CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

The Gypsy Violin

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By

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Abstract

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The origins of the Gypsies are not exactly known, and they lived a nomadic lifestyle for centuries, embracing many cultures, including music. Within their music, Gypsies favored the violin due to its portability, fitting their nomadic lifestyle. Therefore, many Gypsy musical works feature violin as their primary instrument. Few studies of the Gypsy violin and its influence in Western musical culture have been conducted, even though this influence is prominent throughout history through the present. One can easily find the Gypsy violin featured across many styles and genres in Western music, from opera to twentieth-century art and film music, to jazz. This study will carefully trace the influence of the Gypsy violin, aiming to fill a small gap within the studies of the Gypsy violin. In doing so, this study can be used to facilitate violinists for proper performance practice of the Gypsy violin. My methodology includes analyses of selected Gypsy-influenced compositions from the Romantic era in conjunction with an examination of secondary literature by musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and musicians, such as Bálint Sárosi, Nicolae Neacsu, David Malvinni, Anna G. Piotrowska, Guy R. Torr, and

Johannes Brahms. Selected musical works include Béla Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances* and Vittorio Monti's *Csárdás*. Monti's *Csádás* is a short violin piece containing various elements of this style, thus it is exemplary of the topic at hand. Each of the melodies within the movements in Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances* is derived from different Gypsy-influenced styles. Therefore, violinists learning this piece are exposed to six different styles of Gypsy music. As a result, this paper will contribute to research of the Gypsy violin through analysis, thus facilitating violin performance practice and knowledge.

Chapter 1: The Gypsy Violin

The history of the Gypsies dates back to the ninth century. Their place of origin is not clearly determined, but it is estimated to be in the lower castes of India.[1] Despite the ambiguity of their origin, the Gypsy culture had a remarkable worldwide influence especially prominent in Western music history. This influence was spread all over Europe, as heard in the music of many Western composers who used national folk music in combination with Gypsy elements, creating a new musical style. As a result, the folk and Gypsy elements were blended together, especially in the countries of Romania and Hungary.[2] In the nineteenth century, Gypsy music influence significantly expanded. For example, in Hungary, Gypsy musicians played a big role during the War of Independence in 1848.[3] Hungarians were said to have healed the wounds of soldiers through Gypsy music.[4] Furthermore, Gypsy-influenced music was well-received by audiences worldwide, which continued into the twentieth century in film music. [5] Incorporating Gypsy rhythms is a compositional trend used by late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century composers such as Bartók, Ravel, Sarasate, Brahms, Monti, Saint-Saëns and others. One of the signature features of Gypsy music is the unique use of the violin, which has been used as a primary instrument due to its ability to appropriately demonstrate the Gypsy style.

This paper will carefully trace how the violin transmitted elements of Gypsy music in Western culture. Through analysis of selected Gypsy-influenced Romantic compositions such as

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[1] Chris Haigh, "Hungarian and Gypsy Fiddle," Fiddling Around the World, accessed August 11, 2019, http://www.fiddlingaround.co.uk/hungarian.
[2] Ibid.
[3] David Malvinni, *The Gypsy Caravan: From Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 39.
[4] Ibid.
[5] David Malvinni, *The Gypsy Caravan: From Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 50.

Béla Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances*, Vittorio Monti's *Csárdás*, this study will help today's violinists gain a historical and theoretical understanding of the Gypsy violin style.

Chapter 2: The Establishment of the Gypsy Violin

In order to trace the growing contribution of the Gypsy violin, having historical context is crucial. The ambiguity of its origin—at least the direct homeland before its diaspora—is believed to be the foothills or plains that follow the Himalayan Mountains. A comparison of Persian, Armenian, and Gypsy cultures reveals how Gypsies traveled from Asia Minor through the Balkans across the Donau River to the West. They have already appeared throughout Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As is commonly the case with migrant groups, Gypsies who were spread out worldwide were socially marginalized in most of countries an issue that continues even in the present. Because of this, Gypsies are referred to by different names depending on the country. In Old England, people assumed Gypsies were from Egypt, and thus referred to them as Egyptians. This was later changed from "Egyptian" to "Gypcy" by removing the "E" from Egyptian. In France, Gypsies were called "Bohemians." In addition, Gypsies are referred to by different names within Western and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. [6]

Not many studies have been conducted on Gypsy music by musicologists, even though their presence is estimated to be the ninth century.[7] However, the Gypsy violin is popularized due to the violin and begins to be used, more particularly in Western composition and performance in the nineteenth century.[8] In this next section, I will trace the popularity of the Gypsy violin and how it made its way into Western culture. Such an examination of this moment in music history can enrich the contemporary violinists knowledge of historic violin figures who were influenced by the music of the Gypsies.

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[6] Chris Haigh, "Hungarian and Gypsy Fiddle," Fiddling Around the World, accessed August 11, 2019, http://www.fiddlingaround.co.uk/hungarian.
[7] David Malvinni, *The Gypsy Caravan: From Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 12.
[8] Ibid., 39.

The Gypsy violin made its way into Eastern European culture by way of migration from regions further to the East. A Hungarian dance called *verbunkos* utilizes the Gypsy violin. In this type of dance music, Gypsy music was the main influence. The Hungarian ethnomusicologist Bálint Sárosi (b. 1925) wrote of the role that Gypsy music played in the healing of the wounds of Hungarian soldiers and civilians from the War of Independence (1848) through its expression of innermost feelings.[9] A researcher of the works of Bartók and Kodály, he writes:

> It is difficult for us to understand today this magic power to cure everything which the Gypsy violin playing *verbunkos* music and Hungarian songs possessed – of which magic power, incidentally Széhenyi had written earlier and Liszt was to write later. Patikárus (chemist) for example, is reputed to have got his name – even before the War of Independence – by "curing" a melancholic nobleman with his violin.[10]

Through the use of extensive violin writing, Gypsy elements became fused with Western composition, a trend which gradually developed in the mid-nineteenth century.[11] Such Gypsy elements include the violin imitating other instrumental sounds, such as winds, and also the human speaking voice and whispering sounds.[12] For this reason of an instrumental technique that is very evocative, the Gypsy violin became very popular in Romanian dance.

An important Romanian violinist and singer named Nicolae Neacsu's (1924-2002) exemplified the old-style *hora* ("Hora din caval: wind instrument"). This dance music utilizes the violin in which wind instruments and the speaking voice are imitated by using the string technique referred to as *ponticello*.[13]

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[9] David Malvinni, *The Gypsy Caravan: From Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 39.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] David Malvinni, *The Gypsy Caravan: From Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 57.
[13] Ibid.

Another popular feature of the Gypsy violin is the expression of melancholy. Compositions by Hungarian composer and pianist Franz Liszt are exemplary of these compositional features. One can easily identify the melancholy feeling in his works—in particular the Hungarian Rhapsodies No. 1 - 3.[14] According to David Malvinni, author of the book titled *Gypsy Caravan*,

> The passionate introduction to the *Rhapsodies* contains all of the elements we associate with Gypsiness… Note that an amateur could "play" these notes, but without intuitive musical understanding of the equations of Gysiness, he could not give them the energy required to express the melancholy aimed for by Liszt."[15]

Although Liszt aimed to imitate the Gypsy violin on the piano, he felt that it was not a sufficient representation. The piano is a virtuosic instrument, but when it comes to Gypsy music, it potential did not quite succeed in portraying its more melancholy musical elements compared to the violin's singing.[16]

Furthermore, the Gypsy violin takes on a significant role in opera during the nineteenth century. The violin is often not only used for imitation of other instrumental sounds but also shares an equal role with operatic vocals. According to Anna G. Piotrowska and Guy R. Torr, authors of the book *Gypsy Music in European Cultures*,

> The song, "Bohémiens" (1913; op. 25), by Théodore Terestchenko (1888-1950), with words from the French Symbolist poet Henri Cazalis (1840-1909), aka Jean Lahor, possessed a text with stereotypical components such as a Gypsy playing a violin at dusk, the violin part is introduced as an equal partner with the vocal line against the accompanying piano. Typical sentimentalism, as well as the association of Gypsy culture with the violin as a motif often exploited in Viennese operetta, remains a characteristic of the song.[17]

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[14] David Malvinni, *The Gypsy Caravan: From Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 102-105.
[15] Ibid., 103.
[16] Ibid., 105.
[17] Anna G. Piotrowska and Guy R. Torr, *Gypsy Music in European Culture: From the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2013), 159.

In summary, we can state that, many composers of the Western tradition used the violin to evoke the Gypsy sound. Elements of this sound include the unique characteristics of the Gypsy violin that express inner sentiments, imitate wind instruments and the human voice, and evoke a melancholy mood. Even today, composers rely on this distinct style of violin music in many applications. Its versatility in expressing a vastly liberal style of phrasing, often melancholy expression and a virtuoso performance style was the primary reason that enabled Gypsy violin music to survive to the present day.

In the nineteenth century, Johannes Brahms encountered a famous Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi, who was influential in the dissemination of Gypsy music. His influence had a great impact on future generations of composers. In 1852, Remenyi was scheduled to perform in Hamburg, but unfortunately, his accompanist fell sick. Nineteen-year-old Brahms was then called in to replace the accompanist and played alongside Reményi, whom through this performance, became fascinated by Brahms's playing.[18] Following this encounter, the duo toured Hungary together that same year.

During this time, Brahms and Reményi familiarized themselves with elements of Gypsy music. Soon afterwards however, their friendship fell apart and Remenyi became upset with Brahms and decided to sue him alongside other gypsy musicians, for publishing volume 1 of *Hungarian Dances*, no. 1 - 5 in 1868.. This case resulted in a trial, and Brahms insisted that Reményi was a source of inspiration and that he did not plagiarize his music. Brahms won his case since he wrote an arrangement, and not a new composition, and therefore did not infringe on copyright law.

[18] Gwendolyn Dunlevy Kelly and George P. Upton, *Edouard Reményi: Musician, Litterateur, and Man* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co, 1906), p.83.

Later, Brahms published the volume 2 (no. 6 - 10) in 1869, volume 3 (no. 11 - 16) and volume 4 (no. 17 - 21) in 1880. It is also part of his success. Volumes 3 and 4 are slightly different in musical style in comparison to volumes 1 and 2 due to less use of Gypsy rhythms. Thus, it seems that he attempted to create more his own version of Hungarian dance music.

During this era, numerous composers such as Bartók, Ravel, Sarasate, Brahms, Monti, Saint-Saëns, Liszt and others wrote pieces that borrow from Gypsy musical culture by fusing their elements with the Western style. In this next section, I will analyze a few specific compositions, showing how the Gypsy violin exemplifies in a work this distinctive style. My primary focus will be on works by Béla Bartók, Vittorio Monti. The aim is to enhance performance practice knowledge within the violinist community of Gypsy music.

Chapter 3: Bela Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances* [1915]

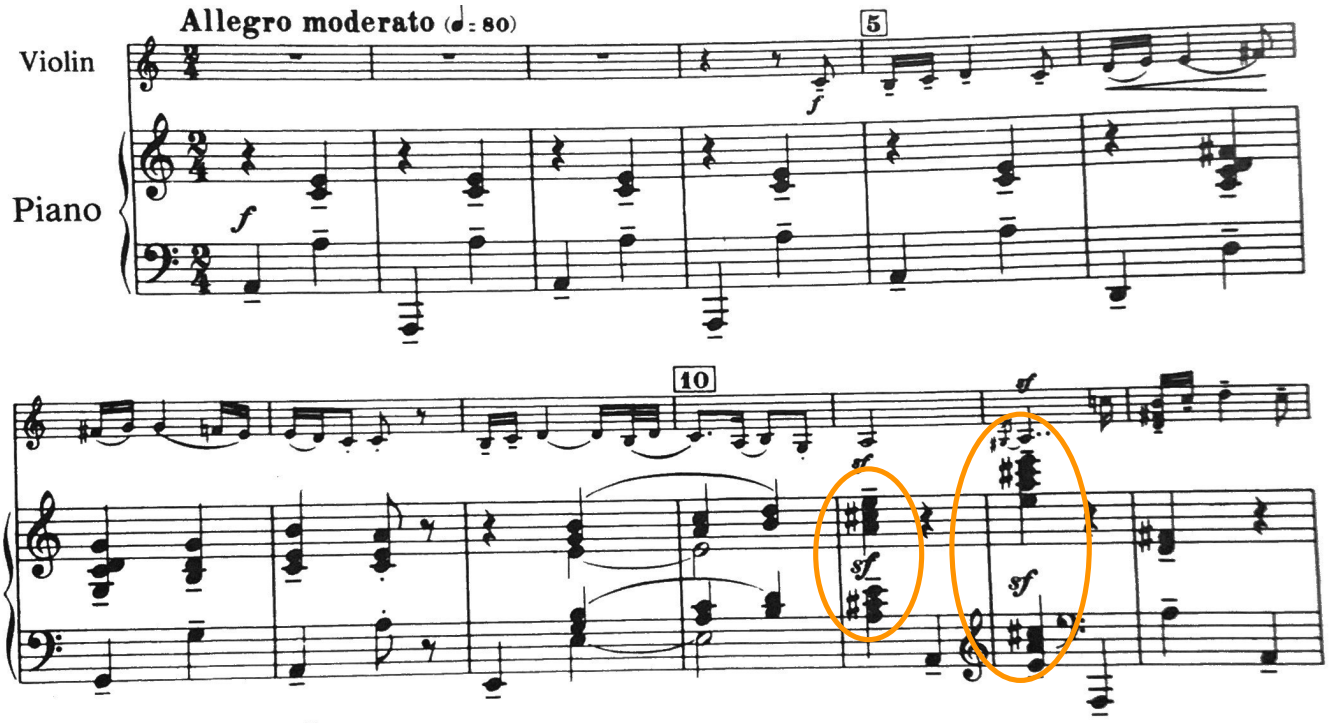
Romanian Folk Dances by Bartók is based on dance songs collected from Transylvania, Romania, and was originally published as a piano suite in 1915. In addition to orchestral arrangements by the composer himself in 1917, many composers have arranged various versions.

Among them, the arrangement of violin and piano titled Romanian Dance was completed in 1926 by a friend of Bartók's, violinist *Zoltan Szekely*. This collection contains six small pieces. When considered as a whole, continuity between each piece is not present. There are no unifying elements or coherence in terms of melody. It appears that Bartók composed this simplification of the overall format in order to escape from the classical-romantic music form, while simultaneously generating elements of folk Gypsy music.

Each movement of the collection is influenced by specific dances that exemplify Gypsy music. For instance, the first movement of this collection is titled "Dance with Sticks" because this it is based on a dance practiced in the Maros-Torda region of Transylvania, where a young man dances alone with a stick. The second movement is titled "Waistband Dance," which melody is typical Romanian dances called *Barâul* that comes from *Egres (Igris)*, in the *Banat* region. The third movement is titled "On the Spot" since it is based on the Torontal farmer dance, which is characterized by slow and stationary accompaniment. The fourth movement is titled "*Butschum*" or "Horn Dance" because it also derives from dance of the Maros-Torda region, which contains a gentle melodic line of three beats. The fifth movement is titled "Romanian Polka" which is based on the dance performance of the Bihal province. It is an exciting song that expresses its vitality with

staccato and short notes. The last movement is titled “Fast Dance” since it is based on a fast-tempo dance performed by couples from the Bihal and Maros-Torda.[19]

In terms of compositional devices that reflects Gypsy influence, Bella Bartók utilizes the Spanish scales, Hungarian scales and variations of musical colors by changing or shifting elements from piece to piece within the collection, in addition to use of the church modes.

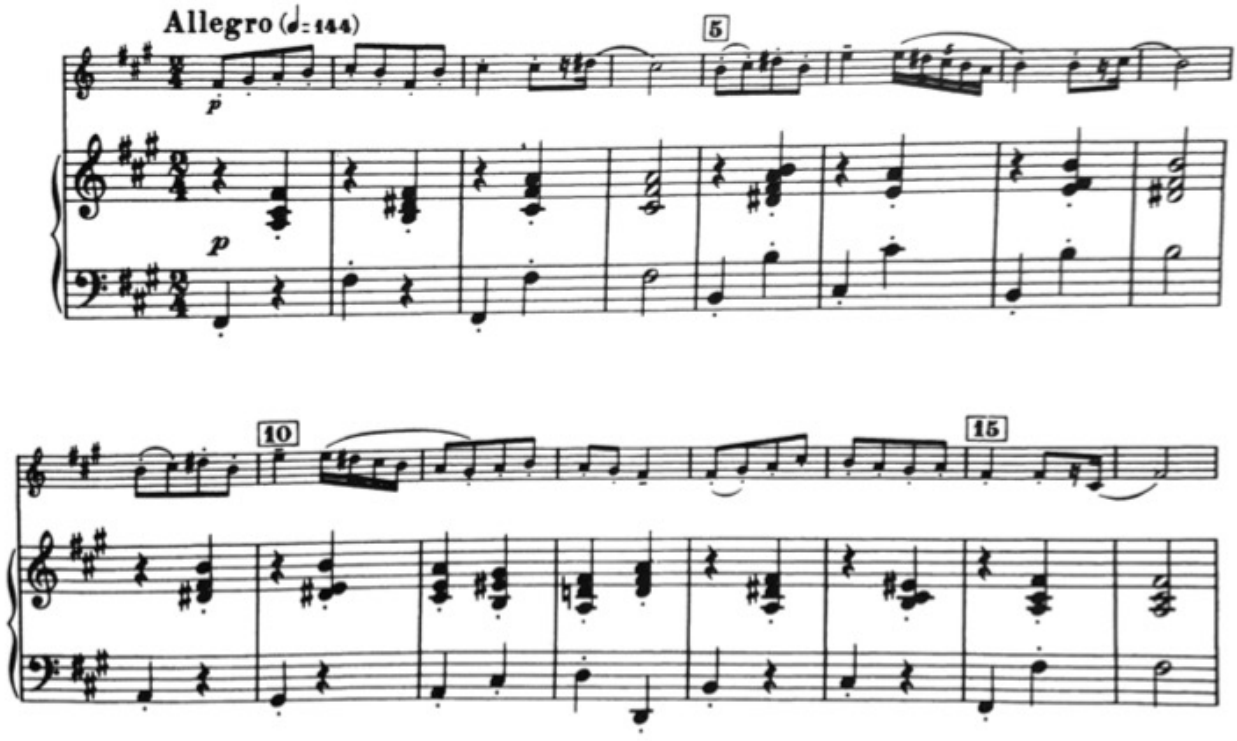


[Musical example 1. *Romanian Dances*, Movement I: mm. 1-13]

[19]Tony Califano, “Bartók’s Romanian folk Dances,” The Right Kind of Saw, accessed August 11, 2019, http://tonycalifano.blogspot.com/2008/07/bartoks-romanian-folk-dances.html.

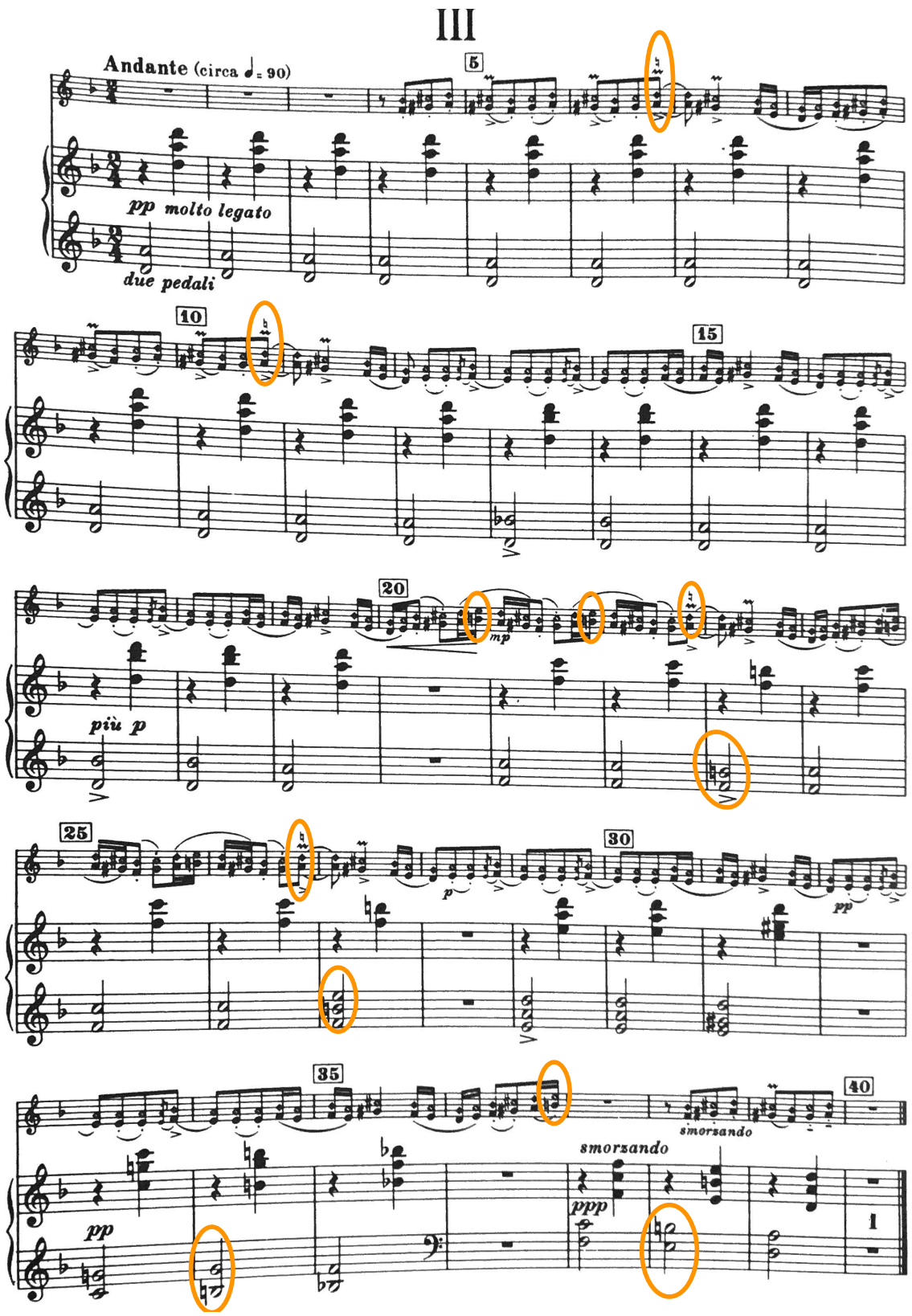
The first movement begins in the key of A minor but notes that imply A major can be seen with the presence of F-sharp, C-sharp, and G-sharp throughout. Although A major is implied, mm. 1 - 5 contains C-natural instead of C-sharp, which implies A minor. A minor is continued until m. 10 when the addition of C# is implemented. Therefore, the keys alternate between A major and A minor frequently, which creates a lack of tonal stability and ambiguity, and a constant shift in mood and color between these two modes.

Furthermore, Bartók uses A Dorian mode. The melody ascends from the note A, with the addition of F#, producing the Dorian scale A-B-C-D-E-F#-G. When the scale descends, F# is now F natural, utilizing Aeolian mode (F-E-D-C-B-A). It also generates ambiguity, in which an unexpected mood is generated. With the combination of church modes and the violin's unique quality, the affect is that of misterioso and exoticism.



[Musical example 2. *Romanian Dances*, Movement II: mm. 1-16]

Additionally, one of the church modes, F# Dorian is used, and no notes are altered in this part when the melodic line descends (F#-G#-A-B-C#-D#-E-D#-C#-B-A-G#-F#).



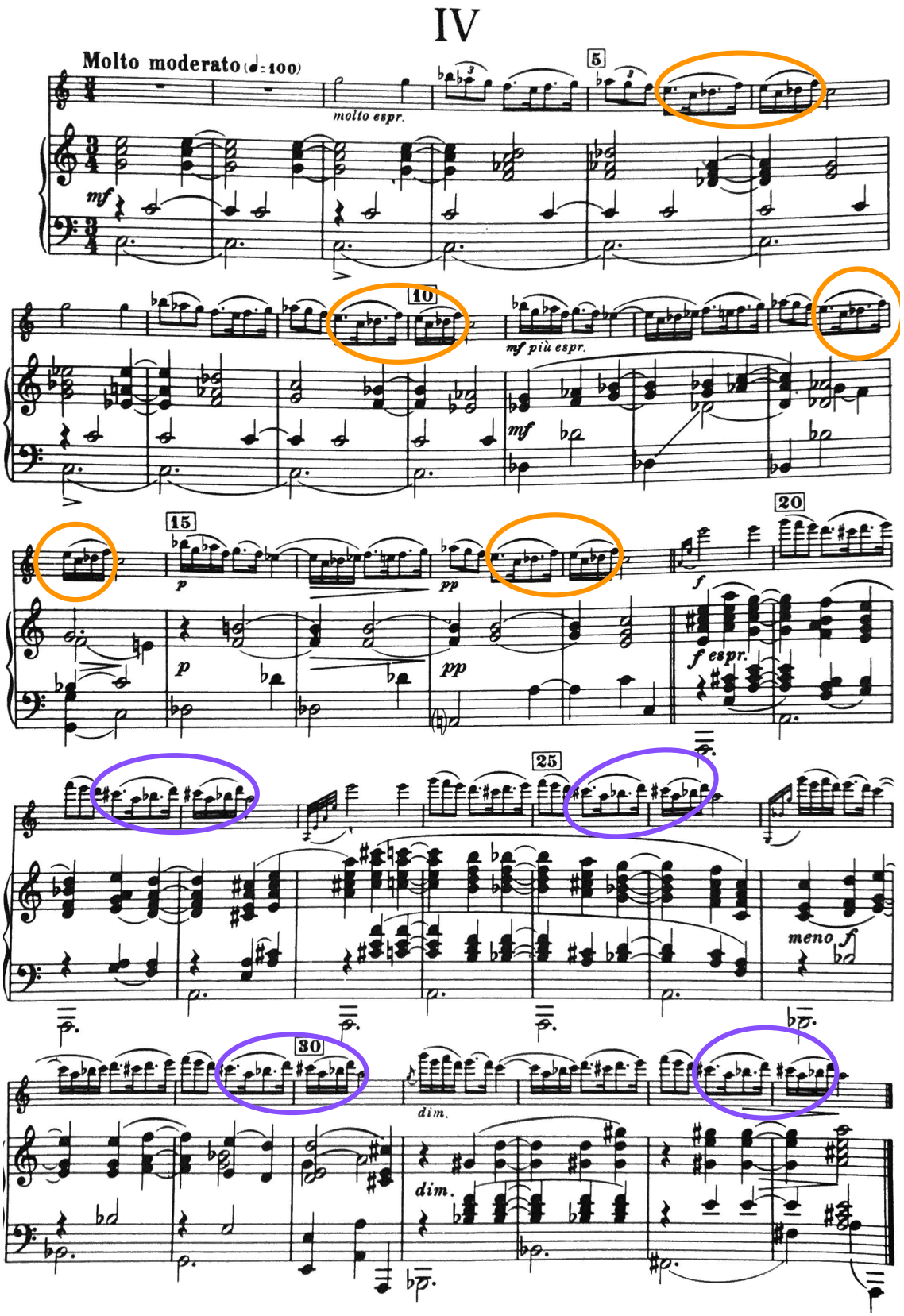
[Musical example 3. *Romanian Dances,* Movement III]

The third movement of this piece is in D Hungarian minor (or D Gypsy minor scale),[20] which is similar to a regular D harmonic minor scale except that it has a raised forth scale degree. Therefore, it is easy to find augmented seconds, which commonly occurs in Gypsy scales. It is also worth noting that there are many B naturals throughout this movement, rather than B flats which one may expect from a D minor scale, in turn creating a major quality and resulting in a lack of tonality.

The piano accompaniment in this movement sustains a pedal tone with occasional chord progressions while the violin melody is played over it with a variety of ornamentations. In addition, the violinist has to employ the use of harmonics for the entirety of this movement. The harmonics produce a flutelike, whispering sound which creates a sensitive and nostalgic atmosphere.

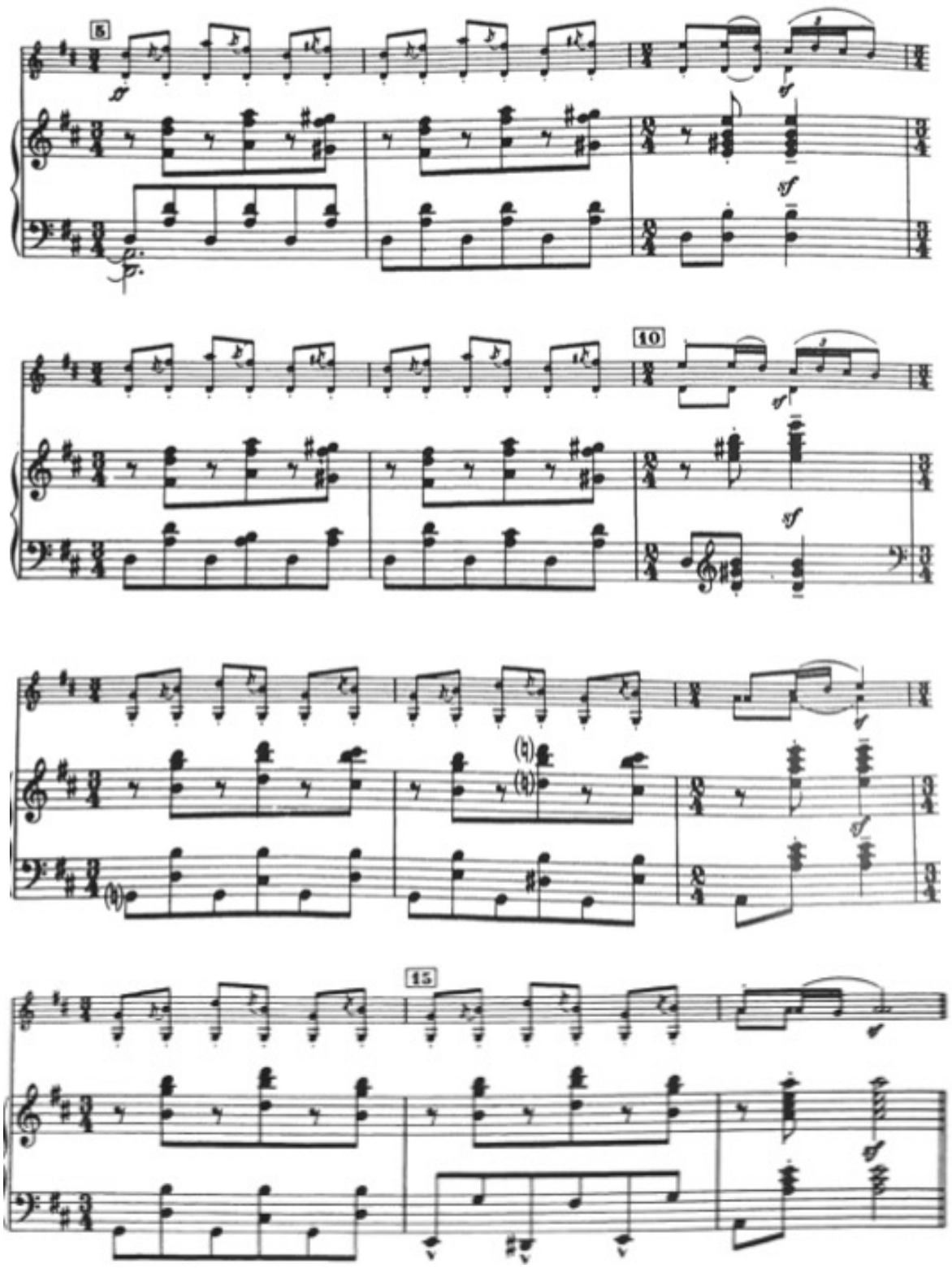
In short, the combination of non-traditional Gypsy minor scales and the use of a variety of violin techniques creates an exotic sound and an air of mystery.

[20] D Hungarian Gypsy scale: D – E – F – G# - A – Bb – C# - D.



[Musical example 4. *Romanian Dances,* Movement IV]

In the fourth movement, Bartók utilizes the Spanish modes in C in mm 1 – 18 and in A in mm 19 - 34, which contains the following pitch classes: C – Db – E natural – F – G – Ab – Bb – C, and A – Bb – C# – D – E – F – G – A respectively. Thus, this movement can be divided into two parts based on the different keys, in which the first section in the key of C Spanish mode will be referred as A, and the second section in the key of A Spanish mode will be referred as B. There are two themes in each part, with each theme repeating once, but the repeat is played with different dynamics compared to the first. It should be noted that there are four notes which repeat in each theme despite the differences in rhythm. These notes being E5 – C5 – Db5 – F5 in Part A, and C#6 – A5 – Bb5 – D6 in Part B. This recurring structure demonstrates the use of Spanish scales due to the presence of augmented seconds (E5 and Db5) within these 4 notes. Interestingly, the note (C5) between the augmented seconds, produces a weaker sound compared to the other 2 notes around it (E5 & Db5) due to its smaller note value and the fact that it comes off the beat. The four notes combined creates a calm and sensitive sound, although to avoid sounding boring, the violinist has to play the theme differently each time. In short, the Gypsy violin style can be achieved through a combination of Spanish scales and versatility in violin techniques, which in turn creates an air of mystique.



[Musical example 5. *Romanian Dances,* Movement V: mm. 5-16]

In movement V, Bartók uses D Lydian mode fragments from mm. 5 – 10 (D – E – F# - G# - A), and G Lydian mode fragments from mm. 11 – 16 (G – A – B – C# - D). The tempo of fifth movement is notated as *Allegro*, but feels faster than *Allegro* due to the melody, which contains continuous ornamentation on the off-beats of eighth-notes. Furthermore, this movement mainly consists of *ff* or *sf* dynamics. Due to the naturally portable and light features of a violin, it is the most appropriate instrument to be used to play Gypsy music as it can recreate the gypsy dancelike atmosphere without sounding overly aggressive.

In addition, this movement alternates between the time signatures 3/4 and 2/4, but the melody is repeated. This creates a change in pulse in large portions of the music, which is juxtaposed with a memorable melodic line that ties the movement together.

Chapter 4: Vittorio Monti's *Csárdás* [1904]

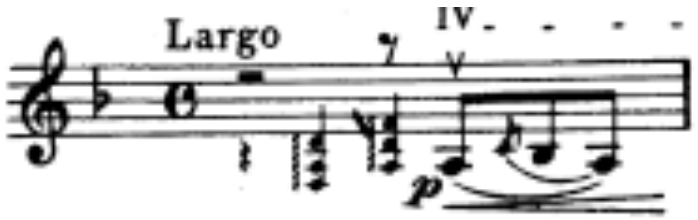
Since the mid-nineteenth century, the nationalistic movement of music emerged in Hungary, along with the dissemination of *Csárdás* dance throughout Europe. The *Csárdás* dance itself was passed down by oral tradition, thus its origin is obscure. In the late eighteenth century, it is said that the *Verbunkos* dance was derived from dance music danced by a Hungarian solider accompanied song called the Csárdás. The original folk *Csárdás* music contains a two-pulse rhythm throughout, with many different contrasting affects. It begins with a slow introduction and a cadenza, in which returns throughout the piece. Other contrasting affects include the *lassu* [meaning "lament"], the brilliant tone, and *friss* or *fiska* theme [meaning "wild" and "frenzied"]. The theme is characterized by its powerful syncopation and rhythm.

Vittorio Monti's *Csárdás* [1904] is very much of the traditional Hungarian Csardas song style arranged for violin, mandolin and piano. In *Csárdás,* Monti borrowed the theme from the traditional Hungarian dance and wrote a slow introduction first and a Gypsy-like, fast-paced style in the latter portion of the piece.

This song is divided into four parts with the 2/4 time signature, which are divided in terms of tempo. These divisions are as follows: Part I is from mm. 1 – 21; Part II is from mm. 22 – 53; Part III is from mm. 54-85; Part IV is from mm. 86 -134. The first part (Largo) begins with a 2/2 time signature, then shifts to a 4/4 time signature when the violin melody enters. Part I develops with a rhythmic and lamented melody of Gypsies.

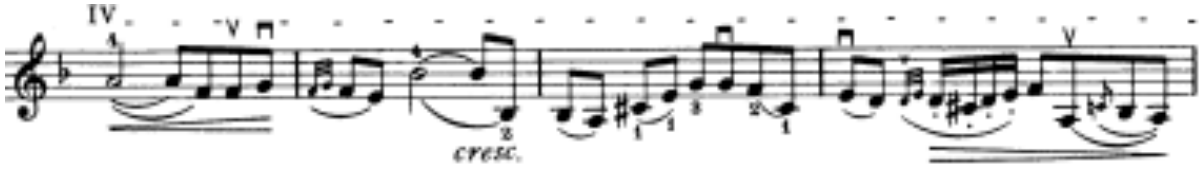
In the introduction, the piano plays the role of accompaniment while the violin plays the melody, which consists of a variety of ornamentation to highlight the "Gypsy" nature within the piece. It is commonly noted that the violin usually shines as the main soloist in

Gypsy music while the other instruments provide the baseline, as demonstrated throughout this piece.



[Musical example 6. *Csárdás,* m. 5]

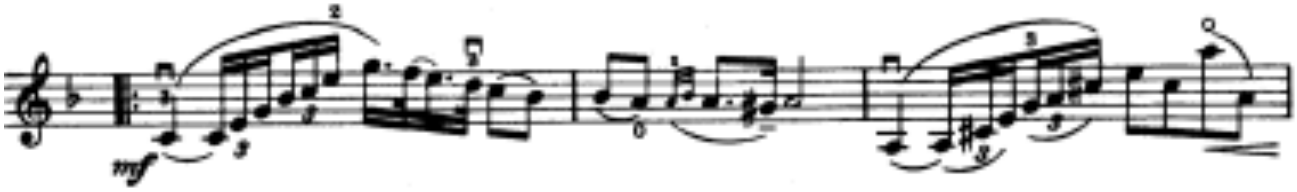
In m. 5, the violin melody begins on a low A3, followed by an appoggiatura before resolving to B3. When played on a violin, this further highlights a sense of gloominess within the piece. It is also worth noting that the violin plays the melody only on the *G string* for nine measures from measure 5 until measure 13, with the aim of highlighting the intense tone quality a violin can produce by playing exclusively on one string, while creating a soothing and grief stricken effect, which are typical features of Gypsy music.



[Musical example 7. *Csárdás,* mm. 6-9]

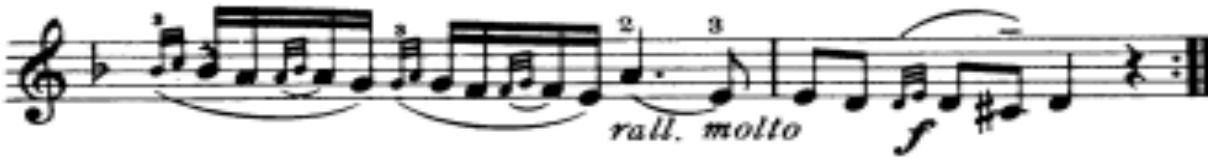
In measure 6, the violinist has to slide an octave upwards from an A3 to A4, which is supposed to recreate the melody of Gypsy music. The violinist is also allowed more leeway to express their artistry, as this section in the piece is a cadenza, allowing the soloist more rhythmic freedom should they choose to.

As shown in musical example 7, measure 7 begins with an ornament before resolving to the principal, expected chord note. This ornament recurs on the fourth beat of the previous measure but in the form of two eighth-notes. Thus, this shows that the ornamentation in measure 7 is a quicker version of the previous beat in measure 6, which gives a feeling of satisfaction to the listener because it is easy to follow and predictable. This is exemplary of Gypsy music, as the violin melody is easy to follow through its floaty sound texture.



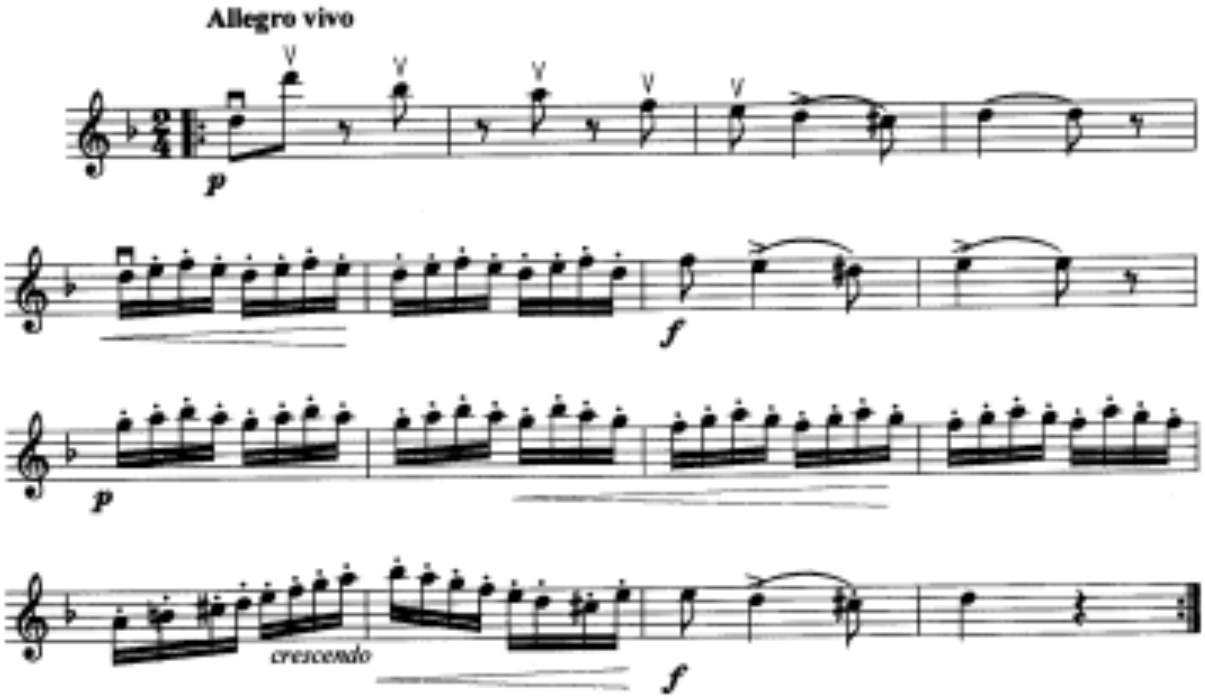
[Musical example 8. *Csárdás,* mm. 14-16]

In this section, the piano still plays the role of accompaniment, as it continues to support the violin melody, which by now has a more interesting rhythmic texture with the inclusion of triplets. In musical example 8, the violin melody starts and lingers on C4, before ascending with triplet notes. As the phrase progresses, dotted sixteenth notes begin to appear, which shows the piece is beginning to take the form of a dance rhythm.



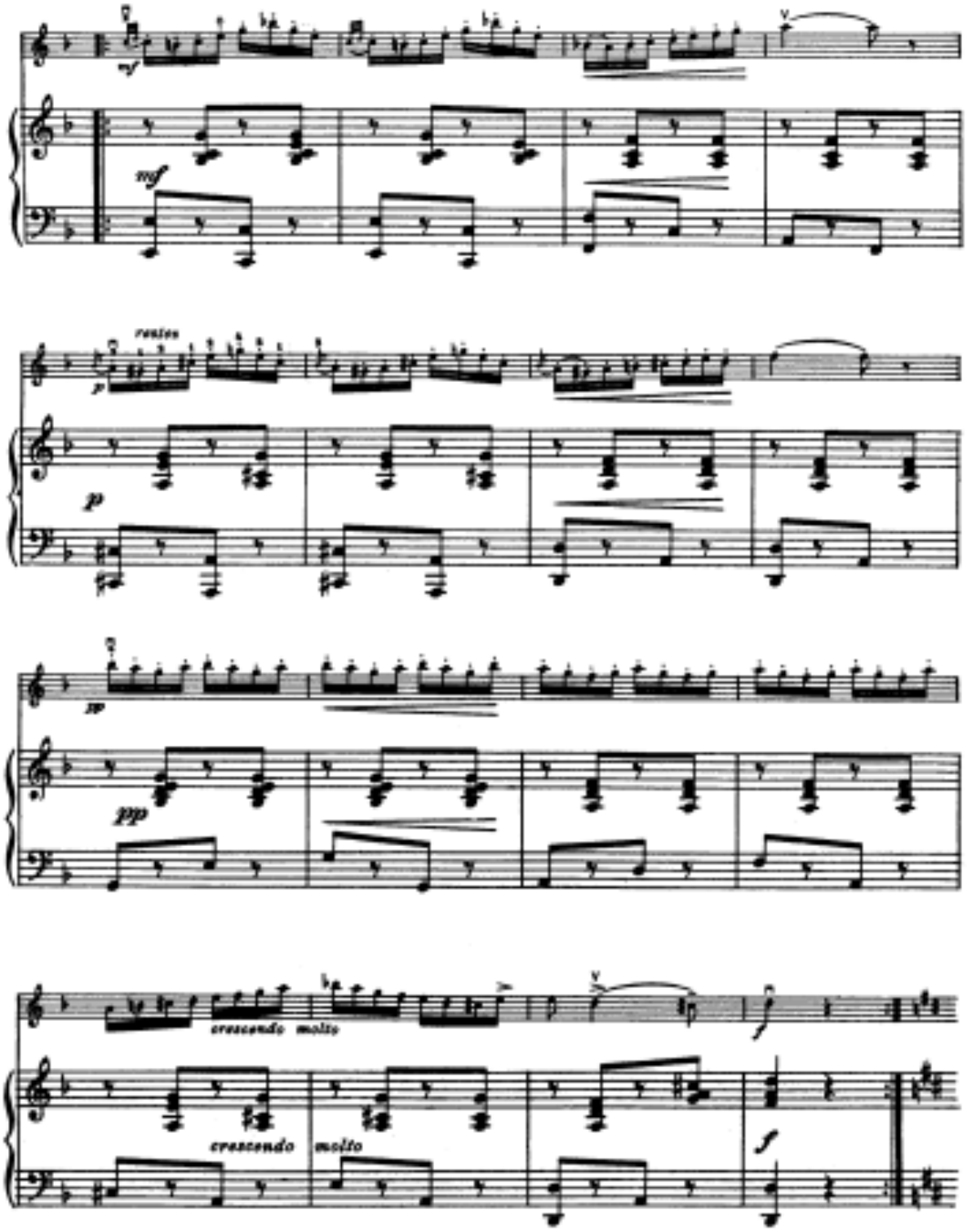
[Musical example 9. *Csárdás,* mm. 20-21]

As shown in musical example 9, mordents also play a role in recreating a dance atmosphere by making the music livelier and did not sounds aggressive even it is *f* dynamic due to violin's sensitive sound.



[Musical example 10. *Csárdás,* mm. 22-37]

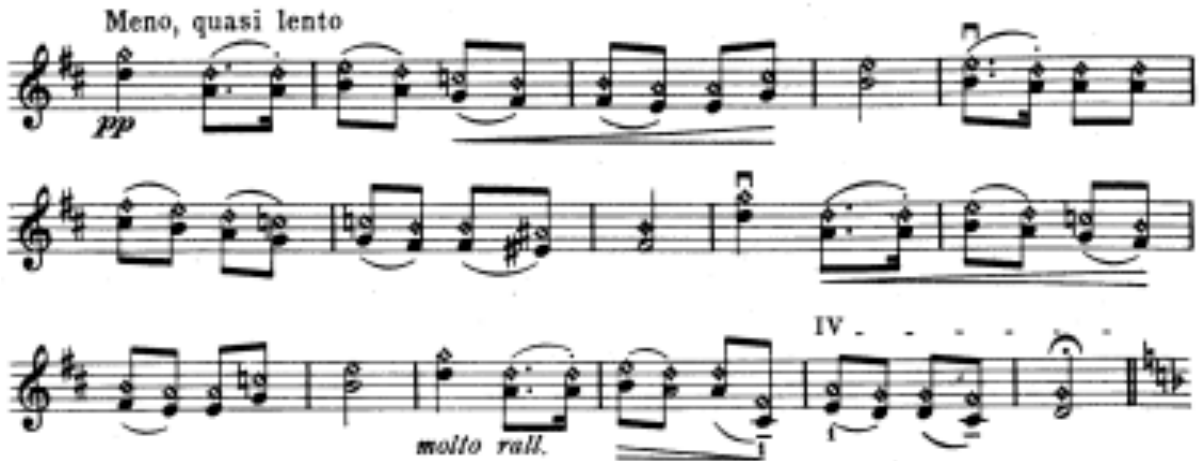
The second part of the piece suddenly quickens in pace, adopting a completely different atmosphere than the first part. The typical pulsating rhythm in Gypsy music is properly expressed here, especially with the use of *spiccatos* in the violin part. The violin displays the youthful and vibrant energy often present in Gypsy music, matched by the piano, whose accompaniment has also become more active compared to in the previous part.



[Musical example 11. *Csárdás,* mm. 38-53]

As shown in musical example 11, syncopation—a typical rhythmic feature of Gypsy that expresses the atmosphere of dance—is used in the accompaniment, providing only a basic beat. This accompaniment rhythm continues in the same fashion from the beginning to the end in Part II. The sixteenth note immediately develops an atmosphere that is heightened for playing fast *spiccato* in the middle of the violin bow. The accent on the downbeat is played heavy to facilitate the accelerated rhythm.

The third part is divided into various tempos, such as *molto meno* and *meno, quasi lento*. The double-stopping technique at *molto meno* is utilized in mm. 54-69, which is to be played in a relaxed, elegant manner, which contrasts from the second part.



[Musical example 12. *Csárdás,* mm. 70-85]

The harmonics technique of the violin—which is a unique sound in Gypsy music that creates a transparent and mysterious affect resembling a human whistle—appears in the *meno, quasi lento* (mm. 70-85) section, further relieving the heightened atmosphere.

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Chapter 5: Conclusion

The origins of Gypsies are not exactly known, but they have been moving all over the world for centuries and have embraced the multiple cultures in their lives and music. Because they were constantly moving, it can be assumed that a portable violin was an appropriate instrument to express their emotions, and thus, many Gypsies were composers and performers. As shown in the previous chapter "The Establishment of the Gypsy Violin," the Gypsy violin has been embraced due to its unique sounds that are capable of evoking the lively atmosphere often present in Gypsy music. The violin in Gypsy music is one of the only instruments able to express the innermost feelings felt in Hungarian dances. Furthermore, the Gypsy violin sounds cannot be demonstrated on any other instrument. The violin can imitate the wind or human voices, a Gypsy characteristic, which caught the attention of Viennese operetta. Moreover, many musicians were devoted to composing music influenced by the Gypsy violin. An example is Johannes Brahms, a composer and musician who loved the Gypsy violin and was highly influenced by this sound as heard in his *Hungarian Dances*.

As previously mentioned in chapters III and IV of this paper, the compositional characteristics of the Gypsy musical style that were found in Western music include Western composer's use of the scales of Hungarian major scale, Hungarian minor scale, and Spanish scale. Rhythm and tempo characteristics include use of repetition, using rhythm patterns borrowed from Gypsy music. In addition, the overall chord progression of *Csárdás* consists of I-ii-V-I, with the exception of the *Largo* in Part I. Verdi Monti's *Csárdás* contains numerous Gypsy elements in its short duration. In his music, Gypsy music is characterized by the speed of the tempo, which is for dancing slowly and mourning.

Composed and played by a Gypsy violinist, *Csárdás* is a Hungarian-derived dance song with slow and fast tempos that Gypsy violinists enjoyed and continue to enjoy today. These advanced playing techniques require rigorous practice but creates an interesting and challenging experience. In this regard, this paper focused on reaching an overall understanding and in-depth interpretation of Gypsy influenced-music, as captured by the violin.

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