



NATION, GENDER, AND MUSIC HISTORY

Liszt Academy, Grand Hall.

PHOTO: FESTIVAL ACADEMY BUDAPEST

by **Gergely Fazekas**

History is not fixed and unchanging, and the way we think about the concept of nation can affect the way we talk about the past. This also applies to the history of music. Let me give you an example. In volume 2 of his seminal book on music history, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, the late Richard Taruskin talks about the circle of fifths, a diagram that helps you visually organize Western music theory's 12 chromatic pitches for learning purposes.¹ He mentions that the circle of fifths first appeared in a Russian music theory book published in Moscow in 1679, decades before Western music theorists began to talk about it. However, the book itself was not originally Russian, but was translated from Polish. Moreover, the author was a Ukrainian clergyman and singing teacher who was born in Kyiv, at that time part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with Krakow as its capital.

When Taruskin published his book in 2004, the background for the first appearance of the circle of fifths was just an interesting anecdote referring to the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Eastern Europe in the 17th century. But how can – or should – one speak of it after February 24, 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? How do you even pronounce the name of the Ukrainian cleric? Nikolai

“IN THE CASE OF HUNGARY, FOR EXAMPLE, MY HOME COUNTRY, THE CONCEPT OF NATION PLAYS A VERY IMPORTANT ROLE IN EVERYDAY MUSICAL LIFE.”

Diletsky, following the Russian form as published in the first edition, or Mykola Diletsky, in the Ukrainian form, as he was born in Kyiv and is considered part of Ukrainian music history?

ALTHOUGH THESE questions are highly controversial due to current political developments, the same problems also arise in the music histories of other Eastern European countries where peace has prevailed (at least so far). In the case of Hungary, for example, my home country, the concept of nation plays a very important role in everyday musical life. If someone arrives to Budapest by airplane, the first name they will encounter is that of Franz Liszt, or to be more precise, the Hungarian version of the name of the great 19th century pianist-composer: Liszt Ferenc. As far as I know, there are only two other airports in the world named after a musician: Louis Armstrong International Airport in New Orleans and War-

saw Chopin Airport, which is named after Frédéric Chopin, another great pianist-composer of the 19th century.

In Hungary, there are state-organized celebrations for the anniversaries of our great composers such as Ferenc Liszt, Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, György Ligeti or György Kurtág, even though their relationship to being Hungarian, or more generally, their relationship to nationality, is complicated in many ways. Take György Ligeti (1923–2006), widely regarded as the most influential classical composer of the second half of the 20th century. The whole contemporary musical world celebrated the centenary of his birth in 2023; in Hungary concerts, lectures, exhibitions, and conferences emphasized his heritage.

LIGETI WAS BORN in 1923 into a Jewish family in the small Hungarian town of Dicsőszentmárton in Transylvania, which had become part of Romania only three years earlier following the peace treaties after the First World War. He miraculously survived the Second World War, in which he lost most of his family, and moved to Budapest in 1945, where he studied at the Liszt Academy and became a professor of music theory. Ligeti emigrated immediately after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, a nationwide revolution against the communist government and the domination of the Soviet Union, which was crushed by Russian troops shortly after it broke out. Ligeti moved to Vienna, later lived in Hamburg and died in the Austrian capital in 2006. In 1978 he gave a radio lecture for the Stuttgart Radio entitled “My Jewishness”, in which he summarized his own identity the following way:

My native language is Hungarian, but I am not a genuine Hungarian, because I am a Jew. At the same time, I am not a member of a Jewish religious community, so I am an assimilated Jew. But I am not completely assimilated, either, because I am not baptized. Now, as an adult, I live in Austria and in Germany, and have for a long time been an Austrian citizen. Yet I am not a real Austrian either, only a Johnnie-come-lately, and my Ger-



György Kurtág, György Kurtág Jr., Vera Ligeti, Lukas Ligeti and Pierre Charial at the inauguration of Ligeti Street.

PHOTO: BÁLINT HROTKÓ/BUDAPEST MUSIC CENTER.

“THE QUESTION OF LIGETI’S NATIONAL IDENTITY IS NOT EASY, BUT THE QUESTION OF THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF HIS (OR ANY) MUSIC IS EVEN MORE COMPLEX.”

man speech will always retain a Hungarian coloration.²

When he died in 2006, his official obituary called him an “Austrian composer of Hungarian origin”. The question of Ligeti’s national identity is not easy, but the question of the national identity of his (or any) music is even more complex. What makes a piece of music Hungarian?

AT THE LISZT ACADEMY, the most important institution of higher music education of Hungary, which was founded by Liszt himself in 1875, the music history curriculum includes not only courses on the general history of Western art music from its beginnings to the 21st century (a total of six semesters for Hungarian and foreign students), but also a course on the history of Hungarian music (one semester for foreign students, two for Hungarian students). So, when I am asked to teach both a general course on the history of 20th century Western music and one on the history of Hungarian music, I am

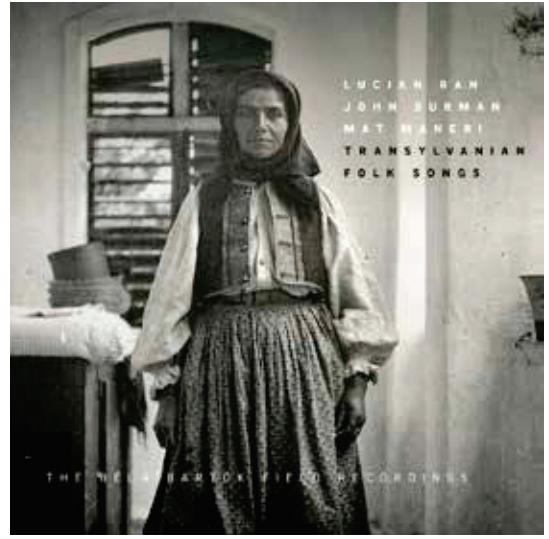
faced with the question of which course should include teaching on the music of Liszt, Bartók or Ligeti. All three composers are considered the most important musical minds of their eras far beyond their national cultures and appear in all major international textbooks on 20th century music history, such as Taruskin’s. But what about, say, Ferenc Erkel, an exact contemporary of Liszt, Leó Weiner, an exact contemporary of Bartók, or András Szöllőssy, an exact contemporary of Ligeti? No substantial course in Hungarian music history would leave them out, but their music is not known outside the borders of their homeland.

FOR ABOUT a hundred years, musical “Hungarianness” has been seemingly easy to define. It was in the early 20th century that Bartók and Kodály, as ethnomusicologists, began to collect Hungarian folk music in a scholarly way; both incorporated elements of it into their own compositions as composers, and the next generation of musicians and music educators, with the



Detail from Peasants dancing, Bosnia, Austro-Hungary, ca. 1890.

SOURCE: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Transylvanian Folk Songs – The Bela Bartók Field Recordings.

support of Kodály as an authority behind them, made Hungarian folk songs the basis of music education in Hungary. Even in elementary school, students already have to learn many folk songs by heart. Although the peasant culture in which these melodies originated and flourished disappeared completely during the 20th century, folk music found its way into urban households, classical concert halls and even clubs and parties (thanks to some parts of Hungarian pop music that are steeped in folk melodies).

BUT IF WE TAKE the presence of folk music – or allusions to folk music – as a defining characteristic of a music’s national identity, a lot of problems arise. The vast majority of Ligeti’s music lacks any reference to Hungarian music, and the same is true of the music of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, who, apart from a few smaller pieces, never used Estonian folk music in his major compositions. How can they fit into the musical history of their own nation? Even for Bartók, collecting folk songs was not primarily a national program: he also collected Romanian and Slovakian music, among others (later in his life, in America, he analyzed Serbo-Croatian material) and was also interested in the folk music of other continents: he visited North Africa and Turkey to collect Arabic and Turkish music.

“BARTÓK USED THE MOST MODERN GERMAN MUSICAL STYLE OF HIS TIME TO EXPRESS DEEPLY ANTI-GERMAN IDEAS.”

When Bartók was commissioned in 1923 to write a short piece of music to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Budapest, (the city was merged from three smaller cities in 1873), he opted for an orchestral piece entitled *Dance Suite*, which consists of various types of folk music: Hungarian, Romanian, Slovakian and – interestingly – even Arabic (Bartók eventually omitted the Slovakian ideas from the final version of the piece). Judging by the reviews of the premiere, no one among his contemporaries really understood the piece’s message.³ As Bartók refused to provide an explanation of the music in the program booklet, most critics only registered the exoticism of the musical ideas. However, in a famous, often quoted private letter from 1931 to the musicologist Octavian Breu, in which Bartók discussed the basic idea of the *Dance Suite* with his Romanian

friend, the composer explained his *ars poetica* as follows:

My creative work, just because it arises from 3 sources (Hungarian, Romanian, Slovakian), might be regarded as the embodiment of the very concept of integration so much emphasized in Hungary today. [...] My own idea, however – of which I have become fully conscious since I found myself as a composer – is the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts. I try – to the best of my ability – to serve this idea in music; therefore I don’t reject any influence, be it Slovakian, Romanian, Arabic or from any other source. The source must only be clean, fresh and healthy!⁴

Bartók had a long intellectual journey behind him to reach this point. In his youth, when he studied at the Liszt Academy and Hungary was still under Habsburg rule as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he was a fervent nationalist. His first major work, which he wrote in 1903 at the age of 22, was a symphonic poem, that is a one-movement, 30-minute-long orchestral piece about Lajos Kossuth, the political leader of the 1848 revolution against the

Habsburgs, who was still a cult figure of Hungarian chauvinists in Bartók's youth.

The paradox of the Kossuth Symphony is that the musical style it represents is at odds with its actual message. In this phase of his musical development, Bartók was inspired by the music of Richard Strauss. The piece is based very closely on one of Strauss's last symphonic poems, *Ein Heldenleben*, op. 40. In addition to some rhythmic patterns and melodic turns that were considered particularly Hungarian at the time he used the German composer's late Romantic style with lush harmonies, exaggerated melodic gestures, dense counterpoint and colorful orchestration. It therefore means that Bartók used the most modern German musical style of his time to express deeply anti-German ideas; at one point he even makes fun of the German anthem, which caused an uproar among the German members of the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra before the Hungarian premiere in 1904.

It may have been difficult for Bartók to reflect on the German aspect of Richard Strauss's style for two reasons: firstly, after years of conservative compositional training at the Liszt Academy of Music, it was too electrifying to maintain the necessary distance for a judgment; secondly, German music was not considered nationally influenced, but a universal style that transcended national boundaries. Strauss was regarded as the heir to the tradition of the greatest composers, which began with Johann Sebastian Bach and led via Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and all the Romantics to Strauss.

THE BIGGEST question for modernist composers at the beginning of the 20th century was how they could deal with this "universal" tradition, which had been created primarily by German composers, and which path could lead on from it. The three greatest musical minds of the era gave different answers: the Austrian Arnold Schoenberg created a new method of composition, the "twelve-tone technique" (or dodecaphony) and considered it the true inheritor of the "universal" style, the Russian-born, French-influenced Igor Stravinsky sought ideas from the eras before the 19th century and cre-



Cécile Louise Stéphanie Chaminade (August 8, 1857–April 13, 1944) was a French composer and pianist. In 1913, she was awarded the Légion d'Honneur, a first for a female composer. Right: Chaminade as sketched in St. Louis by Marguerite Martyn, November 1908.



ated what is known as "neoclassicism", while Bartók found the way out in the music of the peasant people, i.e., in folk music. It is another music-historical paradox that Bartók left chauvinism behind with the discovery of the very music that later became the defining characteristic of musical "Hungarianism".

Bartók's project was successful in three respects: from an ethnographic perspective, he and his colleagues saved a traditional culture for future generations; from his own perspective as a composer, he found a way out of the late Romantic Germanic trap; and from a national perspective, his compositions put Hungary on the map of universal art music for the first time (Liszt's output was much too cosmopolitan and heterogeneous in terms of national character, to consider him the first).

ALL THE COMPOSERS in question here are men, as are almost all the great names of the Western classical canon. Although there are some remarkable, exceptional female composers from different eras, such as Hildegard von Bingen from the

Middle Ages, Barbara Strozzi from the 17th century or Fanny Mendelssohn from the 19th century, music historiography has kept them on the fringes of the mainstream. The creation and dissemination of art music in the Western tradition is highly dependent on various resources that are difficult to obtain: Writing skills, which in the case of musical notation require knowledge of music theory, the availability of parchment or paper or, from the early 16th century onwards, access to the printing process, and also the social capital to get your music heard. For historical and social reasons, all this was almost always out of reach for women.

The fact that women were missing from the list of the great creative minds of Europe's musical past led to the assumption in the 19th century that women were biologically incapable of composing music. And even if they did, they were trapped, as the British musicologist Nicholas Cook illustrates with the example of a late 19th century composer:

the (male) reviewers of music
by the French composer Cécile

Chaminade, whose long life spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, alternately complained that her music did not have the ‘virility’ of men’s music, and that its virility was unbecoming in a woman.⁵

It was the late 20th century that not only brought about the social changes that paved the way for women as composers (today there are as many women as men among the composition students at the Liszt Academy of Music), but also the historiographical perspective that enabled women to appear in music history courses and textbooks. How can they be part of history if they were not there? It’s just a question of perspective. Of course, we cannot invent women composers in the past, but we can change the focus of historiography. If we turn our gaze from composers to other aspects of musical life and tell a story that focuses on other actors who have shaped the history of music, we will find many women who have played an important, sometimes even decisive role in the creation, dissemination and performance of music, as patrons, copyists, organizers, performers, or inspiring forces.

THE CHANGE of historical perspective is only a matter of intellectual choice. But the difficulty with Western art music is that it is not only, not primarily, a historical phenomenon. In the field of classical music, the past dominates the present to a much greater extent than in any other art form. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and all the mighty German men who define the great tradition are all our contemporaries. Their music is played more often today in concert halls than the music of 21st century composers, the ever-changing performance practice of their music reflects changing audience tastes and enables the music to appeal to listeners living several centuries later than the composers themselves. In addition, the works of the great old composers form the basis of the curriculum for higher music education. If you are studying harmony, you must start with the Bach chorales; if you are studying piano, you must go through the Mozart sonatas; if you are

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studying conducting, you must try your hand at the great Beethoven symphonies. After all, the very name of conservatory refers to a culture that strives to conserve tradition.

All this means that the aesthetic attitude of today’s listeners and musicians in the field of classical music, i.e., the decisive factor for our musical preferences, is essentially shaped by the great tradition. Should it be changed? I would be happy to live in an era in which only contemporary music is played. All eras before 1800 were like that. The gender balance in the music scene would be solved this way because there are many great women composers whose pieces are frequently played today, from the late Finnish composer Kaija Saarihao to the Austrian Olga Neuwirth, the Berlin-based Korean composer Unsuk Chin and many others. When Hungary’s most prestigious concert hall, the Palace of Arts, decided to choose the “Composer of the Year” for each season, the institution’s first choice in 2022 was a woman: Judit Varga, a Hungarian composer who was head of the composition department at the Vienna Academy of Music at the time. In this imaginary world of all contemporary music, the concept of history would also dissolve. Music history as a frame of reference did not exist for musicians before 1800; they composed music only for their present. In this way, the concept of the universal mainstream would also disappear, possibly offering a solution to the problem of the national vs. the universal, and we would live in different idioms, similar to the Baroque era, where there was a special French, Italian or German taste in music.

CHANGING THE music-historical canon and the tastes of today’s concert organizers and audiences is a tougher nut to crack. Of course, it would be nice to see more

works by women composers in concert programs, and in this respect, there is a remarkable change compared to the concert programs of half a century ago. But the problem with the classical music we like to listen to is that the aesthetic standard by which we measure great music is based on the great German tradition. This is the reason why musicians would in most cases prefer the music of, say, Felix Mendelssohn to that of his sister Fanny Mendelssohn. This says nothing about Fanny’s talent. Due to historical circumstances, she had far fewer opportunities to practice composing, hone her skills and develop her talent, than her brother. Thus, the music of Felix is written with more composition experience, and it becomes more exciting and inspiring for musicians of later generations who are trained in institutions that were founded to keep alive the very tradition that created the standard. It is clearly a circular process, but to get out of it you would have to put aside a culture to which so many are wholeheartedly devoted, regardless of their gender, because the music of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and others offers them so much aesthetic beauty and emotional experience. ✕

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