



PERFORMER CORNER

The Heartbeat of the Táncház

by Colleen Bertsch

You have never heard a rhythm section like this before. One bass and one viola, pulses intertwined non-stop the entire night for dancing couples to dig their heels into. The duo creates a momentum for you to spin to, sway then stomp, and turn the world under your feet. It is a big job. If one of the two musicians misses a beat, the entire táncház collapses. As a follow up to the winter article *The Táncház Movement*, I would like to share this aspect of bass and viola playing virtually unknown in the United States.

Pál Havasréti is the bassist for Téka, one of the top táncház bands of Hungary. Pál's childhood friend György Lányi is Téka's kontra player, that is, a rhythm violist. Classically trained, both men became interested in folk music in their late teens and traveled to Romania to collect tunes and learn the styles that are authentic to each individual village. Not unlike teenagers starting a rock band with friends in their parent's garage, György and Pál started a Hungarian folk band.

Thirty years later, Pál is now a leading ambassador of Hungarian folk music as an organizer of the Budapest Folk Music and Dance Festival held annually the last weekend of March. This event grew so large that it moved from a sprinkling of small taverns and concert halls around town, to taking over the entire Budapest Sports Arena for a three-day weekend. Most recently, Pál was appointed as faculty in the Ferenc Liszt Academy's new Folk Music Department, which will host its first class this fall, 2007.

Since his foray into folk music study, György Lányi has produced and released field recordings of village master musicians. His CD of Ádám "Icsán" István from Szék, Transylvania is hailed as an important piece of Hungarian folk music documentation. He also is known as a bőrduda (bagpipe) player and teaches at workshops and festivals around the world. Both men are large figures at FONÓ, which is a recording and production studio, táncház (dance house) hall, and CD store in Budapest that promotes traditional music of all kinds includ-

ing jazz and blues.

The bass and kontra in Hungarian folk music is the rhythm section for dancers to groove to. Depending on the region, the playing style, and even the instruments themselves, can be primitive or highly developed. A good example of this vast difference can be seen in comparing the regions of Mezőség and Kalotaszeg, both in Transylvania, Romania. A traditional bass in Mezőség (specifically in the village of Magyarpalatka where the famous Kodoba family of musicians live) has only three gut strings: A – D – G. But the A string is tuned up to a C and is the only string used for all of the



György Lányi on kontra and Pál Havasréti on bass, from the band Téka.

music. The D and G strings only offer structural support for the bridge or as a quick replacement should the "C" string break in the middle of playing. The folk bow used is club-like, shorter than a classical bow and made out of hard wood with no flexibility whatsoever. This instrument produces a "whump-whump" sound that is earthy and heavy. In nearby Kalotaszeg however, classical instruments and German bows are used for the fast moving bass lines. Although similar rhythms are used in the two regions, Kalotaszeg music drives forward more with virtuosity with the spring of the classical bow and wound strings.

The kontra, or rhythm viola, is a secret to Western music. It is not a terribly old

instrument as it made its first appearance in Transylvania in the first half of the 1900s, but it is a staple in a vast amount of Hungarian, Romanian, and Ukrainian folk music. Usually a 15 to 16 inch viola, the bridge is filed flat and re-notched for three strings: G – D – A with the A being one whole step higher than the G rather than a ninth. It is held on the chest vertically rather than on the shoulder horizontally. Because of this setup, the instrument only produces chords. The "violin" in a Hungarian band must become a master off beats and chord inversions.

In the folk music of Transylvania, the melody from the violin is secondary. People

cannot dance without the bass and kontra. As a section, these two instruments play either rhythmically in unison or bounce off one another with down beats and off beats. One rhythm that is often played in unison is "dűvő," a slow-fast-slow bow in one long

down or up stroke. This pulsing rhythm helps slow dancing couples to sway side to side with a steady swinging momentum. In a csárdás, the bass provides a downbeat foundation while the kontra plays only off beats to create a frenzied, ramped-up drive not unlike techno beats at a disco.

On my visits to Budapest's táncházok, I witnessed bands play five or six dance cycles in one evening, each cycle being from a different region (and therefore different playing style) and each cycle being approximately one hour of continuous music without pause. I have never seen harder working musicians than these dance bands playing for the sake of community. I never heard a dancer complain about tempi and I never

heard a dropped beat. I did hear the rhythm
and I danced.

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