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THE DANCE HOUSE MOVEMENT – A LIVING TRADITION

When talking about Hungary and Hungarians to a foreigner, a number of stereotypes come up, from paprika to the spas, the goulasch to the puszta, the poppy-seed bread (*mákos guba*) to the puli dog, and the pálinka (a traditional fruit brandy) to Bartók and Imre Kertész.



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However, if we are honest to ourselves, we have to admit that even though we Hungarians think that these aspects, lives and results, are outstanding and worth telling the world, none of them is truly unique. Special buildings, food, manufactured goods, beautiful views and talented people can be found in every country.

But there is something that is truly ‘Hungaricum’, that is the so-called ‘dance house’ and the resulting *dance house movement*. In Transylvania, the dance house was a place (a room of a house or a barn) used for dancing by the young people of the village. A group of young dancers from Budapest decided to organise similar communal dance gatherings and applied the original model to an urban environment. The first urban dance house was organised in Budapest on 6th May 1972 in the banquet hall of the Book Club on Liszt Ferenc Square, with the contribution of four folk dance ensembles and professional ethnographers. Visitors were offered Hungarian pálinka as the Transsylvanian tradition requires, and then the party began.

However, it must be noted that this could not have happened without other developments in the preceding almost 100 years: from the first phonograph-recorded folk songs by Béla Vikár (1896), through the world famous oeuvres of Bartók and Kodály, the *Gyöngyös Bokréta (Bouquet of Pearls)* movement in the

1930s and 1940s, to the folk dance research conducted by György Martin and his colleagues. Ultimately, in the beginning of the 1970s, a group of urban youth had the chance to participate in a dance house in Sic (Transylvania, Romania) and marvel at the special atmosphere of an authentic live music dance party that is based on improvisation, yet is also strictly regulated. Wishing to share this experience with their friends, these young men organised the first dance houses in Budapest. Having been private events for political reasons at first, dance houses opened to the public a year later. Since then, anyone could join the dance houses in Budapest and, after a few years, all over the country.

Participants of a dance house acquire dance knowledge from experienced members or tradition bearers by direct observation and imitation, to the accompaniment of live music, while using their individual level of creativity to develop their competence and dancing ability. The dancing is complemented by singing instructions, handicraft activities and ethnographic presentations.

Anyone regardless of age, competence or prior experience can become an active participant of a dance house.

The dance house model offers diverse intangible cultural heritage (including music, dance, poetry,

customs, handicrafts activities, etc.) in an interactive, community-based form of entertainment and cultural enrichment for people today. The essence of the method is that elements of cultural heritage are taken



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directly from living practices, traditions in rural communities and archival collection and transposed into vastly different sociocultural contexts.

Before dance houses are stigmatised as nationalist events, it has to be noted that other ethnic groups living in Hungary (such as Southern Slavs, Greeks, Bulgarians) soon

took over this appealing method and

began organising their own dance houses. Hungarian dance houses, on the other hand, feature the Hungarian *verbunk* of the Szatmár region just as much as the ethnic Romanian dances from *Méhkerék*, Southeastern Hungary, the *csángó* round dances from Moldova, or *Gypsy* dances from *Nagyecsed*.

The best evidence of the community building power of dance houses is the fact that nowadays different generations gather into pubs and cultural houses on different evenings, and in Budapest, a dance house can be visited any night of the week. Moreover, Hungarian dance houses are held regularly not only in Budapest or Hungary but all over the world: in Japan, the USA, Australia and England. Hundreds of folk dance ensembles and folk music bands exist. There is a possibility to learn folk music and dance from elementary school to the university level. The method of transmitting rural heritage to the 21st century society has gained success; other countries have taken over this practice of Hungarian culture, and it also served as a model, for example, to the Slovak dance house movement.

The Hungarian dance house method, as a value-based, community-building, entertaining yet educational form of recreational activity through the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, has won recognition to be a part of UNESCO's Register of Best Safeguarding Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011, thus serving as a role model for other nations' own cultural heritage preservation methods. Nowadays, when all over the world children watch the same animation movies, teenagers adore the same pop stars, listen to the same music hits, young (and less young) women search for inspiration in the same fashion magazines and consider the same top models as their ideals, and we read the same books and watch the same films, it is an especially great achievement to know that there are some places where the youth are having fun to their own national music and dance with their hearts.