

THE MUSICAL STYLE OF SÁNDOR VERESS'S *FOUR TRANSYLVANIAN DANCES*. THE SYNTHESIS OF 'TRADITION' AND 'RENEWAL'

MIKLÓS FEKETE¹

SUMMARY. The paper examines the style of Sándor Veress in his first compositional period through the dance suite *Four Transylvanian Dances*, written for string orchestra. Throughout the musical analysis, the paper points out a few compositional principles and techniques, with which the heritage of classical and folk music can be successfully translated into an innovative and progressive contemporary musical language.

Keywords: Sándor Veress, style, compositional techniques, analysis, *Four Transylvanian Dances*.

Sándor Veress was born in Transylvania and moved with his family to Hungary as a nine-year-old child. His first compositional period was strongly influenced by the compositional style of Kodály and Bartók (he was called the most significant and authentic successor of the two Hungarian composers), by the stylistic pluralism of Western European music, and by his Transylvanian musical roots, especially by the Hungarian and Romanian folk music². In several of his works, he reaches back to Transylvanian folk music – one of them, as its title also denotes, being the analyzed *Four Transylvanian Dances*.

¹ PhD Lecturer, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Reformed Theology and Music, Music Department, RO. 400535 Cluj-Napoca, Horea Str. 7.,
E-mail: fktmiklos@gmail.com

² For the biographical background of his first compositional period see Fekete Miklós. "Veress Sándor zeneszerzői indulása és erdélyi kötődése" ("The Compositional Beginnings of Sándor Veress and His Transylvanian Bonding."). In: *Kodály 140 – Tanulmánykötet (Kodály 140 – Studies)*. JATEPress, Szeged, 2023, pp. 94-98.



Based on Veress's letters, János Demény and Ioana Baalbaki outline³ the genesis of the work. Thus, Veress's letters to his future wife reveal the fact that around 1940, at the suggestion of Sándor Végh, he planned to compose a piece based on Transylvanian folk dances. Végh had already a scheduled concert in Italy, in February 1941, on which he intended to present the piece. This did not happen at that time. It is unclear why the work, originally planned as a duo for violin and piano, was ultimately scored for string orchestra⁴. What we know for certain is⁵ that Veress originally composed three dance movements in 1943 (*Three Transylvanian Dances*) at the request of Géza Kresz and the Academy Chamber Orchestra. The composition was performed with Kresz's ensemble in 1944, during their Transylvanian concert tour. In the autumn of 1948, at the International Folk Music Congress in Basel, Paul Sacher took over and bought the three movements, and commissioned a fourth. This is why the movement entitled *Lejtűs* was written in 1949.

Demény, referring to Veress, points out that “the *Four Transylvanian Dances* are not folk song arrangements. They are the composer's melodies written in the style of certain Transylvanian dances”⁶.

The four movements of the dance suite show a *slow–fast–slow–fast* pattern (the initial three-movement version was *slow–fast–fast*).

The first movement (*Lassú, Poco rubato – Andante con moto*) serves – as is often the case in dance suites – as a warm-up before the faster dances. It is structured in four sections (*a-b-a'-b'*), with a four-bar introduction and a short, three-bar conclusion (coda). In this movement we find the characteristics of modality: on the one hand through the rhythmic, metric, and melodic structure of the folk-like melodies, on the other hand through their horizontal/linear and vertical/harmonic development (counterpoints, melodic-harmonic ostinato motifs, harmonic accompaniment, etc.). The opening modal acoustic sonority of the movement is built up from a series of ascending perfect fourths, which result in a full diatonic cluster of seven notes:

³ See Demény János. “Veress Sándor – életmű-vázlat” (“Sándor Veress – Biographical Sketch”). In: *Veress Sándor. Tanulmányok (Sándor Veress. Studies)*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1982, pp. 35-36; and Baalbaki, Ioana. “Quattro danze transilvane von Sándor Veress”. In: *Musik-Konzepte*, 192/193, IV/2021, Edition Text+Kritik, Richard Boorber Verlag, München, 2021, p. 111.

⁴ Baalbaki, Ioana. *Op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁵ See Demény János. *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁶ Demény János. *Op. cit.*, p. 36. The Preface to the Milan edition (Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1950) confirms the fact that all the used folk tune-like melodies are Veress's inventions.

E.g. 1



Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, No. 1, Lassú – Poco rubato, succession of perfect fourth (bars 1-3)

The harmonic structure made up of perfect fourth represents one of the main characteristics of the movement: they can be found at key moments, at emphatic beginnings of phrases or sections. Veress combines these chords made up of perfect fourths (or perfect fifths) with triads and four-note chords, but these are mainly used with a coloring function, and their role in providing (tonal-)functional stability is exploited just through internal cadences and movement closure. The composer presents the folk-like melody in this modal atmosphere, along with a syncopated rhythmic accompaniment, typical of slow folk dances. The melody will be integrated throughout the movement into an increasingly dense and dissonant chromatic harmonic texture. The melodic notes of the opening suggest an F Dorian mode. The melodic shaping of the first bars reveals that, although it is entirely folkloric in character, it is a melody of the composer: this is evident both in the lack of formal internal symmetry and in the tonal-modal shifts or harmonic scordatura (mistuning) applied before cadences. The pedal notes of the bass and the syncopated accompaniment of the second violins and violas imitate and evoke the accompaniment of folk-dance music. Already at the beginning, it can be found an interesting symbiosis of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘innovative’.

E.g. 2

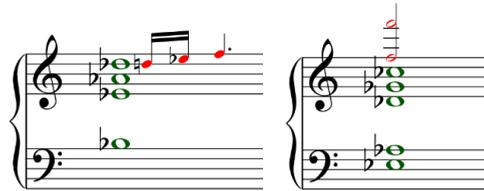
Andante con moto

A musical score for four staves: Vln. 1, Vln. 2, Vla., and Vlc. The key signature is Bb major (two flats) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked 'Andante con moto'. The first staff (Vln. 1) has a melodic line with a 'p espress.' marking. The second staff (Vln. 2) has a syncopated accompaniment. The third staff (Vla.) has a steady accompaniment. The fourth staff (Vlc.) has a steady accompaniment. A red box highlights the first four notes of the Vln. 2 staff: Bb, Eb, Ab, and Db. Below the box, the text reads 'structure of P4th Bb-Eb-Ab-Db'. Blue circles highlight specific notes in the Vln. 1 and Vla. staves.

Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 1. Lassú – Andante con moto, the folk-dance melody and its accompaniment (bars 5-9)

As an example of the composer's particular use of harmony and the process of densifying the harmonic texture, let us compare the structure of bars 5 and 29 (the beginnings of the first and third sections): both begin with the same melody on the first violin, and in both cases, the composer underlines it harmonically with a chord formed of perfect fourth. In bar 5, the succession of perfect fourth is Bb-Eb-Ab-Db, and the opening notes of the melody produce a relatively consonant overall effect (just the passing dissonance of the Db-D interval overwrites it, but due to the fact, that note D is a short appoggiatura, this dissonance is blurred. Bar 29 opens with a five-note chord formed of perfect fourths (Eb-Ab-Db-Gb-Cb), which is completed – as the first note of the melody – by an augmented fourth (F). This is a complex and strongly dissonant acoustic sonority, especially due to the dissonances of the Cb-F augmented fourth and the Gb-F major seventh:

E.g. 3



Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 1. Lassú – Andante con moto, comparison of the harmonic structure of the bars 5 and 29

In the musical texture of the segment starting at bar 29, Veress separates and contrasts the melodic and harmonic layers, obtaining an original polytonal–polymodal harmonic context:

E.g. 4

structure of P4th
Eb-Ab-Db-Gb-Cb + F

Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 1. Lassú – Andante con moto, separate melodic and harmonic layers (bars 29-33)

The entire third section – due to the varied repetition – is characterized by a harmonic complexity and a strong use of dissonance. In bar 37 Veress uses a chord formed of four perfect fifths (and as a fifth, comes the melody note). Its function is like those made up of perfect fourth: on the one hand, it softens the tonal and functional character of the commonly used triads and tetrads, on the other hand, it creates an original neo modal harmonic accompaniment to the folk-dance melody.

The final, fourth section of the first movement will show – as a contrast – a gradual thinning of the harmonic texture, a reduction in intensity and volume, a slowing of tempo, and a preparation for the ending. The three-bar Coda is a specific modal chord progression (plagal relation) above the organ point of the F-tonic: the closing F major (triad) is preceded by a five-note chord, which is again a harmonic structure made up of perfect fourths (refers to the movement opening), built on the note B \flat , and the chord progression results in a subdominant-tonic relation:

E.g. 5

structure of P4th
on a pedal note

F major

Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 1. Lassú – Andante con moto, the harmonic structure of the cadence (bars 53-55)

The second movement (*Ugrós – Allegretto*) is characterized by its strong rhythmic structure, the continually alternating meter (2/8, 3/8, 4/8, 5/8) – which are so frequent also in Bartók's music –, and the strong contrapuntal development. The movement is an interesting fusion of fugue and variation. The subject of the fugue is a four-line, 16-bar folk dance diatonic melody. The second and fourth melody lines of the four-line folk melody are repetitions of the first and third melody lines (*aabb^{var}*), and the melodic line second half of the stanza is placed a fifth lower, than the register of the first half. This is why Veress introduces the first segment of the subject on the second violins and continues on the violas from the middle of the stanza. The presentation of the theme is not monophonic: the dance melody is accompanied by the violins, which insert a rhythmic and harmonic completion to the main theme.

E.g. 6

Allegretto ♩ = 176-184

Vln.1

Vln.2

Vln.1

Vln.2

Vla.

**Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 2. Ugrós – Allegretto,
the subject of the fugue (bars 1-16)**

In the exposition of the fugue, there are four entries, with atypical spacing between the entering voices: the presentation of the subject (second violin, then viola) is followed by the second entry an octave higher (again second violin), after which the third entry presents the theme a fifth lower (cello), and the fourth a fifth (twelfth) higher (first violin). Atypical again, that the counterpoint of the second entry (from bar 16 onwards) is not a separate, independent melodic line or countersubject, but its melodic texture is formed from the head motif of the subject, or – more particular – from the canonic imitation of the subject itself. Again, a typical imitation technique, present in Bartók's compositions.

E.g. 7

Vln.2

Vla.

**Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 2. Ugrós – Allegretto,
canonic imitation (bars 16-22)**

Along the third thematic entry (cellos, bar 31), Veress introduces a contrasting counterpoint (second violins) to the subject: the new thematic material is formed of a two-bar motif (bars 31-32), which is repeated in

multiple varied and elaborated forms (bars 33-45). This characteristic thematic material in some places (e.g. bars 42-44) becomes rhythmically and tonally independent, resulting in a superposition of simultaneous rhythmic-melodic-harmonic layers (forming harmonic contrasts/dissonances between the voices). With the fourth entry, the musical texture becomes increasingly dense. The composer combines the different rhythmic patterns and melodic elements exposed earlier: the *pizzicato*-accompaniment, the head motifs of the subject and countersubject, and the canonic imitation – foreshadowing the development of the thematic material:

E.g. 8

The musical score for 'Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 2. Ugrós – Allegretto, development of the thematic material (bars 46-53)' is presented for a string quartet. It begins at bar 29 and is marked 'Allegretto' with a tempo of 176-184. The score is in 3/8 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *mf*, *p*, and *sf*. The score shows the development of the thematic material through various instrumental entries and interactions, including *pizz.* (pizzicato) and *arco* (arco) markings.

**Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 2. Ugrós – Allegretto,
development of the thematic material (bars 46-53)**

In bar 60, after four entries (starting from notes D, D, G, A), the fugal exposition ends. Starting from bar 61 – as the part of middle section and development – the dance melody (subject) reappears in its full length. Veress presents simultaneously two different versions of the dance melody. The violins bring an embellished and developed melodic variation of the original dance melody, starting on note G, and keeping the original meter and rhythm. Parallel with the violins, the double basses – which join the string orchestra for the first time at this point – introduce another version (variation) of the dance melody, starting on note C, played *pizzicato*, and presented in an augmented form. The original notes values are doubled (just the half notes are derived into repetitive eighth notes, to assure the rhythmicity of the dance), and for this, the composer changes the meter from 3/8 and 4/8 to 3/4 and 4/4. Putting the two mentioned melodic layers together, we can observe that the first violins end the integral dance melody, meanwhile the double basses just the first half of the stanza. In this musical texture, the cellos bring the rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment, while the second violins and violas continue the contrapuntal imitative dialogue, using the head motif of the subject.

E.g. 9

The image displays a musical score for five instruments: Violin 1 (Vln.1), Violin 2 (Vln.2), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vlc.), and Contrabasso (Cb.). The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers bars 61-64, and the second system covers bars 65-68. The time signature changes from 3/4 to 4/4 between the systems. Red annotations are used to highlight specific melodic lines and motifs: a red box around the first violin's melodic line in the first system, and red circles around notes in the double bass parts (Cb.) in both systems. Performance markings such as 'pizz.' and 'arco' are present in the first system.

Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 2. Ugrós – Allegretto, parallel presentation of the varied and embellished dance melody (Vln. 1) the augmented dance melody (Cb.), and the contrapuntal development through the head motif (bars 61-64)

From bar 69 it can be found another melodic variation of the dance on the first violins (to let the double basses finish the second half of the augmented theme). In this variation the composer realizes a climax (bar 72), using the embellished variations of the head motif, in dialog between the two violins. The entire dance melody recurs twice more, but the musical texture – as the opposite of the exposition – is gradually thinned. Veress keeps the polyphonic contrapuntal accompaniment during the melodic entry of the cellos (bars 81-94), and even experiments with another, varied canonic imitation between the violins and cellos (bars 96-110), but the long harmonic pedal of the violas and double basses (also as a characteristic of the final entry of the fugue) leads slowly to an ending of the dance (movement).

The third movement (*Lejtős – Andantino*) is the latest, and therefore the most modern and complex. If the first two, and – partly – the last movements are mainly the musical expressions of the ‘tradition’, this third and the fourth movement exemplifies the innovation and the ‘renewal’ of the musical language.

The key signature (2#: *F#* and *G#*) already suggests a specific modal melodic and harmonic treatment, affirmed by the unusual 5/4 meter. At the beginning of the movement, Veress introduces a one-measure long *ostinato* motif: it consists of a syncopated rhythmic *F#* pedal note and an arched melodic line, with a predominant chromatic (dissonant) character. In the asymmetrical frame of the 5/4 meter, the melodic *ostinato* consists of the series of notes *G#-A-C-/C#-A-/C-G-/A#*, which shows a chromatically creeping melodic profile (often in the music of Bartók) and is characterized by the ambiguity of the notes/ intervals through the mobile degrees (*C-C#* and *A-A#*). The melody of the viola solo is based on this rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ostinato, which, with the gradual integration of the other voices, leads to a dissonant and tensed harmonic context.

E.g. 10

ostinato (rhythmic, melodic and harmonic)

Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 3. Lejtős – Andantino, rhythmic and melodic ostinato (bars 1-4)

As in the second movement, the harmonic texture is entirely the result of the interaction of melodic layers. Ede Terényi, analyzing Veress's works, states the followings:

“Sándor Veress is a composer of linear orientation: the main emphasis in his works is on the melody and the horizontal structure of the parallel melodic lines. The vertical acoustic dimension rarely comes to the fore, and if it does, it will dominate just for a short time, to give its place – as soon as possible – to polyphony again. The harmonic structures are often imperfect and are born of the rich polyphonic motion of the voices, and this perpetual fluctuation does not allow the individualization of the harmonies”⁷.

⁷ Terényi, Ede. “Veress Sándor alkotóperiódusai. Stíluselemzés” (“Compositional Periods of Sándor Veress. Stylistic Analysis”). In: *Veress Sándor. Tanulmányok (Sándor Veress. Studies)*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1982, p. 68.

The opening melodic line (on violas, then on violins) evokes a *doina*-like melody, due to its rubato tempo, its modal character (the beginning outlines a F# Dorian) and its predominantly descending melodic profile. As in the *ostinato*, also in the melody line is detectable the presence of mobile degrees (the alternation of notes D#-D or C#-C in the modal frame of F# Dorian). From the beginning of the movement, it is a contrast between the *ostinato* and the melodic layer and its accompaniment and counterpoint – both harmonically (multiple dissonances, parallel harmonic structures) and rhythmically (it is a polymetric and polyrhythmic opposition between the two layers).

The movement is divided into four sections (*Andantino* – bars 1-23, *Poco piu mosso* – bars 24-41, *Tempo I* – bars 41-55 and *Allegretto* – bars 55-74), and except the last one, the *ostinato* is present in all the inner sections (either in 5/4 or in 4/4). Veress uses this *ostinato* motif to increase the density and the harmonic tension of the musical texture, built up almost entirely from imitative and contrapuntal melodic layers. Using the thematic material of bars 9-11, the last section of the movement (*Allegretto*) starts with the acceleration (*stringendo*) of the motif, followed by its polyphonic development and transformation into a veritable fast folk dance melody (bars 66-69). But, as if the composer had moved too soon from glumness to a cheerful mood, he soon after fades out the dance.

The concluding, fourth movement (*Dobbantós – Allegro vivace*) is a whirling folk dance. It is built on the continuous alternation of the 2/4 and 3/4 metric pulsation. The dance tune, like folk dances, is played on violins, and is a wavering melody line made up of sequences of continuous thirty-second note passages, interrupted by short rests and strong accents (at the beginning or endings of the phrases).

One of the most impressive characteristics of the movement is the rhythmic and metric accompaniment of the dance melody. Veress uses three different metric layers (creating a massive polyrhythmic and polymetric texture): The melody brings a natural metric accentuation. The double basses keep the beat and the rhythmic fund, but permanently shift the metric accent (typical bowing technique of the instrument in the folk ensemble). The violas and the cellos introduce a completely different meter: although inserted in the alternative 2/4 and 3/4, their *ostinato* rhythm pattern is in 5/8.

The melody is played mainly on the violins, with the harmonic accompaniment on the rest of the strings, but surprisingly, the composer changes their role and shifts the *Allegro vivace* dance melody to the violas, cellos, and double basses (bars 51-57), putting the first and second violins to accompany them. As in the folk dances usual, the melody is accompanied harmonically by rhythmized intervals or chords. But Veress includes – very effectively – the technique of canonic imitation of the dance tune (see bars 91-110).

Veress uses modal melodic and harmonic structures both for dance melody and its accompaniment. The first appearance of the dance melody (bars 3-19) is in C Lydian, with its very characteristic raised fourth degree (F#). This Lydian character will be predominant in this movement. At certain points, the composer recolors the Lydian mode with the lowered seventh degree (Bb), resulting in an Acoustic mode. These melodic fragments (see bars 16-19, 27-31, 41-43, 103-105, 120-122) refresh the sonority but create at the same time a more tensioned harmonic texture. Besides Lydian and Acoustic modes, the composer also uses major (Ionian), minor (Eolian), or Dorian modes for longer or shorter melodic fragments. Due to their diatonic character, there are phrases where it cannot depict a certain mode (or its tonic/*finalis*). The melodic line mostly avoids tonicization (the highlighting or confirming a tonic) or dominantization (V-I or VII-I melodic or harmonic relations), so the *finalis* of a section is rather that note of the diatonic linear structure, which is confirmed due to its multiple repetitions or its presence at the end of the period or phrase (we have often the feeling of tonal-modal ambiguity).

The mentioned tonal-modal ambiguity is even more accentuated by the vertical layer. Veress intentionally avoids triads built up from thirds (or inversions of triads) but uses as accompaniment perfect fifth (without the thirds), multiple simultaneous layers of fifth, unusual harmonic structures built up from seconds, thirds, and fourths, polytonal and polymodal textures (between the melody and the accompaniment, or through the superposition of contrasting harmonic layers), diatonic clusters, or ascending and descending diatonic/chromatic chord progressions. The beginning – for example – introduces a rhythmic and harmonic *ostinato* accompaniment, built on the notes G-C-D (bars 1-9), which will be the support for the dance melody in C Lydian mode. The next harmonic structure (from bar 10) will be a four-note chord formed from the notes of a tetratonic scale (C-D-A-G). Even when the dance tune is in F Ionian, the harmonic accompaniment will be a chord formed from notes F-C-G (superposition of two perfect fifths, see bars 20-26) or Bb-D-F-A (major chord with major seventh built on the fourth grade of the F Ionian, see bars 35-41). The rhythmic, metric, and harmonic *ostinato* patterns in bars 27-33, 44-50, or 91-96 use the notes of a perfect fifth (D-A, respectively C-G) as a harmonic accompaniment to the folk-dance melody. Veress creates a chromatic and modulatory harmonic background with an ascending progression of perfect fifths (bars 113-114).

E.g. 11

folk dance melody

counter-motion of the melody

modal harmonic shift

cluster

progression of ascending fifths

contrasting harmonic layers

(stacc.)

cresc.

ff

Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 4. Dobbantós – Allegro vivace, contrapuntal melodic counter-motion, chord progression and harmonic shift (bars 111-115)

Between bars 115-122, there is another use of the perfect fifths: as an accompaniment of the last presentation of the dance tune, the composer superposes a perfect fifth (Eb-Bb, on the cellos and double basses) and a perfect fourth (F#-B, on violas and second violins) creating a dense acoustic sonority and a massive dissonance, not just between the melodic and harmonic layers, but even between the two inner harmonic layers.

E.g. 12

fragment of the dance melody in Acoustic mode

harmonic contrast (dissonance) between the two parallel harmonic and the melodic layers

cluster (B-C#-D-E-F#-A)

F#-B

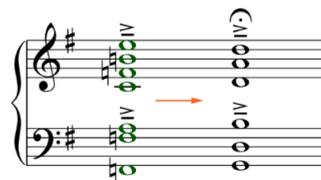
E♭-B♭

ff

Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 4. Dobbantós – Allegro vivace, Acoustic mode use in melody, and massive dissonance between the melodic and two harmonic layers (bars 120-123)

The two accentuated final chords of the movement indicate the end of the dance. This chord progression has a tension–release character and usually shows a V–I tonal relation. Due to the modal character of the piece, the closing G major, with an added second (G-A-B-D), is preceded by a chord built on its subtonic: this F major triad has an added augmented fourth and major seventh (F-A-B-C-E), and as an uncommon five-note chord has a strange, but still predominant function in this plagal cadence (Veress probably refers back to similar closure of the first movement).

E.g. 13



Sándor Veress: Four Transylvanian Dances, 4. Dobbantós – Allegro vivace, reduction: final plagal cadence (bars 127-128)

This dance suite is an eloquent example of representing musical ‘tradition’ (diatonicism, modal harmonic structures, tonal-functional system, melodiousness, dance rhythms, folk melodies, rhythmic and melodic *ostinato*, polyphonic writing techniques, common musical forms), and ‘innovation’ (dissonance treatment in polyphonic and imitative counterpoint, neomodality, mobile degrees, tonal-modal ambiguity, original acoustic structures, superposition of contrasting melodic and harmonic layers [polytonal and polymodal structures, harmonic mistuning], intense melodic and harmonic chromaticism, alternating time signatures, asymmetrical rhythms, polyrhythmic and polymetric textures, etc.). And all this in perfect synthesis.

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