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The thesis of my doctoral dissertation

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A Historical Ethnographic Analysis of the Hungarian Folk Musical Instruments

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Budapest, 2010
1. Thesis statement

Folk musical instruments are an important component of ethnography. In spite of their potent informative role regarding the various contexts of social history, folk musical instruments have been studied in a far lesser degree than other aspects of our material culture. The importance of a scholarly approach to folk musical instruments is confirmed by their relevance for cultural-historical and socio-historical research as well. Based on iconographical analysis we are able to gather information about the structure of the instruments, their material, their social context, and also about the nature of music played on them. The etymological study of the names of the instruments helps us trace their origins and map the interethnic relations that contributed to their territorial spreading.

Because the regional presence, the iconography and the etymology of folk musical instruments have been studied only piecemeal by our ethnomusicologists, the lack of trustworthy scholarly information unfortunately gave rise to many faulty opinions and believes according to which the origins of Hungarian folk musical instruments should be sought in ancient Asian culture. These views completely dismissed the interethnic relations between the neighbouring nations, which however, as my own research shows, are vital in the understanding of our folk musical heritage. Given the alleged Asian origin of the Hungarian people, of course it can be useful to look further back in history and farther than the European continent nevertheless, without examining the medieval European data and the folk musical instruments of our neighbouring countries we are not able to account for the historical changes that occurred in our folk musical heritage. The results of cultural historical research convince us that the study of cultural material should be pursued in a regional context rather than in a national one, since the circulation of culture does not stop at national borders. Regarding our material culture we have to take into account the geographical differences which influenced the customs of production and consumption, as well as the various social forms in which these artefacts were used. Therefore in order to examine and understand the Hungarian folk musical culture it is necessary to scrutinise the instruments of the neighbouring countries. In this respect the only common aspect that Hungary and its neighbours share is the lack of such an encompassing comparative study of folk musical instruments.
2. Methodology
Applying the methods of historical ethnography have proven to be very efficient tools in understanding interethnic analogies, studying archive sources and mapping our recent material. In addition to this I used the methods of ethnographic cartography so as to explain historical developments, regional specificities, and interethnic contacts. We are able to gain a comprehensive picture about the history of a specific type of instrument by applying both the methods of the historical-ethnography and of ethnographic cartography. Further I investigated the instrumental culture of the neighbouring peoples, the historical material of the different European nations and, given the Asian origins of the Hungarians, I also paid attention to the Inner Asian archaeological findings and the current musical instruments of that region as well.

The underdevelopment of the historical study of our folk musical instruments can be explained by the vague definition regarding the field of competence of the various branches of folklore studies. Originally it was the task of the folklore scholars to investigate instrumental melodies, while the European ethnography was responsible for the study of the structure and making of the instruments. However, ethnography was only interested in musical instruments as far as they could be seen as forms of the peasant way of life. Therefore horns and wooden horns have been regarded as practical tools, while the duct flutes and pipes have been treated as professional accessories. The melody-centric analysis of the ethnomusicology on the other hand, paid very little if any attention to the history of the instruments, or to their regional distribution. Neither were the written sources of the Ethnologic Archive of the Ethnographic Museum ever properly researched. The rich instrumental material of the Hungarian public collections were also neglected and they have never been submitted to a thorough comparative morphologic assessment.

Very significant aspects of the comparative research of the history of ethnographic objects are the analysis of historical source and morphological enquiries. Because without a proper investigation of the sources and the morphological characteristics of the various types of instruments we are not able to form a clear picture of their territorial and chronological spreading, my dissertation endeavours to fill in this gap in the current state of the ethnographic research by focusing primarily on the regional distribution and interethnic
contacts. Thus the main aim of my thesis is to subject the folk musical instruments of Hungary to a scholarly scrutiny by paying attention both to ethnographic analogies and interethnic contacts.

Ethnographic research based on linguistic principles that characterised the Romantic period, did not pay any attention to the original and adapted cultural heritage of the ethnic minorities speaking the languages of the neighbouring nations. During the proceedings of the Atlas of the Hungarian Ethnography the lemmas were chosen in a way to represent only the culture of the Magyars. Contrary to such works, my aim has been to include the culture of the Magyars and other ethnic groups living in Hungary, as well as the international and interethnic contacts that influenced the distribution and development of the folk musical instruments.

When investigating the collections of the Hungarian museums I have been using the methods of the cartographic ethnography and European ethnography and I have been focusing on the historicity and geographical spreading of the folk musical instruments, instead of examining the repertory, the musical characteristics or the playing techniques as advocated by the folklorists. More often than not, the poor state of the instruments in the musea does not make possible to produce sound with them. For example, the string instruments in these collections, rarely have all their strings preserved, thus the majority of these instruments can provide us information only about the number of the strings they originally possessed. But very often, in the case of the zithers even the number of the strings is impossible to determine, because when a string-pin was loosened, it was often replaced by a new one which however, was fixed next to the old hole. Thus we are faced with many holes on the instruments, but these are no indicators of the original number of the strings. Moreover, when we scrutinise the material of the museum collections, we have to remind ourselves that it is barely possible to define the tonality or the structure of the melodies played on these instruments which have not been used for ages. The scales played on such a museum item are dead string of sounds, from which a folk musician arbitrarily chose only some for his or her melodies. In addition, in the case of the aerophone type of instruments it is impossible to decide whether the folk musician used the cross-holding, the partly covered finger aperture, or the cross blowing playing technique. The idiophone and membranophone musical instruments stored on musea can also
provide us very little information about the nature of music played on them. Taking all these factors in consideration we could stipulate that the exact research of the folk musical instruments found in museum collections can be carried out by a comparative morphological investigation instead of a pure ethnomusicological melody-centred research.

Due to the amount of the examined museum objects (1015 folk musical instruments), the range of the scholarly written material about these instruments, and the limit of the length of a doctoral dissertation, I have defined as instruments only those objects whose main function was to be played as musical instruments. Among the typological theoretical systems currently in use, I have chosen for the most widely used and highly regarded Sachs-Hornbostel systematization. Therefore the table of content and the structure of my dissertation also reflects the principles of the international scholarly works applying the systematization of Sachs-Hornbostel.

I give a short overview of the semantic development of the term folk musical instrument, as well as the denotations of some other terms related to this, such as the notion of national instrument, and the cultivation and preservation of national heritage. The authoritative English and German scholarly works make us aware that it is time to reconsider and replace the old, vernacular words referring to the instruments or to their parts used in the Hungarian terminology, because these are often misleading. On the other hand, at other occasions, I tried to avoid the ambiguous verbatim translations of the foreign terminology and to replace them with a more adequate Hungarian word. My aim was to create a jargon in Hungarian that reflects the local peculiarities but at the same time is compatible with the international terminology currently in use.

3. Sources
For examining the geographical distribution of the vernacular material culture, we have to systematically investigate a large amount of regionally grouped material. In order to be able to precisely localise and cover this regional distribution I documented and processed in my dissertation the ethnographic collection of instruments of thirty Hungarian museums, and I scrutinised the material Ethnologic Archive of the Ethnographic Museum. By interpreting the gathered information with the methods of the cartography I pursued to assemble a corpus
that could be used by the maps of a new Hungarian Ethnographic Atlas, as the old atlas does not contain any data about the distribution of the types of folk musical instruments. Since the ethnographic material of the musea and the description of the Ethnological Archive of the Ethnographic Museum are dominated by data referring to the twentieth century, I decided to reach back to earlier periods and study the material of the etymological dictionaries, ethnographic and literary descriptions, as well as the iconographic representations of these musical instruments.

One of the principles of the cartographic method is to encompass the most important elements of the research for the sake of the comparative analysis. For this purpose an overview of the basic characteristics of the instruments – such as their form, place, time, function and social content – is needed for the study of the historical and ethnographic phenomena. Therefore the analysis of the following elements played a significant role in my dissertation: typology, archaeological and iconographic data, written sources, the etymology of the names of the instruments, current ethnographic analogies, and the findings of social ethnography when studying the use and function of the instruments.

I have scrutinised the Inner Asian material because of the oriental roots of the Magyars, the Greek and Roman sources because of the European embeddedness of the Hungarian culture, and the Islamic iconographies because of our encounter with this culture under the one and a half centuries long Turkish occupation. Because of the popularity of the theories connecting the Hungarian culture to Mesopotamian and Egyptian culture, I also paid attention to some publications claiming our relatedness to these cultures, just to conclude that it is impossible to support such theories with any kind of scholarly evidence.

For studying the regional and local distribution of the instruments the abundance and quality of the collection, as well as the helpfulness of the staff members were the most important factors in choosing the musea in which I gathered my material. The collections of these musea reflect the interest of their curators. It is also worth mentioning that the leading principles in putting together these collections were the representation of the largest possible variety of the instruments and their rarity. The emphasis on the local peculiarities and locally used instruments were hardly ever considered as important guidelines for creating a collection. Because my research focuses on local peculiarities and regional
distribution, I dismissed the private collections containing a large number of instruments, because their principles of collecting was focused on curiosities, and the commercial nature of their purchase can hardly be regarded as suitable for a scholarly investigation of regional spreading. In the ethnographic collections of the musea the place of the collection is mentioned in the catalogues, thus when these descriptions do not provide information about the exact place of the making of these instruments, we have to be content with the locality where they were found or collected.

4. Conclusions

We might stipulate that the folk musical instruments in Hungary, as other objects of our material culture, have been subjected to continuous change and development. This change had often been influenced by various fashion trends, contact with the neighbouring peoples, and a specific inner evolution. The oldest group of the folk musical instruments are represented by the so-called signal instruments, like different sorts of horns. The centuries long presence of these instruments could be explained by the fact that their role did not change and they did not need to become musically refined, since their primary function was not musical, but functional.

Our knowledge about the musical instruments of the early and late medieval times is very scarce, as little information has been preserved about them. We might assume that there were instruments in use of which we do not know anything and which disappeared in time without leaving any trace. Some other ancient instruments from the time of the settlement of the Magyars in Pannonia or from the Árpádian Age also vanished as they were no more used, and they could be traced back only in the etymology of some similar instruments of the later times.

As the structure of the villages and the medieval society changed during the Turkish occupation, so did the folk musical culture too. Later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the ethnic composition of the country changed significantly, as Slavic groups, Romanians and Germanic peoples settled on the territory of Hungary. As a consequence of these sociological developments, new types of folk musical instruments appeared which were partly brought in simultaneously by the settling ethnic groups, and partly imported later from their
country of origin. Hungary, being at the crossing roads of East and West, incorporated cultural material coming from both directions. Nevertheless, occidental borrowings and their oriental mediation became the standard practice. This can be explained by the western contacts and interests of the dominant social classes, whose developed material cultural artefacts were copied by the middle-class, and which was later transferred and transformed by the peasant culture.

The material culture had been unaffected by the idea of the so-called preservation of the cultural heritage, as it can be observed by the study of the history of the objects and the descriptions of the Ethnological Archive of the Ethnographic Museum. Depending on the financial situation, everybody was trying to purchase modern tools which were more functional and easier to use. This is a general trend that characterises the folk musical instruments as well. Even the signal-instruments, whose function did not change, were subjected to the same tendency, when their manufacturing cost more time and craft than the cheaper pieces mass-produced in the factories.

Conferences Attended:
April 2002, Orosháza (Hungary), Conference on the Souther Plains Region (Hungary); conference paper on the folk instruments of the Southern Plains
June 2005, Budapest, conference on the Relationship of Literature, the Fine Arts and Music in 19th and 20th Century Hungary; conference paper on folk music, musicians and folk instruments

Publications:


2010: The Hurdy-Gurdy. Bearing the burden of the fidelity to the Alföld. Festschriften in honour of the 75th birthday of Ferenc Szabó pp.103-112. Orosháza