AQA AoS4: Kodály's *Háry János*

KS4

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Introduction

Zoltán Kodály's slogan was 'Let music belong to everyone!' And that's a sentiment very much on display in the suite taken from his popular light opera *Háry János*. It's a fun story, with music that directly tells the tale: a good pick, then, for AoS4 of AQA's GCSE specification (first examination in 2022) as an introduction to programmatic music, elements of orchestration and aspects of Romantic nationalist style.

AQA have, as usual, produced a detailed teacher's resource on the piece (**https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/music/AQA-8271-TEACHER-GUIDE_AOS4.PDF**). This resource is about building on that, giving:

- creative approaches to introducing the piece and teaching key features.
- context around Kodály's style and musical nationalism.
- examples of wider listening.
- further insights into the details of the score.

Setting the scene

One instrument that immediately evokes the Hungarian, or Eastern European, folk sound is the cimbalom, a table-top harp (or 'chordophone' or 'hammered dulcimer' to use the generic terms) struck with a variety of hammers, normally wooden sticks with small cotton-bound tips. The resulting sound has an unmistakable glint to it, both percussive and exotic.

To set the scene for exploring the sound of Kodály, who did much to bring the cimbalom to international attention through his inclusion of it in scores such as *Háry János,* you could bathe students with its sound as they arrive to the session. There are lots of cimbalom performance videos on YouTube: try this one (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=omRo_nFTato**) as a starting point. See if your students can guess:

- how it's played.
- where it comes from.
- what mood it sets.

> The opening to Hans Zimmer's score for the recent film versions of Sherlock Holmes makes prominent use of the cimbalom, right from the start (**https://open.spotify.com/track/2IYTLeT9L49AfQO3kOvaZK?si=9d3aecd801724aa8**). It lends a sense of mystery, suggesting a plot is afoot, and refers to one of the main characters, a Roma fortune-teller called Madame Simza. Zimmer said he was trying to capture the sound of the Weimar Republic in his score, channelling Kurt Weill and the sounds of German cabaret.

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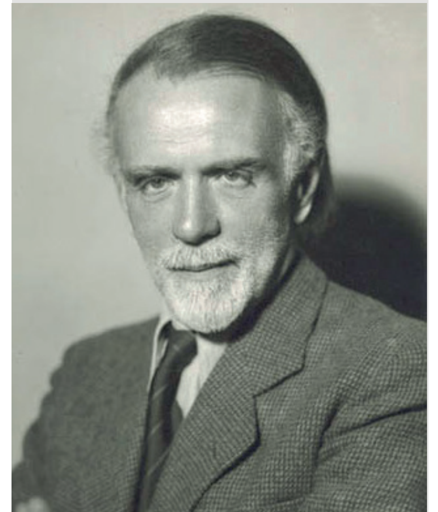
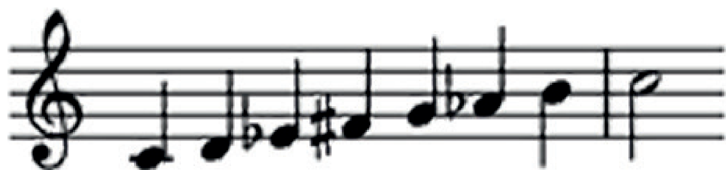


If you have a piano to hand, strum the strings for a (pale) imitation of the cimbalom sound.

Next you could get the class clapping along to a Hungarian *czárdás*, which typically starts with a slow, free section (*lassú*) before accelerating into a faster section with stricter tempo (*frist*). It's like a seductive song before the dance at the party.

This is an example of the *frist* section of a *czárdás* (**https://open.spotify.com/track/5BdbeQB9tGtTB3QDYOEQ46?si=c331666aca6e46f0**). It's often interesting to compare how classical composers have appropriated the raw materials of folk music for their own compositions, and to see how that adaptation either enhances or distorts the spirit of the original. What do students make of this characterful rendition of Vittorio Monti's famous *Czárdás* (**https://open.spotify.com/track/1FoQfY9QHUomGLFoHgTERS?si=8f7b0ffebaae465b**) played by Nicola Benedetti with accompaniment on accordion and cello?

If there are instruments to hand, you could set up a gradual, *czárdás*-style *accelerando* using a 'um-cha' rhythm on C minor, with some elements of the 'Hungarian minor' scale:



Notice the harmonic minor shape at the top, prefigured in the 3rd and 4th degrees.

Cultural terminology

Students might loosely describe all of this as 'gypsy music'. This is a good opportunity to explore the cultural meaning of the word 'gypsy', as well as its derogatory connotations. It's more sensitive and accurate to talk of a blend of **Roma, Magyar** and **Transylvanian** sounds in the work of Kodály.

'Magyar' is the name of the main Hungarian ethnic group.

Who was Zoltán Kodály?

Kodály (1882-1967) was composing complex music while still a boy in shorts. He was a precociously talented, bright child with a keen interest in science, languages and music. A quick search will normally depict him either transcribing folk tunes from the gramophone or surrounded by Hungarian school children as he taught, reflecting the multiple roles he was to have in his career as pedagogue, ethnomusicologist, philosopher and composer.

He famously wrote:

'Teach music and singing at school in such a way that it is not torture but a joy for the pupil; instil a thirst for finer music in them, a thirst that will last a lifetime.'

Part of making sightsinging less 'torturous' was to involve hand-signs to help visualise and physicalise the pitch, using the system developed by John Curwen, as well as using simple folk-songs that all the students could relate to.

Kodály's name his often connected with that of his compatriot and lifelong friend, Béla Bartók, who was just one year older. In their 20s they encouraged each other to venture deeper into the rural communities of Hungary and beyond to collect material for their massive compendium of folk music. Kodály describes his trips in 1905 'into the most backward districts, alone, on foot with just a knapsack on my back'.

A quick pause here to reflect on how times have changed. Can students imagine going out (perhaps as a slightly older version of themselves) into a country pub and asking the locals to sing their favourite folksong? How would people react? How was folk music the 'pop music' of the day?

Musical nationalism

One way into this topic might be to ask the class what music or sounds immediately make them think of their home culture, whatever that may be. Is it a song that they can remember being played or sung to them when they were young? Or is it a medley of film tunes that remind them of the country?

If they were asked to organise the next Olympics in London, which music would they choose and why?

The questions here are meant to provoke a discussion on how music shapes culture and vice versa, or how a perception of national identity can be either reinforced or sometimes undermined by the music associated with it. Such were the fundamental questions for Romantic and early 20th-century composers who wanted to differentiate their sound from the predominant German musical culture of the day.

It's easy to see musical nationalism as a form of patriotism, which it can be in its crudest form. Critically, though, exploring folk material allowed composers such as Bartók and Kodály important paths to developing their own, idiosyncratic musical language – something that served their individual creativity as much as advocating a unique sound for their country.

Outside of Hungary, the sound of Roma musicians held a special allure for some of the German Romantics in particular, extending the fascination with 'Turkish' oriental sounds in the Classical period (e.g. Haydn's 'Military' Symphony and Mozart's 'Rondo alla Turca'). Adding some elements of the so-called *style hongroise* added sparkle and verve. Listeners loved it, as did publishers. Some well-known examples include:

- Schubert's *Divertissement à la hongroise*
- Brahms's *Hungarian Dances*
- Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*

These give us a stereotyped, foreigner's view (with the exception of Liszt, who had Hungarian blood) of the Hungarian folk style, and it's interesting to compare these to the more authentic 'translations' by Kodály, Bartók, Dohnányi and Ligeti.

Kodály's personal style and the trilogy

Kodály's style is generally accessible, with an emphasis on strong, folk-inspired melodies rather than harmonic innovation. He was not a modernist, although his experiments with speech rhythm, folk modes and orchestral colours reflect some of modernists' preoccupations. He just did it in a way that 'let music belong to everyone'.

His orchestral textures can often be described as impressionistic, because of the lightness of touch, the clarity of detail and the often shimmering textures (eg the opening to the *Dances of Galánta*.). This was in part inspired by his brief spell in Paris, where he was entranced by the music of Claude Debussy and had a few lessons with the organist Charles Widor.

Kodály's flair for writing beguiling programmatic music and upbeat dances helped establish him in the repertoire of concert halls across the western world. Three works were particularly popular and became known as his 'Hungarian trilogy':

- The suite from *Háry János* (1926)
- The *Dances of Marosszék* (1929)
- The *Dances of Galánta* (1930)

Kodály's *Dances of Galánta* were the subject of their own *Music Teacher* resource in February 2017.

Exploring *Háry János*

Ask a volunteer to imitate the sound of a sneeze on the piano. An upwards gesture for the intake of breath, perhaps, then a violent descent for the sneeze itself? Then compare this to the opening of the *Háry János* Suite, which is a famous depiction of a sneeze for full orchestra. Kodály has a pizzicato for the sharp intake of breath and then everybody surges upwards, followed by a downwards double-handed glissando on the piano. And so 'The Fairy Tale Begins'.

Apparently in Hungarian folklore if you sneeze before the telling a story, it's a way of signalling it is the truth. If so, then Háry is stringing us along right from the start, because what follows will be a series of fanciful tales, told with the swagger that comes with a little too much wine and the rapt attention of his admiring audience.

Háry János is a veteran Hussar, a soldier who dreams about his exploits and then retells them with added heroic gusto each time. Although based on a soldier who actually existed, Háry is more of a Baron Munchausen character, a fantasist. He has been referred to as a 'Hungarian Don Quixote', and much of the story is prompted by Háry's desire to impress the Empress Marie Louise before realising (having defeated Napoleon's armies single-handedly) his true love lies back at home with his humble sweetheart from the village.

These tall tales form the basis of an epic poem called *The Veteran*, by János Garay, which was well known in the country. This was then turned into the libretto for Kodály's operetta or *Singspiel*, a comic blend of spoken word and song.

Lies or poetry?

On the theme of Háry's tall tales, Kodály insisted:

'He does not lie; he creates a tale, he is a poet. What he relates has never happened but he has lived it through, and so it is the truth.'

Dubious logic, perhaps, but the composer adds:

'Háry's stories are not true but that is unimportant. They are expressions of the beauty of his fantasy… A deeper significance is given to the story of Háry as symbolic of the Hungarian nation, whose strivings and ambitions can be fulfilled only in dream.'

The underlying message here is how folklore can supersede politics in defining a nation's spirit – something that Kodály was philosophically committed to throughout his life.

'Háryades'

Such was the popularity of the Háry János figure that the word 'Háryade' became common Hungarian parlance to describe a story that has been embellished to ennoble its teller.

As a quick game to put the class into the spirit of the opera and its suite, three students could tell their own Háryade – except one of them is telling the truth. The class has to guess which one.

The Suite

After the local success of the opera, it was Bartók who suggested Kodály should create an orchestral suite from its music. This Suite proved even more popular than the opera, and quickly became a party piece to lighten symphonic programmes across Europe. In the two years after it was assembled, 1928-30, it received no fewer than 150 performances internationally.

We started with that sneeze, played out on one of the largest orchestras that Kodàly was to use. Note how he adds an alto saxophone, three cornets to his three trumpets, an expanded percussion section with four tubular bells, a piano and a celeste and, as we've established, a cimbalom.

Just looking at that instrumentation tells us this is going to be a colourful and imaginative musical story, potentially. Kodály is an unsung hero of orchestration, absorbing the best of the French style in that period and adding his own personal touches.

Listen to the last few minutes of 'The Fairy Tale Begins', for example (from figure 2 in the score). It has the texture of a Debussy or Ravel tone poem, with arpeggiating flutes and rippling pianos, but the melody, based on the opening motif, sounds distinctly Hungarian – not folk-like, but in Kodály's unique voice.

Sequence of events

The order of the Suite's pieces does not follow the opera's narrative, but rather what makes musical sense for the orchestral work. After the sneeze, there's a slow build from a mysterious tremolo in the bass registers of the orchestra as the angular tune (based on whole tones) builds intensity. This intensity disappears with the sudden brightness of the 'Viennese musical clock' that follows, a playful, child-like rondo.

The 'Song' is full of melancholy, and its sense of longing and nostalgia (with the cimbalom adding a touch of homesickness for the soldier on the frontline) is contrasted by the absurd energy of the 'Battle and Defeat of Napoleon'. This has a comic lightness to it compared to the heartfelt 'authenticity' of the 'Intermezzo' that follows. The 'Entrance of the Emperor' brings the suite to a grand conclusion, blazing with oriental colours.

'The Battle and Defeat of Napoleon'

We find Háry here in full fantasy storytelling mode, regaling how he was able to see off the entire French army in order to defend his honour and protect the Empress. You can imagine a film montage here: Háry heroically emerging from improbable odds with the French flag in tatters at the end as the funeral march sounds.

Before playing the music to the students, ask what sounds they would use to represent an army. Hopefully they would include:

- assorted percussion and drums.
- marching band: fifes and pipes.
- fanfares.
- sudden events and interruptions.

All of these are very much present in the music. For his percussion, Kodály deliberately selects those you would find in a marching band, given by their Italian names in the score:

- *Triangolo*: triangle
- *Gran cassa:* bass drum
- *Piatti:* cymbals
- *Tamburo piccolo*: snare drum
- *Tamburo basco*: tambourine

Introduction

Ominous thuds on the bass drum set the tone. The army is still in the distance. Háry is warming to his story, gathering in his listeners. The trombones play the march theme first, their lower register matching the tone. Trumpets or horns would be too bright at this early stage.

Notice how much repetition there is in this theme, both rhythmically and melodically. It feels, in other words, like a typical marching song, one you don't have to think about too much as you pound out the miles. The staccato articulation and the dotted rhythms add extra martial character.

As the trumpets join, the dynamics go from *p* to *mf*. Notice how controlled the dynamics are throughout. It's all very strategic. With them come extra percussion, including the tap of the tambourine.

Figure 1

Suddenly there is the first sighting of the enemy. The cymbals clash and there is an alarm call led by the shrill combination of three piccolos with brass blaring underneath. The discord here is built on tritones and semitones.

In the middle of this texture is the saxophone, alternating between written A flat and G (concert C flat and B flat, a major 6th below). Is this a voice calling? (Perhaps even Napoleon's?) Their marching band has come to a halt below: two *pianissimo* steps and then there is a pause bar as everybody holds their breath.

Figures 2-5

A fanfare is given as a call to arms, made all the more strident by its use of 4ths and 7ths. A solo trumpet adds an echo, as if the call has been passed back to a distant battalion. Again, there is a general pause. Silence is being used here to build the tension.

We've now heard all the main elements of this opening section, which will be repeated in different guises: the **march theme**, the **alarm call,** the **saxophone call** and the **fanfare**.

Rather than charge into battle after the fanfare as you might expect, there are *pianissimo* quavers as the march gently starts again. The impression is perhaps of toy soldiers, an army that exists just in Háry's mind. The march theme is given again, this time with some more rhythmic counterpoint in the second trumpet and on the side drum.

The piccolo trio joins in with the theme, sounding this time like fifes and in jaunty open 5ths and 4ths. The same interruption follows, with the alarm call receding into a tense silence, this time with the sax an octave lower. The next fanfare is an ear-shattering *fff*.

Create your own fanfare

A convincing fanfare can be created just with one wind instrument – ideally brass, of course – and one item of percussion. See if your students can compose a brief, fanfare-like phrase using the core components:

- Triads
- At least one dotted rhythm
- At least one triplet
- Plenty of repetition
- Some *staccato* and *marcato* for emphasis

Figure 5: *lunga pausa*

This is where the real battle begins. The bass trombone is rolled out here for extra menace, with glissandos onto the downbeat. A punning reference to the 'Marseillaise' is heard (just the opening phrase), *pesante* and doom-laden. By the time you hear it again (figure 6) it will have sunk down a semitone, symbolically. More voices are brought into the melée, with rhythmic canons and an exciting textural build-up.

By figure 6 the piccolos are used to open out the registral range, pitted against the bass brass and the percussion session now at full throttle. A *stringendo* adds to the excitement, until a final capitulation: a descending semitone couplet in the brass, underlined by the bass drum. All is over.

It's been a very short battle. In his tale, Háry has apparently beaten off all attackers until left with Napoleon himself. In the long pause before the final funeral march he delivers his verdict: he will not decapitate the Emperor on this occasion, but rather send him away humiliated with an admonishment.

Marcia funebre

What we hear at the end is the forlorn voice of Napoleon mocked on the solo saxophone (the perfect colour for this episode: mournful and parodic), traipsing off the field with a sad version of the initial marching theme.

Intermezzo

Can the students imagine the kind of gesture that would open this dance with those abrupt three notes and the slight pause? A dramatic fling of the arm above the head, perhaps?

The mood marking for this celebratory dance is telling: *maestoso, ma con fuoco*. Majestic but with fire, proud and passionate, in the tradition of the *czárdás*. Much of this in conveyed in the clipped rhythms alone, dotted either long-short or short-long.

After the episodic nature of the battle music before, this is now in familiar territory of an ABA form, with extended themes and solid harmonic progression. The material is bold, with a broad sweep to the sound.

The first theme is scalic, moving between tonic and dominant, with the cimbalom scampering around on melodic or harmonic minor scales (which we experience more as a rippling colour than individual notes).

A stamping rhythm (*poco pesante*) in the relative major of F brings us to the second half of this first section, which features scales descending in accented couplets over a strong movement of 5ths in the bass. The use of *rubato* is important here to make the most of the dramatic arch and passionate rhetoric of the melody.

Notice how both ideas from this section are repeated in turn, as is typical of the folk style.

Figures 2-5

In this B section, everything is contrasted. The mood is graceful, the texture light, the key is in the major, the melody staccato and adorned with grace notes and trills. The emphasis shifts to solo colours and chamber accompaniment.

Again there are two parts to this middle theme, each repeated. The second part (4 bars before figure 4) recalls the more passionate opening and has a polonaise-like accompaniment in the horns, with busier flourishes on the cimbalom. Note the dialogue between upper and lower registers here, in both the wind and strings.

Figure 5 to the end

The A section returns in a direct repeat of what happened before, this time even more defiant, and rounded off with three dramatic chords that include a nice side-step to the dominant A via an A flat.

It is customary in performance to have more fun with the timing and sense of drama on this repeat.

Conclusion

For further listening, the 'Intermezzo' could be compared with:

- Kodály's *Dances of Galánta*
- Brahms's *Hungarian Dances*
- Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*
- An authentic *czárdás*, as suggested before

The 'Battle' sequence has some good forerunners in:

- Beethoven's *Wellington's Victory,* or *Battle Symphony*
- Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*
- Rossini's *William Tell* Overture

These two excerpts from the Suite are a good introduction to Kodály as a programmatic and nationalist composer, but they also should excite those new to the sounds of an orchestra to what treasures lie in store.