IN THEIR OWN WORDS. . .

Bartók on Folk Song and Art Music (1921)

Béla Bartók (1881–1945) stressed the importance of folksong—which he researched in a highly systematic way—for the creation of modern music. In the essay that is excerpted here, “The Relationship of Folk Song to the Music of Our Time” (1921), he makes connections between peasant music and the seemingly remote language of atonality. Bartók finds the origin for the equalization of tones that characterizes atonality not in Wagner, Strauss, and Schoenberg, but in old Hungarian folksongs in which familiar tonic, dominant, and leading tone functions are absent. Bartók was especially active as an essayist during the early 1920s. This article was written in German for the English journal *The Sackbut*, where it appeared in 1921 in an English translation.

...The purpose of this essay is not to discover which of the modern composers have been influenced by the folk music of one country or another and in what form the influence has manifested itself. So I shall not raise the question as to whether Debussy acquired certain characteristics through the medium of Musorgsky or from direct contact with Russian folk music, nor shall I speculate upon the sources of the pentatonic element in the work of Ravel.

I shall invite your attention only to the most remarkable manifestations of those that owe their origin to the influence of peasant music. The first in this category is undoubtedly Musorgsky, some scores of years before any other. It did not fall to him to achieve perfection—he should be regarded rather as a forerunner of this tendency.

Stravinsky’s *Sacre du printemps* is one of the best examples of the intensive permeation of art music by genuine peasant music. The work, in spite of its extraordinary verve and power, fails to be completely satisfying. Under the influence of the short-winded structure of the Russian peasant melodies Stravinsky did not escape the danger of yielding to a broken mosaic-like construction which is sometimes disturbing and of which the effect is enhanced by his peculiar technique, monotonous as it becomes by repetition and by its practice of, as it were, automatically superimposing several chord sequences of varying length, in constant repetition, without regard to their consonances.

It is not the Russian peasant music that we must blame for this but the composer’s lack of grasp and power of organization.

The majority of the works of the Hungarian Zoltán Kodály, which may be called the apotheosis of the old Hungarian folk music, furnish a second and moreover a satisfactory example. As a young Hungarian critic1 aptly remarks: “Kodály, having discovered in the peasant music of the Hungarians, that is, of the Seklers, the Transylvanian Hungarians, a language appropriate to his specifically Hungarian thoughts, he did not apply himself to it as to a scientific proposition but learnt the language and spoke it as one speaks one’s mother tongue.” Kodály’s technique lacks any striking sensational novelty, but he is a master of form and has something thoroughly individual to say—two factors which always ensure perfection in creative work.

Finally, as a negative example of what I mean, the works of Schoenberg may be mentioned. He is free from all peasant influence, and his complete alienation to Nature, which of course I do not regard as a blemish, is no doubt the reason why many find his work so difficult to understand.

The two composers who furnish the examples quoted above gave themselves up to the folk music of a particular country, but I wish especially to emphasize that this

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1Aládar Tóth in the periodical *Nyugat*, July 1920.
exclusiveness is not important. The personality of the composer must be strong enough to synthesize the results of his reactions to most widely divergent types of folk music. He will, of course, probably react only to a folk music in harmony with his personality. It would be stupid to force a selection for exterior reasons such as a wrongly conceived patriotism.

Naturally a composer will be most influenced by the music he hears most of—the music of his home. This circumstance ensures a certain geographical difference in style—at least superficially.

As I have already indicated, the practice of employing peasant music in the attempt to put life into works of art music is not entirely new but appears merely to have disappeared for a certain time during the nineteenth century. In fact, many symphonic themes—especially in last movements—of the Viennese Classics, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, suggest peasant music; in their case it would seem to be a matter of Slavonic peasant instrumental music. We shall probably never arrive at a clear solution of this question as the material in the form of contemporary peasant music necessary for a thorough comparative analysis is lacking. In many cases the Croatian melodies, which were preserved until the second half of the nineteenth century and were then actually committed to writing, give us grounds for supposing that peasant music exercised a considerable influence at that time. For certain melodies which had quite accidentally escaped oblivion appear in a collection published between the years 1878 and 1881; and these were made use of in Haydn’s and Beethoven’s works.

In order to make some of these interesting cases known more widely in musical circles, I will quote three melodies out of the collection. The first melody [Example 1, below] is identical with the main theme of Haydn’s D major Symphony [No. 104] (finale). The second and third melodies [Examples 2-3] (two variations) constitute the main theme of the first passage of [Beethoven’s] Pastoral Symphony. The possible theory that this was Beethoven’s own theme and penetrated to the Croatian peasantry with the popularization of the symphony is quite untenable. The peasantry is capable of taking up only such melodies as it hears repeated to the point of satiety at village dances or other meetings. Nobody can imagine that Beethoven's symphonies achieved such widespread popularity in the villages of the east of Europe. One has only to consider that in the country districts of the east of Europe the very name of Beethoven is unknown even to the gentry; these circles in fact lack the slightest acquaintance with the higher art music of any period. It is much nearer the truth to say that Beethoven heard this melody from a bagpiper in West Hungary, where Croats also are settlers and where he often stayed. Before strangers peasants play on an instrument much more naturally than they sing melodies from a text. The tune appealed to Beethoven and as it just

Example 1

Franjo Šaver Kuha, ed., *Juzno-slovjenske narodne popievke* [South Slavic Folksongs], 4 volumes (Zagreb, 1878–81). The collection contains about 1600 Croatian, Slovenian, and Serbian melodies.

These musical examples were omitted in the first edition in The Sackbut. They are returned here as they appeared in Bartók’s original German text.
Example 2

Example 3

give a picture of rural life, he used it in his symphony without acknowledgment—as was in fact usual at the time. Bars 16 to 25, which constantly repeat the selfsame one-bar motif, are in fact a very faithful imitation of the bagpipe interlude passages as they can still be heard in our day. Thus, for instance, the interlude occurs as the eight- or ten-fold repetition of the motif in a melody which I heard played on the bagpipes by a Hungarian peasant. My theory is strengthened by the bagpipe-like accompaniment of the theme. As I have already said, there are scarcely eight, or at the most, ten examples of this kind. How many such melodies may have perished amongst the peasantry before they could be written down!

An examination of the part played by the [Lutheran] “chorale” melodies in the art music of the seventeenth century will furnish still older analogy. I cannot say for certain whether or not these melodies may be counted as peasant music, as I have not investigated this question, but their simple and uniform character agrees fairly generally with that of all genuine peasant music. As chorale melodies have been used to serve as the basis of instruction in composition, more especially in the study of counterpoint, up to the present day, peasant melodies might to still greater advantage be made to serve an academic purpose in the future. One of the most difficult tasks is to find such accompaniments to peasant melodies as will not obscure but will emphasize and bring into relief their characteristic features. In the hands of a good teacher these
melodies could exercise an extraordinarily beneficent effect. Students of composition and in fact musical students generally would be well advised to study peasant melodies thoroughly, where possible from phonograph records, or if they can, in its natural form—not that a person of medium talent can thereby be transformed into a creator of note, but it is a study which will refine the budding musician's taste and considerably enlarge his horizon.

Source: Béla Bartók, “The Relationship of Folk Song to the Music of Our Time,” Sackbut, 1 (1921), translated from German by Brian Lunn.