

The problems of the curriculum and of teaching the folk viola on the primary level

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Abstract

The core curriculum for all folk instruments was issued in 1998. In the 1990s, mostly only adults and secondary school students studied folk music at institutes; however, from the 2000s, the number of primary school students, and, among them, lower primary students, has been increasing continually. Nonetheless, the core curriculum has not changed virtually at all up until now, and it can be seen that the curriculum written for late adolescents and adults cannot be implemented for younger children, according to educators' experiences. Dr. István Ferenc Bíró, dr. Mátyás Bolya, and Bálint Könczei have discussed the analyses of core curricula from different aspects earlier; their work was used for this research. The two main questions were the following: whether the appearance of small children among folk viola students is truly significant; and along what conceptual framework or with the help of what existing literature it would be possible to renew the core curriculum for folk viola on the primary level. In this research, the records of the Folk Music School of Óbuda, the curriculum of 1981 for folk instruments, and the curricula of 1998 for the folk violin, the folk viola, the classical violin, and the classical viola were examined with document analysis. As a result, a possible solution may be to adopt certain materials from the curriculum for the classical violin into the one for the folk viola, and to arrange teaching folk music knowledge according to the student's technical level on the instrument.

Keywords: teaching the folk viola; Folk Music School of Óbuda; curriculum for the folk viola; curriculum and material for the classical violin

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1. Introduction

The “táncház!” movement began in Hungary in 1972, with the first táncház in Budapest (Jávorszky 2022, 34-36). People took interest in studying folk dance and

1 Lit. “dance house”. A casual event where people can join in and learn folk dancing on the fly (as opposed to a choreographed stage performance). The name, apparently, comes from the fact that, in Transylvania, Romania, dancing also took place at private homes. Starting from 1972, a cultural movement was launched to revive folk dancing as a form of preserving and cherishing tradition and heritage.

folk instruments almost immediately, then participants' numbers continued to increase, thus, in 1975, institutional folk music education was begun in Budapest, in the Music School of Mókus street, in the 3rd district². In the first few years, only a handful of folk instruments could be studied, but it was continually being expanded, until, by 1990, all instruments had become available to learn. At this point, the first independent primary school for folk music, the Folk Music School of Óbuda was founded. In the following 17 years, teaching folk music at the secondary and tertiary levels was also established, but discussing these fields is beyond the scope of this paper. The all-encompassing curriculum of folk music education for the primary level was issued in 1998. At that time, mostly only adults and adolescents studied folk viola at music schools. Nowadays, however, more and more young children sign up to study this instrument; nevertheless, the amended curricula in 2011 and 2022 did not follow this societal change from the aspect of the order of teaching materials.

In the research discussed in this paper which is part of broader, wider ranging investigations, it is attempted to evince the change in the mean age of folk viola students numerically with document analysis, in order to better understand the relevance of the fundamental problem. It is then followed by the analysis of the relevant sections in the curricula of 1981 and 1998, and a comparison with the curriculum for the classical violin. This has been carried out with the aid of an exceptional copy of the 1981 curriculum, and of previous papers by fellow folk music teachers (papers, theses, doctoral dissertations), which have already discussed the topic. The main goal was to find the source and the causes of the methodological flaws in the curriculum for the folk viola on the primary level, and to propose suggestions to amend them based on the curriculum for the classical violin.

2. The changes of the average age of students of folk string instruments, especially those of folk viola, in the Folk Music School of Óbuda from 1978 until today

It is presumed as a generation had grown up by 2000 since the beginnings of the *táncház* movement that young parents in the urban folk music scene wanted their children to experience its advantages, therefore, when it was already possible, they signed them up to study folk viola at a music school. As a consequence of this, the number of lower primary students studying at primary music schools may have increased at this time. This was visible and perceptible through personal connections and experiences, but we wanted to support it with numerical evidence based on quantitative research. Thanks to Béla Szerényi, the incumbent headteacher of the Folk Music School of Óbuda, it was possible to examine the records³ of the institute going back until the academic year of 1978/79. This, obviously, does not

² <https://oniarchivum.hu/rolunk>

³ The registry of students.

show the changes taking place in the whole country; yet, we think the results of the research are still authoritative, as this institute is the most representative of the programmes, both because it is the oldest, and because it has the greatest number of students.

Based on the records, the mean of the age of the enrolled students was calculated, first with respect to all students of string instruments. The data is somewhat skewed, yet also broadened, by the fact that, before the 1998 curriculum for all folk instruments was issued, it is not certain if the student really studied in the programme they were registered to, especially if their teacher taught in more than one programme, such as Sándor Csoóri Jr (bagpipe, violin, viola, double bass) and György Lányi (bagpipe, viola). This is due to the fact that several students were registered for the programmes (instruments) that already had a curriculum from 1981. Taking these considerations into account, it can be shown that, from the end of the '70s until the academic year of 2004/05, the mean age was around 21.22 years in general. This did not decrease even when, at the beginning of the '80s, the School established a partnership with Árpád Grammar School, also in Óbuda, which provided that students in classes C with a speciality of folk music and folk dance were obligated to choose a folk music instrument that they studied at the Folk Music School of Óbuda⁴. The number of primary school students was negligible until the academic year 1998/99, the majority of the students were between 20 and 30 years, and, indeed, there have been students older than 40, too. From the academic year 2004/05 on, there were increasingly more students under 14, with still a lot of students being quite old; however, beginning with 2008, more and more students can be found under the age of 10, and the oldest are also under 30. The mean age leaped somewhat higher by the academic year of 2022/23; this can be explained by the fact that, as a consequence of online teaching during the Covid-19 epidemic in 2020/21, a lot of small children terminated or interrupted their music studies, since offline presence has an extremely important role in music education, which schools, understandably, could not provide in this period. This is even more pronounced in folk music education due to the fact that learning is primarily through listening; practising alone is even more difficult for accompanying instruments (for example, the viola and the double bass).

The mean age of folk viola students was examined only from the school year 1998/99, since, as mentioned above, it is not certain what instrument precisely they studied before. The mean age had started to visibly decrease in this group, too, by 2008, but it started to increase again beginning from 2018, to 19-20 years. This is caused, besides the epidemic, by the fact that, in this period, many secondary school students failed their admission exams to university, and certain students of the Music Academy began their university studies, but then interrupted them, and they signed up back again to the Folk Music School. Despite all this, the general trend discussed above can be observed even in this programme: students older than 30 years disappeared, and the number of students below 14 grew; many are under 10 among the violists, too.

⁴ Interview with Béla Szerényi

3. Curricula

3.1. 1981

As it was mentioned in the previous chapters, the first curriculum for folk music instruments was issued in 1981. Since it contains the material for only four instruments – the recorder, the bagpipe, the zither, and the hurdy-gurdy –, it cannot be considered the direct predecessor of the topic of this research, but it is worth analysing briefly from the aspects of educational concept and education organisation. On top of this, owing to head teacher Béla Szerényi, I had access to the copy of this curriculum of his predecessor, Tamás “Kobzos” Kiss⁵, with handwritten notes by him which allude to his intentions to later renew teaching materials and teaching system⁶.

Despite the fact that the foreword is a general text for music schools, and Tamás Kiss suggests writing a new one focusing expressly on teaching folk music, there are some guidelines in there which are relevant to the topic of this paper. Such are the development of musical skills and abilities, establishing musical literacy, preparing for playing music together (this is paramount in folk music, especially for the accompanying instrument players), and preparing for professional training⁷. Apparently, the former head teacher did not consider the latter important, since this possibility was still fairly uncertain at that time. Furthermore, in general and independently of style, it is important to develop efficient and safe instrumental technique, and that primary and secondary subjects⁸ develop the student in co-ordination. Moreover, today it is more and more evident that it is indispensable to recognise the connection between musical styles and related playing techniques, since musicians today are more and more given the task to play music outside of their core field of expertise.

In the following page (in the document at the link below), the course structure of the curriculum can be found. One of the important and remarkable pieces of data is that these programmes were, essentially, four-year courses, since the primary subject ceases for years 5 and 6, and the student would be in a chamber music programme. Today, this is not like so, the so-called “short” programmes are of eight years (4 + 4, with a base exam at the end of year 4), and the “long” ones are of ten (6 + 4, base exam at the end of year 6), and, after them, the student may elect to

5 A late Hungarian folk musician and teacher, who played a central role in the folk music revival. The nickname roughly translates as “cobza-player”.

6 See the original Hungarian document at: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1fzE7X-7-OjBc-NWT3_iNzZdxgG1LTL-Rq?usp=drive_link (retrieved: 28 June 2024)

7 In Hungary, primary music schools offer music education as part of general cultural education and as quality pastime activity. Professional musical training officially begins on the secondary level.

8 In Hungary, on the primary level, students study a primary subject – their instrument in the majority of cases – and a secondary subject of music: four years of compulsory solfège (to learn to read and write music, to develop fundamental musical abilities, such as hearing, inner hearing, sense of rhythm and metre, and to build some basic theoretical understanding of music), and then a compulsory elective subject, such as further solfège, music theory, music literacy, chamber music, ensemble, second instrument etc.

enrol in the chamber music programme. It is an interesting observation that there was no specialised “B” curriculum for folk music issued centrally in this period; Tamás Kiss seemed to think that it would have been necessary, since it could have provided talent promotion and preparation for a career in music. He would essentially merge the subject “group music” into “chamber music”, the latter of which he would make compulsory in the “B” curriculum in 2 × 45 minutes. The remark “for the little ones” probably refers to children; for them, parallelly to the solfège preparatory course⁹, he would teach a subject called “basics of folk music”, which does appear in the 1998 curriculum. A further change is that he would teach the piano only in years 5 and 6, and only in the “B” curriculum, which seems logical, since learning to play the piano as a folk musician is only necessary for secondary and tertiary education. At this time, many students auditioned for the programmes at the Bessenyei György Teacher Training College directly from the Folk Music School of Óbuda, as secondary education in folk music was available only in Székesfehérvár between 1994 and 2001. He may suggest for the same reason to include such supplementary subjects as music literacy, improvisation, transcription, and basics of instrument building; two of them can be found today in the curriculum for secondary schools of folk music. He proposes that a school may have their own folk orchestra and folk song group, this may follow from the strengthening of chamber music. He would find it necessary to introduce folk dance classes (this is part of the curriculum for secondary schools of folk music today), and dance accompaniment; the latter would only be possible in cooperation with folk dance ensembles or schools where there is a special curriculum for folk dance, which would prove a fairly complicated task for education organisation.

In the next page of his curriculum, the segment about developing abilities is visibly crossed out, even though the recommendations could refer to folk music with the exception of faithfulness to the score (if it is not about a certain specific transcription). Nevertheless, as he indicates, it, indeed, may need amending. Tamás Kiss insists on yearly exams for students (even in the preparatory course), but it could take different forms: concert, exam, or dance accompaniment. The rest of the notes repeat, by and large, the information from the previous page.

In his paper *Renewing folk musician training in Hungary* (2017), Mátyás Bolya does not discuss the role of the 1981 curriculum, probably because it did not still include every instrument. On the other hand, István Ferenc Bíró did an analysis in the same year, in which he compared the contents of the 1981 curriculum to the 1998 one, mainly from the aspect of when the paradigm shift occurs in institutional folk music education towards traditional knowledge transfer and traditional application, and if it happens at the same time for all instruments (Bíró 2017). A couple of observations are cited here that are relevant for this research. It is important to note that, contrary to the first curriculum for classical music in 1969, the 1981 curricu-

⁹ In Hungary, if a child is very young (6-7 years) or otherwise yet unfit for studying an instrument, they may be admitted to the music school without beginning their instrumental studies, and they participate in solfège classes to start getting acquainted with the fundamentals of music and reading and writing music, mostly through singing, and various games and activities.

lum is entirely professional in its contents, and they are not saturated with the socialist ideology of the state of the period¹⁰. It also shows a relaxation in educational policy in that it contains recommended teaching materials instead of compulsory ones. The authors of the curriculum, however, seem to have run into problems, as there were no instrument textbooks for folk music instruments, apart from János Béres's *Recorder school*, which was still written for the Blockflöte and not the 6-hole peasant recorder, albeit it was based on Hungarian folk music; neither were there published collections and transcriptions available for folk music instruments. This is probably the reason why there are recommended publications borrowed from the materials for musicianship (e.g. Kodály: 333 reading exercises, Bicinia); these are, by the way, not without merit for folk musicians for developing technique and musicianship. Biró notes, too, that the selection of teaching materials must be flexible and can be expanded by the teachers as other sources become available later on (this notion can be found, indeed, on page 58 in the curriculum).

Biró also quotes folk music researcher Bertalan Andrásfalvy's ideas from his lecture in 1996: '*...if we teach folk music, we do not train professional musicians who make a living from it, we want to teach children the joy of playing music instead...*' This, however, raises several questions that not even Biró discusses in his analysis. It is unclear why Andrásfalvy believed that being a professional musician precludes finding joy in playing music. Since learning music, and, thus, music schools are elective, as opposed to general education at primary and secondary schools, it seems plausible to assume that mostly those children sign up who find joy in it, and they have the greatest chance to become professional musicians later. From another point of view, as was shown in the previous chapter, folk music programmes were already available on the secondary and tertiary levels of education in 1996, that is, advising talented children to pursue a career in music must have been part of the discourse.

According to Biró, by mentioning "faithfulness to score and style", the curriculum precludes traditional knowledge transfer at school, although it is far from being evident just because the expression is present in the text. In all probability, the phrase was borrowed from the curricula for classical music for the sake of simplicity and formality; but, even disregarding this notion, the expression does not necessarily mean the teacher could not teach the music to the student through listening, while using the score only as a tool for checking. It is remarkable that the curriculum states knowledge is not handed down '*from fathers to sons*' anymore, even though, 40 years ago, village singers and musicians were active in large numbers. This phenomenon has not gone completely extinct even today, although it has truly diminished.

The curriculum does not have a formal hierarchy of goals, it aims to achieve education in folk, national, and general culture. It does contain, however, technical terms referring to elements of instrumental technique to learn. It formulates the goal to develop students' personality and ability to cooperate, but it does not specify competencies for students and teachers.

10 Between 1949 and 1989, Hungary was a Soviet-style "people's republic" (in reality, a dictatorship).

It becomes clear from Tamás “Kobzos” Kiss’s further notes that he would suggest to partially rewrite the chapter “*Recommendations, guidelines*” at the end of the curriculum, most probably in order to make it more tailored to folk music education. He indicates that the recommended literature ought to be expanded and specified for different instruments; this refers to the aforementioned lack of instrument textbooks and organised collections. He underlines certain recommendations on page 56 which clearly suggest that, in this period, the expectation was adolescents and adults would participate in the programmes, not young children. Examples are instrument building and folk music collecting; these can hardly be tasks for lower primary students. The question mark on page 57 indicates not even he understood why the author of the curriculum thought there should be no specialised programmes (“A” and “B”)¹¹ in folk music education, since, as was mentioned before, talent promotion would be as important in this genre as in any other. The “*courses*” as required qualifications for the teachers most probably refer to the *táncház* musician training of category C continually organised from 1973 until the change of regime in 1989 – other qualifications were not available at the time (Héra 1984).

Tamás “Kobzos” Kiss’s notes at the end of the volume are also incredibly informative. He envisages an independent centre for folk music education, which shows the need for an institute for methodology and education organisation¹². He tries to collect possible supporters of primary art education (for instance, the *National Cultural Fund of Hungary* and *KÓTA*¹³), which indicates that central funding may have been faltering already at the time. On the next page, he proposes the ideal structure for folk music programmes with regards to requirements and education organisation; he establishes the number of hours in 6, which is remarkable because this is the upper limit available for the participation fee on the primary level today. On the last two pages, he attempts to assign the authors for the new curricula, especially for instruments which did not have one at the time, and he also assesses who teaches in which school. It is noteworthy for this paper that there are no names for the viola (and the double bass). It is unclear whether he did not know at the time to whom to assign them, or if no one was willing to take the task. In any case, there seems to be some uncertainty about the matter. He emphasises again the need for the “B” programme and that of musical coaching, the latter of

11 Programme “A” is the general one for any primary music school student; programme “B” has a higher number of classes, more subjects, and higher requirements, and it is dedicated to talent promotion and preparation for auditioning for secondary and tertiary education.

12 It is worth noting that, within the Hungarian Heritage House established in 2001, there is a department called Folk Art Methodology Workshop (Kiss F. 2006). As part of its tasks, it supports professional NGOs, offers services of event organising, marketing, and education, strengthens the international relations for folk art, and it organises training, courses, and masterclasses for educators. It also publishes media and educational material; it is the editor of the series of albums *Táncház-Népzene* (“Táncház-Folk Music”), as well. Despite its name, it apparently deals with methodology in the strict sense only to a small degree, and it is also unclear how it does so.

13 The Hungarian Association of Choirs, Orchestras, and Folk Ensembles.

which is still an unsolved problem of organisation in folk music education. The idea of transforming the programmes into “long ones” emerges; this notion becomes relevant in the later issued full curriculum.

3.2 1998 (2011, 2022)

The core curriculum for all Hungarian folk music instruments was accredited by the Ministry of Education in 1998, and it was published in print in 1999. The original text for the folk viola was written by Zsolt Nagy. The official revisions in 2011 and 2022 were made by Péter Árendás, but the changes are so negligible that they do not warrant discussion. In 2017, folk viola teacher Bálint Könczei did an analysis of the curriculum as a part of his thesis for the programme of mentor educator at the University of Nyíregyháza. He did not know about the latest edition at the time, but it does not affect his results for the above mentioned reasons. His work focuses on the comparison between the system of requirements in the curricula for the folk and classical viola, and it reveals the contradictions and lack of professionalism in the former. As part of other research, I interviewed 20 folk music teachers about the problems of teaching the folk viola on the primary level, and the majority of the problems they mentioned can also be found in Könczei’s paper. Since the general opinion of the colleagues was that beginners ought to be taught the violin (that is, not even the kontra-violin¹⁴), the contents for the first two years in the curriculum are also compared to those for the classical violin and viola¹⁵. It will also be discussed why I did not use the material in the curriculum for the folk violin for my suggestions, despite its being stylistically more relevant in theory.

The first important sentence in the curriculum, also highlighted by Könczei, is, *‘The teaching plan for the folk viola aligns – as much as possible to those for the folk violin and the folk double bass/cello.’* (Könczei 2017) I fundamentally agree with this notion, since chamber music has a definitive role in folk music education and folk music in general, although, due to the individual characteristics of the different instruments, it would prove useful if smaller differences were allowed

14 This refers to the playing style when the so-called “kontra” is played on the lower two strings (g and d’) of the violin built the same way as the one used for classical music. The word “kontra” itself does not mean a specific instrument, but a way of playing, that is, the kontra is always the instrument on which the part of the kontra is played (Pávai 2013, 150-157). In the traditions of the Carpathian Basin, this does not have to be a string instrument, but, in this paper, only the fiddle and viola type instruments are mentioned in this regard. As a consequence, the term “kontrás” (lit. kontra player) means the musician who plays a rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment as part of his role in the ensemble. In the early period of institutional folk music education, the term “kontra” was also used for the school programme, too, and the name was changed to “folk viola” in the second half of the ‘90s. There is a special type of folk viola with a flattened bridge and 3 strings built specifically to make playing the multiple stops required for playing the kontra part easier; this instrument has also been called “kontra” sometimes, as well as “three-stringed viola”.

15 See the original curricula here: <https://mzmsz.hu/index.php/hu/tantervek> (retrieved: 28 June 2024)

for; precisely because I also agree that the faults of one curriculum also affect the other in this case, so they cannot be treated fully independently. The majority of the colleagues participating in the interviews mentioned that the curriculum is exceptionally rigid with regards to the selection of teaching materials, compulsory materials are assigned for every year; despite the fact that section 3 of part I (*GENERAL PROVISIONS The role of requirements and curricula in the content regulation of art education*) of *The Requirements and Curricula of Primary Art Education* stipulates that, *'The requirement and the curriculum realises content regulation in such a fashion that various and differentiated activities of schools, educators, and students may be built on a unified basis.'* Therefore, by setting exclusive material for each year, the curriculum for the folk viola goes completely against one of the fundamental notions of primary art education. A further point worthy of notice is the fact that the following sentence appears among the input competences: *'The programme takes into account the age-specific characteristics, and it develops students' skills and increases their knowledge building on their interests and abilities.'* Not only is this information in the wrong place, but it is also untrue in reality. It is not an accident that the majority of the colleagues complained about the lack of possibilities to differentiate according to the students' abilities.

At the beginning of the curriculum for the classical viola, the following can be found: *'The opportunity to change from the violin to the viola is provided for the students at different levels of the programme, but contrary to earlier practice it is also possible to study the viola as an absolute beginner.'*¹⁶ This, on one hand, proves that it is a general practice in classical music that future violists begin studying the violin at a young age; on the other hand, it is interesting to note that, in theory, it is possible to dispense with it. However, if the material for the first two years in the curriculum are examined and compared to that for the violin, it is clear that the authors either think of older students (which is justified by the size of the instrument), or assume some sort of preliminary training. Namely, the 3rd position as material appears tangentially in the first year, and specifically, together with the 2nd and half positions, in the second one. These are presented in the third year in the curriculum for the violin, thus, it would require a viola student who is more talented than the average to get to this level in such a short time. Among the tasks of teaching the folk viola, the following is written, *'The goal of teaching the folk viola as the main subject is to train musicians who can play the instrumental pieces of Hungarian and ethnic folk music in such a fashion that is authentic to the style and faithful to the musical tradition, both on the (classical) 4-stringed viola, and the (mostly Transylvanian) 3-stringed one.'* Based on this, it is clear that, in 1998, the authors of the curriculum did not think either about the already existing secondary (from 1994) and tertiary (from 1991) education, or that small children may participate in the programme. This requirement cannot be expected of primary school students; it can partially be expected of secondary school students by the end of their studies at a secondary school of music. This point was also raised by

16 See the original here: <https://mzmsz.hu/index.php/hu/tantervek> (retrieved 28 June 2024)

Könczei; I also agree with his notion that a more differentiated approach would be necessary for primary music school students, since not nearly all of them become professional musicians; and that, in this age, learning the basics of instrumental technique would be paramount instead, since the requirements of the music of any folk music region can be logically built on them later.

In his study, Könczei made a table in which he compares the tasks given in the curricula for the classical and folk viola on the primary level. This gives an excellent picture about the dominant way of thinking of 25 years ago, in that, although it would have been relevant to adopt quite a few competences into folk music education, too, only fairly few of them actually were. It is quite baffling, for instance, why folk violists would not need to move their hands in a coordinated fashion, practise scales, chords, finger and bow exercises, the skills to use dynamics for expression, or to learn how to tune the instrument. It is particularly interesting that not even the remark *'The specifics of playing intervals and chords must be paid attention to'* was adopted to the system of competences in the curriculum for the folk viola, albeit it is far more important in this genre than in classical music.

The structure of primary music education, in general, consists of 2 years of preparatory course, 6 years of elementary and 4 years of advanced classes, which can be seen in the tables in the section *"The structure of the programme"*. This, fundamentally, aligns with the years of general primary and secondary education, since the preparatory and the elementary courses give 8 years together, and the further 4 years clearly coincide with secondary school. (Students who begin professional music education normally do not participate in the latter, since after year 8 of general education [year 6 at the music school], they begin their studies at a secondary school of music.) This approach has become relevant for folk music programmes today, too. It is an established practice in many music schools (for instance, where I teach, too¹⁷) that, if a young child signs up as a year 3 or higher student of general primary school, then the preparatory course is omitted and they are admitted right into year 1 of the elementary course. As can be seen in the document, the student's primary subject is their chosen instrument (or singing), and they also have to sign up for a compulsory secondary subject, which can be solfège or basics of folk music for four years; then, after a base exam from either of them, they can choose to study chamber music, ensemble, a second instrument, or any subject indeed, even from another programme. It is also possible to take up a further secondary subject; it is quite common that music school students go both to solfège and orchestra. Thus, a student can have altogether 4-6 lessons a week.

'The goal of the preparatory years is to preface instrumental studies, to pave the way and to prepare for them.' (Könczei 2017) Indeed, many recommendations implying this can be found among the development tasks, under the headers of *'Skill development'* and *'Without the instrument'* of the first preparatory year in the curriculum for the classical violin; most of these recommendations refer to posture, the coordination of the hands, and the establishing of certain bodily feedback.

17 Tóth Aladár Music School AMI ("AMI" is the abbreviation for "Alapfokú Művészetoktatási Intézmény", that is, an institute of primary art education.)

Moreover, there are six types of publications recommended for this year already. In the second preparatory year, essentially the same knowledge is given, in a way that is more specified for the instrument, and complemented with the introduction to reading and writing music. The recommended exam material provides a lot of freedom for the teachers so that every student may be assessed at the end of the year with respect to their own knowledge and progress. Whereas, in the material of the first preparatory year in the curriculum for the folk viola, only rhythm is introduced, with the help of percussion instruments and other tools to make sound, as well as nursery rhymes. Interestingly enough, certain rhythmic patterns are included in the material that the student will encounter only years later in solfège (dotted rhythms, syncopation), which seems less well thought-through. In the material of the second preparatory year – instead, again, of preliminary movements –, playing every string instrument on a basic level was included. Among them, only the violin and the children's songs to be played might somewhat prepare students for the folk viola, but this, in itself, is not established in any fashion whatsoever, and it is not specified, either, since no literature is referred to. Playing the viola and the bass (even if it is replaced by the cello) at this age (7–8 years) comes up against physical limits. The latter requires a system of motion greatly different to the one for the violin and the viola, thus, it is unlikely to truly prepare for playing them. The length of the body of the viola is generally between 38–42 cm, which is obviously impossible for a student of this age to hold and meaningfully play. If the viola is replaced by the kontra-violin, young children will be able to hold and play it, but it is unclear why a beginner should play two notes together right away – as is required in this way of playing – on an instrument they cannot play at all yet. Double stops appear in the curriculum for the classical violin in the second elementary year, and, in my experience, even this is too soon; I have been able to arrive at this point before year 3 only with children who were more talented than the average. In theory, it would be possible to create one of the types of viola from a half-size violin with the replacement of strings (and the bridge in the case of a three-stringed viola), but this instrument would not make a pleasant sound due to its acoustics (Pap 1994, 134–137), thus, beyond methodology concerns, it would not be attractive for the student, either.

Comparing elementary year one of the two programmes yields even more drastic differences. In the curriculum for the classical violin, still basic instrumental skills are found among “*Development tasks*”, such as stopping a string, playing in tune, simple bowing, or string crossing. In the first year of the folk viola, however, the first thing presented is the music of a Hungarian region and that of a Transylvanian village; apparently, not even as recommended, but compulsory material. Thereafter, it is clear why getting to know the parts of the instrument and how to hold it and how to hold the bow are given; however, in the following, a large amount of – and somewhat unclear – knowledge is found. Such a term as “basic chord” does not exist, but even if this is overlooked, it turns out that the students should be taught 8–10 major and minor chords right away, without it being specified on what instrument. It can only be assumed that two are needed right away, since the classical viola is used in southern Transdanubian music, and the three-stringed one in Szék, a village Transylvania. That is, in this year, the student should learn to play not only two

but three notes together at the same time, as well as fast rhythmic patterns that are impossible to properly notate¹⁸ at times. Furthermore, the student is expected to have bowing skills for which they are not prepared; the material expected to commit to memory likely exceeds the abilities of the student, too – even if the material of both series of dances for the exam takes no more than the recommended 7-8 minutes –, but even this is unclear. It is downright astonishing that the male dance called “fast pace”¹⁹ from the music of Szék is also included in the material of year 1 – playing the so-called grace notes in this piece would require such fine motor skills in the student’s hand that many classical violin students cannot execute flawlessly even at the secondary school of music; and bowing is difficult anyway due to problems of bow handling and rhythm even without the grace notes. Two scores are given here for comparison that indicate what a classical violin student and what a folk viola student (in this order) should be able to play at the end of the first year of studies, according to the curriculum.

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¹⁸ In the accompaniment of old style Hungarian folk dances, a lot of rhythms are used which cannot be notated by values of quarters-eighths-sixteenths, or even triplets; the rhythm can only be learned by listening to a lot of music and playing in ensembles. This usually takes years for everyone.

For example, László Lajtha notated the rhythm of the Hungarian dance from Szék (In this case, Hungarian dance refers to a specific dance from the village that is called “magyar”, lit. “Hungarian” there.) with incomplete septuplets, which, although it is an extremely complicated rhythm, is not even entirely accurate. See here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8orvzOXMWog&list=PLkgSj-2hp6Lhfw3hsuFcy9_eq3c1-Si-5u&index=1&ab_channel=hotdogfalo (retrieved: 28 June 2024)

¹⁹ “Sűrű tempó” in Hungarian

Sűrű tempó

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Sűrű tempó". It is written for Violin (Vln.) and Viola (Vla.) in 3/4 time. The score is divided into four systems. The first system (measures 1-5) features a Violin part with a melodic line marked "inegal" and a Viola part with a complex, rhythmic accompaniment of chords, many of which are marked with a "3" indicating a triplet. The second system (measures 6-11) includes first and second endings for both instruments. The third system (measures 12-14) shows a more active Violin part with eighth-note patterns and a corresponding Viola accompaniment. The fourth system (measures 15-18) also includes first and second endings. The Viola part throughout is characterized by dense, rhythmic chordal patterns, often in triplets, with a "simile" marking in the first system.

It may be visible even for the untrained eye – perhaps even for one who does not read music – that the notation of the second example is fundamentally more complicated²⁰. Although it is only indirectly related to my research, it is still worth noting that the violin part, too, is more difficult by several degrees than the classical example. With regards to the classical curriculum, this violin part in the second example could only be played in an acceptable fashion by a talented fourth-year student, and without any knowledge of style and fairly more slowly than the traditional tempo of the dance (cca. $q = 140-150$). A related, also noteworthy instruction is, that the student *'should strive to play the learned dance music in the right tempo, preferably without the score'*. The question of playing from memory was already discussed; the meaning of the "right" tempo is, however, unclear. If it is the original, traditional dance tempo, it can prove far too fast for a student of this age. A further, incredibly baffling point is that, in the requirements of year 1, again, the following competence can be found: *'Creating a fingering chart with simpler, then more complicated chords.'* This cannot be expected of a student who can barely read music, but it is also questionable whether it can be expected at all of any student in primary art education.

²⁰ And the viola part is already simplified to a version imagined by the curriculum, since the seventh chords used by violist István Ádám from Szék are not even included.

In the material for year 2, the same two types of music are given, and it is still unclear what instruments the student should use; the lack of clarity is even more intensified by the appearance of the term “kontra”. Learning melodies after hearing seems to be far too soon, since the student does not have the relevant theoretical background knowledge; it would require the skills to recognise harmonies which are the entry level requirement for secondary schools of music. This is where it becomes obvious that this curriculum does not employ even that part of the universal terminology that could also refer to the musical phenomena and technical solutions of folk music. For instance, the expression “lofty” bow attack is problematic in two ways; firstly, the expression “airy” would be more fortunate (although it is true that they are synonymous), since it is already in use in classical music education; and, secondly, in this case, it is not the bow attack that is “airy”, but the bow stroke: the attack is accented, point-like (surely, they must have been thinking about the bowing of the slow dance and csárdás from Szék). As Könczei points it out, too, there are several contradictions between the study material and the recommended exam material for the same year; it occurs that a type of dance is given as exam material that the student, in theory, has not even studied that year, and a complete set of music is not set as exam material that they have (for example, in year 2, Transdanubian music is also study material, but there is only music from Szék in the recommended exam material). The curriculum claims to coordinate the material with that of the (folk) violin and the bass, but even this is not always successful. Folk violinists only study fast pace from the music of Szék in elementary year 1, in theory, which is exactly the most difficult; it is precisely what the bassists do not learn, they study the porka instead, whose metre is the same as that of the csárdás, but its tunes are different. This may be simple thoughtlessness on behalf of the authors of the curriculum; however, if they wanted to regulate the material so specifically, the arrangement is quite unfortunate from this aspect, too.

It is not a goal to analyse the entire curriculum (as Könczei did), since what I want to state with this comparison is clearly shown by these examples. It is only briefly mentioned that, by the end of the elementary years, according to the curriculum, the student can, in theory, accompany further six (eight in the “B” programme) types of music besides the styles from southern Transdanubia and Szék. This expectation is completely unrealistic for a 14-years-old student, neither I nor my colleagues have met anyone yet who could do this. Even if a student begins at an older age and is signed up to elementary year 1 right away, it seems unfeasible that they would achieve this level in six years. In the material of year 3, there is music from Rábaköz and Kalotaszeg, and their functional harmonic progressions require connecting the type of double stops and three-part harmony that classical violinists study only at secondary school and university through études directly written for this purpose and through the solo violin works of Johann Sebastian Bach, for instance. That said, it is true that, if education is focused more on this sort of knowledge instead of playing melody, the level can be achieved sooner, but by no means with an 11-years-old child. Music from Szatmár is given first in elementary year 5, and this is the first time when the curriculum clearly indicates that the music should be taught on the classical viola. This raises two questions. Does it mean

that the material of earlier years, irrespective of tradition, should be taught on the three-stringed viola? That would result in the students having to relearn the music in question on the classical viola. Why would this be necessary? With the currently available knowledge, which is much more detailed than that of 1998, the material could be easily organised in such a fashion that teaching a certain type or piece of music take place when the student can tackle it in its original form, because their actual technical level allows it. On the other hand, why exactly should music from Szatmár be the first one to teach on a new instrument, when it is hardly the easiest? From the following two examples (Nagy Zs. 2004), the fairly great difference of technical demands between the viola accompaniment for music from southern Transdanubia (in year 1) and that from Szatmár can be understood.

DÉL-DUNANTUL

4. „Rókatánc” (Ha megfogom az ördögöt...)

Ha meg - fo - gom az ör - dős - göt, a lá - dá - ba rá - rom,
 men - nél job - bun fic - kán - do - zók, an - nál job - ban rá - zom.

Somogy

Sárkőz

aj - la - la - la...

C C C C C C E E E E a⁵ a⁵

C C C C a⁰ a⁰ E E E E⁷ a a

SZATMÁR

VERBUNK „D”-BEN

simile

D D D D D A⁷ D E⁷ A E⁷ A A A E⁷ A A

A gisz[°] A A⁷ D Fis⁷ H H⁷ e gisz[°] A A⁷ D A⁷ D D

G G G G G a[°] e Cisz⁷ D D D D D D⁷ D⁷ D⁷

G G E E⁷ A gisz[°] A A A E⁷ A A⁷ D A⁷ D D

h h eisz[°] eisz[°] Fis⁷ Fis⁷ Fis⁷ Fis⁷ G G G gisz[°] D D H⁷ H⁷

e e e[°] e[°] D D E⁷ gisz[°] A E⁷ A A⁷ D A⁷ D D

Moreover, referring to the playing style of András Horváth Jr. from Tiszakórod, this music ought to be taught both on the three-stringed and the classical viola, which would surely confuse the student at this time, since the point would be exactly that they get used to the new instrument. It would be much more reasonable, in the earlier years, to use music from Bonchida, which essentially has simpler harmonies

and fingering; despite, it appears only in year 5 of programme “B” and year 8 of programme “A”.

BONCHIDA

SŰRŰ MAGYAR

1.

A A E E Fis⁷

H H H E

D D E⁷ A A

H H H⁷ E E⁷ A

From among the styles of music using the three-stringed viola, two of the simplest come from Magyarbece and Magyarlapád, which only appear in year 6 of programme “A”, even though it would be much more logical to teach them before the one from Szék.

It is quite clear even from this brief analysis that the author of the curriculum was not driven by methodological considerations when arranging the material, but, rather, by the rough order in which ethnomusicology discovered these types of village music, and by the notion that the folk viola student should be able to use the music learned in class outside of school, too, as soon as possible, for example in *táncház* events and to accompany the performances of dance ensembles. However, with the fact that it is not only adolescents and adults who study in this programme, many circumstances have changed. Firstly, what is radically different today is the fundamental way folk music can be learned. Zsolt Nagy, the author of the curriculum, and his contemporaries still had the opportunity to go in person to study the

playing of the village folk ensembles in their traditional environments (for example, at weddings, baptismal ceremonies, Christmas chants, funerals, etc.). This was such a euphoric experience for them that it helped them through the biggest technical obstacles of the instrument somehow, even if not in the most practical way methodically speaking, but this latter aspect was not at all important at the time. This, today, is impossible not only because there are barely a handful of existing village ensembles (one or two still play well and regularly), but because these traditional occasions are also different to the ones 30-40 years ago; usually, not even village people use the service of these ensembles, they book instead a modern one (saxophone, electric guitars, synthesiser, drum kit) in the urban fashion instead, or not even that, and they play music from a device. The other important place for learning music is the *táncház* or the folk pub, where revival²¹ musicians can learn from each other while playing together, since, at these occasions, the more experienced members of the ensemble of the evening will generally allow younger musicians who want to learn to play together with them. Primary music school students do not have this opportunity because the social circumstances of these events are not suited for them; they are also at such a time (e.g. weekday nights) which would make it impossible for the children to perform their school tasks next day, since they would not have the required amount of energy; and, parents would not necessarily be happy with their young children going home on their own at 2 in the morning through the downtown of Budapest. For this reason, it is not important anymore that primary music school students should learn at all costs those pieces of music that they could immediately use in such situations, since they very rarely or not at all have the opportunity to participate. Thus, educators seem to have the freedom to arrange material in a fundamentally different way which is structured by technique²². Apart from the above mentioned places, there are only music camps left where small children can participate, but, since the basis of learning music is regularity, and camps are only held in the summer, it is not really feasible to rely on them, they can only have a supplementary role – this latter one is, however, extremely important, especially for personal experiences with music. It is clear, therefore, that the only place where children under the age of 14 can regularly study folk music is the primary music school, where, incidentally, teaching every folk instrument has been established. In this case, then, there is only one possibility for students to make up for the lack of experiences older generations could still have: they ought to receive professional education methodically so that, by the time they have reached the necessary age and they can have the community experiences

21 The name was first given in Ireland to the movement whose objective is that people who were not born into the community and are not, originally, a member of a traditional village culture on the verge of extinction learn it and, thus, keep it alive. It was Ferenc Sebő who so named the – mostly – urban musicians and dancers and their groups and ensembles who learned and, thus, preserved the music or dance of village cultures as outsiders.

22 Since then, fashionable music at *táncház* events has also strongly changed; in a *táncház* in Budapest, music from Szék or anything from Hungary (eg. southern Transdanubian, music of Rábaköz or Szatmár) is much more rarely played than 25 years ago.

offered by the revival movement, they be able to learn the technique and the musical and performative components that only these community experiences can give them. But if they do not have the basis for this (and it seems very uncertain looking at the curriculum currently in effect), they start with a disadvantage for which they may never be able to make up. This regards first and foremost those students who could train to become professional musicians, but, at the very beginning of learning – for example, in lower primary school –, it is impossible to determine about anyone whether they will be suited for that; therefore, everyone ought to be offered the education that is necessary to prepare for a career in music.

The curriculum of the secondary level is not part of this research, but it is important to note that its material is extremely packed²³, and it clearly shows signs that its authors either did not take the existence of tertiary education into account, or the experience was that university students do not study actual music – certain responses of the interviewees seem to allege so. It is fundamentally positive that the material is not scheduled for separate years, only given aggregately; this probably could be the sign that the teacher can arrange them according to the student's background, but this is not clearly indicated. This has not even been officially changed since 1998, which can be seen from the fact alone that it contains only five types of music not included in the “B” programme of primary music schools (music from Kalocsa, Ördöngösfüzes, Magyarszovát, Csallóköz, and Sopron), and even these have only little technical novelty with respect to the previous level. All this reflects methodological thoughtlessness.

It is not an accident that Mátyás Bolya, incumbent chair of the Department of Folk Music at the Liszt Academy of Music, Budapest, emphasises in his study *Renewing folk musician training in Hungary* that the revisions of 2011 and 2022 of the curriculum of the primary level are not thorough, and there are no important changes in them compared to 1998 (Bolya 2019, 49-51). He confirms that, at this time, secondary level was still adult education, too, thus, its contents can be considered obsolete today: there are too many competences, the knowledge is oversized and not sufficiently structured. More proportionate distribution between the primary and secondary levels would be necessary. The core curricula are too rigid and they only serve as an inventory of ideas. Despite this, local curricula are also rarely written, although they would have to be authorised by the director of the local school district centre, who is usually not a (folk) musician, even though this ought to be the task of an educational committee of experts in the field. A further disadvantage of the curriculum is that it was made after the ones for general education, which is unfortunate due to the fact that there are students of different ages in the same class. Directors of school district centres generally do not comprehend and do not perceive these differences, and this may lead to a loss of motivation among teachers in the long run. According to the latest research, new core curricula are clearly necessary, and they ought to be written by committees of educators teaching on different levels (so that they can take input and output requirements

23 See the original here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iKNbJEHp0gkln_8WebdYyd_Be46C-N93A/view?usp=drive_link (retrieved: 28 June 2024)

into account), as well as professionals of law, education theory, and communication. The new curricula so created should handle the needs of students of different ages, they should contain more possibilities for freedom, and they should build more on teachers' competences. Moreover, in the long run, the teaching of solfège and music theory should be based on folk music.

4. Curriculum and material for the classical violin as possible sources of solution

During the interviews mentioned in section 3.2, the responses of the interviewees indicate that the majority of the colleagues believe that small children as beginners ought to be taught the violin first; the major part of the conversations I had with informants also seem to support this notion. In all probability, this makes it necessary to adopt material from the curriculum for the classical violin into the one for the folk viola, because the one for the folk violin has the exact same problems: technique is unprepared, and, from the same aspect, the materials do not build on each other. The methodology for the classical violin could certainly be applicable for the basics of learning folk string instruments, since the build of the instruments and the basic way of playing do not differ in the two styles (cf. Dénes 1960, 2-3; Pávai 2013, 144-150).

The difference that springs to attention right away is that there is no compulsory material whatsoever in the curriculum for the classical violin, only recommended, and only one or two publications are given there as reference to the level of difficulty. Among the skills to develop, there are only technical requirements for the instrument, and the materials for musical knowledge are connected to solfège; they are expected to be put to use on the instrument, too, when playing exercises and pieces. Colleagues indicated in their answers that students who later study the folk viola should spend two years on average on studying the violin. If the requirements in the curriculum for the classical violin are closely observed, it does show that students are expected to learn the skills that may be necessary to play this type of instrument on a basic level, irrespective of style. I would highlight the following among them: stopping the string, playing the correct pitch, bow hold, bow strokes, bow division, string crossing, and *détaché*, *legato*, *portato*, and *martalé* bowing. About bow hold, it is worth mentioning that, based on the interviews with informants (Vizeli 2023) and educators, it was possible to conclude that, in the village tradition, musicians did, in fact, have different bow holds tailored to their own musical style, and these do exhibit greater differences than what can be observed among classical musicians, yet the main approaches can all be traced back to the form taught in the classical method, thus, it does not create a problem if a small child, even if they become a folk musician later, begins with learning the classical form. It can be later changed in accordance with everyone's definitive style of playing, while the reverse process is much more difficult: learning a profoundly different hold, if necessary, at an older age is a fundamentally more strenuous and longer

process. As was mentioned before, a further point connecting to the idea to study the violin in the first two years is that playing double stops appears in a relevant fashion only in elementary year 3, as does the use of changing positions, the latter of which is less needed by a future folk violist, therefore, this could be the point at which playing kontra on two strings could begin to be taught. Analysing this in detail may be within the scope of another study.

5. Summary

In conclusion, it can be stated that the population of primary folk viola students has changed since 1998 in such a fashion that makes significant changes in the curriculum and a great deal of methodological innovation necessary. These changes seem to be overdue also based on the general thinking and the experiences of fellow folk viola teachers; however, education management and curriculum authors or revisitors have not yet paid enough attention to this problem. As the comparison in this study suggests, a possible solution may be to adopt certain materials from the curriculum for the classical violin, and to organise folk music knowledge according to the technical levels of instrument playing.

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