bartók was not willing to compromise, and his use of folk music, whose idiom he had polished to perfection (by skilfully dealing



Béla Bartók in Transylvania, 1907



Karol Szymanowski in his studio in Villa Atma, Zakopane, 1935

it in the right measure in his compositions, and developing his 'folkloristic' compositions, with a strong emphasis on didactic music, parallel to his artistic creations) was only partly helpful in establishing contact with the public. The situation was much better for Kodály, who, as a much more traditional composer, was able to transform folk material into concert music whose originality could compete with *The Rhapsodies* by Liszt. The suites from *Dances of Galanta* or *Háry János* became a catchy and popular showpieces of Hungarian national music. 'If I were to point out a composer whose works express the Hungarian spirit best, I would say Kodály,' Bartók himself described his colleague's music. Kodály's long and extremely successful teaching work and universal acclaim of Bartók's masterpieces

contributed to the eventual post-war success of authenticity in Hungarian music.

If Bartók was inspired by the discovery of genuine Hungarian folk music already in his youth, Polish composers, who passed by Chopin (or rather were only superficially inspired by him), were to wait for such an epiphany for a long time. Before Karol Szymanowski's encounter with the music of the Podhale region (and that did not happen during his first visits to Zakopane), he had already passed through several stages of artistic development: after years of dependence on Richard Strauss (in his student days and at the time of the Young Poland movement), he had reached the early maturity of his individual style, combining its propensity for ecstatic elation with

a somewhat secessionist elaborateness of the melodic pattern and a unique harmonic sophistication, based on symbolic inspirations, the exoticism of antiquity and the mysticism of the Near East. His artistic manifesto at that time was the opera *King Roger* (but also notable are his masterpieces: *Violin Concerto No. 1*, *Symphony No. 3*, and many songs). Szymanowski discovered the Podhale folklore in 1921, and it was a discovery that evoked a special ambition which linked him to his Hungarian counterparts: he ventured to create modern 'Polish music'. Although in his Strauss period he had already had to refute criticisms, stating that 'as a Pole, he composed Polish music', yet even in his self-awareness he could not remain indifferent to the widespread ethnic trend of the music culture of his generation and perhaps yielded to the national euphoria over Poland's recovery of her independence. The example had been set: Stravinsky, the revolutionary, had been searching for traces of Russian folklore in his early works, and so had the admired late romantic Rachmaninow; the Spaniards could relate to the music by Manuel de Falla, while the Hungarians or Romanians could turn not only to Bartók or Kodály, but also to Weiner or Enescu; Swiss-born Ernest Bloch cultivated his Jewish background. Even Debussy and Ravel may be credited with attempts to find national identification in music due to their deliberate references to French baroque (as a French style). Charles Ives, an unknown outsider who did extraordinary experiments with the melodies

of American hymns and marches, also followed the same path. In fact, the trend goes back to Chopin, through Moravian folk bands audible in Mahler's symphonies (d. 1911), Norwegian tunes in romantic Grieg (d. 1907) or the purely Russian character of Musorgsky (d. 1881).

Although nothing in his previous compositions pointed that way, Szymanowski pursued the trend with dedication and conviction. And with outstanding results: *Harnasie*, the impressive ballet set in the Tatra highland, are only too vivid an illustration of the sources of his inspiration. Other works, however, also belong to the same category of compositions where folklore is sublimated to an artistic form in Chopin's manner. It is modernist in *Śtopiewnie* (lyrics by Julian Tuwim), heartbreaking and economical in *Stabat Mater*, dazzling in the piano *Symphony No. 4 (Symphony Concertante)* and in the *Violin Concerto No. 2*, and more hermetic in the *Mazurkas op. 50*.

And yet there were few composers who, like de Falla, remained faithful to ethnic music. Bartók insisted on not mixing the two types of his creations (although he himself was capable of masterly synthesis), Stravinsky also soon parted with elements of folklore (but none of his later achievements could match his early successes in terms of influence and popularity). Bloch oscillated between Jewishness, sophisticated expressionism and technical neoclassicism. Fascination with highlanders' music

Stanisława Szymanowska, Zbigniew Unitowski, Karol Szymanowski, Rafał Malczewski in front of Villa Atma, Zakopane, 1935

and focusing on songs from the Kurpie region were merely intermediary stages in Szymanowski's development. Important, to be sure, but final only by accident, due to his untimely death in 1937. It was still in 1932 that the composer complained that he had not written any music on a par with *King Roger* (including *Harnasie*) afterwards, and while composing *Concertino* (whose unfinished manuscript perished during the bombing of Warsaw in 1939) he declared, 'there will be no more oberkas,' (as in the captivating finale of *Symphony No. 4*) 'I've had enough of folklore'. It is possible that, disappointed with his failures in Poland, he was also disillusioned with the concept of 'national music'; he may have artistically grown out of his folk inspirations.

And it was true not only of Szymanowski: almost all twentieth century artists found

folk material insufficient. If it remained a frame of reference throughout the century, it is to be explained by the extra-musical factors dominant in the society. Thinking of the composers' duty to create national identity turned out to be more lasting than their fruitful marriage to folklore.

TRANSLATED BY ANNA MIROSLAWSKA-OLSZEWSKA

