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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Folk-music : Hungarian

Author: Lajosi, Krisztina

Verbunkos (derived from German *Werbung*, “recruitment of soldiers”) as a specific musical “form” is documented from the early 18th century on (Apponyi MS, 1730), characterized by dotted rhythms in a 16-measure binary section form, and usually instrumented for violins, bass, dulcimer, and clarinet. It has been associated with Hungarian music since the 18th century: Mozart, Haydn, and Schubert use the *verbunkos* rhythm and structure in their pieces, and often they refer to it as *Ungaresca* style. In the 19th century, Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsodies* popularized *verbunkos* and, as the title indicates, identified this type of music with Hungarian style.

Like national styles in general, the Hungarian national style is also a transcultural phenomenon. In an article entitled “Our folk-music and the folk-music of neighboring peoples” (*Népzeneink és a szomszéd népek népzeneje*, 1934) Béla Bartók argued that *verbunkos* developed under a strong North-Slavic influence and is a mixture of the musical styles of neighbouring countries.

Starting in the 1710s Romani (“Gypsy”) musicians were hired by the Habsburg army to play music for festive recruiting events in villages and towns throughout Hungary. These recruitment practices ended with the Hungarian War of Independence in 1849, when, ironically, a musical genre originally associated with the Habsburg Empire had come to symbolize Hungary’s anti-Habsburg struggle.

The terminology denoting Hungarian musical style has been inconsistent and malleable: the type of music that came to be known as *verbunkos* was often simply called *magyar*, and it was based on dance music for men played in Hungarian villages, like the *kanásztánc* (“swineherds’ dance”) or *legényes* (“lads’ dance”). These dances usually began in a slow or moderate tempo and had a fast or fiery ending. In the second half of the 19th century such dance music came to be known as *csárdás* (“inn dance”), which was faster in tempo than the original version and was to be danced by couples. The strongly masculine character of *verbunkos* was mitigated in *csárdás*, and therefore the latter was rejected by some critics as an effeminate and corrupt version of the original Hungarian style.

While Romantic Nationalism idealized these dances as the expression of a Hungarian national style, *verbunkos* had been shaped and disseminated in much wider circles, including the Western European concert halls and opera stages. The *verbunkos* embraced by the 19th-century Hungarian public was not the original village music but a transculturally adapted version of it, played mainly by travelling Romani bands. Hence, Hungarian music was also often referred to as “Gypsy music”. In *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie* (1859), Liszt claimed that Hungarian music was in fact a symbiosis between Magyar social traditions and the inventiveness and virtuosity which he credited the Romani ethnicity. Liszt’s opinion combined the ethnotypes of Romantic exoticism with the social reality as to the role, careers, and audience-appeal of Romani musicians and “Gypsy bands” in Hungary.

Many music critics, in criticizing the westernized nature of *verbunkos*, instead emphasized *magyar nóta* (“Hungarian popular song”) as the truly authentic representative of the Hungarian musical tradition. The first Hungarian musical journal, *Zenészeti Lapok* (1860-76), published a series of articles on the characteristics of the Hungarian national style. A so-called “area theory” emerged, which sketched a topography of the Hungarian style and divided Hungarian music according to various geographic locations. The composers preferring *verbunkos* (János Bihari, 1764–1827; János Lavotta, 1764–1820; Antal Csermák; 1774–1822; Mihály Mosonyi, 1815–1870, as well as Erkel and Liszt) were born in the Western part of Hungary and had a German musical education, while the composers preferring popular folk-songs (József Szerdahelyi, 1804–1851; Béni Egressy, 1814–1851; Gusztáv Szémfy, 1819–1875) were born in Eastern Hungary and were closer to the rural folk-traditions of Hungary. In *Magyar zenekönyv* (“Hungarian music book”, 1858-59) Szémfy argued that the difference in style was linked to the

regional character of the composers. Szénfy identified two distinct musical trends in Europe, a Western and an Eastern one; the latter, located in Hungary, Transylvania, Croatia, Slovenia, Turkey and Russia, had a “fabulous tranquillity” and was more masculine. He concluded that the most valuable Hungarian music was Eastern in character and more purely authentic, while the music of Western Hungary was a blend of different national traditions and styles, incapable of faithfully reflecting the Hungarian soul. Szénfy proposed that the Eastern style should be institutionalized as the official musical “mother tongue” of the Hungarians, following the example of the [linguists](#), who also standardized the Eastern dialect.

The *palotás* (“palace music”), a slow dance originating in Hungarian Renaissance aristocratic courts and royal palaces, and played mainly by German and, later, Romani musicians, was often used in the operas of Ferenc Erkel and other composers. In the discourse about Hungarian music, *palotás* was often contrasted with *verbunkos* and *csárdás* as the elevated, nobler dance against the vulgar dance music of inns and taverns. Some critics considered *palotás* more “Magyar” than *verbunkos*; it was used at balls organized for the aristocracy and the middle-class public, popular forms of sociability since the late 18th century and coded manifestations of national resistance against Habsburg rule. These balls provided occasions for parading [Hungarian festive garments](#), traditionally seen as symbols of the Hungarian nation in its formative upper echelons.

Notes:

Aspects of the development of Hungarian national-classical music are covered in the articles on [Erkel](#) and Liszt.



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Loya, Shay; 2011. *Liszt's transcultural Modernism and the Hungarian-Gypsy tradition* (Rochester: U of Rochester P)



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