

Thoughts on Transylvanian folksong competitions

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Abstract: *The paper is a guide for the teachers of the students participating in the folk songs competitions in Transylvania. It presents in detail the problems faced both by teachers (during the training of students) and by the specialized jury (during the evaluation). These issues concern the learning of folk songs, the selection of melodies by students, the way they are performed, and the jury's evaluation of student performance. All responsibility for the evolution of students participating in a folk song competition falls on the shoulders of preparatory teachers. If they encounter difficulties during training, if they cannot cope with more difficult situations, it is good to contact a specialists in the field. There are always people willing to help. The main goal of these competitions is to have more people sing folk songs, and to live with the possibility of singing folk songs in future, either individually or in groups. Learn from authentic recordings and learn the authentic way of performing. To know as many records as possible, possibly people who have been born in communities where they still live the tradition. This will allow us to develop respect for our own traditions.*

Key-words: *Folk songs, learning, selection, interpretation, evaluation*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, more and more folk song competitions are being organized at local, regional and national levels. Thus questions frequently arise concerning the learning of folk songs, the choice of material, presentation issues and the evaluation of performances; so I have decided to put some ideas on paper.

1.1. How should folk songs be learnt?

There are several ways to learn folk songs:

a. learning from authentic, “pure sources”

As old traditions pass away, there are fewer places around us (and throughout the Carpathian Basin) where folk songs are still passed on in the traditional way, mouth-to-mouth, in the family or in the village. This can still be seen in Moldova

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and *Gyimes*, and to a lesser extent in *Mezőség*, *Kalotaszeg*, *Küküllő*, on the upper course of the *Maros*, and also here and there in the remoter parts of *Székelyföld*, in more secluded villages.

- b.** learning from recorded material in old and newer collections which feature traditional singers, as above

Such collections are now available on the internet in almost unlimited quantities. In the material collected in Hungarian-speaking areas (from the turn of the old century to the millennium) we find a huge quantity of valuable material. In this respect I can recommend the online databases of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute of Musicology (www.db.zti.hu) and also the Folklore Database (<http://folkloredb.hu/fdb/index.php>).

- c.** learning from folk singers

Today, many schools offer folk song, folk music and folk dance education, although this is not included in the official curriculum. This phenomenon is mainly found in elementary classes, where a dedicated teacher considers it important to cultivate children's music and movement. In older classes, partly due to the pressures of the formal curriculum, and also because young people develop other interests, this is usually absent from school education. However, within the framework of folk art schools, this mode of learning is still available in adulthood. Furthermore, folk music and dance camps provide children and adults alike the opportunity to learn.

- d.** learning from recordings made by contemporary folk singers (audio and / or video CDs, DVDs, concerts, etc.)

There are more and more so-called 'revival' folk performers, playing revitalized or re-interpreted folk music. In my opinion it is important to make the distinction between authentic performers and performances, and those who change (or spoil) the authentic mode of presentation.

- e.** learning from sheet music.

In addition, we differentiate between group and individual tuition, as well as those who learn with help or independently, without instruction.

Which of these methods should we choose? That depends on what our goal is. If we simply wish to cultivate our own musical taste and enrich our musical knowledge, then any of the methods described will suffice. Of course once we have progressed beyond a certain level (having familiarized ourselves with dozens of folk songs), our demand increases and we will increasingly strive for one of the first three modes. However, if someone wants to learn a folk song in order to perform it in front of an audience, it is not enough to learn it from sheet music or by listening to representatives of the 'revival' movement.

Sheet music can never replace audio recordings because it cannot reproduce the distinctive nuances of performance and pronunciation. But these stylistic features are exactly those that distinguish the folk music of *Palóc* from that of *Székelyföld*, the *Dunántúl* from the *Mezőség* etc. Only to the extent that a 'revival' movement performer can authentically interpret a folk song from a particular location, so will anyone who learns secondhand from their performance. But nowadays there are so many folk singers, so many choices, that enhanced expertise is needed to choose a credible and authentic source. The vocal qualities of the modern performer, their charisma, their fabulous singing techniques are often deceptive because this is not always the case with authentic performances (I'll return to this theme later).

If you are preparing a folk music lesson, you must have at your disposal all the musical, performance, and language features of the folk song you wish to teach. Additionally, it can be important to use original collections in teaching. This is equally valid for individual tuition. Each student has their own unique profile in terms of pitch, intonation, musical memory, vocal technique, temperament etc., so repertoire choices are better made on an individual basis. After many years of work, persistent and talented students will be able to learn folk songs without a teacher, primarily from authentic collections. But it is a good thing if they sometimes come back to their teachers to get feedback on whether they're on the right track.

It occasionally still happens that a young singer comes from an environment where an oral folk song tradition is still alive. These young singers, whether they have a helping hand or not, have all the features of authentic performance "in their blood". Most of these can only be ruined.

2. About the compilation

For almost two decades we have been organizing folk song competitions for schoolchildren in *Csíkszék* (*Kászonok to Borszék*). During these competitions we provide professional advice to the participants' preparatory teachers, wherein we always discuss the contestant's intended repertoire. We indicate which melodies may not be appropriate for this type of competition. In this way, we try to raise awareness amongst those young people who show an aptitude and interest in folk music, of its enduring value that has been developed over thousands of years and polished to perfection by the Hungarian soul. The features that make Hungarian folk music different from the music of other peoples in Europe are the very ones that distinguish old-style melodies and performances from the newer style of folk music. We try to promote that which remains from the thousand-year tradition of Hungarian folk song, to be incorporated into the repertoire of our contestants and their teachers, and thence into the public domain.

It has been shown that amongst our older-style melodies are some songs that are one or two thousand years old. These are characterized by a descending curve,

for the most part featuring the pentatonic scale. They are often performed with a narrative rhythm, characterized by fast melodies of eight lines, and long pauses in the final extended syllables of each line. Additional features include rich decorative inflexions and sharp, open-throat singing. Over time, the erosion of this distinctive form has resulted in seven-tone melodies, bound, rigid rhythms, a dry and unruly melody, often coupled with a softer, quieter intonation. The old style of performance has remained in Transylvania for many years, principally in *Gyimes* and *Mezőség*, and to some extent in *Kalotaszeg*. It has also remained in the *Csángó* population of Moldavia. These features are mostly found in laments and other types of slow-tempo songs. Of course, these are recommended for older people, as their degree of difficulty requires advanced performer skills. We also recommend that our students first master the folk song treasures of their own region before moving on to songs from other places.

With all this I do not want to suggest that newer style songs should be avoided. Amongst these there are some very valuable songs that have to a great extent been affected by the abovementioned erosion. We strongly recommend learning newer-style melodies in which the ancient elements can still be found: the pentatonic scale and richly decorated melody. These are maximum 100-150 years old. At the same time, we are explicitly opposed to folksy art songs, melodies of foreign origin, and songs of degraded form in folk song competitions. (see Jagamas 1980-1982).

I would like to draw attention to an additional phenomenon that we do not often, but sometimes meet. Occasionally students include ecclesiastical songs in their list. These, also referred to as sacred songs, are sometimes confused with folk songs. We know that these represent a valuable strand in the Hungarian music tradition, and there is hardly any forum where they can be performed and popularized. Therefore, if we meet with such an entry in our folk-song competition, we usually admit it. However, we consider it an exaggeration when someone wins a folk song competition through the performance of an ecclesiastical song (which unfortunately happened recently).

Another factor to consider is that some folk-music teachers of small children do not take into account the vocal register of the child. It is common knowledge among music teachers that the smaller the child, the narrower the vocal register. It is no coincidence that so many of our children's songs have a very small vocal register indeed. Therefore, I do not recommend teaching pre-school or first-class children songs with a larger register than six tones. Although there are always exceptions, I have myself encountered a first-grade student who could sing a ten-toned folk song without effort. If that were the case, of course it would not be necessary to limit the child's abilities.

3. Presentation of folk songs

There has been a lot of talk about the authentic performance of folk songs, about the particularities we consider important in public singing. I will not come up with these again, but instead, I draw attention to some of the mistakes that are often encountered in folk song competitions.

One such mistake is the manner of singing. One aspect of this is employing the performance style of other genres. Occasionally, they can produce folk songs even in pop music or choral or opera style. Pop music style primarily refers to specific ornamentations or rhythms. It's about singers who like to sing their pop music and have perhaps been persuaded (often unwillingly so) to participate in a folk song competition. If their interest in the folk songs is intrinsically motivated, then with time and a lot of work, they can overcome these shortcomings and experience the beauty of authentic folk singing.

Choral singing is mainly characterized by a subtle, mostly vibrato-free performance that is often accompanied by singing in the high register using the head voice. Sometimes this also applies to genuine folk-song competitors. In such cases, we always draw the teachers' attention to it. According to our experience, the opera style is (fortunately) becoming increasingly rare. I'm thinking of the 'belcanto' intonation, which often accompanies some dramatization to emphasize the message of the text. This is primarily due to the use of volume, which is not recommended for folk singing. As with singing in the head, it is just not characteristic of the authentic performance of folk songs.

Occasionally, the preparatory teacher chooses a more complicated tune for his pupil than he or she can handle. In this case ornamentations are forced, unnatural, as deployed in choral or classical (operatic) singing. They resemble melisma. The enunciation of words can also be forced and unnatural, in that the singer fails to retain the linking of syllables characteristic of spoken language. For example: instead of *hajtyák*, they sing *hajt-ják*, or instead of *tejjes* they sing *tel-jes*, or a further example could be *mond-ta* instead of *monta* etc. In other cases, composite words are pronounced separately, such as *édes anyám* instead of *édesanyám*. Articulation in folk singing is just as natural as in ordinary speech.

It is often the case that students include dance songs from their repertoire, but because they haven't learned the particular rhythm of that dance well, they cannot reproduce it correctly. This is especially the case with asymmetrical rhythm dance songs. Examples include Hungarian dances from *Mezőség* (including *Szék*), *lassú magyaros* dances from *Gyimes*, Moldavian *kecskés* dance, etc. We usually suggest that these singers start dancing. With children who have been dancing for a number of years, this does not occur.

We have also encountered a flawed rhythm in a new presentation phenomenon that is unfortunately popular with folk singers and 'táncház' musicians. In doing so, certain parts of the rhythm of quarter-movement melodies

are sung incorrectly. The rhythm of the Hungarian folk song is adapted to the rhythm of the text by quarter pairs: one of the syllables is shortened, in proportion to which the other lengthens. To simplify: this adaptive rhythm results in a distinctive dotted rhythms. Instead, some singers modify the rhythm by measure (i.e. four syllables): the first three syllables are shortened, the latter being extended proportionally. This phenomenon often occurs in the performances of Gypsy musicians in city restaurants and at weddings, which may be how it has come to appear in the repertoire of 'revival' movement musicians. I would point out that, irrespective of this, this phenomenon also occurs frequently in instrumental performances (esp. *Széki magyar* dance, or *Szászcsávás* musicians when they accompany the *csárdás*). Here, however, it is only an instrumental phenomenon; it is not characteristic of a true vocal performer. In slow-paced dance songs, (*hajnali, asztali nóta* etc.) we often encounter similar rhythms; but these are not quarters, they are eight-movement melodies. Here the rules of adaptive rhythm do not apply in the same way.

Folk song competitions have raised the question of whether a competitor can use a tuning fork or if the teacher may give him/her the initial tone. We usually allow this in the folk song competitions we organize. There are indeed some specially gifted young people who have innate inner hearing. Most people, however, have to sing a lot (for years, or indeed decades) to enable it to develop. In the heat of the moment it can also happen that competitors begin at either too high or too low a pitch to sing the song properly. It is good if the jury allows them to resume and does not evaluate them negatively. Thus there will be fewer participants who will return home with a feeling of failure. Our primary goal is to have more people sing folk songs, and to live with the possibility of singing folk songs in future, either individually or in groups. It would be a pity to limit the number of people who feel motivated to do this.

4. Evaluation criteria

The criteria by which we judge performances during our folk song competitions are open and made known to everyone in advance: "During the competition we are looking for these things: a clean, ringing voice, a beautiful tone, the value of the songs on the list and, last but not least, the authenticity and the convincing power of the performance." However, although members of the jury are chosen as experienced specialists, opinions often differ. This difference is mainly due to the ever-higher level of our entries. If you have to evaluate performances where you'd like to give a prize to everyone, it's difficult to make a decision. An artistic, dramatic production is not a mathematical exercise with a straightforward conclusion.

Moreover, if a contestant possesses all the attributes of the old style of performing, and has selected a song that can be interpreted appropriately in this way, they have an advantage over those participants who may have similar talents but have not selected a song that showcases these effectively. So it matters what kind of song we choose. This choice must always fit with the talents and attributes of the competitor. The higher the professional quality of a folk song competition, the more important the above mentioned considerations are.

A talented child, after several years of practice, is credibly able to sing richly ornamented melodies at the age of a 4th grade student, and can authentically reproduce at least one other local dialect. These attributes give the advantage over those who otherwise have the same characteristics but are singing without ornament, or not in the local style that is typical of the chosen song. Here I would like to point out that talented children from rural areas where traditional, old-fashioned performances are more or less alive can, with good governance, be able to interpret the above-mentioned features in advance. In addition, generally, with the 5th-8th class age group, after several years of practice and singing, the need for such a performance begins to appear. In my opinion, competitors above 9th class should only stand on stage to sing folk songs if they can do so in this way.

In folk song competitions sometimes a dissatisfied parent or teacher has accused the jury of favoring riders who “roar”. Although natural, open-throat singing is often coupled with high volume, it has never been decisive in terms of evaluation. If someone has a strong voice and deploys it effortlessly during the performance, we really appreciate it. If this is a natural endowment for the performer, then powerful singing from the throat as one of the characteristics of the old style of performance is a positive consideration. However, if this is at the expense of the quality of the performance, then we will downgrade it accordingly. The other extreme is when a competitor has a characterless, muted, quiet or hoarse voice. I confess that in a folk song competition this is not advantageous. However, with plenty of exercise, their voice can be opened up, and if the volume does not become overwhelming, their voice may sooner or later become silvery, tinkling.

All of these thoughts were born in me after long decades’ research work and participation in folk song competition juries, and through many discussions with other professionals. I have outlined these criteria and guidelines as a proposal, rather than as a completed task. If someone has achieved good results by other methods, I advise you to continue working the same way. I’m happy to hear anyone’s experience in this area. At the same time, I would emphasize that all the responsibilities of participating in a student’s folk song competition weigh on the shoulders of a teacher. Therefore, if you feel you cannot deal with a particular situation alone, do not be ashamed to seek advice. We are always happy to help you whenever you need it.

Our efforts over the years have brought this result: that contestants are selecting more and more beautiful melodies and they are able to interpret them more and

more authentically. We have enabled a generally more rigorous selection from the list of less valuable folk songs, and made the teachers aware that they do not necessarily have to teach what is currently most popular in their village or area.

It is no accident that in respect to our folk song competitions we bear in mind Zoltán Kodály's relevant guidance: "If we want the old light of our monumental folk songs to flow to the whole nation, we must prepare the child in its system and spirit. ... Otherwise, as you grow up on today's musical teaching materials, you will feel a strange alienation ... the oldest music of the nation. ... furthermore there are still textbooks in use that do not even reference the pentatonic scale. But for us, only that can be our natural foundation." (Kodály 1943, 63.) Therefore I consider it important that the whole competition should have as its most important objective to encourage more children to sing and become culturally enriched in the process. Thus, we can do our part to help Transylvanian Hungarians to reinvigorate the treasures of their own rich folksong heritage.

5. References

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