

THE *VERBUNKOS*, A MUSIC GENRE AND MUSICAL SYMBOL OF HUNGARY

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Abstract: *The verbunkos music, this special genre, which is an alloy of art and folk music, showed up as a symbol of the past since the moment of its development around 1780-90. It spread quickly after its style was firmly established. Some earlier features from the old Hungarian music of this style can be found in late 18 century music, but a new folk trend came to life during this period as well. The author here approaches to the topic as an ethnomusicologist and relies on the verbunkos sources to summarize the significance of this musical symbol of the national history of Hungary.*

Key words: *verbunkos, verbunk, national music, folk and art music, gypsy musicians.*

1. The name and origin of the Verbunkos

The verbunkos this typical Hungarian musical genre [10.] arose around the 1730s the earliest and unfolded as a Hungarian dance form in the last third of the 18th century. This dance music form lent its name to the style of the entire instrumental crop of the period and the age between 1780 and 1830-50 called the period of verbunkos music in Hungarian music history. It is a musical (and with the name *verbunk* a dance) genre of great importance which became a national symbol in the 19th. During the Austrian domination of Hungary, after 1715 the customs of recruiting conscripts for the regiments of the imperial army at tavern carousals with drinking and dancing also became customary. The Hungarian word *verbunk* (*verbuvál*) derives from German *Werbung* meaning also 'recruitment', and it was

used parallel with or in place of the corresponding Hungarian *toboroz*, *toborzás*.

Following the period of germination in the 18th century, the *verbunkos* as a new genre is registered from the last third of the century. Its efflorescence was in the early 19th century and it spread wide from the mid-1820s through the '30s. The period lasting from these years until the mid-19th century witnessed the consolidation of the specific national dance types (first of all the *csárdás*) and their spread in broad social strata, and the strengthening of the popular art song (*magyarnóta*) which emerged in these years parallel with and independently of the *verbunkos*, developing partly together with the latter before taking a diverging course. This popular style spread and was moulded like folklore to become urban civilian popular music.

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2. Emergence, periods

The first *verbunkos* tunes in writing are found in manuscripts around 1729-30 [4, p. 17-22.]. The music accompanying the dance during the Austrians' recruitment among Hungarians was designated by old Hungarian dances and their names (*Lassú* [slow], *Magyar* [Hungarian], *Régi magyar nóta* [old Hungarian song], *Saltus Hungaricus*, etc.) still for a long time. The first published sources (in Vienna) registering the new fashionable Hungarian music ("*Ausgesuchte Ungarische Nationaltänze*", "*Originale Ungarische Nationaltänze*") do not use the word *verbunkos* but allude to the Magyars by the word 'national'. The name *verbunkos* appeared relatively late, in the 1770s. The unifying name 'verbunk' (less frequently 'verbunkos') replaced the designations of old instrumental dance music towards the end of the first great period of *verbunkos* music (in the early 1800s) [12-15.]. It came to prevail when the music was separated from military recruitment and went on developing as a musical genre in its own right; the change in the musical style also indicates the stylization of the genre in its name. *Verbunk* survived as a virtuosic men's dance in the folk tradition.

The first four prominent masters and also virtuoso public performers of the new style were János Lavotta (1764-1820) [2.], János Bihari (1764-1827) [9.], Antal Csermák (1774-1822) and Ignác Ruzitska (1777-1833). Motivated by a drive to gain independence from the Austrian rule, the Hungarians – similarly to other Central European nations – began to cultivate their

own singular features. The fashionable Hungarian music, the *verbunkos*, rose to predominance as a sign of Magyarization. Hungarians (as the noble Lavotta) and foreigners living in the area of Hungary (Germans: J. Bengráf, F. P. Rigler, Á. Berner [3, 7.], Gy. Arnold, Czechs such as A. Csermák) living in Hungary, embraced this new style in the name of the national idea. The performer of this music, the Gypsy musician, also became the personified of this national ideal. From the 19th century *verbunkos* music was also composed by Gypsies, but their compositions were transcribed from others and not from the virtuos instrumentalists themselves (so was it in the case of Bihari whose compositions were notated by contemporary musicians from the living tradition).

The infiltration of the *verbunkos* style into Hungarian composed music began in the 1820s-'30s, strengthened from the '40s and fundamentally influenced its 19th century development (e.g. Liszt, particularly in his rhapsodies Erkel, Mosonyi among others). The conscious collection of dance tunes began at that time in the early 1820s. The first publications appeared in 1823: I. Ruzitska *Magyar Nóták Veszprém Vármegyéből* (*Hungarian Tunes from Veszprém County*) [5.]. The Nr.75. *FriSs Magyar* (in F-major) is a composition of Gy. Arnold which is to be found also in the manuscript of Mária Csányi (Nr. 4. *Friss* in F-major) [15., Nr. 23.] The *Hungarian Tunes from Veszprém County* contains also a wellknown piece of János Bihari 1.

2 Primátialis I. f. s. Magyar.

ADAGIO
non molto
N^o 41.
Bihari.

TRIO .
p dolce

Fig. 1

The verbunkos was quick to conquer Europe after its emergence. It had a fertilizing effect on European art music from the late 18th century, incorporated in West European art music through the greatest composers. The process ranges from the use of Hungarisms labelled as *alla turca*, *all' ongherese/ungherese/zingarese*, etc., implying the use of melodic schemes, rhythms, rhapsodic performance and other performing mannerisms deemed typical of Hungarian or [improperly in the eyes of others] Gypsy music, to the involvement of the solo violin as the leading instrument of a performing apparatus. The tendency among foreign composers to use allegedly Hungarian tunes or stylistic elements continued into later decades of the 19th century (Berlioz, Brahms, Sarasate) and even into the 20th. Developed his stereotypical elements which were easy to emulate and use as part of the musical vernacular emerged, also influencing the

folk music of neighbouring peoples. From Hungary spreaded to the Slovak, Croatian and the Roman folk music the *csárdás* and the *verbunk* (Slovak, Croat: *Cardaš*, *Verbunk*, Roumanian: *Çardas*, *Barbunk*), from Hungary spreaded to the South-Slavic people the gypsy-band as ensemble-type, the modernised *tárogató* and *Schundacimbalom* and to the Serbs recently as modern instrument the violin).

3. Performers

As the army had no official band at that time (the military band in the contemporary sense evolved by the late 19th century), local musicians were engaged for recruitment. Gypsies have been present in Hungary from the mid-15th century. [8, p. 11.] There were some musicians among them earlier, but they only began to play a determining role even from this time. The recruitment increased their number because besides by playing

music they could redeem their unpaid taxes. Music-making as a career started among them around this time. Hungarian nobels had that time a new convention, namely they engaged gypsy musicians (a various gypsy bands) instead of Hungarian and foreign musician (as in earlier centuries) as a special form of court musicians. At the beginning the Gypsies only entertained the rural nobility and only very slowly, at varying dates by region, they came to replace peasant musicians in

villages too, on the whole by the early 20th century. The most striking fact was the appearance of solists, partly with new instruments such as the clarinet or the modernized cimbalom. B. Vikár recorded different gypsy clarinet players in the Hungarian villages of Transylvania. One particular, by the name of Pista Gálfi, played many *Verbunkos* pieces. The tunes were trascribed by Kodály, like the following “Székely verbunk”.



Fig. 2

By the mid-century, the number of Gypsy bands soared: even small-town restaurants had their bands and the bands began touring not only the country but also abroad, at first in Europe (from the 1830s) [6.] and after 1867 in North-America and other countries [11., 16.]. Not only the verbunkos pieces but also the Gypsy musicians, who performed them, soon became the personification of the Hungarian national ideal abroad.

4. The verbunkos style

The origin of the *verbunkos* style – *verbunk*, the dance of young serfs recruited for the army – came to the fore of public attention already during recruitments in the 18th century. The initial social background to the style was a relatively thin layer, the emerging middle class. Contributory to its emergence were the old military dances and their tunes, including the “*Hajdú-dance*” called mostly *ungaresca* in foreign sources. Bartók was the first to note that the augmentation of quavers to crotchets already began in the 18th century and led to the dignified dotted rhythm of the *verbunkos* and the 16-bar two-part song form typical of the *verbunk* and *verbunkos*. [1.]

As regards form, two types exist: one consists of a slow section of two parts and attached to it a swift part usually called *Figura* in the early times; the other has three parts: slow, medium fast. The slow sections contain freely shaped rhapsodic elements, the swift parts have vivid, virtuosic motifs. Rhythmically, the slow and medium-fast parts are strongly rhythmized with dotted and sharply dotted $\frac{4}{4}$ rhythms. In Aeolian tunes there are many augmented and diminished steps. The swift – *Friss* – parts are often in major tonality compared to the minor-key main sections with fast pregnant swineherd's dance rhythm in $\frac{2}{4}$ measure. The *Friss* (fast) movements are generally in major

modes. All this was often complemented with elements of the classical musical style and with colours of Turkish and Arabic flavour (e.g. augmented seconds in a minor scale). Because of his twofold origin (written art music and oral folk music origin) and transmission ethnomusicology currently defines this specific genre as traditional instrumental music [15, p. 8.]

5. Summary

The history of the *verbunk* and the new musical style sprouting from it, the *verbunkos*, as well as the *csárdás*, was closely interlaced with the Hungarian national reformist movement. This dance and music became part of the Hungarian romanticism. It influenced the contemporary stage, literature, composed music and peasant culture. It played a significant role – reviving its original function – in recruiting soldiers during the war of independence of 1848/49. Folk tradition has preserved several dignified elements and tunes of the *verbunkos* dance in different areas and in a variety of forms. Its emergence fitted in the tendency of the major stylistic change that took place in Europe in diverse ways affecting the arsenal of instruments, instrumental and vocal music, folk culture in the strict sense and the culture of the higher social strata.

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