The Tárogató: A Forgotten Instrument?

by Michèle Gingras

During the ClarFest in Cincinnati hosted by Ron de Kant in 1992, I heard an unforgettable program played by tárogatóist Gheorghe Trimbitas. A Romanian native, Trimbitas settled in the U.S. in 1990. He resides in Cleveland where he performs with his band, Transylvania Group.

His performance made a formidable impression on me three years before I was to embark on a journey into the world of klezmer music in 1995. My fascination for world music continues and it led me to further investigate eastern European folk music, particularly Romanian folklore. As a result of the generous support available to me as a professor at Miami University, I acquired a tárogató, contacted Mr. Trimbitas, and spent time at his home in Cleveland to learn, play, listen to vintage recordings, and to talk about Romanian music making. (The term taragot is used in Romania, and tárogató is used in Hungary.)

The tárogató is a Hungarian wooden instrument with a single reed and a conical bore, similar to the soprano saxophone. It is usually pitched in Bb (but it was also available in C and A), with a range of Bb to C" or higher, depending on the instrument and performer. (The lowest pad, Bb, is activated by the right-hand thumb, but it is rarely used, so its mechanism is sometimes removed to allow more comfort below the thumb rest.) In former times, the tárogató was a double-reed instrument. It was redesigned in 1894 by Hungarian instrument maker Joseph Schunda. At the beginning of the 18th century, the instrument was very popular among the adherents of the Rákóczy movement and it later became such a symbol of freedom to the Hungarians that when the movement was defeated, the tárogató was prohibited and disappeared from public use, only to reappear at the time of the war of independence against the Austrian Hapsburgs in 1896.

The tárogató is used in the shepherd’s tune in Act 3 of Tristan und Isolde in performances at the Budapest Opera House.
since Mahler suggested the idea, and the practice was followed at Bayreuth under Hans Richter. The first known appearance of the tárógať in symphonic music was in Károly Thern’s opera Svatopluc (1839). In more recent times, Antal Molnár used the instrument in his Karuc muzzika for small orchestra and four tárógaťós (1936). More information and photos may be found in The New Grove Dictionary of Instruments, volume 3.

Today, the instrument is mostly used in Romanian folk bands for celebrations and gatherings. These bands may include an accordion, a trumpet, a violin, an alto saxophone or clarinet (which sometimes doubles the melody in unison or in harmony along with the tárógať for short periods), a shepherd’s flute, a cimbalom (or dulcimer), and a double bass. The tárógať is sometimes replaced by a soprano saxophone or clarinet.

**DETAILS, DETAILS!**

The tárógať’s bell is pierced with 10 strategically placed holes to enhance resonance (one upper row with five small holes, and one lower row with five larger holes). Its key system combines a mixture of different instruments’ characteristics, including the clarinet, oboe and saxophone. The chromatic scale is played with fingerings used on those three instruments. The keywork is somewhat elementary and often cumbersome, with archaic mechanisms such as split key levers and curved octave keys. (There are two octave keys, both operated by the left thumb.)

It is rare to find two identical tárógaťós. Each instrument seems to have distinct and unique features which sets it apart from other tárógaťós. One instrument could have covered plates instead of open rings, or an extra key for alternate fingerings, and so on (see photo 1). The relatively small mouthpiece requires soft or medium soft soprano saxophone (or clarinet) reeds, and its baffle is typically lined with a thick and hard substance to give the tárógať its characteristic nasal and dark sound, as well as to improve sound projection. It is connected to the instrument in the same manner as a saxophone mouthpiece, with the cork on the tárógať’s upper joint instead of on the actual mouthpiece. Some players use two different mouthpieces with various reed strengths depending on sound, style and repertoire. For example, to play a fast dance from the region of Banat called Joc de doi, a bright “Gypsy” sound (typical of Banat) would be more appropriate, whereas a doina from Transylvania requires a warmer, richer “classical” sound.

Other dances include hora (a mixed dance where men and women hold hands and dance in a circle), joc de doi, (literally meaning “dance for two” — a very fast mixed dance where men and women dance separately in line and in a circle), sirba (mixed circle dance, similar to a hora but faster, where dancers place their hands and arms on each other’s shoulders), and fecioara (a Transylvanian circle and line dance for men only) (see Figures 2, 3 and 4). Another dance called fieoara fetelor de la crihalma is for women only. It was created in Crihalma, a village near Fagaras City (Transylvania) when men left for war, leaving their families behind.

It is interesting to note that a piece played in one tonality on the tárógať would actually sound better on the clarinet if it were transposed to a higher key. For example, Fecioara (see Figure 3) played in F major on the clarinet would better capture the appropriate “folk” spirit than if played in the same key as the tárógaťő (C major).
THE BEST IN THE LAND

Legendary tárogató players include Luca Novac (considered the very best player from Banat), Dumitru Farcas (from Transylvania, he studied the oboe at a music conservatory in Romania, which may explain his “classical” tárogató sound), Ion Peptenar, Djivan Gasparian, Dimitru Dobrican, Luta Popovici and Luta Ivota. Originally from Banat, Ivota was the first Romanian taragotist. He brought the instrument to Romania around 1910. Vintage LP recordings made by these musicians are not available any more but can be found in households in Eastern Europe, France (Romanian folk music is highly appreciated by the French) and in the U.S.

WHERE ARE THE TÁROGÁTOŚ?

Acquiring a tárogató is a challenging task. The most desirable make is by Stowasser (Budapest). One of the reasons the tárogató became a rare instrument is that the Stowasser Company burned down in 1917 and stopped manufacturing tárogatós after that year. (Original instruments usually have a serial number near and up to 19900.) The most common serial numbers being around 19865.) Since the instrument is not made anymore (except for a relatively small number of copies), owners rarely want to part with their instrument, even though they might own unusable specimens or don’t play it themselves. Prices vary from a few hundred dollars to several thousand dollars, depending on the age, condition and most often availability. Owners can be found mainly in Romania, Hungary and in a handful of states in the U.S.

A strategy to purchase an instrument is to approach a tárogatóist and go from there, acquiring names by word of mouth. Tárogatóists can be found in musicians’ union directories in large cities and by investigating folk bands in various locations or browsing the Internet.

PLAYING THE TÁROGÁTOŚ—JOYS AND CHALLENGES

From a clarinetist’s point of view, playing a tárogató is a refreshing experience because the air column resistance is so minimal and free; however, small fingers might find it difficult to seal the holes completely, especially on the right hand. The conical bore’s construction calls for larger holes in the right hand, making low E and D holes quite wide and difficult to cover completely. Additionally, the holes are far apart, resulting in extra stretching on both hands. Tendinitis sufferers beware! One suggestion is to seek a master repair person who would create plate covers to replace open ring systems (see photo 1). The procedure is complicated and requires cutting down hole chimneys, adding a metal post and pads using sophisticated tools owned by highly qualified woodwind technicians. Another challenge is intonation which tends to be uneven and very sharp unless the mouthpiece is pulled out several millimeters, while the embouchure remains flexible.

Fingerings are simple to grasp, especially for a woodwind doubler. The chromatic scale is indicated on the fingering chart (see Figure 1). Certain notes may be modified to improve timbre, such as adding the left C# key while playing E', F', and F#.

Although double tonguing is often considered an advanced contemporary technique by clarinetists, it is an essential and basic skill to develop as a tárogatóist. Romanian folk music from the region of Banat includes
extremely rapid myriads of long passages of staccato notes (see Figure 4). The good news is that the tárogató’s low air column resistance makes it a breeze to learn double tonguing. Simply play “da-ga,” “ta-ka,” “tu-ku” or similar syllables depending upon personal and pedagogical philosophy, and apply the fingerings slightly before the next note to insure proper coordination and precision of articulation.

Romanian folk music (as in many other kinds of folk music) is seldom written down and, understandably, scores are practically nonexistent. The music is handed down by oral tradition, so one way musicians get to exchange different pieces is by traveling from town to town and playing for each other; moreover, folk musicians who learn their skills by ear early on from their parents or relatives, often find score reading unnecessary, and memorize countless pieces easily. Naturally, ornamentation (including trills, grace notes, mordents, tone bending) is also achieved through listening and experience. Ornamentation styles are directly linked to the sounds of specific regions in Romania; Banat (close to Serbia), Moldavia, Transylvania and so on. For example, players from Banat usually focus on extremely fast technique involving double tonguing, while Transylvanian tárogatóists often prefer slow, meditative songs.

When I asked accordionist Ioan Ailoae from the Transylvania Group to teach me chords, he told me he doesn’t read music or use chord names and that actually he has a hard time explaining how he even knew where to place his fingers. He casually answered, “I just hear it, that’s all(!).” His fingers glide up and down the keyboard with breathtaking ability and artistry. How inspiring a musicianship!

Michele Gingras wishes to thank Miami University’s School of Fine Arts (Ohio) for its generous support, and Gheorghe Trimbitas for his contribution to this article.

Brian Sutin (a scientist by profession) created a comprehensive Web site for the tárogató. It includes photos, historical information, names of tárogató dealers for new and used instruments, tárogató summer camps, a list of books, performers, recordings, and more. The URL is: <www.ucolick.org/~sutin/tarogato.html>.

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