

Race purity in music

Béla Bartók

There is much talk these days, mostly for political reasons, about the purity and impurity of the human race, the usual implication being that purity of race should be preserved, even by means of prohibitive laws. Those who champion this or that issue of the question have probably studied the subject thoroughly (at least, they should have done so), spending many years examining the available published material or gathering data by personal investigation. Not having done that, perhaps I cannot support either side, may even lack the right to do so. But I have spent many years studying a phenomenon of human life considered more or less important by some dreamers commonly called students of folk music. This manifestation is the spontaneous music of the lower classes, peasants especially. In the present period of controversy over racial problems, it may be timely to examine the question: "Is racial impurity favourable to folk (i.e. peasant) music or not?" (I apply the word racial here to the music itself, and not to the individuals creating, preserving or performing the music.)

The principal scene of my research has been Eastern Europe. As a Hungarian I naturally began my work with Hungarian folk music, but soon extended it to neighbouring territories – Slovakian, Ukrainian, Romanian. Occasionally I have even made jumps into more remote countries (in North Africa and Asia Minor) to gain a broader outlook. Besides this "active" research work dealing with problems on the spot, I have made "passive" investigations, studying material collected and published by others.

From the very beginning I have been amazed by the extraordinary wealth of melody types existing in the territory under investigation in Eastern Europe. As I pursued my research, this amazement increased. In view of the comparatively small size of the countries – numbering forty to fifty million people – the variety in folk music is really marvellous! Comparison of the folk music of these peoples made it clear that there was a continuous give-and-take of melodies, a constant crossing and recrossing which had persisted through centuries.

I must now stress a very important fact. This give-and-take is not so simple as many of us might believe. When a folk melody passes the language frontier of a people, sooner or later it will be subjected to certain changes determined by environment, and especially by differences of language. The greater

dissimilarity between the accents, inflections, metrical conditions, syllabic structure and so on, of two languages, the greater the changes that fortunately may occur in the “emigrated” melody. I say “fortunately” because this phenomenon itself engenders and further increases in its number of types and sub-types. I have used the term “crossing and recrossing”. Now, the “recrossing” generally takes place this way. A Hungarian melody is taken over, let us say, by the Slovaks and “Slovakised”; this Slovakised form may then be retaken by the Hungarians and so “re-Magyarised”. But – and again I say fortunately – this re-Magyarised form will be different from the original Hungarian.

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Numerous factors explain the almost uninterrupted exchange of melodies: social conditions, deliberate or forced migrations and colonisations of individuals or peoples. As everybody knows, Eastern Europe (except for the Russians, Ukrainians and Poles) is inhabited chiefly by small peoples, each numbering about ten million or even less, and there are no insurmountable geographical obstacles at the frontiers. Some districts have a completely mixed population, the result of war devastation which has been followed by colonisation to fill the gaps. Continued contact between these peoples has been quite easy. And there have been conquests (for instance, of the Balkans by the Turks). Conquerors and conquered have mixed and reciprocally influenced their respective languages and folk music.

Contact with foreign material not only results in an exchange of melodies, but – and this is still more important – it gives an impulse to the development of new styles. At the same time, the more or less ancient styles are generally well preserved, too, which still further enhances the richness of the music. The trend toward transformation of foreign melodies prevents the internationalisation of the music of these peoples. The material of each, however heterogeneous in origin, receives its marked individuality. The

situation of folk music in Eastern Europe may be summed up thus: as a result of uninterrupted reciprocal influence upon the folk music of these peoples there is an immense variety and a wealth of melodies and melodic types. The “racial impurity” finally attained is definitely beneficial.

And now let us look at the opposite picture. If you visit an oasis in North Africa, for instance Biskra or one of its surrounding villages, you will hear folk music of a rather unified and simple structure which is, nevertheless, highly interesting. Then if you go, let us say, as far as fifteen hundred miles to the East and listen to the folk music of Cairo and its surroundings, you will hear exactly the same types of music. I don't know very much about the migrations and history of the Arabic-speaking inhabitants of North Africa, but I should say that such uniformity in so large a territory indicates that there have been comparatively few migrations and changes of population. Also there is another factor. The Arabic people in North Africa many times outnumber those small peoples of Eastern Europe; they live in a far larger territory and are not intermingled with peoples of different race and language.

It is obvious that if there remains any hope for the survival of folk music in the near or distant future (a rather doubtful outcome considering the rapid intrusion of higher civilisation into the more remote parts of the world), an artificial erection of Chinese walls to separate peoples from each other bodes no good for its development. A complete separation from foreign influences means stagnation: well assimilated foreign impulses offer possibilities of enrichment.

BÉLA BARTÓK – WAY AND WORK

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