

Dance House:

European Models of Folk Music and Dance Revival in Urban Settings

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Abstract

At its inception in Hungary in the 1970s, the gatherings of young urban musicians at which they performed rural dance music for urban audiences had clearly political connotations. These gatherings, named Dance House or “Táncház” in Hungarian, were meant to be an alternative to the Soviet-style choreographed stage presentations of “folklore”. As the model spread to other European countries, the political overtones became either different or irrelevant as the gatherings became largely recognized as both learning and entertaining events for urbanites. This presentation first contextualizes the appearance of the Dance House in the words of some of its creators and practitioners. This is followed by an analytical overview of Dance House gatherings in various parts of Europe. The central part of the presentation provides a detailed examination of the application of the Hungarian model in Slovenia. Based on multifarious experiences with Dance House in Slovenia and other European countries, the paper ends up with suggestions on possible applications of this model and its variants in worldwide contexts.

Keywords: Táncház, Cultural, Society, Folk, Slovenia, Urban Revival, Edutainment

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Folk Music in European Settings

Following the views of the influential German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), many urban intellectuals throughout Europe accepted the notion that the soul of each national group lives in traditional forms of expression of its rural population.¹ Folk music, and within this category folk songs in particular (due to presence of national language), received major attention. The nineteenth century was strongly marked by the two mutually interwoven agendas: political movements towards national emancipation and the artistic movement named the Romanticism. “The national past became a subject of intense historical investigation, and there was new enthusiasm for folk songs, dances, legends, and fairy tales” (Kamien 1988: 353). European composers of art music were preoccupied by the idea of creating nationally relevant expressions by using language, as well as traditional melodies, rhythms, movements, costumes, customs, specific natural and cultural milieus, myths and historical topics, related to their own national groups.²

Collecting folk songs from own rural people became a respected activity in the perceptions of the urban elites. The top-to-bottom project *Das Volkslied in Österreich* (Folk Song in Austria), initiated in 1904, encouraged the collecting activity of several national committees and paralleled several ongoing grassroots activities of individuals and societies. In most cases, folk song collecting remained in the domain of urban nationally minded people, who gradually gave rise to the scholarly branch that during the 20th century became known as folk music research and eventually resulted in representative collections of folk songs in many European nation states.³ Characteristic modern examples include the *Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae* in Hungary and *Slovenske ljudske pesmi* in Slovenia, both being scholarly editions in several volumes, and related to the respective national academies of science. The work of Béla Bartók (1881-1945) and Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) in Hungary, and Karel Štrelj (1859-1912) and France Marolt (1891-1951) in Slovenia thus have lines of continuity to our days within the realms of what ethnomusicologist John Morgan O’Connell calls “national ethnomusicologies.”⁴

State Folklore vs. Folk Music Revival

During most of the second, half of the twentieth century Europe was divided along the Cold War line. Political separation of “eastern” and “western” Europe was reflected in the competing ideological and economic systems (communism vs. capitalism), supported by the mutually confronted military blocs (Warsaw Alliance vs. NATO).⁵

¹ Among Herder’s most often quoted works in this context are *Stimmen der Völker in ihren Liedern* (Voices of the Peoples in their Songs, 1773) and later *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (The Voices of Peoples in Songs, 1778-1779).

² “Bedřich Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* (Prodaná nevěsta 1866) provides a clear example of national opera, further representing what we might call a peasant opera, in which the Czechness of the work lies in the peasant world portrayed by the people of the nation, even before they are themselves ‘national’” (Bohlman 2004: 83).

³ Interesting to note, the world’s major association of ethnomusicologists, the *International Council for Traditional Music* (ICTM), was formed in 1949 by folk music researchers and named *International Folk Music Council*.

⁴ “National ethnomusicologies” was the theme of a plenary panel put together by O’Connell for the 39th world conference of ICTM in Vienna, Austria, in 2007.

⁵ Greece and Turkey, located in the Eastern half of Europe, were part of the “western” alliance. Countries such as Switzerland and Austria, though widely recognized as “western” claimed “neutral” status in military terms. Yugoslavia was founding member and the only representative of “non-aligned” countries in Europe. Non-alignment was a useful alternative for most countries in Asia, Africa, and South America to avoid the confrontational view of the world suggested by the two blocs.

Interest in folk music was present in both “eastern” and “western” contexts, but the approaches, aims and results showed significant differences. The dominant “eastern” model was based on state-supported folklore ensembles with heavily choreographed performances in folk costumes, adapted for a staged show. In contrast, the model that can be named “western” was based on young urban intellectuals, participants in the folk music revival movement, not interested in choreographies and costumes, and sometimes even not in the staged performance as the ultimate aim. In both cases, their motivations varied in a range from artistic experimenting to national idealism and in both cases the existing folk song collections and sometimes even own field research served as sources for new creations.

State folklore ensembles followed the logic “National in form, socialist in content” with their principal notion coming from the Soviet Union rather than from the respective countries. The most representative ones among them were established in cities and not in villages, “their choirs, orchestras, and repertoires fused West European performative structures, compositional techniques, and standards of professionalism (...) with aspects of village lore, to create hybridic forms that typified socialist modernity ...” (Buchanan 2006: 82-83, based on her research in Bulgaria). In contrast to this model, in which everything was strictly determined, from music and dance arrangements to performance features such as the number and physical appearance of dancers (their unified physical measures, costumes, even smiles on their faces), the “western” model was offering a more relaxed, spontaneous, and varied approaches to rural music. Opinions expressed by members of two revival ensembles, the first one from the northwestern end of what was Yugoslavia and the second from Austria, makes good examples. “The ensemble Istranova attempts in its own way to bring traditional Istrian music closer to a contemporary listener. Its main goal is neither a static reproduction of folk song as of a deceased fact nor the exotic folklorism escaping from reality” (Istranova 1982, sleeve note).⁶ In words of the Austrian ensemble Urfahrner Aufgeiger, “We do not play traditional music to cultivate tradition, but because it is the music of spirit, intelligence, and emotional impact” (Pettan 1996, sleeve note).

Tanchaz in Hungary

At its inception in Hungary in the 1970s, the gatherings of young urban musicians at which they performed rural songs and dance music for urban audiences had clearly political connotations. Hungary, located in central Europe, was then part of the “eastern,” Soviet-dominated political, and military bloc, very much against the will of most of its population.⁷ “With the aim of mastering and keeping alive authentic folk music, young urban musicians – beginning with Béla Halmos and Ferenc Sebő – followed in the footsteps of Bartók and Kodály by going to rural areas of Hungary and to Hungarian villages (...) of Transylvania in Romania. A movement developed, bands were formed and folk dancing halls were established

⁶ *Istranova* specialised in the repertoire of its own culturally distinctive region called Istra (Istria).

⁷ Hungarians’ anti-Soviet protests in 1956 were brutally crashed by the Soviet army.

where urban young people and their children could learn the music and dances of their ancestors (...) and dances to live music” (Szönyi and Lévai 2005: 29-30). These folk music and dance gatherings, named *tánc ház* (“dance house”), were widely understood as an alternative to Soviet-style choreographed stage presentations of folklore, both in national and presentational terms.⁸

The *tánc ház* concept celebrated and continues to celebrate spontaneity, flexibility, inclusiveness, and improvisation. Its sessions were organized not as preparations for staged performances, but as educational and entertaining events, in which practitioners were strengthening their national awareness by learning Hungarian folk songs, instrumental tunes, and functional dance steps through their practical and voluntary involvement. Nobody was subjected to judgments according to age, measures of the body, or physical abilities.

As the model spread to other European countries, political overtones became either different or irrelevant. Especially in the western European countries, in which Soviet politics, ideology, and the earlier described approach to folklore were not present; the gatherings became largely recognized as a fashionable urban way to learn and enjoy rural music, or in short as edutainment.⁹ Names for this type of gatherings often reflected the Hungarian origin: in Northern European countries they became known as *Danshuis*, in Germany *Tanzhaus*, in England *Dancehouse*, in Slovenia *Plesna hiša*, which is the literal translation of the original Hungarian name. In the countries outside the Soviet sphere of domination, the gatherings were linked to contemporary folk music scene (folk music revival) and included in multicultural festivals (such as e.g. Falun) and camps for young musicians (such as Ethno, both in Sweden).

Plesna Hiša in Slovenia

Introduction of the *tánc ház* in Slovenia took place surprisingly late, bearing in mind that Hungary and Slovenia are neighboring countries. During the Cold War, Slovenia was one of the republics of the Europe’s only non-aligned country – the multinational Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Balancing between East and West, Warsaw Alliance, and NATO, Yugoslavia was encouraging and financially supporting folklore ensembles, which in turn were somewhat less rigidly subject to popular Soviet-model canons. Folk music revival, on the other hand, although present thanks to a few soloists and ensembles from the early 1980s, became widely recognized from the mid 1990s, following the independence of Slovenia in 1991. Its presence is linked to the activities of the Cultural Society Folk Slovenia, established in 1996 by folk music performers and researchers. The presentation that follows is theoretically framed within the six classical research approaches, as the American ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood named them, ranging from descriptive, historical, analytical, comparative, and critical, to a synthesis.

⁸ Soviet-style “manufactured folklore presented as if it were genuinely traditional” is sometimes named *fakelore* (term coined by Richard M. Dorson in 1950).

⁹ Edutainment is a coined term that brings together the notions of education and entertainment.

1. *Descriptive*

Cultural Society Folk Slovenia (CSFS) was established as an independent, voluntary, and non-profit association of citizens, who through their work wish to satisfy their interests in the cultural realm and thus contributes to the enrichment of cultural life in their immediate and broader environment (Constitution, art. 1).

Its goals were defined as:

- Connecting performers of folk music and assisting their quantitative and qualitative development
- Promoting the use of folk sources and instruments in musical life
- Educating
- Collecting sound and other materials for a permanent archive
- Publishing
- Organizing cultural events
- Cooperating with societies of Slovenes outside of the Republic of Slovenia
- Cooperating with societies and institutions at home and abroad
- Informing the public about activities

CSFS currently consists of about 70 members from various parts of Slovenia. Most of them publicly perform Slovene folk music and dance. Several members are professionally associated with universities, research institutes, museums, or media. The society organizes concerts, lectures, panels and workshops in singing, playing instruments, and dancing. Nearly a month ago, the society added the word ethnomusicology to its name, which after long negotiations opened the way to more ethnography-based approaches and increase in membership.

2. *Historical*

According to a 1984 survey of musicians linked to *tánc ház* in Hungary, a typical ensemble consisted of “three to six members, mostly male, age twenty to thirty-five years old, playing older traditional dance melodies on the folk instruments of Hungary and Transylvania (violins, bagpipes, hurdy-gurdies, flutes), all of which they learned through records, cassettes, videos, informal courses, and occasionally by serving as apprentices to famous village musicians” (Ronström and Malm 2000: 153). As the dance house model moved to Western Europe, the key-terms such as hybridity, modernity, and syncretism became more and more emphasized.

And how is it in Slovenia? Members of the CSFS agreed about adopting a “responsible,” though more flexible attitude towards folk music and dance compared to folklore ensembles, whose approaches are partly rooted in the earlier described “eastern” model. General characteristics from the survey on Hungary are comparable with the Slovenian experience, of course with Slovene music and musical instruments. Dance house events in Slovenia never include choreographies and folk costumes, and are open to general audiences. Since the year 2000, when the first Slovene dance house took place in the capital Ljubljana, the gatherings take place in various localities and at various occasions throughout Slovenia.

3. Analytical

An analysis should consider three categories of participants: musicians, dance instructors, and dancers. Music is provided either by one of the bands within the CSFS or by an ad-hoc group of instrumentalists. Dance instructors – usually two, based on the fact that most of Slovene dances belong to the category of couple dances – are experienced dancers, who are also involved in research and education. It was expected that the dancers will by far count to the most heterogeneous category compared to musicians and dance instructors, but soon we noticed two basic groups: former or current members of folklore ensembles and university students. The former accepted dance house as an opportunity to broaden their experiences in a free manner, while the latter perceive it as a practical addition to their classes in ethnomusicology. The individuals outside these two categories are diverse, though not numerous. Their motives for attending dance houses are social and educational.

4. Comparative

I was in a position to compare Slovene dance house with dance houses in several other countries, but on this occasion I shall limit myself to the single, most relevant comparison that with the Hungarian *táncház*. My fieldwork in the Hungarian capital Budapest in 2004 revealed that there are at least two *táncház*es available daily, so the frequency of the gatherings was much higher in comparison with Slovenian ones. The results of my fieldwork confirmed that Hungarian *táncház* still, several decades after its inception, uses dance instructors and that dancers do not simply dance for the sake of their pleasure. In other words, the educational part of edutainment remains a vital aspect of the event. Yet, another important fact is that *táncház* in Hungary is not restricted to Hungarian music and dance in the ethnic sense. There may be evenings dedicated to a specific other culture or to several cultures. There are also *táncház*es specialized in Greek, South-Slav or Klezmer repertoires. Some feature programs aimed at specific age groups, such as children (Hoppál 2002: 124-126).

5. Critical

At the time of my first mandate as president of the CSFS in 2001, I expressed wish for inclusion of those individuals and ensembles that perform non-Slovene repertoires, but was outnumbered within the Executive Board. The “nationally conscious” majority suggested that The Others should establish their own society, if they wish, so my vision of the CSFS as a meeting point of various traditions, whose carriers are Slovene citizens of various ethnic origins and affinities had to wait for almost a decade. My current, second mandate, is marked by the new openness towards the Others.

6. Synthesis

The well-grounded opinion of researchers that diversity counts to the most important characteristics of Slovene folk music and dance (Kumer 1981: 250) is

seemingly at odds with domination of two dance patterns – those of polka and valse, which are generated by the trans-Alpine folk-pop music. CSFS intended to contribute to affirmation of the diversity of dance patterns from its inception and continues to be successful in this direction. The initial concept of Slovene dance houses was regional (e.g. dances from northern Slovenia) or focused on a selected local area. Other criteria (e.g. related dance features – couple dances, communal round dances, etc.) were introduced later.

Conclusion

Dance house became accepted in Slovenia as a specific urban phenomenon related to folk music revival, also either as an alternative to or as a more natural and relaxed extension of activities practiced by folklore ensembles. Clearly, its goal is neither the simple transfer of village lore to the city environment nor the adoption of dance choreographies for the sake of stage performances in folk costumes, but the adoption of functional dance steps and other related skills that enable their application in real-life situations, such as weddings, and other social gatherings with music and dance. With this intention in mind, a typical dance house gathering is structured in a way that learning of the steps and figures based on the imitation of dance instructors is followed by the checking of the learned contents in a sense “Once you hear music, relate it to the appropriated dance skills.”

Dance house in Slovenia already became recognized as a representative item in a variety of situations calling for cultural exchange across national borders, as well. The two pictures at the end of this article document two such situations. The former is related to the ICTM’s Executive Board meeting in Ljubljana in 2006. The Board member Tran Quang Hai presented the Slovene hosts with the workshop in harmonic singing; in return, the guests received Slovene dance house workshop. The later photograph is related to cultural exchange project between the Bangkok-based Chulalongkorn University and the University of Ljubljana in 2008. Slovene dance house took place following the Thai guests’ presentation of their Ram Wong.

This promising model that already proved successful in several European contexts has potential to serve other important, so far not addressed purposes, such as bringing closer together people of different backgrounds within national borders, serving as a tool in gathering together around various ecological and social issues, and contributing to peace-promoting and reconciliatory circumstances in today’s world.



Plesna hiša for the participants of the first meeting of the ICTM STG Applied Ethnomusicology, Ljubljana © Svanibor Pettan 2008



Plesna hiša as a case of cooperation between Slovene and Thai students - Thai Ram Wong dance, Ljubljana © Svanibor Pettan 2007

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