

“MUSIC FOR MILLIONS”. JÁNOS MARÓTHY AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH ON POPULAR MUSIC IN SOCIALIST HUNGARY

*Ádám Ignácz*¹

Institute of Musicology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I demonstrate the changes in János Maróthy's aesthetic and political attitudes towards popular music. Being an internationally acknowledged Marxist musicologist, Maróthy found employment in many important musical institutions, in the framework of which he not only had an overview of the events of Hungarian popular music, but with his presentations and articles, in the 1950s and early 1960s he also exerted a considerable influence on them. Using archival data and media coverage, I examine Maróthy's key texts which demanded a revision in the matter of “socialist realism” and which announced a growing attention and tolerance towards the musical products of Western “mass culture”: jazz and pop-rock. His work shows how popular music became a part of academic research in Socialist Hungary.

KEYWORDS: János Maróthy, Hungarian popular music, marxist musicology, socialist realism

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I demonstrate the changes in János Maróthy's (1925–2001) aesthetic and political attitudes towards popular music from the late 1940s up to the early 1970s. Being an internationally acknowledged Marxist musicologist, Maróthy found employment in many important musical institutions, in the framework of which he not only had

¹ ignacz.adam@btk.mta.hu

Some parts of this article have already been published in the author's other articles (in German and Hungarian).

an overview of the events of Hungarian popular music, but with his presentations and articles, in the 1950s and the early 1960s he also exerted a considerable influence on them. In reconstructing and analyzing his aesthetic and sociological approach, however, one can point out Maróthy's forced ideological path, and notice how the Soviet proclamation on "peaceful coexistence" of the two camps and the rapidly changing East-West relations from the 1960s influenced his thinking. With the help of archival data and media coverage, I examine Maróthy's key texts, chosen from different periods. Primarily I elaborate those texts and sketches from the 1960s which demanded a revision in the matter of "socialist realism," and which announced a growing attention and tolerance towards the musical products of Western "mass culture:" jazz and pop-rock. His work shows us how popular music became a part of academic research in Socialist Hungary.

MUSICOLOGY AND SOCIALIST REALISM

Following its campaigns against literature and philosophy, in the beginning of 1948, the Soviet leadership began to intervene in the internal affairs of musical life. The chief party ideologist Andrei Zhdanov delivered two speeches during the convention of Soviet musical experts in the Central Committee of CPSU, in which he incited them to fight against formalism and cosmopolitanism. His words soon turned into a party resolution and were looked upon as doctrines for all musicians in the Soviet Union.

The consequences and conclusions of the resolutions are well-known: socialist realism no longer had an alternative in artistic ideology. Jazz and dance music, maligned as "warmongering instruments" of Western imperialism, could not avoid the devastating critique either, nor the transformation in order to comply with the requirements of the new aesthetic principles.

The news of the events that shocked Soviet artists also spread, within a short time, to Hungary. One of the daily papers, *Szabad Nép* [Free Nation], published the resolutions as early as February 1948, and so did the major musicology journal, *Zenei Szemle* [Musical Review], in the autumn, with the translation of Zhdanov's speeches (Zsdanov 1948). In the same issue of *Zenei Szemle*, one can find an article entitled "Improvizáció és romantika" [Improvisation and Romanticism], written by the 23-year-old musicology student János Maróthy. Referring to the American music historian and sociologist Rudi Blesh, in his article Maróthy considered modern jazz as the most developed form of the art of improvisation, and in the hope of resurrecting music "bonding intimately with society," he showed no inclination to distinguish between the products of "lonely geniuses" and the "masses;" furthermore, up until that point, he rejected the dichotomies of "imperialist" versus "communist" or "bourgeoisie" versus "popular" (Maróthy 1948a).

In his other two articles from this period (Maróthy 1948b; 1949), Maróthy raised very similar issues. In these early articles one can already observe certain motifs that later determined his thinking. All these motifs – such as reevaluating the musical activity of people and the ability to improvise, or bringing the "higher" and "lower" artistic spheres closer to each other – stem from his belief in the collective power of music and in the importance of "music of the masses".

These early papers, nevertheless, are true documents of the times: although they were published under the shadow of the Soviet musical resolutions, they capture a historic moment when these resolutions had not yet been binding in Hungary. Rather, they represent the cultural efforts of the post-war coalition parties (Póth 1985), who concentrated all their energies on creating a “popular culture” based on folk art that, being intelligible and available for everybody, was considered to be able to push its way to “higher” culture.

The future was planned in the new intellectual circles with bustling zeal: there were ardent, but free-atmosphere discussions about the ways to address the masses, and, at that time, the Zhdanovschina appeared to be only one possibility. Thus it might occur that the debates and critiques about the changes in Soviet cultural policy could be publicly conducted. It is a well-known fact, however, how the status changed and how the reception of the Zhdanov doctrines underwent a transformation with the acceleration of the country’s Sovietization. The transition towards socialism entered a new, utopian phase: the Cultural Revolution, started in 1949, demanded the upheaval and reorganization of musical life. Among the executives one mostly finds youngsters who were otherwise very loyal to the new regime. Maróthy, who was singled out in 1954 as the most talented young Marxist musicologist,² also found employment in many important institutions. He was a member of the Musicological Department, the Mass Musical Department and the Popular Musical Department of the Association of Hungarian Musicians. He also became the editor of the new leading musicological journal *Új Zenei Szemle* ([New Musical Review]; founded in 1950), in which he published the very first Hungarian socialist realist music reviews that tried to be an example for the ideal music reviews of the future. And in his new scientific work he tried to popularize the new aesthetic slogan of “national in form, socialist in content” (Maróthy 1951; Maróthy 1953a).

Since publishing anything that deviated from the official line was not permitted anymore after the communist takeover, we should not attempt to infer how ideologically committed he was at that time. This commitment could only be proven by the quantity and influence of his writings and by the nature of his verbal communication during non-public debates in the committees and departments. The student, who had previously sympathized with Bartókian and Kodályian “folk realism” seemed to develop into a supporter of new communist ideas within a few months and become constantly up-to-date concerning the events of Soviet culture.

The aforementioned fundamental motifs of Maróthy’s thinking, however, did not disappear from his main works of this period either – but rather adapted to the changed political circumstances. He remained convinced that the common activities coming from “below” and the collective improvisation are only capable of renewing musical styles. Yet to prove this thesis, from then on he permanently advocated for the necessity of following the new type of Soviet folk art (thriving since 1948), and,

2 A brief of Mrs. Szávai for the Ministry of People’s Education, September 24, 1954. MNL OL (National Archives of Hungary) P2146 71. d.

in general, he emphasized (if not overemphasized) the role of folk tunes, not only in classical, but also in popular music culture.

It is remarkable how Maróthy persisted with his thesis when Stalin died in 1953. This insistence manifests in his programmatic article published in spring 1953 entitled “Tánczenénk fejlesztésének néhány sürgető feladata” [A Few Urgent Tasks Regarding the Improvement of Our Dance Music]. This two-part essay includes what is probably the last large-scale concept of “national dance music.” The point under discussion here, again, was the relation between music and the masses. But its sole aim was to show the world that had been split into two opposing camps. Capitalism, according to Maróthy, oppresses and disorganizes the masses, and destroys the creativity of the people by concentrating on individual talent. In contrast, in the “liberated and democratic” countries and the Soviet Union there is a “golden age” of the art of the masses – people are creating with enormous intensity. Only with this fresh impetus can the “democratic” forces stop the global hegemonic aspirations of the United States that are embodied in recent years’ bourgeois popular music, namely in the “infected, unhealthy swinging” and in the “convulsing jerking of the bebop” (Maróthy 1953b).

Maróthy pushed for a comprehensive reform of the Hungarian dance music scene, and in order to do that, he started to criticize all existing “schools” of the early 1950s. First, the so-called “neutral school,” since on the one hand it purged the dance music repertoire of any songs that could contain attributes of Americanism, but on the other, it did not recognize the liberating effect of the creative power of the masses, expressed in the vitality and virtuosity of the dancing. Second, the so-called “high-quality school,” because it emphasized the role of form and quality. Third, Maróthy also condemned the “Hungarian-style school,” although he described it as the most progressive socialist realist popular music endeavor. He called attention to the dangers of its schematic relation to folk music, but at the same time it was the only “school” for which he made suggestions in order to put it “on the right track” and to eliminate its foreign influences. Starting from the fact that social dances have almost the same metric and rhythmic structure, he worked out a strict musicological method on which he demonstrated how Hungarian *leánytánc* (girls’ dance) should substitute for the slow two-measure dances (such as slow fox) and the Hungarian pig shepherds dances (*kanásztánc*) for the quick two-measure dances (such as twist or boogie woogie). He did not even refrain from bureaucratic intervention to implement this programme: he demanded the creation of a band that could serve as a model and that would be capable of fulfilling the socialist entertainment requirements (Maróthy 1953b).

There was indeed an intervention in June 1953, but it was rather disadvantageous for the musicologist: the new Soviet leadership forced the Hungarian Working People’s Party to admit its former faults and make some compromises. The newly appointed Prime Minister, Imre Nagy announced a new government program, following which a new struggle commenced between the “revisionist” and “dogmatic” wings of the communists. Maróthy, could not avoid self-criticism and a partial correction of his views. Attached to the ministerial statement of the new minister for people’s education, József Darvas (1953), he also accused himself of aristocratism and confessed that the official cultural policy had lost touch with

the people. At the debate-sessions of the Second Musical Week in 1953, in his article entitled “A magyar zene fejlődésének néhány időszerű kérdése” [Some Current Issues Regarding The Development of Hungarian Music] from 1954, and even in his presentation entitled “Zenénk és a tömegek” [Our Music and the Masses] from 1956, he expounded why he disapproved of musicians in Hungary looking down on the masses, as well as Hungarian composers enforcing the new type of songs they were expected to compose “from above” on the people, without asking the people themselves (Maróthy 1954; Maróthy 1956). Do not compose for the stage, he warned in 1956, because the best songs are born during collective amusement, and not on the stage (Maróthy 1956). And from then on, he considered administrative measures risky, expecting success from those new musical pieces that were capable of capturing the “novelty germinating in the mind of the masses” (Ibid.). Only this novelty could beat the old and outmoded way of thinking that made a distinction between classical and popular, and moreover, between popular and mass music. Maróthy argued for breaking down the walls between these musical styles, and set up again a model as an ideal, in which popular music blazed the trail towards the higher musical spheres.

In fact, the aforementioned corrections could only be considered as minor shifting of accents. At that time, the “correction” for him meant going back to the pre-1951 phase of the communist establishment. He criticized the paralyzing effects of bureaucratic mechanisms between 1951 and 1953 and the relatively free atmosphere of the post-1953 period for retaining the capitalist dichotomy of the “ivory tower” versus “trash,” as well as for giving up the comprehensive and centralized concept of the socialist realist transformation of musical life.

During these years, however, Maróthy could not see or even acknowledge the extent to which the regime was illusionistic, and the extent to which it ignored the existing differences and contradictions between the social classes. The Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and the Hungarian Revolution) in 1956, however, changed everything, including the interpretation of Zhdanov and socialist realist music.

RECONSIDERATION

In the 1960s, due to the dramatic changes occurring in both national and international policy, Maróthy had to gradually reconsider the cultural and ideological legacy of the 1950s. One of his first steps in that direction was to redefine the terms “people” and “nation,” or rather, to point out their misinterpretation during the high Stalinist period. Maróthy once again promulgated the primacy of Lenin’s theories of populism (*narodnichestvo*), i.e. “raising the most backward classes of society to the higher spheres of culture” (Maróthy 1982).

Maróthy, who found employment in the Budapest Bartók Archives, further realized that Stalinist cultural policy, albeit aspiring to a “humanistic totality,” excluded works, schools, even entire epochs from the socialist realist canon, and it sensed the

“smell of bourgeois decay” even where capitalism and bourgeois tastes were carped.³ This is why the musicologist tried later to rehabilitate the so called “golden ‘20s” and searched for artists of that time who had taken up the fight against petty bourgeoisie taste and the individualism of the Western consumer society. Presenting the works of Shostakovich, Eisler or Prokofiev as real prototypes for socialist realist art, Maróthy explained that this period, beginning with the October Socialist Revolution in 1917, did not resign to reduce the gap between the artist and the masses, and wanted to transform the social and receptive framework of the arts in order to express the collective experience of music.

The aforementioned changes in Maróthy’s ideological and aesthetic approach also affected his judgments on “popular” (here: “everyday”) music. At the first stage, he was ready to redefine *jazz* as a genre and reconcile with it. In his article entitled “Kinek a zenéje és meddig?” [Whose music and for how long?], published in 1961 in the journal *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature], Maróthy seemed to put himself ahead of the modernization of Hungarian scientific discourses on popular music (Martóhy 1961). Hungarian jazz historians referred to this essay as the starting point of the emancipation of this genre in the socialist musical environment. We have to keep in mind, however, that Maróthy here, as well as in his later reflections, such as in his major work *Zene és polgár, zene és proletár* [Music and Bourgeois, Music and Proletarian], already turned away from the main directions of the local discussions on jazz. He did not concentrate on the presumptive role of jazz in the improvement of musical taste, and did not consider it as an effective instrument capable of putting an end to the flow of Western dance music. Rather, he was interested in the social roots of this type of music, and therefore he made a sharp distinction between the so-called “native” jazz and “commercial” jazz. He clearly preferred the former. Before its commercialization, he said, jazz connected the destiny of poor black people and white proletarians, and regenerated collective creativity. With its dynamic rhythmic and harmonic system, “native” jazz was able to both imitate and destroy any form of bourgeois music. Neither its dirty notes, nor its glissandos and syncopes exist for the sake of art; they are instead for the critics, as well as for the negation of bourgeois sentimentality and expressivity. According to Maróthy, “native” jazz was a true (proto)-realist art, yet the later jazz styles did not fulfill the conditions of realism (Maróthy 1966).

From his 1961 article onwards, Maróthy designated, for instance, the so-called “pentatonic” jazz, which is equal to the above-mentioned “Hungarian-style dance music” of the early 1950s. He objected not only to its practical imperfections, but also denied the entire concept of “national dance music” and called the concept of a “nationalistic musical culture” in the 20th century anachronistic. Shifting from Stalinist nationalism to a socialist internationalism, he also emphasized the importance of cultural relations and interrelations of Hungary with other countries and nations.

He condemned the so-called “sweet jazz” for quite different reasons: “with its

3 Maróthy, János: „Népiség és folklór – ma: Történeti és aktuális megfontolások a marxista népiség-elmélethez” (manuscript), MZA (Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music, Hungarian Academy of Sciences) I.2004/21.3.

mechanically beating accompaniment and the sentimental melody floating above it,” sweet jazz “represents the bourgeois episteme,” as well as the serial and punctual musical endeavors. The same goes with the snobby “cool jazz” as it depicts the cynicism and emptiness of imperialist ideology (Maróthy 1966).

The aforementioned aesthetic-sociologist model explains to us why Maróthy revaluated those new folk singers whose background was in the labour movement (such as Pete Seeger, Josh White or Paul Robeson), and why he supported “the amateur guitarist” movement also coming from a working-class environment, despite its Western origins. Maróthy predominantly took the side of folkish beat songs with political lyrics, even when it caused arguments between him and his comrades. This was also true later on when the official cultural policy tried to get rid of bands with their own political songs, because they were making small profit. Only few people demanded the development of the artistic activity of the masses, and the supporting of the new wave of youth music, as persistently as him.

CONCLUSION

By the end of the 1960s, Maróthy had already formulated a modified canon of socialist realism that included those genres of Western popular music that had resisted the capitalist methods of entertainment, distribution and economy. In his famous essay entitled “A beat ürügén – a művelődésről” [On the Pretext Of the Beat Music – Regarding Education], he made it entirely clear that in a socialist culture mass genres are not adversaries of ‘high’ art. Capitalism, however, has torn humans and their culture into pieces, and these pieces are turning against each other. What was a young beat music fan to do if they were advised to listen to Mozart instead of beat music? And what was a Puccini fan to do if they were forced to listen to Stockhausen? The very demarcation line lies not between ‘light’ and ‘serious’ or ‘modern’ and ‘traditional,’ but within these categories. One who understands native jazz is also able to reach Bartók, while a lover of romantic operetta accesses even Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* more quickly than Bartók’s *Second Piano Concerto* (Maróthy 1969–1982: 107–108).

These remarks can be identified with the original music aesthetic and music political objectives of the communists, but not with those of the 1970s. After 1968, leaders of Hungarian cultural policy were far too interested in preserving the dichotomy of education versus entertainment, or of classical music versus popular music. In music policy the economic-commercial aspects prevailed over the ideological one. Thus, becoming old-fashioned, János Maróthy, who had been an initiator and major figure of the local political and aesthetic discussions concerning the popular music for decades, lost his influence and was gradually ousted from the public. However, he remained loyal to his principles. His persistence made conducting research on popular music genres in the Department of Sociology of Music at the Budapest Institute of Musicology (from 1969) possible, and therefore, a new discipline, popular music studies was able to set foot officially in Hungary.

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АДАМ ИГЊАЦ

„Музика милиона“

ЈАНОШ МАРОТИ И АКАДЕМСКО ПРОУЧАВАЊЕ ПОПУЛАРНЕ МУЗИКЕ У
МАЂАРСКОЈ

(САЖЕТАК)

У овом раду разматрам делатност Јаноша Маротија (1925–2001) и промене његових естетичких и политичких ставова у односу на популарну музику, у периоду од краја четрдесетих до почетка седамдесетих година XX века. Као међународно признат музиколог марксистичке оријентације, Мароти је радио у многим значајним музичким институцијама, које су му пружале платформу са које је могао не само да прати догађања у мађарској популарној музици, већ и да значајно утиче на њих, посебно путем јавних наступа и чланака објављених током педесетих и почетком шездесетих година прошлог века. При покушају реконструисања и анализирања његових естетичких и социолошких ставова, суочавамо се са Маротијевом форсираном идеолошком путањом и примећујемо да су совјетски проглас о „мирољубивом сапостојању“ два кампа и промене у односима између Истока и Запада од почетка шездесетих година итекако имали утицаја на његова размишљања. На основу архивских података и сачуваних медијских записа, разматрам кључне Маротијеве текстове, из различитих раздобља његовог рада. Првенствено се бавим текстовима и скицама из шездесетих, у којима је Мароти захтевао ревизију тумачења „социјалистичког реализма“ и који су најавили његову све већу пажњу и толеранцију за музичке производе западњачке масовне културе: цез и поп-рок. Тиме његови написи показују како је популарна музика постала део академских расправа у социјалистичкој Мађарској.

Након 1968. године, креатори мађарске културне политике били су заинтересовани за очување дихотомије између образовања и забаве, односно, између класичне и популарне музике. На подручју музике економско-комерцијални аспект превагнуо је над идеолошким. Оваквим обртом, Јанош Мароти, који је деценијама био иницијатор и најзначајнији протагониста политичких и естетичких дискусија у вези са популарном музиком, постао је „превазиђен“, изгубио утицај и постепено нестао из јавног живота. Међутим, он је остао веран својим принципима. Захваљујући његовом деловању, проучавање популарне музике на Одсеку за социологију музике при Музиколошком институту у Будимпешти постало је могуће од 1969. године, а студије популарне музике су званично утемељене као нова научна дисциплина.

Кључне речи: Јанош Мароти, мађарска популарна музика, марксистичка музикологија, социјалистички реализам