

From Bela Bartok's Folk Music Research in Turkey

By Adnan Saygun; Edited by Laszlo Vikar

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In this volume Saygun included the entire manuscript of Bartok's initial draft of his fieldwork notes and the transcriptions he made during the fieldwork expedition to Turkey in 1936. Below is an excerpt from the 'Introduction' that describes the trip, including its origins and purposes and the role of Saygun and two "observers," the composers Necil Kazim [Akses] and Ulvi Cemal [Erkin].

Introduction

In 1936, as a result of a suggestion of Dr. Laszlo Rasonyi, teacher at the University of Ankara, I was invited by the Ankara branch of the political party Halkevi to give a few lectures in Ankara, appear as soloist with the Ankara orchestra, and to do some research work on Turkish folk music in appropriately chosen villages. I very gladly accepted the invitation as I had long desired to investigate Turkish folk music at first hand, and especially, to find out if there were any relation between Old Hungarian and Old Turkish folk music. To get an answer to this question became more and more imperative since a comparison between Old Hungarian folk music on the one hand, and the folk music of the Cheremiss (Mari) people¹ and of the Turko-Tatar inhabitants² of the Kazan area in Russia on the other hand, resulted in the establishment of a definitive relationship between the folk music of these various peoples. It seemed highly important to know whether the Turkish folk music contains a similar stock of melodies, for this would suggest the possibility of far-reaching conclusions.

The period available for the research work was unfortunately rather short, 10 days being at our disposal. In Ankara, the plans for the journey were thoroughly discussed, especially the question which area of the rather extended territory of Turkey should be chosen for the work. Again on the suggestion of

¹ Living on the banks of the upper Volga. They are of Finno-Ugrian race, but were subject to a considerable Old Turkish influence on their language and civilization about 1000-1500 years ago.

² Their language is very nearly related to the language of the Turks of Asia Minor.

Dr. Rasonyi, we finally decide on the winter quarters of the so-called Yürük tribes. These were nomad tribes living during summer in the Taurus mountain regions, and descending for winter to a place not far from the Southern seashore around Osmaniye, some 60-70 miles eastward from Adana (Seyhan). The presumption was that people exhibiting such ancient migratory customs may have better preserved their old musical material than the more settled peoples.

The Halkevi branch of Ankara appointed Mr. Ahmed Adnan Saygin as my interpreter who also undertook the notation of the texts on the spot. In addition, two "observers," Mr. Necil Kazim and Mr. Ulvi Cemal, both from the Ankara music school, came with us.

Preceding the journey to the Adana area occasional collecting work was done in Ankara twice, on Nov. 16 and 17. On Nov. 18 I left the capital accompanied by these three gentlemen, and with great expectation to discover at least a few melodies belonging to the above-mentioned characteristic old stock of material; expectations which were encouraged by the discovery of two melodies of a similar type in the preliminary research work on Nov. 16.

This short excerpt is transcribed exactly as it appears in Bartok's manuscript. He continues with a description of the melodies found in the preliminary research along with general conclusions to be made about the origins of certain melodies and their relation to other regions. The desire to draw far-reaching conclusions about the ancient ties between peoples through language and music was not only a trend in folkloric research of the time but also politically motivated. In the case of Turkey scholars began establishing closer connections between the Turkic cultures of Central Asia and that of Turkey as a way of realigning the country's cultural interests and identity and to distance it from the Persian and Arabic influences of the Ottoman period. Bartok's earlier research was clearly in line with these interests, which may be one reason he was invited to Turkey at this particular juncture.

At the time of Bartok's research trip in 1936, Hungarian and Finnish were in fact considered part of the larger Finno-Ugric-Altaic language family, which included Turkish and Turkic languages of Central Asia. At some point in the last 30 years, the Finno-Ugric family was determined to be separate from the Altaic (Turkic) family by linguists, possibly pointing to a more recent political agenda. In any case, as part of Bartok's efforts to connect with the villagers he was interviewing and recording and to convey his interest in establishing a shared musical heritage with them, he and

Saygun devised a sentence that was mutually intelligible in Hungarian and Turkish based on shared roots and vocabulary. The sentence in Hungarian: *Pamuk tarlón sok árpa, alma, teve, sátor, bal'a, csizma, kicsi kecske van.* In Turkish: *Pamuk tarlasında çok arpa, alma, deve, çadır, bal'a, çizme, küçük keçi var.* And in English translation: 'In the cotton field, barley, apples, camels, tents, axes, boots, and young goats are plentiful.'

Bartok's approach to folk music in his compositions must have also left an indelible imprint on the young composers who accompanied him, as the incorporation of folk melodies and rhythms figure largely in their original works, and the approach to setting the melodies, harmonically and texturally, often bears a strong resemblance to Bartok's style.

Incidentally, "Saygin" (as Bartok wrote in the introduction) was the original spelling of Saygun's last name, meaning 'respect' in Turkish. Bartok apparently was not aware or perhaps not provided with the surnames for Akses and Erkin, as surnames were not adopted by Turkish citizens until the late 1920s and possibly still not widely used in 1936.



Photo of Bartok's Turkish fieldwork team in Adana. From the right: Adnan Saygun, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, Necil Kazim Akses and Bela Bartok (center left).