

Krisztina Lajosi
University of Amsterdam
k.k.lajosi@uva.nl

Why did Faust go to Hungary?

Music and “Cultivation of Culture” in Nineteenth-Century Europe

1. Classical Music and Cultural Studies

Even the most mathematical minded musicologists would agree that music is more than scattered notes printed on a piece of paper and that a musical piece is only partially identical with the score. Instead, it relates to it as a signified to its signifier. One of the most famous definitions of music comes from the nineteenth-century music critic Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), who argued in his work *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1854) that “the content of music is tonally moving forms”. This renowned sentence of Hanslick has become the trump card of the advocates of “pure music”. But does this definition contradict a more contextual and culturally oriented approach to music? Does it exclude the possibility that in order to interpret and understand music we have to consider other aspects as well? And – most of all – should we not interpret Hanslick’s own stipulation in its own ideological cultural-historical context? As I will argue in the following sections, it is only a contextual analysis – or at least an awareness of contextuality – that could account for any creation or perception of music.

What is music after all? How and where can we locate it? Every epoch and every society has its own concept of music. The norms guiding musical creation and perception vary from age to age and from country to country. Why is traditional Chinese music different from the tunes of the Balkan? Why did Bach compose a very different music than Mussorgsky or Berlioz? Solely score reading or mastering the technical challenges of an instrument do not help when it comes to answer these questions. Unless we regard music as something that is being written in a vacuum, we should pay attention to its cultural, historical, social and even political context.

Cultural studies discovered music as an object worth of investigation from the beginning of its foundation as an academic discipline. However, it generally limits the range of its inquiry to the different contemporary popular music styles such as pop, rock, punk, rap, hip-hop, techno or other genres. Classical music – with the exception

of the record industry – fell out of its spectre. In spite of the fact that Cultural Studies had a huge impact on literary history and it urged literary scholars to reconsider their methods of thinking and teaching about the literary canon, it did not have similar influence in musicology.

Music historians ignored the cultural perspective and instead they preferred to tackle with technical, analytical and aesthetic questions for a long time. Music history meant either a sequence of chronologically juxtaposed musical works of art, or a narrative of succession of some outstanding composers. But why were exactly certain works or specific composers chosen? Why do we regard today Mozart a greater artist than Salieri in spite of the fact that the latter was more popular in the eighteenth century than the “wunderkind”? Why did the posterity of Bach almost forget him and why was he rediscovered in the nineteenth century? Why was the eighteenth-century Western music infatuated with exotic tunes – mainly Turkish – and why had this influence been absent in earlier periods? Why was before the nineteenth century the language of opera libretti Italian and French, and why did the situation change by the 1840s when suddenly dozens of works written in local vernacular appeared on the European operatic stages? These questions can be answered by taking under close scrutiny the relationship of music and its cultural, historical, ideological and social background. Only by analysing the dynamic interplay between all these factors can we account for the form and content of classical music instead of repeating the aesthetic ideologies of music history writing.

However, nowadays music and cultural studies seem to merge in the cross-disciplinary works of some outstanding musicologists as Carolyn Abbate, Susan McClary, the ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman, Lawrence Kramer or Richard Taruskin, to name only a few. Issues known from cultural studies such as feminist approach, post-colonial theories or discourse analysis appear to be more often in the focus of musicological journals. Indeed, cultural musicology has become a similarly established academic discipline as ethnomusicology, psychomusicology or sociology of music. Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done, and especially cultural-historical issues can challenge both old and new musicology.

On the following pages I am going to address a question that has scarcely been studied either by musicologists or scholars of Cultural Studies: the relationship of nineteenth-century nation-building movements and music. As the subtitle indicates the paper is going to focus on the dynamics of the “*cultivation of culture*”, a concept

borrowed from Joep Leerssen's theory of European cultural nationalism. According to Leerssen nationalism should be approached as a cultural phenomenon, because of the unprecedented growth of public interest in culture and the cultivation of "folk" or "national" cultural heritage in the nineteenth century (Leerssen 2006: 559-578).

2. National music – an ideological *rendezvous* of culture and nationalism

This paper is going to focus on the idea of *national music*, which is a concept coined in the nineteenth century, and aims to point out that it is not primarily a musical fact but rather the sounding manifestation of a cultural-historical construct, which emerged at the crossroad of aesthetic and political ideologies. National music – as a matter of fact music in general – cannot be separated from its discursive component – the way people verbalised their musical perception – or from its social-historical context. The history of musical compositions is also a history of culture. Thus it would be legitimate to approach national music as a *sound site* of the nineteenth-century culture. The term *site* is borrowed from Peter Brooker's *Glossary of Cultural Theory* and refers to a cultural and social formation, which is created and defined by the interaction of meanings, especially those influencing relations of power (Brooker 2003: 234).

As case study I am going to take under close scrutiny the *verbunkos* and one of its best-known representations, the *Rákóczy March*. *Verbunkos* music – or *Werbungsmusik* – is a genre of military recruiting music, a descendant of the *Ungaresca* (Hungarian) dance music and a forerunner of the well-known *csárdás*. *Verbunkos* had been identified throughout the ages with *the* typical Hungarian musical idiom. I aim to point out that the interaction between cultural endeavours and political discourses during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were responsible for the association of *verbunkos* with *par excellence* Hungarian national style. The conclusions of this specific case study could be broadened for all "national styles". Instead of the traditional way of studying music and literature, political history or cultural theory that aimed to explain the developments of a field confining its perspective only to that specific media and discipline, it would be more rewarding to target cultural knots, nodes – *sites* – that cannot be explained only from within one discipline, but need to be studied as a complex cultural phenomenon, which involves more than one cultural fields.

The idea that local cultural characteristics might influence musical thinking can be traced back to the seventeenth century when the debate about musical *styles* began. “The concept of *style* refers to a manner or mode of expression, the way in which musical gestures are articulated. In this sense, it can be seen to relate to the concept of *identity*.” (Musicology 2005: 170) Styles are characterized by technical elements, such as types of melody, rhythm, certain features of harmony and their relation to each other. The term emerged in the Enlightenment with the impulse for categorizing, and was soon used by German theorist such as Athanasius Kircher and Johann Mattheson. The Jesuit polymath, Kircher in his *Musurgia universalis* (1650) already used the word *national* when referring to different musical styles, as well as the influential German music theorist, Mattheson in *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739) also spoke about *national styles*. (Ratner 1980) Recently the ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman emphasises the fact that in the construction and recognition of style the awareness of its *shared social dimension* is crucial. (Bohlman 1988) This casts light on a possible interdisciplinary investigation of traditional musicology and cultural studies, which will also form the primary theoretical background of this essay.

3. When European art music spoke in Hungarian dialect

Beginning with the eighteenth century the *Ungaresca* style appeared quite often in the works of European composers. Mozart included Hungarian passages in his A Major violin concerto (K. 219, 3rd movement), and he also used Hungarian dance music patterns in *The Abduction from Seraglio* in order to create Turkish atmosphere in the opera. We can find examples of Hungarian dance motives in the *Concerto for flute and harp in C Major*, K. 299 in the final passage of the rondo section. Or one should not forget the rondo with Hungarian colour in Haydn’s D Major piano concerto (Hob. XVIII), the verbunkos like style in Beethoven’s 3rd Symphony or Diabelli’s Hungarian dances. Later it is Liszt, Schubert and Brahms, who use Hungarian idioms in their compositions.

But what is this Hungarian idiom actually? Why and by whom was it identified as such? How could it become a part of European cultural memory? Béla Bartók asserted in an article entitled *Our folk music and the folk music of the neighbouring peoples* (Népzeneünk és a szomszéd népek népzeneje) (1934) that the *verbunkos* or

Werbungsmusik, developed under a strong North-Slavic influence, and it is a mixture of different musical styles of the neighbouring countries. (Szabolcsi 1964: 3-7) But if it is a mixture of the neighbouring peoples' music than why and how could it become *par excellence* Hungarian?

This is a point when the theoretical approaches of Cultural Studies and the analytical methods of cultural history come to the help of musicologists. In order to understand the importance of an interdisciplinary investigation let us concentrate on one well-known musical piece: the *Rákóczy March*. The music loving public remembers it mainly from Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* (1846), which he wrote while touring in Europe in the 1840s. In the first part of Berlioz's dramatic legend Faust is wandering on the Plains of Hungary, where soldiers march past on the rhythm of the *Rákóczy March*. Berlioz orchestrated this piece in 1845, when he was giving a series of concerts in Pest, and as he remembers in his *Memoires* he achieved a huge success with it among the Hungarian public. However, only those who have read Berlioz's diary might know that the idea to play the Rákóczy March for a Hungarian public was suggested to him by his Viennese friends and that it was Ferenc Erkel (1810-1893), the conductor of the National Theatre in Pest, who gave Berlioz the musical score of the Rákóczy March. Thus one might assume that Rákóczy March had already been widely known in Hungary and in the neighbouring Vienna and it could stir up national feelings in the public around the revolution of 1848. Why was this piece so significant in nineteenth-century Europe? Why did Faust go to Hungary?

The first written trace of the basic motif of the Rákóczy March appeared with a Slovakian text in the *Vietorisz-Kodex* (1680), a book containing different dance music scores, and it was entitled "Oláh tánc" (Walachian/Romanian dance). A few years later it was copied without text in the *Szirmai-Keczerschen Handschrift* in northern Hungary, and it also appeared in the *Handschrift von Appony* (Oponice) (1730). Its final version, which later became to be known as *Rákóczy-nóta* (Rákóczy-song) dates from 1780 and it appeared with a Hungarian text. (Szabolcsi 1964: 4) This song became widely spread and played in Hungary during and after the Rákóczy *kuruc* uprising and the following war of independence against the House of the Habsburgs between 1706-1711.

This Hungarian revolt was known everywhere in Europe and it was regarded as a war against Habsburg absolutism. In France and on German territories the

Rákóczy uprising inspired many writers who circulated the topic in the European literary consciousness. However, Hungarians were associated with the idea of freedom fighters even from the sixteenth century, when Hungary became the Western border of the expanding Ottoman Empire. The association of the Hungarians with military practices had already been embedded in the European cultural memory. No wonder that in the nineteenth century, in the upheaval of the revolution from 1848 – another war of independence against the Habsburg rule – the Rákóczy theme became again popular not only in music, but also in literature and fine arts. Witness the many dramas, novels, poems and paintings inspired by the Rákóczy uprising.

Thus the image of the Hungarians as soldiers and the significant position of the Rákóczy uprising in European cultural and historical memory as well as the cultivation of this memory in various works of arts from all over in Europe would explain the status of the *verbunkos* music and the reputation of the Rákóczy song. But the next question to answer is that since this *verbunkos* music is a mixture of different cultural influences – Magyar, Slovakian, Serbian and Romanian – why was it identified only with Hungarian style? Music history needs again cultural history as companion in order answer this question.

Hungary was in that time the second biggest land ruled by the Habsburgs. However, the inhabitants of Hungary were of multiethnic origin: Magyars, Slovaks, Serbs, Croatians, Romanians and Germans constituted the population, among which the largest group were the Magyars. In the eighteenth century the cultural-political identity is bound to the land and not to the culture of a specific ethnic group. It is this *Hungarus* identity that begins to slowly disintegrate by the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the former patriotism – the loyalty to one's country – is replaced by nationalism – a form of cultural identity defined by “national” values.

The Magyars, since they were the largest group living on the territory of Hungary, tried to shape their separate *Hungarian* identity and to distinguish themselves both from the Germans and from the other ethnicities. In that time everywhere in Europe Art was regarded as evidence of “national excellence” and it became an ideology, which could feed national pride. Music became one of the most important tools of this ideology. Magyar – a word used as synonym for Hungarian – national consciousness was seen as a direct and organic continuation of the *Ungaresca* or *Hungarus* identity. Even though the *Hungarus* concept was

dismembered by the mid nineteenth century, the new *nationalist ideology* merged with the *older terminology* thus creating the sense of national continuity and authenticity.

Therefore the *verbunkos* music was identified with Hungary and Hungarian style, because this music had been played on the territory of Hungary for at least two centuries and its early versions were mentioned in German collections as *Ungarescas* or Hungarian dances. However, the reality what the concept of *Ungaresca* denoted in the eighteenth century was not the same with the Magyar (or Hungarian) concept of the nineteenth century. The semantic shift was in disjunction with the actual cultural reality. This is how the *Ungaresca* style, later known as *verbunkos* music, became to be viewed as par excellence Magyar-Hungarian national music.

4. Conclusion. National music as a cultural site

The musicologist Philip Bohlman argued that “more than any other form of identity, nationalism closes the gap between music and culture. (...) The nation that emerges from the intersecting domain shared by music and culture is remarkable for both its vastness and the detail of its landscapes, and it is for this reason that nationalists so eagerly reach towards music, and that so much power accrues to music when it is enlisted for nationalist ends.” (Bohlman 2003: 50) One of the shortcomings of both nineteenth century music histories and cultural histories is that they did not reflect on each other. However, their connection is obvious, because on the one hand music became a marker of national identity in the nineteenth century and on the other hand, one cannot account for musical facts without cultural history.

Therefore the concept of *site* as defined by Peter Brooker in his *Glossary of Cultural Theory* seems to be a suitable term to define national music. A *site* “is produced by an interaction or conflict of forces focused at a particular point. Thus, the individual or human subject, a text, artistic movement or epoch might be regarded as the site on which aesthetic, philosophical, social, or cultural tensions, or some combination of these, is both decipherable and played out.” (Brooker 2003: 234) National music is such a site created by the interaction of nationalism and aesthetic theories of the age, as well as by the linguistic, discursive and historical forces of the nineteenth century and its later reception.

It is only in this interaction of symbolic sign system and semantics that one can account for music. The focus on *sites* can be rewarding for all the disciplines. Instead of the traditional comparative methods, which *a priori* define the borders of their discipline, one could achieve the study of culture as a *histoire croisée*. Contrary to *histoire comparé* the *histoire croisée* focuses on the entangled (*croisée*) nature of culture and analysis the structural connectedness of historical entities. Music in general – and the concept of national music in particular – is a good example for what a *site* is, and how the entangled nature of the disciplines can lead us to new scholarly insights.

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Krisztina Lajosi (1977) is a Ph.D. candidate and research assistant at the University of Amsterdam at the European Studies Department. Her major interests are European nationalism and its relation to different cultural practices, as well as general theoretical and historical aspects of nineteenth-century literature and music. Her Ph.D. thesis focuses on nineteenth-century nation-building movements and musical practices in East-Central Europe.

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http://www.dunav.org.il/balkan_music_hungarian.html