

‘Sweet was my mother’s milk’: 1881–1902

Béla Viktor János Bartók was born on 25 March 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós (Great Saint Nicholas) in Torontál County of the ‘Kingdom of Hungary within the Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen’. At that point in the country’s chequered history the town lay in the Bánát region of central Hungary and such celebrity as it had within Austria-Hungary largely resulted from the ‘treasures of Nagyszentmiklós’. These comprise a group of first- and early second-millennium decorated golden vessels that were discovered in the town in 1799 by a Serbian peasant called Vuin Neru and taken to the imperial capital of Vienna, where they remain on display in the city’s Kunsthistorisches Museum. Beyond this, Nagyszentmiklós was a relatively prosperous if unremarkable agricultural and market community. The population statistics for 1880 indicate that of its 10,836 inhabitants, around one third were ethnically Romanian and just over two fifths were German, with Hungarians and Serbs each forming slightly more than a tenth of the population;¹ in terms of religious affiliation, half of the inhabitants were Roman Catholic and most of the rest were Eastern Orthodox. This racial and religious mix reflected the diversity of late nineteenth-century Hungary as a whole, in which Magyars, the ethnic Hungarians, formed the minority in Magyarország, the country that bore their name.

The Hungary (or alternatively ‘Transleithania’) of the composer’s early years was heterogeneous in terms of the racial origins of its inhabitants,² and in 1890 the Magyars formed just 42.8 per cent of a population approaching twenty million.³ Romanians, Germans, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Ruthenians, Jews and Gypsies coexisted as the majority in a state that to at least some degree repressed and penalised them for their non-Magyar ethnicity. Jürg Hoensch has argued that the policy of Magyarisation adopted after the *Ausgleich* (or ‘compromise’) of 1867 effectively denied them full citizenship, for ‘only Hungarian citizens “of