

A Quarter-Century of Academic Folk Music Collecting*

An Introduction to the Databases

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Institutional Background

In 1934, under the leadership of Béla Bartók, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences began preparations for the long-planned scholarly edition of Hungarian folk melodies, *Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae – A Magyar Népzene Tára* (The Collection of Hungarian Folk Music). Following Bartók's departure for the United States in 1940, the leadership of the project was taken over by Zoltán Kodály.¹ After the Second World War, an important milestone in the history of the reorganized research group was the decree issued by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education in March 1949, which allocated substantial state funding for the publication of the collection.² The steadily growing editorial team published the first volume of the monumental series, *Gyermekjátékok* (Children's Games), in 1951, followed in 1953 by *Jeles napok* (Calendar Customs).³

On 1 August 1953, the working group was reorganized under the name Folk Music Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This provided it with a stable institutional framework and secure funding, while its responsibilities were expanded to include the collection of folk music, the central coordination of collecting activities and the archiving of the resulting materials, as well as scholarly research.⁴ György Kerényi, who had worked alongside Bartók from the very beginning and later became head of department in the Folk Music Research Group, had already called attention in 1940 to the necessity of centrally organized folk music collecting. He pointed out that the approximately 14,000 folk melodies assembled for the planned edition had been collected in only 4 per

* The project was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

¹ Richter, Pál: „A 200 éves Magyar Tudományos Akadémia és a népzene kutatás” [The 200-Year-Old Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Ethnomusicology]. *Magyar Tudomány* 186/2 (February 2025), 245–255., 246–251.

² Decree No. 239.224/1949/VI of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, 25 May 1949. Folk Music and Folk Dance Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Uncatalogued.

³ Kerényi, György (ed.): *Gyermekjátékok* [Children's Games]. In: Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály (eds.): *A Magyar Népzene Tára I* [The Collection of Hungarian Folk Music I]. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1951.; Kerényi, György (ed.): *Jeles napok* [Calendar Customs]. In: Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály (eds.): *A Magyar Népzene Tára II* [The Collection of Hungarian Folk Music II]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1953.

⁴ Szalay, Olga: *Kodály, a népzene kutató és tudományos műhelye* [Kodály, the Ethnomusicologist and His Scholarly Workshop]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2004. 296–302.

cent of Hungarian villages both within and outside the borders of Hungary.⁵ Alongside the preparation of the comprehensive scholarly edition of folk melodies, folk music collecting continued after the establishment of the Folk Music Research Group through intensive and well-organized collecting campaigns, which, partly owing to the introduction of tape-recording technology, resulted in the extensive documentation of a folk music tradition that was already beginning to disappear.

This online platform presents the exceptionally rich folk music collecting activities of the Folk Music Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences during the approximately quarter century following the Second World War. During this period, the institution was directed first by Zoltán Kodály and, following his death in 1967, by Benjamin Rajeczky. The project is based on the processing and systematic organization of primary sources preserved in the Folk Music and Folk Dance Archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. A particularly important role in shaping the project's objectives was played by a newly processed group of sources, namely three archival boxes of official travel reports documenting the folk music collecting activities of the Folk Music Research Group of the HAS. At the same time, drawing on folk music sound recordings, transcriptions, films, photographs, and collectors' field notebooks, the research reconstructs the collecting expeditions themselves and also considers the period between 1945 and 1953, which may be regarded as a precursor to the work of the Folk Music Research Group.⁶

The tabular datasets published on this website present the collecting expeditions in chronological order and bring together and organize information derived from the sources currently available, including several newly processed groups of sources. The catalogue of 1,739 travel reports provides comprehensive information on the sources relating to collecting expeditions undertaken between 1953 and 1968 and discussed in these reports, while the more extensive database devoted to the Academy's folk music collecting activities seeks to document all identifiable collecting activities from this period attributable to the Folk Music Research Group. Wherever possible, both datasets present these events together with information drawn from the complete body of surviving sources. These two tables are supplemented by a smaller database covering Academy-sponsored collecting activities between 1945 and 1953. The separation of these years is

⁵ Kerényi, György: „A magyar népdallamok teljes gyűjteménye” [The Complete Collection of Hungarian Folk Melodies]. *Énekszó* 7/4 (February 1940), 700–701.

⁶ A major part of the sources is accessible in the online databases listed below:

<https://www.hungaricana.hu/en/databases/zti/>,

<https://gallery.hungaricana.hu/hu/search/results/?list=eyJxdWVyeSI6IIRJUFVTPShGb3RcdTAwZjMpliwjZmlsdGVycyI6eyJTT1VSQ0UiOlsiS1RfWIRJl19fQ>, <https://neptanctudastar.abtk.hu/en>.

justified by the distinct institutional framework within which the work was carried out. As a consequence, both the methods of collection and the more limited body of surviving source material differ substantially from those of the subsequent period.

I. Official Travel Reports

Physical Characteristics and Arrangement of the Documents

Among the newly uncovered and valuable documents relating to the folk music collecting activities of the Folk Music Research Group are the reports written by its researchers and preserved in the Folk Music and Folk Dance Archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. For decades, this source material remained unnoticed among the institutional papers of the ethnomusicologist Imre Olsvai (1931–2014). Olsvai became involved in the work of the Group at the time of its foundation while still a student at the Liszt Academy of Music. From 1958 until his retirement in 1998, he worked as a researcher at the institution and, subsequently, at its successor, the Institute for Musicology. In 2023, three paper boxes were discovered among his institutional papers. They contained the official travel reports submitted between August 1953 and December 1968 by both internal and external collaborators of the Folk Music Research Group. Before undertaking fieldwork, collectors received an official travel order specifying the destination, purpose, and duration of the journey; at the same time, this document served as proof of authorization for the authorities of the period. Upon their return, they reported on the results of their work in official travel reports. The administration of the Folk Music Research Group arranged the reports into monthly units, which were subsequently organized into semi-annual or annual folders, but no archival reference numbers were assigned to them. Judging from their condition, the folders themselves, several of which had been wrapped and tied with string before being placed in boxes, together with the reports preserved within them, had probably not been consulted for decades, perhaps not since the Folk Music Research Group moved out of the Academy's central headquarters in 1970.

The collection comprises a total of 1,739 individual field reports and 6 covering letters arranged in 1,353 archival files. The reports were generally written by the researchers shortly after completing their fieldwork, while external collaborators usually prepared their reports promptly as well, in order to settle travel expenses. For administrative purposes, the documents relating to a particular trip were placed together in a file folder on which the date of the journey, the name of

the researcher, and the localities visited were recorded. When several researchers participated in the same trip, each prepared a separate report; these, however, were usually placed together in a single folder, that is, in a single archival file.

Content and Methodological Significance

The reports were prepared partly in typescript and partly in handwritten form, ranging in length from a few lines to descriptions extending over several pages. The author's name appears on almost every report, and most documents are also dated. Researchers typically recorded the starting and ending dates of their fieldwork, identified the settlements in which collecting took place, and noted the number of melodies collected. They frequently also stated the purpose of the collecting trip, thereby revealing the directions and methods of the collecting activities pursued by the Folk Music Research Group. The accounts of the results often draw attention to relationships and phenomena that are not evident from other documents associated with the collecting process. In certain cases, for example, only the report itself reveals that a particular custom and its associated customary melody still formed part of the living tradition in the locality at the time of collection.⁷ The reports are particularly valuable because, unlike most other documents relating to the collecting activities, they also provide information on unsuccessful attempts. On numerous occasions the collectors identified settlements where they had conducted inquiries without success, either in general or specifically in relation to the melodies, melody types, customs, or other phenomena they were seeking. As a result, these reports make it possible to establish not only where a particular melody or custom was known, but also where it was not known within a given region at the time of collection.

The Nature of the Reports

The 1,739 reports were submitted by 169 different individuals, and their length, tone, and degree of professionalism reflect their authors' personalities and levels of experience to a remarkable extent. A few examples may illustrate these

⁷ Thus, the information on the *regölés* performance collected at Rigács during the joint field trip of György Kerényi, Gyula Kertész, and Tibor Fonay in November 1953 could still be incorporated into the preparatory material of *Jeles napok*. Neither there, however, nor in the transcription of the performance prepared retrospectively by Mária Katanics in July 1955, is there any mention of the fact, recorded in Kerényi's report, that the custom was still being practised at the time of collection. Kerényi, *Jeles napok*, op. cit., 1159; "Eljöttünk, eljöttünk..." *Regölés*. Collected by György Kerényi, Rigács (Veszprém County), November 1953. Transcribed by Mária Katanics, July 1955. ZTI_AP_00827b.

differences. The reports of György Kerényi, head of department, are primarily accounts of journeys and field trips, describing the difficulties encountered during collecting, recording observations of importance for future work, identifying local individuals who assisted the researchers, and highlighting the most significant results achieved. By contrast, Lajos Kiss, who likewise possessed extensive experience as a collector, presented the collected melodies in numerical breakdowns according to musical style layers and the customs associated with them, while writing only briefly and impersonally about the circumstances, objectives, and success of the collecting work. Others, such as Károly Mathia and Géza Paulovics, followed relatively fixed templates, reporting the most important information in a standardized form, though they generally also recorded the names of local informants, including singers and instrumental musicians. Members of the technical staff, such as Gyula Kertész, László Kammerer, and Pál Sztanó, focused primarily on the operation of tape recorders and on the quantity and quality of the sound recordings produced. The most vivid and detailed reports were written by relatively inexperienced collectors and, quite often, by women. Although these accounts, especially those submitted by external collaborators, are occasionally imprecise in recording the principal data of the collecting work, they provide valuable information about the everyday realities of field collecting, its difficulties, the settlements visited, and the way of life, modes of expression, and local speech habits of their inhabitants. In general, the reports from the first years convey the fresh experience of the revival of folk music collecting and of the renewed exploration of rural Hungary and its folk culture after the Second World War. By the 1960s, however, when the earlier momentum of the collecting campaigns had begun to diminish, the reports became considerably more concise and increasingly schematic.

II. Catalogue of the Field Reports

Metadata of the Field Reports

The dataset available on this website, entitled „MTA Népzene kutató Csoport kiküldetési jelentések 1953–1968” (Official travel reports of the Folk Music Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1953–1968), is a structured table divided into three main colour-coded sections for ease of use and clarity.

The first section of the table, distinguished by a brown header, contains information relating to the field reports themselves. Since the reports appear to have been arranged according to their date of arrival, the original order of the

report files did not accurately reflect the chronological sequence of the collecting activities. The newly established order follows, as far as possible, the chronology of the collecting expeditions and official field assignments, primarily on the basis of the starting date and secondarily on that of the ending date. This arrangement is the result of detailed processing of the documents and their comparison with a variety of other sources. Complete consistency could not be achieved, however, as the exact dates of collection are not always known.

The report file number is a temporary identifier intended to facilitate searching within the table and navigating the individual files until the field reports receive final archival reference numbers. The following two columns, „A kiküldetési jelentés borítóján jelzett idő” (Date indicated on the cover of the field report) and „A kiküldetési jelentés borítóján jelzett település” (Locality indicated on the cover of the field report), reproduce without alteration the information relating to the collecting activity as recorded on the cover, thereby assisting the identification of individual report files and the consultation of the original documents. The name of the report's author and the date of writing are given in the form in which they appear on the document itself, with any editorial additions indicated in square brackets. The use of different shades of colour in the rows serves solely to facilitate the overview of individual report files.

Folk Music Collecting Data

The second section of the tabular database, marked with a green header, contains data relating to the folk music collecting activities documented in the official travel reports. Although the vast majority of these reports were written following journeys undertaken for the purpose of folk music collecting, the material also includes reports on provincial conferences, as well as on research conducted in libraries, museums, and archives. The columns containing collecting data relate specifically to folk music collecting activities, including those journeys during which fieldwork was carried out alongside museum or library research. Unlike the first section of the database, which presents the descriptive metadata of the reports themselves, this second section is based on the processing and comparison of various sources and therefore reflects the results of research. Consequently, it cannot be regarded as definitive. The collecting data derive partly from the reports and partly from other sources. In some cases, for example, a report does not list every locality visited, even though these appear in the related transcriptions or in the documentation accompanying the sound recordings. In other instances, these documents do not provide the most accurate information concerning the dates of collecting activities. Conversely, the reports

often furnish additional information regarding the timing of collecting work, the settlements visited, or the complete list of participants. Uncertain data are indicated in the table by a question mark, while data inferred from the available sources are enclosed in square brackets.

A collector's name is recorded in the standardized form most commonly used for that individual. In keeping with established practice in Hungarian ethnomusicology, the database distinguishes between the place where a collecting activity was carried out and the area of validity of the folk music data, that is, the settlement or region from which the informant originated or where the given item may be regarded as part of the local tradition. In some cases, the informant's place of residence differs from both of these. Many of the place names involve a degree of uncertainty, as collectors occasionally referred not to settlements but to smaller geographical regions or local areas. In the case of group collecting activities, the dates of collecting and the settlements visited could be recorded differently by individual contributors to the reports. Besides simple inaccuracies, such discrepancies may also result from differing interpretations of the starting and ending dates of fieldwork, depending on whether travel time was included. It also occurred that one collector highlighted only certain settlements in a report or omitted places where the collecting work had not been successful. At the same time, because collecting teams often split up in order to survey an area more efficiently, the locations where individual members carried out their work could in fact differ. In the database, settlement names are generally given in the form in which they appear in the original documents, with only obvious errors corrected. As a result, different names for settlements that were renamed or administratively reorganized during the twentieth century may coexist within the table.

Archival Source Data

The section of the table marked in blue in the header contains the reference numbers of other sources associated with the collecting expeditions, including sound recordings, photographs, films, and field notebooks containing transcriptions. In the Folk Music and Folk Dance Archives of HAS, the reference number of a sound recording can be used to identify further related sources, including recording logs, disc copies, and transcriptions. By linking the reports, the corresponding collecting trips, and the sound carriers, the archival data presented here are thus connected to a broader network of archival sources. This section of the table also attempts to associate photographs preserved in the collection with individual collecting expeditions and sound recordings. Such

identifications cannot be complete, however, because part of the photographic collection is only partially documented or lacks documentation altogether. As the following column indicates, relatively few film recordings can be linked to the activities of the Folk Music Research Group during this period. Most of the folk dance and folk music films made before 1965 and preserved in the archive were produced by the Népművészeti Intézet (Institute of Folk Arts), from 1958, the Népművelési Intézet (Institute of Popular Culture) and were transferred to the Academy's research group in 1965. The process of cross-checking the available data has also revealed that several films mentioned in the reports are currently unaccounted for. The field notebooks served not only for note-taking but also for recording fair-copy transcriptions. Of the approximately 1,200 field notebooks preserved in the archive, only the 207 notebooks of Lajos Kiss had previously been catalogued. The comparison of the field notebooks with the reports therefore also resulted in the cataloguing of the remaining notebooks.

III. Comprehensive Table of the Academy's Folk Music Collecting Activities

The more extensive database available on this website, which can be expanded chronologically in the future, is intended to complement the timeline established by the field reports by including all collecting activities for which no official report survives, but which can nevertheless be linked to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on the basis of sound recordings or manuscript sources. In this way, it becomes possible to obtain an almost complete picture of the folk music collecting activities carried out on behalf of the Folk Music Research Group during the period under consideration. This supplementary approach was necessary because the archive, which sought to assemble a comprehensive collection of Hungarian folk music materials, also contains copies of documents originating from other institutions, not always accompanied by information identifying their source. Although a field report constitutes important evidence that a particular piece of fieldwork was carried out under the Academy's official commission, reports were not prepared for every collecting activity. For example, many sound recordings were made in the Academy's Budapest studio, to which village singers were brought following the preliminary stages of fieldwork. Since no travel to the countryside was involved, there was generally no need for a field report, although by the 1960s written accounts of such sessions were being prepared with increasing frequency. In other cases, the Folk Music Research Group participated in fieldwork in a more informal capacity. During the 1960s, for instance, close cooperation developed between the Folk Music Research Group and the dance

research workshop led by György Martin at the Institute of Popular Culture. In 1965, both György Martin and Ágoston Lányi were officially transferred to the Academy's staff. For a number of their earlier joint collecting expeditions, the only indication of collaboration is provided by the strictly consecutive archival reference numbers assigned to the magnetophone recordings. In uncertain cases, the database adopts an inclusive approach by drawing the boundaries of collecting activities associated with the Academy somewhat more broadly, with the aim of providing researchers with the most complete source base possible.

Conclusion

The official travel reports, arranged in broadly chronological order, provide a clear sense of the temporal development of folk music collecting activities and highlight the need for a comprehensive reconstruction of these collecting efforts. The identification and correlation of documents relating to the folk music collecting activities of the most important Hungarian ethnomusicological research centre of the post-war period, together with the databases compiled on this basis primarily for research purposes, make it possible to examine Hungarian folk music collecting within a broader context. They also offer opportunities to investigate the research aims, methods, and experiences that lay behind the collecting work. In this way, they not only document the fieldwork itself but also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the operation and scholarly outlook of Hungarian ethnomusicology during this period.