

# Kodály Program Notes

## Zoltán Kodály

**Born:** December 16, 1882, Kecskemét

**Died:** March 6, 1967, Budapest

### *Dances of Galánta (Galántai Táncok)*

The two composers and ethnomusicologists who brought to the concert hall a striking Hungarian national music—Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály—were born just a year apart, in 1881 and 1882. Both were determined to be true to their Magyar origins, creating music whose foundation was folksong, even when all the tunes were entirely original with them. They started from the then-uncharted songs and dances of the peasants, which they tracked down by wandering from village to village, equipped with primitive recording equipment as well as a good ear for notating what they heard.

At times Kodály's researches were frustrated because the peasants, too often tricked, had grown suspicious of city slickers. Recalling his journeys with Bartók across Transylvania, where they divided certain districts between them, he wrote: "It wasn't so bad as long as we went on foot, but when we needed a carriage to take all our equipment—the paraphernalia, including wax cylinders, finally provided by the government—they smelled a rat, suspecting some kind of 'business.'" Getting the women to sing, except on the sly, was not always easy, for in those days it was generally thought that women only sang in public if they'd had too much to drink. "The men, however, were ready enough to cooperate, once they had had a glass or two."

### richly ornamented tunes, remembered from boyhood

Kodály's first research took him back to the village of his boyhood, Galánta, on the main train line from Budapest to Vienna and Prague, where his father had been appointed stationmaster in 1885. He started by looking up his old schoolmates and persuading them to sing; he subsequently elicited songs from the family's former servants, notating what they performed. This is the town, with its joyous memories of a rustic boyhood, that he memorializes in his *Dances of Galánta*.

But the actual tunes in the work, familiar from that vague wash of

childhood recollection, did not derive from his own collecting but rather from some almost forgotten volumes compiled around 1800. Published in Vienna, this collection had preserved the old *verbunkos* tradition (from the German *Werbung*, "recruiting"). The *verbunkos* was a Hungarian dance associated with a ritual method of enlisting soldiers during the imperial wars of Haydn's time. Performed by a dozen or so hussars, led by their sergeant, the essence of the dance was the alternation of slow figures with quick ones; the tunes, mostly simple folksongs, were extravagantly elaborated by the accompanying gypsy musicians. Thus a striking feature of the *verbunkos* to be heard in the *Dances of Galánta* is its rich ornamentation, coupled with crisply syncopated rhythms and wide leaps.

The *Dances of Galánta* date from Kodály's middle years, the most rewarding period for him as a composer. Recognizing Kodály's musical individuality, Toscanini conducted many of his works, including, in 1930, the *Dances of Marosszék*. Three years later, upon a commission for the 80th anniversary of the Budapest Philharmonic, Kodály composed the complementary *Dances of Galánta*, first performed on October 23, 1933. The work includes a chain of five connected dances, gradually accelerating in tempo, upon which Kodály imposed an original structure.

First there is a slow introduction, with a haunting gypsy motive to set the mood. The various solo statements of this idea (cello, horn, flute/oboe, and so forth) are separated by whirling figures out of which the clarinet comes to the fore; after a showy cadenza, it delivers the majestic strain of the first dance. This theme functions as the refrain for roughly the first half of the work—a rondo whose episodes generate new dances. The fourth dance, with its own subsection (a little march, somewhat slower), launches the second half, which culminates in a fiery, lavishly ornamented dance that Kodály paints in the most brilliant orchestral colors (*Allegro vivace*). Suddenly the motion is arrested, and a short coda recalls the stately rondo, but only momentarily, for the whirling, stomping dancing soon resumes to leave the listener with an unforgettable image of Eastern Europe as it was in our great grandfathers' time.

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, bells, snare drum, triangle and strings

*Program note by Mary Ann Feldman.*