

FOLK SONG ADAPTATIONS FOR MEN'S CHOIR BY JÁNOS SEPRŐDI

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SUMMARY. Music historian and folklorist János Seprődi deceased 95 years ago. He played a significant part in the Transylvanian folk song collecting endeavours. A predecessor to Kodály and Bartók he published some of his folk song collections from the region of Marosszék already in 1901. In the paper hereby I intend to write about the folk songs he collected and the 57 pieces for men's choir based on these collections.

Keywords: Folk song adaptations, Szekler folk songs, folk ballads, recruited songs, mockery songs, exile songs, old style pentatonic tunes, heptatonic tunes, new style tunes.

He was born at Chibed, in the county of Mureş on August 15th 1874. After he graduated from primary school his parents did not intend to give him further education. But his teacher, folk tale collector János Ősz suggested they did. Thus in 1885 Seprődi became a student at the Reformed Secondary School of Odorheiu Secuiesc. Here he participated at all musical activities: he sang in the school choir, he learnt how to play the violin and played in the school band. In the last two years of his studies the teachers of the school entrusted him with teaching hymnology and music theory.

Between 1894-1898 he studied Latin and Hungarian language and literature at the humanities faculty of the University of Cluj-Napoca, then he became the Hungarian and Latin teacher of the Reformed Secondary School of Cluj-Napoca and at the same time he taught music and singing.

He also tried writing. Some of his works are: *A testvérek (Brothers)* (1895), a Hungarian folk play in three acts and *A híres jövendőmondó (The Famous Fortune Teller)* (1901), a folk comedy in five acts.² In 1907 he was

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² A variant of the title of the folk comedy: *A két góbé (The Two Szeklers)*.

elected a member of the Music Society of Cluj-Napoca. He also played music: he played second violin and later tenor violin in the chamber music ensemble. As a composer he created several significant musical works: an opera in three acts based on one of Jókai's novellas entitled *Petki Farkas leányai* (*The Daughters of Farkas Petki*) (1901) and the accompaniment of *Kotsonya Mihály házassága – Omnia vincit amor* (*The Marriage of Mihály Kotsonya - Omnia vincit amor*) and of *Bakhusz* (*Bacchus*) (1912). Relying on his music teaching experience of several years he created a plan for music teaching for Reformed secondary schools. He urged the creation of a unanimous music curriculum containing music reading and writing practice in the lower classes and harmony, musical form studies, musical history, instrument studies and Hungarian musical history in the upper classes. He became the official study book critique for the Ministry of Public Education. In his writings he stressed the role of folk songs in musical studies in school.³ He is commissioned to edit a series of study books. The study books he wrote presented pieces of classical music along with folk songs. Music reading and writing was practiced with exercises on one or two voices. On concerts organized to musically educate the youth he presented the evolution of Hungarian music.⁴

As the music teacher of the Reformed Secondary School of Cluj-Napoca he pressed for the renewal of the musical material of the Reformed Church. He criticized distortions in the tunes that have been persisting for centuries, the incorrect measure divisions, the elimination of upbeat introductions, the lack of tempo signs, the slights in melismas, the change of ecclesiastical, i.e. modal tonality to major and minor keys. Due to his hard work in editing the hymn book, in 1908 the Reformed Church of Transylvania introduced a new hymn book.

He studied issues of the Hungarian music history at a scientific level. In 1909 he published two studies about the Codex Caioni,⁵ containing

³ "Every person (child or adult) can sense the general human values only through his or her own special nationality and he or she can get to understand the general human principles only after he or she understands his or her particular situation, for this is the natural way of evolution..." *A népiskolai énektanítás főbb kérdései* (*Main Issues of Music Teaching in Public Elementary Schools*), *Néptanítók lapja*, Budapest, 1909.

⁴ The choirs singing the musical material of the presentations were lead by Ilona Csipkés and Ferenc Zsigmond; instrumental pieces for orchestra were played by the Army Band of Cluj-Napoca under the conductorship of Samu Borsay; chamber music pieces were played by the students.

⁵ The two studies are entitled: *A Kájoni-kódex dallamai* (*Tunes of the Codex Caioni*). *Adalékok a magyar zene történetéhez a XVII. századból* (*Additions to the Hungarian Musical History from the 17th Century*). Akadémiai Értesítő, Budapest, XX., 1909, 61-70; *A Kájoni-codex iradalom- s zenetörténeti adalékai*, In: *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények*, XIX, Budapest, 1909.

the description of the collection, the history of its creation, an explanation for the music writing in the codex and he transposed the tunes in the codex to the five line music system. As a result of this work he was later quoted as a scientific source. He published a treatise on the Batthány Codex.⁶ In his study entitled *Feladatok a magyar zene körül (Tasks Related to Hungarian Music)*⁷ he criticised the lack of scientific musical magazines and the lack of composing. He wrote criticisms of pieces of musical specialized literature: among many others he wrote criticism of the folk song collection of István Bartalus, of the works of Bertalan Fabó,⁸ János Drumár⁹ and Kornél Ábrányi¹⁰. He flagelated the retrograde state of Hungarian musical science, but at the same time he pointed out also the new direction in which studies should be conducted. He stressed Bartók's role in creating the new Hungarian artistic music.¹¹

He attached tunes of exemplification and photocopies to the study (pp. 129-146, 282-301, 385-424). Benkő evaluates the work thus: "He was the first person to decipher the Codex Caioini and he did it in a way that is scientifically consistent up to this day. And he also published most of the materials in the Codex." Benkő András, *Seprődi János, a zenepedagógus (János Seprődi, the Music Educator)*, In: Korunk, 1972/5, 689.

⁶ *A Batthyány-kódex jelentősége (The Importance of the Codex Batthány)* – study presented at the ambulatory meeting of Alba Iulia of the Transylvanian Museum Society and published in the memorial edited by Pál Erdélyi, Kiadó: EME, Kolozsvár, 1913, 132-140.

⁷ He wrote his study entitled *Emlékirat a magyar zene ügyében (Memoir In the Case of Hungarian Music)* commissioned by the board of directors of the Musical Conservatory of Cluj-Napoca. The study was published by the *Budapesti Szemle* in May 1906 (pp. 214-263) under the title *Feladatok a magyar zene körül (Tasks Related to Hungarian Music)*. The part that raised the most controversy was when he blamed Ferenc Liszt's activities for the fact that the non-Hungarian speaking teachers of the Musical Academy educated the composers and musicians of the future generations in a foreign spirit.

⁸ The criticism of the book entitled *A magyar népdal zenei fejlődése (The Musical Evolution of the Hungarian Folk Songs)* In: Erdélyi Múzeum, XXV., 1908, 293-327.

⁹ The criticism of the book entitled *Zenetörténet zeneiskolák, magántanulás s a művelt közönség használatára (For the Use of the Musical History, Music Schools, Private Music Study and the Educated Audience)* In: Erdélyi Múzeum, XXVII., 1910, 396-405.

¹⁰ The criticism of the book entitled *A magyar zene a XIX. Században (Hungarian Music in the 19th Century)* In: Erdélyi Múzeum, XVIII., 1901, 106-108.

¹¹ "In this respect it is indisputable that Béla Bartók, the most genial Hungarian composer is on the right track using the folk song as the point of origin and shaping the primitive folk music motifs into such an original and enchanting artistic form that can stand up to the most sophisticated concert music tastes, yet it manages to maintain its original Hungarian folk style." *A magyar klasszikus zene problémája (The Problem with the Hungarian Classical Music)*, In: Napkelet, II, 1921, 830.

His activity as folk music researcher

He started scientific research on folk music in 1901.¹² He considered that the most urgent task was folk music collection with scientific purpose and methodology. He started to collect folk music first in his own home village, Chibed. Then he presented these during the scientific sessions of the Transylvanian Museum Society as a member of the Humanities, Language and Historical Science Departments. He publishes the 72 tunes he wrote down in the *Ethnographia* magazine under the title *Marosszéki dalgyűjtemény* (*Folk Song Collection from Marosszék*) in eight parts.¹³ Besides the scientifically reliable data he also published many sound theoretical and methodological explanations and excellent observations. He observed that the sources do not conform to the note pitches of the instruments tuned in the equal temperament system, that lyrics tend to produce more variants than tune and that with singing dialect tends to be less prominent. He regreted that folk ballads gradually were fading out of folk tradition while recruit songs and love songs thrived.¹⁴ In his writing entitled *Emlékirat a magyar zene ügyében* he emphasized the importance of research conducted in folk music: "Every measure wrote down from the mouth of the people will clarify the air and disperse darkness... I.e. it will prepare the scene for the future of Hungarian art."¹⁵

As a beginner collector he was against using the phonograph. He considered that the sources felt uncomfortable with the unusual device. Yet he admitted it was a useful tool to record tunes accompanied with musical instruments. Initially he used the method of so called reminiscence based collection: he wrote down with score the tunes of the folk songs he heard as a child and youth. He noted thoroughly the collection data of the new songs he heard and wrote on score. He first learned to sing the tunes, then at home he wrote them down on a score using his violin. He was very

¹² During the 19th century we know of many initiatives to discover folk music. A few of the most important contributors were Ádám Pálóczi Horváth, Sámuel Almási, Mihály Füredi, Gábor Mátray, István Bartalus, Áron Kiss, Béla Vikár. In some of the handwritten collections and publications folk songs have piano or guitar accompaniment. Since there was no clear definition of what a folk song was, folklorized artistic songs and foreign artistic songs were also included in the collections. The tunes were also frequently wrote down with errors or scanty.

¹³ This work could be considered the predecessor of the later popular village monographies.

¹⁴ See: The study of István Almási entitled *A népzene kutató (The Folk Music Researcher)*, In: *Seprődi János válogatott zenei írásai és népzenei gyűjtése (Various Musical Writings and Folk Song Collections of János Seprődi)*, ed. Almási István, Benkő András, Lakatos István, Kriterion Könyvkiadó, Bukarest, 1974, 66.

¹⁵ pp. 44-45.

precise in assigning tempo, he even used a metronome. He classified the tunes according to the contents of the lyrics dividing them into pieces pertaining to the epic, lyric and drama genres. He considered it very important that Hungarians familiarize themselves with the songs of their kin folks.¹⁶ In his opinion this was the way one could identify the specific and particular traits in a song.

As a folk music researcher Seprődi mobilized his students as well offering a yearly grant for collection activities.¹⁷ He studied the life of professional folk singers of Marossszék. He considered studying the music of the neighbouring people and the related people in the East and identifying interferences an urgent matter. He collected folk songs from the Ukrainians of Subcarpathia commissioned by Sztripszky Hiador.¹⁸

During his 10 years of collecting he brought forth more than three hundred folk songs with lyrics and with accompaniment from 12 villages. He classified them according to genre and in 1911 he created a handwritten book out of them entitled *A magyar nép dalai és dallamai (Songs and Tunes of the Hungarian People)*. In October the same year dr. Sebestyén Gyula, the president of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society announced Seprődi that besides Bartók's and Kodály's collections he intended to publish Seprődi's collection as well. But the plan failed.

Commissioned by the Hungarian Society for Community Culture of Transylvania he created adaptations from his own folk music collection for men's choir. The volume was entitled: *Eredeti székely dalok (Original Szekler Folk Song)*. The quick reply Seprődi gave to the commissioning from the early 1900s is proven by the foreword of 1903 to the adaptations, which remained a manuscript. In this foreword he emphasized in parallel with Bartók's and Kodály's principles the musical value of the folk songs and their positive effect

¹⁶ "They did not pay much attention to these, although they are the ones who let us know which song is original and which is a borrowing." *A hazai kis oroszok között (Among the Ukrainians of Subcarpathia)*, Erdélyi Lapok, I., 1908, 12.

¹⁷ In the newspaper of the secondary school he taught at the following announcement was placed: "Anyone who collects the folk songs of a village, if possible, completely will be rewarded 30 Hungarian crowns. It is preferable that the collection would be organized according to genres and writing down the tunes of the folk songs also constitutes an advantage." The three students who excelled at collecting were: János Bogdán who collected at Magyargyerőmonostor, Lajos Kocsis at Felsőtők and Seprődi's own son, János who collected recruit songs from his fellow students who served as soldiers. Lajos Jékely who was in fact the poet Lajos Áprily also was mentioned as productive collector.

¹⁸ He recorded the folk songs he collected. Among them we find colomeikas (a Russian-Ruthenian dance), volosikas (a Romanian dance), sidovskis (Jewish song) and many wedding songs. Ukrainians from Subcarpathia were also called Ruthenians or little Russians.

on artistic music: "Today these songs are alive only among the people and on the violin of the village musician, but I trust very much that in a short time they will be appreciated also by larger audiences, for they convey more powerful, deeper and more varied feelings than the now popular Dankó songs."¹⁹ The volume was finally published in 1914 at Cluj-Napoca in two thousand copies. His intention by it: to renew artistic music.

Musical Analysis of the Folk Song Adaptations

Seprődi chose the tunes intended for adaptation from among his collections in Szeklerland. These were collected at Chibed, Odorheiu Secuiesc, Sarateni, Viile Dejului, Sambatesti and Pauleni.

This material is quite varied according to genre: love songs (1, 11, 15, 19, 21, 22, 23, 46, 49, 53.), folk ballads (32, 43, 48.), recruit songs (3, 16, 17, 26, 33, 36, 50.), mockery songs, waggery songs and songs of ridicule (5, 30.), songs of the outlaw, exile songs and prisoner's songs (12), moan songs (24), pub songs (29) and artistic songs featuring folk songs (2, 7, 10, 13, 14, 18, 25, 27, 28, 31, 34, 35, 38, 41, 42, 44, 45, 47, 51, 55, 57.) .

As far as style is concerned, the adapted material comprises of old style pentatonic tunes (3, 11, 12, 17, 21, 23, 29, 30, 32, 43, 48, 49.), heptatonic tunes (1, 5, 16, 24, 33, 46, 50), new style tunes (15, 22, 26, 36, 53.), artistic songs and foreign tunes (19). By adapting these to men's choir Seprődi intended to encourage their spread to the large public.

The greatest part of the adaptations have major or minor keys. The 32 adaptations in a minor key are matched by only 18 ones in a major key. He preferred D minor, G minor, C minor and F minor. Composing the adaptations he realized he could deviate from the classical harmony rules,²⁰ he could ignore the primary usage of the system of majors and minors. Therefore some of the compositions are in keys of the folklore: in Doric mode is the adaptation of the pentatonic ballad beginning *Rózsa Sándor Bársony lovát nyergeli* (*Sándor Rózsa Saddles His Smooth Haired Horse*), the adaptation of the pentatonic song of ridicule beginning *Jaj Istenem, te tudod* (*Woe, My Lord, You Only Know*), the adaptation of the artistic song featuring folk songs entitled *Ha meguntad rózsám* (*Honey If You Will No Longer*), the adaptation of the

¹⁹ *Előszó az Eredeti székely dalok című kötethez* (*Foreword to the Volume Entitled Original Szekler Folk Songs*), 1903, manuscript.

²⁰ „I did not refrain even from forbidden combinations, since it appeared to me that the asperity of these songs was not so much asperity, rather a refreshing unusual particularity and forcefulness.” *Előszó az „Eredeti székely dalok” című kötethez*, 1903, 4.

pentatonic love song beginning *Elment az én uram* (*My Hubby Has Gone Away*). The adaptation of the pentatonic love song beginning *Sárga virág, ha leszakasztanálak* (*Yellow Flower If I Would Pick You*) is in Doric mode based on extended fourths and the adaptation of the pentatonic pub song beginning *Iszom a bort* (*Here I Am Savouring My Wine*) and the adaptation of the heptatonic moan song beginning *Fiátfalvi halastóba* (*In the Fish Pond of Fiátfalva*) is in Frigian mode.

We find a peculiar choice of key in the case of the folk ballad beginning *Jöjjön haza édesanyám* (*Come Home Mother*). It feels as if it were written in both major and minor. The initial motif of the tune, appearing in rubato style is in D minor. Which reflects keenly the content of this part: the girl asks her mother to come to her father who is ill. Yet the closing of this line is already in F major. The reply of the mother that she will rather dance a little longer and only then she will return home is reflected by a modulation from D minor to C major and a vivid tempo.

As far as tempo is concerned Seprődi prefers temperate or slow motion: there are 23 Moderato adaptations, 4 Lento, 6 Adagio and only 11 Vivace. In some cases he also notes the character of the tempo: Lento-Rubato or Moderato-Rubato. He uses all the steps of the dynamic scale according to the character of the music and the content of the lyrics. As far as meter is concerned he mostly uses duple meter: 2/4 in 27 pieces, 4/8 in 23 pieces, while in 7 pieces he combines duple meter variants (2/4, 2/8, 4/8) or duple and triple meter variants (3/8-4/8; 2/4-3/4).

He created mostly simple, homophonic structures, maintaining the original form of the tune. In the second and third stage of the pieces he uses variation as a compositional tool. At the beginning of some pieces we find a unisono and at the end an organ like maintained tune.

E.g. 1

Méréskelten ♩ = 60

f

Én el-me-gyek szép sze-re-tőt ke-res-ni. Szé-pen kér-tem,
 Mer a-ré-gi nem a-kar már sze-ret-ni. sze-ret-ni.

He rarely uses imitation, but even then he will not let it flow though the tune consequently, but rather turns it into chordic music.

E.g. 2

Élénken $\text{♩} = 60$

Vá-sár-he-lyi csár-dá-ba, E-czet ég a lám-pá-ba; Vá-sár-he-lyi
 Vá-sár-he-lyi csár-dá-ba, lám-pá-ba;
 Vá-sár-he-lyi csár-dá-ba, E-czet ég a lám-pá-ba;

The various voices often sing the tune one third apart; rarely does he use longer counter-movements between the voices as well. But each compositional choice is meant to make each voice as melodious as possible.

E.g. 3

Mérsékeltén

Uc-zu bi-zony meg-é-rett a sa-lá-ta,

E.g. 4

Mérsékeltén

I.É-des a-nyám so-kat in-tett a jó-ra,

In harmony he usually uses pitched tones. In some cases we find mediants, inversions, passing notes and shifts. In the case of waggery song beginning *Amint én az úton járok (As I Pass Along the Road)* the bass voice is the one immitating the sound of the folk instrument, the pipe.

E.g. 5

Élénken

f 1. A - mint én az ú - ton já - rok,
1. A - mint én az ú - ton já - rok,

Out of the three ballads he adapted in the case of two he deviates from the four voice structure. The main tune of the ballad is sung by a soloist, while the choir itself accompanies the soloist in 4 voices. In the case of ballad *Szabó Vilma* the accompanying voices sing mimicking an instrumental accompaniment in staccato style, while in the case of ballad *Molnár Anna* the choir merely murmurs singing only an M sound.

E.g. 6

Lassan

mf Sza - bó Vil - ma ki - ment az er - dó - re,
pp Sza - bó Vil - ma az er - dó - ré,

E.g. 7

Lassan

mf Gye - re ve - lem, Mol - nár An - na, Ren - ge - teg - be,
p M - M - M - M -

Why the simplicity? As he put it: „...I wanted to avoid anything that would alter the original, specific traits of these simple folk songs and the atmosphere their simple originality created.”²¹ His aim was not to compose not so much adaptations of these songs, but rather transcriptions for simple choirs.

As a conclusion one could say that he did a meritorious work in any field he contributed to: unveiling the old musical relics of the Hungarians or researching and promoting the archaic tunes of the Reformed hymns or the collection and artistic adaptation of the Szekler folk songs or studying the historic layers of the Hungarian folk songs. Let me finally quote musical historian András Benkő of Cluj-Napoca on his work: „...He was one of the pioneers of the modern ethnomusicology brought to completion by Bartók and Kodály.”²² His work and oeuvre is worth knowing and appreciating.

Translated from Hungarian by Danel Zsuzsa

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²¹ See: *Előszó*, In: *Eredeti székely dalok*, Gyűjtötte és férfikarra alkalmazta Seprődi János, Kiadja az Erdélyi Irodalmi Társaság, Kolozsvár, 1914, 4.

²² *Seprődi János válogatott zenei írásai és népzenei gyűjtése (Various Musical Writings and Folk Song Collections of János Seprődi)*, ed. Almási István, Benkő András, Lakatos István, Kriterion Könyvkiadó, Bukarest, 1974, 55.

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A list of the songs:

1. A bögözi nagy híd alatt
2. A gergelyi utca
3. A kibédi bíró levelet kapott
4. A merre én járok
5. Amint én az úton járok
6. Bánom, bánom
7. Besorozott a német katonának
8. Bukarestből jön a posta
9. Bús életem
10. Császár körte
11. Elment az én uram
12. Elveszett a lovam
13. Engem hívnak Fábián Pistának
14. Este van már
15. Ez a kis lány rezet lopott
16. Édes anyám kiállott a kapuba
17. Édes anyám, hol vagy az édes té
18. Édes anyám, selyem a zsebkendőm
19. Édes anyám, sokat intett
20. Én a tehént kihajtottam
21. Én elmegyek szép szeretőt...
22. Érik a ropogós cseresznye
23. Fejér fuszujkavirág
24. Fiátfalvi halastóba
25. Ha meguntad rózsám
26. Hej, azért, a mért...
27. Hej, de szépen esik az eső
28. Hervad az a rózsa
29. Iszom a bort
30. Jaj Istenem, te tudod
31. Jancsi! Jancsi!
32. Jöjjön haza édes anyám
33. Kapitány úr, arra kérem
34. Kádár Ferkó
35. Kis kertemben legel
36. Kis-szebeni, nagy-szebeni
37. Magyarország gyászba' van
38. Már minálunk babám
39. Márványkőből van a
40. Ments meg Isten
41. Miklós-huszar nem eszik
42. Mikor mentem Pestre
43. Molnár Anna
44. Nincsen pénzem
45. Rászállott a fülemile
46. Repülj madár, repülj
47. Rózsa Sándor az én nevem
48. Rózsa Sándor Bársony lovát nyergeli
49. Sárga virág, ha leszakasztanálak
50. Sárgára van a kaszárnya befestve
51. Sebesen folyik a...
52. Szabó Vilma
53. Szánt az ökör
54. Töltik az erdei utat
55. Ucczu bizony
56. Vásárhelyi csárdába
57. Vásárhelyi nagy kaszárnya

