From a Hungarian Suicidical Song to the Totalitarian Abuse of Folklore

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Intensive emotions, desire, enjoyment and conditions of mind are entangled with music to such a degree that they became synonyms for various music genres or qualities. Take for example English terms 'feeling', 'soul' or Portuguese *fado* [destiny] or *saudade* [desire]. The genre of *choro* [cry] has its origin in Brasil and is surprisingly exclusively instrumental, whereas *morriña* is typical for Galicia and means homesick. The Bosnians sing ballads called *sevdah*, which is a Turkish word for love, passion, ecstasy and desire, and also bitterness or gall. In my present paper I will focus on two absolute extremes from the opposite poles of this emotional spectrum. On the one hand, there is a song intimately bound with love and death, and on the other hand emotionally sterile musical industry in the totalitarian era.

"Gloomy Sunday"

While the British Monty Python team defined the funniest joke in the world as the one you die of laughter after hearing it, a well-known Hungarian suicidal song "Szomorú Vasárnap" ("Gloomy Sunday") is the saddest song. Despite the Monty Pythons' definition this is no idle speculation. The history of the song has really been associated with a series of deaths.

Dozens of artists have made English cover versions of the song, such as Billie Holiday, Björk, Portishead, Sarah Vaughan, Ray Charles, Diamanda Gallas, and Marianne Faithfull (see Phespirit, no date). Czech performer Iva Bittová has made an English version as well, and the song has been part of the repertoire of Moravian and Slovak hammered-cimbalom bands. It is astonishing that we know so little about the true

history of this exceptional composition, which reflects both the media disinformation and tragic life stories. If the sound of the horn made 'the walls of Jericho came trembling down' and Hussite hymns had the power to chase away the enemies even before a battle started, the effect of "Gloomy Sunday" was even more powerful, according to the media legends. Allegedly, the song drove many people to suicide. In the 1940s, the song was even banned from such a liberal radio station as BBC, and the author of the song contributed to this myth by his death, jumping from the window.

The Hungarian "Gloomy Sunday" was written in 1933 by a 44-year-old bar pianist Rezső Seress from Budapest. There are many stories about its origin. The most likely version says that László Jávor, a friend of the pianist, broke up with his girlfriend and wrote very depressing lyrics and asked Seress to set it to music. The "Gloomy Sunday" narrates the story of a man who lost his love and saw no other possibility but suicide. We can feel the hopelessness even if we do not understand the lyrics: as if the monotonous tune somehow introduced the recurring question, which is never answered, and creates an unbroken circle with no chance to escape. At that time Rezső Seress was an unknown composer, but later he found a publisher and at that point the media legends started. According to one legend, Seress sent the published song to his ex-girlfriend to demonstrate his success in hope of reconciliation, but he got no reply. Only a few days later he learned that his lover was found dead: she poisoned herself and in her hand she grasped a piece of paper with the name of the song on it. Another source says that she jumped off the bridge into the Danube. Here the legend does not meet the reality: the lover refused was not Seress, who was happily married to a beautiful wife, but the author of the lyrics, László Jávor. However, the song had spread, as well as the myths about the numbers of suicides it caused. An 83-year-old man in Berlin jumped from the tenth floor when he heard the song from a window of another apartment. When a beggar sang the song in the streets of Rome, a messenger gave him all his money and jumped into the Tiber...

Are these legends really just media fables? Something very similar has already happened (see "Copycat suicide" in Wikipedia): in 1774 Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published; its main character is driven to suicide by unhappy love. The story inspired many young men to the same solution, and the book was banned. We can assume that some 150 years later the authors of media stories were inspired by real life stories and just arranged them appropriately. We have to keep in mind that the song originated in the 1930s during the depression years; a period very convenient for suicides. For a person already decided on committing suicide, the song provides a perfect sound track. Such an explanation is more likely than a rather daring claim that the song had always inspired people to suicides.

A connection between "Gloomy Sunday" and suicides was discussed and published not only in Hungary, but also in Switzerland, Italy, and France, and rumours finally reached the USA. There the legend contributed to the first English version, recorded by Paul Robeson in 1935. Then the song started to live its own life; the most played English version is rather an adaptation than a literal translation of the original Hungarian song. The English lyrics soften the tune, and add one more stanza which suggests that the grief was just a dream: there is a way to escape. The song has become an evergreen, but the media has been still interested in the performers of the song who committed suicide.

Stalin's Disneyland

In the second part of my paper I will focus on another song extreme: emotional emptiness and musical falsehood. However, could emotionality be ever measured? Despite the fact that such an idea sounds absurd, it is possible to recognize the sincerity of music, and there are ways how to distinguish human behaviour from machine behaviour simulated by a computer. A test designed to differentiate a man and a computer, called the Turing's test, originated in 1950. Nevertheless, emotionally empty music was here long before the computers.

A crucial moment of this very specific genre came when a folk song was abused by politics. It is not only the matter of Nazi Germany or the states of the former Eastern Block. In the past 50 years, there have been many countries with some kind of totalitarian rule, including even musically very interesting ones like Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Ethiopia. It is quite illuminating to see how the political oppression has been reflected in diverse forms of music. From the Czech point of view the most apparent examples are megalomaniac folklore ensembles which were established in the Soviet Union under Stalin. One can ask a question: Was this musical neologism a product of pure routine, historical coincidence, or was it part of an elaborated Orwellian plan to re-educate the population and review the history? And who was actually the designer of the process, which cleared folk music, the source of authentic emotions, of all authenticity?

One of the pioneers of this Soviet model was Igor Alexandrovich Moiseyev (1906 – 2007). At first he worked as a choreographer for Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and he considered traditional folk music as something low and amateurish. Later on, this motivated him to create 'high folklore'. Everything he made was choreographed; masses not individuals dominated in his ensembles. In his article "How Stalin Created World Music", American producer and specialist for music of the Eastern Europe Joe Boyd explains that it corresponded with the political order of the day:

> "[In the Soviet Union] By the late 1920s, the purge of the kulaks (prosperous peasants) was under way and the decision had been made to hammer the rural proletariat until they were forged into a new class with a new mentality. That meant the elimination of superstitions, religious observances, shamanism, rituals, non-Socialist celebrations, regional differences... Orders went out to the Cultural Bodies: all art must be uplifting, inspirational and unifying. In the field of 'national music' there shall be no individual performance... All male dancers had to be 1.82 meters tall. Even the smiles of the women - young, pretty and of the same height - were

measured for uniformity. Folk ensembles became gigantic metaphors for Stalinism: that the supreme will of one man could orchestrate the transformation of a culture" (Boyd, 2003).

Russian folklorist Vyacheslav Shchurov, who in 2009 gave a lecture at the festival in Rudolstadt, Germany, told me: "Those big ensembles were very important for the regime, they worked like machines. Everybody laughed artificially on command. Stalin was the leader and all people followed him like machines, and a similar system dominated in the art."

Unfortunately, this ideology did not end with Stalin's death. In the 1960s with a temporary political release, the USSR experienced its first folklore revival. Professor Shchurov collected traditional folk music in rural areas similarly like Alan Lomax did. At that time he managed to publicize traditional folk music in the media and personally ran two radio shows and one TV show. "In Khrushchev era this was no problem", recalls Shchurov. "But when Breznyev came, he filled the posts in culture by his own people. And they said: 'We have been building up communism. And you show us on TV old men with their archaic bast shoes and their long beards? Nothing like that will be on TV'. That was an end of my shows." After Gorbachev's perestroika in the 1980s, Professor Shchurov returned on the scene, but in 2006 his shows ended for the second time. As before, the pressure came from above and the argument was that traditional music was not appealing to young people. Joe Boyd in his above-mentioned article claims that even after the perestroika it was the 90-year-old Igor Moiseyev who affected the position of traditional folk music in the media. When he saw music documents from Russian villages on the Russian public TV's second channel he threatened them and asked them to stop broadcasting the documents: "It is a lie. There is no such music."

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