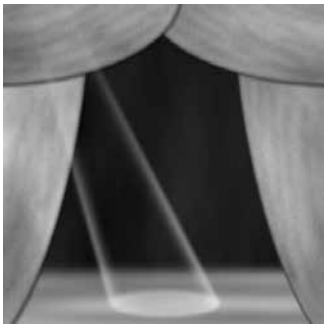

# Performer Corner

## The Hungarian Táncház Movement

by Colleen Bertsch

The richest string music in the world comes from Transylvania, Bukovina, and Wallachia. It is the music from these mystical-sounding places that inspired Bartók and Kodály. In Hungarian folk music, they found the key to stretch Western tonal music to its limits, just before bursting into atonality. There they also found the ingredients that discern culture, pass traditions, and bond people across generations.

This is a side-step from my usual article, as I generally like to uncover and share the stories of our performing co-workers in the Minnesota string world. But in this case I can't help myself. From time to time our beloved Cedar Cultural Center in Minneapolis brings to our front door musicians from the difficult-to-reach Carpathians (Romania) and westward from Hungary with an astonishingly low audience turnout. Such was the case last October with the appearance of the Carpathian Folk Quartet which was headed by a virtuosic young violinist from Transylvania and who was backed by some of Budapest's most seasoned musicians on viola/kontra, cimbalom (a concert hammered dulcimer), and upright bass. My intent is not to give an account of their performance, which was a flashy mix of classical standards and village folk music, but rather to give the reader an idea of what has been happening in the string performance world in Hungary and Romania. In doing so, I hope to spark your interest and continue the dialogue on where else we might travel with string music.

Teka performing outside the Hungarian Cultural Museum in Budapest

What has been happening just west of the Carpathians is a movement called Táncház (dance house) that was born in the mid 1970s. Previous to that date, Communist ideals had all but eradicated authentic Hungarian traditions. The 1956 Hungarian Revolt against the Soviet Union was a call for political autonomy, but it also sparked the Magyar's desire to reclaim their lost culture. In 1969-70 a television company aired "Repulj Pava," the first ever folk song contest where the audience mailed in their ballot to vote for their favorite contestant. The people's reaction could not have been anticipated, but the wild popularity proved the country's pride in their identity and music's power to bridge skipped generations. That single event spurred an interest among musicians and scholars who began working in earnest on the preservation of their music and dance traditions — work started by Bartók and Kodály that had lain mostly silent for half a century.

One of the leading characters in the Táncház movement was violinist Béla Halmos, a young contestant in the televised competition. He did not win. The judges who made the final decision could not bring themselves to award a young man with such long hair. But Halmos took the experience farther by traveling, eventually multiple times to what is now Romania to learn at the feet of the forgotten village masters. These men (always men) are still today considered to be the authentic keepers of Hungarian music and dance. They are encyclopedias of tunes, ornamentations, dances, and variations according to village and ethnic group. They are the sole entertainment for every wedding, funeral, namesake day, and pig killing, events that sometimes last up to three days with hardly a break in their playing. They never write a tune down and they never forget. Most of the men Halmos studied with have passed away. Their sons and nephews are the new village masters, but their numbers are shrinking.

Halmos and other young musicians, including the now famous band Muzsikás and their students Pál Havasréti and György Lányi (who would later form the band Téka), were quickly at work taking trips to Romania to learn their ancestor's traditions and recreating it in clubs and concert halls in Budapest. Of this period, Havasréti said, "…nationalistic values were dangerous and unpredictable for the government … They were very careful with poets, musicians, who were visiting the dance houses at that time. We were just tolerated as children." [1] These "children" clad in bell bottoms and shaggy long hair made a unanimous agreement on an important point: to strive for authenticity in traditional Hungarian music in order to preserve and respect what had been taught them by the masters.

There was also an agreement on a second point: the importance of teaching and passing on their knowledge to the next generation. Such was the culmination of the Táncház movement. At every Táncház (there is at least one happening somewhere in Budapest on any given night of the week September–May) there is a beginner area for dancing and a dance leader to help the uninitiated. Musicians are encouraged to sit along side or behind the band to play along. In the off-season, the musicians spend their time teaching at Hungarian music and dance camps that have sprouted up across Europe (but mostly Hungary and Romania) and Canada. "Folk music is not the subject of folk music collection," Halmos said. "It

is a joy; it is emotion. We don't collect folk dance so that a few scholars make a living at it … we have to bring it back to where it belongs. What is of value is that which we create together, when we are together." [2]

Recordings of Hungarian folk music are difficult to find in stores in Minnesota. However, you might be able to find Muzsikás' *The Bartók Album* (with Márta Sebestyén), which includes field recordings made by Bartók himself. After the field recording track, Muzsikás plays the tune as a village band and, in some cases, performs Bartók's classical treatment of the same tune. Their long-time vocal collaborator Márta Sebestyén also has many solo CDs that are widely distributed and features some of the best Hungarian musicians.

To order CDs online, PassiOn Music (www.passiondiscs.com) has the widest selection available listed in English. Some Táncház bands to look for are: Téka, Ökrös, Dűvő and Tükrös. If you would like to hear the source directly, some village master names to look for are Sándor "Neti" Fodor and Béla Koboda, both from regions within Transylvania.

For a free sound sample of Hungarian folk music, go to Muzsikás' website (www.muzsikas.hu) or Dűvő's website (www.duvo.hu) and allow enough time for the homepage to download the automatic music sample.

1 Ian Morrison, interview with Pál Havasréti of Téka Ensemble, PassiOn Music (www.passiondiscs.com).

2 Sue Fekete, interview with Béla Halmos of Kalamajka Ensemble, PassiOn Music (www.passiondiscs.com).

*A former public school string educator in the Twin Cities area, Colleen Bertsch now maintains a private violin studio in northeast Minneapolis. She performs with the Ethnic Dance Theatre and is the fiddle player for Orkestar Bez Ime, an international folk-dance band that specializes in Balkan and eastern European music. You can visit their website at www.rogaria.com.*