

All-State: String Bands in Foreign Lands

presented by Colleen Bertsch

reported by Janet Anderson & Cassandra Herold

Colleen Bertsch presented an interesting collection sampling various types of traditional music from Romania. She gathered much of her material during a ten-week trip to Hungary and Romania to collect field recordings and documentary photographs of musicians still playing their village folk music. During this trip, Colleen traveled to sixteen small villages.

You need to have soul to play this music!

In Romania, music is a tradition that is passed down from male generation to male generation. Romanian, Hungarian and Gypsy are the mix of the languages in Transylvania. In the folk music tradition there are the village homes and dance houses for self-entertainment. These musicians do not read music—they have learned their skills from their father or “uncle,” and then in turn pass their knowledge down. There is a strong music and dance correlation as well as singing. Bartok and Kodaly singled out the idea of major and minor thirds in folk music and this is typical in Romanian music. Microtones and ornaments also define their music. Some have their own ornaments.

The string band consists of some combination of these instruments: violin with standard tuning; viola or kontra (3 strings,

G-D-A, where the A is a G string tuned up a second and a filed-down bridge to play chords/rhythm); bass (3 gut strings, no E); and accordion to provide supporting rhythm, bass and chords. Each clip of music was from a different area, and presented a slightly different ensemble grouping. Each village has a Hungarian, Romanian and Gypsy name and the culture is literally mixed up.

These village people of Magyarpetele play after working with their hands all day in the field with oxen and horses. They will play for hours with these essential elements: soul, rhythm, technique and notes with a strong emphasis on the soul component. In one musical example, the violin played melody and the violist or kontra played rhythmic chords. The music goes on in unending style with running notes and chords played with high energy without pause! As to what key they are in is not always obvious with shifting between major and minor resulting in obscuring the root.

The instruments are found, traded, cut down and usually in bad shape. The technique of vibrato is a cross between trill and vibrato. In the village of Ture, the accordion is added to the ensemble. The music includes many parallelisms, trills,

ornamentation, heavy chords and a continuous moving melody. The style changes abruptly from heavy gypsy romantic, to lighter faster melodies with offbeat chording accompaniment.

In the village of Sarmasu, the ensemble is violin, kontra, accordion and bass. The players move from tune to tune effortlessly communicating with a nod of head, a pause, and off they are to another tune! Truly they are in-sync to each other.

In the village of Budesti, yet another style of group emerges with a violin, kontra and bass. The chords were legato, the bass was playing even quarter notes underneath the running melody in the listening example, giving a well balanced, more even sound. Sliding on the fingerboard is unique to this village's sound.

Every village, no matter how close, had it's own distinctive style of music slightly varied, with endless knowledge of tunes and endurance that would put any of us to shame.

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