

Ferenc László

## Constantin Brăiloiu and the Research of Csángó Folk Music\*

Constantin Brăiloiu's name (1893–1958) should be known to every erudite Hungarian musician; if not from other sources, at least through the biographies written on Béla Bartók. Brăiloiu was Bartók's most helpful, wise and selfless friend abroad. A highly respected secretary general of the Society of Romanian Composers, founder and director of the Folklore Archive in Bucharest and an aristocrat both by descent and intellectual format, he hosted Bartók in his own home on several occasions, translated his works into Romanian and French, organized recitals and lectures for him in Bucharest, wrote about him, and defended him against polemic attacks in Romania. From being Bartók's disciple, Brăiloiu grew into a fellow scholar, pursuing ethnomusicology at the highest international standards. No other foreign colleague of Bartók's received so many words of appraisal as Brăiloiu did in his study entitled *Miért és hogyan gyűjtsünk népzeneét?* [Why and How To Collect Folk Music]<sup>1</sup>. It is most probable that Brăiloiu became co-author of the *Zenei lexikon* [Encyclopaedia of Music] (1931) edited by Bence Szabolcsi and Aladár Tóth upon Bartók's recommendation. By the time the volumes of the *Kodály-émlékkönyv* [Essays in Honor of Zoltán Kodály] (1943) edited by Béla Gunda and *Studia memoriae Belae Bartók Sacra* (1956) were published, Brăiloiu needed no further recommendations to the musical circles in Budapest, as he was already known to be one of the best musicologists of his time.

The correspondence between Bartók and Brăiloiu<sup>2</sup> reveals that the former had incessantly been building bridges for his friend in Budapest. For example, Kodály contacted Brăiloiu for scientific information upon Bartók's recommendation. Of all other contacts

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible that the study would not have been written without the urge of Brăiloiu. It can be considered as a response to the methodological work of the latter entitled *Esquisse d'une méthode de folklore musical* (in Romanian Bucharest, in French Paris: 1931). It is the only writing in which Bartók used as a motto a quotation from Brăiloiu. Later he would exemplify exclusively with quotations from the same scholar that "collectors from abroad are working with such an accuracy". In his opinion Brăiloiu "is not only the best Romanian scholar, but one of the best in Europe as well". He also stated that in the case of Brăiloiu "the description of a folk custom is taken to the extreme with all the details, shaming even the meticulousness of the most competent German scholars". (The study was published in several versions in 1934 and 1935, but all my references are based on the one included in the volume *Bartók Béla Írásai* I., 1966.)

<sup>2</sup> Benkó 1974, László 1976, László 1985, László 1990, László 1993, László 1999. For the latter I shall use the abbreviation: 36 Bartók-Briefe/the number of the quoted letter.

established through Bartók it is worth mentioning that the one between Brăiloiu and László Lajtha became self-sufficient over time, even after Bartók had left for the USA, coming to fruition in many instances of personal cooperation in international folk music research. Whilst this period in the two scholars' biographies still needs to be documented further, existing documents reveal that Lajtha, too, became a mediator for Brăiloiu. After Bartók, it was due to Lajtha that Brăiloiu's ties with Hungarian academics deepened and broadened.

The Cluj-based publishing house Eikon recently published a collection of 36 documents – mostly letters from Hungarian senders relevant to this subject – which were made accessible to the public courtesy of a Brăiloiu-disciple, Professor Emilia Comișel.<sup>3</sup> A substantial part of the material is related to the research of Csángó folk music. This will be summed up in the following. To those familiar with the topic, it is no secret that Brăiloiu supported the fieldwork of Sándor Veress, Gábor Lükő and Péter Balla. These documents, however, reveal substantial new information on the fieldwork of the aforementioned scholars and on the merits of Brăiloiu in the matter.

Pál Péter Domokos (1901–1992) was the first to collect Csángó folk music in Moldova in the summer of 1929, and he did so upon his own initiative and responsibility. Newly discovered documents signal that, by then, Sándor Veress (1907–1992) was also ready to begin his fieldwork, inspired and encouraged by his father, Endre Veress (1868–1953). The eminent historian, having invaluable merits in the study of Hungarian–Romanian historical relations, had spent many years of his childhood in Bucharest, where his father, an engineer and topographer – but also an 1848 refugee – Sándor Veress (1828–1884), held important public functions. Endre Veress showed his interest in the Csángós as early as at the age of twenty, when he published a series of articles entitled *Barangolás Romániában* [Wanderings in Romania]. In a letter written to Brăiloiu on 18 June 1929 he states, “I have a very rich unpublished material on Csángó folklore, which awaits completion on-the-spot – songs and other texts.” He recommends his 21-year-old son to Brăiloiu as a graduate of the Budapest Music Academy, as Kodály's best student, as a composer and as an excellent pianist. The letter speaks mainly about the fact that the planned field trip to Moldova needed to be postponed for a while (Comișel–László/1, 73–74). In his response letter, written on 2 July (Comișel–László/2, 75–77)<sup>4</sup>, Brăiloiu expresses his regrets, after learning that the trip had been “cancelled” for reasons beyond his comprehension, although he would have been busy throughout the summer anyway. He would not give up his intention to join Endre and Sándor Veress in their research trip to the Csángó region. His dear friend, Countess Ghika-Comănești, who owned vast property in Bacău County, had already promised her help in this respect, he concludes. It is left to the imagination of the reader to ponder on the results of the research, had it

<sup>3</sup> Comișel–László 2006. In the following I shall use the abbreviation: Comișel–László/number of the quoted letter.

<sup>4</sup> The original can be found at the Hungarian National Archives (MOL. P. 1569, correspondence of Veress E. nr. 216). Many thanks to historian Lajos Demény from Bucharest for providing a copy of this document.

been accomplished in 1929 by the brilliant young Sándor Veress and his eminent father, along with the secretary general of the Society of Romanian Composers' and director of the Bucharest Folklore Archives, the well respected and influential Brăiloiu. Back in 1929, however, it did not depend on Brăiloiu that the field trip did not take place.

The field trip is mentioned again in a letter dated 16 May 1930, in which Endre Veress asks his permanent translator in Bucharest, Avram P. Todor, to find affordable accommodation for himself and for his son Sanyi, for the summer months. He also asks Todor to kindly ask Brăiloiu to be instrumental in obtaining sponsorship for the upcoming field trip from the King Ferdinand Foundation. Should Brăiloiu not want to join them or ask for funding, they would, of course, finance the field trip through their own means, for the three of them: Endre and Sándor Veress, and Todor, the translator. Either way, they asked Brăiloiu to provide them with two official letters of invitation on letterhead stationery, to be used when crossing the border both ways at Lökösháza, with all their manuscripts and phonograph recording cylinders. If Brăiloiu joined them, he could record everything with the Archives' phonograph, or, in case he wouldn't make the trip with them but would secure funding, he would receive a copy of all the recordings made by "the boy." Veres also offered to translate his son's report that was to be published in *Ethnographia* into Romanian (Comișel-László/3, 77–82). On 16 June, Endre Veress, who was staying in Bucharest by that time, urged Brăiloiu to send the required letter to his son, also asking when and where he could pick up the funds promised for the field trip. (Comișel-László/4, 83). We can thus conclude that Brăiloiu would not accompany them to Moldavia, but that he had managed to raise the necessary funding for the trip. On 20 June, Sándor Veress writes to Brăiloiu to confirm the receipt of the letter and the laissez-passer, adding that, whilst he would be bringing a phonograph, he would not bring any cylinders. He continues by asking Brăiloiu to lend him about 50–60 cylinders until September. At this point Lajtha's name is mentioned for the first time, as being a supporter of Sándor Veress, along with the name of Bartók, with who the young researcher was in personal contact, as well. (Comișel-László/5, 84–85).

Very well mannered, Veress returned the official letter of invitation to Brăiloiu upon completion of the trip. The trip lasted for a month, during which he collected most of the material on his own, as Todor was summoned back to Budapest due to his father's illness. A local boy was hired as translator, but he quickly got bored with the job and quit. The document was found in Brăiloiu's estate. Issued by the General Police Directorate it was addressed to the police superintendents of Putna, Bacău, Roman and Neamț counties. The letter reads as follows: Dr. Endre Veress, historian, affiliated with the King Ferdinand I Foundation, and his son, Sándor Veress, professor and composer from Budapest, will be carrying out ethnographic and ethno-musical research on behalf of the Society of Romanian Composers; please assist them with all the moral support they might require. The document is signed by two officials, on behalf of the minister (Comișel-László/6, 86–87). Needless to say that Brăiloiu was one of the very few who could obtain such a laissez-passer from the authorities!

At the end of his fieldwork, whilst still in Bucharest, Sándor Veress outlined a report for his sponsor (14 August 1930), in which he states that he has recorded about 120 Hungarian

songs on 57 cylinders in villages located along the river Siret. He mentions recording four cylinders with Romanian folk songs, especially for Brăiloiu. Not speaking any Romanian, the texts to these songs were written down by the local notary (Comișel–László/11, 94–95). In a letter dated 13 October 1930, Lajtha praises Veress for his “interesting and good collection”, which they had already begun to put down on paper (Comișel–László/12, 96–97). Two days later, Veress sends a second, more detailed report to Brăiloiu, stating that he has recorded 134 melodies. He mentions a minor incident he had with the local policeman in Cleja, but otherwise, he says, everything went well. Veress concludes by saying that he would return the cylinders he owed to Bucharest, along with a copy of his notes (Comișel–László/13, 98–99). On 24 January 1931, Veress kindly invites Brăiloiu to a lecture he was to give about his collection of Moldavian material at the Ethnographical Society. On this occasion, he expresses his wish to return to Moldova in the coming year. For this purpose, he had already started to learn Romanian – he claims in his letter, written in Romanian, obviously with the help of his father. (Comișel–László/15, 106). All things considered, we can say that whilst Brăiloiu proved to be an ideal supporter, Veress reciprocated this helpfulness generously.

Gábor Lükő (1909–2001) and his Moldavian research followed a different pattern altogether. When crossing the Hungarian-Romanian border in 1931, he did not have the slightest intention of going to the Csángós. He was interested in the Romanians. Rumour had it that he wanted to marry a Romanian and become a Romanian peasant himself. He spent months in the Southern Romanian countryside to learn the language and the songs of the locals. In December 1931, sociologists of the world-renowned Bucharest School of Sociology led by Dimitrie Gusti (1880–1955) conducted research in Cornova, a village in Bessarabia, and invited Lükő, who in the meantime registered at the University of Bucharest, to participate in the on-site research. In January 1932, Lükő collected folklore material in Dâmbovița County, in the village of Brebu. Brăiloiu, who was closely in touch with Gusti, became interested in Lükő, introducing him to his academic circles at the Society of Romanian Composers’ Folklore Archive, where the young Hungarian with his out-of-the-box way of thinking was received with sympathy. It was Brăiloiu who convinced his young protégé to do research on the Moldavian Csángós. As there are no documents to underpin this supposition, I can only hypothesize that Brăiloiu supported Lükő also because he wanted to see the research left unfinished by Sándor Veress in Moldova rounded up; it was a matter of great importance to him, both as a scholar as well as in his capacity of founder and leader of the Folklore Archive. The contents of a letter written by Lajtha on 31 March 1932 to Brăiloiu cast a very favourable light on Lükő: “He wrote to me that he would like to collect material in Moldova. He also sent me a few melodies from his previous collection. I can see from those that he found some important data. It is an old conviction of mine that Hungarian and Romanian folk music overlap in more than one way [in the original the term “zusammentriff” is used, which can be translated both as “coincide” or “tally”], just as Bartók believed. Lükő has already brought some evidence in this sense, and this is exactly what I want to direct his attention to. As someone who is interested in both Romanian and Hungarian folklore and ethnography, he will certainly

agree to do this work which both of us need. I hope that we will find the trails of the Cumanians and Petchenegs in both nations. I therefore ask you, my dear friend, to do for Lükő everything you deem possible; he is a good fellow who deserves it, and I believe that you will be delighted with his work” (Comişel–László/16, 110–111). I am convinced that all those who carry out research on the works of Lükő and Lajtha will be surprised by these findings and the interpreters of Bartók’s scientific works will have to face the fact, as well: as early as in 1932, Lajtha was dissatisfied “for a long time” with the results of Bartók’s comparative studies of Hungarian and Romanian folk music.

Lajtha’s next letter (dated 18 May 1933) in the document collection makes reference to the unfortunate “Lükő-case”, which worried Brăiloiu as well. Lükő sums up the “matter” in concise, matter-of-fact terms: “I have spent seven months in Moldova during the years 1932 and 1933. I was unable to follow my initial itinerary to the Székler settlements along the Trotuş river, as due to a lost and misinterpreted postcard I was suspected of spreading revisionist propaganda. After a three weeks long inconclusive investigation I was expelled from Romania on the grounds of the unfriendly relations between our two countries” (Lükő 2002: 13). “As a result of my expulsion and the negligence of my Hungarian friends in Bucharest, my recording cylinders<sup>5</sup> were, unfortunately, destroyed” (Lükő 2002: 11). Lajtha further informs Brăiloiu, that Lükő was well, having not suffered any physical injuries. He thanks his friend in Bucharest for offering to forward Lükő’s cylinders to Budapest, assuring him that he would receive the promised copies as soon as they were available. He concludes by recounting how he had admonished his protégé for not contacting Brăiloiu immediately. (Comişel–László/18, 112–114). It is indeed difficult to understand why Lükő did not seek Brăiloiu’s protection after being taken to Bucharest by the police. Since he was able to contact his Hungarian friends in Bucharest to bequest his cylinders upon them, he could have easily gotten in touch with the initiator and sponsor of his field trip. In lieu of any further evidence, one can only assume that, a true gentleman, Lükő did not want to involve Brăiloiu into his case, given its delicate political context. Or might he have had something to hide from his mentor? This being all guessing, of course, one can only be certain that had he contacted Brăiloiu, even if the latter could not have prevented his expulsion, the cylinders would have been stored properly and would have been forwarded to Budapest.

The following letter, written by Lajtha on 7 November 1933, is on Péter Balla, who was set to leave but was not allowed to do so until Lajtha checked with Brăiloiu. Lajtha acknowledges receipt of Brăiloiu’s telegram, thanking him for his “endearing and obliging courtesy. You are always the same, and you have just obliged me again” he writes. From the context, one gathers that Brăiloiu had offered to be of help to Balla, as well (Comişel–László/19, 115–116). Balla kept the letter of commission he had used during his fieldwork east of the Carpathians, a letter which was written on the letterhead stationary of the Minister of

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<sup>5</sup> A remark is due here. To be more precise he should have written: “the cylinders containing my recordings.” The cylinders, just as the phonograph itself, were the property of the Archive in Bucharest.

Education, Religion and Arts. C. Petrescu signs it on behalf of the Minister, recommending all members of the clergy and of the educational and administrative institutions to support the 25-year old music teacher from Beiuş in his assignment to collect folklore data in the region on behalf of the Society of Romanian Composers. (It is noteworthy that whilst the letter has a registration number, it is not dated.) Balla had it stamped, just like a passport by all the local officials he had encountered during his journey, thus providing us with an itinerary of his trip: August 6. 1933: Cetatea Albă, August 13–14: Tighina, August 19: Soroca, August 26: Suceava. Presenting his letter of commission to the local officials also served them as a reassurance that he was collecting data with the approval of the state authorities. Balla returned to Moldova the following year, using the same (undated, thus still valid) document, and continued his work where he had left it before: August 27. 1934: Suceava, August 30: Roman, September 4: Bacău (Comişel–László/20, 117–120). Several sources indicate that he contacted Lükő's sources as well, re-recording from them many of the data that had been stored on the cylinders destroyed in Bucharest.

The scandal exploded after Balla's second return to Budapest. The details are still not clear. Lajtha mentions the matter to Brăiloiu for the first time on 19 January 1935. From this letter (and from the next one, dated 22 February) one realises that this time the stakes were much higher than in Lükő's case; whilst the latter had 'only' been expelled from the country, a matter that Brăiloiu could easily brush off, it seems that Balla was not only accused of, but also condemned for "propaganda", while Brăiloiu himself was faced with the same accusation. Feeling responsible for his protégé's actions, Lajtha explains to Brăiloiu that the accusations were unfounded since the accused was a Romanian citizen who was residing in Budapest for study purposes only, intending to settle down for good in Romania. He further relates that Balla was utterly confused and embittered by the case. Whilst travelling, he had no disagreements with any of the authorities as he always registered with the local police, as required by law. There seem to be two possibilities, writes Lajtha: either Balla or his denunciator was lying. If the first case would be confirmed, he would, of course, "drop" Balla immediately; however, as long as this remained unconfirmed, he asks Brăiloiu not to give up Balla, especially since Lajtha and Balla were set to make a research trip to Moldova together in 1936! (Comişel–László/22, 123–125) Other sources indicate that Balla found out about his condemnation long after his arrival to Budapest, probably from Brăiloiu's letter to Lajtha. On the last day of 1934, Bartók writes to Brăiloiu: "I was very happy to hear from Balla that you were so obliging towards him, kindly supporting his trip. The matter was brought up with a musical folklore committee as well, and Balla will, no doubt, report on this to you" (36 Bartók-Briefe/15, 423). Balla had thus not mentioned to Bartók the trouble he had encountered in Moldova. The next letter, sent by Lajtha on 22 February 1935 is mainly focused on the Balla-affair, as well. We learn that Balla called at the Romanian Embassy in Budapest to at least find out the charges, which were brought against him, but to no avail. He was still waiting for an answer. He was ready to travel to Bucharest in order to clear his name. Lajtha repeatedly intervened with Brăiloiu, asking him not to drop Balla. We can only guess Brăiloiu's reaction from the following reply: "In spite of your last letter I cannot believe that in Europe,

in 1935, it is possible to condemn somebody without any charge, defence and inquiry, solely based on some dark denunciations, thus destroying an important scientific career and a human life" (Comișel–László/23, 128–129). Lajtha did not exaggerate when speaking of destroying a human life; following his condemnation in Bucharest, Balla decided to return home only after 1949, when he took up Hungarian citizenship and his "sin" was prescribed. Typically for Balla and for those times, Balla never mentioned his condemnation, not even to his children, as his daughter, Zsuzsánna Balla, testifies.

That evil denunciation put an end not only to a scientific career but also to the research of Csángó folk music until 1951, when János Jagamas and his colleagues from the Cluj Folklore Institute resumed the pioneer work of Pál Péter Domokos, Sándor Veress, Gábor Lükő and Péter Balla. By that time, however, Constantin Brăiloiu was already living in Geneva and in Paris, not being allowed to return home, not even for a visit.

Although not mentioned in the documents kept by Professor Comișel, it has to be said here that no relations of cooperation ever developed between Brăiloiu and Pál Péter Domokos. The latter called on Brăiloiu in 1934 with a letter which was later qualified by Bartók on 31 December as "unanständig", that is, "indecent, improper". We do not know whether this negative characterisation was used by Brăiloiu, or perhaps by Balla, who was conveying the message, or perhaps even by Bartók himself, when summing up what he had heard from Balla about the letter. Bartók evoked the letter when Domokos personally requested that he recommends him to Brăiloiu. "I should know anyway what is the matter with that letter, because if he was using an insulting, arrogant tone with you, I cannot provide him with a letter of recommendation" – Bartók wrote to Brăiloiu on the last day of 1934 (36 Bartók-Briefe/15, 423–424). Brăiloiu's reply is unknown and we do not know if eventually Bartók did write that letter of recommendation or not. Domokos, who collected in Moldova with a phonograph in 1932, did not return to the region again, neither in 1935 nor later.

To sum up things: "the Hungarian network" played a great role within Brăiloiu's system of foreign contacts and, besides Bartók and Lajtha, it included all those young scholars whom Brăiloiu had encountered in connection with the collecting of Csángó folk music. He had assisted the latter quite effectively: he provided them with letters of recommendation and recording cylinders, he raised funds for them, and he personally convinced one of them to study not only Romanian but also Csángó folk music. There was a moment when he was ready to participate in the fieldwork. The obviously politically motivated – administrative and penal – injustices directed against his protégées more or less affected him, their supporter, as well, but these instances did not influence his relations of cooperation with Hungarian scholars in the least, relations which were further expanding during the 1930s, and indeed, throughout the 1940s. By cultivating these relations he did not only serve the ideal of ethnomusicology without frontiers, but he also enriched his own institute, the Folklore Archive of the Society of Romanian Composers. Of course, it remains an open question whether any Romanian scholar after Brăiloiu has ever worked on the Csángó material collected and sent as a copy to the Folklore Archive in Bucharest by Sándor Veress or Péter Balla.

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