

## ***Táncház*: Improvisatory Folk-Dancing and String Playing in Toronto's Hungarian Community**

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"Music is historically constructed, socially maintained and individually adapted;" this paradigm has been proposed by Tim Rice, as a paraphrase of Clifford Geertz.<sup>1</sup> I will adapt the above model for use in this paper in discussing the dynamics of folk music and also of folk-dancing in the Hungarian community of Toronto where I conducted field research from November 1984 to March 1985. Rather than dealing with Hungarian folk music generally, this paper will focus on its most recent importation to Toronto, the so-called *táncház* (dance-house) tradition of improvised dancing and Gypsy-style string band music.

Toronto's Hungarian traditions were historically constructed in three periods of immigration. The first period was the 1920s and 1930s; the second, the years directly after the Second World War; and the third, following the Revolution of 1956.<sup>2</sup> It is the immigrants of the last wave, the wave of 1956-57, who were largely responsible for the founding of several cultural and musical organizations in Toronto.<sup>3</sup>

The Hungarian Canadian Cultural Centre was founded in 1974 and has been the home of several organizations. The Kodaly Dance Ensemble, founded in 1963, rehearses there every week and has a combined membership of fifty to sixty dancers in the junior and senior groups. The senior group has ten to twelve couples, dancers ranging from fifteen to forty years of age. The Kodaly Chorus, the Ensemble's immediate progenitor, was founded in 1960. Nowadays it rehearses at the Cultural Centre as well, and has a membership of forty-five singers, largely first-generation immigrants in their forties, fifties and sixties. Further, a *citera* (zither) orchestra called the *Szivárvány Együttes* (Rainbow Ensemble) was begun in 1982 by István

Erdélyi. It has a membership of fifteen to twenty children, between the ages of ten and sixteen.

In addition, there are two string bands which rehearse in various members' basement recreation rooms. One group, *Életfa* (Tree of Life) was initiated in 1982-83 as the "house band" of the Kodaly Dance Ensemble and has three, sometimes four, players: a *primás*, or lead violin; one or two *brácsa* or viola players; and a *bőgő* or string bass player. Another string band, which has operated independently for nine years is *Feketeföld* (Black Earth). Unlike *Életfa*, *Feketeföld* has two lead violins or *primas-es*. *Primás* Árpád Verseghy — the founder of the group — can play all of the instruments, in the tradition of the Transylvanian village bands.<sup>4</sup>

It was in 1971-72 that the *táncház* movement was initiated in Hungary by the urban musicians, Béla Halmos and Ferenc Sebő. They had made extended folk music collecting trips to Hungarian villages in Transylvania, which had been under Romanian administration since the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Halmos and Sebő managed to smuggle their field recordings across the border from Romania to Hungary. Almost at once, this Transylvanian village tradition of dance and music became an extremely popular means of entertainment and socializing in the newly founded *táncház* clubs of Budapest.

In Toronto, *táncház* dancing was first introduced in 1975-76 at rehearsals of the Kodaly Ensemble by its present leader, Kalman Dreisziger. The first Transylvanian string band was the *Mezőségi Banda*, the forerunner of *Feketeföld*, which made its first public appearance in 1976.<sup>5</sup>

The *táncház* tradition has been transmitted to Toronto in the following ways: firstly, musicians and dancers like Kalman Dreisziger have visited Hungary, often to attend workshops and seminars in string playing and dancing.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, they have brought back to Toronto cassette tapes of field recordings as well as many folk instruments and costumes. Secondly, Hungarian teachers of string playing and folk-dancing have visited Toronto to give *táncház* courses and seminars.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, young Hungarians like Verseghy have encountered Hungarian and Transylvanian village music by obtaining recordings in libraries and in record shops.<sup>8</sup> Fourthly, members of Toronto's string bands have brought from Hungary and consistently used at rehearsals the transcriptions of dance tunes made by Halmos; these transcriptions contain skeletal melodies, conventional chord symbols and some song texts which are sung occasionally by the dancers. And lastly, folk musicians have used the well-known, fully detailed phonetic transcriptions of two Transylva-

nian village repertoires, which were published in Budapest in 1954 and 1955 by the ethnomusicologist, László Lajtha.<sup>9</sup>

Knowledge of Hungarian culture can be obtained in the new urban environment of Toronto through various other Hungarian organizations and institutions like the Hungarian scouting movement, various youth clubs and the Saturday Hungarian school held at the Cultural Centre. It is available at non-Hungarian institutions as well, for example in public libraries and in high school and university courses.

Before a discussion of the social maintenance of *táncház* dancing and music, it is necessary to define the improvisatory nature of *táncház*. Árpád Verseghy has related that the Transylvanian *primás* - who was invariably a Gypsy — originally played solo at village dance occasions; the *brácsa* and *bőgő* were added only in the late nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Given the framework of a village's specific style of musical ornamentation and the structure of the tunes, the *primás* was at liberty to improvise. To a limited extent, the *brácsa* and *bőgő* players could also add notes and change rhythms in improvisatory fashion. But it was invariably the *primás* who started the tunes, and the others followed suit only after they recognized the tune in question.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, it is the improvisatory possibilities available to the Transylvanian village dancer that gave the dances of Transylvania their strongest definition. This was attested by the dance historian, choreographer, György Martin, when he wrote: "The stylistic essence of the general dance performance practice of the Carpathian Basin is an unusually large amount of individual improvisation."<sup>12</sup> The Carpathian Basin includes Hungary as well as Transylvania. In Hungary improvisatory dancing has long been on the decline, whereas in Transylvania's isolated Hungarian community, it has survived to the present day.

In an attempt to define the nature of *táncház* dancing, George Tömössy described a dancer's task as follows: "You're given a motif which fits a certain rhythm in the dance. You have to become accustomed to spotting a certain rhythm and a sequence of rhythms and applying certain combinations of steps and that can only be done through practice and listening to the music."<sup>13</sup> In fact, the freedom of the *táncház* dancer's improvisation is limited by three factors: specific musical rhythms and melodies that give rise to related, similarly specific, dance steps; the choice of steps which is limited by the style boundaries of the locality from which the dance and the musical dialect springs; and a certain limitation on style that is imposed by the community of dancers and musicians in Toronto and Budapest inasmuch as it was in the original Transylvanian

villages. As Linda Dégh wrote: “The creative freedom of the performer is limited by the traditional material and its controlling guardian, the community.”<sup>14</sup>

The means by which *táncház* music and dance are socially maintained are highlighted by comparing the three venues in which *táncház* music and dance are preserved. In the Hungarian villages of Transylvania, *táncház* activity took the form of Friday evening get-togethers in community halls, in barns, in villagers’ living rooms. There the dancing, accompanied by Gypsy string music, functioned as entertainment for villagers young and old, providing dancers with occasions for impromptu socializing and furnishing gainful employment for the members of the Gypsy string bands.<sup>15</sup>

In Hungary a strong tradition of choreographed dancing has been maintained, with government support, since the 1950s. Beginning in 1971, however, *táncház* clubs were founded in Budapest and other Hungarian cities to teach young people to improvise, using village dance dialects.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, recreational *táncház*-es transplanted village music and dancing onto city soil with success, thereby affording city dwellers, especially young people, opportunities for recreation and socializing in the improvisatory spirit of the villages. Today in Budapest, *táncház* sessions continue to be offered every day of the week.

Consistently with the pervasive world of rock and roll, several current Hungarian *táncház* bands like Muzsikás have introduced “Western” influences into their recordings. Thus, blues numbers — with harmonica and electric bass — alternate with village dance pieces. Furthermore, a number of *táncház* clubs have recently incorporated South Slavic dance-house styles (which are reportedly easier to perform than Transylvanian dialects) and Gypsy dances.<sup>17</sup>

The reasons for the consistent popularity of the *táncház* movement in Hungary are twofold: first, Hungarians need to make a palpable connection with the isolated Hungarian community of Transylvania — with the recent gradual easing of political tensions in Hungary, there has been growing concern in Hungary, and Canada as well, for the well-being of the oppressed Transylvanian Hungarians and a renewed interest in Transylvanian village life.<sup>18</sup> Second, in the continuing urban youth scene of Budapest, the *táncház* clubs are the direct descendants of the ballroom dance schools of the 1920s and 1930s and of the rock and blues clubs of the 1970s. Thus, the young people of Budapest and of other Hungarian cities have frequented dance clubs for several generations.

In Toronto it is the choreographed dancing that has been very successful.<sup>19</sup> However, most dancers and the community at large

however, have shown little interest in the *táncház* movement as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Why has the movement not been more popular in Toronto? The reason lies in the discrepancy between *táncház* and the values espoused by the local Hungarian community which are, in the words of informant Gabor Vaski, “goal orientation and hard work.”<sup>21</sup>

Goal orientation is indeed not present in *táncház*, beyond the learning of dance dialects for their own sake. *Táncház* is improvisational, experimental, with no performing occasion in mind. Conversely, choreographed dancing does provide young dancers with the goal of gaining the approval of their parents and the community. Most of Toronto’s Hungarian folk-dancers see *táncház* dancing not as hard work, but as an “unstructured activity.” In it there is no regimentation, no obligation to participate, no commitment to stay. It has been described as a “free-for-all,” with lots of smoking, drinking and telling of jokes — in short, a party atmosphere. All of these features clearly oppose the ethic of hard work that the immigrant Hungarian community is committed to foster.

Moreover, in being an art tied to the dialects of specific villages, *táncház* lacks the generalized Hungarian-ness of many choreographed dances, like the *csardas* and the *verbunkos*. Consequently, it also lacks the approbation that choreographed dance performances receive at patriotic ceremonies, like the commemorations of the Revolutions of 1848 and 1956. And lastly, choreographed dancing is preferred to *táncház* because of the community’s interest in promulgating a concert tradition: most Hungarians do not participate in folk-dancing and are certainly not interested in learning difficult *táncház* dance dialects from remote Transylvanian villages, but they are a willing and supportive audience for “presentational” dancing.<sup>22</sup>

So, the *táncház* tradition with its recreational and improvisational nature has not “caught on” in Toronto on a community-wide basis. It can, however, be said to serve the needs of at least a small number of individuals, who come to it with a variety of unique backgrounds, unique even if they are united by their membership in the Canadian-Hungarian community. Several of these dedicated individuals continue to feel responsible for transmitting *táncház* to the Hungarian community.<sup>23</sup>

*Táncház* has been adapted and expressed by individuals in a variety of ways. It has served as a means of retaining and reinforcing ethnic identity for twenty-two-year-old Gabor Vaski. A full-time student of classical music and jazz, Vaski expresses his Hungarian-ness through dancing in the Kodaly Dance Ensemble, by playing *bőgő* in the *Életfa* band and by studying Hungarian language and

literature at the University of Toronto. He has visited Hungary twice, in 1975 and in 1980. He said in an interview that, "being Hungarian is extremely important to me, second only to my ambition to be a successful musician."<sup>24</sup>

Kalman Dreisziger, forty years of age, works in an advertising agency. He joined the Kodaly Dance Ensemble in 1964 and became its leader in the late 1970s. He has returned to Hungary on several visits, but it was during his visit to Transylvania in 1975 that he attended a *táncház* in the living room of a farmhouse. For him, *táncház* has served as a vehicle for nostalgia, the wish to re-experience the village life of a bygone era. He wrote in a recent article: "There is a need for Canadian dancers to make a link with Transylvanian dance culture, so that if they should go to Transylvania, they would fit right in ... they could enter into the ancient community and dance and make music with its members."<sup>25</sup>

Folk-dancing and playing in string bands has created strong friendships for many members and an opportunity for teamwork. Fifteen-year-old George Tömössy, in his third season as a dancer in the Kodaly Ensemble, said in an interview: "The fact that I'm with other people and the fact that we're making an effort to achieve something gives me a good feeling." He also valued the opportunity that dancing affords to keep in trim, "working up a sweat every Tuesday night."<sup>26</sup>

Violinist and *primás* Mária Kovács (pseudonym), twenty-six years old, began studying violin at the age of seven and played in the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra for three years. She first encountered *táncház* music in 1982 in a seminar given by the visiting Bela Halmos in Toronto. She was so taken then with *táncház* music that to focus on it, she gave up her classical music activity altogether.<sup>27</sup>

For thirty-four-year-old violinist and *primas* Árpád Verseghy, *táncház* is an all-consuming hobby. A professional music teacher, he has a large collection of field and studio recordings and makes his own folk instruments, the most recent of which is an authentic *cimbalom*.<sup>28</sup>

*Táncház* dancing affords individual dancers the enjoyment of their own virtuosity. The difficulty of the steps and the concentration needed to match the appropriate steps to musical cues provide a physical, intellectual and artistic challenge.

In conclusion, *táncház* has provided a focus of interest for young and energetic individual folk artists in the Toronto Hungarian community. These individuals have hoped to replicate the resounding success of the *táncház* movement in Hungary. However, most

dancers and the community as a whole have resisted the advance of this unique, improvisational art, preferring to stay with the pre-rehearsed, choreographed performances. The Hungarian community's preference for choreographed, presentational dancing can thus be understood in terms of its need to have a finished product, a demonstration of achievement at hand. In Hungary *táncház* has been steadily maintained alongside choreographed dancing, but in Toronto, most community support has gone to choreographed dancing. Despite the fact that the *táncház* tradition does not involve the whole of the community, it does remain a very rich source of culture for certain dedicated individuals.

### Notes

1. See Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp.52,145. Professor Rice's paraphrase was first given on Feb. 20, 1985 in the Graduate Ethnomusicology Seminar, University of Toronto.
2. See Susan M. Papp-Zubrits, "Reflections of the Members of Three Waves of Hungarian Immigrants in Ontario," in *Roots and Realities among Eastern and Central Europeans* (Edmonton: Central and East European Studies Association of Canada, 1983), pp.155-64.
3. See George Bisztray, "Why 1956? Recent Cultural Changes in the Hungarian Community," in *Roots and Realities among Eastern and Central Europeans*, pp. 165-71. See also George Zaduban, "Hungary," in *Encyclopaedia of Music in Canada* (Montreal: Fides, 1983), p. 439.
4. See László Lajtha, *Körispataki Gyűjtes* [Körispatak Collection] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1955), p. 9.
5. From interviews with Árpád Verseggy, Dec. 19, 1984 and Feb. 20, 1985. The group was initially called *Mezőségi Banda* because most of its repertoire at first originated in the Mezőség region of east-central Transylvania. Within a few months, however, its repertoire of various villages' dance music had considerably broadened, and the name *Mezőségi Banda* became too specific and narrow in the view of the band members. Thus the name change to *Feketeföld* soon followed.
6. From interviews with Mária Kovács (pseudonym) Feb. 15, 1985, with Gabor Vaski Feb. 7, 1985 and with Kalman Dreisziger Dec. 30, 1984 and Feb. 15, 1985.
7. For example, Béla Halmos, "the foremost teacher of Transylvanian-style violin playing" (Árpád Verseggy, Feb. 20, 1985) gave a seminar in Toronto in the summer of 1982; Matyas Pribojszki, the greatest Hungarian *citera* player of our day, gave a course in *citera* playing in Toronto in 1983.
8. It was the discovery at the Toronto Public Music Library of a record album of Hungarian folk music, published by UNESCO that first awakened the interest of Árpád Verseggy in village music-making and led, thereafter, to informal music-making sessions with friends and eventually to Gypsy-style string band playing in Toronto, that is, to Mezősegi Banda and Feketeföld.
9. See Lajtha's very informative and vivid descriptions of village life and village Gypsy bands in the introductions of the two volumes, *Széki Gyűjtés* [Szék Collection] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1954) and *Körispataki Gyűjtés* [Körispatak Collection] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1955).
10. From the interview with Árpád Verseggy, Feb. 20, 1985. See also Bálint Sárosi, *Gypsy Music* (Budapest: Corvina, 1978).
11. See Lajtha, *Körispataki Gyűjtés*, p. 10.

12. See *Magyar Néptáncagyományok* [Hungarian Folk-Dance Traditions], ed. B. Andrásfalvy, etc. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1980), p.12.
13. From the interview with George Tömössy, Feb. 26, 1985.
14. As quoted by Stephen Erdelyi in "Traditional and Individual Traits in the Songs of Three Hungarian Americans," in *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* III, no. 1, ed. J. Porter (Los Angeles: University of California, 1978), p.102.
15. See Lajtha, *loc. cit.*
16. See János Szász, "Beszélgetés Martin Györggyel az új folklórhullám és néptáncmozgalom előzményeiről" [Conversation with György Martin Concerning the Sources of the New Folklore and Folk-Dance Movement], in *Kultura es Kozosseg* [Culture and Community] IV (Budapest, 1981).
17. From the interview with Árpád Verseghy, Feb. 20, 1985.
18. For accounts of the cultural, political and economic oppression of the Hungarians in Transylvania, see Anonymus Napocensis, "Methods of Rumanianization Employed in Transylvania," in *Witnesses to Cultural Genocide*, ed. G. Schopflin (New York: American Transylvanian Federation and Committee for Human Rights in Roumania, 1979); Ferenc Kunszabo, "Modernized Genocide," in *Transylvania and the Hungarian-Roumanian Problem*, ed. A.F. Sanborn and G.W. de Czege (Astor, Florida: Danubian Press, 1979); Bulcsu Veress, "The Status of Minority Rights in Transylvania: International Legal Expectations and Roumanian Realities," in *Transylvania: The Roots of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. J.F. Caldwell, A. Ludanyi and L.J. Elteto (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1983); see also Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
19. From interviews with Kalman Dreisziger (Dec. 30, 1984 and Feb. 15, 1985), Árpád Verseghy (Dec. 19, 1984 and Feb. 20, 1985), Mária Kovács (Feb. 15, 1985) and Gabor Vaski (Feb. 7, 1985).
20. *Ibid.*
21. From the interview with Gabor Vaski, Feb. 7, 1985.
22. Interview with Mária Kovács, Feb. 15, 1985.
23. See Kalman Dreisziger, "Magyar néptáncsoportok felelőssége" [The Responsibility of Hungarian Folk-Dance Groups], in *Magyar Népművészet Kanadában* [Hungarian Folk Art in Canada] I, no. 1 (Dec. 1983).
24. Interview with Gabor Vaski, Feb. 7, 1985.
25. See Kalman Dreisziger, *op. cit.*
26. From the interview with George Tömössy, Feb. 26, 1985.
27. From the interview with Mária Kovács, Feb. 15, 1985. 28. From the interview with Árpád Verseghy, Dec. 19, 1984 and Feb. 20, 1985.

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