

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945), 43

Malcolm Gillies

Béla Bartók was a Hungarian composer, pianist, ethnomusicologist, and educator. Until his teenage years, Bartók lived in a succession of provincial Hungarian towns, where he gained a spasmodic general and musical education. His first compositions, small programmatic works or dances, date from the early 1890s; he first appeared in public as a pianist in 1892. In 1894, his family settled in Pozsony (now Bratislava), where Bartók attended the Catholic grammar school and gained more consistent musical tuition. His regular involvement in chamber-music playing led to an increasing number of chamber compositions and in 1899 his first attempts at writing for orchestra. During 1899–1903, Bartók attended the Budapest Academy of Music, where his talents as a pianist were more acknowledged than as a composer.

Following his graduation from the academy, Bartók attempted to follow in the footsteps of his mentor Ernő Dohnányi in establishing a career as composer-pianist. Although he did gain recital engagements in major European centers, where his early romantic-style compositions were occasionally performed, his dedication to such an itinerant career soon wavered. From 1904 onwards, his interest in folk music grew; sometimes in collaboration with Zoltán Kodály, he undertook collecting expeditions not just of Hungarian folk music, but also of Slovak (from 1906) and Romanian (from 1908). In later years, he collected some Ruthenian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Arabic, and Turkish tunes, and developed an increasingly comparative perspective on the musical folklore of eastern Europe. Under the influence of these new folk experiences and also of contemporary art-music trends (notably Claude Debussy), Bartók's compositional style became more radical. Yet, these works found little favor at home or abroad. By 1912, his disillusionment was profound. He withdrew from Hungarian public musical life, apart from his duties as a piano professor at the Budapest Academy of Music. During the following years of isolation, his dedication to the collection, transcription, and analysis of folk music intensified. He continued to compose

44

Page 44

but with little expectation that these works would ever be performed. The unexpectedly warm reception of his ballet *The Wooden Prince* at the Budapest Opera in 1917 soon led to a second premiere of his opera (*Duke*) *Bluebeard's Castle*, op. 11 (1911). These performances encouraged Universal Edition in Vienna to contract to publish and promote his compositions, and persuaded Bartók to reemerge as a public performer. During 1918–1922, as his compositions and reputation started to spread through Europe, he composed his stylistically most extreme works: *Three Studies*, op. 18 (1918); *The Miraculous Mandarin*, op. 19 (1918–1919, 1924), a pantomime; *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*, op. 20 (1920); and the two violin sonatas. Commentators then, as now, still debate the constructional and stylistic bases of these works.

From the early 1920s onward, Bartók was heard and seen increasingly on both the national and international stage. His pianistic career, largely as a performer of his own works, culminated in

the later 1920s, with frequent tours of western and central Europe as well as of the United States and the Soviet Union. Many of the compositions of the prolific period of 1926–1931 were written for his own performing needs as a soloist or chamber player, including two piano concertos, two rhapsodies for violin and piano, his piano sonata, and many short piano pieces. As an ethnomusicologist, Bartók withdrew from field work after 1918, but continued to work doggedly at transcription and analysis. During the 1920s and early 1930s, he prepared extensive volumes of Hungarian, Romanian, and Slovak folk music and texts, of which only the Hungarian study gained significant international dissemination during his lifetime. Later, he also prepared Turkish and Serbo-Croatian studies. From 1934 to 1940, Bartók held a full-time position as a leader of an Hungarian Academy of Sciences project to produce a complete edition of Hungarian folk music. He still undertook several concert tours each year, and normally during the summers engaged in the composition of some of his most renowned works, including the final two string quartets: *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936) and *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937); and the second violin concerto (1937–1938).

Beginning in late 1937, Bartók’s anxieties about remaining in Europe grew, and by October 1940 he had moved to the United States. In New York, he found it hard to break into the established performing circuits and gained little incentive to compose. He was, however, appointed to an ethnomusicological research fellowship at Columbia University, and in 1943 gained a visiting professorship at Harvard University, which illness soon interrupted. With generous medical support and lengthy periods at resorts, Bartók found the inspiration to compose several final masterpieces during 1943–1945, including the *Concerto for Orchestra* (1943), *Sonata for Solo Violin* (1944), and the third piano concerto (1945). His *Viola Concerto* remained to considerable degree unfinished at his death from leukemia in September 1945.

Bartók’s move toward, and then away from, his most compositionally avant-garde period of 1918–1922 is marked by a series of sometimes chance encounters with folk or art music. After some years of stagnation as a composer, his

Page 45

youthful inspiration was fired by exposure in 1902 to Richard Strauss’s tone poems *Also sprach Zarathustra* and then *Ein Heldenleben*. Those tone poems suggested a highly nationalistic compositional path to him. The consequent, largely orchestral works of 1902–1905, notably *Kossuth* (1903), merged a Straussian thematic/motivic technique and orchestration with stylistic gestures of Franz Liszt and popular Hungarian rhythmic and melodic turns.

Bartók, however, sought a more autochthonously Hungarian style, to which the overhearing of the singing of a Transylvanian maid in 1904 provided the key. His first essays with folk music were simple settings of Hungarian songs, but he soon developed a wide range of approaches to the expanding range of his ethnic types. In 1941, he identified three broad types among his arrangements: where the folk melody is mounted like a jewel, where melody and accompaniment are almost equal in importance, and where the folk melody is used as a kind of inspirational “motto” for composition. He also developed ways of incorporating the general “folk spirit” into an original composition, and of imitating, extrapolating, or transcending specific folk features within an original composition. These multifarious influences of folk music, along with a daring

tonal-modal approach and development of a leaner form of piano writing, caused Ferruccio Busoni to acknowledge the startling originality of Bartók's *Fourteen Bagatelles*, op. 6 (1908). Although initially rejected for publication as "too difficult and too modern for the public," the *Bagatelles* laid down a blueprint for many aspects of Bartók's subsequent development.

Five encounters with folk music exerted particularly profound effects on Bartók's approach to composition. During a 1907 collecting tour of the Hungarian heartland, Transylvania, he came to recognize the pentatonic basis of the oldest stratum of Hungarian folk music and immediately started to incorporate pentatonic tunes into his own compositions, starting with the final movement of his second orchestral suite, op. 4 (1905–1907) rev. 1920, 1943. Pentatonic, frequently parlando, usage became a frequent cue for nostalgic primitivism in Bartók's music. So, too, in 1913 did he come unexpectedly on the phenomenon of the ancient *hora lunga* (long dance) among the Romanians of Maramureş county. This instrumental music—improvisational, highly ornamented, and of indeterminate structure—subsequently influenced Bartók's style of melodic writing and encouraged his quest for similar constructions, which he found in Arabic, Ukrainian, and Persian musics. His tour of North Africa in June 1913 brought him into contact with folk music of a strikingly different character from eastern Europe's. Among Arabic (probably Berber) tunes, he found narrower ranges and changeable scale types, structural chromatic usage, and a virtually constant drumming that accompanied most strict-time melodies. Those experiences influenced passages in several of his works of the 1914–1918 period, such as the *Suite*, op. 14 (1916), and the second string quartet (1914–1917), and also the opening movement of the *Dance Suite* (1923). Irregular Bulgarian meters and rhythms, although not discovered in his own field work, came to fascinate Bartók from the late 1920s and caused him to revise much of his thinking about

Page 46

folk rhythms. These meters feature in a number of his *Mikrokosmos* pieces, not least the series' culminating *Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm* (1937), and in the third movement of the fifth string quartet (1934). A final encounter concerns Bartók's discovery of melodic transformation through expansion and contraction of scalar intervals in the Dalmatian folk music, on which he was working in 1941–1942. That is, the Dalmatians' chromatic melodies were "compressed" diatonic melodies of surrounding areas. Bartók was surprised at this discovery, because he had himself started to adopt such a principle of transformation of scalar terrain in the 1920s (probably suggested by the changeable Arabic scales), and had brought the principle to a majestic expression in his *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, where the opening chromatic fugue subject is transformed into an open, "acoustic"—scale form near the piece's end. For Bartók, however, the discovery of the same consistent principle in folk sources gave it an additional legitimacy.

Over the four decades of Bartók's compositional maturity, an increasingly innovative modal usage is found. While many of his earliest folk-influenced pieces and many of his early arrangements adhere fairly strictly to ecclesiastical or pentatonic modes, he soon came to wind together strands from different modes, normally based on the same fundamental note, thereby producing a form of partially or fully chromatic polymodal writing. Beginning in 1923 with his *Dance Suite*, he started to experiment further, with "melodic new chromaticism," in which those

earlier modal strands are transcended and a form of “structural” chromatic writing (sometimes not dissimilar to north African folk usage) emerges. This “new chromatic” writing became increasingly prevalent in his works of the latter half of the 1930s, as seen in the twisting fugal theme to *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* and the twelve-note “row” theme to the second violin concerto, with which, in Yehudi Menuhin’s recollection, Bartók wished to demonstrate that the use of all twelve tones did not necessarily negate tonality. As an ethnomusicologist, Bartók represented one transcriptional extreme: rather than noting down a normative form of a melody, he was meticulous about documenting all variants. Thereby, he built up a huge arsenal of transformational strategies, more and less structural, that he drew on in his own compositions. In 1937, he stated that his own musical nature was, like Hungarian folk music, characterized by extreme variety. His output shows few theme-and-variation movements, but frequent writing of finales as variants of opening movements, systematic variation of exposition material in recapitulations, and ceaseless bar-by-bar alterations in thematic and motivic working. Beneath Bartók’s variations and transformations, however, lies a great concern for symmetries, which owes little to folk origins, on a large scale (both the fourth and fifth string quartets have symmetrical five-movement plans), medium scale (the cycle-of-fifth pathways to and from the climax in the opening movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*), and small scale (including mirror inversion of themes and motives, or usage of four-note chromatic, whole-tone, and semitonally interlocking tritones, such as C, C sharp, F sharp, and G, as in the fourth

Page 47

string quartet). Bartók’s acute sense of proportion, with many structures closely paralleling Golden Section ratios or Fibonacci series, appears, however, to have been a product of his innate rather than conscious planning.

Bartók’s most determinedly avant-garde works date, as mentioned, from 1918–1922. With his *Three Studies*, he launched into a radically expressionistic phase during which he believed he was approaching some kind of atonal musical goal. Later, however, he would deny such a goal, asserting atonality’s incompatibility with a style based on necessarily tonal, folk music. In 1929, Bartók claimed that during these immediate postwar years his tonality was not lacking. Nonetheless, the influence of the immediate prewar works of Arnold Schoenberg, and in different ways, Igor Stravinsky, was considerable both on Bartók’s musical style and on his thinking about the future of music. In his essay “The Problem of the New Music,” Bartók referred four times to Schoenberg and recognized the need “for the equality of rights of the individual twelve tones” (1920). He even drew examples of this type of usage from his own *Three Studies* and *Miraculous Mandarin*. The formal nature of his writing, especially in the *Miraculous Mandarin*, shows much similarity with the short-winded, mosaic-like construction of Stravinsky’s recent works, in particular *The Rite of Spring*, to which Bartók repeatedly refers in essays of the period. In his New Music essay, Bartók is particularly interested in the potential of “tone patches” of varying degrees of intensity, and states that architectural considerations were not absolutely necessary and that construction could be achieved by the use of intensity. With *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*, Bartók attempted a radical marriage between innovative techniques of folk song arrangement and “atonal” thinking. He placed literal playings of simple folk songs within sometimes highly dissonant, improvisational contexts loosely drawn

from melodic or rhythmic characteristics of the songs. He explained in an essay of 1921 that using the polarization of opposing tendencies strengthened the composition. Furthermore, he explained that the tonal folk tunes saved works such as *Improvisations* from a surfeit of unrelenting dissonance. His two violin sonatas, of 1921 and 1922, show a less stark distinction between tune and accompaniment, as Bartók moved to merge folk-derived ideas in with characteristics of his “atonal” direction. He did, through his segregation of thematic materials, however, highlight the horizontal orientation of the violin part and the vertical of the piano. With these two sonatas, he was already on the way back to adopting a more overt tonality and to preparing for the tonally based “new chromaticism” first found in his highly popular *Dance Suite*.

Bartók’s placement in the history of avant-garde twentieth-century music has been problematic: because of the strong folk basis to much of his art (inclining some historians to consider him a mere “nationalist” composer), because of his relative isolation from other leading avant-garde composers or artistic figures, and because of his eventual affirmation of a strongly tonal idiom. In the decade after his death, he was accused by younger avant-gardists (Pierre Boulez and René Leibowitz) of “compromise,” in withdrawing progressively during the

Page 48

1930s and 1940s from his more radical compositional stances of earlier decades. The socialist realist reception of his music in Hungary during these same postwar years, correspondingly, condemned those radical midperiod works as “formalist” and acknowledged his post-1930 works as his greatest. Lexicographers have frequently emphasized the eclectic nature of his compositional technique, seeing him as a bridging figure between the more iconoclastic Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Both those composers themselves, however, expressed regret at the basis of Bartók’s art in “static” folk music. Bartók scholars have preferred to see him as a figure of ultimate synthesis of Schoenberg and Stravinsky (Kárpáti 1994), of East and West (Suchoff 1997), and, most broadly, of tradition and innovation.

SELECTED WORKS

Chamber: Six string quartets (1908–1909, 1914–1917, 1927, 1928, 1934, 1939); two violin and piano sonatas (1921, 1922); two violin and piano rhapsodies (1928–1929); *Forty-Four Duos*, for violins (1931); *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937); *Contrasts*, for clarinet, violin, and piano (1938); *Sonata for Solo Violin* (1944)

Choral: *Cantata Profana* (with orchestra) (1930); *Twenty-Seven, Two-, and Three-Part Choruses* (1935–1936)

Orchestral: *Kossuth* (1903); two orchestral suites, opp. 3 and 4 (1905, 1905–1907); *Four Orchestral Pieces*, op. 12 (1912); *Dance Suite* (1923); three piano concertos (1926, 1930–1931, 1945); *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936); second violin concerto (1937–1938); *Concerto for Orchestra* (1943)

Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook, ed. Larry Sitsky (Bloomsbury, 2002)

Piano: *Fourteen Bagatelles*, op. 6 (1908); *Allegro Barbaro* (1911), *Suite*, op. 14 (1916); *Three Studies*, op. 18 (1918); *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*, op. 20 (1920); *Sonata* (1926); *Mikrokosmos* (1926, 1932–1939)

Songs: *Hungarian Folksongs* (1906); *Eight Hungarian Folksongs* (1907, 1917); *Five Songs*, op. 15 (1916); *Five Songs*, op. 16 (1916); *Village Scenes* (1924); *Twenty Hungarian Folksongs* (1929)

Stage: *(Duke) Bluebeard's Castle*, op. 11 (1911), opera; *The Wooden Prince*, op. 13 (1914–1917), ballet; *The Miraculous Mandarin*, op. 19, a pantomime (1918–1919, 1924)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Antokoletz, Elliott. 1984. *The Music of Béla Bartók*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 1997. *Béla Bartók: A Guide to Research*. 2nd ed. New York: Garland.

Botstein, Leon. 1995. “Out of Hungary: Bartók, Modernism, and the Cultural Politics of Twentieth-Century Music.” In *Bartók and his World*, ed. Peter Laki. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Crow, Todd, ed. 1976. *Bartók Studies*. Detroit: Information Coordinators.

Demény, János, ed. 1971. *Béla Bartók Letters*. London: Faber and Faber.

Documenta Bartókiana 1–6 (1964, 1965, 1968, 1970, 1977, 1981).

Frigyesi, Judit. 1998. *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Page 49

Gillies, Malcolm. 1989. *Notation and Tonal Structure in Bartók's Later Works*. New York: Garland.

———. ed. 1993. *The Bartók Companion*. London: Faber and Faber.

Gillies, Malcolm, and Adrienne Gombocz, eds. 1999. *Bartók Letters: The Musical Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Howat, Roy. 1986. “Debussy, Bartók et les formes de la nature.” *Revue musicale de la Suisse Romande* 39:128–141.

Kárpáti, János. 1994. *Bartók's Chamber Music*. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon.

Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook, ed. Larry Sitsky (Bloomsbury, 2002)

Leibowitz, René. 1947. "Béla Bartók ou la possibilité de compromis dans la musique contemporaine." *Les temps modernes* 2, no. 25:705–734.

Lendvai, Ernő. 1983. *The Workshop of Bartók and Kodály*. Budapest: Editio Musica.

Perle, George. 1955. "Symmetrical Formations in the String Quartets of Béla Bartók." *Music Review* 16:300–312.

Somfai, László. 1996. *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts and Autograph Sources*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stevens, Halsey. 1993. *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon.

Studia Musicologica 5 (1963), 23 (1981), 24 (1982), 36 (1995), 37 (1996), special issues.

Suchoff, Benjamin, ed. 1976. *Béla Bartók Essays*. London: Faber and Faber.

———. 1987. "Ethnomusicological Roots of Béla Bartók's Musical Language." *The World of Music* 29, no. 1:43–65

———. ed. 1997. *Béla Bartók Studies in Ethnomusicology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Travis, Roy. 1970. "Tonal Coherence in the First Movement of Bartók's Fourth String Quartet." *Music Forum* 2:298–371

Wilson, Paul. 1992. *The Music of Béla Bartók*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.