

Changing traditions

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Abstract: *The alarm-bell has been sounded many times over our traditions. It is true that our traditional culture has undergone serious changes, but it seems that the time for the funeral has not yet come. What direction is indicated by these changes? The proportion of old-style melodies is much less than a hundred years ago, whereas newer-style folk songs, and in particular 'artificial' folk songs, have become much more popular. The endeavours of professionals to influence or reverse this process has been a failure. Their aspirations mostly do not meet the needs of small communities. In the folk music and folk dance movement, business interest and self-promotion have proliferated. This approach is completely contrary to the features of traditional culture and the ancient Hungarian mentality. Only through service to the community, and by personal example, can we make progress in helping our people find their way back to their own soul.*

Keywords: *traditions, change, folk songs, folk movement, business, regeneration*

1. Introduction

The alarm-bell has been rung many times over our traditions. The question is posed: is it really the final hour? Is it really time to “bury” our traditions? I would like to respond to this question with the results of a folk-song collection from Felcsik (the Upper Csík basin, in Harghita county, Romania).

Having collected a total of 570 songs in the village of Csíkmadaras, from which (after setting aside variations) 402 distinct melodies can be identified, I have come to the conclusion that the situation is not at all as bad as the experts say. Most of these 402 melodies are valuable (new style and old-style folk songs, as well as pieces belonging to other genres of folk music); a smaller number are not closely related to the folk song, so are less valuable. The specific data is as follows: from the total of 402 there are 216 folk songs (the rest are not). Of these 62 can be classified as old style and 106 as new style. The collection took place around the turn of the millennium in 1999 and over the following few years.

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I therefore believe that, on the one hand, the time for ringing alarm-bells time has not yet come, and on the other hand it is true that folk traditions are constantly changing. This change is also confirmed by the fact that in collections from the Csik region of a hundred years ago (Bartók, Kodály, Lajtha and Bodon Pál) there are less than a quarter of the melodies available to me today in Felcsík. This means that real change has been taking place. To what can we attribute this change? How does it present itself and what are the processes in the background?

2. The change

Alarmists are “threatening” that folk culture and tradition are already extinct. Already in the thirties of the last century, they formulated the need to “save Hungarian folk music”² If Hungarian folk song and folk traditions need to be rescued, then how can we presume to ask in which direction they are going? The fact that today there are fewer old-style folk songs than a hundred years ago, and also that the proportion of folk songs and synthetic folk songs is in the process of changing, calls our attention to some phenomena. Specialists and many in the movement aspire to influence this process of change to try to replicate how it was a hundred, two hundred, a thousand years ago and so on. Is there really any justification for this in the situation where the change is happening in today’s world, where reality is going in another direction?

I think that the direction that can be experienced today can indeed be influenced to some extent. Folk-music professionals seek to do this, and it is the aim of the movement too. And indeed, maybe it could be reversible, but despite their efforts it hasn’t happened. What is the reason for this? Why is it that so many factors are trying to “positively” influence the course of development, to bring back those states we deem worthy of value (compared to which today’s changes seem to be towards degeneration) and yet without success?

It is true that specialists, schools and the folk scene have done a lot: folk music, folk dance and handicrafts have been introduced to schools and higher education, after-school clubs, traditional folk and folk dance camps, quizzes, traditional markets, festivals etc. However, they have not really made a breakthrough. First of all, we have to ask what kinds of needs the movement itself (by this I refer to the “táncház” movement, the folk dance movement, professional

² László Lajtha said in 1933: “The only way to save Hungarian folk music is for the educated Hungarian class to love Hungarian folk songs not only in performances, not just applauding Imre Palló and Vilma Medgyaszay, but also for them to sing Hungarian folk songs themselves.” Source: <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/00549/17189.htm> (viewed 21 September 2018).

and amateur movements, and so on) met in the past, and what kinds of needs does it meet today?

At the inception of the movement it primarily served the needs of high culture. Folk music, folk dance, customs and costumes were presented on stage and thus artistic creations were born, and are still being born today. These presentations primarily met – and still meet today – the needs of urban society. At the same time, the dance-house movement grew from the context of urban youth and served the needs of urban youth, seeking a new orientation by turning back to the things of the past. In this sense, the dance-house movement shows development in its own domain. I join László Felföldi³ in posing the question whether this movement fulfils the needs of those communities from which it arises and, moreover, the needs of the greater population? And to this we have to reply no. Because if these needs were satisfied, the change would not go in the same direction as we experience today.

Yet smaller communities and village communities still claim this culture, they still have the desire to express themselves by these means. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that here and there we can see exceptional and scattered results. I would like to point out just one example: Csikszentdomokos. In this large village, the youth folk dance movement has grown to such an extent that – I feel – it has extended itself back to the whole community.

The following quotation from Bartók is very instructive for the issues raised. The peasantry “fulfills its physical or spiritual life-needs more or less either by means of appropriate traditional expressive forms or through higher (urban) culture, but instinctively adapted to the expressive forms of its own spiritual dispositions.” Here, I would like to emphasize the “instinctively adapted to the expressive forms of its own spiritual dispositions.”⁴ It seems that the change of tradition reflects a change in certain spiritual processes. In addition to Kodály, we can say that Hungarian folklore is the mirror of the whole Hungarian soul.⁵ If folk tradition moves in one direction and shows certain tendencies, we must look primarily for the changes that are causing this tendency in the change of the Hungarian soul.

The theme of one of my presentations was precisely this – the Hungarian soul, and I studied this in parallel with Hungarian language and Hungarian folk music. Here, I would only draw attention to the conclusion: the Hungarian soul can primarily be characterised by service to the community, attention to others, caring, humanity, and

³ László Felföldi spoke after the lectures of the first session of the conference in the morning and expressed doubts about the issue discussed.

⁴ Bartók 1924, p. V.

⁵ “The Hungarian folk song is not just the echo of today’s village life, it is not only the expression of the »primitive feelings of the village man«, but also the mirror of the whole Hungarian spirit.” published in Kodály 1964, p 33-35.

morality. But if we look around from our own doorsteps, we can see that these are exactly the spiritual aspects that are most absent from today's Hungarian society. It is thereby possible to explain the direction of change of our folk traditions.

What is also the secret of the Csikszentdomokos phenomenon (and others)? Why does not it work at the level of the general public? One of the keywords in my opinion is experience. The more children and youth groups and communities we can reach, if the activity is not just one among many others, but folk music, folk dance, folk singing, folk handicraft is one of the main forms of recreational entertainment, the closer we get to the goal. In that sense, we can pose the question: what motivates the members of such groups? If its just for the sake of appearances, for the promise of a foreign tour or with a view to being well-placed in an important competition, we are far from the goal. Only if the values of this tradition become part of their lives, only if they take them out in their free time, and then when they become adults with their own family, implanting these values with appreciation and love, only then can we say that our aspirations have reached their goal. In such a sense, great responsibility weighs on the educators' shoulders. "If we want to bring the old light of a monumental folk song to the whole nation, we have to prepare the child for it..." wrote Kodály in the middle of the last century.⁶

On the other hand, I find it important to link the aspirations of professionals and those in the movement with the needs of smaller and larger communities. It is not straining at already-forgotten dance and music opportunities and customs but the raising of existing standards and building in new ways of meeting people's needs that will lead to worthwhile results. Here I would share two personal experiences.

We were at a 40-year-olds reunion in Felcsík, in Csíkmadaras to be precise, about fifteen years ago.⁷ Here, those 40-year-olds sang more folk songs in half an hour than the musicians played during the whole party, from evening to morning. So the question is: who is responsible for this? In another case, we were at a wedding in Csíkcsicsó. It was a good village wedding with at least 400 guests. During the celebrations the musicians only played folk music (csárdás) once, and that was when the traditional masked pranksters came in and demanded it.⁸ And when my wife asked the musicians why they did not play folk music, they replied that there was no need for it. However, there was a stratum of the gathering (at

⁶ Kodály 1961, p. 63.

⁷ Community reunions are also organised for 50 and 60 year olds. This custom began 30-40 years ago in Felcsík and surrounding areas.

⁸ These masked intruders were traditionally members of the community who had not been invited to the wedding, but felt that they should have been. Today, they appear at weddings for the sake of fun and amusement. In this case, they make themselves unrecognizable and burst in. They often disguise themselves as opposite sexes, so they dance with the same sex. They always require the kind of music that enables to make fun of the community through dancing in pairs. They are then offered all manner of good things from the wedding feast.

least one-fifth of the 400 people), who did not dance at all. These were primarily from the over-60s generation. Because the musicians were used to playing the genres of newer dance songs for young people, and social dances (waltz, tango, etc.) for middle-aged people, in their opinion there was no need for folk music or folk dancing. But at the same time a significant proportion of the community had to remain helplessly seated because there was nothing for them to dance to. Members of the older age group tend not to go up to the musicians and request a dance for themselves. They feel that their time is over and young people have the right to choose. So wedding musicians too have a great responsibility: they should pay more attention to the needs of the whole community.

I also want to highlight the responsibility of the media. Current practice shows that the proportion of genres broadcast by the media is not really in line with the huge folk music database that Hungarians have at their disposal and which they consider to be the greatest in the world. Representatives of the Hungarian media could take an example from Romanians, who broadcast much more traditional folk music and folk dance.

Last but not least, I would like to emphasize the responsibility of the movement and the people of standing from the profession. Here I would like to draw attention to an important contradiction. These experts often practice folk music, folk dance, and folk traditions with the educational aim of these traditions being embraced by the younger generation, but at the same time all the signs indicate that they are far away from embodying the characteristics of the Hungarian soul. Business and self-interest are overrunning our profession. I know an excellent dancer who has retired from the stage as a manager, but driven by financial interest she exploits the knowledge of village informants for profit. One can also see this in professional self-promotion. Folk music and folk dance collectors market their own collections and those of others (often without returning the collected material to their informants), and instructors or group leaders are promoting the interests of their dance group or band, mostly at the expense of a small community. Everyone has their own interests, and exactly that soul quality is often missing (with respect to the exceptions) on the part of the experts who established this culture and who are striving to save it. We can see another good example of this in children's games: Bertalan Andrásfalvy writes "... there is no competition in them, the opposing ambition of men to overcome one another for glory and joy. Today's game is clearly the essence of this: Who is stronger, faster, who hits who, who knocks down the other, who throws farther, who is more beautiful, who plays violin better, who sings, plays piano better etc. Everything has become a competition. In economics, commerce, politics, on the

battlefield, in science, arts ... Competition spoils the community. Where there is a winner, there are many losers.”⁹

3. Conclusions

How can things change? How can soul consciousness change back to the community from the individuals that comprise it? I think that traditional culture, which was formed by the unique Hungarian soul, can reverse these effects. According to Zsuzsa Manulek, a psychologist who taught 200 Hungarian folk and childrens songs to her own little daughter up to the age of five, if the child is fortified with these values before school age, then later whatever music she is exposed to her good musical taste will not be damaged, she will always return to the pure source.¹⁰ It seems that Zoltán Kodály’s warnings are no longer relevant today: “Perhaps it is self-evident why it is better to keep young children from music before fifth-grade. (...) Bring home our children at last. Then when they become adults they will also feel at home in the air of Hungarian music.”¹¹

I am convinced that it is not in vain that we are born Hungarians, in the Carpathian Basin. Sequestered in the depths of our souls are the forgotten or suppressed strings that fully resonate with the pearls of our traditional culture. And if we can unearth these from ourselves, then by serving the community, by personal example, we can move our people towards the rediscovery of their own souls.¹²

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⁹ Andrásfalvy 2008., p, 472.

¹⁰ Psychologist Dr. Zsuzsa Manulek shared these observations at a presentation for teachers and nurses at the Bólyai Summer Academy in 2001, in Sovata.

¹¹ Kodály w. y, p. 43-44.

¹² This paper is a written version of my lecture entitled “Tradition – Heritage – Public Culture: The place and the future of Hungarian folk art in the Carpathian Basin”, in Budapest, on March 26, 2010 in the House of Traditions.