

Zoltán Kodály's *Dances of Galánta*: Musical Nationalism or Exoticism?

Courtney Nichols

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967), an ethnomusicologist known as a nationalist composer and for drawing inspiration from the folk songs of the state, wrote *Dances of Galánta* (1933), a piece that Kodály described as a piece that represented the folk songs and heritage of Hungary. Specifically, *Dances of Galánta* borrows from and imitates the *verbunkos*: a style of dance associated with the Romani, a stateless ethnic group in Europe. Not only is it necessary to examine the difference between Roma and Hungarian culture, but it is also essential to distinguish the difference between nationalism and exoticism in music; one term describes music that represents one's own ethnicity (nationalism) while the other describes music that depicts the Other (exoticism). When a composer borrows music from another country/culture and does not acknowledge that the music was borrowed, they are then appropriating that music into their own culture. Moreover, the culture of the Roma has been appropriated by other people, especially during the twentieth century. Since the Roma do not consider themselves Hungarian, and Kodály did not consider himself Roma, it is unlikely that *Dances of Galánta* is actually a nationalist piece but rather it is an example of musical exoticism. In this paper, I will argue that Kodály's *Dances of Galánta* falls into the category of exoticism because this piece appropriated from the Roma culture which is not synonymous with Hungarian culture, and with this research, music that belongs to the Roma is given back to them.

Zoltán Kodály often drew inspiration for his compositions from the folk music of his homeland of Hungary. Kodály spent seven years of his childhood in Galánta, a small Hungarian town rich in history, where he grew up hearing the local Romani band; this local band was the first "orchestral sonority" Kodály heard in his young life.<sup>1</sup> As an ethnomusicologist, Kodály found folk music incredibly significant. When it came to Hungarian folksongs, Béla Bartók,

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<sup>1</sup> Zoltán Kodály, *Dances of Galánta*, (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1934), XI.

Kodály’s friend and fellow Hungarian composer, agreed with his opinion on the importance of folk music. Therefore, they traveled through the Hungarian countryside recording folk melodies both vocal and instrumental in search of true Hungarian music.<sup>2</sup> Some common characteristics Bartók and Kodály found in Hungarian folk music include the use of the D and G pentatonic scales (often containing a flat third (e.g. G-Bb, C, D-F or D-F, G, A-C)<sup>3</sup> as well as two specific types of meter, *tempo giusto*, for faster melodies, and *parlando-rubato*, for slower melodies.<sup>4</sup> The following Hungarian folk tune shown below employs the G minor pentatonic scale as well as the *tempo giusto* that is often seen in many Hungarian folk songs. No matter which type of meter was used both the *tempo giusto* and *parlando-rubato* are rhythmically free when it comes to the actual performance of the melody. Both composers would then use these folk melodies to create a “Hungarian sound” in many of their musical compositions.



For example, in Kodály’s *Dances of Marosszék*, a piece based on the music of a formerly Hungarian region, he marks the very beginning of the piece it *poco rubato* in order to give the piece a Hungarian sound. Kodály’s career as a composer takes on traditionalist aesthetics as well

<sup>2</sup> Bálint Sárosi, “Instrumental Folk Music in Kodály's Works: The Galánta and Marosszék Dances,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 25, no. 1/4 (1983): 23.

<sup>3</sup> Zoltán Kodály, *Folk Music of Hungary* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), 35-36.

<sup>4</sup> Corinne Kay Ong, “A Historical Overview and Analysis of the Use of Hungarian Folk Music in Zoltán Kodály’s *Háry János Suite*, *Dances of Marosszek*, and *Dances of Galánta*,” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2011), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Kodály, *The Folk Music of Hungary*, 38.

as modernist aesthetics, but his music is still rooted in “peasant culture.”<sup>6</sup> By incorporating the folk music of Hungary, Kodály was able to compose music that would reflect the culture of his native country and break traditional musical standards. This is very evident in *Dances of Galánta*, named for the city that inspired this orchestral work and influenced Kodály’s musical career.

However, Kodály did not just limit his inspirations to Hungarian folk music; he also included Romani music as an inspiration to his piece *Dances of Galánta*. This raises the question: “Are Roma Hungarian?” Romani history and culture is not simple but one cannot argue that they do not have their own distinct culture. The Roma, a nomadic people, are Europe’s largest minority whose culture is generally forgotten or ignored, but their music is celebrated and often appropriated around the world.<sup>7</sup> Because Romani have been and still are geographically dispersed over great distances, it can be difficult to trace roots to their history and culture.<sup>8</sup> Ethnically, Roma are not Hungarian because historically they are nomadic and actually have ethnic roots in South Asia, specifically that of the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, Romani do not consider them to be anything but Roma. Another reason why it is often so difficult in tracing Romani history is that borders, especially in twentieth-century Europe, kept changing and were established without taking into consideration the presence of minority nations of people like the Roma. Essentially, where ever groups of Roma were in Europe when borders were established was their new home despite them being a nomadic people. Deciding who is and who is not

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<sup>6</sup> László Eöszé, Mícheál Houlahan, and Philip Tacka, “Zoltán Kodály,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Oxford University Press, 1878).

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Kapchan, “Balkan,” in *Cultural Heritage in Transit: Intangible Rights as Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 125-6.

<sup>8</sup> Yaron Matras, *The Romani Gypsies*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2, EBSCO.

ethnically Hungarian can be a difficult task because the modern country of Hungary did not exist until the twentieth century.

In *Dances of Galánta*, a large orchestral work, Kodály borrows from and imitates the *verbunkos*, a style of dance from the Romani that he heard as a child growing up in Galánta. Historically, the *verbunkos* melodies are similar to the swineherd, heyduck, and Ukrainian Kolomyjka dance tunes.<sup>9</sup> As the photograph below shows, the dance was often done by military men in uniform in order encourage other young men to join the military.



With the Roma being a nomadic group of people, it is understandable why the *verbunkos* sounds similar to other dances from other cultures. While migrating around Europe, it expected that the Roma would both influence and incorporate the sounds they were hearing from the other peoples that the Roma were encountering. The *verbunkos* is written in two parts, the *lassú* (slow) and the *friss* (fast), that alternate throughout the dance tune.<sup>11</sup> Looking at *Dances of Galánta* as a whole, the piece is constructed like one large *verbunkos*. In other words, the piece begins a slow section followed by a faster section with a reprise of the slower beginning part. The *verbunkos*,

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<sup>9</sup> Béla Bartók, *The Hungarian Folk Song* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1981), xv.

<sup>10</sup> Online Kulturális Magazin, “Verbunkos-Birth of National Dance,” Teraszu.hu, Accessed April 19, 2019, [http://www.terasz.hu/terasz.php?id=egyeb&page=cikk&cikk\\_id=7987](http://www.terasz.hu/terasz.php?id=egyeb&page=cikk&cikk_id=7987).

<sup>11</sup> Kodály, *Dances of Galánta*, XII.

as seen in measures 96 through 102, is characterized by its slow-fast form also known as the *lassú* and the *friss*. Characteristics of the *verbunkos* include dotted rhythms, double dotted rhythms, and American march-like accompaniment.<sup>12</sup> The third dance also closely resembles the *verbunkos* because of its fast *friss* theme (A), measure 123 through 134, followed by the slow *lassú* (B) theme, measures 135 through 141. Not only does the third dance contain the *verbunkos*' traditional *friss* and *lassú* sections but it also contains the characteristic binary form "A-A, B-B".

(a. "A" theme of the third dance)

(b. "B" theme of the third dance)

<sup>12</sup> Ong, "A Historical," 69.

<sup>13</sup> Kodály, *Dances of Galánta*, 96-101.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-137.

Furthermore, Kodály incorporates a total of five Romani dances into his piece, *Dances of Galánta*. For example, from measure 50 to 57 the clarinet introduces the first borrowed Roma dance that is more lyrical in style in comparison to the *verbunkos* but is still characterized by syncopation and dotted rhythms. The second Roma dance, beginning in measure 96 in the first flute part, is more upbeat in tempo in comparison to the first dance and is accompanied by march-like accompaniment in the violins and contrabasso. Not only does the second dance display the march-like accompaniment but it also uses an atypical binary form. Instead of demonstrating an A theme followed a B theme, the *verbunkos* displays the A theme twice then the B theme twice. With its march-like accompaniment, nonstandard binary form, and syncopated and dotted rhythms, the second dance presents the *verbunkos* dance. The third Roma dance is first found in measures 129 through 134. However, the third dance is split into two parts, “A” and “B”; part “B” is first seen in measures 135 through 141. The third dance is similar to the second dance in that it is written in the same binary form “A-A, B-B”. The A theme is introduced in measures 181 through 188 by the flute while the B theme begins in measures 189 with the piccolo. The fourth dance, heard in measure 236 through 241, is characterized by syncopation. The fifth dance is written in two parts, an A theme and a B theme. The A theme is seen in measures 350 through 353 while the B theme is seen in measures 361 through 364. Both themes are characterized by fast, dotted rhythms. With so many dances and other characteristics being borrowed from and portrayed in *Dances of Galánta*, there is no doubt that this piece represents Roma culture. However, there is great doubt that this piece represents the country of Hungary.

Also, it should be taken into consideration that Roma culture, especially the *verbunkos*, is often taken and appropriated by other larger cultures and groups of people. Roma culture

throughout the world is considered inferior to white European races and culture.<sup>15</sup> Often when a culture is seen a “lesser” or “inferior” to another culture, those larger cultures take advantage of an “inferior” culture and take from the “lesser” culture. Therefore, it is possible that *Dance of Galánta* appropriated the dance style from the Roma and people accepted the piece as nationalist. The *verbunkos* was also adopted by Hussar officers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and used it as dance music.<sup>16</sup> In the nineteenth century, the *verbunkos*, heard in orchestral music as far back as the works of Haydn and Beethoven, became a national Hungarian musical idiom.<sup>17</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, *verbunkos* became synonymous with Hungarian music due to the efforts of Roma musicians to popularize the dance style through incorporating it into their compositions. After the fame of the *verbunkos* grew, many other composers such as Brahms and Schubert began using it in their own compositions. For example, Schubert’s *Divertissement* and Brahms’s *Three Hungarian dances* incorporated Hungarian characteristics which ultimately meant that the *verbunkos* was also included in these works.<sup>18</sup> With nationalism on the rise in Europe in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, composers looked to the folk music of their native countries in order to create new, modern music that “sounded” like their own country and broke away from traditional standards of music. Later on in the twentieth century, record companies would repeatedly sold Romani music and labeled it as Hungarian folk music; moreover, recent research into Roma culture has found that there is a clear difference between Roma and Hungarian culture.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Hungarian and Roma cultures are not

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<sup>15</sup> Melissa W. Elliot, “Music, ‘Race’ and Diaspora: Romani Music Making in Ostrava, Czech Republic,” (PhD diss., University of London, 2005), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Bartók, *The Hungarian Folk Song*, xv.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>18</sup> Corinne Kay Ong, “A Historical Overview,” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2011), 35.

<sup>19</sup> Michael J. Horvath, *Hungarian Civilization: A Short History*, Fifth ed (College Park: University of Maryland, 1998), 94.



synonymous. Even though Romani culture is frequently classified as Hungarian, the Roma have a distinct history and culture as does the Hungarian culture.

Kodály and Béla Bartók traveled throughout Hungary in order to research and record Hungarian folk songs, but in their research, both rarely mention the Roma culture. According to Kodály's book *Folk Music of Hungary* and Bartók's book *The Hungarian Folk Song*, Hungarian folk music includes that of the Rumanian and Magyar people. In further research, Hungarian folk melodies can even be traced back to the Ural and Volga regions, whose ancestors were closely related to the ancestors of the Magyars.<sup>20</sup> Béla Bartok articulated in his book *The Hungarian Folk Song* that Hungarian folk music includes that of the Rumanian people, a nation who are ethnically related to Romanians. Also, Hungarians have a historical connection with the Magyars and the Mari people of the Volga region; however, despite borrowing from Romani music, Kodály barely mentions the Romani culture in *Folk Music of Hungary*.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Bartók only mentions the *verbunkos* briefly in *The Hungarian Folk Song* while Kodály only provides a short description of the Roma culture and its music in his *Folk Music of Hungary*. The fact that the Roma are rarely mentioned in books on Hungarian folk music shows that Romani music is not very influential on Hungarian folk music or significant to Hungarian culture at all. With it being stated what people and cultures Hungarians can trace themselves to, it is safe to say that the Mari, Rumanian, Ural, and Magyar peoples are the cultures that truly influence and make up the gamut of Hungarian folk music. In addition, the Roma people are only mentioned in very concise sections in both book mentioned earlier. When Kodály does refer to Romani composers of the eighteenth-century, he declares that they are "second-rate imitators of the regular

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<sup>20</sup> Zoltán Kodály, "Folk Music and Art Music in Hungary," *Tempo*, no. 63 (1962): 32.

<sup>21</sup> Zoltán Kodály, *Folk Music of Hungary* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), 24.

Hungarian style.”<sup>22</sup> In this quote, Kodály essentially separates the Roma culture from the Hungarian culture by stating that the Roma “imitate” Hungarian music. Therefore, Hungarian culture and Roma culture are two distinctly different cultures.

Another topic that is important to consider is nationalism and exoticism in music as well as the differences between the two intentions. Even though the two concepts employ similar techniques when it comes to composing music, they have different intentions. With that said, Zoltán Kodály’s *Dances of Galánta* is often considered a nationalist piece for Hungary because people refer to the Roma culture and music as Hungarian folk music. However, this is a misunderstanding, for the Roma are Roma and not Hungarian. Further, Kodály quotes the *verbunkos*, the Roma style of dance, in his large orchestral work *Dances of Galánta*.

Because Kodály borrowed musical ideas from a group of people that are not Hungarian, *Dance of Galánta* is not a nationalist piece. Often, nationalist composers borrow from the folk music of their countries in order to express their unique culture and to turn away from traditional ways of composing music. As Reginald de Koven states in his article, “National music has been defined as that music which, appertaining to a nation or tribe whose individual emotions and passions it expresses, exhibits certain peculiarities more or less characteristic, which distinguish it from the music of any other nation or tribe.”<sup>23</sup> For instance, a Kodály piece that most definitely portrays Hungarian nationalism is *Dances of Marosszék*. Named for the region of Marosszék, once a part of the Kingdom of Hungary but is now part of modern Romania, this large orchestral work contains several folk dance and vocal melodies from the region. *Dances of Marosszék*

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<sup>22</sup> Kodály, *Folk Music*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Reginald De Koven, "Nationalism in Music," *The North American Review* 189, no. 640 (1909): 389.

begins with one of these folk melodies as seen in measures one through four.<sup>24</sup> Not only does Kodály borrow this folk melody but he also incorporates ‘*Marosszeki*’, a pair dance whose choreography includes the man passing the woman from one arm to the other. Kodály portrays the ‘*Marosszeki*’ by passing the dance between the *tutti* string sections and solo woodwind voices.<sup>25</sup> *Dances of Marosszék* is considered a nationalist piece because the people of Marosszék were at one point in time Hungarian. Therefore when Kodály wrote this piece, his goal was to express the folk that represented Hungary. The difference between the Marosszék region and the Roma is the people within the Marosszék region do consider themselves Hungarian. While *Dances of Galánta* does represent a nation of people with a distinct culture and traditions, people mistake that nation of people for Hungarians and do not give the credit to the Roma who, as stated previously, are not Hungarian.

Since *Dance of Galánta* does not musically represent the country of Hungary but rather the culture of the Roma, it is a musical example of exoticism. According to ethnomusicologist and Dutch composer Ton de Leeuw, exoticism can be defined as a way of bridging two different cultures or a way of getting a glimpse into an unfamiliar culture.<sup>26</sup> Exoticism can also be described as a way of “[offering] us a glimpse of another world” and that exotic music is often “tinted” by folklore.<sup>27</sup> The way composers achieve the sound of another culture is by borrowing from that country’s folk music or by writing music that “sounds like the country” attempting to be represented. In a similar way, composers of exoticism borrow music, but exoticism’s intention is to represent a different culture or nation that is distant, literally, from their own. The way

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<sup>24</sup> Zoltán Kodály, *Dances of Marosszék* (London: Universal Edition, 1930), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ong, “A Historical Overview,” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2011), 58-59.

<sup>26</sup> Ton de Leeuw, *Music of the Twentieth Century: A study of Its Elements and Structure*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 117.

<sup>27</sup> Leeuw, *Music of the Twentieth*, 122.

composers achieve the sound of another culture is by borrowing from their folk music. Another way of looking at exoticism is to think about the music as showcasing the local color of the area, country, or nation.<sup>28</sup> In other words, musical exoticism is a composer's way of representing a culture or place that is "foreign" to their own. Since Kodály himself is not Romani and the Roma do not think of themselves as Hungarian, *Dances of Galánta* exemplifies musical exoticism more so than musical nationalism.

After researching this topic through resources that explain the Romani culture including the *verbunkos*, articles that clearly define nationalism and exoticism, and books that describe Hungarian folk music, discuss the history of the Roma people, and that differentiate between nationalism and exoticism, this paper disproves the view that *Dances of Galánta* is a nationalist piece for the country of Hungary. Rather, *Dances of Galánta* is an example of musical exoticism because of the fact that it contains borrowed melodies from a culture that the composer does not align himself with. It has been extremely for historians difficult to research and trace Romani history because they are a nomadic people whose travels pushed them from Asia to Europe. With borders in Europe changing throughout the centuries and finally being solidified in the twentieth century, groups of Roma basically became citizens of whichever country they were at the time of the borders being drawn. Secondly, Romani music has historically been appropriated by other larger cultures that take advantage of the smaller cultures like the Roma who have almost political power. Therefore, their music has also been incorrectly called Hungarian folk music.

Moreover, the piece *Dances of Galánta* borrows the *verbunkos*, a Romani dance style of music similar to an American march, from the Roma culture. Even though Kodály grew up in Galánta and used the sounds of the local Romani band to inspire his musical career, he himself is

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<sup>28</sup> D. C. Parker, "Exoticism in Music in Retrospect," *The Musical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1917): 138.

not Romani. Thus, Kodály is neither representing Hungary nor his own culture in *Dances of Galánta*. Given these points, *Dance of Galánta* is not an example of nationalism in music but rather an example of musical exoticism.

Many composers in the past have incorporated melodies and other characteristics from cultures that are not well known. Therefore, it is possible that other pieces might have incorrectly been labeled as nationalist pieces rather than exotic pieces. One could find more examples of how composers incorporated Romani music into their music and do an in-depth study on the characteristics that are present. In that research, it would also be necessary to research if those composers gave credit to the Roma or claimed that that borrowed music belonged to their own “non-Roma” culture, which in that case the composition would no longer be considered a nationalist piece but rather an example of musical exoticism. Other topics and studies that could benefit from this paper include studies on folk music and how it relates to the minorities as well as other ethnicities within countries. Not everyone from the same country identifies with the majority or larger ethnicities, especially when it comes to groups of people who have no state. The Romani are only one example of a “people without a state”; the Basques between Spain and France and the Kurds in the Middle East are also “people without a state” of their own and have very distinct cultures that are different from the culture of the majority of the people in rest of their countries.

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