

Constancy and Variability within 19th Century Hungarian Gypsy Orchestras: Instruments, Sounds and Timbres

In the 19th century Hungarian Gypsy orchestras were the very essential elements of musical life in Hungary. Still today their art is a living tradition. Although a certain confusion still exists concerning the nature of the music played by them (especially in the Western musical world), at present there is no more scientific doubt that they handed down a fundamentally Hungarian repertoire. This repertoire emerged gradually from the second half of the 18th century. It rooted in different musical cultures and absorbed their elements. Then it was crystallized at the beginning of the 19th century as a homogenous musical style which was perceived by the Hungarian, and later by the foreign public as the typical Hungarian national music called *verbunkos*. The *verbunkos* music was the instrumental dance music conceived in a popular and folkish style, played and danced at different places and occasions in Hungary (i.e. at balls, restaurants, cafés, even at political events or at vintages) during the first decades of the century. However, except the first period when few characteristics of folk music were transmitted, it was not an oral folk tradition, but a music which rose to the rank of national art music due to numerous composers and composer-musicians who created countless instrumental *verbunkos* dance pieces in this national and very fashionable style. Later on, the *verbunkos* was replaced by a new dance type, the *csárdás*, the entertaining character of which was more emphasized. However, its novelty was a bit illusory. It was, in reality, a direct heritage of the *verbunkos* with new elements borrowed from the other characteristic repertoire of the period, the folk-like vocal melodies.

The interesting thing is (and at the same time, the reason of the confusion about the term “Gypsy music” is) that the performers of this typical 19th century Hungarian popular repertoire were Gypsy orchestras, nearly exclusively consisting of Gypsy musicians. Simply because the profession of musician, at least in the field of entertaining music, was reserved to this specific minority in Hungary. The orchestras formed by Gypsy musicians had many facets. As we will see, the sources of the period give quite a diversified idea about them, yet with a few recurring elements. Gypsy orchestras were exclusively chamber orchestras. However, the concept of chamber orchestra was vague in this specific musical environment. Although we will detect a certain variability as for the number and the type of the instruments used, there are a few inalienable features which undoubtedly characterize these orchestras. In the very heart of their sound there is the first violin which has mostly the leading role with important solo passages and the elaboration of singing melodies referring to the Hungarian vocal repertoire of the period. In most of the cases the leader of the Gypsy orchestra plays on the first violin, and conducts the group with it. But, even if its role is essential, naturally the first violin in itself is not enough to create the typical sound surface of Gypsy ensembles, i.e. the warm and intense timbre provided by the whole group of strings. The number of the strings, however, is not fixed, and can vary freely, as we will see. To colour the strings’ sound-carpet, there are two typical instruments indispensable in a Gypsy orchestra. One is a woodwind instrument, the clarinet, which enriches the sound mixture by its nasal but round timbre when completing the musical texture by playing broken chords or in lamenting or virtuoso solo parts. The other one, the *cimbalom* (Hungarian dulcimer), was a real curiosity, at least abroad. This is the instrument which was perceived as the strangest amongst the instruments used by Gypsy groups, as the articles of the period show it. The instrument was developed from old Asian models into a modern conception by the 19th century Hungarian instrument maker János Schunda. In this form, the metallic chords are sounded by little hammers covered by little pieces of cloth or cotton and can be muted rapidly by the use of several pedals to obtain much more virtuosity. This interesting instrument was closely linked with the 19th century Hungarian dance repertoire and with its performers, the Gypsy orchestras. Articles on Gypsy music underline mainly the extreme virtuosity of the musicians playing on the *cimbalom* and wonder sometimes at its appearance and construction which are unfamiliar and inclassable for non-Hungarian commentators. On the other hand, they write rarely about its very interesting resonant and metallic sound which counterbalances the full-bodied and velvety strings. That is why the two sources of the period cited below (the first one from a German, the second one from a French newspaper) are particularly interesting from the point of view of the *cimbalom*’s foreign reception. The *Vossische Zeitung*’s description is more detailed, while the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* mentions briefly the instrument, but both of them try to describe the special sonority of the instrument.

Zum Schluß spielte Hr. Imre, der Violoncellist der Gesellschaft, ein Zimbal-Solo. [...] Im Tone erinnert es an die Rohrtrommel des Russen Gusikow, theilweise auch an die Mandoline der Italianer. Die ausserordentliche Fertigkeit, mit der das Instrument gespielt wurde, erregte stürmischen Beifall. Der Spieler bediente sich nur zweier Klöpfel und zaubert mit diesen aus den Drahtsaiten die rapidesten Triller und Passagen, die überraschendsten Übergänge hervor, und bewahrt auch im Spiel dieses Instruments einen gewissen nationalen Typus.¹

[Finally, Mr. Imre, the orchestra's cello player played a solo on the cimbalom. [...] As for its sound, it reminds one of the Russian Gusikow's cane-drum, and partly also of the Italian mandolin. The artist's extraordinary dexterity to sound his instrument had a great success. He used only two hammers, and he executed with them the most rapid shakes and broken chords, the most amazing scale passages on the metallic chords. While playing his instrument, he remained also faithful to a certain national character.]

Douze Hongrois et Bohémiens: six violons, deux basses, une clarinette, deux altos et une sorte de piano primitif, dont les cordes frappées par des baguettes tamponnées vibrent avec une sonorité cristalline et stridente.²

[Twelve Hungarians and Gypsies: six violins, two double-basses, one clarinet, two violas and a sort of primitive piano, the strings of which, struck by cotton covered hammers, vibrate with a pure and strident tone.]

After the presentation of the main characteristic features of Gypsy orchestras, let us turn to the phenomenon in its complexity. First of all, let us examine the question of size, which is a factor difficult to define in case of these groups. In the early period, they could be quite small. The only well-known 18th century Gypsy band, that of a female violinist, Panna Czinka, had two violins, one *cimbalom* and one double-bass.³ This type of little chamber orchestra remains characteristic even in the 1820s. However, the presence of the *cimbalom* is not indispensable. As a Hungarian newspaper entitled *Hasznos Műlatságok* [Useful Amusements] wrote in 1817:

Három négy Czigány Hegedűs egy Brugóval mitsoda vígaságra, 's tombolásra lázaszt némely házi gyülekezetet!!

[How some company at a house feast can liven up to gaiety and to raving by three or four Gypsy violinists with a double-bass player!!]⁴

Even the legendary Gypsy violinist, one of the fathers of the *verbunkos* music, János Bihari (died in 1827) was the leader of a small orchestra which consisted mostly of five members. The strings were completed by a *cimbalom*.⁵ These early examples show that the real sound base of these orchestras was the string sound.

Later on, the number of musicians within the Gypsy bands increased. In the 1840s, one of the well-known orchestras of the period, that of Sándor Veszter (a dancer, not a musician) consisted of six or seven members. The duality of the strings and the *cimbalom* was completed by a clarinet. These facts could be interpreted as a gradual increase in the number of musicians following also a historical continuity, the enrichment of the ensembles decade by decade. However, this simple idea is far from reality. On the one hand, we have few sporadic data already from the end of the 18th century which prove the existence of greater orchestras even in this early period. Two articles (from 1790 and 1792) of the *Magyar Kurír* [Hungarian Courier] report on two Gypsy groups consisting respectively of twelve and ten members.⁶ On the other hand, we know that in parallel

¹ Vossische Zeitung, Berlin, 26.03.1851, no. 72, Beilage. Published in: Csaba Szíjjártó: *A cigány útra ment...* [The Gypsy went on a tour...] (Budapest: Masszi Kiadó, 2002), 436.

² Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris, 01.09.1867, no. 35, 281. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 538.

³ Bálint Sárosi: *Cigányzene* [Gypsy Music] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1971), 65.

⁴ *Hasznos Műlatságok*, 1817, First semester, no. 8, 62.

⁵ Sárosi, 1971, 71.

⁶ *Magyar Kurír*, 01.06.1790, 10.02.1792. Published in: Bálint Sárosi: *A cigányzenekar múltja az egykorú sajtó tükrében. 1776–1903* [The Past of the Gypsy Orchestra Reflected by the Press of the Period. 1776–1903] (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2004), 27, 29. Due to the restrained amount of information in general from this period, and the lack of detailed information on these two groups, it is difficult to consider the informative value of the articles and to know if the orchestras in question were exceptional or represented an already wide-spread musical practice in which greater ensembles found their place.

with Veszter's relatively little orchestra, greater ensembles also existed. Veszter's contemporary, the nobleman and landowner Károly Dobozy founded a Gypsy orchestra with a great number of musicians, compared to those cited above. The difference is really significant. Dobozy's group consisted of sixteen members. In this case the enrichment was due to the introduction of a new instrument type, brass wind instruments and a drum joined the string base. This interesting combination, however, is far from being typical in a classical Gypsy orchestra. Dobozy's group was not the only exception. That of János Kálózdý, the great musician and successful Gypsy band leader of the fifties had more or less the same parameters. The number of musicians varied between twelve and sixteen, and several combinations of wind instruments formed the wind section. Various articles report on the band's instruments. The *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung* mentions six strings and six wind instruments (without further specifications).⁷ Six months later the *Deutsche Zeitung* writes about fifteen instruments. Besides the strings (four violins, three violas, one cello, one double-bass), there was one ophicleide, one horn, two trumpets and two clarinets.⁸ Or, as we see from another source, the *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung*, the wind section could be formed also by four trumpets and a tuba with two clarinets.⁹ So, the wind instruments did not have a fixed place at all within the orchestra. Nevertheless, their various combinations always had an important role in Kálózdý's band. This fact can be also explained by a historical circumstance. Kálózdý, as many other fellow musicians of his, served in the army as a member of a military band during several war periods, such as the Napoleonic wars or the Hungarian war of independence in 1848–49 against the Habsbourg domination. As Sárosi points out, Gypsy musicians played more often on wind instruments in the army instead of the violin. The clarinet had the leading role, and sometimes the brass too.¹⁰ After the war period in a non-military cultural context this practice was abandoned in most of the cases in favour of the more traditional composition of the strings–*cimbalom*–clarinet trinity, but as Kálózdý's example shows, vestiges rooting in military tradition could survive. One could be tempted also by explaining the use of such a powerful group of instruments as a necessity within an orchestra that played, as we know from the sources of the period, not only the fashionable Hungarian dance music of these decades, but also a rich classical Western repertoire, mostly arrangements, transcriptions and pot-pourries of airs, duets, choruses and ouvertures from famous operas. On the other hand, this explication seems to be groundless if we consider the fact that other orchestras did not use this instrumental possibility to play the same type of repertoire. In fact, well-known ensembles of the late fifties and the sixties, as the orchestras of Ferenc Sárközy or Ferkó Patikárius, had the classical layout of strings, one or two clarinets and a *cimbalom*. They did not need brass wind instruments to play operatic arrangements on a high artistic level, as various articles from the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* or the *Constitutionnel* show it.¹¹ But they had a relatively great number of musicians. Even without the brass, owning a powerful string corpus, they reached nearly the size of Kálózdý's band. They had twelve members, i.e. nine or ten strings, one or two clarinets and a *cimbalom*. As we can see, it is difficult to establish rules concerning the "classical form" of Gypsy bands. There is no casuality between the used instrument types and the played repertoire, or the number of musicians and the earlier or later periods of the phenomenon of Gypsy orchestras. In fact, even in the second half of the 19th century, in addition to the above mentioned big ensembles, the presence of small chamber orchestras on the musical scene also persisted. A Hungarian newspaper, the *Hölgyfutár* [Ladies Courier] with several articles from 1854 and 1858 reports on a group, that of János Salamon, which consisted of only five members.¹² Nearly at the same time, the same press organ writes about Ferenc Bunkó's orchestra invited to Saint-Petersbourg with an impressive dimension of twenty-five musicians.¹³ Summarizing all of these historical data, we can establish that, instead of stability and academic frames, Gypsy orchestras were characterized by great freedom and fluctuation, as for their size and the use of instruments. This is not surprising at all as freedom was a significant element of the musical attitude of Gypsy musicians in general. Their manner of playing was always free and natural, either as a soloist, or in different musical environments, such as intimate chamber orchestras or greater ensembles. They were far from being

⁷ Allgemeine Theaterzeitung, Wien, 14.08.1850, no. 192, 767. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 422.

⁸ Deutsche Zeitung, Prague, 07.01.1851, no. 7, 24. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 430.

⁹ Neue Berliner Musikzeitung, 02.04.1851, no. 14, 108. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 436.

¹⁰ Sárosi, 1971, 124.

¹¹ According to a remark of the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, the Gypsy orchestra offered a remarkable version of a quadrille of Meyerbeer's opera, "L'Africaine". See: RGMP, 01.09.1867, no. 35, 281. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 538. They played also passages from Verdi's and Wagner's operas. See: Le Constitutionnel, 12.08.1867, no. 224. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 537.

¹² Hölgyfutár, 17.05.1854, no. 99, 408, 28.07.1858, no. 170, 679. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 500.

¹³ Hölgyfutár, 17.01.1860, no. 4, 31. Published in: Szíjjártó, 2002, 523.

influenced by changing circumstances to which they adapted themselves easily anyway. They were predestined by the nature of their art to follow this principle of freedom also in forming their ensembles. So, in practical questions concerning their orchestras, one can meet much more richness, diversity, and freedom than in other cases of more established examples of orchestras.

Beyond all this variability, an interesting unifying factor of the sound created by Gypsy orchestras is its volume and intensity. Since the emergence of these bands, the myth of the loud playing exists. As early as in 1819 a literary source gives us information about this facet of the Gypsy sound. In a Hungarian press organ named *Tudományos Gyűjtemény* [Scientific Anthology] a book review is published on the work of an English writer, Richard Bright who travelled through Hungary in this period and summarized his experiences in a travelogue. The review points out that Bright, hearing a concert of a Gypsy band (the Gypsies Ságfi), remarked only the fact that their playing was noisy.¹⁴ Later on, critics report from time to time on the same phenomenon but more and more with a positive overtone. An article from the *Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung* (from 1844) deals with the playing of a Gypsy orchestra, whose identity, however, remains unknown because of the inexact and incomplete information provided. Here again, one of the things underlined in the short description is the force of the sound.

*[...] bei einem der ersten Mittagmale, zu welchen wir eingeladen waren, sollte das Zigeunermusikchor spielen. Beim Eintritte in den Saal schmetterte dieses zwar, daß wir fast erschrecken, aus vollen Lungen, darauf aber führte es mehrere sehr schwierige Stücke mit großer Genauigkeit aus [...].*¹⁵

[...] at the first lunch we were invited to, we were received by the music played by the Gypsy orchestra. When we entered in the hall, we were nearly frightened because of the shrilling tones, but later the orchestra played very difficult pieces with great precision [...].

The mention of the “shrilling tones” sheds light on the fact that Gypsy orchestras’ loudness and resounding manner of playing was quite unusual to the public that was used to listening to Western art music’s more subtle sound. However, the Viennese article shows a certain appreciation of this peculiar style. In the next decades, foreign reports and critics dealing with Hungarian Gypsy orchestras often admire the intensity emanating from the musicians’ bow producing a really powerful sound. Several ensembles amongst the already mentioned ones, for example that of János Kálózdy, Ferenc Sárközy, or Ferkó Patikárius were praised because of the same characteristics. Two reviews reflecting the same opinion are cited below. However, they do not report on the same orchestra, and the second one was published fifteen years later than the first one. As we can read in *La France Musicale*:

Rien de plus agréable à voir que ces quatorze musiciens revêtus du pittoresque costume de la Hongrie ; et puis il faut les entendre exécuter avec un ensemble qui ferait croire à la réunion de plus de cinquante artistes, si on ne pouvait les compter, les mélodies les plus délicates et les plus difficiles. C’est une merveille.¹⁶

[There is nothing more pleasant to see than these fourteen musicians wearing the picturesque costume of Hungary; and then one has to hear them playing the most delicate and the most difficult melodies, with an ensemble which makes the effect of having more than fifty artists. This is a marvel.]

The second article comes from a Hungarian newspaper, *Fővárosi Lapok* [Journal of the Capital], but translates a French article from *Le Moniteur des Pianistes*:

A cigányok kis zenekara [...] csak 12 tagból áll, de oly szép, oly bő és terjedelmes hangokat ad, mintha 50 zenészt egyszerre hallanánk; mikor játszanak, nem lehet képzelni, hogy valaki több lélekemelést, több szívet egyesítsen.¹⁷

¹⁴ Tudományos Gyűjtemény, 1819, vol. 3, 101–102.

¹⁵ Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung, 19.12.1844, vol. 4, no. 152, 606.

¹⁶ La France Musicale, 04.07.1852, no. 27, 223. Published in : Szíjjártó, 2002, 471.

¹⁷ Fővárosi Lapok, 22.10.1867, no. 243, 972. Published in : Szíjjártó, 2002, 540.

[The gypsies' little orchestra [...] consists of only 12 members, but it emanates so beautiful, so rich and so powerful sounds that one could believe to hear 50 musicians at the same time; when they play, one can hardly imagine that it is possible to play in a more elevating manner and with more heart.]

So, as we can see, Gypsy orchestras have a very special sound, in which the instruments have their specific roles to create interesting timbres by using their solo or tutti, virtuosic or harmonic “sound-carpet” positions. In conclusion, it will be interesting to talk about how composers interpreted these specific timbres by imitations of instrument and by evoking specific sounds. I propose four interesting examples from this point of view. The chosen works are all related to the *style hongrois*, a specific and very fashionable style reference in 19th century Western art music.¹⁸ This style imitation was realized by many composers of the period, but the best creations in this field are those of the great masters as Schubert, Liszt or Brahms. They used a great number of diversified elements (specific rhythms, melodic patterns, accents and dynamics, among others) to create a stylized Hungarian idiom and to integrate it in their personal style. Another possible element for elaboration is the instrumental sound. The *Trio* of the third movement of Schubert's *String Quintet in C major* can be heard as a subtle allusion to the full-bodied and resonant sound of Gypsy strings in a gently stylized manner. The utilization of the lower registers which creates an intense timber corpus, and the rustic musical idiom underline the sound reference (Example 1).

Example 1. Franz Schubert: String Quintet in C major, 3rd movement, Trio, mm. 235–243.

As for another type of stylized interpretation of the Gypsy sound, let us examine how composers evoked the particular sound of the *cimbalom*, the *par excellence* Gypsy instrument. The passages from the works of Schubert and Liszt (see below) have similar characteristics as for the choice of the instrument. The *cimbalom* is represented by the piano. The brief imitation of its role as a harmonic support is assured by a specific technical element, the tremolo playing in Schubert's work, while the greater part of the passage and the beginning of Liszt's work refer to the virtuoso *cimbalom* in a free, cadenza-like musical context. The first passage is the *cadenza* of the first movement of Schubert's *Divertissement à l'hongroise*, the second one comes from the piano introduction of Liszt's *Die drei Zigeuner*. (Examples 2, 3.)

Example 2. Franz Schubert: Divertissement à l'hongroise, 1st movement, mm. 133–139.

¹⁸ The term is borrowed from : Jonathan Bellman : *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

Example 3. Ferenc Liszt: Die Drei Zigeuner, piano introduction

Finally, let us see an example of a very idiomatic stylization of the Gypsy clarinet. The clarinet solo from Brahms' *Clarinet Quintet in B minor* (second movement, *Trio*) pays homage to the Gypsy musicians' rhapsody-like, rubato style playing. It is closely linked to the Hungarian musical idiom of the instrumental "slow" tunes. The warm singing of the clarinet accompanied by the smooth strings is in parallel with the sound created by Gypsy orchestras in intimate moments of chamber orchestration with the clarinet in the main role, playing a solo against a delicate string background. (Example 4.)

Example 4. Johannes Brahms: *Clarinet Quintet in B minor*, 2nd movement, the beginning of the Trio

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the Trio in the second movement of Brahms' Clarinet Quintet in B minor. The score is in B minor and 3/4 time. It features a clarinet solo in the upper voice, marked 'Più lento'. The strings provide a delicate accompaniment, marked 'poco f'. The clarinet solo includes sixteenth-note runs and a trill. The strings play a simple harmonic accompaniment. The score ends with a 'pp' dynamic marking.

Santrauka

XIX a. Vengrijos čigonų orkestrų pastovumas ir kaita: instrumentai, sąskambiai, tembrai

Vengrijos čigonų orkestrai buvo pagrindinis muzikinio gyvenimo elementas XIX a. Vengrijoje. Jie dažnai gastroliuodavo po Europą ir iš daugelio kitų lengvosios muzikos orkestrų išsiskirdavo savo egzotišku spalvingumu. Šis pranešimas pagrįstas autorės tyrimais ir vengrų muzikologo Bálinto Sárosi didžiulio mokslinio tiriamojo darbo rezultatais. Naudojantis to laikotarpio rašytiniais šaltiniais (pvz., straipsniais iš muzikinės ir nespacializuotos spaudos), aptariama šių orkestrų instrumentinės sudėties įvairovė.

Be kai kurių nekintamų bruožų, tokių kaip styginių instrumentų dominavimas, dėl instrumentų skaičiaus šių orkestrų sudėtyje galima išvelgti ir tam tikros laisvės bei nepastovumo, o šis daugiau ar mažiau nuspėjamas nepastovumas reikalauja didelio tembrinio sodrumo. Tačiau kalbėdami apie čigonų orkestro skambesį šiandien dažniau akcentuojame panašumus, o ne skirtumus. Taigi įprasta manyti, kad čigonų muzikantų griežimas yra intensyvus ir galingas, taip pat galima įsivaizduoti, kokios savybės yra būdingos tipiškiems čigonų orkestro instrumentams ir koks yra jų vaidmuo orkestre.

Baigiamąjoje pranešimo dalyje atskleidžiama, kaip Vengrijos čigonų muzikos skambesys yra priimamas Vakarų muzikos kontekste. Pranešime demonstruojama, kaip kompozitoriai, besidomintys šiuo unikaliu muzikiniu reiškiniu, interpretuoja specifinius tembrus, naudodami instrumentų kopijas ir analogus.