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Introduction

. . . this other music of today, the music of Bartók! Chaos in place of Cosmos, confusion in place of order, scattered clouds of aural sensation in place of clarity and shape, fortuitous proportions and a renunciation of architecture in place of structure and controlled development. Yet this too was masterly. Even beautiful, moving, sublime, wonderfully gifted! . . . And all the more beautiful and irresistible by virtue of its being precisely the music of our time: an expression of our experience, our view of life, our strengths and our weaknesses. It expresses us and our questionable life-styles while also affirming us. Like us, this music knows the beauty of dissonance and pain; the many scales of fractional and varied tones, the overthrow and relativization of morals and established modes of thought. No less than us does it know the yearning for the paradises of order and security, of logic and of harmony.[1]

Hermann Hesse's diary-entry of 15 May 1955, in response to a radio broadcast that morning of the Concerto for Orchestra and a concerto grosso by Handel, captures the essence of Bartók's music, with its precarious tightrope balance between urban art music and rural popular music, tonality and atonality, chaos and order. The conventional musical analyst will probably reject Hesse's opinions of the structural fortuity of the work as the value judgement of an amateur. Yet Hesse's assessment avoids the tendency to normalize Bartók's music which is so prevalent among professional commentators today, albeit according to a number of different systems of analysis. By rejecting the closed listening that can result from dogmatic adherence to a single analytic system, Hesse opens his ears to the music as phenomenon, and hears within it the imprint of the chaos which gives meaning to our lives.

It is widely accepted that Bartók achieved a synthesis in his music,[2] in which the oppositions alluded to above, among others, have been neutralized within a unified musical structure. However, the very plurality of the strategies used to 'explain' this synthesis and the unity which results from it may suggest to the sceptic that the cohesion and congruity which the normalizing critic observes may well be illusory. Perhaps we should admire Bartók's music as much for its ability to accommodate, as for its tendency to assimilate

difference, for its admission of the coexistence of disparate materials, as much as their integration.

As Hesse implies, it is the fragmentary nature of the music which makes it such a potent metaphor for, and reflection of, contemporary life. He hears in it an allusive quality, which intimates both the world of nature, and the world of man in its avoidance of regularity and symmetry. Its soundworld had

> the beauty of the silvery scores that are fantastically drawn by the summer-wind in grass; the beauty of a swirl of snowflakes, or of the short-lived play of dramatic evening-light over the surface of sand-dunes. So too did it have the beauty of those just-lost sounds that one can't pin down to laughter or sobbing – such sounds as one might hear while travelling: half-waking for the first time in a foreign city, in a strange room and bed. One would love to know what each was, but there is no time, so quickly and restlessly do they tumble upon each other. Just so does this richly sensual, colourful, painfully beautiful music ripple, laugh, sob, groan, grumble and gambol on its way – without logic, without stasis; all movement, all beautiful, fading transitoriness.

Given the difficult circumstances surrounding the composition of the Concerto, and its subsequent popular success, it is too easy to regard it as a compromise of the composer's musical integrity, a mere money-spinner for his wife Ditta after his death. The musical language of the work is, however, the culmination of a process of simplification and crystallization of Bartók's style in terms of density of dissonance and increased use of triadic harmony,[3] a process which began around 1930, after a period of experimentation which had seen the composition of such works as *The Miraculous Mandarin,* the two Violin Sonatas, the relatively rebarbative middle pair of String Quartets, and the First Piano Concerto. This process reflects Bartók's conviction, expressed in print in 1938, that contemporary music 'ought to be directed at the present time to the search for that which we will call "inspired simplicity"'.[4]

The Concerto is historically embedded in a world in crisis. Written at the turning point of the Second World War, it forms the most powerful of Requiems, one that perhaps only an atheist could have written. It is a lament for man's inhumanity to man, but also a positive vision of a world in a kind of harmony in which chaos and order, the primeval enemies, are held in dynamic equilibrium.

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Background

'In the name of Nature, Art and Science . . .'[1]

Béla Bartók invoked his personal trinity in 1907, at the age of twenty-six, in a letter to his friend the violinist Stefi Geyer, and for the rest of his life devoted himself to its veneration with a commitment and conviction that matched the intensity of his early rejection of conventional religious belief.[2] For Bartók, the music of the uneducated rural peasantry which he began studying seriously in 1905 was as much a manifestation of nature as the butterflies, insects and alpine flowers he collected:

> Peasant music, in the strict sense of the word, must be regarded as a natural phenomenon; the forms in which it manifests itself are due to the instinctive *transforming power* of a community entirely devoid of erudition. It is just as much a natural phenomenon as, for instance, the various manifestations of Nature in fauna and flora. Correspondingly it has in its individual parts an absolute artistic perfection, a perfection in miniature forms which – one might say – is equal to the perfection of a musical masterpiece of the largest proportions. It is the classical model of how to express an idea musically in the most concise form, with the greatest simplicity of means, with freshness and life, briefly yet completely and properly proportioned.[3]

There is a strange inverse relationship between Bartók's construct of the innately artistic peasantry which produces melodies that are models of perfection (though individual peasants are not to be credited with the composition of songs or instrumental music, but rather with their modification and variation),[4] and Heinrich Schenker's concept of the unique, divinely inspired improvising genius who 'composes out' the fundamental structure, which is itself derived from nature. In both constructs, the musicians are effectively deprived of agency, and form a medium through which culture is spontaneously transmitted, their role being essentially passive. Whilst such a view, redolent as it is of a fairly conventional nineteenth-century Romantic idealism, is deeply problematic, it is consistently and unambiguously expressed throughout Bartók's writings. Leibowitz suggests that Bartók was attracted by a freedom, asymmetry and perhaps even a chaos which he could

discern in rural music, and which mirrored his own musical interests and predilections.[5] It is possible that he heard in its 'eternal changeableness' a reflection of the arbitrariness and variability of nature,[6] but it is clear that he particularly admired it for its total 'absence of sentimentality and exaggeration of expression',[7] features which became characteristics of his own compositional language.

Bartók perceived a dichotomy between the 'natural' unconscious artistry of peasant music (especially of an older kind untainted by civilization) and the artificiality of an urban folk music whose function was 'to furnish entertainment and to satisfy the musical needs of those whose sensibilities are of a low order'.[8] The non-alienated peasantry who still retained the crafts and customs of their ancestors, and whose lives were sustained by the fruit of their own labour, provided the last link to the older, innate musical culture, and it was from this class (which was probably already something of an anachronism when he started collecting folk music) that he transcribed the songs which were to have the greatest influence on his own musical output.[9]

He naïvely held the peasantry to be peace-loving, apolitical beings in harmony with both the natural world and the peoples of neighbouring countries, and felt they were drawn, against their best instincts, into conflicts and wars, betrayed by their corrupt urban masters. Their songs expressed a kind of non-political nationalism which was devoid of chauvinism and competition, for 'where politics begin, art and science come to an end, equity and good faith cease to exist'.[10] Such a view informs his own mature music, for it is rarely conventionally nationalistic, but draws on folkloric influences from a wide range of musical dialects including Hungarian, Romanian, Slovakian, Serbo-Croatian, North African and Turkish.[11]

In the ethnomusicological hagiography, Bartók's name is still revered as one of the founding fathers of the objective study of popular music, though there are revisionist voices which suggest that his importance has been somewhat overrated. As early as 1931, in a review of *Hungarian Folk Music*, the composer and critic Bernard Van Dieren poured scorn on Bartók the 'scientist'. In a splenetic and scornful attack, he pilloried Bartók for being

> so bewitched by the glamour of supposed 'scientific research' that he expends his valuable time on work that any efficient clerk might in a couple of years be trained to do. He aspires to rank with the paleontologist with his stones and bones, or the biologist with his microscope, diatoma, and protozoa.[12]

Van Dieren's basic criticism in this review (which at times is dazzlingly off the wall) is that Bartók's research is not properly scientific at all, but trivial

hack-work which merely presents data, and does not use it either as 'an introduction to a new working method' or 'for reference, with deductions leading to a system or theory from which he could claim personal credit'.[13] His tone, moreover, suggests that he believed that even the attempt to study music of a 'racial popular idiom' was effectively worthless and irrelevant.

Bartók believed that one of the main functions of folk-music research was to help to trace the common ancestry of races who were physically separated from each other and whose music contained common features.[14] Such a goal, requiring the collection of vast quantities of raw data from many ethnic sources, implies that Bartók's brand of ethnomusicology is indeed a form of palaeontology, and can be best considered as being allied to various branches of the social sciences including linguistics, and social and cultural anthropology. As Lenoir has observed, there are parallels between Bartók's methodology and that of structuralists such as Propp and Lévi-Strauss in the field of mythology, and Jakobson in linguistics.[15]

Although he had no formal advanced training as a scientist, Bartók seems to have exhibited considerable acumen in both physics and mathematics at school, and developed an amateur interest in astronomy, the natural sciences and technology. In terms of his 'scientific' approach, he was more of a Rosalind Franklin than a John Watson.[16] The hallmarks of the transcriptions and comparative analyses of the materials he collected were fastidiousness and rigour, characteristics which are exemplified in the extreme detail with which he notated the rhythmic and melodic parameters of the music. His method, which was closer to that of a photographer than a sketch-artist, was contrived to present the music in as accurate and objective a way as possible, and avoid subjective interpretation wherever feasible, though he made it clear that this was very often difficult.[17] Each transcription is thus the representation of a single performance by an individual peasant, rather than an averaged-out illustration of a class of melodies, like a single butterfly with its own distinct phenotype pinned to a board by a lepidopterist.

The method of taxonomy adopted by Bartók was adapted from that of the Finnish musicologist Ilmari Krohn, and subjected to various revisions in the course of his career. It provides for the discrimination of musical 'genotypes' by such essential features as scale type, form, number of melodic lines, cadential note of each line, syllabic and rhythmic structure, and range. A song or instrumental melody could thus be reduced to a fairly simple formula or structure, and be tabulated for comparison with other transcriptions in the corpus from the same or other regions.

Bartók's writings do not indicate that the function of folk-music research was to preserve it by simply disseminating it to the urban proletariat. The precision and visual complexity of the transcriptions, with their rhythmic quantization levels of as little as a demisemiquaver or quintuplet semiquaver, and their microtonal inflections, often make them almost unreadable as performance scores; indeed it is questionable if any musician would wish to reproduce or realize such highly contingent performances, dependent as they are on the psychology and physiology of their original executants, their social function, and other specific prevailing conditions. They were to be regarded more as examples of natural form, or archetypes of organic musical practice which could provide the music student with material for imitation and emulation, and which could even have an analogous role to the Bach chorales conventionally used as models in academic institutions.[18] Whilst he made very many arrangements of actual peasant music for voice and piano, chorus, violin, and piano, these were the work of a lapidary who has polished the gems until they have lost their natural roughness, and set them as jewellery – domestic ornaments which are no longer intimately tied to the culture from which they sprang.

It was through the medium of 'art music' that the spirit of peasant music was to be retained:

> the pure folk music can be considered as a natural phenomenon influencing higher art music, as bodily properties perceptible with the eye are for the fine arts, or the phenomena of life are for the poet. This influence is most effective for the musician if he acquaints himself with folk music in the form in which it lives, in unbridled strength, amidst the lower people, and not by means of inanimate collections of folk music which anyway lack adequate diatonic symbols capable of restoring their minute nuances and throbbing life.[19]

Ironically, the very act of notation freezes the music and destroys the 'essence . . . which enables it to awake the emotions in the soul of the composer',[20] just as the administration of chloroform to a butterfly kills what is so attractive about it – its freedom to interact with the rest of the natural world.

The apparently condescending tone he adopts should not be misunderstood – Bartók was no patrician aloofly admiring the peasantry as one might appreciate a herd of prize cattle; he honestly felt that their lifestyle was more valuable and authentic than that of the city. He seems to have been ill-at-ease with both the Hungarian aristocracy and the generally pro-German middle classes, and adopted the accoutrements of the 'lower people', delighting in their hand-carved furniture, embroidery and instruments.[21] But he could

never, as a sophisticated outsider and observer, be wholly accepted within their culture. Instead, their culture was to be transplanted and absorbed into middle-class art music by composers who displayed 'great creative talent',[22] to bear fruit in an authentic national style, in a process which was analogous to that of the development of the Classical style from an amalgamation of Austro-German 'popular' music and its 'serious' counterpart. Bartók implies that the musical style which makes the best use of the peasant music is the one in which the composer does not quote from, or even imitate, folk music, but in which he uses it as a 'musical mother tongue',[23] the extremes of the 'great artistic genius' and 'illiterate peasant' becoming united in a synthesis of high and low art.

Zoltán Kodály, Bartók's compatriot, fellow ethnomusicologist and collaborator, and long-time friend, saw the strands of Bartók's trinity as being inextricably interwoven, for his performance and compositional activities were informed by his scientific work which in turn was enriched by his musical artistry:

> For the roots of science and art are the same. Each, in its own way, reflects the world. The basic conditions: sharp powers of observation, precise expression of the life observed, and raising it to a higher synthesis. And the foundation of scientific and artistic greatness is also the same: just man, *vir justus*.[24]

The sources of the mature style – the orchestral music from *Kossuth* to the Second Piano Concerto

The compositional style of Bartók's late teens shows many of the influences that other composers of his generation would have shared, namely that of Brahms, Liszt and Wagner, the latter two composers becoming the subject of a detailed and enthusiastic study whilst he was a student at the Budapest Academy of Music between 1899 and 1903. In 1902 he attended the Hungarian première of Richard Strauss's symphonic tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* and was bowled over by it, believing it to hold 'the seeds of a new life'.[25] Later in 1902 he transcribed Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* for solo piano, performing it on 26 January 1903 in the Vienna Tonkünstlerverein to considerable public acclaim.

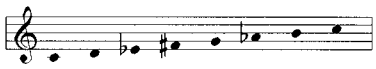
The soil which initially ripened the seed sown by Strauss's works was that of Hungarian nationalism, which Bartók seems to have adopted as a political credo around 1902–3.[26] In doing so, he was reflecting a chauvinism that had been developing over the preceding years, which had been fostered by the

Hungarian ruling classes in the interests of promoting political and economic autonomy, and which, according to Ujfalussy,[27] was essentially divisive in nature in that it encouraged antagonism between the native and non-native Hungarian working classes. It was a brand of nationalism that had no role for the essentially marginalized peasantry, founded as it was on the notion of the aristocracy forming the entire 'Hungarian nation'.[28] Bartók felt that the nationalist ideals espoused by politicians should be adopted by the whole population, but rejected such demonstrations against Austrian rule as the commonplace refusal of people to sing the Austrian anthem 'Gott erhalte', believing them to be unhelpful to the Magyar cause. However, he felt that it was imperative that Hungarians should 'speak in a foreign language only when absolutely necessary',[29] properly to display their national pride.

The musical outcome of this nationalistic enthusiasm was *Kossuth*. This symphonic poem in ten sections based on the career of the lower nobleman Lajos Kossuth,[30] the leader of the Hungarian cause in the 1848 revolution, was composed between April and May 1903, and orchestrated in the summer of that year; Bartók considered it to be Hungarian in every way.[31] The Hungarian quality to which Bartók alludes derives from the essentially petty-aristocratic pseudo-folk *verbunkos* tradition which arose in the middle of the eighteenth century as an accompaniment to military recruitment ceremonies. It was moulded from an amalgam of musical styles, high and low, and from a disparate range of national sources, and was mainly disseminated by gypsy musicians. Stereotypical features of the *verbunkos* style include: the use of the so-called gypsy or 'Hungarian' scale with its idiosyncratic augmented seconds between the third and fourth notes and between the sixth and seventh notes (Ex. 1), a curt cambiata-like cadential figure (bokázó); a wide melodic tessitura with flamboyant decoration; and the alternation between slow (lassú) and fast (friss) tempi.[32] Whilst Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies* and Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* are probably the most familiar examples of the transplantation of the *verbunkos* tradition into nineteenth-century art music,[33] it is in the works of the Hungarian Romantics such as Ferenc Erkel in opera, and Mihály Mosonyi in instrumental music, that this style is most self-consciously adopted and developed. In his later music, Bartók reassimilated the *verbunkos* tradition, particularly in *Contrasts* and the Sixth String Quartet. The third idea of the *Introduzione* of the Concerto for Orchestra, which reappears in the *Elegia* (see Chapter 4, Ex. 10), for example, is a stylized *verbunkos* gesture.

The *Rhapsody* Op. 1 for piano and orchestra (1904), and the First Suite for Orchestra (1905) whose five-movement structure foreshadows the Concerto

Ex. 1 The gypsy scale



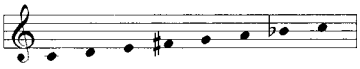
for Orchestra, retain the influence of the *verbunkos*, though by 1905 Bartók was much less interested in Strauss, and was rediscovering the works of Liszt, which 'after being stripped of their mere external brilliance which I did not like, revealed to me the true essence of composing'.[34] His discovery of an autochthonous Hungarian music in 1905,[35] encouraged by Zoltán Kodály, had less of an initially dramatic consequence than his Straussian epiphany; in the third movement of the serenade-like Second Suite for Orchestra (1905–7) a melody appears whose structure bears the influence of the old-style peasant music,[36] and in the finale a pentatonic folk-like fragment emerges, which hints at the new compositional possibilities that peasant music might nurture, whilst remaining firmly rooted in a conventional late-Romantic chromatic style.

The adoption of a style which bears the influences of peasant rather than gypsy music implies a political as well a musical change of heart on the part of Bartók,[37] for the peasant music which particularly interested him was the most ancient type, whose origins may have even predated the conquest of Hungary, and which was thus clearly detached from the musico-nationalistic status quo. As Frigyesi observes:

> the recognition of peasant music was offensive because it called attention to the existence of a Hungarian art known only to the peasants, and hence independent of the upper classes, the nobility, and the gentry. Collectivity or spontaneity of musical culture was a similarly sensitive issue, since it was thought that the 'weeping-rejoicing' Gypsy music was the most characteristic and spontaneous expression of the Hungarian soul. . . . In a sense, Bartók and Kodály were taking away whatever was valued as 'national' in Gypsy music and transferring it to the peasant song, whose very existence had not previously been suspected. They undermined the notion that national character could be represented by one class and taken as the ultimate measure of value.[38]

Bartók's borrowings from peasant music are generally applied on the microscopic rather than macroscopic scale: he tends to adopt the scale forms, phrasings, metres, rhythms, or rough melodic contours of folk-sources (very rarely quoting verbatim from actual melodies in his large-scale works), and he often employs them within what initially appear to be conventional musical forms such as ternary or sonata form. Thus the peasant music, especially the

Ex. 2 The acoustic scale on C



'older' type, which is generally not rounded or 'architectural',[39] provides substitutes for the periods and sentences which articulate the thematic ideas of much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music, and which themselves were often influenced by popular models. It also supplies several novel scale forms,[40] in particular one which is called the acoustic scale (because it is derived from the first sixteen harmonics of a harmonic series starting, in Example 2, on C) by the Hungarian musicologist Ernő Lendvai, and *heptatonia secunda* (or second seven-note system, parallel to the diatonic seven-note modes) by Lajos Bárdos.[41] The acoustic scale particularly dominates the finale of the Concerto for Orchestra.

In 1907 Bartók became interested in the music of Claude Debussy, noting in it '"pentatonic phrases" similar in character to those contained in our peasant music'.[42] It may be reasonable to ascribe to Debussy's influence the appearance of the whole-tone scale, a formation which is not found as such in central European folk music, in the *Two Pictures* ('Images') for orchestra Op. 10 (1910), where it saturates the final section of the impressionistic first picture, 'In full flower', and strongly flavours the second, 'Village dance'. Whilst from this point on, whole-tone fragments are to be found in Bartók's oeuvre, including the second movement of the Concerto for Orchestra, none of the large-scale works is articulated by the unambiguous employment of this mode, its use being highly localized.

The slow–fast pairing used in *Two Pictures* is also to be found in the two large-scale theatrical works written in the period leading up to the First World War: the opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, and the ballet *The Wooden Prince*.[43] *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* Op. 11 of 1911, with a libretto by Béla Balázs, the first fruit of Bartók's maturity, bears witness to the overwhelming influence of Hungarian peasant music without ever quoting a single original peasant melody. Whilst Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* casts its unmistakable shadow, the opera's Hungarian quality is guaranteed by the pervasive influence of the Hungarian language on the vocal rhythms, and the sustained use of pentatonicism. In effect the opera is like a massive slow movement which forms a parabolic trajectory from dark, through light, then returning to