

Understanding the Clarinet's Role in the Hungarian *Verbunkos*: Leó Weiner's *Peregi Verbunk* with a dash of Paprika

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Hungarian music is often a crowd favorite with its lively rhythms and exotic harmonies. Many classical composers, especially in nearby German speaking countries, were influenced by Hungarian folk music and Gypsy music. The most familiar Hungarian music comes from the tradition of the *verbunkos*, which will be the focus of this presentation. Leó Weiner's *Peregi Verbunk* is one of the most popular Hungarian works for clarinet. Knowledge of Hungarian folk music and Gypsy performance will aid in the performing and teaching of works like *Peregi Verbunk*. Much of the performance considerations will be drawn from the author's experience under the instruction of József Balogh, prominent Hungarian clarinetist in classical and folk styles.

Audience members will learn the cultural history of the *verbunkos*, its distinguishing musical characteristics, and its relationship to folk music and Gypsy performance style. A brief biography of Leó Weiner will be followed by an overview of *Peregi Verbunk*. The remainder of the presentation will demonstrate the connection of the *verbunkos* tradition to Weiner's work. Musical examples will be shown using PowerPoint, written handouts, and live performance on clarinet and piano.

Dancing has bound together Magyar customs and culture since ancient times. It probably began as inspired jumping and grew more sophisticated and organized as the culture did the same. Dancing is a way for men to show off their athletic skill and creativity in improvisation, while performing complex footwork and impressive leaps. Traditional men's dances may be done with implements of trade or weapons such as shepherds staves or barrel rings, swords or axes. Circle dances are the most common for

female dancers. Dance music does not generally have lyrics, but Hungarian dance often involves “dance words,” which are shouts and exclamations, sometimes little rhymes, in which dancers describe their elation in the dance, make jokes, or show off.

Hungarian music historian, Bence Szabolcsi claims that “everything known abroad since 1780 by the name of Hungarian music, consisted without exception of the music of the *verbunkos*.” The *verbunkos* was the source of the *style hongrois* used by art music composers who wanted to add an exotic flavor to their music. For example, Johannes Brahms’ *Hungarian Dances* WOO1, and Joseph Haydn’s Rondo all'ongarese’ of the *Piano Trio* h XV: 25 are derived from the *verbunkos*. *Verbunkos* was the chief material Liszt used for all of his Hungarian-influenced compositions.

The *verbunkos* was used as propaganda by the Austrians to cajole young peasant men into enlisting in the hussar army through passionate music and dance. The practice occurred from about 1720-1820 and was at its height around 1760. The word “*verbunkos*” came from the German *verbung*, meaning vow. *Verbung* later came to mean “enlistment” and “*verbunkos*” to mean the dance and later, the music for that dance.

Verbunkos has roots in traditional Hungarian peasant music, but it was played by hired Gypsy musicians. The Gypsies applied their own style to the music, with a resulting product that was distinctive from the original peasant tunes. The style became well known abroad as the national music of Hungary. The clarinet, along with its Hungarian folk relative the *tárogató*, was often used as a solo instrument in the recruiting dance, and remains a staple in present-day Gypsy bands. Because of the military origin, *verbunkos* music and dance have a stately martial character. Other traits will be discussed as well including the use of the Gypsy Scale, division into slow and fast

sections, use of *hallgató*, or free expressive melodies, rhythms from Hungarian speech, and the *cadence maygare* or *bokázó* cadence. Musical examples will accompany each of these traits, some will be written and others played from recorded music including Gypsy style Hungarian folk music, as well as *verbunkos*-inspired art music.

Leó Weiner (1855-1960) taught Chamber Music, Theory and Composition at the Budapest Academy of Music. Weiner was a contemporary of Bartók and Kodály, born in Budapest in 1885, but he was influenced by Bizet, Mendelssohn and Brahms. He was not attracted to Bartók's modernism, though he shared his nationalist interest in some works, using folk music sources collected by Bartók and Lajtha. Weiner's period of greatest folk music composition spanned from 1931 to 1951.

Weiner used the material from *Peregi Verbunk* in three published works. It began as a movement for a larger solo piano work, was later orchestrated, and finally arranged for clarinet or violin and piano in 1951. Later, the composer arranged it for woodwind quintet and for string quintet. *Peregi Verbunk* begins with an introduction, followed by three *verbunkos* tunes, which are then embellished with sweeping arpeggios in a variation, and further developed in an extended cadenza. A coda incorporating previous material concludes the piece.

In following with their musical training, American clarinetists often take more license with rubato than would have been traditionally done. In the Gypsy band, all performers must adhere to a strict rhythm, called *düvő*, played by the viola and bass. Rubato is used but the beat is never obscured. Following the description of *düvő*, an illustrative recorded musical example will be played.

The three tunes on which the entire piece is based will be considered individually. The presenter will demonstrate each tune on the clarinet in order to show how it can be performed in alignment with the Gypsy and *verbunkos* musical traditions. The variation section is typical of improvisatory *hallgató*. A recorded example will illustrate the way a Gypsy performer would improvise a variation on a theme with fast scales and arpeggios. A live example of excerpts from the variation section will demonstrate a performance with rubato, and another more closely resembling Gypsy *hallgató* playing. The cadenza, which was not a part of the original piano version, displays the virtuosity for which Gypsy violinists as well as clarinetists are well known. Because the soloist is alone here, there is less emphasis on a steady beat and rubato may be used freely. A few brief performed examples will demonstrate the use of themes embellished in the cadenza and additional characteristics of Gypsy performance style.

It is the presenter's hope, that audience members will gain a basic understanding of *verbunkos* music, the ability to recognize its influence in classical compositions, and the ability to apply more traditional performance practices in *Peregi Verbunk* and other clarinet works composed with the inspiration of Gypsy performance practice. Lists of additional Hungarian clarinet music, as well as recorded Hungarian folk music, will be included in the handout accompanying the presentation as suggestions for further study.

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