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Sparks of the Phonograph, Echoes of Revolution: Béla Bartók and the Birth of Modern Ethnomusicology as a Scholarly Discipline

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Abstract

Folk music in nineteenth-century Europe was frequently perceived in a romanticized manner as a symbol of national identity, thereby obscuring a scholarly understanding of its authentic traditions. This article aims to examine the central role of Béla Bartók in establishing the foundational principles of modern ethnomusicology, with particular focus on his use of the phonograph as a revolutionary instrument in folk music research. The study employs a qualitative approach grounded in historical and descriptive-analytical literature review, synthesizing Bartók's own primary writings with secondary sources drawn from a range of academic musicological studies. The findings demonstrate that the phonograph enabled Bartók to conduct objective field recordings, execute microscopically precise transcriptions, and systematically classify melodic materials, while simultaneously correcting prevalent misconceptions between authentic Hungarian peasant music and the so called style hongrois. *Nevertheless, the phonograph's inherent material constraints including the limited duration of wax cylinder recordings and the acoustic horn's restricted frequency response imposed significant boundaries on Bartók's structural analyses and transcription work, requiring him to develop compensatory methodological strategies to approximate the full complexity of the performances captured. Bartók's ethnomusicological discoveries not only forged a new scientific methodology for the cross-cultural study of music, but also fundamentally transformed his compositional practice through an organic synthesis of folkloric elements and twentieth-century modernism. The study concludes that Bartók's contributions marked a fundamental paradigm shift in the way the world perceived folk music from an object of romanticization to a subject of rigorous scholarly inquiry leaving a methodological legacy that remains relevant to contemporary ethnomusicology.*

Keywords: *Béla Bartók, Ethnomusicology, Phonograph, Folk Music, Musical Modernization.*

Introduction

Folk music, an entity that has accompanied human civilization for centuries, only acquired its identity as "folk" when consciously heard and defined by observers from outside its originating community. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, both academic and popular perceptions of folk music were frequently colored by tones of romanticization (Bellman, 1993). Folk music was regarded as the pure expression of the "soul of the nation" (Volksgeist), a reflection of simplicity and authenticity yet untouched by the complexities of urban life and industrialization. However, this idealistic view often overlooked the genuine intricacy and depth inherent in those musical traditions, reducing them to sentimental relics of the past.

In this context, folk music also played a significant role as an instrument in the waves of nationalism that swept across Europe. It was employed as a means of arousing national sentiment, reinforcing

collective identity, and even legitimizing political aspirations. As an extreme example, in Germany, the Volkslied (folk song) was placed as a central element in Nazi propaganda that celebrated the supposed superiority of the "Aryan" race (Bayley, 2001). In Hungary, the situation grew more complex through a widespread confusion between authentic Hungarian peasant music and what was known as the style hongrois a musical style inspired by nineteenth-century Hungarian music, also commonly referred to as "Gypsy music." The latter, often a stylized and commercialized version performed by Romani musicians, had become popular in European salons. Celebrated composers such as Franz Liszt, though instrumental in popularizing Hungarian themes, drew primarily upon this Romani-derived style rather than the older peasant music, which was considered less appealing (Hooker, 2014). Early definitions of folk music, as formulated by pioneers such as Cecil J. Sharp in England and Bartók himself, emphasized its rural character, oral transmission, continuous variability, structural simplicity, and its focus on communal rather than individual expression.

This context reveals a paradox on one hand, folk music was extolled as the unique symbol of national identity; on the other, the understanding of it was frequently superficial, and the universality of its human expression was disregarded. Early efforts at folk music collection, though driven by nationalist zeal, ultimately opened the path toward a broader appreciation of musical cultural diversity.

The thought of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) provided an important philosophical foundation for the understanding and collection of folk music in Europe. Herder was a key figure in popularizing the concept of *Volksgeist*, or "the spirit of the people," which held that every nation possesses a unique character and spirit manifested in its language, customs, and, naturally, its folk songs (Yoshida, 2020). It is essential, however, to understand Herder's philosophy within its original intellectual context rather than through the distorting lens of its later appropriations. Herder was fundamentally a cosmopolitan humanist; his celebration of cultural particularity was never exclusionary but pluralistic, premised on the conviction that the diversity of human cultures collectively constitutes the richness of humanity as a whole. He did not hierarchy cultures or advocate for the supremacy of any single Volk over others quite the contrary, his framework was designed to resist the cultural imperialism of Enlightenment universalism, which he believed flattened genuine human difference under a single normative standard. The ideological mutations that transformed Herderian thought into instruments of exclusionary nationalism occurred gradually across the nineteenth century, as Romantic nationalists selectively extracted his vocabulary of *Volk* and *Volksgeist* while discarding his pluralist and humanist commitments. This selective appropriation intensified further in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as pseudo-scientific theories of racial hierarchy became entangled with nationalist cultural discourse a development that was entirely foreign to Herder's original framework.

The extreme endpoint of this long ideological mutation the cooptation of folk culture by National Socialist propaganda in Germany, which weaponized the concept of *Volkslied* in the service of racial ideology must therefore be understood not as a logical extension of Herder's philosophy, but as its profound betrayal; a radical deformation achieved through decades of selective misreading, political instrumentalization, and the grafting of biological racism onto what had originally been a cultural and linguistic concept. His monumental work, Volkslieder (Folk Songs), published in 1778–79, though lacking musical notation, is regarded as one of the first systematic attempts to collect and publish folk songs from various cultures, including the Dainas from Latvia, which had a profound influence on him.

Herder argued that language and folk song constitute the most authentic expressions of a community, reflecting its values, worldview, and unique contribution to human civilization as a whole. He viewed folk song as "scattered voices of humanity" (Stimmen der Völker in Liedern), emphasizing the universal human experience contained therein, transcending national boundaries (Kealiinohomoku, 2015). These ideas lent intellectual legitimacy to the folk music collection movement that flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collectors, often animated by nationalist sentiment, saw themselves as rescuers of a vanishing cultural heritage, in alignment with Herder's view on the importance of preserving authentic expressions of the Volk (Hooker, 2019). In Hungary, Herder's prediction regarding the potential disappearance of the Hungarian language and culture amid German and Slavic cultural dominance further spurred intensive efforts at cultural preservation, including the study of folk music undertaken by Béla Bartók.

Béla Bartók was born on 25 March 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sânnicolau Mare, Romania). He received his early musical education from his mother, an accomplished pianist, and his musically inclined father (Gollin, 2007). After his family relocated to Pressburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia), he studied with László Erkel, the son of the important Hungarian opera composer Ferenc Erkel. In 1899, Bartók continued his studies at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, under the guidance of István Thoman, a pupil of Franz Liszt, in piano, and János Koessler, a friend of Brahms, in composition.

Bartók's early compositions, born of this academic environment, naturally reflected the strong influence of the late Romantic tradition then dominant, as well as the nationalist elements then in vogue. The works of such major composers as Richard Wagner, Johannes Brahms, Franz Liszt, and Richard Strauss provided models and inspiration for the young Bartók. One representative example from this early period is the symphonic poem *Kossuth* (1903), a grand work dedicated to the hero of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, Lajos Kossuth, which demonstrates Bartók's mastery of the Romantic orchestral idiom alongside his patriotic spirit. Significantly, this idiom was entirely predicated upon the Western tradition of visual notation a system of fixed scores, standardized pitch, and regularized rhythm that presupposes literate musical transmission and the precise, repeatable execution of a written text. It was a musical world in which the score constituted the authoritative source of the work itself. It was this very background and its foundational dependence on written notation that would subsequently undergo a radical transformation when Bartók came into direct contact with authentic peasant music; an oral tradition whose fluid intonation, rhythmic variability, and spontaneous ornamentation actively defied the capacities of standard Western notation to represent it faithfully (Borio, 2022)

This article will demonstrate that Béla Bartók's scholarly approach to folk music revolutionarily facilitated by his use of the phonograph not only corrected existing misconceptions about Hungarian folk music but also laid the foundational methodological and theoretical principles for the birth and development of modern ethnomusicology as a discipline. His innovations in the collection, transcription, classification, and analysis of folk music, together with the integration of his findings into his musical compositions, marked a paradigm shift in the cross-cultural study of music. The "spark" of the phonograph literally enabled the "echo" of folk music to be heard, analyzed, and understood in an entirely new way, elevating its status from a mere object of romanticization or a tool of nationalist propaganda to a complex and valuable subject of scientific inquiry.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach through a historical and descriptive-analytical literature review method. This method was selected for its relevance in undertaking an in-depth examination of Béla Bartók's thought, historical context, and revolutionary influence on folk music and the formation of the discipline of ethnomusicology. The research focus is to construct a coherent argument by synthesizing, analyzing, and interpreting existing scholarly sources on Bartók and his era. The research was conducted through several systematic stages as follows:

2.1. Data Collection and Source Selection

The initial stage involved the identification and collection of relevant literary sources. These sources were classified into two primary categories:

a. Primary Sources, comprising authentic writings by Béla Bartók himself, such as his essays on folk music (e.g., "The Hungarian Folk Song"), correspondence, field notes, and prefaces to his published folk music collections. Writings by his closest colleagues, such as Zoltán Kodály, were also categorized as primary sources to provide a contemporary perspective. These sources are essential for understanding directly Bartók's methodology, thought, and philosophy.
b. Secondary Sources, consisting of published academic analyses and interpretations. These include biographical books (e.g., Gollin, 2007), articles in reputable scholarly journals in musicology and ethnomusicology, dissertations, and book chapters that specifically address Bartók's contributions. Source searches were conducted through academic databases such as JSTOR, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Sage Journals, and university libraries using keywords such as "Béla Bartók," "ethnomusicology," "Hungarian folk music," "phonograph in ethnomusicology," "musical nationalism," and "Johann Gottfried Herder."

2.2. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical and thematic framework. The analytical process was divided into three main steps:

a. Contextual Identification and Synthesis, This step involved identifying and synthesizing information to construct a comprehensive understanding of the historical, social, and intellectual context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This included an analysis of the climate of nationalism in Europe, the influence of Herder's philosophy of Volksgeist, and prevailing misconceptions concerning authentic Hungarian peasant music as opposed to the style hongrois.
b. Thematic Analysis, Data from various sources were analyzed to identify recurring and interrelated key themes, including: (1) the revolutionary role of the phonograph not merely as a transparent recording instrument, but as a historically situated media technology whose material properties including wax cylinder duration, acoustic horn frequency response, and the mechanical conditions of playback actively shaped the possibilities and limits of Bartók's scholarly work; (2) the development of Bartók's scientific methodology (collection, transcription, classification, and comparative analysis), understood as a practice co-constituted by both human agency and

technological affordance; (3) the paradigm shift from romanticization of folk music to scientific study; and (4) the integration of ethnomusicological findings into his compositional work as a form of artistic and scholarly synthesis. In analyzing these themes, the present study draws selectively on insights from Media Archaeology and the history of technology particularly the understanding that recording devices are not neutral conduits of reality but material artifacts that mediate, filter, and partly construct the knowledge they appear merely to capture. This perspective allows for a more critically reflexive reading of Bartók's methodology, acknowledging that his analytical conclusions were not only the product of individual genius, but also the result of working within and against the specific technological constraints of his era.

c. Critical Interpretation and Argument Construction, The final stage involved a critical interpretation of the analyzed data. At this point, the causal relationship among technological innovation (the phonograph), Bartók's scientific methodology, and the birth of modern ethnomusicology was made explicit. The study constructs the central argument that the "spark" of phonograph technology in Bartók's hands enabled the "echo" of folk music to be analyzed with precision, which in turn triggered a revolution in the cross-cultural study of music and laid the foundations for a new scholarly discipline.

By employing this method, the present article does not merely aim to retell the history of Béla Bartók, but also to critically analyze how the intersection of national spirit, technological advancement, and individual genius has fundamentally altered the way the world perceives, studies, and appreciates folk music.

Results and Discussion

3.1. The Transformation of Bartók's Compositional Style: A Synthesis of Folklore and Modernism

Béla Bartók's intensive research into folk music not only produced a monumental corpus of ethnomusicological data, but also fundamentally transformed the musical language and compositional style of the composer himself (Hernon, 2023). Rather than superficially quoting folk melodies, he succeeded in absorbing the essence, structure, and atmosphere of that music, subsequently integrating it organically with the highly developed idioms of Western art music of his time particularly the elements of twentieth-century modernism. This process yielded a synthesis that was unique and deeply personal, distinguishing his work from that of both his predecessors and contemporaries.

In his essay "The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music" (1931), Bartók himself identified three principal ways in which peasant/folk music could be appropriated and transformed into modern music (Gillies, 2001):

a. Use of Original Folk Melodies A composer may take a peasant melody in its entirety or with minor variations and write an accompaniment and, possibly, introductory and concluding phrases. In this approach, Bartók distinguished between two poles; the first, in which the folk melody is treated as a precious "jewel" and the accompaniment serves only as an ornamental frame; and the second, in which the folk melody functions only as a motto or point of departure, while the elaboration and development surrounding it become the more

important element (Hernon, 2023). Works such as *Romanian Folk Dances* (1915) for piano exemplify how authentic melodies are presented with accompaniment that enriches without compromising their original character. It is important, however, to subject this framework to critical scrutiny from the perspective of contemporary cultural ethics. Bartók's own metaphor of the folk melody as a "precious jewel" requiring an ornamental frame is analytically revealing precisely because of what it inadvertently discloses about the power relations embedded in this model of appropriation. The metaphor positions the rural community as the unconscious producer of raw aesthetic material valuable, naturally occurring, but unfinished while reserving for the urban intellectual composer the role of the craftsman who perceives its worth, extracts it from its original setting, and provides the refined frame that renders it legible and presentable to cultivated audiences. This is, in structural terms, a model of cultural extraction the source community contributes the essential substance, yet the act of valorization the determination of what constitutes musical worth and how it ought to be presented remains entirely within the authority of the educated elite. From a contemporary ethnomusicological standpoint informed by postcolonial theory and the ethics of cultural heritage, such a relationship must be acknowledged as asymmetrical and, in important respects, problematic. This is not to diminish the genuine admiration and scholarly rigor Bartók brought to his engagement with folk traditions, nor to reduce his complex practice to a simple act of extraction. Rather, it is to recognize that even the most well-intentioned acts of cultural preservation and artistic synthesis occur within structures of unequal access, unequal recognition, and unequal benefit and that an honest accounting of Bartók's legacy must hold both his transformative contributions and these structural tensions in view simultaneously.

b. Creation of Folk Melody Imitations Rather than using an existing folk melody, the composer creates a new one that imitates the style, character, and idiom of peasant music. Bartók argued that, in essence, there is no fundamental difference between this method and the first, since what matters most is the composer's mastery of the folk musical language.
c. Absorption of the Folk Music Atmosphere This represents the deepest and most subtle level of influence. In this case, the music no longer contains explicit folk melody quotations or even direct imitations; rather, it has been entirely permeated by the atmosphere of peasant/folk music. The folk idiom has become the composer's musical "mother tongue," internalized to such a degree that it naturally and intuitively colors his entire musical expression.

The integration of authentic folk music elements into his compositions encompassed several fundamental aspects. Regarding scales and modality, Bartók made extensive use of ancient pentatonic scales, old church modes (such as Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Mixolydian), and various other non-diatonic scales he found in abundance in Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, and other folk traditions. It is crucial to recognize, however, that the very identification and preservation of these non-diatonic systems was made possible in large part by the mediating role of the phonograph. A human transcriber trained within the Western art music tradition carried an inherent perceptual bias: when attempting to notate unfamiliar microtonal inflections or asymmetrical intervals by ear in real time, the trained musical mind would frequently often unconsciously resolve ambiguous pitches toward the nearest diatonic equivalent, effectively "correcting" what it perceived as deviation

rather than recognizing it as a distinct tonal logic. The phonograph, by contrast, recorded with mechanical fidelity and without cultural preconception, capturing microtonal nuances and non-diatonic contours precisely as they were performed. This allowed Bartók to replay recordings repeatedly and analyze them with deliberate, unhurried scrutiny arriving at transcriptions that preserved the authentic scalar identity of the music rather than assimilating it into Western tonal categories. In this sense, the phonograph was not merely a convenience but an epistemological necessity; it was the technological precondition that made the accurate recognition and subsequent compositional appropriation of these ancient modal and pentatonic systems genuinely possible.

This discovery, he maintained, had liberated him from the tyranny of the major-minor tonal system that had dominated Western art music for centuries, opening up new harmonic and melodic possibilities. Concerning rhythm and metre, he adopted free and frequently shifting rhythmic patterns, irregular (asymmetrical) metres, and particularly the aksak rhythm (often in patterns of 2+3 or 3+2) commonly found in Balkan and Eastern European folk music(Antokoletz, 1984) imparting a distinctive vitality and energy to his music. With respect to harmony, influenced by the melodic contour and modality of folk music, Bartók's harmonic language was often bold, dissonant, and innovative; he developed a polymodal harmonic idiom and frequently employed tone clusters and sharp intervals. In terms of expression and mood, Bartók also captured the expressive essence of folk music, including the use of elements such as lamentation, naturalistic weeping effects, and the solitary, introspective character of monologue, all rooted in vocal and instrumental folk traditions (Schneider, 2006).

Photo 3.1. Bela Bartok
Resource. Stringmagazine.com

Notably, Bartók's sensitivity to the essence of folk music enabled him to discern similar traces even in the work of other composers he admired. He noted that in 1907, on Kodály's encouragement, he began studying the compositions of Claude Debussy and "was astonished to find some pentatonic turns, corresponding to those in our folk music, also playing a large role" (Peker, 2024). He attributed this to the influence of Eastern European folk music, possibly Russian, on Debussy, and perceived similar endeavors in the works of Igor Stravinsky.

The reciprocal relationship between Bartók's ethnomusicological research and his compositional practice was of fundamental importance. His research provided the raw material and new structural principles that refreshed his compositional language, liberating him from late Romantic conventions (Bayles, 2005). Conversely, his innovative compositional works subsequently introduced the

richness of this folk music to an international art music audience, which in turn could influence perceptions and appreciation of the folk music itself. For Bartók, ethnomusicology and composition were not two separate entities but two sides of the same coin, mutually sustaining and enriching each other in a dynamic and ongoing cycle of influence.

He was not merely an assiduous collector, but also a penetrating analyst and innovative theorist. His work provided a model for future ethnomusicological research, underscoring the importance of accurate data collection, meticulous transcription, systematic classification, and careful comparative analysis (Bruggeman, 2013). Bartók not only excavated musical artifacts from the past, but also built an intellectual framework for understanding their cultural and historical significance, rendering him simultaneously a musical archaeologist and a cultural architect who reshaped our understanding of folk music.

3.2. The Birth of Ethnomusicology: Bartók's Central Role

Béla Bartók is broadly recognized as one of the principal founding figures of the discipline of ethnomusicology, which in its early developmental stages was more commonly known as comparative musicology. His multidimensional and pioneering contributions laid the foundational methodological and theoretical principles for the scientific study of music in its cultural context.

The central role of Bartók in the birth of modern ethnomusicology can be traced through several key aspects of his work (Nelson, 2012):

a. Systematic Collection and Intensive Fieldwork, Unlike the approach of earlier amateur collectors, Bartók (often alongside Kodály) conducted systematic and extensive fieldwork. He traveled to remote rural areas to record music directly from cultural practitioners, ensuring that the data collected were as authentic as possible. It is essential, however, to examine this fieldwork practice not only as a methodological achievement but also as a social encounter embedded in pronounced asymmetries of power. Bartók arrived in these rural spaces as a representative of Budapest's Royal Academy of Music an institution of Western art music authority accompanied by the phonograph, a piece of modern industrial technology wholly unfamiliar to most village communities he visited. This combination of institutional prestige and technological apparatus positioned him, regardless of his personal intentions, within a distinctly unequal relational field; the urban, educated, institutionally affiliated researcher entering the subaltern space of the rural peasant community to extract cultural material that would subsequently be analyzed, classified, and presented within the frameworks of Western scholarly discourse.

   The informants the singers, instrumentalists, and custodians of these living oral traditions were not collaborators in any symmetrical sense; they were sources, their musical knowledge harvested for purposes and audiences largely beyond their awareness or influence. Furthermore, the very act of deciding which melodies were worth recording, which performances were deemed sufficiently "authentic," and which materials merited inclusion in published collections involved constant acts of curatorial judgment that reflected Bartók's own analytical priorities and aesthetic sensibilities rather than the values of the communities themselves. This is not to suggest that Bartók's fieldwork was conducted in bad faith his personal respect for peasant musicians and his genuine admiration for their traditions are amply documented. Rather, it is to recognize that good intentions do not dissolve structural inequalities, and that the birth of comparative musicology as a scholarly discipline was

constitutively shaped by these asymmetrical encounters between Western institutional authority and subaltern cultural knowledge. Acknowledging this context does not diminish Bartók's methodological legacy; it renders that legacy more historically honest and more productively available for critical engagement by contemporary ethnomusicologists working under very different ethical frameworks.

b. Utilization of Recording Technology (the Phonograph) for Accuracy and Objectivity The use of the phonograph was a revolutionary step. This instrument enabled Bartók to record musical performances with a degree of accuracy far surpassing the capacity of manual transcription. Sound recordings became primary documents that could be analyzed repeatedly, minimizing the subjective bias of the researcher.
c. Development of Detailed (Microscopic) Transcription Methods Bartók was dissatisfied with standard musical notation. He developed an exceptionally detailed transcription system to capture the subtle nuances of intonation, rhythm, and ornamentation that characterize folk music (Mayes, 2014). This "microscopic" approach aimed to represent the music as closely as possible to its original sound.
d. Construction of a Scientific Classification System To manage the large volume of musical material he collected, Bartók designed a comprehensive melodic classification system based on structural parameters such as the number of sections, caesura pitch patterns, and syllabic structure (Kirk, 2013). This system enabled the systematic organization of data and comparisons between melodies.
e. Rigorous and In-Depth Musical Analysis Bartók did not merely collect and classify; he also undertook profound analyses of the internal structure of folk music, including its scales, modes, rhythms, forms, and variations. Such analysis transcended surface description and sought to understand the underlying musical principles.
f. A Comparative Study Approach Bartók's interest was not confined to Hungarian folk music alone. He actively compared folk music from various ethnic groups and geographical regions (e.g., Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, Arab, and Turkish) to identify similarities, differences, mutual influences, and possible routes of melodic migration or evolution. This comparative approach became a hallmark of early comparative musicology and ethnomusicology. Bartók himself was deeply interested in comparing the folklore of different peoples and in tracing melodic and stylistic borrowings.

The term "comparative musicology" itself first appeared in Guido Adler's writings in 1885 and initially tended to focus on the study of non-Western music, often through methodological perspectives shaped by the Western art music tradition, which risked introducing bias (Myers, 1992). Over time, particularly from the mid-twentieth century onward (approximately the 1950s), the term "ethnomusicology" came to be more widely adopted. This terminological shift reflected a desire to emphasize a more holistic, descriptive, and culturally sensitive approach that values each musical tradition according to its own frame of reference, rather than comparing it solely against Western musical standards. Although Bartók's work was largely conducted before the term "ethnomusicology" was established, the fundamental principles he applied emphasis on fieldwork, accurate documentation, contextual analysis, and careful comparative study are entirely consonant with, and indeed helped shape, much of the core of modern ethnomusicology.

Bartók's endeavor to explore folk music through the phonograph and analyze it scientifically constituted a form of critical modernism. He rejected the romantic and simplistic view of folk music that had prevailed in the nineteenth century, as well as the style hongrois, which he considered inauthentic (Sakarya, 2025). Instead, he sought musical "truth" through rigorous empirical research. The use of the phonograph a modern instrument to excavate and understand traditions of the past was central to his innovative approach, connecting his scholarly inquiry with the broader modernist artistic movement that also sought new forms of expression while drawing upon sources considered more fundamental and authentic.

3.3. The Phonograph: A Revolution in Ethnomusicological Fieldwork

The invention of the phonograph by Thomas Alva Edison in 1877, followed by subsequent developments such as the graphophone employing wax cylinders by Alexander Graham Bell and the gramophone with flat discs by Émile Berliner, brought revolutionary consequences for numerous fields of research, including musicology, ethnology, and anthropology. Sound recording technology fundamentally altered the way researchers documented and analyzed auditory cultural phenomena, while simultaneously laying the crucial technological groundwork for the birth of the discipline of ethnomusicology. Yet this transformation demands critical examination that extends beyond its methodological achievements. The act of arranging a folk performance before the acoustic horn of a phonograph was never a neutral act of documentation it was an intervention that fundamentally reorganized the socio-ritual conditions under which the music originally existed and derived its meaning. Folk music in its living context is rarely, if ever, a disembodied acoustic event it is embedded in specific social occasions, seasonal rituals, communal celebrations, rites of passage, and shared bodily practices that constitute the very conditions of its performance and significance.

A harvest song sung collectively in a field, a lament performed within the emotional gravity of a funeral gathering, or a dance melody inseparable from the kinetic and social energy of its dancers each of these exists as a socially constituted event, not merely as a sequence of pitches and rhythms available for extraction. When Bartók positioned an informant before the phonograph's horn and requested a performance, this arrangement necessarily stripped away the surrounding socio-ritual fabric, the communal participants became an absent audience, the occasion became a clinical session, and the music itself was transformed from a living social act into what might be termed an acoustic specimen isolated, repeatable, and reproducible outside its original habitat. This effect of alienation is not incidental but structural it is an inherent consequence of translating embodied, context-dependent cultural practice into the disembodied, context-independent format of a mechanical recording.

The phonograph, in this sense, did not merely capture folk music it simultaneously estranged it from the conditions that gave it life, producing a representation that was acoustically more faithful than any manual transcription yet ontologically removed from the living tradition it purported to preserve. A critical awareness of this paradox that the most powerful instrument of ethnomusicological preservation was also an instrument of cultural decontextualization is essential for an honest assessment of both the achievements and the limitations of Bartók's foundational methodology.

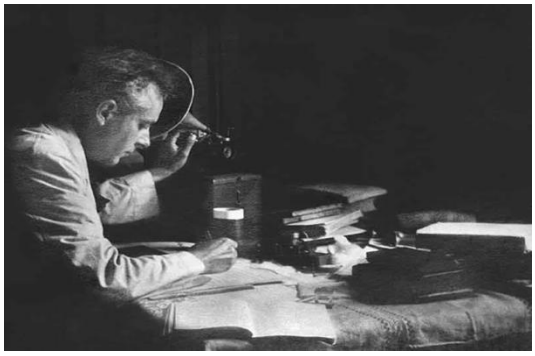

Photo 3.2. Bela Bartok reviews recordings of folk music on the phonograph
Resource. Bartok Archives

Prior to the phonograph era, the sole method for capturing and preserving music was through manual transcription. Collectors and researchers had to rely on their hearing and ability to notate melodies and rhythms in Western staff notation (Brady, 1999). This method suffered from severe limitations. Accuracy depended heavily on the individual transcriber's skill, and subtle nuances such as vocal inflection, intricate ornaments, delicate rhythmic variations, and unique performance characteristics were frequently lost or distorted in the transcription process. Moreover, the subjective bias of the researcher and the cultural bias inherent in the Western notation system could affect the representation of non-Western music.

The phonograph offered a solution to these various limitations. Objectivity and accuracy became its primary advantage; the phonograph enabled the relatively objective and accurate recording of sound, capturing details of musical performance that had previously been impossible to document with precision. Bartók himself acknowledged the phonograph as an essential tool for achieving accuracy and objectivity in his research (Gollin, 2007). The capacity for in-depth analysis through replay represented a further breakthrough; recordings could be played back repeatedly, enabling researchers to check their notations, process material in detail, and study the intricacies of melody, rhythm, and ornamentation with a degree of exactitude previously unimaginable. Bartók, for example, exploited this replay capability to develop his celebrated microscopic transcription technique. Yet the mechanical realities of this process were considerably more complex than a simple slowing of playback speed might suggest. When a wax cylinder was rotated at a reduced speed to allow more deliberate listening, the laws of analog sound reproduction meant that pitch descended proportionally alongside tempo a phenomenon that introduced systematic distortion into every slowed playback session. A melody analyzed at half speed would sound approximately an octave lower than its original register, rendering direct pitch transcription from slow playback acoustically unreliable.

Bartók was therefore compelled to negotiate these technological artifacts through a compound set of compensatory strategies; cross-referencing slowed playback against real-time listening to establish the correct original pitch level, applying his extensive knowledge of modal and pentatonic systems to identify which tonal frame a given melody most plausibly inhabited, and, where ambiguity persisted, returning to the field or consulting informants to verify contested intervallic details. The transcription process was thus never a straightforward act of mechanical translation from sound to notation, but rather an interpretive negotiation between the affordances and limitations of the phonograph, the analytical ear of the researcher, and the elusive acoustic reality of the original performance. It is precisely this layered complexity that renders Bartók's microscopic

transcriptions a remarkable intellectual achievement not despite the technological constraints of his era, but in active dialogue with them.

In Hungary, the ethnographer Béla Vikár is recorded as one of the pioneers in the use of the phonograph for folk music collection, which he undertook from 1896 onward. Bartók subsequently transcribed a substantial portion of Vikár's recorded collection, demonstrating the continuity and development of methodology in Hungarian folk music research (Somfai, 1996). Bartók and his colleague Zoltán Kodály began making extensive use of the phonograph in their fieldwork in the summer of 1906, marking a new era in the study of folk music in the region.

Although the phonograph offered a far higher degree of objectivity compared to manual transcription, it is important to note that the research process as a whole was not entirely free from subjectivity. Bartók himself acknowledged that, as long as human work is involved in the process, subjective elements will undoubtedly be introduced into the recordings. The choice of material to be recorded, the manner of interaction with informants, and the ultimate interpretation of the collected data continued to involve the researcher's decisions and perspectives. The phonograph functioned as an important mediator between the inherent subjectivity of the researcher and the aspiration toward scientific objectivity an instrument that enabled more rigorous analysis while nonetheless requiring the careful and critically reflective engagement of its user.

3.4. The Redefinition of 'Nép' in Hungarian Modernism

The concept of nép, which in Hungarian may signify "people" or "nation," played a pivotal role in Hungarian cultural, political, and nationalist discourse in the early twentieth century (Taylor, 2008). This period was characterized by intensive efforts on the part of various intellectuals and artists to define, preserve, and promote what was considered "authentic" Hungarian culture in the face of the currents of modernization and foreign cultural influence.

In the musical domain, the work of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály in uncovering and popularizing "original" Hungarian peasant music made a significant contribution to the redefinition of Hungarian national musical identity. They consciously distinguished this peasant music which they regarded as the true source of Hungarian musical expression from the more superficial and urban-popular style hongrois, as well as from the magyar nóta (Hungarian urban popular song), which had been substantially influenced by Western art music (Reed, 2007). Through extensive fieldwork, Bartók and Kodály found that the most ancient Hungarian folk melodies were often based on pentatonic scales with a characteristic descending melodic structure (commonly referred to as a fifth-shifting pentatonic structure) (Kodály, 1971). They perceived this structure as an element free from the influence of Western art music and therefore capable of representing genuinely Hungarian music.

Photo 3.3. Bela Bartok and Endre Ady in field
Sumber. Stringmagazine.com

Bartók's endeavors in the musical sphere may be seen as paralleling the Hungarian modernist movement in other arts and literature. Figures such as the poet Endre Ady, for example, were also engaged in a search for authentic expressions of a modern yet tradition-rooted Hungarian identity. A shared spirit existed between Bartók's aim to "purify" Hungarian music of foreign and superficial influences and Ady's efforts to renew the Hungarian poetic language and its themes. Yet the very language of purification warrants critical scrutiny. To define what counted as authentically *nép* was simultaneously to determine what and who did not qualify, the Romani musicians whose *style hongrois* was dismissed as commercialized distortion, the urban Jewish musical culture integrated into Hungarian popular life, and the cosmopolitan Viennese influences woven into bourgeois musical taste were all positioned outside the boundaries of the "genuine." This boundary-drawing was not merely an aesthetic judgment; it operated along lines of ethnic and cultural anxiety that resonated, however uncomfortably, with broader nationalist discourses about cultural contamination and racial authenticity circulating in early twentieth-century Central Europe. Bartók's personal politics were considerably more liberal and anti-nationalist than this framework might suggest his comparative research across Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, and Turkish traditions reflected a genuine openness to cultural hybridity yet the structural logic of purification embedded in his musical program carried ideological implications that extended beyond his individual intentions, implications that a critically honest reading of his legacy cannot afford to overlook. Bartók and Kodály even advocated for Hungarian musicians to master folk music as their musical "mother tongue" an idea reflecting their conviction in the importance of cultural roots in the creation of meaningful and authentic art (Balan, 2024).

Bartók's philosophical perspective on peasant music provided a conceptual foundation for his approach. He often described peasant music as a "natural product," one that develops instinctively and organically, akin to the diverse forms of animal and plant life in nature (Vikárius, 2016). According to him, such music was impulsively created by human communities without formal education and represents the outcome of changes forged by natural forces whose operation is unconscious. This view emphasizes the evolutionary and communal nature of folk music, in which every song is continually shaped and transformed intuitively from one singer to the next, from one generation to the following, without ever attaining a fixed, final form. This conception of folk music as a dynamic natural phenomenon not only justified his meticulous methods of collection and

analysis, but also provided a framework for understanding how this music could serve as a vital source for the renewal of modern art music.

Conclusion

Béla Bartók's journey into the world of folk music ignited by a chance encounter and driven by scholarly zeal and artistic genius has left an indelible mark on the history of twentieth-century music. Through meticulous and methodical folk music research, supported by his innovative use of the phonograph, Bartók fundamentally transformed both the understanding and the methodology of the study of oral musical traditions. He succeeded in shifting the paradigm: from a perspective inclined toward the romanticization and, at times, exploitation of folk music for the purposes of narrow nationalism, toward a scientific approach that valorizes the authenticity, complexity, and cultural context of such music. His profound research not only gave birth to the discipline of modern ethnomusicology, but also significantly revitalized and transformed his own compositional practice. He managed to create a synthesis unique and powerful between the richness of folk tradition and the idioms of twentieth-century modernism, producing works that remain relevant and influential to this day.

Although sound recording technology has advanced considerably since the era of the wax phonograph, the foundational principles applied by Béla Bartók in folk music research remain at the core of contemporary ethnomusicological methodology. His dedication to deep fieldwork, his commitment to accurate recording, his meticulous approach to detailed transcription, his systematic analytical method, and his emphasis on comparative study for understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural music are all pillars that continue to sustain modern ethnomusicological practice. The phonograph, as the initial technological "spark," paved the way for the development of increasingly sophisticated recording devices that now constitute standard tools for ethnomusicologists worldwide. Yet Bartók's most essential legacy lies not in the technology itself, but in his insistence on deep listening and his relentless effort to understand music not merely as an object, but as the living, expressive subject of a culture.

Contemporary scholarship recognizes Bartók as a visionary pioneer. However, as ethical awareness in research has evolved, critical discussions have emerged regarding certain aspects of early twentieth-century fieldwork practice, including issues of representation, cultural ownership, and the relationship between the researcher and the communities studied. Nevertheless, Bartók's methodological contributions remain of inestimable value. In the current era of digitalization and globalization where access to world music is readily available and recording technology increasingly sophisticated Bartók's core principles of respect for authenticity, comprehension of cultural context, in-depth analysis, and reverence for music as a diverse human expression are, in fact, becoming ever more relevant. In the face of cultural homogenization, Bartók's approach which prizes the diversity and specificity of musical cultures offers an important model for contemporary music studies.

The "spark of the phonograph" has evolved into the "digital echo," but the need for careful listening, critical analysis, and contextual understanding remains at the heart of the ethnomusicological endeavor. This evolution is not merely metaphorical it carries concrete and ethically significant consequences for contemporary practice. The wax cylinder recordings that Bartók made in the villages of Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia in the early twentieth century, once accessible only to researchers with physical access to institutional archives, have increasingly become the subject of

systematic digitization efforts by institutions such as the Bartók Archives in Budapest and collaborative projects with ethnomusicological centers across Central and Eastern Europe. Crucially, these digitized recordings are now being used not only for continued scholarly analysis, but also for the cultural repatriation of intangible heritage returning sonic documents of folk performances to the very source communities from which they were originally collected. A Romanian village community may today access a digital reproduction of a melody recorded by Bartók over a century ago; a Slovak folk ensemble may recover lost ornamental practices preserved only on a cylinder that had long resided in a Budapest archive. In this sense, the digital archive does not merely extend Bartók's methodology it fundamentally transforms its ethical orientation, shifting the flow of musical knowledge from one of institutional extraction toward one of communal restoration. The "spark" that once illuminated folk music for the scholarly world has become an "echo" that returns, across generations and borders, to the communities whose voices it originally captured.

Béla Bartók unquestionably occupies a central position not only as one of the most innovative and influential composers of the twentieth century, but also as an indisputable pioneering figure in the formation and institutionalization of ethnomusicology as a globally recognized academic discipline. His work as a composer absorbing and transforming elements of folk music into a modernist language has empowered subsequent generations of composers to explore and integrate folk and classical musical traditions from diverse cultures into their own works, significantly enriching the treasury of world music.

Beyond that, his dedication as an ethnomusicologis through tireless fieldwork, the revolutionary deployment of the phonograph, the development of sophisticated transcription and classification methods, and the publication of rigorous scholarly works has laid a solid foundation for the study of music in a cross-cultural perspective. The "echoes of revolution" set in motion by Bartók and the spark of his phonograph continue to resonate to this day, shaping the way we study, understand, and ultimately appreciate the diversity of human musical expression across the world. He demonstrated that art and science in music are not two separate domains but can enrich each other symbiotically a legacy of thought that remains vital to the future development of musicology and ethnomusicology.

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