

## MAGYAR EXPLORERS

BY ADJORAN OTVOS

**T**WO unquestionably unique figures in the musical life of Central Europe are Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. Their contributions to modern music are the outstanding assets today of the culture of the Magyars.

What singular importance they possess is apparent when they are recognized as the first true representatives of Hungarian music. The fact is that, preposterous as it seems at first statement, their predecessors were either Hungarians but not composers of scope and significance, or else they were composers but not Hungarians.

Brahms, Liszt and Sarasate, whose names have always been associated with Hungarian music, employed more or less obsolete Hungarian airs and arranged them in a more or less Hungarian manner.

On the other hand, writers of popular and acknowledgedly Hungarian national songs belong to that type of composers who are best classified in America as "song-writers." Though the most popular Hungarian music has been written by them, nobody would think of calling Dankó Pista, Fráter Loránd, Dóczi József or Béla Zerkovitz composers in the largest meaning of the word. Lucrative as is the profession of writing popular music—and nowhere has it been more so than in Hungary—it is obvious even to that war-sick country, which cannot insure the needs of such poverty-stricken but inspired musicians as Bartók and Kodály, that these latter stand apart, taking their place in the sphere of the true artist.

Nor have they been content to achieve fame as individual creators. Bizarrely fanfaronaded over Europe as innovators in the modern idiom, whose every new composition has added luster to their reputation as iconoclasts, Bartók and Kodály have accomplished a pioneer work of quite a different nature, an exploration

into the folk music of Hungary which has yielded a collection of historic significance, the most important and only authentic one made in that country.

Bartók, poor, and supported only by a scholarship he had recently won, started out in 1905 on an individual investigation of the music of his race. Spending a week with a friend in the country, he heard a servant singing, while at work, a tune quite different from the hybrid gypsy airs which pass as currency for Magyar music in Hungary and elsewhere. He contrived to conceal himself and, day after day, while the servant worked, recorded a number of songs whose primitive character he at once recognized. With this impetus he embarked on a tour which lasted over two years, as long as his money held out. On his journeys among the peasants he met Kodály who had set out on a similar mission of research. Without previous inkling of each other's aims they proceeded together, recording the ancient songs of the Magyars in the compilation which is famous today.

It was a heroic task, far more taxing than that of other explorers in folk music. For it should be understood that no people on earth are as unmusical as the Magyars.

Meeting in a convivial spirit they do not sing; they whoop it up. No one in Hungary has ever heard peasants singing quietly, much less in harmony. Each voice improvises its own variations. Every air is differently interpreted by different people. It requires a rare knack indeed, and courageous labor to trace one's way through this muddle of melody.



The union of Kodály and Bartók in an enterprise so scholarly is all the more remarkable in view of their differences in musical tendency and temperament.

Bartók, the greater innovator, a slight man, prematurely gray, of terrible nervous intensity, is reticent, taciturn and yet defiant. He was born in 1881 at Nagyszentmiklós, and entered the Academy of Music in Budapest at an early age, studying piano and

composition. From the outset he showed a capacity for absorbing only technical education, and displayed a remarkable individuality, even genius for trail-breaking. His very first suite, then regarded as daring, was ablaze with barbaric color, riotous with new rhythms.

Bartók's early music was closely akin to impressionism. To give it organic adhesion he employed every weapon of technical skill at his disposal, often cloaking shallow intrinsic values with extremely adroit external effects. Later he developed a perfect revelry of instrumental color. Rhythmic variety and complex chord combinations became increasingly important factors. Abandoning tonality, he introduced apparently irrelevant tonal bulks which lent his pattern a crudely picturesque effect.

Characteristic of Bartók's ever increasing output is his attitude of defiance, almost of spite. No sooner does a contemporary, Schoenberg or Stravinsky, introduce a new invention than Bartók brings forth one to top it. His second string quartet fairly hurls at Schoenberg a "Just for that!"



Kodály is in many ways Bartók's antithesis, a man of reserve, generally morose and even brusque. He is calm in appearance, with an almost Christ-like face. Born in 1882 at Kecskemét he too studied at the Budapest Academy and is at present the successor of Koessler there. He is by no means the ideal professor, lacking patience and pedantry, and believing moreover that the student should follow his own inclinations. Though ready to assist he refuses to guide.

In composition Kodály is no revolutionary. He is content to revise and improve on half a century of Magyar musical history. With a modern equipment he has managed to blend peculiarly Hungarian folk forms with Western musical culture. In no sense a destroyer, he chooses rather to weed out what is artificial.

In form he is clear and easily communicable; in rhythm, melody and harmony, unlabored. Not for him is the recording of great

levity or reckless carousal. His nature is disposed to melancholy, which, in his music, still conveys a sense of quiet power. He is not prolific, speaking only when his ideas are mature. Every bar of music is fastidiously made, and all his work bears a temperate quality.

Individual as they are in style and technique, Bartók and Kodály have sought and found one common inspiration. Today as in the past, folk song infuses new blood into music; gives it freshness and youth when it grows weary of artifice. But neither Kodály nor Bartók can be said to have taken music to the fount of folk song and dipped it there for baptism. Folk music, rather, has again been given a new life by the power of their art. Out of their most intricate orchestral cacophonies there shines forth today an occasional ancient, unalloyed melody, the most eloquent illustration of Magyar speech.

