

BARTÓK AND THE SEARCH FOR A MOTHER TONGUE

Like Sibelius in Finland, Béla Bartók (1881–1945) came to be regarded as *the* Hungarian national composer. A precociously talented pianist and composer, he studied at the Budapest Academy of Music before traveling abroad to perform in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. He returned to the academy in 1906 to teach piano, a position he held until 1934. Concerned by Hungary's growing alliance with Nazi Germany, he immigrated to the United States in 1940, where he spent the last difficult years of his life (see Chapter 7).

Profoundly engaged with folk music as both composer and ethnomusicologist, Bartók believed it offered the basis for a style that was both modern and deeply rooted in his native soil. As he wrote, "A German musician will be able to find in Bach and Beethoven what we had to search for in our villages: the continuity of a national musical tradition." Bartók criticized previous attempts by Hungarian composers to create an authentic national style, dismissing those who in his view simply wedged Gypsy-style tunes or Hungarian dances into works that were otherwise based on Western European models. Yet his early tone poem *Kossuth* (1903), about the national hero who led the nineteenth-century resistance against Austria, is strongly indebted to Wagner, Liszt, and especially Strauss. While the music contains some markers of a national style, as with Sibelius's *Kullervo* it was primarily the piece's programmatic aspects that led listeners to hear it as Hungarian.

The major turning point in Bartók's career came in 1906, when he decided—together with fellow Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967)—to create a comprehensive collection of Eastern European folk songs. Their goal was to preserve a tradition they viewed as threatened by not only the encroachment of cosmopolitan European styles, but also the commercialized Gypsy music popular in urban cafes and restaurants. This research, which occupied them until the outbreak of World War I, involved numerous tours throughout Hungary and surrounding regions, and as far afield as North Africa. Bartók, who is regarded

as one of the founding figures of ethnomusicology, eventually collected nearly 10,000 folk melodies, which he transcribed and annotated in a series of scholarly books and articles. He also published many sets of folk song arrangements, which run the gamut from simple settings to elaborate reinterpretations. Bartók took special interest in tunes that he believed were very old, with roots dating back a thousand years to the Asiatic tribes that became the Hungarian Magyar people.

The political ramifications of any construction of the folk can be seen in the strong opposition Bartók faced because of his decision to study the music of many ethnic groups. He found significant inspiration in the additive rhythms of Bulgarian folk music, with meters made up of groupings of two and three beats, as reflected in the 4+2+3 over 8 time signature in his Fifth String Quartet (1934; Ex. 4.3). For his scholarly claims of the interrelations between Hungarian folk music and other national styles, as well as the bridging of traditions in his own works, Bartók was attacked by those who insisted on notions of national purity. In response he wrote in 1931 of his commitment to “the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts. . . . Therefore I don’t reject any influence, be it Slovakian, Rumanian, Arabic, or from any other source.”

In contrast to earlier approaches to folk song that tended to regularize it within the parameters of tonal harmony, Bartók sought to make his transcriptions as accurate as possible. Recognizing the limitations of notation, he was an early advocate for the use of the phonograph in fieldwork. By preserving musical features that resist transcription, including timbre and nuances of rhythm and intonation, recording captured the sound of folk music in all its strangeness. Such recordings also destabilized traditional conceptions of melody and harmony. Writing in 1916, the German music theorist Hugo Riemann identified the use of the phonograph by ethnomusicologists to document other cultures as potentially dangerous, capturing as it did “indications of individual intervals that contradicted our habitual intonations. . . . The annoying result of this research of comparative musicology was, first and foremost, to shake up the very foundations of music theory.”

In *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*, Op. 20 (1920), Bartók demonstrates his conviction that the value of folk music was not just to preserve a

Example 4.3: Béla Bartók, *String Quartet No. 5, movement 3, Scherzo, mm. 1–4*

The musical score for Example 4.3 consists of three staves: Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked "Alta bulgarese (vivace, ♩ = 46)" and the time signature is 4+2+3 over 8. The Violoncello part is marked "pizz." and "p". The Violin II and Viola parts are marked "p". The score shows the first four measures of the piece, with the Violin II and Viola parts playing a melodic line and the Violoncello part playing a rhythmic accompaniment.

vanishing past, but to provide the seed of a new style. The short first movement consists of four increasingly complex variations on a four-measure folk tune. In keeping with his scholarly orientation, Bartók provided information in a preface about this and the other tunes he incorporated in the score, including the texts, and when and where they were collected. Example 4.4 provides the first two measures of each variation.

The drone-like accompaniment of the first variation is built on the first two notes of the Dorian theme. In the second variation, Bartók creates a rough-hewn effect by harmonizing the folk tune with block major and minor triads that lack a functional harmonic context. The more expressive third variation combines the theme with increasingly chromatic and dissonant harmonies, ending with a half-diminished “Tristan” chord. As if to conclude an overview of the development of harmony from modes to the emancipation of the dissonance, the final

Example 4.4: Béla Bartók, *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*, Op. 20, No. 1.

(a) mm. 1–2

Molto moderato ($\text{♩} = 44\text{--}46$)

pp

Piano

p dolce

(b) mm. 5–6

(Ped.)

(c) mm. 9–10

espr.

mp *mf*

(d) mm. 13–14

p *dim.* — —

variation abandons triadic harmonies while preserving only fragments of the tune.

The remarkable emotional trajectory of this short piece, from its simple bucolic beginning to the introspective ruminations of the final section, underscores Bartók's belief that folk materials were the key to the deepest layers of experience. This unlocking is dramatized in his Modernist opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911), in which the duke's new bride forces him to open a series of symbolic doors. The focus here, as in many of Bartók's works, is not on specific borrowed tunes, but on creating what he described as a pervasive "atmosphere of peasant music." In the opera's speechlike melodies, modal harmonies, drones, and simple ostinato figures, we can hear what Bartók had in mind when he wrote in his 1931 essay "The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music" of a composer's ability to absorb "the idiom of peasant music which has become his musical mother tongue" (SR 198:1440–1441; 7/29:170–171). This implication that a mother tongue is not something you are born with but something you have to master is a stark reminder of the challenges composers faced during these years in forging a sense of identity and wholeness.