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# *Interpretation of Hungarian works in cello repertoire*

*Exploring possible ways of approaching music  
written by Hungarian composers*

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## **Abstract**

This essay investigates how a musician's background influences their interpretation of Hungarian cello music, focusing on the Sonata for Solo Cello by György Ligeti and the Duo for Violin and Cello by Zoltán Kodály. Exploring the connection between nationality, musical upbringing, and interpretive choices, the essay delves into Hungarian folk music's influence on these compositions. It examines the role of the Hungarian language in shaping rhythmic interpretations and analyzes recordings and scores to identify effective performance strategies. Through score analysis and examples of alterations, the essay proposes methods for achieving authenticity in interpreting unfamiliar cultural music traditions.

## **Key words**

*folk music, interpretation, authenticity, score analysis, Hungarian language*

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	2
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	3
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>2. Purpose, methods and research questions</b> .....	6
2.1 Purpose.....	6
2.2 Methods.....	7
2.3 Research questions.....	7
<b>3. About folk music in Hungary</b> .....	8
3.1 How the text influences interpretation.....	9
Example 1, folk song <i>Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek</i> .....	9
Example 2, straightforward performance.....	9
Example 3, performance with imaginative phrasing.....	10
Example 4, understanding the meaning of the text of the folk song <i>Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek</i> .....	10
Example 5, reading and analysing the text in its original language	11
Example 6, the influence of the text on phrasing.....	12
Example 7, singing the folk song.....	13
3.2 Using folk songs as a source in composition.....	13
<b>4. Folk music elements in the repertoire performed at my master recital</b> .....	14
<b>4.1 The Sonata for Solo Cello by Ligeti</b> .....	15
4.2 About different interpretations of the sonata – comparison and preferences	16
Finding the right timing.....	16
Romantic style versus simplicity.....	18
Fragments of motives near the end.....	20
4.3 Conclusions after comparing different recordings.....	21
<b>4.4 The Duo for Violin and Cello by Kodály</b> .....	22
Strong opinions on interpretation – the dilemma of listening or not listening to recordings.....	23
The tempo and character of the opening.....	24
The second subject.....	25
Rhythmic patterns – the importance of playing the same material in a similar way.....	27

The buildup to the first culminating point.....	29
Grandioso themes for the violin – can they be free in tempo?.....	31
Interpreting the recitativo-like cello theme.....	35
The ending of the first movement.....	36
<b>5. Overall conclusions</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>42</b>

# 1. Introduction

When I was planning my master exam concert repertoire, I was sure I wanted to include pieces by Hungarian composers. The reason was my own background: I wanted this concert to be personal and reflect my musical journey so far, and an important part of this was through music from my home country. In the end, two out of the three pieces I chose were by Hungarian composers: the Sonata for Solo Cello by György Ligeti and the Duo for Violin and Cello by Zoltán Kodály. Another reason why I picked this repertoire was that I had a particularly clear view about how the music should be interpreted, and I felt very confident about my approach.

During the stage of studying the pieces, however, after listening to several recordings, I came to the conclusion that it took some time until I found recordings I was convinced by. Even though some of the musicians were reputable artists whose playing I enjoyed otherwise, I didn't always fully agree with their musical choices and in the end I found myself mostly listening to Hungarian players like Miklós Perényi and Barnabás Kelemen.

I felt 'at home' straightaway. I did not consider it before that Hungarian music might not be that straightforward for musicians with a different background. When listening to some other interpretations, certain details didn't feel right for my taste. I had thoughts such as *that* particular ornament should have been quicker, the tempo was too hesitant, there was not enough drive and fire in *this* exact passage, *this* melody was played in an overly emotional way while it should have been simple instead, etc.

At the time when I listened to the above mentioned repertoire first, I had not studied the scores yet. This means that whether or not I liked a certain recording was depending on my taste and musical instinct at that point. Therefore, I would like to stress that it was my personal opinion at this point and someone else with a similar background might not have the same taste – people are different. At this first encounter with the music, I did not have a way of knowing whether my opinion had a connection with the performer respecting the score or it was just a taste issue likely to be based on some kind of performance tradition I did not even think about before. However, when I started learning the repertoire, I attempted to read the music as thoroughly as I could to have a clear picture of what the composer wanted – this is when I came to the conclusion that this important first step was missing in the cases of numerous recordings.

In my opinion, if the performer is not respectful of the score – by playing different tempos, different dynamics, and in some cases, even different notes to what the composer wrote – we cannot even talk about the next layer, which is whether there is something in the music which requires a deeper understanding of folklore and performance tradition. In my opinion, understanding what the composer's will was through the analysis of the score should be the first step of learning new repertoire. If this work has been done, there comes the other important aspect: personal choices, emotions and expression. I believe that the order is important: first comes the composer's will while the musician's own intent is secondary, however, playing without it can result in a rather dull and impersonal performance.

Later during my analysis, I will attempt to separate these two factors: being true to the score as a starting point and performing with one's own ideas. I would like to investigate whether the particular performer's background has some impact on their musical choices. While the question of being true to the score is more black-and-white, whether one's personal choices deliver their intent seems highly subjective. After raising these dilemmas, I thought this would make an interesting topic for my research.

## **2. Purpose, methods and research questions**

### **2.1 Purpose**

I want to investigate why I consider certain interpretations of these works (the Sonata for Solo Cello by Ligeti and the Duo for Violin and Cello by Kodály) more or less convincing. I would like to get a deeper knowledge of my own aesthetic understanding and skills in this specific musical tradition. Specifically, I would like to research how my Hungarian background influences my interpretation of this repertoire by looking at examples of folk music as it was often used as a source by Hungarian composers. I would like to reflect on the way my knowledge about folk songs affects my ideas of interpretation unconsciously, and whether becoming familiar with Hungarian folk music could influence the interpretations of musicians from different cultural backgrounds. I would also like to understand why I disagree with particular interpretations: whether the reason is mostly connected to the performers not being true to the score or if it has more to do with the other, more subjective factor – performance tradition and taste influenced by the origin of the piece.

## **2.2 Methods**

I am going to compare some specific parts of certain recordings I find convincing and others which I do not feel the same way about. I would like to highlight that my first impressions of the interpretations mentioned later in my research were based on feelings and thoughts which are subjective and personal. I intend to find reasons to explain my thoughts through studying the score and looking for examples of folk music elements to which I can find possible references in the music. I would like to include how an imaginary text could help with the correct phrasing if one speaks Hungarian, and whether it could help musicians whose mother tongue is not Hungarian if they are made familiar with the melody and some principals of the language. It is very important to stress that my primary source of analysis will be the score, attempting to understand the composers' will to the fullest possible extent. Then I would like to reflect on some of my unconscious feelings towards interpretation which might not be marked in the music. I would like to research whether these ideas come to my mind because of my background, and if so, how these 'unwritten rules' can be accessible for musicians from foreign cultures. I will also include some parts of my own master recital where I performed this repertoire to demonstrate my personal musical choices and compare it to other interpretations.

## **2.3 Research questions**

I am looking for answers to the following questions:

How does being born and raised in the Hungarian music culture affect my abilities to understand and interpret Hungarian music?

How does my own musical and cultural background provide me tools to evaluate interpretations of music by Hungarian composers?

On the other hand, how does having a certain background affect the interpretation of musicians when performing works by foreign composers?

What methods could one use as an attempt to perform foreign repertoire authentically?

### 3. About folk music in Hungary

Folk music in a wider sense refers to those songs which a certain nation still sings or used to sing, and which are strongly expressing the musical intuition of that particular nation (Bartók, 1981, p. 9). Bartók (1981) also mentions that those songs which are only known by a small number of villagers should not be considered as examples of folk music, and the same goes for patriotic songs which pupils only become familiar with once they start school.

Vargyas (1970) mentions that the existence of folk songs was not known to the Hungarian public until the end of the 19th century. People in towns and cities only heard of songs written by contemporary song composers which represented the current trend and 'if there happened to be a few old, genuine folk-melodies among them, they were hard to recognize because of the poor notation.' (Vargyas, 1970, p. 1)

The collection of folk traditions began at the end of the century when the folklorist Béla Vikár used a phonograph to collect material for his work. Even though he recorded a large number of folk songs, because of not being a musician himself, he could not notate the melodies. One of the figures who is – up to this day – known as one of the most important 'ambassadors' of Hungarian folk music is Zoltán Kodály, who already recalls being familiar with songs in his childhood, growing up in the countryside (see Vargyas, 1970, for more detail).

As Vargyas (1970) states, Kodály already felt the urge to get acquainted with the folk music tradition at a young age, but it was only after having seen Vikár's collection and having heard some of the recorded tunes at an exhibition that he got motivated to do more research. The composer Béla Bartók also became familiar with Kodály's plan about collecting the remaining folk tunes and since he 'also sought new ways of laying the foundation for genuine Hungarian musical art', he started collaborating with Kodály from 1905 onwards, discovering Hungarian musical tradition (Vargyas, 1970, p. 2).

Bartók (1981) wondered how to start collecting folk music as it seemed a huge task indeed. He claimed that all songs had to be notated regardless of their musical value, and that it was not enough to only write down these melodies on paper; the singers had to be recorded using a phonograph or gramophone even if the melodies were very simple. *Why*, the reader could wonder. Because these interpretations have certain characteristics which cannot be notated otherwise, for example their fresh-flowing, unbound rhythm and the tone of the singer



(Bartók, 1981, p. 11). Vargyas (1970) also writes about the same difficulties when it comes to notating folk songs. He believes that 'these tunes are almost impossible to write down from listening because the ornaments sound different every time you listen to them.' (Vargyas, 1970, p. 4). These are the songs which we call *parlando rubato*. *Parlando* means *spoken*, a way of interpretation which is free and suited to the text influencing the rhythm. It is the opposite of *tempo giusto*, which is also very common for Hungarian folk songs and means *to be played with clear and steady rhythm*. *Rubato* also refers to a free way of interpretation, but not as much flexibility as *parlando*. It is often difficult to separate *parlando* and *rubato*, so they often go together when it comes to markings of interpretation.

### 3.1 How the text influences interpretation

#### **Example 1, folk song *Erdők, völgyek szűk ligetek***

Let's look at an example of a Hungarian folk song. First I will attach the score without the text and performance instructions.



Figure 1: Sheet music of a Hungarian folk song without text (original image). Retrieved from [on9c5vy0.png \(763×172\)](https://on9c5vy0.png) ([wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)) on March 20, 2023. Modified by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

#### **Example 2, straightforward performance**

Let's assume this is the first time I see this melody. The only information provided is that it is a Hungarian folk song, but I don't know anything about the text or the topic. I cannot see any tempo or interpretation markings either. This way, I have to trust the notation attached above. And let's also assume I don't have any particular knowledge about Hungarian folk music. Imagine this tune in a solo piece for cello. How would I perform it without 'investigating' further? [This short sound recording is an example](#) (fannipelle, 2024a).

### **Example 3, performance with imaginative phrasing**

There could be other possible ways of playing this melody of course. But without knowing the text, the performer could assume that the quavers are slightly off-string, staccato-like, and that the tied notes are important and give some groove to the music. Now let's see another possible way, [from a different imaginary performer demonstrated by me](#) (fannipelle, 2024b).

In this recording the performer decided to play the quavers on the string, so the character of the song is a bit different compared to the previous one. But as there were no instructions about tempo and interpretation, she decided to stay true to the rhythm which is written.

### **Example 4, understanding the meaning of the text of the folk song *Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek***

After having played this melody, our imaginary performer decides to search what this folk tune could be as an attempt to play it more authentically. And here is the result:

The image shows a musical score for a folk song. It consists of two staves of music in 2/4 time, with a tempo marking of quarter note = 60. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are in Hungarian, and an English translation is provided below. The Hungarian lyrics are: "Erdők, völgyek, szűk li - ge - tek, so - kat bujdos - tam ben - ne - tek. Bujdostam én a va - dakkal, sír - tam a kis ma - da - rakkal." The English translation is: "Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek, Édesanyám sok szép szava, Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek, sokat bujdos-tam bennetek. kire nem hajlottam soha. elmegyek már közületek. Bujdostam én a vadakkal, Hajlanék én, de már késő, Gondom nem jól viseltétek, sírtam a kis madarakkal. hullik fölöttem az eső. szívem rabbá ejtettétek."

Figure 2: Screenshot from Wikipedia. The same folk song with text. Retrieved from [https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erd%C5%91k,\\_v%C3%B6lgyek,\\_sz%C5%B1k\\_ligetek](https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erd%C5%91k,_v%C3%B6lgyek,_sz%C5%B1k_ligetek) on March 20, 2023

After finding the song on the internet, the performer comes to the conclusion that understanding the text would be really helpful and therefore translates it to English. See my own translation below.

Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek, Sokat bujdosam bennetek. Bujdosam én a vadakkal, Sírtam a kis madarakkal.	Forests, valleys, narrow groves, I have wandered so much in all of you. I have wandered with the wild animals, And cried with the small birds.
Édesanyám sok szép szava, Kire nem hajlottam soha. Hajlanék én, de már késő, Hullik fölöttem az eső.	My mother's many nice words Which I never obeyed... I would now, but it's too late, The rain is pouring down above me.
Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek, Elmegyek már közületek. Gondom nem jól viseltétek, Szívem rabbá ejtettétek.	Forests, valleys, narrow groves, I am going and leaving you. You didn't take good care of me, Because you enslaved my heart.

Figure 3: Lyrics of the folk song with translation to English. Translated by Fanni Noémi Pelle, March 20, 2023

In my opinion, becoming familiar the meaning of the text definitely influences how one's interpretation of this melody. For example, understanding that the text is quite melancholic, the first recording doesn't really match its atmosphere. One could think that the second one could be closer to how the song is performed, but there is something more we haven't considered: prosody, which refers to the 'study of the elements of language, especially metre, that contribute to rhythmic and acoustic effects in poetry.' (Prosody summary, 2020).

### **Example 5, reading and analysing the text in its original language**

Not speaking the language definitely sets a quite difficult task for the performer. I have many memories from my primary and high school years when I was a member of a choir: when preparing for a competition or tour abroad and there was a compulsory piece in the country's own language, it took some time for us to learn it. In these cases, we always received a recording of the text read by a native speaker, so that is what I will do now – [here comes a recording of the first verse in Hungarian](#) (fannipelle, 2024c). If one listens to the recording, they may notice that the length of the syllables is different depending on the vowels and consonants. Below you can see an illustration where  $\cup$  means *short syllable*,  $-$  stands for *long syllable*, ' means *accented syllable* and | marks *the end of the word*.

Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek,  
 ' - | ' - u | ' - | u u u  
 Sokat bujdostam bennetek.  
 ' u u | - u u | - u u  
 Bujdostam én a vadakkal,  
 ' - u u | - | u | ' u - u  
 Sírtam a kis madarakkal.  
 ' - u | u | u | ' u u - u

Figure 4: Illustration of the rhythm of the text. Illustration created by Fanni Noémi Pelle, March 20, 2023

**Example 6, the influence of the text on phrasing**

The reader can see above how the rhythm of the lyrics would look like if there was no melody attached. However, the tune also influences the length of certain syllables. I am going to show this by using some symbols in the score and explanation below.



Figure 5: Folk song with the author’s markings. Modified image from Wikimedia Commons. (Modifications made by Fanni Noémi Pelle, April 15, 2024. Original image retrieved from [on9c5vy0.png \(763x172\) \(wikimedia.org\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:on9c5vy0.png) on March 20, 2023.)

I marked what I consider to be important in this song regarding both lyrics and melody. In the first line, the melody is very simple, recitativo-like, consisting of 2 notes. In my opinion, the first syllable (*Er*, the first syllable of the word *Erdők*=forests) is important since it marks the beginning of the song. Moreover, it is one of the characteristics of Hungarian language to accent the start of words. The melodic pattern of the first line includes a repeated G (3x)

which goes to F, indicating that the melody flows until the lower note. After that, the second important syllable, which is also a whole word in our case is *szűk* at the beginning of the second bar, exactly where the melody goes up to G again. Since *ligetek* is one word with three short syllables, a native singer would probably take more time on the syllable with the long vowel, *szűk*. At the end of the first line (ending with the first double barline), the long F note is kept longer because there is some time after the comma in the text which connects the two parts of the sentence as well.

In the second line, the melody goes up in the first bar, so I would sing this bar with direction until it drops to the lower C, marking the beginning of the word *bennetek*. Similarly, this line also ends with a longer note since the first sentence ends here.

The third line reaches the top note C after a perfect fourth interval and stays there longer. Unlike in speech where the word *én* (=I) is not accented this time, it becomes the most important syllable throughout the third line because of the C note.

The fourth line starts with the word *sírtam* meaning *I cried*, an important syllable because of its meaning and the long vowel „*i*”. This line has the lowest note of the whole melody, B flat, one note below the note C where the song ends, so it should also be shown a little bit when it is performed.

### **Example 7, singing the folk song**

After this explanation, let's hear the song, [first in my interpretation](#) (fannipelle, 2024d). Followed by [Katalin Halmi and Zoltán Kocsis](#) (Kris9kris, 2012, 0:06:46). The song was used in the last cycle of folk songs for voice and piano by Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, namely *Twenty Hungarian Folksongs* (Húsz magyar népdal, n.d.).

## **3.2 Using folk songs as a source in composition**

If we think of the example of the folk song *Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek*, we can note that there are differences between the tune Bartók uses and to the one I showed previously. There could be several reasons why: firstly, a certain folk song usually exists in various forms. It is a natural phenomenon that if the primary way people learn something is word of mouth, it could change slightly after some time depending on the performer. Think of a grandmother who used to sing a particular folk tune next to the fireplace and her grandchildren remember the melody and text after having heard it several times. She probably learnt it from her own

parents decades ago and just passes it on the way she remembers it, exchanging a few words and changing the melody a little bit, unintentionally. The grandchildren also continue these traditions later when they grow up, slightly modifying the melody and text.

Secondly, the composer might change the melody, add accompanying harmonies, etc. Bartók (1981) writes about several different ways folk tunes can be used in composition. One way is using the melody as it is but adding accompaniment or introduction, interlude or postlude. In this case, however, the folk tune is of primary importance compared to the accompaniment which just serves the melody. The other way is the exact opposite: the folk tune is only the motto of the composition, what is more important is the music surrounding it. In several cases it is hard to decide which of these ways is more present in the composition because it is not so black and white. The most important thing is that the character of the folk song should decide what kind of music the composer adds to it and that the melody and everything else feels like an inseparable unit (Bartók, 1981, pp. 35-36).

#### **4. Folk music elements in the repertoire performed at my master recital**

As I have mentioned before, I was certain about including pieces of Hungarian origin on my *examenskonsert*, mostly because I felt comfortable playing them and also because I wanted to dedicate some of the repertoire to my home country which has contributed so much to my musicianship. I was sure about including the Duo for Violin and Cello by Zoltán Kodály as a way of giving credits to the school where I started my music education. This was an institution named after Kodály and educating with the help of his principles. He believed that the primary instrument should be the human voice: we had five music lessons a week where the teachers were using the so-called *Kodály method* where most of the focus was on introducing us to our cultural heritage through folk songs. We had intensive ear training through sung *solfège* (also known as solfa), using a *moveable-do system*, sang in choirs from third grade and most of the students learned to play one or more instruments too.

The other piece I decided to play was the Sonata for Solo Cello by György Ligeti. Some members of the general public might believe they are unfamiliar with the composer's music before finding out that his works were used as soundtrack in Stanley Kubrick's films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Eyes Wide Shut* or *The Shining*. In any case, the reader might wonder how the term *folk music* and Ligeti's name can be mentioned on the same

page. It is true that Ligeti might be more known for his later works where he experimented with new composition techniques such as *micropolyphony*, but these are completely different from his early works which often recall the musical language of Bartók and Kodály.

#### 4.1 The Sonata for Solo Cello by Ligeti

Although this piece has become an integral part of cello repertoire, it had not been performed for more than two decades after the young Ligeti finished it in 1953. The first movement, *Dialogo* (1948) was originally dedicated to a fellow student at the Liszt Academy where the young composer also studied. The cellist – namely Annus Virányi, towards whom Ligeti had romantic feelings in secret – unfortunately never performed the piece, probably not having understood the composer's gesture. It was only after meeting the virtuosic cellist Vera Dénes some years later when Ligeti decided to expand the first movement into a two-movement sonata, adding the technically demanding *Capriccio*. At this time, Hungary was a part of the Communist Bloc which also had an effect on composers: they had to submit all new compositions to the so-called Composers' Union for approval, and unfortunately, the newly finished sonata didn't stand a chance (see Steinitz, 2003, pp. 51-52, for more detail). As Ligeti remembers later:

We were denied permission to publish the work or to perform it in public, but we were allowed to record it for radio broadcast. She made an excellent recording for Hungarian Radio, but it was never broadcast [I believe]. The committee decided that it was too 'modern' because of the second movement... (As cited in Steinitz, 2003, p. 52)

I personally find the first movement more challenging musically and the second movement technically. Ligeti himself admitted that his early compositions were heavily influenced by Bartók and Kodály (Várnai et al., 1983, p. 7). This could be one reason why playing the first movement can be difficult without knowledge about the influence of folk music in the above mentioned composers' works. As cited in the liner notes by Steven (1991) of the CD recorded by cellist Matt Haimovitz, Ligeti described the first movement as follows:

It's a dialogue. Because it's like two people, a man and a woman, conversing. I used the C string, the G string and the A string separately... I had been writing much more 'modern' music in 1946 and 1947, and then in '48 I began to feel that I should try to be more 'popular'... I attempted in this piece to write a beautiful melody, with a typical Hungarian profile, but not a folksong... or only half, like in Bartók or in Kodály—actually, closer to Kodály.

Haimovitz met Ligeti in person in Hamburg in 1991 to get a deeper understanding of the way the piece should be performed and writes about it as being an 'eye-opening experience'. The

cellist also mentions that Ligeti sang the melody of the first movement for him so that he could get a better picture of the composer's intent (Lloyd, 2022). Although Ligeti made up the tune in the first movement himself, he definitely took inspiration from the newer type of Hungarian folk songs. I will elaborate on this shortly below in my analysis.

#### **4.2 About different interpretations of the sonata – comparison and preferences**

Based on the sources above, we can agree that the composer had a very clear view about the interpretation of his piece. He acknowledged the link between the music in *Dialogo* and Hungarian folk music, moreover, even referred to Bartók and Kodály – both known as composers who used Hungarian folk music in their own compositions. As I mentioned before, when I was getting familiar with the sonata for the first time and started learning it myself, I had difficulty finding a recording which I really found convincing. I usually prefer the interpretations of certain cellists in particular styles, so it's not unusual that it takes some time until I find one I really enjoy listening to. [I knew about Miklós Perényi's interpretation](#) (Ligeti, 2012) which caught my attention the very first time I listened to it. In general I try to be cautious when listening to recordings as I want to rely on my own musical ideas rather than copying others. However, I believe there is a way in the middle where one gets familiar with the possible playing traditions of a certain piece but takes their own decisions afterwards. A fellow cellist recommended listening to [Mathias Johansen's recording on YouTube](#) (Mathias Johansen, 2011) which I did, however, I was not convinced afterwards. I am going to use this recording as an example of the situation when a reputable cellist's performance leaves me with the feeling that something is missing, or the opposite: too much.

After listening to his performance, I simply felt that this – otherwise – great cellist is either not familiar with the fact that the first movement is inspired by folk music or he doesn't know in what way this information could have influenced his interpretation. I mostly feel this in terms of timing, dynamics and his choices of vibrato and bow pressure. Let me mention a few examples.

##### **Finding the right timing**

[Let's listen to the beginning of Johansen's recording.](#) The composer's markings are *adagio*, *rubato* and *cantabile*, and even though Johansen takes his time to get into the right atmosphere, I get the feeling that he is rushing in between the different musical materials: the *pizzicato* chords joining together by a *glissando* and the melody itself. I have marked the



places where transitions are too quick for my taste.

**Sonate**  
für Violoncello solo  
(1948/53)

György Ligeti  
\* 1923

**I. Dialogo**  
Adagio, rubato, cantabile

Figure 6: Bar 1-7 from Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello [Musical score, 1948/1990] with annotations for clarity

Johansen doesn't follow the pulse well enough in my opinion: he rushes in between the two *pizzicato* chords and during the rests in general. The rests at the beginning and end of bar 3 separate the *pizzicato-glissando* effect which stands in between the two imaginary speakers Ligeti also mentioned before: the man in the low register in bar 2 and the woman a fifth plus one octave higher because of the different voice register, bar 4. Their 'conversation' feels a bit rushed; I as a listener would need more time between their sentences. However, I like that he makes a smooth transition from bar 5 to 6: the woman is continuing the sentence which was interrupted before. In my opinion, the melody resembles an imaginary Hungarian folk song from the newer type. These songs typically consist of 4 lines where the middle two have an arched melodic line, often a fifth above the first one. The phrases are usually longer compared to the ancient type of songs and the melody has a wider register. I attach an excerpt of the sonata where each of these four lines is clearly distinguishable. A is marking the first line,  $A^5_v$  is the second line where '5' refers to the tune being a fifth above the original first line (here there is also a shift in the register so it is actually an octave plus a fifth). 'v' stands for variant, B marks the third line which is very different from the others, and  $A_v$  is the fourth line – 'v' meaning variant since there is only a small change compared to the first line.

A

- $A^5_v$

B

- $A_v$

The image shows a musical score excerpt for Solo Cello. It consists of four staves. The first staff is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with dynamics *p* and *espr., sempre legato*. The second staff is in treble clef and contains a harmonic accompaniment with dynamics *p* and *arco*. The third staff is in treble clef and contains a harmonic accompaniment with dynamics *mf* and *> p*. The fourth staff is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with dynamics *p*.

Figure 7: Folk song-like melody. Modified excerpt from Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello [Musical score, 1948/1990]

The above mentioned characteristics are very common in Hungarian folk music, which is why I believe the performer should approach this movement with the same attitude they would have towards a folk melody. Johansen presents the melody in a simple way and with flow, however, he is missing the time between the different melodic lines. In this case, if the performer follows the score thoroughly, the right timing is notated by the composer via the rests, see the original score above. Remember the same phenomenon in the case of the folk song *Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek* at the end of each melodic line.

In comparison, [let's see how I played the beginning of Dialogo](#) on my concert until 1:32 (Fanni Pelle, 2022, 0:00:08). I aimed for a simple but expressive way of presenting the melody, which resembled a folk song to me from the very day I started learning the sonata. I did not need to think too much about the way of playing the theme since I was reminded of a large number of folk music examples, however, I do believe it is possible to achieve the same for someone with a non-Hungarian heritage with the right background knowledge.

### Romantic style versus simplicity

[Let's listen to Johansen from where we stopped](#) with excerpts of the score attached below (see Mathias Johansen, 2011, 0:01:20). I agree with his choices in bar 8: his sound got larger following the sudden change in dynamics (this is the first time the marking is *forte* and harmonies start to join the melody, which resembles the third line of the 'folk song' in bar 6).



Figure 8: Bar 8 from Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello [Musical score, 1948/1990]

Meanwhile, Johansen plays the sudden *piano* in a very sensitive way. This is reminiscent of the second line in bar 4, but accompanied by double stops, chords and *pizzicato* this time.

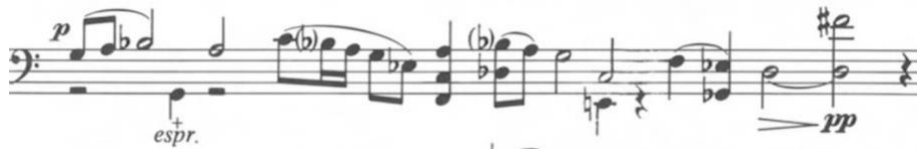


Figure 9: Bar 9 from Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello [Musical score, 1948/1990]

[Now let's listen to Mathias Johansen play after the double barline](#) with the score attached (Mathias Johansen, 2011, 0:01:58).



Figure 10: Bar 10-11 from Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello [Musical score, 1948/1990]

In this part of the movement the music reaches its first culminating point, while this is also the first time the voices join together. Johansen chose a very romantic type of playing, yet he doesn't really consider the folk music profile of the melody. In my opinion, the interpretation should be as simple and immaculate as one would sing an ancient folk melody: no artificial expressions, over-romanticising and exhibitionism. For comparison, let's listen to the same part of the movement by Miklós Perényi, [between 1:57 and 2:29 on this Spotify track](#) (Ligeti, 2012). When I listen to his playing, I only hear the music flowing. No unnecessary expression, staging and 'makeup'. The music alone is strong enough to deliver what needs to be expressed. I had the same aim when I played this particular part myself, [between 2:13 and 2:52 on this recording from my exam concert](#) (Fanni Pelle, 2022).

[I can sense the same extremes in the upcoming part of Johansen's recording](#) (Mathias

Johansen, 2011, 0:02:42). In a way, I understand the reason: I feel the climax of the movement approaching, although I would place it at and after 3:00, whereas he already lets the dynamic drop before that point. On the other hand, the score only indicates *forte* and there are no other markings, which makes me question his overly passionate way of interpretation (see the excerpt below). Johansen also chooses to do a big *ritardando* while playing the last four notes of the phrase. This is not indicated by the composer and I don't find it such an organic way of connection to the musical material afterwards: the recapitulation of the first line of the theme.



Figure 11: Bar 13-14 from Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello [Musical score, 1948/1990]

[Perényi interprets the same part between 2:44 and 3:15 on this track](#) in an emotional yet fluid way where expression doesn't stand in the way of the natural flow of the music (Ligeti, 2012). And [let's hear how I played this particular part on my concert](#) between 3:06 and 3:42 (Fanni Pelle, 2022). Although this is the climax of the movement in my opinion, I still kept in mind that the starting point was a folk song-like melody. As a result, I had the goals already mentioned above: simplicity, flow and using the music itself to deliver without adding 'extras'.

### **Fragments of motives near the end**

Lastly, let's talk about the ending. Generally, I like [the sensitive tone Mathias Johansen uses](#) after 3:12 (Mathias Johansen, 2011). However, [just after that](#), I had the same thought as in the beginning: he rushes between the different motives such as the pizzicato-glissandos and the long, sustained Ds (Mathias Johansen, 2011, 0:03:35). Johansen's gestures also lack calmness, see the way he moves from *pizzicato* to *arco* and vice versa. Find the score of this excerpt attached below.



Figure 12: Bar 16 (last bar) from Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello [Musical score, 1948/1990]

We have reached the climax of the movement before and now the melody is tired and melancholic. *Dialogo* finishes with fragments from the beginning: the effect of the *pizzicato-glissandos* and a D major arpeggio chord played *pizzicato*, bringing some hope and keeping the intensity until the second movement, *Capriccio* starts with an outburst. When I played the piece, I took more time between the fragments because for me, they resemble different voices (as the title of the movement also suggests). [Listen here](#) (Fanni Pelle, 2022, 0:04:07).

### 4.3 Conclusions after comparing different recordings

One of the reasons why I chose Mathias Johansen's recording (Mathias Johansen, 2011) was because it was one of the interpretations having the largest number of views on YouTube and had a very positive review in general. As I wrote before, it was also suggested by a fellow cellist. Even though I found his playing very high level (and I should probably mention that he was only finishing his Bachelor studies at the time), I felt something was missing from his interpretation. After this analysis, I would put this in a different way: some of his musical choices felt too extreme for my taste: too emotional, exhibitionist, expressive and romanticized. I agree that the melody suggests a way of interpretation which is not *senza espressivo*, approaching this music the same way as one would do when it comes to romantic cello concertos might not be ideal. In my opinion, when composers take inspiration from a source as pure as folk music, performers should also exclude anything artificial from their interpretation. If one knows Ligeti's intentions of writing a melody which resembles a Hungarian folk song, imagining the way people of the countryside would sing it could be helpful. People who usually work in agriculture, haven't been influenced by anything but the environment and untouched nature surrounding them and do not have any musical background from institutions but rely on their musical instincts. I can't imagine a very exhibitionist way of interpretation in these circumstances.

I believe it is an advantage to be familiar with the *parlando rubato* type of folk songs when playing the first movement, *Dialogo*. It is less of a challenge if someone knows these

melodies since childhood, but I don't think it becomes unapproachable for musicians from other nations either. I am going to elaborate on this later – methods musicians can turn to when it comes to performing music from unfamiliar musical traditions.

#### **4.4 The Duo for Violin and Cello by Kodály**

As I mentioned before, I chose this piece as a gesture to thank my primary school – named after Zoltán Kodály – for starting me on my musical journey. Although I became familiar with the composer's works at an early age, it was not until a few years ago that I discovered the existence of the Duo for Violin and Cello.

String duo itself is a genre with not so much tradition, and there could be a number of reasons why: it is quite demanding for the composer to create the same sense of unity with only two instruments (instead of the four instruments of a string quartet, for example). Another reason might be the lack of examples of this combination in history. As Breuer (1990) mentions, until the early 20th century there wasn't any music written for these two instruments where the parts were of equal difficulty: the cello usually served an accompanying role (think of violin sonatas in the Baroque with figured bass accompaniment). Then the nineteenth century brought a change when Russian composer Reinhold Glière finished his 8 Duets for Violin and Cello, and having played the piece, I can confirm that the two instruments have an equally important role throughout the piece. The next example was the duo by Hungarian Emánuel Moór in 1910. It is not known whether Kodály was familiar with these pieces, but his work (1914) is definitely the first one written for this combination which later became an important piece in repertoire (Breuer, 1990, p. 39).

As Boronkay (1978) mentions, one of the key characteristics about Kodály's music was staying true to the classical traditions. Even compared to Bartók's composition style, Kodály's musical language is considered to be more traditional, although both of them were trying to develop a way of composing which was based on Hungarian folk music. Kodály himself also agreed that even though he and Bartók shared their sources of inspiration, their aims were different: Bartók was always searching for something revolutionary and he got far in that regard, while his [Kodály's] purposes were not the same; he chose to dig further down and discover the 'geological layers' of Hungarian folk songs (p. 81). Furthermore, according to Boronkay (1978), Kodály's compositions unite three different layers: Hungarian folk music, harmonies resembling the style of Debussy and classical forms (p. 82).

## **Strong opinions on interpretation – the dilemma of listening or not listening to recordings**

I can't exactly remember how the idea of performing this piece on my final recital occurred to me, but from the very beginning, it was straightforward that I wanted to perform it with my violinist friend Magdolna Schaff. We both felt that the piece suited us and we had very similar views about its interpretation; the composer actually helps a lot in this sense with the large number of markings in the score. We invested in a great amount of time to understand what the composer's will was, making sure we were true to what was written with regards to tempo, character, articulation, etc. Our primary source was studying the score thoroughly, not listening to recordings, which gave us the freedom to use our own imagination, staying within the boundaries of what Kodály wanted. Eventually, after becoming more familiar with the piece and having been rehearsing for a while, we wanted to get a taste of other musicians' choices, so we listened to a few recordings. Our experience was very similar to mine with the sonata by Ligeti before. We found lots of recordings by reputable artists which either weren't really considering the composer's wishes or didn't feel convincing. However, we got a lot of inspiration from [the recording by Barnabás Kelemen and Nicholas Altstaedt](#) (Kodály, 2021) and I recently discovered [Jonian Ilias Kadesha's and Vashti Hunter's interpretation](#) too (Kodály, 2019) which I like similarly, although that was already after having played the piece ourselves.

As I mentioned before, my colleague and I also found numerous interpretations where there had been clear attempts to make the music interesting, but either the composer's wishes were not considered enough, or some musical choices sounded strange or not right for our taste. I would like to present two examples. [The first one is a live concert with Gilles Apap and István Várdai](#) (KAPOSFEST, 2018), and [the other recording is a more informal performance by Isabelle Faust and Mario Brunello](#) (Sergio Gibellini, 2013). In my opinion, in the video uploaded by KAPOSFEST (2018), it is Apap who is taking more initiative and risks but ends up overdoing it for my taste, while Várdai stays on the passive side with not much involvement, although personally I cannot argue with his musical choices. There is a very clear difference in the energy levels of the two artists, which creates an unbalanced situation throughout the whole performance. The reader might assume that my judgement about whether a particular musical idea feels convincing or on the contrary, unnatural, is only *my* opinion. However, I came to the conclusion that numerous times when a certain musical solution did not feel natural for me, it had something to do with the performer not following

the composer's indications in the score. I often realized this only after going into a deeper analysis of the score and I will talk about this in detail later throughout the essay.

The example of the Faust-Brunello duo is similar to the Apap-Várdai performance in a sense that the musicians didn't manage to find a common ground either, in my opinion. I agree with many of Faust's choices which are disrupted by Brunello, neither considering the composer's markings nor reacting enough to his partner.

### **The tempo and character of the opening**

In this piece, I find it incredibly important to work on creating the perfect balance of the two instruments. They should complement each other to an extent where the listener is not able to separate the sound of each instrument. [Let's listen to the opening of the first movement played by Gilles Apap and István Várdai](#) in the video by KAPOSFEST (2018).

Figure 13: Bar 1-6 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

The piece starts with a cello solo resembling the ancient type of Hungarian folk songs where the melody is gradually descending, marked *risoluto* by Kodály. There is also a tempo marking where the quarter note equals 126 BPM. The composer also wrote *cominciando un poco largamente*, meaning that the tempo shouldn't be kept very strictly and metronomically in the beginning. In my opinion, Várdai plays the theme in a rather uninvolved way, making the 'comments' of the violin stick out and sound more important than the actual melody. On the contrary, when Apap takes over, I have the impression that he is making the theme sound too complicated and important by artificial changes of the tempo



and not following the natural flow of the melody. See the violin theme below.



Figure 14: Bar 6-18 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

For the sake of comparison, [let's listen to Barnabás Kelemen and Nicholas Altstaedt](#) until 0:39 (Kodály, 1914/2021), followed by [our recording from my master recital](#) until 38:58 (Fanni Pelle, 2022, 0:38:12). I think that in the case of both examples above, the music until this point feels more like one unit, the character is kept *risoluto* in the beginning, the tempo marking is considered, and when the violin takes over the theme, the differences compared to the cello theme are shown in a more delicate and not too direct way.

### **The second subject**

[Let's listen to Isabelle Faust and Mario Brunello after the two chords](#) (Sergio Gibellini, 2013, 0:02:35). See an excerpt from the score attached below.



Figure 15: Bar 1-10 after rehearsal number 1 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

I have written about the importance of forms and structure in Kodály's works before. If we name the *risoluto* theme the first subject, the following one (introduced by the violin) is the second subject; the character and the key are both different and we feel that the two chords right before have some sort of closing and connecting function. In practice, this could mean taking some time after the two chords before rehearsal number 1 which is where the second subject group begins, and the audience would definitely understand it and be able to separate the two parts better.



Figure 16: 1 bar before 1 – 5 bars after 1 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP. Illustration added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

However, Brunello starts with the *pizzicati* straightaway, not keeping the *pianissimo* marking in mind. This affects his partner, Faust, who needs more time to truly find the *tranquillo, non espressivo* character of the second theme. In my opinion, it would have been interesting to experiment with the *pizzicato* accompaniment: I imagine it reserved, perhaps how two shepherds would play it on a sunny field while they are watching their sheep from under a tree, absent-mindedly killing some time on a hot summer day. I find Brunello's accompaniment too 'present', leaving very little space for Faust to play the melody as she

wants to. The *pizzicato* accompaniment and the violin's *tranquillo* theme are more convincing with the Apap-Várdai duo, however, the following buildup to *fortissimo* lacks courage and daring to take risks and the *con fuoco* stays rather reserved. See the score of this excerpt below while [listening to Apap and Várdai](#) (KAPOSFEST, 2018, 0:01:04). And for comparison, [Kelemen and Altstaedt](#) from 0:40 until 1:20 (Kodály, 1914/2021). I find their interpretation much more convincing for several reasons. The separate voices complement each other: it is hard to tell which instrument is playing since the transitions between accompaniment and theme are solved so well. As I have mentioned before, I consider the unity of sound really important in Kodály, and this is very well accomplished in this excerpt. I also find their way of leading up to the *fortissimo* organic and convincing, and their following unison has courage and direction up until the *fermata*.



Figure 17: Bar 17-29 after rehearsal number 1 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

### **Rhythmic patterns – the importance of playing the same material in a similar way**

In the upcoming part after the *fermata*, the violin and cello are reacting to each other with some rhythmic patterns interrupted by one *espressivo* note which develops into a rhapsodic melody fragment played by the cello. This is then developed further and transformed by the violin. See the score below.



Figure 18: Bar 30-33 after rehearsal number 1 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP. Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

Now [listen to Apap and Várdai playing the above mentioned part](#) (KAPOSFEST, 2018, 0:01:51). My impression is that the two musicians didn't discuss how to play the rhythmic pattern since their ways simply do not match: while Várdai stays more on the string, Apap's solution would make me assume the marking is *scherzando*. Here I agree with Várdai since Kodály also puts *tenutos* on the first notes and there are no dots on the triplets. Another issue is the *espressivo* note: Apap ignores it and plays it completely flat unlike Várdai. This interrupts the music and is not considering Kodály's idea of transforming those interrupting notes into the cello's sudden rhapsodic takeover starting with the long sustained F note (circled in orange). See the score below.



Figure 19: 5 bars before rehearsal number 2 – 6 bars after rehearsal number 2 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP. Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

Then when the violin takes over in bar 7 after rehearsal number 2, Apap's playing is rather hesitant. This way, I as a listener do not realise that the violin's rhapsodic theme actually is a reminiscent of the opening melody and therefore should match its character. See the score below.



Figure 20: Bar 7-12 after rehearsal number 2 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

[This part is more convincing in the interpretation of Faust and Brunello](#), however, the cellist lacks delicateness and daring to stay in the background at the start of his solo starting from the low F (Sergio Gibellini, 2013, 0:03:17), [followed by how my chamber music partner and I played this excerpt](#) until 40:49 (Fanni Pelle, 2022, 0:39:44). We discussed the role our part plays within this area and as a result, it is clear for the listener whether one instrument is in the background or the spotlight. We also worked on making the moment where the cello stays on the low F the darkest in the piece so far, having agreed that it should not show any sign of the outburst coming a few bars later.

### **The buildup to the first culminating point**

Let's listen to [the upcoming part leading up to the culminating point of the movement](#), with Faust and Brunello (Sergio Gibellini, 2013, 0:04:16). In my opinion, the function of this part is to build up the tension until the following extremely rhapsodic and expressive place. Based on the information in the score – marked *leggiero*, many accidentals, unstable tonality, chromatically descending cello accompaniment – I have the feeling that the musical material should sound very uncertain until the *pizzicato* accompaniment starts in the cello part.



Figure 21: Bar 13-18 after rehearsal number 2 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP. Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

If the right character and sound is achieved, it is easier for the cellist to play the upcoming short solo (see the score below) in a dreamy character instead of having a concrete sound. The composer's markings could also suggest this since the solo is marked *sempre piano*, *poco sostenuto*.



Figure 22: Bar 3 & 2 before rehearsal number 3 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP. Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

However, Brunello doesn't consider the *sostenuto* marking and plays it with a tone which is quite direct, which makes the connection to the upcoming violin theme in F sharp major (the reminiscent of the second theme of the exposition) feel unprepared. This is another example when one musician in a chamber music setting does not consider the composer's markings, creating an unbalanced situation with their partner. The cello theme starting 10 bars before 4 is also a bit too direct for my taste. Let's have a look at the score here: Kodály's marking is *sonoro cantabile*, and in my opinion, that indicates an expressive but not harsh way of playing.



Figure 23: 12 bars before rehearsal number 4 – 1 bar before 4 from Kodály’s Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP. Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

The start of the cello solo above is nice and sensitive in Brunello’s interpretation, but suddenly becomes very heavy when the melody reaches the lower register. [For the sake of comparison, listen to my chamber music partner and I play the entire buildup section](#) until 41:53 (Fanni Pelle, 2022, 0:40:48). Our main goals included creating the uncertain atmosphere indicated by the musical material and Kodály’s markings, making the transitions between the violin’s and the cello’s *pizzicati* as smooth as possible and switching immediately between playing accompaniment and soloistic material.

### **Grandioso themes for the violin – can they be free in tempo?**

We have arrived at the first culminating point of the first movement. Let’s see the violin score first.



Figure 24: Bar 6-17 after rehearsal number 4 from Kodály’s Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

This part has a lot in common with another soloistic moment for the violin which comes a bit later during the piece, attached for comparison below.

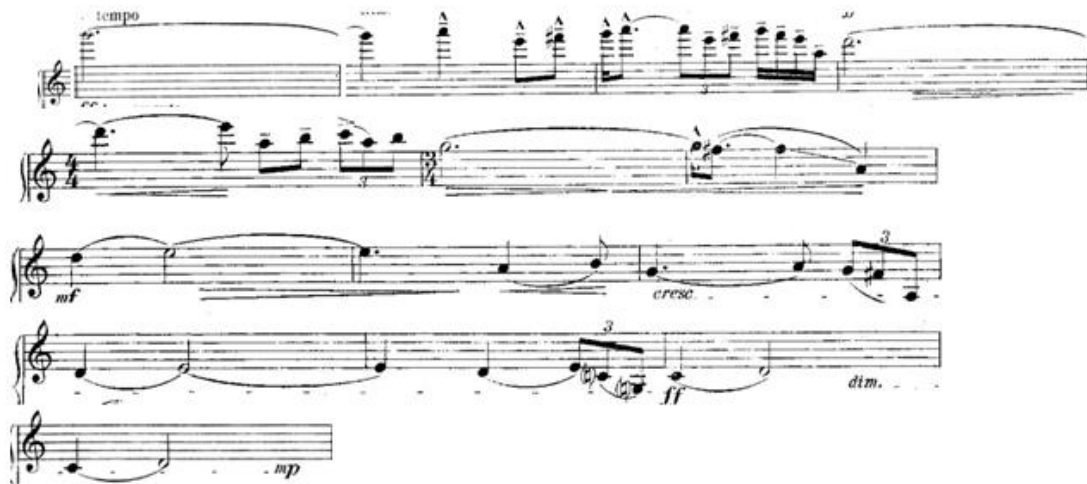


Figure 25: Bar 7-20 after rehearsal number 6 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

If I was a violinist and only had access to my own part without the accompaniment, I would assume there is space for some kind of artistic freedom at both places. But after looking at the cello part, it doesn't seem to be the case. Let's have a look at what the cello plays during the first violin solo (bar 6-17 after rehearsal number 4).



Figure 26: Bar 6-16 after rehearsal number 4 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP. Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

After looking at the accompaniment above, we can agree that the rhythm plays a very important role here: punctuated rhythms, paired slurs and slurs of four notes create a very stable base for the melody. The harmony is also changing in four steps:  $G^7$  with an additional  $C\#$ ,  $Bb^7$  with  $E$  and  $C\#^7$  with  $Fx$  and  $E^7$  with  $A\#$ . We can also notice that the lowest note of



each new chord (G – Bb – C# – E) is the  $3^4$  inversion of a C# diminished seventh-chord. Considering the rhythmic patterns, the above mentioned harmonies and the dynamic markings in the cello part, I dare say it is the accompaniment which is actually in charge of shaping the melody.

Let's have a look at the cello part during the other violin solo (bar 7-20 after rehearsal number 6). My first thought when looking at this passage is how similar the structure is when comparing it to the other violin solo and cello accompaniment above: a seemingly free solo accompanied by rhythmically stable patterns. First, the cello plays an  $F^{MA7}$  chord with arpeggios for several bars which then changes into an  $F^7$  chord (dominant). Eventually, the original  $F^{MA7}$  returns.



Figure 27:  $F^{MA7}$  and  $F^7$  chords in Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), bar 7 & 10 after rehearsal number 6

Then the next chord, a  $D_{m5}^6$  appears, bringing some calmness into this very agitated moment in the piece.



Figure 28:  $D_{m5}^6$  chord, the moment of calmness, bar 14 after rehearsal number 6 in Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922)

This doesn't last long, since the F in the lowest voice goes to E, altering the chord into an  $E_m^7$  which then leads to an  $E_b^{MA7}$ .



Figure 29:  $E_m^7$  and  $E_b^{MA7}$  chords, bar 15 & 16 after rehearsal number 6 in Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922). Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

From here onwards it is more conspicuous that the lowest voice of the cello part and even the other voices in some cases are chromatically descending until the bassline finally reaches the

lowest note of the instrument, C.

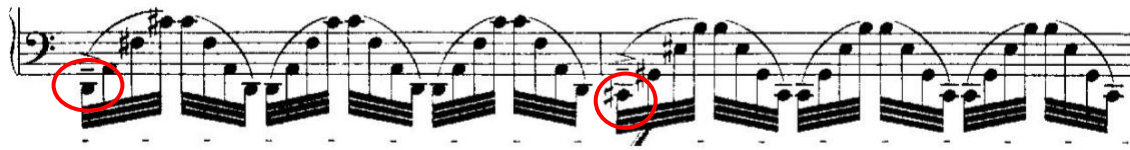


Figure 30: D<sup>MA7</sup> and C<sup>#7</sup> chords, bar 17 & 18 after rehearsal number 6 in Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922). Illustrations added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.



Figure 31: C<sup>MA7</sup> and C<sup>7</sup> chords in Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), bar 19-21 after rehearsal number 6. Illustration added by Fanni Noémi Pelle.

There is a continuous *crescendo* during the chromatic part until we finally arrive here, which is a contrast to the *crescendo-diminuendos* marked before during this entire section. However, the music relaxes very fast after it finally reaches the C through a *diminuendo* over three bars.

My conclusion is that these two places are very similar in the piece: they both consist of a seemingly free melody in the violin part accompanied by an extremely stable and rhythmical musical material played by the cello. Another point is the harmonic structure: the accompaniment of the cello is shaping the violin's melody since the dynamic markings of the violin part follow the chords played by the cello. In my opinion, these conclusions indicate that the overall tempo at these places should be stable, leaving very little room for freedom for the violinist and it is the cellist who is in charge of stability and dynamics at both places. Now, [let's listen to Apap and Várdai play the first grandioso theme](#) (KAPOSFEST, 2018, 0:04:00), [followed by the second grandioso theme](#) (0:05:03), both from the same performance.

In my opinion, Apap doesn't pay enough attention to the accompanying cello part: he changes the tempo here and there which might work alone, but it creates some uncertainty since Várdai has to adjust. In the first solo (bar 6-17 after number 4), it seems to be important that the violin changes on offbeats, however, this is not completely clear in the above mentioned recording. In my opinion, the violin part can sound improvised and free even if the tempo is stable. Since Apap is trying to have his artistic freedom by not keeping the tempo, they are simply not together with Várdai. The same thing happens during the following large

solo marked *fortissimo largamente* (bar 7-20 after 6), where the opening theme of the movement returns. In my opinion, from a listener's perspective it is much easier to understand the music if passages using the exact same material are interpreted in a similar way. Since Apap made a decision to be musically free during these excerpts – without considering the role of the cello accompaniment –, this effect is not delivered.

### Interpreting the recitativo-like cello theme

The above mentioned violin theme leads to a recitativo-like cello solo, sounding as if it was improvised in the moment. As Boronkay (1978) also notes, this is a typical example of a common way of melody-use in Kodály's compositions: a recitativo-like melody with a free tempo which usually starts with a long sustained note repeated several times afterwards, followed by sudden changes of the rhythm and accentuation, which resembles the melancholic *rubatos* of Hungarian folk songs (Boronkay, 1978, p. 85). See the score below.

Figure 32: Bar 14-1 before rehearsal number 7 from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

[Listen to István Várdai](#) (KAPOSFEST, 2018, 0:05:33), [followed by Mario Brunello](#) (Sergio Gibellini, 2013, 0:06:39). In my opinion, there is a very big difference between these two interpretations. Várdai's sounds natural, organic and I get the impression that it is improvised in the moment, whereas Brunello's is slightly heavy, the repeated notes are accentuated and there are some false accents which stand in the way of the flow of the music. To me, the way Brunello plays this passage doesn't resemble the *parlando rubato* type of folk songs, instead, an imaginary excerpt of a romantic cello concerto comes to my mind at first. For comparison, [see how I interpreted this solo on my master recital](#) (listen until 44:30). I also

kept the notated rhythm in mind and tried to aim for freedom within (Fanni Pelle, 2022, 0:43:33). If the reader follows the score while listening to Várdai, it is noticeable that he is not that strict when it comes to keeping the notated rhythm here. As this is a *recitativo* and the cellist is completely alone, I am convinced by his choices regardless.

### The ending of the first movement

In the recapitulation (after rehearsal number 7), I am not going to go into detail about the performances since the motives I already covered in the exposition reappear. The last part I would like to reflect on is the very end of the movement where the opening theme comes back for the last time, although in a different form. Kodály indicated *forte, pesante, a tempo poco a poco rallentando*, followed by a gradual *diminuendo al fine*. See the score attached.



Figure 33: The last 9 bars before the end of the first movement from Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Musical Score] (1914/1922), downloaded from IMSLP

Now let's listen to both duos, first [Faust-Brunello until the end of the movement](#) (Sergio Gibellini, 2013, 0:09:12), [followed by Apap and Várdai](#), similarly until the very end of the movement (KAPOSFEST, 2018, 0:08:14). In my opinion, neither of the duos follows exactly what the composer intended: they do not really succeed in bringing the opening tempo back, leaving very little space for *diminuendo* and *rallentando* afterwards. Since the musical material just before the ending is already cadenza-like, first introduced by the violin and then continued by the cello, it seems to be important for the composer to leave that dreamy atmosphere for a brief moment once again before the music fades into silence. We can assume this based on the markings in the score: *forte, pesante, a tempo poco a poco*

*rallentando*. According to the indications, the composer did not intend this part to sound exhausted and slow. [For comparison, listen to my partner and I play the ending](#) (Fanni Pelle, 2022, 0:46:30). Our starting point was the composer's intention. We made sure to play with the same energy and kept the same tempo as in the very beginning of the piece so the listener could be reminded of the opening theme as we gradually slowed down and made the *diminuendo* from here. This is exactly what Kodály marked in the score, so the effect is more convincing in my opinion.

## Overall conclusions

After having compared several recordings of Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Cello and the Duo for Violin and Cello by Kodály, I am going to answer my research questions. The first two are about my own experience:

1. How does being born and raised in the Hungarian music culture affect my abilities to understand and interpret Hungarian music?
2. How does my own musical and cultural background provide me tools to evaluate interpretations of music by Hungarian composers?

I grew up surrounded by thousands of folk songs: I learned them in their pure form or encountered them in compositions where they were used as a primary source. They are very much present in today's folklore in Hungary thanks to our collectors who preserved them for the modern world, and I believe there are some remote areas where people still follow the traditions today. It has been an important part of my life since I was a child, so I can say I have a considerable amount of knowledge about them – it is not only the fact that I know hundreds of folk songs by heart, but also that I studied folk song analysis for many years. When it comes to composers using folk tunes or melodies resembling them (but are actually their own melodies) in their works, I can connect them to a certain group of folk songs and how they are usually performed. I showed the example of the song *Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek* which belongs to the *parlando rubato* type of ancient folk songs (often circa 1000 years old). This type of songs usually consists of 4 melodic lines which are typically shorter, while the melody is descending from the beginning to the end of the song. The newer type of folk songs also usually has 4 lines where the middle two have an arched melodic line, the phrases are usually longer and the register is larger. In the case of both the ancient and the newer type of songs, we can find examples which are performed *tempo giusto* and *parlando rubato*.

The reader might remember the part of my essay where I showed a link between the newer type of folk songs and the melody in the *Dialogo* movement of Ligeti's *Sonata for Solo Cello*. Because of my background in folk music, it was clear for me that Ligeti took inspiration from folk songs, and knowing this definitely influenced my own interpretation of the music. On the other hand, this also means that I can sense if a performer is not familiar with this connection and the interpretation is not in relation to our folk music tradition. I had this feeling when listening to Mathias Johansen, who – despite being a very skilled cellist – didn't convince me with his interpretation. As I wrote in the part of my essay covering *Dialogo*, I found his playing overly romantic, lacking simplicity and the natural pulse and flow of the song.

The other two research questions concern musicians in general:

3. How does having a certain background affect the interpretation of musicians when performing works by foreign composers?
4. What methods could one use as an attempt to perform foreign repertoire authentically?

I believe number 3 is a tricky question because there are differences between composer and performer. I haven't heard people talking about Bach's music from a nationalistic perspective, and I have never considered that one could have a better understanding of his genius by being raised in Germany. Although this doesn't mean there isn't a cultural aspect which I am not aware of. Once I raised this question for a number of German and Austrian musician colleagues during an informal conversation and included composers like Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann etc. None of them believed there was a 'nationality' aspect regarding the interpretation of these composers' works; however, they all stressed the importance of style, such as Baroque, the First Viennese School and the (early) romantic era (H. Daub, A. Toth, & F. Hügel, personal communications, Summer 2023).

However, there are composers where I assume there is a nationalistic point of view. I have heard Finnish musicians talk about how the Sibelius violin concerto should be played, taking influence from their harsh but beautiful nature (A. Perttunen & J. Hernberg, personal communications). Recently, I had a conversation with an Icelandic violinist who mentioned believing she had a better understanding of the way a particular piece by an Icelandic composer should be played, saying not a lot of people grow up surrounded by all those brutal forces of nature and eruptive volcanoes (M. E. Garðarsdóttir, personal communication,

March 2, 2024). A Czech clarinetist friend of mine told me the story why she thought she won a particular audition in Prague. There was a well-known Smetana excerpt included in the audition programme, and while the other foreign applicants played it exactly as written in the score, she knew the hidden agogics and timing nuances which are only straightforward for those who grew up surrounded by that music (G. Matoušková, personal communication, December 17, 2023). And lastly, it has happened to me several times that I felt I had a hard time playing repertoire from a foreign culture. The last occasion was when I was on tour with the European Union Youth Orchestra in Mexico and we performed Latin music together with Mexican musicians. Although all of us from Europe were very fine players, [we struggled with a particular piece \(Blas Galindo: Sones de Mariachi\)](#) which included several traditional songs usually performed by their so-called mariachi groups (MEX Experiencia Mexico, 2018). While our Mexican colleagues were having the time of their lives, we could hardly follow the two against three patterns and were completely lost throughout the first rehearsal. Eventually we became more familiar with the groove and did a great performance, but the way until there was not the easiest one.

Based on my personal experience, it is always worth asking for guidelines and help from someone who has first-hand experience with a particular musical tradition. I can refer to my experience in Mexico once again: I relied a lot on my Mexican colleague sitting next to me whose movements and tips got me through the first rehearsal. Therefore, I may say consulting a local is one of the most important suggestions I have for performing unfamiliar music authentically. I could imagine that Hungarian music might be similarly unknown for someone as my experience with the mariachi piece. Personally, I have also been asked by colleagues to give feedback on their interpretation of Hungarian pieces or orchestra excerpts and have always been happy to help (and honoured by their trust of course).

In case one doesn't know a local musician in person, it is slightly more difficult to get the right information, but still not impossible. You can listen to interpretations by respected musicians from that particular music culture and get inspiration – remember my example of Miklós Perényi's Ligeti recording (Ligeti, 2012). As for the Ligeti example, it is possible to research the folk music connection in the first movement on the internet as well as countless other sources. Once the performer is familiar with the existence of the *parlando rubato* type of folk songs, getting inspiration from listening to Hungarian folk music could be a great idea, preferably in its original form first. Later one can shift their attention to folk music-inspired compositions such as Bartók's and Kodály's works as a reference. If there are

lyrics involved, it can be incredibly useful to translate the text in order to get a general idea about the meaning. Additionally, it can be even more useful to know what some particular words stand for and how they are pronounced since they might influence the flow of the melody, see my explanation using the example of the folk song *Erdők, völgyek, szűk ligetek*.

In my opinion, the biggest reason why I didn't find Mathias Johansen's recording convincing is that his way of playing was lacking the background knowledge about Hungarian folk music. In my opinion, at some places in the *Dialogo* movement his playing resembled the playing style of a romantic cello concerto, while I was missing an intimate, free and singing sound.

On the other hand, my concerns with the interpretations of Kodály's duo were different. I cannot stress the importance of the score as one's primary starting point of analysis enough. In the case of both of my music examples, the composers added plenty of information and the musician can already be fairly close to an authentic and convincing performance solely by taking this into account. As the reader might remember, I pointed out a large number of cases where particular musicians did not respect the score enough, creating a result lacking authenticity. When listening to the YouTube videos by KAPOSFEST (2018) and Sergio Gibellini (2013), I noticed that it happened mostly with Gilles Apap and Mario Brunello, while their chamber music partners (István Várdai and Isabelle Faust) seemed to take the composer's will more into account. However, since Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello is a piece where both instruments should be on the same level of hierarchy, one performer making alterations while the other is trying to catch up could raise some concerns. As a result, I did not find either of the above mentioned interpretations convincing.

As for me and my chamber music partner, we both felt that performing Kodály's music came naturally to us thanks to our Hungarian heritage. However, we could not spare the immense amount of time spent thinking about the composer's indications, connecting certain parts, trying to find the most organic and natural way of doing tempo changes, working on particular motives sounding the same, etc.

All in all, some methods musicians can use to become familiar with and interpret foreign repertoire authentically are:

- A thorough analysis of the score
- Researching the background of the music and becoming familiar with it through recordings, books and other sources



- Translating the lyrics if there are any
- Consulting someone who is familiar with that particular nation's folk music

In my opinion, in most cases, the musical idea one has about one's own folk music can be explained and passed on to others from different cultures, so music influenced by a certain nation's folk traditions doesn't become exclusive to performers from that specific culture. I believe that music is a universal language which should be accessible to anyone of any origin. However, my advice is getting acquainted with the background of the composition when performing pieces from an unfamiliar musical culture, and this is what I am going to do myself in the future: paying extra attention when I'm playing foreign music, but not skipping the same work when it comes to Hungarian repertoire either.

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