

There has been a lot of cheap wit expended on "folk song" composers. The matter seems to boil down to two accusations: First that it is "cheating" to make use of folk-song material. This is really nothing more than the old complaint of the vested interests who are annoyed when anyone drinks a glass of pure water which he can get free, rather than a glass of beer which will bring profit to the company. This appears to involve a moral rather than an artistic question; from the point of view of musical experience it seems to me that so long as good music is made it matters very little how it is made or who makes it. If a composer can, by tapping the sources hidden in folk song, make beautiful music, he will be disloyal to his art if he does not make full use of such an avenue of beauty.

The second accusation is made by people who affect to scorn what is "folksy" because it does not come within the ken of their airless smuggeries, because it does not require any highly-paid teachers to inculcate it, or the purchase of text-books with a corresponding royalty to the author. It is really a case of the vested interests once again.

Why should music be "original"? The object of art is to stretch out to the ultimate realities through the medium of beauty. The duty of the composer is to find the *mot juste*. It does not matter if this word has been said a thousand times before as long as it is the right thing to say at that moment. If it is *not* the right thing to say, however unheard of it may be, it is of no artistic value. Music which is unoriginal is so, not simply because it has been said before, but because the composer has not taken the trouble to make sure that this was the right thing to say at the right moment.

My intercourse with Cecil Sharp [1859–1924, folk-song collector and propagandist] crystallized and confirmed what I already vaguely felt about folk song and its relationship to the composer's art. With Sharp it was a case of "Under which King, Bezonian? Speak, or die." You had to be either pro folk song or anti folk song and I came down heavily on the folk song side.

In 1904 I undertook to edit the music of a hymn-book. This meant two years with no "original" work except a few hymn-tunes. I wondered then if I were "wasting my time." The years were passing and I was adding nothing to the sum of musical invention. But I know now that two years of close association with some of the best (as well as some of the worst) tunes in the world was a better musical education than any amount of sonatas and fugues.

Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music, and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 189–90.

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The Cataclysm

The complete disruption of European cultural life brought about in the aftermath of the First World War is well described in an essay by Béla Bartók. A sadly persistent twentieth-century theme is introduced: the buffeting art has suffered amid the unstable and oft-times totalitarian political conditions that plagued Europe in recent times. This led certain composers all the more resolutely to renounce public, "establishmentarian" musical outlets, and was a prime factor in turning many of the century's

foremost musical minds away from the large forms like symphony and opera, and toward more exclusive and private "chamber" media. Bartók is a case in point: once past his student years he never wrote a symphony, and all his stage works were composed by the time he wrote this article. Thereafter his reputation was to rest on his piano music, his string quartets, and his works for chamber orchestra. This development, of course, has widened the rift between serious music and the mass audience.

Before the war Budapest had a comparatively flourishing musical life. Apart from the performances of the three principal institutions—the High School of Music, the National Opera and the Philharmonic Society (consisting of the Opera orchestra)—a large number of concerts by foreign and home talent stilled the public's craving for good music. Once even Debussy himself came to act as pianist at a Debussy evening. The Vienna orchestral societies were wont to visit us, Richard Strauss's unforgettable conducting being among the chief attractions of these tours. In 1912 even the Russian Ballet was seen here, producing among other things Stravinsky's *Firebird*.

The outbreak of the war naturally brought certain interruptions in its train. At first only the artists hailing from Entente countries held aloof, but since 1919 nearly all foreigners have shunned us. The Opera House remained closed during the season 1914–15. Although it was opened in 1915–16, it had to forgo the assistance of its best conductor, Egisto Tango, of Italian nationality, owing to political intrigues. All these drawbacks were followed in 1916–17 by a very decided improvement. Signor Tango at last was graciously pardoned for happening to be an Italian and enabled to continue his work, which had been so beneficial in every way, and Ernst von Dohnányi [1877–1960], the most eminent Hungarian pianist, left Berlin to take up permanent residence in Budapest. [Tango] was planning the performance of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* when the revolution broke out in 1918; all connections with other countries were interrupted for a very long time, and it thus became impossible to procure the necessary music.

The Socialists, who then came into power, were very progressively inclined toward all matters pertaining to art, and this soon found its expression in the musical life of the city. The oldest instructors at the High School, no longer able to do justice to their posts, were pensioned and Hungary's two eminent musicians, Dohnányi and Kodály, were entrusted with the management of the institution and the carrying into effect of all those reforms of Dohnányi's which hitherto had been blocked.

Then came the month of March, 1919, and with it the Communist dictatorship. In principle this regime favored the progressive home talent even more than its predecessor. A musical directorate was founded (Dohnányi, Kodály and Bartók) and to its care was committed the guidance of the entire musical life. The artists mentioned, although not avowed Communists, accepted this mission for several reasons: on the one hand they hoped for an improvement of general conditions, and on the other, were desirous of preventing any acts of force that might endanger musical life, and of cutting the ground from under the feet of ungifted musical parvenus.

Unfortunately, the Socialist rule as such was a grave disappointment, and that of the Communists even more so. From November, 1918, onward an absolute delirium to call into being "monumental" institutions seized certain sectors, spreading continuously until it almost took on maniacal proportions, and without any deference to the sparse material resources available. The Soviet revealed its utter ignorance of any planned action in establishing the general and fundamental points according to which

the reform of musical instruction, concert life and the publication of musical works were to find their solution. The Trades Union of Musicians (artists) and Musical Craftsmen (both classes were coupled together in one union!) stubbornly—albeit unsuccessfully—attempted, with the backing of the proletariat, to launch its most untalented but noisiest claimants to fame into leading positions. Protectionism and bureaucracy flourished as never before. The Soviet was just as narrow-minded as the former bourgeois administrations had been. Serious and fruitful work was an utter impossibility under such conditions, and a feeling of relief was general when the dictatorship collapsed on July 29, 1919.

But—out of the frying pan into the fire! In the period of conservative reaction that followed, Dohnányi and Kodály were dismissed from their positions as heads of the High School; all their reforms were annulled, the best instructors swept aside, and all this under the false and thin pretense of routing out Bolshevism. Egisto Tango's contract with the Opera was rescinded, and he was allowed to enter the service of Romania as director of the new Romanian National Opera at Cluj. His last performance here (and at the same time the only outstanding musical event during the Communist era) was the new staging of Verdi's *Otello* in a wonderful presentation in May, 1919.

Thus at the present moment—the end of February, 1920—the High School stands deprived of its best instructors, the Opera House of its only good conductor. Complete demoralization reigns at the latter institution since the autumn; it has even happened that the conductor had to interrupt a public performance and start in all over again! The repertory is a hackneyed one, everlastingly *Tannhäuser*, *Carmen*, *Butterfly*, and so forth. New works were unknown, barring two unimportant, local one-act productions. But far from being censured for the loss of Tango or for the present inartistic regime, Emil Abrányi, the general director of opera, has merely been accused of possessing too little-marked a sense of "Christian Nationalism"! He was, in all seriousness, accused of having engaged several new Jewish members and of having performed two local works by Jewish composers. For with us at present it is no longer a question of whether a singer, an artist, a savant is of good repute in his especial class of work, but whether he is a Jew or a man of liberal tendencies. For these two sections of humanity are to be excluded as far as possible from all public activity.

Béla Bartók, "Hungary in the Throes of Reaction," *The Musical Courier*, LXXX, no. 18 (April 1920), 42–43.

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Between the Wars

This remarkable survey by the American composer Roger Sessions (1896–1985) was published in 1933. Sessions saw music in his time as passing through a "crisis" brought about by the breakdown of the common musical language of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He distinguishes three basic trends: "objective" neoclassical ideals; "subjective" twelve-tone composition; and "popular" or "functional" styles that represented an attempt—sometimes spontaneous, sometimes coerced by political authorities—to reestablish ties with the public at large. Sessions leaves no doubt as to where his own sympathies lie, and this is one of the most valuable aspects of his