

Béla Bartók: The Father of Ethnomusicology

Madeline Heaton

Western Carolina University School of Music

Western
Carolina
UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Ethnomusicology, or the study of the sociocultural aspects of music, is a young study with a smaller history compared to many disciplines. The term was originally coined by musicologist Jaap Kunst (1891-1960) in 1950, but its earlier name, comparative musicology, was first developed due to various researchers of the early 1900s, most notably composer Béla Bartók (1881-1945) ("Ethnomusicology"). Bartók's additional interests in the rural people of different cultures caused him to collect many musical ideas in the form of research and musical compositions. As such, the interest in folk music and his incorporation of the genre into his own compositions earned him the title of the "Father of Ethnomusicology" for later generations of ethnomusicologists (Gillies).

This research will analyze the impact that Béla Bartók had on the beginnings of ethnomusicology in terms of research methods and study, as well as the ways he incorporated his findings into his own compositions.

BIOGRAPHY & THE PHONOGRAPH

Bartók began his career at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, studying composition under Kolessar. Bartók was an ardent Hungarian nationalist, and from this nationalism came a declaration for an "appeal to the Hungarian people" in the form of "a complete collection of folk songs, gathered with scholarly exactitude." Bartók was of the firm belief that an influx of "light music" and "imitation folk songs" would render authentic Hungarian music lost to time. Bartók, along with Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967), his colleague and lifelong friend, called on scholars to collect 20 settings in total for piano and voice. The collection was published in December 1906, but drew very little response from the Hungarian public (Gillies). After returning from a tour of Spain and Portugal accompanying violinist Ferenz Vecsey, Bartók and Kodály began their first expedition to collect folk music from around Hungary (Parker 407-408).

Bartók's methods of study began with the utilization of the phonograph, a device capable of copying sound waves as a series of undulations ("Phonograph"). He would then transcribe these melodies by ear and record his findings based on his own Western notation styles. When discussing his use of the phonograph for his research into Romanian folk songs, Bartók wrote, "The recording of songs on a phonograph is extremely helpful as a method for the gathering of songs, because sometimes we lack the appropriate musical signs corresponding to those whimsical gliding effects from one series of sounds to the next...and can be properly interpreted only through phonographic reproductions." Bartók also knew of the difficulties of transcribing directly from the phonograph, as there was always a high probability of the performer altering the melody when asked to perform for a second time. Bartók would counteract these possible differences by notating changes in the melodies and harmonies in the transcriptions himself, and directly describe the differences in the recording compared to the live performances (Suchoff, *Bela Bartók Studies in Ethnomusicology*, 1).

EASTERN EUROPEAN ETHNOGRAPHY

While Bartók started his ethnomusicological interests with the Hungarian national anthem, it was the singing of a Transylvanian servant woman that truly sparked his interest in collecting folk music. After hearing such melodies, Bartók wrote to his sister in December of 1904: "Now I have a new plan: to collect the finest Hungarian folksongs and to raise them, adding the best possible piano accompaniments, to the level of art-song" (Gillies). Bartók not only studied art music, but also folk music across Hungary. His *Hungarian Folk Songs* score speaks to his passion for collecting such folk songs across the country.

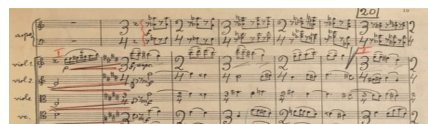


Figure 1: *Hungarian Folk Songs* (1904), mm. 14-20, Bela Bartók. Bridgeman Images; DeAgostini Library, edited by Bridgeman Images, 1st edition, 2014. Credo Reference.

In this excerpt, the constantly changing meter from 2/4 to 3/4 reflects Bartók's findings in Hungarian folk music, as the interchanging of meters is common in many Hungarian dance tunes. (See Fig. 1). It was from these studies that Bartók proved that what is commonly known as the Hungarian scale, a scale consisting of two augmented seconds, is not actually found in Hungarian peasant music (Suchoff, "Ethnomusicological Roots of Béla Bartók's Musical Language," 44).

Bartók expanded into Romanian culture as well, and his research in this area highlights an important research habit of Bartók's: he tended to avoid generalizations in his work. He always notated the exact villages he visited and collected folk songs from, and avoided stating that musical habits were the same across a nation. In his 1909 and 1910 studies of Romanian folk music, he wrote, "The melodies and their respective texts were collected in the following villages: Delan (Gyalány), Teleac (Telek), ...and Câmp (Vaskomezó)" (Suchoff, *Bela Bartók Studies in Ethnomusicology*, 1). This is extremely important to the development of productive, unbiased, ethnographic research. Considering that this study was conducted in the early 1900s, when generalizations of nonwestern European cultures was customary and accepted in scientific research, this is a monumental example of cultural relativism before it was a common practice in ethnography. It is also important to note that not only does Bartók write down the foreign terms for these areas, but he also includes the native pronunciations for these villages. In ethnography, it is extremely important to pay tribute to the culture(s) being researched, and providing pronunciations is considered to be a very respectful way of subtly incorporating the culture being studied back into the study itself.

BEYOND EASTERN EUROPE

Bartók's fieldwork extended beyond the locations of Eastern Europe. His studies into the tendencies of Arabian folk music are some of the most detailed and revealing, as folk music from the Middle East was notoriously appropriated by European composers as a result of musical exoticism. In his 1920 study "Arab Folk Music from the Biskra District," Bartók delves into the musical form, rhythms, accompaniment, tempo, and other characteristics defining the music of Biskra, Algeria. Each paragraph of study describes these characteristics of Middle Eastern music in Western music terms in order for Western musicians to understand the techniques (Suchoff, *Bela Bartók Studies in Ethnomusicology* 32). He also takes measurements and timbre into account when writing his observations, as highlighted in his studies of Arabian instruments: "Žăūaq is the equivalent of the shepherd's pipe; 25 cm long; made of reed, has 5 key holes. Not a widely used instrument" (Suchoff, *Bela Bartók Studies in Ethnomusicology*, 29). In order to find the tonal center of each foreign instrument, he typically transposed to the pitch G in order to find the instruments' tonal relationships compared to that of traditional European instruments. Not only did Bartók discuss the instrumentation of winds, but he also took careful notes of string and percussion instruments of the area, Bartók also notates the varying and fluid tonalities of Algerian folk music: "Instead...I give the tonal series: the small-head notes that are performed with less intensity and the larger ones which have to be taken into consideration when establishing the range" (Suchoff, *Bela Bartók Studies in Ethnomusicology*, 39).

COMPOSITIONS

The musical endeavors did not stop at ethnographic research, as Bartók implemented his studies into his compositions. Bartók primarily considered three types of arrangement for the placement of folk songs in composition: "...where the folk melody is mounted like a jewel, where melody and accompaniment are almost equal in importance, and where the folk melody is a kind of inspirational 'motto' to be creatively developed" (Gillies).



Figure 2: *Romanian Folk Dances* (1915), Movement III, mm. 1-8, Gillies, Malcolm.

"Bartók, Béla." Grove Music Online.

In Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances*, the melody is apparent and distinguishable in the right hand from the accompanying left hand in measures four through eight. The trills in measures five through seven demonstrate the ties to Romanian folk music as well. This piece demonstrates the "jewel" analogy of Bartók's first type of folk song arrangement (See Fig. 2).



Figure 3: *Improvisations*, op. 20 (1920), Movement VII, mm. 29-33, Gillies, Malcolm. "Bartók, Béla." Grove Music Online.

In *Improvisations*, the folk melody becomes increasingly embellished as the piece continues, highlighting Bartók's third principle of folk song arrangement. This is especially apparent in measure four, where the divisions of the beat become smaller and smaller in the form of sixtupelets (See Fig. 3). There are also greater dynamic and tempo contrasts in measures three and four, where the tempo changes from *lento* to *più lento* and the piece descends from *pianissimo* to *pianississimo*. (Gillies).

It was not long before Bartók delved into his research from other cultures as important aspects to utilize in his compositions as well. Once again, his studies into Middle Eastern music are some of his most notable works of research. In his composition *The Dance Suite*, Bartók used reed instruments, such as the oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, and french horn to replicate the rustic sound of Middle Eastern instruments, such as the žăūaq, gâşba, and yeita, in his compositions for a European orchestra (Parker 415).

CONCLUSION

What started off as Béla Bartók's enthusiastic nationalism evolved into a deep cultural understanding of music from a social perspective. His research into his native culture exemplifies the nationalistic tendencies that are common throughout major composers in music history. His comparisons into other European cultures highlighted a broader viewpoint of music that could be explored with careful study and dedication. Furthermore, his research into non-Hungarian cultures cements Bartók as an important forerunner in the subfield of ethnomusicology. His thorough research methods and ethnographic fieldwork brought forth a fresh, logistical approach to analyzing music, earning him the title as the "father of ethnomusicology" for generations of scholars to come.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Christina Reitz and the WCU School of Music for fostering the development of my knowledge and research into music history through research opportunities such as this one.