

Christian Roma Musicking in Hungary

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate Romani musicians and Romani religious musicking, a previously under-researched facet of Roma musicking. We detail the emergence of Romani religious music and its distinctive features, explore its evolution over the past fifty years, and identify the earliest Roma religious musicians in Hungary. Furthermore, this study will highlight the significance of Romani religious music in the process of Romani conversion, the emergence of a Christian Romani collective identity, and the development of Romani relations and inculturation. In addition to historical sources and literature, our study draws on personal field experiences and interviews with Roma believers in Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal-Charismatic, and Free Christian congregations in Békés, Budapest, Szeged, Szendrőlád, Csátka, and Uszka.

Hungarian Abstract

A keresztény roma zene Magyarországon

Tanulmányunkban a roma zenei kultúra egy kevésbé kutatott területét, a roma vallási zenészeket és a roma vallási zenélést vizsgáljuk. Bemutatjuk a roma vallási zene magyarországi kialakulását és jellegzetességeit, megvizsgáljuk az elmúlt, nagyjából fél évszázad alatt bekövetkezett változásait, illetve a legkorábbi magyarországi roma vallási zenészeket. A tanulmány továbbá rávilágít arra, hogy a roma vallási zene milyen jelentőséggel rendelkezik a roma megtérés folyamatában, a keresztény roma kollektív identitás kialakulásában, valamint az inkulturáció folyamatában. Tanulmányunk a történelmi források és a szakirodalom mellett személyes helyszíni tapasztalatokra, Békésen, Budapesten, Szegeden, Szendrőládon, Csatkán és Uszkan élő, baptista, katolikus, pünkösdi-karizmatikus és szabadkeresztény gyülekezetekben élő roma hívőkkel készített interjúkra támaszkodik.

Introduction

Sitting at a Roman Catholic mass in Szendrőlád, a predominantly Roma village in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, one of the poorest regions of Hungary where a group of Roma converted to Roman Catholicism in the mid-1990s and became active in Roma missionary work. They have formed a band, serve at Catholic masses, and hold pastoral retreats, making them relatively well known in Hungarian Christian circles. Jenő Rézműves – the leader of Szendrőládi Dicsőítők (Worshippers of Szendrőlád) – and his group has frequently appeared in Hungarian media in the past decades. As part of our research, we are attending the local church with our Roma interlocutors to hear them play music. Due to Szendrőlád's Roma converts to Catholicism, this is not the first time that the faithful of this small church have encountered a camera or a camcorder. Yet a great deal of attention is being paid to us, foreign, gadjo (non-Roma) researchers with their cameras, especially from the benches where non-Roma believers are seated. The elaborately attired Szendrőládi Dicsőítők sit on the front pew (see Figures 1 and 2). Once the priest arrives, the elderly non-Roma organist begins to sing before the Roma musicians. The flow of singing commences as they follow. The Roma are faster in the next song, and then their guitar and mandolin, and the poor quality organ by the older organist are played simultaneously. The Roma musicians¹ smile bemusedly at each other, then fade away as the organist continues to sing. At this moment the priest celebrating the mass kindly reminds her that at this Mass, if possible, “let us enjoy the singing of our Gypsy brothers and sisters.” No further musical conflict follows. The organist departs in anger, slamming the wooden church door loudly behind her. After the service, a resident approaches us and speaks to us privately, cautioning us to be wary because “the Gypsies are only interested in money and theft.” We are surprised by her statement and comment that we had not experienced this before. We had visited their homes earlier and saw the conditions in which they lived. It was evident to us that they were not earning substantial amounts from performing music in church. “It’s all just an appearance,” she responds. We are confused as Jenő approaches us, smiling. “So did he tell you we’re stealing from the church?” – he asks. “That’s how it goes. As a Gypsy you can never be good enough for everyone.”

Research on Roma music in Hungary started early and achieved international results (Csenki and Csenki 1955; Sárosi 1971; Stewart 1994; Kovalcsik 2011). Sárosi's monograph not only provided one of the earliest ethnomusicological and historical analyses of “Gypsy music” in Hungary but also described the situation of “Gypsy musicians” in the decades of Socialism. Important works have been produced on the Roma folk revival movement, which suddenly took off in the 1970s. Kovalcsik and Lynn Hooker analyzed how Roma folk musicians became involved in the movement in the 1970s, which

¹ Throughout the study, the term “musician” refers to both singers and instrumentalists, while the term “music” encompasses both singing and instrumental music.



Figure 1. Catholic Holy Mass in the church of Szendrőlád (photo by István Povedák, October 11, 2015).

was not only musically significant but also had an extraordinary impact on the development of Roma community identity and the emergence of Roma intellectuals (Kovalcsik 2011; Hooker 2011, 2015). Hooker looked at successful Roma musicians and examined whether their social rise has had an impact on the marginalized Roma population and analyzed the ways some musicians in Hungary “are working to improve both the conditions for Roma and the perception of Roma by non-Roma” (2011: 287). However, it was Lange (1993, 2003) who was the first to study Roma religious music in detail after the change of regime. Her study of Pentecostal Roma communities in Hungary is also an international pioneer. Despite the increasing attention paid in the international literature over the last three decades to the success of charismatic movements with a strong influence on Roma religious culture (e.g. Acton 1979; Benovska-Sabkova and Altanov 2009; Fosztó 2009; Gay y Blasco 2000; Marsh and Thurfjell 2014; Podolinská 2007; Zachar Podolinská 2021), there is a major gap in analyzing the role of religious art and music in contemporary religious processes (Howard and Streck 1999). Although many note that small community singing and guitar playing are an indispensable part of Roma conversion and Roma mission, opening the way to the church, and that Roma services are more interactive and have a more Romani musical world, the significance of music and Roma religious musicians is not further elaborated or discussed. The study



Figure 2. Preparing and tuning for the Holy Mass. In the foreground Jenő Rézműves, the leader of the Szendrőlád Cursillo community and the Szendrőládi Dicsőítők band (photo by István Povedák, October 11, 2015).

of Roma religious music, apart from a few outstanding works, is a neglected field. The importance of the Pentecostal hymns in the lives of Roma and their influence on the identity construction and imagination are relatively well studied, demonstrating how this religious movement has reshaped identity categories and concepts of Roma tradition and history through the use of music (Lange 2003; Kovalcsik 2007: 109–137; Slavkova 2012.) Llera Blanes' (2005) study offers insights into the complex interplay between music, ideology, and practice within the Roma Pentecostal community, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of musical expression and its significance in shaping religious identity and discourse, while Åberg explains how Finnish Roma gospel music expresses “[d]esire to participate in a broader national or more cosmopolitan international community” (2014: 161) and serves as a forum to discuss the topics which are important to them (ibid.: 157). Some scholars argue that music plays a key role in attracting many Roma to Pentecostal worship (Thurfjell 2009: 179–191). At the same time, research on this topic is particularly important because we are dealing with a segment of Roma culture with a vibrant popular religiosity (Primiano 1995) and a rich musical culture that is not only in a constant state of dynamic change, thus allowing us to cap-

ture Roma creativity, but also because religious songs help us to understand the collective wounded identity of the marginalized, colonized Roma population (Máté-Tóth 2019). The transformation of Roma popular religiosity and musical culture is taking place right under our noses. In our hyperventilating times, accelerated political, cultural, and technological change is also reshaping forms of religious practice with unprecedented intensity, and religious music is one of the most tangible indicators of this process. If we fail to examine this, we fail to understand the deeper layers of religious transformation *per se*.

In addition, the study of religious music may reveal important details for researchers of Roma history. We detail the emergence of Romani religious music and its distinctive features, explore its evolution over the past fifty years, and identify the earliest Roma religious musicians in Hungary. Furthermore, this study will highlight the significance of Romani religious music in the process of Romani conversion, the emergence of a Christian Romani collective identity, and the development of Romani relations and inculturation. In addition to historical sources and literature, our study draws on personal field experiences and interviews with Roma believers in Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal-Charismatic, and Free Christian congregations in Békés, Budapest, Szeged, Szendrőlád, Csatka, and Uszka. Over the course of almost ten years of research, we conducted multi-sited ethnographic research (see Marcus 1995), including several visits to the Roma congregations mentioned above. We conducted interviews with community members, worship leaders, and pastors, recorded their worship services, and sometimes accompanied them to rites in communities other than their own (regional pastoral day, Catholic pilgrimages). As part of the multi-sited ethnographic work, we also followed the songs, monitoring their changes and uses.

Apart from all this, it is important to emphasize from the beginning of our study that there is no such thing as “Roma religious music,” just as there is no such thing as a unified Roma culture, unified Roma folk poetry and folk songs, and there is no such thing as “religion and religious music for all Roma.” Different Roma groups converted at different times and to different denominations, so that different sets of Roma songs have developed from denomination to denomination, and not all have their own set of Roma religious songs, and the language of the songs is often distinct. All the songs analyzed in our study were written exclusively in Hungarian and are also spoken in Hungarian by the members of the communities analyzed, but there are still bilingual convert congregations where the same songs are sung in Hungarian and in their own language. However, the proportion of these is decreasing, as the linguistic assimilation of Roma seems to be spreading inexorably among all Roma groups.²

Since the appearance of Roma religious music is closely intertwined with the missionary activities of the various denominations, especially the Free Christians and the

² Compared to 2011 census data, the number of people speaking a Romani dialect in the family/friendship environment has halved by 2022 (from 61,143 to 31,173).

Pentecostals, and the nature, use and functions of Roma religious music reflect the specific characteristics of the religious culture of the Roma, we begin the analysis with a brief description of these aspects.

Roma Religious Culture in Hungary

However surprising, census data show that the number of Roma in Hungary is decreasing. While in 2011, 308,957 people declared themselves as belonging to the wider Roma population, in 2022 this number drops to 209,909.³ Meanwhile, all sociological and statistical surveys report the opposite, a steady increase in the Roma population, and put the number of Roma in Hungary at between 700,000 and 1,000,000.⁴ Looking at religious data, according to the census, roughly half of Roma are Roman Catholic, just over a tenth are Reformed, with a negligible number of Evangelical and Israelite Roma, while nearly 20% declared themselves as “other denominations” or did not declare.⁵ In contrast, Roma barely participate in Roman Catholic liturgies and are almost invisible in the Catholic Church, while a significant proportion of the smaller Pentecostal-Charismatic congregations are mixed, Roma-Hungarian or Roma-majority congregations, who are visibly doing effective conversion work among Roma people.

There are significant differences in the vernacular religiosity of Catholic and Pentecostal-Charismatic Roma. For Roma belonging to the Roman Catholic Church in general, their vernacular religiosity is characterized by “cultural Christianity” (Demerath III 2000), a low institutional commitment, and a tendency to abstain from formal liturgical practices and rituals. Their understanding of Christian doctrines is characterized as superficial; however, they place great emphasis on Christian identity. This phenomenon manifests in seemingly inconsistent behaviors, for instance abstaining from church rituals but almost always baptizing their children; they are less likely to attend church

³ For the detailed statistics see <https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu/adatbazis/#/table/WBS009/N4IgFgpgghjiBcBtEAVAgWQKIHOAKWASmgPIAiAugDQgDOAljBASgHJYYBaVtdEAYwAuDAPYA7VjRAAZBgBshEAE50EoANYNxceCAXQADiFoRxQ5QwhqkydNnxFSFapu26QAZQhCTIAG5Q8gCu1qwgAEwADACMMX7REREJUbFUAL407Jw8riBaOghePn6BIWFIIABCWADIOLVofnUNTZSZ7elAA===> (accessed October 8, 2024).

⁴ For more details see Hidvégi (2023). There are several explanations for why more and more Roma do not declare their ethnic identity. One of these is the growing racism that is now evident in government communications. On this, see for instance Tremlett and Messing (2015) and Jovanovic (2020).

⁵ The denominational affiliation of Roma broadly reflects the religious distribution of Hungary, suggesting that historically Roma people have always been aligned with the dominant religious indicators of a given region. For the Roma membership of the different denominations, see: <https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu/adatbazis/#/table/WBS009/N4IgFgpgghjiBcBtEAVAgWQKIHOAKWASmgPIAiAugDQgDOAljBASigIKEDKAUlgDL8ATFVp0IAIYwAuDAPYA7ViABYWDAC1RIAGYMANlIgAnOglABrBvLjwQGKAACQtCPKIGGEU0jaZcBYnJnCysbEC4IKWcQADcoQPBXLYUhAAYARnTotKERWjSMqgBfGmRVDWCQS2sEcMjouMTkpBAAISwAcRwOtGjO7t7KEuo2Tl4BYUrgsIio2kak72RCXABhAJWcQnXaTY6dkE3V9g3cfgBVU5wSA6OKXdweK5v7w9xlEhQr5ROhyiGika> (accessed October 8, 2024).

weddings yet choose to bury their deceased in religious ceremonies, or while they generally do not read the Bible and have only a superficial knowledge of its teachings, they place great emphasis on the spectacular, external, material representation of religiosity (e.g. religious symbols such as tattoos or large rosaries in the car). In religious surveys, they tend to classify themselves as “religious in their own way,” which is perfectly described by the term “believing without belonging” used in religious studies (Davie 2010: 191–194).

However, there is another Roma religiosity that diverges significantly, characterized by an unwavering institutional commitment, regular participation in liturgical and religious community events, frequent Bible reading, or participation in religious education. Religiosity of this kind emerged in Hungary during the 1970s and was initially only representative of communities that had undergone conversion resulting from Pentecostal-Charismatic Roma missions. After the turn of the millennium, Roma missions emerged in historic Christian churches in Hungary. The discrepancy in the emergence of Roma missions in different churches can be attributed to the different approaches taken by the respective churches towards the Roma community.

Roma Missions

Until the end of the 20th century (and in many cases even today), the Catholic Church approached the Roma with a colonial attitude. They did not engage with them, nor did they consider the Roma population as missionary territory. Very rarely did they engage in missionary work among them, largely driven by the belief that the church should mold the “undesirable Roma” into useful citizens. It is worth noting that the Greek Catholic priest, Miklós Sója, stood out among them. His successful Greek-Catholic mission in the village of Hodász, located in Szabolcs-Szatmár County in north-eastern Hungary, was lauded as a paradigm of Roma mission in Hungary started in 1941. Sója approached the Roma by rejecting the colonialist church mentality of the time. He demonstrated his sensitivity to the local Vlach Roma⁶ and Romungro Roma⁷ groups by learning their Romani language and translating the liturgy and liturgical hymns, undertaking charitable work, and educating children. As a result, the “Gypsy Row” of mud houses was reconstructed and modernized, which included a school, a community center, and a chapel for the Roma, all built by 1948. Although the political situation of the period may have contributed, his actions did not receive endorsement from the church (J. Oláh 2001).

6 The Vlach Roma are the second largest group of Roma in Hungary. The Vlach Roma tribes arrived in Hungary from Romania in the mid-19th century. They have generally retained their Romani language and traditions.

7 The Romungro is the largest Hungarian Roma group in terms of population. The first groups of Roma appeared in Hungary in the 15th century and gradually lost their language and traditions. Since the 19th century, many of them have been involved in music and have integrated more successfully into mainstream society than other Roma groups.

Until the turn of the millennium, the Roman Catholic Church had no coordinated strategy, and outreach to Roma was limited to priests who were active in this field (Géza Dúl, József Hofher SJ, Bishop János Székely).⁸ The Catholic strategy focuses primarily on education, upbringing, and lifestyle counseling, but its effectiveness has long lagged behind that of charismatic movements. Many have expressed their sorrow at the delay and ineffectiveness of pastoral work, highlighting the achievements of smaller, but much more active and successful denominations.

The Pentecostal and charismatic movements adopted a different strategy when approaching the Roma, rejecting the colonial approach. Similarly to the way Clement le Cossec, a pastor from the Assemblies of God congregation extended a helping hand to the Roma community in France in 1952 (Acton 1979: 292–294), the Western European, American, and American Hungarian – mainly Pentecostal charismatic – missionaries appearing in Hungary during the 1970s Cold War-era prioritized evangelizing Roma with a with a helpful, supportive attitude, approaching them as equals. The Roma were seen as partners who were directly reached within the family circle. The hierarchical church organization was completely abandoned, and the focus was on personal faith, on the spontaneous emergence, understanding, and interpretation of personal feelings and their resolution through faith.

The “Roma awakening,” in other words, the mass conversion of the Roma began in the 1970s in Szabolcs-Szatmár County, one of the most underdeveloped regions of Hungary with a significant Roma population.⁹ A retailer, Jenő Kopasz appeared in Uszka¹⁰ and converted the local Roma. The “Roma Awakening” spread to the Debrecen congregation and from there to Békés in 1978 (see A. Durkó 2016: 22).¹¹ From the 1980s, the previously exclusively Hungarian congregations became more and more ethnically mixed in many settlements.¹²

⁸ Although the Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ College decided in 2001 to set up a Migration Office to coordinate pastoral care for Roma, a substantial change started only after 2010. In 2011, the Christian Roma College Network was established, while the Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ Faculty Committee for Roma Pastoral Care was founded only in 2013.

⁹ The success of the mission was influenced by a combination of factors: the disadvantaged situation of the local Roma, their extremely low level of education, and the great flood of 1970 that destroyed a number of settlements. The success was also attributed to the presence of a few Romani clans who resided in the small settlement and had close-knit family ties. Consequently, word of house meetings, miraculous healings, and lifestyle changes quickly spread among relatives (Péterfi and Szűcs 2004: 152).

¹⁰ Uszka is a small village on the present-day Hungarian-Ukrainian border, inhabited mainly by Roma (see Kopasz 2011).

¹¹ Debrecen is the second most populous settlement in Hungary, Békés is a small town near the Hungarian-Romanian border.

¹² The transformation of Roma communities following their conversion was defined by Pastor Sándor Durkó, who led the Békés Roma Mission for an extended period, by five specific characteristics. Firstly, both genders abstained from pubs, resulting in a decline in pub, street, and family altercations. Secondly, there was an increase in official marriages. Finally, there were improvements in financial management. The strict moral conception of Pentecostal congregations also affects their lifestyle. The Puritan tradition, which is still prevalent among Pentecostals

The atheistic cultural policy of the time allowed for the spread of the Roma Awakening movement without obstruction but did not provide any form of support for it. The Free Christian Church, which was the pioneer in initiating Roma mission in Hungary, was a part of the state-recognized Council of Free Churches (SZET). However, it was still considered a sect and therefore placed under continual surveillance and official supervision (see Kopasz 2011: 93). For this reason, Jenő Kopasz and the Roma people of Uszka held secretive meetings in their homes. In the latter half of the 1970s, as the cultural policies of the regime were relaxed, the dissemination of charismatic Roma missions gained momentum.

At a meeting of the State Church Office (ÁEH) held on December 9, 1980, among other things, the “Gypsy issue,” which caused tension within the Communist Party (MSZMP), was discussed: “The Gypsy mission has been raised many times . . . It would be better if we achieved results in this field. But we can’t get results . . . It is still better for us to have a religious Gypsy than one who is not religious but doesn’t work and riots” (Rajki and Szigeti 2012: 358–359). The earlier one-sided negative portrayal of the denominations involved in the Roma mission was then replaced by a more complex approach.¹³

The Role of Religious Music in Roma Mission

From the earliest Roma missions, it has been emphasized that Roma people tend to rely on their impressions, which may differ from the rational perceptions of the Western world, and that it is important to appeal first and foremost to their emotions and feelings. Therefore, music can play an important role in reaching them (Balogh 2019: 17). Regardless of which Christian denomination’s Roma strategy we are looking at, the process is inconceivable without musical outreach. It is not an exaggeration to say that effective Roma mission and pastoral care is always a musical activity. This has been observed in successful Catholic missions and Pentecostal charismatic Roma missions. As

who led the Roma mission movement, adheres to abstinence from alcohol and tobacco and avoidance of worldly entertainment. These practices were criticized during the 1960s and 1970s because they resulted in community members not consuming radio and television (Hegyí and Kovalik 1981). This was attributed to their lack of enlightenment, on the one hand, and, on the other, it prevented state propaganda from reaching them.

¹³ One example was the 1982 documentary film *A sövények mellett* (“Along the Hedges,” Kovács 1982) about the Uszka community (although this was banned from public broadcasting until 1989). The film and the accompanying report in the magazine *Vigilia* attempted to provide a rational explanation – that was compatible with the principles of socialist cultural policy – for the spread of the “sect.” The role of charitable donations and aid from abroad was emphasized, suggesting a “mimicry religion,” namely that the conversion of the Roma was not based on faith but on material interests. However, the film also demonstrated the life and happiness of the community, the improvement in public safety, the radical reduction in crime and alcoholism; in other words, a change in lifestyle as a result of conversion, which was interpreted positively by the majority society.

the first congregations were generally composed of large families, children's and youth mission also developed and has been a major focus of the Roma mission ever since (A. Durkó 2016: 184).

In the 1940s, the first step towards musical outreach was taken by reaching out to children and mothers in the Greek Catholic Roma mission of Miklós Sója. Father Sója was recorded playing and singing with the children while sitting by the ditch bank in Hodász (Gyetvai and Rajki 2014 44). Similarly, Sándor Durkó (2015: 240) wrote about the beginnings of the Pentecostal Roma awakening in Békés. One of his first steps was to address the Roma children, mainly through singing and teaching Bible stories. The documentary film about Jenő Kopasz's mission also features a choir of children singing religious Roma songs and playing guitar in the Roma congregation in Uszka (see [Video 1: Kovács 1982](#), Children's choir singing "Menj Ábrahám" ["Go, Abraham"] in the film *A sövények mellett*). Reaching out to and engaging with children is not only an investment in the long-term success of the mission, but has also contributed to the self-confidence of Roma children and thus to the therapy of their wounded collective identity. On the other hand, if the children's mission is successful, there is a greater chance of achieving results with the parents, especially the mothers.

The role of singing with children from an educational point of view should not be underestimated. Roma children often do not receive adequate recognition from teachers in pre-school and school education. During the socialist era, segregated education was still prevalent, with Roma children being classified as "problematic" or "children with special educational needs" and placed in special classes (Alcalde 2008). And in these institutions, the colonizing, dishonoring attitude of the system towards the Roma has been instilled and internalized. In contrast, through congregational singing, Roma children from deprived backgrounds receive a constant sense of achievement, of winning the community's approval, and of affirmation (see Figure 3). As Hegyi and Kovalik noted in 1981, with a clearly positive connotation, the children of Uszka "sing clearly, with a brilliant singing voice, dressed up, play music, dance, and talk together about their changed lives . . . And has there ever been a more effective method of pedagogy than learning by singing? . . . Here, the melodic twists and turns of today's Gypsy folklore preserve the biblical parable" (Hegyi and Kovalik 1981: 686, 691). It is no coincidence that – regardless of whether a denomination recognizes infant baptism or not – performances by small choirs of children from the local congregation are still essential to every converted Roma congregation and worship service.

Alongside the children's choir, Miklós Sója promoted instrumental music for singing in an unusual way in the Greek Catholic liturgy from the very beginning, for which electric instruments and synthesizers have long been used by the Greek Catholic Roma of Hodász. In fact, members of the community have been learning charismatic hymns from their priests for use outside the church since the 1970s (Gyetvai and Rajki 2014: 45).

Gyetvai and Rajki's extensive analyses have shown, among other things, how the atmosphere of church services plays a prominent role in the conversion of Roma to



Figure 3. Children from Uszka singing at the service (photo by István Povedák, December 13, 2015).

Pentecostal-Charismatic denominations. It was highlighted that 37.2% of Roma converting to charismatic congregations, 49% in the 16–20 age group, converted because of the atmosphere of the services, while in non-charismatic congregations, where the role of music is less important, the figure is only 18.6%. For 18.1% of Roma belonging to charismatic congregations, singing is the favorite part of the liturgy, compared to only 8.5% of non-charismatic congregations, and 81.5% of Roma belonging to charismatic denominations and 49.1% of non-charismatic congregations listen to Christian music on a daily basis (*ibid.*: 160–162, 172–173, 185).¹⁴ The nature of music, however, can be a reason not only for conversion but also for alienation. The perception of the music of the historic Christian churches among the Roma in general is that the sound of the organ and the nature of the traditional hymns sung at the liturgy are alien to the Roma and have no emotional (positive) impact on them, therefore this music seems to be inadequate for expressing their own feelings. “In the church the music of the whites is playing. The organ is the instrument of the peasants [non-Roma], not ours. It is the music of the Hungarians” (Kis, interview, November 29, 2017).

The limited effectiveness of Catholic pastoral care for the Roma has been linked to religious music by concerned clerics too. SJ Hofher pointed out that “[among] the Roma, for now, the form of praise and singing in the homes is much more popular than the

¹⁴ Gyetvai and Rajki did not investigate the familiarity of specific religious Roma songs, nor which songs are listened to outside liturgy. We do not have precise data on the proportion of people listening to secular and religious Roma music in different denominations. Based on our personal intuition, those belonging to Pentecostal charismatic Roma congregations listen to a significantly lower proportion of secular Roma music in their daily lives than Roman Catholics.

Holy Mass. We must take note of this, otherwise the sects will turn the Roma to their side in large numbers. It is time for us Catholics to invent some form of home worship to keep our faithful. It would also be important for these prayers to be led by local Roma after a possible parish ‘prayer leader’ inauguration” (2008: 29). Bishop János Székely made a similar point, referring to Spain, which is traditionally Catholic and has stronger religious indicators than Hungary, still, the conversion of local Roma to charismatic denominations has already reached mass proportions: “more than half of the approximately one million Roma have become sectarian. They justify this by saying that the Catholic church is the church of the Spaniards, it is not ours. But the assembly hall, where we can sing in our own style, where the preacher is often a Gypsy, that is ours. It is important to create the Gypsy face of our church, to be more inclusive, more open” (Székely in Bodnár 2011: 212). The first successful Roma mission of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary is linked to Cursillo, an international renewal movement that places great emphasis on making music together.¹⁵

The spread of Cursillo among the Roma has been facilitated by the international movement’s strong emphasis on ethnic diversity (their widespread form of greeting, “De colores!” [“In color!”] and its symbol, the rainbow-colored rooster), and the Mediterranean character of the movement’s songs. In Hungary, Cursillo first appeared among the Roma in Szendrőlád, in 1996. According to Jenő Rézműves, the local leader of the movement, it has been reported that over the course of two decades more than 800 Roma from the region have participated in Cursillo weekends. It is worth noting that while not all participants converted, the relationship between Roma and Hungarians in the settlement has shown a significant improvement.

Religious Roma Music in Hungary

Roma religious music emerged in the 1970s, drawing on the cultural milieu and prevalent style of Roma music in contemporary popular culture. It lacked precedents in religious and liturgical music. From a stylistic perspective, it could be argued that there are distinct differences between the music of the Roma revival wave of the 1970s, the music of the 1990s, the praise and worship music that emerged a few years after the millen-

¹⁵ Cursillo (Cursillos de Cristiandad, “Short Courses on Christianity”) is one of the first religious revival movements in the Roman Catholic Church of the second half of the 20th century, founded in Spain in 1944. The movement began to spread in Western Europe in the late 1950s and in North America in the following decade. Due to its popularity, it soon appeared in other denominations (see Hughes 1992). It arrived in Hungary after the change of regime. The weekend courses and small group activities created by Cursillo became a model for the Catholic renewal movements (e.g. Marriage Encounter, Christian Family Movement) that emerged in the 1960s. One of the secrets of its success is a three-day weekend training course where participants listen to talks and testimonies that encourage them to live out the love of the Gospel in their own lives and in their own environment. The short but intensive weekend includes collective singing several times.

nium, and contemporary Roma Christian music. The different periods also imply distinct uses of the Roma folk music tradition. From a denominational perspective, the music of the charismatic small churches is particularly captivating. This is partly due to its earlier emergence, and partly because almost all religious songs composed by Roma musicians were created within these movements. In contrast, there has been no autonomous Roma religious music associated with “historical Christian churches” (that includes the Roman Catholic, the Reformed, and the Lutheran Church).

The Pentecostal Charismatic Music of the Roma Awakening

After the initial conversions of the Roma Awakening in Hungary during the 1970s, Roma religious music emerged. The songs were composed by Roma villagers who played instruments, mainly the guitar and mandolin, and “received songs” from the Holy Spirit. This might have happened any time of the day: in their sleep, while working, or often even during the night shift: “Jóska Kóczé was already the Lord’s at that time, he received this song in the bull stable” (Kopasz 2011: 105). Sometimes, waking up in the middle of the night, they felt the need to play a tune. Miklós Algács’ daughter recalled the beginnings as follows:

My father received 23 songs from the Lord. And each one has a story . . . I think there was a score of the songs, but I’m not sure. The first hymn was given to them by the Lord together with my mother. My dad received the sound and my mom the lyrics. “A földön volt sok mindennem. . .” [“On earth I had many things. . .”] This song was given to them by the Lord when my mother’s mother died. So every song has a story. At that time my dad was very much in the Lord. He had a guitar and God showed his face through the guitar. Then he got several other songs. (Algács, email, September 12, 2014)

In their own words, the songs were not composed by a particular person, but “given” to them by God, the Holy Spirit. The lyrics and melody of the Roma-sounding songs therefore come from God, who chose the person and gave him the grace to bring them to the community through him. From this point of view, songwriting can be interpreted as a form of sacral communication and resulted in a certain degree of special status of the “chosen” person within the community (Korpics and P. Szilczl 2007: 11–36).

The earliest Roma religious songs were associated with the charismatic awakening in Uszka. Their musical domain relied on the sound of traditional Roma music, with guitar, mandolin, kettle, spoon, clapping, *szájbőgő* (“oral bassing”), and *pergetés* (“rolling”).¹⁶ The hymns, with folkloric features, swiftly circulated in the new congregations. Songs with religious lyrics reflecting the Roma melody became an indispensable and popular part of missionary services. Initially, this was of particular importance, as often

¹⁶ Szájbőgőzés, lit. “playing the oral bass,” that is vocal rhythm accompaniment of the melody. Pergetés, lit. “rolling,” is used to describe an improvisational vocal performance similar to “scat singing” in jazz, in which meaningless syllables are used in a quasi-instrumental manner. During our field researches we have not encountered the use any of them in Pentecostal charismatic liturgical music.

those who received the songs were the ones who carried out the missionary work, and through them the Roma themselves could be connected to God. However, over time, younger generations have grown, and the songs have spread to increasingly remote congregations, resulting in the gradual strengthening of their folklore character. The composer's individuality was eclipsed, while the communal, Roma-inspired essence assumed greater significance. Furthermore, since the musicians from different congregations frequently learnt the songs by ear, variations quickly appeared.

As scholars of Roma music have noted, Roma religious music emerging since the 1970s, although it may seem so, is not in fact part of traditional Roma folk music (Lange 2003). Even though there is a clear link in stylistic features: traditional or seemingly traditional elements are used, and the performers and the Roma community consider them to be genuine Roma songs, and the distinctive features of Roma rhythm, melody and instrumental character appear, but as the stylistic features cannot be linked to the traditional musical culture of any local Roma group, they must rather be considered “folkish,” “Roma-like,” and can be interpreted as a folkloresque phenomenon (Foster 2016: 5). However, this does not mean that they play a secondary role to traditional folk songs. Although “folkloresque” is merely a branding of “authenticity,” the songs possess a pervasive energy that can make even musically literate listeners feel as though they are experiencing traditional Roma folk music. An excellent illustration of this is József Kóczé's song “Cigány vagyok, nem bánom” (“I am a Gypsy, but I Don't Mind”), which was collected by Erdélyi Miklós in Uszka in 1978 and was presented as folk music on the album *Cigányok a Kárpát-medencében* (“Gypsies in the Carpathian Basin,” [Kiss 2004](#)). Furthermore, the traditional elements of the songs attract the Roma, who no longer see them as “white” music, but as their own Roma songs.

The emergence of folkloresque Roma religious music cannot be isolated from the transformation of secular Roma popular music and the attitudes of socialist cultural policy. Due to the marginalized situation of the Roma, traditional Roma music survived as living folklore for a long time during the years of socialism. As Kovalcsik put it, the position of the Roma on the margins of society, “the invisibility of music and its users, and their exclusion from the media prolonged the survival of folk culture” (Kovalcsik 2011: 63). This was indicated by the fact that researchers of folk music and folk dance could still locate interlocutors relatively easily when visiting a rural, local Roma community. In addition, *magyar nóta* (lit. “Hungarian song,” meaning Hungarian folk-like songs, sometimes with links to nationalist irredentism, and performed mostly by Roma musicians), which had enjoyed great popularity in the interwar years, was also ideologically relegated to the background after 1948 (Hajnóczky 2021). By excluding interwar magyar nóta songs and labelling many of them as nationalist, socialist cultural policy partially deprived the musically uneducated or poorly educated masses of “their own” song repertoire. However, the enforced rejection of tradition (even if in this case we are talking about a folkloresque musical tradition that was only understood by the masses as folk) sooner or later automatically creates new forms of return to tradition. This was

how in the 1970s the Roma folklore movement emerged out of the Hungarian dance house movement.¹⁷

The Roma folklore movement was a heritage-preserving revival of traditional music and dance culture which sought to repair the wounds of collective identity by returning to tradition. In the case of the Roma, who were treated as a “socially backward” ethnic group (Hajnáczy 2015: 22), these collective injuries were also present in a multiplied form. It was plagued not only by the internationalizing aspirations of socialist cultural policy and the forced assimilation of the Roma, but also by the grievances and complexities of their marginalized minority status.¹⁸ The discovery of Roma folk music, making it visible and audible within the framework of the cultural policies of the regime, was thus a cultural awakening movement in which music was used to express emancipatory aspirations (Kovalcsik 2011: 51). This kind of grievance and identity-preserving activity – as a result of the marginalization of the Roma and their limited possibilities for asserting their interests – took on cultural rather than political forms. As Hofer has observed, in the countries of the Socialist Bloc, due to the absence or impaired functioning of adequate representative institutions, numerous political and human rights aspirations sought metaphorical expression in the cultural sphere (e.g. literature, music, dance; Hofer 1991: 8). Music was also an appropriate form for all these activities, because among the few positive stereotypes about Roma culture, the one related to the musical talent of Roma is perhaps the most widespread. The image of “talented Roma musicians” was thus a particular link in the more positive perception and inculturation of Roma. However, as we shall see, this became a dominant strategy and form of expression not only in secular but also in Roma religious culture.

Parallel to this the 1970s brought the emergence of charismatic religious movements that featured their own Roma religious music. This occurred at the same time as the Roma communities were undergoing similar processes, resulting in their musical cultures becoming intertwined. As a result, the Roma religious songs of the 1970s naturally evolved from the still-living Roma folk music that was fading at the time. The modernization, a shift away from tradition, and the contemporary religious music of missionary churches had an influence on them. For instance, the labor migration of large

¹⁷ The emergence of Roma literature (e.g. Károly Bari, Menyhért Lakatos) and Roma painting (e.g. János Balázs, Tamás Péli), as well as the Roma folklore movement (e.g. the bands Kaly Jag, Ternipe), appeared in the Hungarian cultural scene at roughly the same time as the Roma Awakening and the emergence of Roma religious music. The socialist cultural policy had previously denied the existence and values of an independent Roma culture in a racist and patronizing manner.

¹⁸ As Hajnáczy's book also reveals, although “some people question the position of the Political Committee that the Roma population in Hungary is a separate ethnic group, they consider it to be a nationality and entitled to the rights of nationality” (2015: 211), the Political Committee of the MSZMP has repeatedly stated that “the Gypsy population should not be considered as a nationality group in the future” because “despite their certain ethnographic characteristics, the Gypsy population does not constitute a nationality group” (ibid.: 203, 215).

numbers of Roma men at that time, and the collective music-making on the *fekete vonatok* (“black trains”) transporting Roma workers to Budapest helped to spread the broader stylistic features of Roma music. Stepping out of locality and the exposure to music from other Roma communities has led to a transformation of Roma music culture. The experience of authenticity associated with collective music-making became the most widespread artistic expression of Roma identity. Moreover, it is worth noting that the music-making on the *fekete vonatok* was influenced by the involvement and musical contributions of converted Roma as well. This led to the religious music associated with them acquiring comparable characteristics and purposes, resulting in the emergence of a Roma religious music culture. This culture incorporates only superficial and fundamental motifs of traditional Roma music.

Whitewashing Roma Religious Music

There was a major change in this respect around the time of the regime change, when the role and importance of Roma religious songs declined. One of the unfortunate consequences of the changing political circumstances was that negative attitudes against the Roma were exposed openly. The economic downturn and soaring unemployment hit Roma with lower skills and education particularly hard, leading to increased poverty, and thus to a rise in negative prejudice against Roma. The previously centrally restrained anti-Roma sentiment in the media and in social culture was intensified, or at least given greater visibility. Political pluralization has also brought with it the rise of radical right-wing political movements. At the same time, the disappearance of control by the political system allowed religions and small churches, previously semi-underground, to suddenly appear in the public space and in the media. The conversion of the Roma to Christianity and the spread of charismatic congregations had by this time gone beyond the sporadic missions in isolated villages. Through the networking of church-affiliated congregations, the Roma mission was already gaining visibility and was able to show significant results in several larger settlements. This visibility of the Roma mission and the rise of anti-Roma attitudes took place simultaneously. This wider visibility meant that it was no longer only local, rural communities that had to break down negative prejudices against Roma, which previously could be done relatively quickly based on direct personal examples and personal experience. This is partly the reason why Roma congregations put such an emphasis on musical style, with the aim of gaining the appreciation of non-Roma through positively valued Roma music (Lange 1993: 245). However, such a strategy, effective in the village context, could not work at the national level. Roma religious music, which attracted both Roma and non-Roma in a village congregation, and represented the Roma on the right path, gained a different perception in the national context. The process of integration based on musical traditions seemed to be replaced by a process of musical assimilation aimed at the strongest possible assimilation of the cultural canon of the majority society, with the least possible ethnic stereotyping.

In order to integrate into society, minority groups have a selective approach to their traditions. They may have cultural characteristics and beliefs that are perceived more negatively by the majority society, and thus they try to refrain from or even prohibit them, while other customs and practices that are perceived as more positive are emphasized. Both of these can be analyzed in the context of the changing nature of Roma religious music over time. At the time of the regime change, several congregations tried to dismantle the traditional Roma musical sound, rhythm, or *szájbőgőzés* and *pergetés*, which can be classified as part of the former strategy. As a result of the power shift between non-Roma and marginalized, “voiceless” Roma, and in parallel with the rise of racism, they felt that to reduce prejudices and anti-Roma attitudes they had to suppress the weight of customary elements and behavioral entrenchments linked to Roma traditions, including traditional folk music. However, this was not universal and not equally appreciated by the community. The rational reasons behind this situation and the turn away from the (seemingly) traditional religious music were in many cases understood by the Roma congregants themselves. Yet there were conflicts between the congregational musicians and the Roma members of the congregation, who in several cases criticized the turn away from the traditional Roma performance style and songs.

They could not understand why, in a community where they had been able to live their Christianity as Roma and could be proud of their ability to integrate into society as converted Roma, self-censorship and a mentality that sought to silence and conceal ethnic traits was once again gaining ground. Believers often complained that church leaders tried to force them to sit quietly during sermons and to sing together in a unified, non-Romani style. They banned fast, rhythmic guitar playing, and synthesizer sounds resembling the disco-style music of wedding parties and used instead soft, organ-like tones. Lange reports that during a year of fieldwork at this time, she did not encounter *szájbőgőzés* in any congregation, while in a non-liturgical setting in a Roma environment, the same Roma musicians were already playing *szájbőgős* songs (Lange 1993: 246–248). This kind of de-ethnicization and de-traditionalization reflects centuries of prejudiced thinking, as if Roma culture, which is considered too secular, “wild,” “instinctive,” and “depraved,” was inherently at odds with the elevation and spirituality of Christianity. As if the popular culture of the Roma were inherently incapable of carrying and transmitting the message of Christianity. A particularly interesting aspect of this obsolete and derogatory thinking is that it originated from Roma musicians in the congregations themselves, who advocated the collective self-censorship of traditional Roma culture in order to gain recognition from non-Roma.

It follows logically that the process could have one of two outcomes: either musical assimilation triumphs and the Roma elements disappear from praise and worship music, or the Roma traditions survive and Roma religious music returns. Lange herself has already reported individual opinions that have since become “prophecies” that have come true. After the regime change, many of her interlocutors also believed that the turn away from tradition could only be a temporary stage in a process. If the Roma were to gain greater security and authority within the congregations, traditional musical elements such as *pergetés* and *szájbőgőzés* would surely return. Looking back from the

present, it can be said that they were right. The turning away from tradition, the breaking of the foundations of community identity, did not result in a stable Christian community identity for the converted Roma, which would have been able to abandon the inherent ethnic traditions and build exclusively on the traditions of de-ethnicized, universal Christianity. Today, Roma worship music proudly reasserts its traditional elements, which means that the dominant strategy towards the majority society has become not the suppression of ethnic specificities, but the emphasis on cultural elements with positive perceptions.

Just as music occupies a prominent place among the few positive stereotypes associated with Roma (Silverman 2012: 5), it is primarily through music that religious Roma are able to make their own converted Roma identity known both within their own community and to the mainstream society. However, it can be observed that the attachment to tradition and traditional Roma folk music has been significantly weakened. It is notable that the traditional community occasions and specialists in live Roma folk music have disappeared, and the Roma's perception of their own folk music has been increasingly influenced by folkloresque Roma music. Furthermore, there has been a decline in the number of Roma "received songs."

The Rise of Roma Praise and Worship Music

Although it is possible that "received songs" have not disappeared from the Roma religious music repertoire permanently, the musical transformation since the turn of the millennium does not support this claim. With the widespread adoption of the internet (in Hungary since the mid-2000s), there has been a surge in popular praise and worship music, which has become easily accessible through online music-sharing portals. In addition, following the secular Roma music scene, "electric Roma" – using a synthesizer and electric drums with only traces of traditional style behind the "coffee-house-style" – continues to be a decisive factor in the Roma praise and worship music scene.

The 2000s also brought the emergence of two new denominational scenes within the Hungarian religious Roma music scene. Around the turn of the millennium, Catholic Roma music emerged, linked to the formation of the Cursillo of Szentrőlad. Catholic Roma musicians basically do not play their own compositions, but re-invent well-known contemporary Christian popular songs with the stylistic features of Roma folk music. One explanation for this is that the Catholic Church, unlike younger congregations, has a centuries-old history of folk hymns, alongside which guitar-accompanied popular music spread from the 1960s and 1970s onwards (K. Povedák 2014, 2019). Although folk hymns tended to alienate Roma from Catholic Masses, by the time Catholic Roma mission began, "guitar songs" were already available and were easily adopted and loved by converted Roma. Later on, this became "Romanized," with the addition of the mandolin to the guitar, beating the beat with a kettle, wooden spoons, oral bass, backing vocals, changing the rhythm and sound of the songs. The best example of this is the album *Jézus Él!* (Jesus Lives!) released in 2020 by the Roma community of the Szendrőládi Dicsőítők (Worshippers of Szendrőlad), which contains (not only Catholic)

praise and worship music and Christian popular music songs (see, for instance, [Video 2: Szendrőládi Dicsőítők 2020a](#), “Táncolok, mint Dávid” [“I Dance like David”]; and [Video 3: Szendrőládi Dicsőítők 2020b](#), “Ajtód előtt állok” [“I Stand before Your Door”]). In this way the characteristics of traditional Roma music are displayed, bringing Christian guitar songs closer to themselves. However, we are not aware of any original compositions that have spread in the Catholic Roma communities.

The last of the different music genres to be mentioned here is Christian Roma world music, the latest non-church and non-liturgical version of Roma religious music. It is composed by popular Roma artists in a contemporary style that is fashionable in the mainstream music scene. The music serves both worship and entertainment purposes and has a professional technical background. The emergence of Christian Roma world music dates back to the period after 2010. The fact that the Orbán governments¹⁹ since 2010 have put more emphasis on supporting Christian popular music has also played a role in its emergence, and several performers – who had not previously played Christian popular music – have appeared on the scene. Furthermore, it is important to note that due to the various talent shows, the number of well-known singers with Roma origins has increased, and many of them are now also openly professing their religious faith. While some of them perform, they do not compose religious music themselves. The famous singers Caramel and Misi Mező regularly sing at ecumenical Christian popular music festivals such as *Ez az a nap* (This is the Day) alongside other Christian popular music artists. Misi Mező, the lead singer of the famous band *Magna Cum Laude*, shares the belief of Roma composers of Pentecostal congregational songs that the creation of Christian music is not solely a matter of personal choice. “God has not yet blessed me with the talent to write Christian music. If He deems me worthy, He will bless me with that talent, if not, He won’t” (Mező, interview, March 28, 2018). Besides, there are well-known Roma singers who embrace their Pentecostal charismatic affiliation. Gergő Oláh²⁰ (*Hit Gyülekezete* / Faith Church)²¹, apart from the aforementioned ecumenical festivals and events of his Church, now openly performs religious music at concerts and in the media. His popular worship songs are mostly related to the genre of Roma world music. Oláh, abandoning the focus on the sinful past, the grievances, and wounds that regularly appear in Pentecostal charismatic praise songs, focuses in his religious songs on the “healing” of the Roma collective wounded identity and on a positive vision of the future. “Gypsy music is often very bitter and painful. There’s a lot of negativities in it, a lot of ‘this is how I’m going to die; this is how I’m going to die!’ and ‘oh, mother, what’s

¹⁹ Viktor Orbán is the prime minister of Hungary. He has won four parliamentary elections (2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022) since 2010 with an absolute majority.

²⁰ Oláh won the Hungarian *X-Faktor* talent show in 2012. Since then, he has become a successful singer and founded the Roma Soul band, which plays various styles of music, including religious and Romani music.

²¹ *Hit Gyülekezete* (in literary translation Congregation of Faith) or Faith Church is the largest Pentecostal Charismatic Church and the sixth largest church in Hungary. Despite the rapid decline in the number of faithful in the country over the past two decades, Faith Church has increased its membership sixfold in the same period.

going to happen to me?’. Roma love to cry. And I decided to create the opposite of that with the band RomaSoul. We’ll keep the authentic Gypsy music, add some modern, trendy stuff, and fill it with positive messages” (G. Oláh, interview, February 10, 2020). Gergő Oláh’s concept is remarkable also for consciously turning not only to Roma traditions but the gospel music traditions of African Americans. He even performs frequently with a gospel choir: “There is no real black gospel music in Hungary, but my album will be. Black gospel with a real choir, only not with blacks, but with Roma” (ibid.).

Christian Roma Musicians

The marginal position of Roma religious music is illustrated by the fact that even the academic literature on the typology of Roma musicians does not mention Roma worship musicians.²² Although this study discusses them collectively under the labels of Roma religious musicians or Roma worship musicians, it must be emphasized that they cannot be considered as a single group. They include musicians who were among the first to convert to Christianity and who studied and played folk music in their rural environment in the 1970s. Many of them, such as József Kóczé and Miklós Algács, were illiterate and became respected figures in their communities, becoming points of reference and even preserving their memories for generations. “He was given 42 songs. In a stable. This is the miracle, that an illiterate gypsy was found by the Holy Spirit, and he sang them beautifully. It’s a miracle. And they were not for a worldly purpose, they really came from God!” (Orgován, interview, December 12, 2017). Jenő Rézműves, a converted member of the Cursillo group, and all the members of the Szendrőlád worship group, who brought music with them as a family tradition but did not play religious songs at all before their conversion, can be placed in this category: “I consider it a grace of God that He called me to this task, that He gave me the knowledge to sing and play music” (Rézműves, interview, October 10, 2015).

Along with them, professional coffee-house musicians who, in addition to their restaurant jobs, joined the Roma movement out of personal conviction and without pay, were constantly reported from the beginning. In Békés, the conversion of the Roma was also started in 1961 by a Roma musician – Béla Horváth – and his family, who was later followed by Jenő Rácz. Rácz “left his secular band to play the violin and sing for the Lord . . . His wife and daughter followed faithfully . . . Then there was the Farkas family, with a large number of children, also musicians. In addition to their serving parents, the children quickly became involved in the life of the congregation and became the dominant figures in the choir and the youth” (A. Durkó 2016: 21). In 1972, the full-time

²² Kállai grouped Roma musicians into categories based on their music genres, such as young musicians playing classical music, older musicians playing Roma music, and folk musicians, which today could be supplemented by Roma wedding musicians, Roma pop musicians playing folkloresque music, Roma pop musicians playing non-Roma music, and Roma worship musicians (Kállai 2002: 72–73).

musician of the Aranybika restaurant in Debrecen provided the worship music at the Roma mission in Kölcse: “now he was playing the violin for God with great fervor, and while he played, tears were streaming down the faces. As the parched earth thirsts for rain, so the Gypsies listened to the music at the services” (Kopasz 2011: 93).

The best-known Roma singer from Hungary, the internationally renowned Margit Bangó, has also played a prominent role in the history of Roma religious music. She was introduced to charismatic Free Christianity at a relative’s baptism in the mid-1970s, promptly renouncing her Catholic faith. Soon after Margit Bangó’s baptism into the church at the age of twenty-five, she established an underground congregation in her Budapest apartment specifically aimed at urban Roma musicians (I. Povedák 2019).

Through our small congregation in Pest, many Roma from Budapest – both musicians and non-musicians – came to know the Gospel. I am aware that my actions were under surveillance by government agents, and although my actions were not well-received by the music community, I did not encounter any significant issues. In the early 1980s, my band produced an album entitled *Songs of Love* which we were unable to release due to censorship. However, after shifting political conditions in 1996, the album was eventually released on both cassette and CD. One of the songs from this album has since become a popular choice for baptism ceremonies (Bangó, interview, April 24, 2018).

Musically, the album is closest in style to Roma folk songs and charismatic praise and worship songs of the 1970s and 1980s, which have Roma overtones but are not dominant. Margit Bangó is the first known Hungarian musician to release an album of Christian popular music without becoming famous as a performer of Christian songs. Some of the songs on the album quickly found their way into the repertoire of charismatic worship musicians. For example, Lange noted that during the singing of “Halleluja néked Mennyei Atyánk” (“Hallelujah to You Our Heavenly Father”) by Margit Bangó in the Assembly of God in Siklós, several people began shouting and speaking in tongues (Lange 2003: 97).

The last few decades have seen a resurgence in the professionalization of Roma worship musicians. This can be attributed to the development of technology, the easy accessibility of online instructional videos, the small community gatherings and music-making several times a week in well-equipped assembly halls, and the spread of music education in schools (see Figures 3 and 4). Christian Roma worship bands are essentially community-based and perform in other congregations, churches, Christian music festivals and events only on special occasions. Thus the congregation and the worshippers are regularly together, attuned to each other. The worship musicians constantly monitor the mood of the congregation, changing the tempo of the songs if necessary, or singing more emotional songs, knowing what the favorite songs of the congregation are, during which the collective effervescence (Durkheim 2003) is stronger (see Figures 4 and 5). Along with attentiveness, musical skills have improved, which is an expectation of the congregants and the musicians themselves too. The improvement in quality is enhanced by the fact that the original version of the transnational charismatic music they perform could be easily accessed via the Internet. However, professionalization



Figure 4. Praise and worship in Uszka in the new church building of Nemzeteknek Világosság Gyülekezet (Light for the Nations Congregation; photo by István Povedák, December 13, 2015).

does not necessarily mean that Roma worshippers benefit in any way. Christian popular music still does not represent a market in Hungary that would allow musicians to earn a significant income.²³

It is well known that Roma musicians, the “gentry Roma,” enjoy a traditionally higher position in Roma society. It is worth noting that this hereditary status is also present among Roma worship musicians who play religious music, albeit in a different manner than Roma musicians who play secular music. While Roma musicians were prominent among the Roma, also due to their financial situation, most of them separated from their traditional Roma community (Kállai 2002: 72–90). But neither the material prominent status nor a separation from the community could be observed among the musicians playing religious Roma music. They become points of orientation because of their musician status, while their lifestyle and social network remain within the traditional, local framework. It is a symbolic change of status for Roma worship musicians if they are not only performers but also “receivers” of the songs. In this case, a kind of prophetic role is revealed in relation to them. The song, born at divine suggestion, shows that they have been chosen by God, “consecrated” for this task.

²³ Government support for Christian popular music in recent years has not been primarily for musicians’ incomes, but for their technical equipment, training, and record production.



Figure 5. Edgár Kovács, pastor of the Szabad Keresztény Egyház (Free Christian Church) in Uszka, at the worship service (photo by István Povedák, December 13, 2015).

Text Analysis of Christian Roma Songs

Roma religious music is not only of aesthetic importance. Liturgical songs serve as a source of religious experiences and can therefore be considered as sacral communication. Without communal music, there cannot be any Roma community religious meetings or services of worship. Religious music makes a notable contribution to the “collective effervescence” that enhances emotions, dissolves traditional attitudes and enables an expressive encounter with religion. The emotional expressions that are manifested throughout the congregation without strain or inhibition are evidently visible during worship. The music is capable of arousing the emotions, pains, sorrows, prayers, and aspirations of the participants to the divine. Intense emotional states often accompany vigorous physical movements such as dancing, raising arms, falling to one’s knees, shedding tears, or praying aloud to the music (see Figures 6 and 7). This captivating rhythm could be interpreted as a prominent form of religious experience, stemming from religious music. The overall collective effervescence also promotes a sense of communal belonging.



Figure 6. Emotions. Collective effervescence in the Uszka Free Christian Church Congregation (photo by István Povedák, December 13, 2015).

All these reactions and attitudes cannot be understood without the lyrics. The textual analysis of the songs may also show that in addition to the religious role, the role of creating sacral communication through worship, there is a more pragmatic function. In the words of Simon Frith, “music, like identity, is both a performance and a story, describing society in the individual and the individual in society” (Frith 1996: 109). Along with the melodic variety of Roma religious songs, their lyrics are complex, shedding light on the wounded collective identity of Roma converts, on the traumatic and often negatively judged foundations of their collective identity. Many of the songs related to the Roma awakening²⁴ – for example, “Cigány vagyok, nem bánom” (“I Am a Gypsy, I Do Not Regret,” by József Kóczé), “Elveszettek voltunk” (“We Were Lost,” by Miklós Algács) – can be understood as testimonies that fit well with the self-image and vision of the Roma who have undergone conversion.

Even the title of the song by József Kóczé from Uszka reflects the self-image of the Roma and the negative stereotypes that are imposed on them (see [Video 4: track 20 of Kiss 2004](#), Baptist worshippers from Uszka singing “Cigány vagyok, nem bánom” [“I Am a Gypsy, I Do Not Regret”], recorded by Tibór Erdélyi in 1978). The song is built upon of the alternation of the lines “Cigány vagyok, nem bánom . . . Cigány vagyok, nem szégyellem . . .” (“I am a Gypsy, I do not regret . . . I am a Gypsy, I am not ashamed . . .”)

²⁴ Naturally, there can be no uniform treatment of Roma religious songs, as their message, form, and popularity vary greatly – a level of detail we cannot explore fully due to limited space. However, we have analyzed two songs based on their enduring prevalence. Both originated during the initial phase of the Roma Awakening and remain widely sung in Roma congregations throughout Hungary. Numerous stylistic versions of the songs can be found online.



Figure 7. Emotions. Collective effervescence in the Kegyelem Gyülekezet (Mercy Congregation) in Békés (photo by István Povedák, December 2, 2012).

and the personal testimony of faith “Jézust látni kívánom . . . Jézus nekem mindenem . . . Jézus elébe vágyom . . . Szeret az én istenem . . . Jézus bent él a szívemben . . . Szentlelkéből nekem adott . . . Jézus az én Megváltóm . . . Jézus lett az életem” (“Jesus is all I desire to see . . . Jesus is all I have . . . Jesus is all I long to be . . . Jesus is my God . . . Jesus lives in my heart . . . Jesus has given me his Holy Spirit . . . Jesus is my Saviour . . . Jesus has become my life”), as if through repetition they are made aware of the need to accept their Roma identity and to convert in addition to it, because only then can they experience the love of God. Finally, in the last verse, the reference to Romaness disappears and is superseded by Christianity: “Hívő vagyok, nem bánom . . . Hívő vagyok, nem szégyellem” (“I am a believer, I do not regret . . . I am a believer, I am not ashamed”). This verse encapsulates the observation that the identity of a Roma convert to charismatic faith is not primarily defined by their Roma ethnicity, but rather by their belonging to Christ.²⁵ In doing so, the song also gives the listener hope for a better life and for overcoming difficulties.

²⁵ This process has resulted, among other things, in the marginalization of traditional Roma music in everyday life and a shift towards Christian music.

Going beyond this, the song of Miklós Algács from Túrrićse confronts the guilty parts of the Roma's past, the sins that have caused the prejudices of the majority society. Collectively, in the plural, the lyrics sharply contrast the secular, sinful past with the happy, converted present (see [Video 5: Cigánymisszió 2011](#), “Elveszettek voltunk” [“We Were Lost”]; and [Video 6: EDSGY 2016](#), live performance of “Most élem a legszebb éveimet” [“I Am Living My Best Years”], a version of “Elveszettek voltunk”): “Elveszettek voltunk, a Sátán foglya voltunk, / De kihozott a mélyből, a halál völgyéből. / Jézus szeret minket, oltalmába vesz minket, / Vigyáz ránk, mint anya az egyszülött fiára” (“We were lost, we were captives of Satan, / But he brought us out of the depths, out of the valley of the shadow of death. / Jesus loves us, takes us under his protection, / He watches over us like a mother watches over her only begotten son”). Then the chorus of the song is a first-person singular confession: “Jézus visszavárlak, / Jézus, Téged várlak, / Jézus, te vagy a mindenem, a mindenem. Te vagy a mindenem” (“Jesus I’ll be waiting for you, / Jesus, I am waiting for you, / Jesus, you’re my everything, my everything. You are my everything”). Here again, the second verse accurately reflects the bipolar vision of a joyful present in baptism that emerges after the process of conversion: “Most élem a legszebb, a legszebb éveimet, / Várom az Úr Jézust, várom a Vőlegényem. / Minden éjjel felnézek az égre, / Hogy mikor jön már az én Vőlegényem” (“I am living my best, my most beautiful years, / Waiting for the Lord Jesus, waiting for my Bridegroom. / Every night I look up to the sky, / When my Bridegroom will come”) But this state is available to all Roma, regardless of their sins, because “Jesus loves us, takes us under his protection, / He watches over us like a mother watches over her only begotten son.”²⁶

Since the 1970s, both songs have existed as worship songs, Roma “folk songs” and poems. They have crossed denominational and national boundaries and are popular in Romanian Roma communities as well. The songs’ popularity stems from their reflection of the main problem faced by the Roma: social marginalization and their wounded self-image. As a testimony, they confront the problems of the past and present, but also present a vision of an optimistic future through the acceptance of Jesus. They make listeners aware that they can be Christians as Roma, and that they always have the chance to change their destiny. As a consequence, the songs heal both individual and collective Roma identity, contribute to a positive self-image, and serve as life guidance and behavioral advice, that is, they go beyond sacral communication to provide solutions and comfort to mundane problems. The situation is similar to what Kovalcsik observed regarding the function of (non-religious) folk songs among marginalized Roma. They felt poor and orphaned, but a sense of community alleviated this feeling. This sense was strengthened by daily singing and playing music together. These activities could also be enhanced by dancing, and they provided opportunities for young people to prepare for a better future. They could adapt their musical style and repertoire to new needs and

²⁶ Several songs associated with the first wave of the Roma awakening demonstrate the aforementioned spread of folklore. These songs exist in multiple versions, including various additional lyrics. Both songs presented here have such multiple versions of lyrics in addition to the one provided.

possibly become professional musicians themselves. It is probably the vibrant cultural life that saved them from total despair, says Kovalcsik (Kovalcsik and Kubínyi 2000: 12–13). These religious songs express the challenges to Roma identity that they experience on a daily basis, including exclusion, discrimination, and systemic prejudices. The songs tell the story of a wounded collective identity and a Roma sense of belonging in a relatable and understandable way through artistic creativity. To rephrase Stewart's words, these songs represent the Roma people themselves. They require no embellishment, as the songs embody their essence (Stewart 1994: 190). The rise in popularity of religious Roma music suggests a shift away from secular music. According to Slavkova, converted Roma perceive religious music as the only form that truly brings joy to the soul, as secular music is seen as an expression of physical pleasures and mundane desires (2012: 36–45). Abandoning secular music and replacing their liturgical and recreational music culture with praise and worship music indicates that an individual has undergone a significant change, affecting not only their faith and transcendental awareness, but also all aspects of their daily culture.

Conclusion

Half a century has passed since the emergence of Romani religious music in Hungary. From the clandestine village communities that met in family homes to listen to testimonies and religious teachings in secret, we have now reached the point where small village congregations meet in their own assembly halls equipped with professional technology, playing not only Roma songs from fifty years ago, but also transnational charismatic hits with hundreds of millions of downloads. Amid all the transformation, one thing hasn't changed. Religious music for Roma not only enables them to express and experience their faith, but also strengthens their collective belonging and social inculturation.

Roma religious music made its debut in Hungary within the Pentecostal charismatic congregations. These congregations were the pioneers in launching an organized mission to marginalized social groups. The success of their mission among the Roma can be attributed to their decolonizing attitude. They approached the Roma as partners, were open to their religious needs, and gave space to their own music. This was not an issue in Pentecostal churches, as worship in the Pentecostal revival movements is flexible, allowing for spontaneity. This has resulted in varied forms of individual expression and the infiltration of popular culture (Lange 2003: 7). Consequently, the music of the Pentecostal churches is the most flexible and rapidly changing component of the liturgy (Titon 1988). It was this openness that led to these congregations being the first to introduce modern soundscapes and electronic instruments alongside popular songs.

The success of the charismatic wave of Roma revivalism has also been fueled by the role of Roma in society and their limited opportunities for community expression. Marginalization, while helping to preserve elements of traditional popular culture over a

long period of time, also entailed a “voicelessness” of the Roma. We can call them voiceless since they have not had, and could not have had, political or cultural representation for a long time (Hajnáczy 2015). For the same reason, they were deprived of almost all opportunities for cultural expression. A breakthrough was the Roma folklore movement and the Roma religious awakening, which started practically simultaneously but affected different strata of the Roma. The Roma folklore movement brought Roma music back mainly to the urban Roma, while the religious awakening brought it back to the rural Roma (and non-Roma). The introduction of Roma music into Catholic liturgies was significantly delayed due to the Catholic Church’s lingering colonial attitude towards the Roma. This is evidenced by the absence of independent Roma religious songs in the Catholic liturgy, with Catholic Roma instead performing well-known Hungarian and international worship songs in a “Roma-ish” style.

The impact of religious music on the identity of Roma converts should not be underestimated either, since conversion has led to paradigmatic changes in the lives of the Roma who have become members of the church. It is not only the polarization of the worldview that we have to consider at this point, but also the way conversion has restructured the forms and intensity of everyday, family, and community time. From a religio-sociological point of view, Roma converts to Pentecostalism are deeply and actively involved in religion, with a strong commitment, and can be classified as “active believers” who meet and worship up to three times a week. Christians who are “religious in their own way” and who only use church services for extraordinary life events (baptisms, weddings, funerals) are practically absent.

By singing Romani religious songs together, they experience the expression of their own Roma traditions. Although the folkloresque nature of the songs is clear to researchers, the community members treat them as their very own, as “our songs,” “given” to Roma people, with Roma-like, “Roma-ish” stylistic features, addressed to the Roma, expressing their feelings. Therefore, we can regard them as an artistic dimension of their Christian community identity. As works of art that make their faith audible and perceivable to themselves and to the non-Roma members of the congregation, and that in the eyes of God there is no ethnic distinction between Roma and non-Roma, that Roma culture is equally capable of embracing and transmitting Christian values, and that through faith any Roma can achieve integration into the majority society.²⁷ In short, that music can contribute to the gradual dismantling of negative ethnic stereotypes and prejudices. The role of the songs is reinforced by the fact that, due to the strict norms of Pentecostal and Free Christian congregations, listening to and singing secular music is

²⁷ Our field experience exemplifies the importance of objectivity. During our Uszka field research in 2016 we had dinner with our students in neighboring Tiszabecs. At the dinner, we asked the non-Roma owner of the restaurant about his experiences with the Roma in Uszka. His response highlighted the atypical nature of the Roma group and how people are often surprised when they do not fit in with long-standing negative stereotypes. He said, “They are like people from Mars! The best workers, I can always trust them with anything! They even clean the furniture and tiles and sharpen the knives before they leave. It is unclear why they are different from the Roma here.”

not preferred for religious and moral reasons. While the performance of worship songs is seen as communication with the transcendent, as praise to God, secular music is interpreted as an expression of physical and frivolous desires.

However, it would be naïve to assume that the conversion of Roma and Roma religious music would suddenly solve the centuries-old prejudices and negative stereotypes and make Roma inculturation unproblematic. The opening lines of our paper exemplify a situation where the organist of the Catholic church in Szentrőlad refused to allow the Roma choir to participate in the mass. It is worth noting that integration into the majority society often results in exclusion from one's own ethnic group and the emergence of new prejudices towards converted Roma within their own communities. Members of the converted Roma community must also confront the prejudices of their own community (Szuhay 2012). Sometimes Roma who have become religious are ostracized by non-believing Roma. Conversion, in their eyes, is yet another colonization strategy through which Roma who have become religious deny their traditions and identify with the "whites" (A. Durkó 2016: 296). For this reason, says Durkó, "the Roma are currently living in a kind of ghetto, separated from society by a wall. But this wall is built not only by the majority society from the outside, but also by the Roma from the inside" (ibid.: 296). However, Roma religious music has the potential to erode the sometimes-antagonistic conflicts within the Roma, just as it weakens and sometimes blurs the boundaries between non-Roma and Roma. In doing so, it creates unprecedented unity among a diverse and fragmented group of people (Gyetvai and Désfalvi 2016: 36–59). Through the shared consumption of Romani religious music, similarities begin to outweigh differences, and it is Romani religious music that can be the first breach in the walls of prejudice.

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