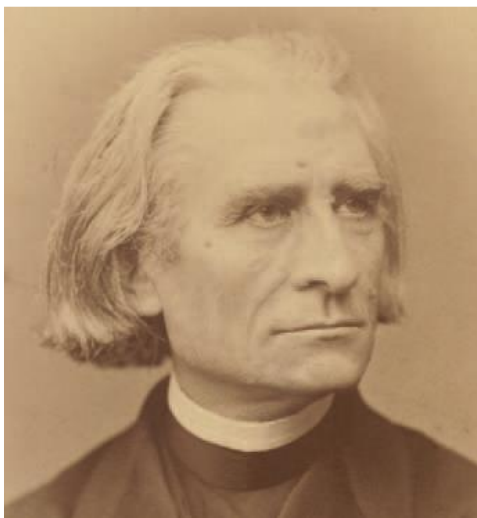


Hungarian composers

When seen on a globe or a world map, Hungary looks merely like a sizeable dot in the middle of Europe, but— similarly to Austria and the Czech Republic — it is a powerhouse in the world of music. Perhaps there is no time of the day, hour or moment, when a Hungarian musical group or soloist is not playing somewhere in the world, or a melody connected to the Hungarians in one way or another is not being played in the media. For example, one of Brahms’s “Hungarian Dances”, Berlioz’s Marche de Rákóczi, Tchaikovsky’s Hungarian Dance (Czardas) from Swan Lake, melodies from the operetta Der Zigeunerbaron (The Gypsy Baron) or the quick polka “Long Live the Magyar!” by Johann Strauss II; and, of course, the pieces—already in the public domain—by Liszt, Bartók, Kodály, Lehár, Kálmán and all the other actors in this story of hundreds of years.

(Source: Fact Sheets on Hungary: From the Harmonia to the Endgame. A History of Hungarian music)



Franz Liszt

Franz Liszt (1811-1886), who was developing strong ties and commitment to musical life in Hungary, was Erkel’s friend, supporter and ally. As for his personality and take on life, however, was in many respects the very opposite—the young Liszt was, at least seemingly, a happy-go-lucky cosmopolitan who was extremely popular. His fate and art is a quintessence of the Romantic Era. He was born in the village of Doborján (today’s Raiding in Austria) which was part of the Esterházy estate,

Franz Liszt started off as a whizz-kid in Sopron and Pozsony (Bratislava), studied in Vienna, and then moved to Paris. The virtuoso pianist and composer travelled all around Europe and generated real hysteria with his divine/diabolical piano performances. It was heaven and hell. Throughout his whole life, the thinking and artistic expression of Liszt—a conqueror of women’s hearts, a humanist, a devout but struggling believer—was determined by the duality of body and soul, and the issues relating to the battle of good and evil.

Therefore, it is understandable that Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Faust problem and the presentation of "Faustic" existence were among his recurring themes.

Liszt was in contact with almost all important European artists of the era. His wide-ranging interests in literature and visual arts were reflected in his music. He was deeply touched by the 1838 flood catastrophe in Pest; he gave several benefit concerts to help repair the damages as soon as possible. After this tragedy, Liszt—the generous patriot—visited Hungary more often, greatly welcomed by his friends, fans and fellow culture creators. In the meantime, and quite importantly, Liszt became one of the more prolific composers of the 19th century. He divided most of his time between Germany, Italy and Hungary, mainly Weimar, Rome and Pest-Buda. The extremely long list of his compositions—containing several hundreds of items—includes orchestral works, piano pieces, cycles, rhapsodies, oratorios, masses, choral works, concertos, songs, transcriptions. He invented the genre of symphonic poem as program music that was further developed, amongst others, by Liszt's admirer, Tchaikovsky, and preserved for the late Romanticism of the early 20th century by Richard Strauss. In 1855, Liszt composed *Missa Solemnis (Esztergom Mass)* for the consecration of the basilica in Esztergom. His *Hungarian Coronation Mass (Missa Coronationalis)*, composed for the coronation of Franz Joseph and Elisabeth as King and Queen of Hungary, was performed for the first time in 1867 in the Church of Our Lady of the Buda Castle (the Matthias Church).

Liszt's unbelievably rich and enigmatic oeuvre is still not fully explored. His artistic spectrum ranges from full-blooded romanticism to minimalist, "sound-economical", more abstract music exposing the underlying truth and progressively pointing towards our age.

It is a well-known fact that Franz Liszt's daughter Cosima was Wagner's wife and after his death, she became the all-powerful director of the Bayreuth Festivals aimed at keeping Wagner's heritage. Liszt, who already successfully experimented with operas as early as his childhood and made new attempts with them in the early 1840s, eventually surrendered the genre to his genius German son-in-law who reached his full potential in musical dramas. However, the first act of the Italian-language Byron adaptation, *Sardanapalo*, which was discovered and reconstructed by David Trippett, music history professor at Cambridge University, and premiered in 2018 in Weimar, proves that Liszt was—or rather, could have been—a subversive innovator in the field of opera with his own unique style.

One of the many interesting
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 ber“ aus „Die Walküre“ (Hr. Láng.)

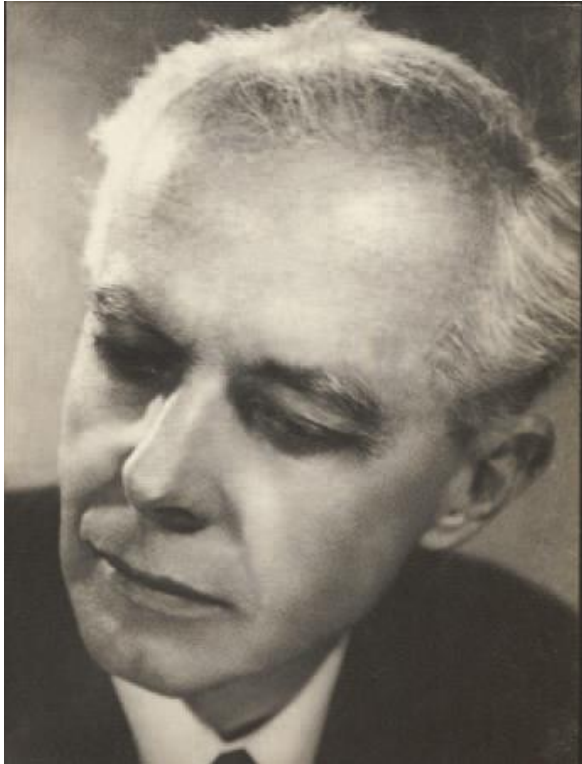
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Budapest, 1875. Druck von Fuchs & Fritsch. (Waltos gazda 12.)

The poster for Wagner and Liszt's mutual concert in the Pesti Vigadó, 1875



Béla Bartók

There is full consensus that one of the composers who had the greatest impact on the 20th century is **Béla Bartók** (1881–1945). Born in Nagyszentmiklós (today's Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), Bartók developed strong affinity towards music at an early age, so he was sent to Pozsony (Bratislava) to learn music under the guidance of László Erkel. Later on, he attended the Budapest College of Music, where he studied piano from István Thomán, and composition from János Koessler. He was travelling all around Europe as a pianist and praised for his performances in the greatest European concert halls and, in the meantime, he developed his composer self, searching for his own voice. Bartók collected and transcribed Hungarian folk melodies with scientific fastidiousness. Besides doing parallel research into the musical heritage of Transylvania and that of the surrounding peoples, he studied the roots of our folk music and its connections with the Middle East and Asia as well. Thanks to this, he met Zoltán Kodály, and the two field-worker folklorist developed a lifelong friendship. Bartók's first major composition, the *Kossuth Symphony* (1903), still reflects the impact of Richard Strauss's symphonic poems. However, his interest in ethnography and the fruits of his field collections have greatly influenced his direction and style as a composer. Similarly to Kodály, he capitalised on his musical mother tongue, but while his brother-in-arms used the authentic folk tunes, wrote instrumentations and, thus, creating a frame for them in a Hungarian national style originating in Romanticism, Bartók—a daring innovator—decomposed these folk melodies into its elements, then synthesised them, made them universal, and that is how he introduced them into the literature of European contemporary music.

Whatever he did, whatever form of expression he chose, Bartók came up with masterpieces—many times generating debates and anger—, be it a short piano piece, chamber music, a piano and violin concerto, the *Cantata Profana*, which is a personal confession “from pure sources”, or the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, rich in disturbing effects, or the *Concerto*, imbued with irony and homesickness, reflecting the struggles he had in the last years of his life spent in voluntary exile in the United States... Bartók’s two-character ballad-like mystery play, the *Bluebeard’s Castle* (1911) constitutes a separate chapter in the universal history of opera. It is a thrilling (musical) drama inexhaustible in its potentials, both in terms of underlying thoughts and staging. His dance drama, *The Wooden Prince*, which also tries to unfold the secrets and controversies of a man-woman relationship, and his provocative and taboo-breaking “pantomime” *The Miraculous Mandarin* have both broadened the horizons of classical ballet. Quite importantly, *Bluebeard’s Castle* is the main ambassador of Hungarian language in all continents. Its beautiful, pompous Art Nouveau-like libretto by Béla Balázs is sung in Hungarian in leading opera houses and concert halls by world-renowned singers of various nationalities. Bartók inspired great film directors as well: for example, the mysterious Adagio in *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* was used as eerie background music by Stanley Kubrick in his adaptation of Stephen King’s novel, *The Shining*.



The Wooden Prince
(Scenography by Gusztáv Oláh)



Bluebeard's Castle, stage scenery



Zoltán Kodály

Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), who was a bit younger than Bartók, was born in Kecskemét and studied at the Academy of Music in Budapest, majoring in composition, also under the guidance of János Koessler. He completed his doctoral studies with a thesis entitled *The Strophic Structure of the Hungarian Folk Song*, and then, inspired by the phonograph recordings of Béla Vikár, he started to collect folk music regularly and systematically. He pursued this pioneering activity together with Bartók. As a composer, he found an absolutely original voice of self-expression primarily in using and adapting folk songs and creating unique instrumentation for them. Similarly, his pedagogical approach of providing music education for everyone, or

“democratising music”, is based on the mutual treasure of folk songs and singing them together. He set the objective of launching music education, varied with choir singing, as early as in pre-school, and that the children would learn reading and performing from sheet music—at least at a basic level—, and write down simple melodies after hearing. His teaching method is built on rhythmic clapping and a “sign language.” Solmization, which is a system of substituting the notes in the musical scale with distinct syllables and using expressive hand signs, helps to learn and comprehend a given song or musical piece by visualising the line of the melody. The Kodály Method that has spread all around the world was included in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2016.

Not only did the musical poet Kodály document the “factual materials” of folk culture, but also looked deep into the souls of the Hungarian people. His witty singspiel rich in bravura instrumentation, *János Hány* (1926; the suite extracted from it is the most frequently mentioned Kodály piece to this day), with its grotesque humour, melancholic optimism, touching idealism and bragging, is one of the most honest (pathological) picture of the Hungarian countryside. As a continuation of brilliant adaptations of folk songs “framed” in classical music and put up on the opera stage, Kodály composed *Székelyfonó* (The Spinning Room). Soon after its world premiere in Budapest, the piece was played at La Scala in Milan in January 1933. The performance was conducted by Italian conductor Sergio Failoni, who reached the height of his career in Budapest and the merits he earned in the musical life of Hungary are imperishable.

Kodály’s literary heritage encompassing musical history, pedagogy, folk culture and his collections is almost as rich as his work in the field of music: hundreds of his songs and choral works pose smaller or bigger challenges to soloists or singing groups of various kinds.

Besides orchestral pieces (*Summer Evening*, *Dances of Marosszék*, *Peacock Variations*, *Concerto*, *Symphony*), oratorical works are also of great importance in his Kodály’s oeuvre as a composer, especially the one written for the 50th anniversary of the unification of Pest, Buda and Óbuda (Old Buda) back in 1873, *Psalmus Hungaricus* (1923), and *Budavári Te Deum* (Te Deum of Buda Castle, 1936), which is a thanksgiving for the reconquest of Buda from the Turks in 1686.

Kodály, who had extensive international relations with highly acclaimed people, was respected also by the Communist regime after 1946. His prestige, professional and personal integrity was unquestionable. He was close friends, among others, with the greatest conductor genius of the late 19th and early 20th century, Arturo Toscanini, who was open to contemporary music and incorporated several of Kodály’s pieces into his repertoire, promoting them in many places.



Zoltán Kodály and the poster of *Székely fonó* (The Spinning Room) in Milan



György Ligeti

György Ligeti was born in Transylvania, studied in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and Budapest, and emigrated after the fall of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution— he lived and taught first in Western Europe, then in the United States. After his death in 2006, the interest towards his works did not decrease. In Hungary, he was inspired mainly by Bartók, Stravinsky and Hungarian poetry, especially the one of Hungarian poet Sándor Weöres. Ligeti, an avid experimenter as a composer, created quite a sensation in Western Europe with his electroacoustic music *Artikulation*, his orchestral piece *Atmosphères*, the canons of the choral work *Lux aeterna* and its pair for symphonic orchestra, *Lontano*. One of the highlights of Ligeti's works—covering a wide spectrum of genres and engaging soloists and a large variety of musical groups—is undoubtedly *Requiem* (1965). What makes it exceptional is its power of expression, the fact that it makes the genre of requiem masses “boundless”, and the impact it has made on contemporary art. Even Stanley Kubrick has contributed to popularising Ligeti's musical universe by using many of his compositions as score music for his cult movie *2001: Space Odyssey*. His epoch-making opera, performed for the first time in 1978 in Stockholm and then revised a couple of times, *Le Grand Macabre* was inspired by Michel de Ghelderode's absurd drama and the grotesque fantasy world of Brueghel's and Bosch's paintings. This ironic paraphrase of a death dance appears every now and then on the menu of the greatest opera houses and concert halls of the world.

In 2004, as an acknowledgement of his professional performance, the Royal Swedish Academy awarded the Polar Music Prize to the Hungarian composer, György Ligeti.

Source: Fact Sheets on Hungary: From the Harmonia to the Endgame. A History of Hungarian music