

The *style hongrois*—literally “Hungarian Style,” but “Gypsy Style” is a better English translation—was, from the late eighteenth century until World War II, the musical style that evoked the music and performance style of the Hungarian Gypsies. Used in both vocal and instrumental works, this highly popular style evolved into a highly developed sort of musical dress-up; the theatrical pathos and dash of popular-culture Gypsies could be evoked through the use of musical gestures made familiar by their own performances. A great deal of popular and amateur music was composed in this style, and a substantial number of true masterpieces also, including works by Franz Schubert and Franz Liszt. The spicy and infectious sound was the product of a variety of Hungarian syncopations and other characteristic rhythmic figures, surprising turns of harmony and a preference for the minor mode, and imitations of the instruments in the Gypsy band. More importantly, this music called up an entire vocabulary of cultural associations.

Like early Jazz, the music of the Romani (i.e. Gypsy) café-bands was perceived by listeners to express the intensified emotions of a musically gifted out-group. Both positive and negative racial stereotypes fed the perception of “natural” musicianship, and a view of the musician (whether Gypsy or African American) as rough, unschooled, and threatening, yet somehow closer to “spontaneous” expression and pure, raw emotion because of both his elemental nature and heritage of suffering and persecution. Here the Gypsy becomes yet one more universal Exotic, loathed yet envied, feared yet mistreated: somehow capable of deeper feelings and more powerful music than yours, and Authentic in a way you can never be. Don’t, however, let him get too close; savage expression pleases, but an actual savage threatens.

The idea that excessive learning could tame and spoil the music, that it must somehow be kept in its natural primitive form, was common. Claude Debussy, thanking a Hungarian

correspondent in 1910 for a gift of some Hungarian-Gypsy music, spoke of its natural “freedom and this feeling of boundlessness that characterizes it,” and rhapsodized about the performances of the Gypsy violinist Radics:

... one’s surroundings vanish. ... One inhales the forest air and hears the rush of streams; and it is also the melancholy intimacy of a heart that aches and laughs, almost in the same instant....

All the same, cultivated treatments of the Gypsies’ style provoked a cautionary tone:

In my opinion, one must never tamper with this music. One would even have to defend it, as much as possible, from the ineptness of the “professionals.” For that reason ... respect your Gypsies all the more. [...]

Your young musicians could gain from being inspired by them, not by copying but in trying to transpose their freedom, their gift for evocation, pathos, and rhythm. ... One must not use the folk music of one’s country except as a base, never as a procedure. That is especially true of yours ... Love it as passionately as you want to, but do not dress it up in school uniforms, do not give it eyeglasses with golden rims!

Debussy was not alone in his concern with *other* composers’ uses, nor in his anxiety about spoiling the vividness and authenticity of the style through excessive “craft” or

“professionalism.” The basic balances between crudity and polish, authenticity and artifice—and ultimately *them* and *us*—are the artistic fault lines of every work. Reaction to the music of these “primitives,” then, reflected both the pleasing *frisson* of the Exotic and the apprehension of the savage, locus of everything feared yet desired.

The two basic moods of *style hongrois* works were *hallgató* music (“music for listening to”) and dance music. *Hallgató* music featured the rhapsodic, metrically free flights of fancy of the violin-playing bandleader, or the soloist on the cimbalom (a larger hammer dulcimer) or *tárogató* (a shawm-like instrument often replaced by the clarinet). Whether it evoked grief, pride, or nostalgia, it was music for *reflection*, and musicians considered it a collaborative art, a sort of duet between soloist and listener, who interacted with each other.

Music for dancing could be in a variety of moods. The music of origin was called *verbunkos* (from German “Werben,” to recruit) and was played for recruiting presentations by the Hungarian army; the proud dance steps, leaps, and characteristic clicking of spurs served to convince Hungarian village boys of the joys of army life. *Verbunkos* evolved, in the 1830s, into the *czardas*, the Hungarian national dance that has two general moods. These are the *Lassan* (in a slow, heavy, duple meter), which is followed by the *Friska* (fast, wild, and virtuosic). Music for dancing could range from slow, lugubrious, and proud, to march-like or swinging, to fast, furious movements played just this side (or *that* side) of losing control.

The peculiar power of the *style hongrois* lay in the way audiences “heard” the ethnic stereotypes in the music played by Gypsy musicians, a process made easier by the Hungarian affinity for the minor mode. Both *hallgató* and *Lassan* styles were heard as expressions of Gypsy introspection, pride (even a haughty strut), and profound grief. In the dance music, a devil-may-care, abandoned celebration verging on frenzy was held to be the natural expression

of a people characterized by its (imagined) freedom from societal constraints. There were good historical reasons for people to hear a tormented muse in Romani café music; Roma were legally enslaved in Romania until 1855 and their history in Europe includes legal Gypsy-hunts, expulsion, and the confiscation of their children. The comparison with the historical African-American experience is thus not hard to understand, nor is the perception of both Jazz and *style hongrois* music as an agonized cry of personal, ethnic, and cultural anguish.

That said, Romungre café-music was always an entertainment product, a public music produced for paying customers; by contrast, the various Romani folk musics are of very different character and were never for commercial use. The success of the *style hongrois* as a popular musical language can be seen not only in the success of Gypsy bands and the large amount of amateur and commercial music that in that idiom. That it further blossomed into a discrete, profoundly expressive language for art music, including works of the highest artistic merit, is illustrated by the works on this recording.

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Liszt's composition *Schuberts Ungarische Melodien* (1846) is the later of his two extensive transcriptions, for solo piano, of the *Divertissement à l'Hongroise* for piano, four hands, of Franz Schubert (D. 818). The original was the closest Schubert ever came to a Hungarian Rhapsody, and was his only major work to be composed exclusively in the *style hongrois*. Liszt's version retains much of the characteristic material, which—especially in the first movement—he punctuates with frequent flourishes and cadenzas; while this might seem self-indulgent, it is actually in keeping with Liszt's own *style hongrois* compositions, in which the flights of fancy of the violin, cimbalom, or tárogató soloist are frequently given voice. In the first movement, a dour little Gypsy march serves as prelude and postlude to an extravagant fantasy on the *bókazó*

rhythm, which is festooned with showers of ornamental triplet runs and put through some very curious harmonic changes. The second movement is another Gypsy march, and the third movement is, as was the third movement of the Divertissement, based on the material from the *Ungarische Melodie*, which is here scored far more thickly and dramatically.

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The Op. 23 *Balli Ongaresi* of Johann Nepomuk Hummel, dating roughly from 1807, represent one of the first instances where the *style hongrois* idiom blossomed beyond the classical *ongheresi*, the characteristic but tame classical-era finale movement. These seven dances have strangeness aplenty, including two seeming slow-fast pairs in dances 1-2 and 4-5 (suggesting that existed in *verbunkos* music before becoming formalized in the *czardas*), seemingly random slippage between major and minor mode, lots of augmented seconds and characteristic syncopations, and even (in no. 6) an opening melody that sounds like a precursor of Liszt's Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody. In these dances, it is as if the mature *style hongrois* of later Schubert and Liszt is here compressed into attractive, amateur-level pieces; the two longest of these, nos. 1 and 2, are each only twenty-four measures in length.

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A Gypsy dance (*bohémienne* being one of the French words that signifies "Gypsy") seems an odd composition for the nineteen-year-old Claude Debussy, who never held the artistic use of "national" music in high regard. This early work is a playful, somewhat arch character piece of the kind written by Stephen Heller and others, full of attractive syncopations and runs. Even at this young age, though, Debussy's Gallic irony is apparent; there is a certain distance in the evocation, as if we are seeing a person in Gypsy costume at a fancy-dress ball rather than an actual Romani café-band of the kind beloved of Schubert, Liszt, and Brahms. It is thus more

musical vignette than (to quote Liszt) the grandiose and ambitious “national Epic—Bohemian Epic—and the strange tongue in which its strains would be delivered would be no strange than everything else done by the people from whom it emanated.” Debussy’s piece speaks a familiar language, not a wild and strange one, in which the *style hongrois* meets the insouciance of a Parisian *boulevardier*.

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The *Három Magyar Népi Tánc* (Hungarian Peasant Dances, 1940) of Léo Wéiner (1885-1960), show a closer relationship to the more concentrated, folksong-based Hungarian music of Wéiner’s contemporary, Béla Bartók, than to the older *style hongrois*. The “Fox Dance” is lively, with surprising harmonic turns but without the dissonances one would expect from Bartók. The “Round Dance of Maroszek” is a highly ornamented, trill-laden piece with frequent pauses and stops to accommodate the dance-steps; these are so carefully notated that the effect is—singularly—to almost destroy the effect of any kind of consistent meter at all, which is an exceedingly odd thing for a dance! The final movement, “Peasants’ Dance,” is a *presto*, high-spirited fling that begins over open drone-fifths in the left hand. Pauses and characteristic ornaments suggest that a certain amount of leaping is part of this dance, all to the accompaniment of the village fiddler who is, clearly, playing at the top of his game.

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Liszt’s Eleventh Hungarian Rhapsody opens with a cimbalom *hallgató*—improvisatory, fragmental, and laced with *kuruc*-4th figures. Spare initially, the texture quickly thickens, and seems to quadruple in force as the stylized pandemonium of a Gypsy ensemble is recalled. After this introductory section comes a short *czardas*, with a *Lassan* built on the spur-clicking *borazon*

rhythm—central to the vocabulary of Hungarian national music—and for the *Friska*, a dancing-tune featuring *prestissimo* chromatic runs.

The Thirteenth Hungarian Rhapsody also starts with an improvisatory *hallgató*, this one more suggestive of a violin soloist who milks each augmented second interval for tragic effect, accompanied sympathetically by his fellow musicians. A slow, yearning melody emerges as a solo with punctuating exclamations from the other instruments. The *Friska* that follows is based on the same bouncing, virtuosic fiddle tune made famous in the *Gypsy Airs* of Pablo de Sarasate.

Easily the most famous piece in the *style hongrois*, Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody is probably almost as well-known as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, its attractive tunes and virtuosic writing being almost synonymous with extroverted pianism. Liszt marks this as a *czardas* by labeling its sections. The *Lassan* section is appropriately slow, heavy, and dark, evoking fierce pride, but also (with its rhythmic caprice) a kind of playfulness. The *Friska* section ranges from moderately fast to breakneck, with the blistering repeated notes throughout evoking the virtuosic mallet-work of the cimbalom player. The final section, in A Major, features the most famous tune and the most extroverted technical display.

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Franz Schubert's *Ungarische Melodie*, D. 817 is one of his earliest forays into Hungarian-Gypsy musical territory. Like the slightly earlier F Minor *Moment Musical*, it is a brief character piece that allowed the composer to become more assured with certain style elements of the *style hongrois*. The *Moment Musical* is primarily concerned with rhythmic and textural gestures; the *Ungarische Melodie*—with a virtually unchanged tempo and rhythmic vocabulary throughout—

is a meditation on *style hongrois* harmonic possibilities, finding some effects which, by the standards of the early 1820s, are really radical.

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